



University of
Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Scotland

Mike Collins, Toby Greany, Tom Perry and Patricia Thompson



Contents

About this report	2
Overview.....	4
1. About the Sustainable School Leadership research	8
2. Leadership and leadership development in Scotland.....	10
3. The school leadership workforce in Scotland	11
4. Selected findings from the survey in Scotland	20
5. Locality case studies	28
Locality Case Study: Scotland – City.....	29
Locality Case Study: Scotland Rural - Coast	57

About this report

Authors

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

Background

This report is one of several outputs from the Sustainable School Leadership project, a UK-wide mixed methods 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 late 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 Scotland 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 Northern Ireland are available along with a final UK-wide report. The full UK Survey findings were published in September 2025 (Perry et al, 2025). We have called this a ‘technical report’ to indicate that it is intended as a resource document, which supports the final UK report (Greany et al, 2026).

More information is available at: sustainableschoolleadership.uk

Suggested Citation

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

Acknowledgements

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

We are also grateful to colleagues in the Scottish Government and the Safepod Network for their support in enabling secure access to the workforce data.

We are particularly grateful to the members of the Scotland National Advisory Group, who provided invaluable advice and support throughout the project. This group, which was aligned with the Scottish Government’s existing Headteacher Recruitment and Retention Working Group, met nine times during the course of the project. Membership comprised:

- Jennifer Crocket, Chief Education Officer, Argyll and Bute Council
- Laurence Findlay, Director of Education and Children’s Services, Aberdeenshire Council and President, Association of Directors of Education in Scotland
- Chris French, Senior Lead Specialist - School and System Leadership, Education Scotland
- Rosemary Grady, Lecturer in Educational Leadership & Learning, Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh
- Clare Harker, Headteacher, St Albert’s Primary School, Glasgow

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Scotland

- Dr Julie Harvie, Senior Lecturer in Educational Leadership, University of Glasgow
- Waheeda Huq, Head Teacher, Strathavan Academy, South Lanarkshire
- Graham Hutton, General Secretary, School Leaders Scotland
- David Leitch, Education Workforce Unit Team Leader, Scottish Government
- Dr Romina Madrid, Senior Lecturer in Educational Leadership, Stirling University
- Claire Meakin, Head Teacher, Kirkwall Grammar School, Orkney
- Dr Zoe Robertson, Director of Teacher Education, Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh
- Seamus Searson, General Secretary, Scottish Secondary Teachers Association
- Alison Weatherston, Lead Specialist - School Leadership, Education Scotland
- Lesley Whelan, Head of Professional Learning and Leadership, Education Scotland
- Tara Woods, Head Teacher, Moffat Academy & Beattock Primary Cluster, Dumfries and Galloway

Overview

This 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 Scotland included an analysis of the leadership workforce (Section 3), a survey of 332 Scottish leaders (Section 4), and in-depth interviews with 28 leaders across two contrasting localities (Section 5): a diverse urban city grappling with poverty and rapid demographic change, and a coastal-rural region stretching from a large seaside town out into isolated villages and farming communities. We visited everything from tiny two-teacher rural primaries to large comprehensive secondaries serving complex urban communities.

Scotland's Leadership Workforce

Scotland's school system comprises around 2,450 schools led by around 2,000 primary, 360 secondary and 100 special school headteachers. The age profile of headteachers in Scotland has shifted significantly since 2010, with a clear movement away from older age bands toward mid-career leadership. The average age of heads dropped by 2.4 years between 2010 and 2023, from 50.9 to 48.5. However, succession risks remain given a large cohort in their early 50s and low rates of leaders staying to their late 50s. These trends are also apparent for deputy headteachers, though the shift towards younger age bands has been even more pronounced, with the average age dropping by 3.2 years to 45.4 in 2023. Across Scotland, women account for 77% of headteachers and 73% of deputies, but with differences between sectors - only 45% of secondary headteachers are women (up from 31% in 2010). Ethnic diversity among school leaders in Scotland remains very limited: just 3.2% of primary heads and 4.2% of secondary heads are from ethnic minority backgrounds.

The data show a clear pattern of attrition from headship over time, mostly as a result of leaders taking early or full retirement. If we take the entire headteacher population in a particular year, and track the proportion that then leave the profession, on average, around 15% leave headship after one year, rising to 25% after two years and 34% after three years. By five years, roughly half (50%) have exited, while after a decade, nearly four-fifths (78%) have gone. Looking at data back to 2010 suggests that there was a gradual decrease in headship attrition rates from 2010-2019, followed by a slight worsening in recent years.

The View from the Survey

When asked how they were faring, Scottish headteachers painted a more challenging picture than their counterparts elsewhere in the UK. Nearly a third described themselves as sometimes or mostly sinking, the highest proportion across all three nations studied. Only about 35% felt they were thriving, compared to over 44% in England and 43% in Northern Ireland.

Scottish headteachers reported spending most of their week on general administration and student attendance, behaviour, and wellbeing, like their counterparts in England and Northern Ireland. They spend notably less time on leading teaching, learning, and curriculum, despite this being a key area for improving educational outcomes.

What drains leaders in Scotland? The key concerns mirror those across the UK but with some distinctly Scottish flavours. Staffing issues topped the list, followed by poor work-life balance and the escalating challenges of special educational needs and inclusion. Behaviour challenges ranked higher in Scotland than elsewhere, reflecting the intensity of what headteachers described as an increasingly dysregulated post-COVID student population. Yet despite these pressures, what sustains leaders remains powerfully relational and altruistic. Relationships with students, seeing young people succeed and grow, and collaborating with colleagues within school were the clear top factors. The moral purpose that drew people to teaching still keeps them going, even when everything else threatens to grind them down.

The City Story: Urban Intensity and Shared Identity

The Scotland City case study reveals a place of stark contrasts. This urban authority serves communities ranging from affluent residential areas to some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in Scotland. Headteachers and local authority officers often used the same phrase: "It's a hard shift in [City]." This was meant as an acknowledgment, rather than a complaint. The city has high numbers of care-experienced young people, multiple languages spoken across schools, significant poverty, and communities affected by industrial decline and ongoing economic hardship.

What is striking is the strong collective identity among City leaders. Many had spent their entire careers in the authority, and there was a palpable sense of shared purpose and values around nurture, inclusion, and reducing inequality. The LA had worked to embed restorative practices and nurture principles across schools. While leaders might not agree on every detail, everyone knew what City stood for. This coherence created both pressure and support. New headteachers inherited clear expectations but also substantial professional learning opportunities and a network of peers who understood the context.

Recruitment in City presented an interesting paradox. Posts were generally filled, often attracting a dozen or more applicants for secondary headships. Yet beneath this apparent health lay concerns about sustainability. Large numbers of headteachers were moving on, with one senior officer estimating around 50 primary appointments in six years. Deputes were watching their headteachers closely and it seems that some had decided the job looked too challenging. The phrase "a depute is a nice place to be" captured a worrying trend: capable people choosing to stop their career progression rather than take on the weight of headship. In small primaries, the pay differential between a senior depute and a headteacher could be negligible or even negative, removing any financial incentive to step up.

The drains in City were relentless. Headteachers described an accumulation of responsibilities: increasing numbers of children with complex additional support needs, staff mental health concerns, budget cuts squeezing resources, and a central HR system that meant they couldn't choose their own teachers. One head captured a common view: "I'm not sure there is a model in terms of sustaining people in headteachers' jobs. Certainly now, with things being so acute in terms of resource, you're just like 'here's a list of things I'm going to completely ignore now', you know, because I'm not going to spend till ten o'clock tonight doing it."

Yet they persisted, sustained by the students, by strong teams, and by a deep-seated belief that education matters for breaking cycles of disadvantage. The local authority's emphasis on

collaborative working and extensive professional learning created a safety net, though whether it was sufficient remained an open question.

Rural-Coast: Geography, Diversity, and Isolation

The Rural-Coast locality presented entirely different challenges. This region combined a large coastal town with good transport links to a vast rural hinterland stretching into isolated communities. The geography itself shaped everything. Headteachers in tiny village schools might serve 15 children and be the only promoted post in the building, functioning as teacher, administrator, building manager, and community leader all at once. At the other end of the spectrum, large comprehensives in the town served diverse populations including affluent families, areas of hidden poverty, and increasingly diverse student populations.

Recruitment here was more precarious. While posts were generally filled, fields of applicants were shrinking. One high-performing secondary in the town received just two applicants for a headship, compared to healthy numbers a decade earlier. Rural primaries faced the hardest struggle. The local authority described "tapping teachers on the shoulder" to ask them to become heads of small schools after multiple failed recruitment rounds.

The reasons were stark: geographic isolation from family, relatively modest salaries for the responsibility, and the sheer breadth of demands in a small school. One deputy considering applying for a rural headship realised it would mean a pay cut from her current role in a larger primary, plus the need to complete the mandatory *Into Headship* programme while starting a demanding new job and managing young children at home. She decided against it.

Secondary teacher recruitment emerged as a particular crisis, especially in subjects like maths, design, and technology. Schools were removing subjects from the curriculum because they couldn't recruit staff. Interviewees highlighted that local employers often paid significantly better and didn't require the same emotional labour.

The two local authorities in this region had different approaches to supporting schools. In the coastal authority, a new leadership team had consciously shifted from what some described as a "dictatorial" model toward more collegiate working. Quality Improvement Officers, all former headteachers, worked to create collaborative networks. In the rural authority, the sheer geographic spread and diversity of contexts made coordination challenging. Primary schools were grouped into "trios" for mutual support, and there was growing recognition that self-improving schools, supported by peers, had to be the model simply because central resources couldn't reach everywhere effectively.

Common Threads: What Emerges Across Scotland

Several themes emerge across both the localities and the survey data. First is the extent to which school leaders are spending significant proportions of their time and energy on addressing issues of care – i.e. inclusion, well-being, behaviour and attendance. The needs of children and young people seem to have exploded, with schools often left to pick up the pieces.

Second, and related, is the unmistakable squeeze on headteacher workloads and wellbeing. The word "relentless" appeared in almost every interview. Leaders described a job that never ends, where the demands have mushroomed while resources have shrunk. Some suggested

that they now need to be social workers, police officers, and community centres as well as educational leaders. Mental health and resilience were constant preoccupations, both for their students and staff, and increasingly for headteachers themselves.

Third is the question of moral purpose versus sustainability. Almost every headteacher articulated a powerful commitment to social justice, to making a difference for young people, to education as a force for overcoming disadvantage. This wasn't rhetoric, it was the bedrock of their professional identity, often rooted in personal biography and reinforced through years of experience. Yet this very commitment also made leaders vulnerable. They cared too much to walk away easily, but the job demanded more than many could sustainably give.

Fourth is the evolving nature of leadership pathways. Very few headteachers had always wanted the job. Most described the journey to headship as emergent or even accidental, shaped by mentors who spotted potential, by circumstances like a previous head retiring, by gradually increasing confidence through experience. The mandatory *Into Headship* programme provided valuable thinking space and exposure to research and policy, even if it didn't fully prepare people for the technical and emotional demands of the role. What mattered more was learning on the job, having trusted colleagues to phone when things got difficult, and building networks of peers who understood.

Fifth is the central importance of relationships. What sustained headteachers wasn't policy or programmes. It was students and seeing them flourish, strong teams within schools where leadership was distributed and trust was high, and professional networks where they could be honest about struggles without judgment. The job could be lonely, especially in small rural schools, but those who had cultivated safe relationships fared better.

Sixth relates to governance and support in a coherent but sometimes stultifying system. While school leaders generally value the support they receive from their Local Authorities, there were also sometimes questions around credibility and (lack of) flexibility in areas such as budgets and staffing. LAs clearly work in different ways, which seems appropriate given the range of contexts involved, but this could be in tension with a busy national policy landscape.

Finally, there is the issue of diversity and succession. The teaching and leadership workforce remains overwhelmingly white in both urban and rural contexts. Leaders recognised this as problematic but felt powerless to change it, pointing to pipeline issues and broader societal factors beyond their control. Education Scotland's work with partners on *Into Headship* and *In Headship* (a programme for newly appointed heads) was certainly valued by participants and recruiting a pipeline of leaders onto *Into Headship* formed the core focus for succession planning efforts by local authorities (though some ran additional programmes to grow potential leaders and, in one case, to encourage diversity). Some individual headteachers were consciously developing their leadership teams, but this important work did not appear to be particularly valued or encouraged across the wider system. Overall, it seems there is more to do to ensure a sustainable pool of diverse, high-quality leaders.

The Scottish education system is proud of its coherence and its commitment to equity, but this research highlights challenges for leadership sustainability which is key to making those commitments meaningful on the ground. It also highlights risks around the appetite of future generations to step up into roles that look increasingly challenging.

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 Scotland 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 contexts. At

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Scotland

these events we shared and validated our findings and considered potential implications for policy and practice. Finally, at the request of Education Scotland, we undertook an additional strand of work in Scotland to understand views on the *In Headship* programme for newly appointed headteachers.

This report focuses mainly on the secondary data analysis and locality case studies for Scotland. We also include a brief overview of the school system and leadership development landscape in Scotland 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 Scotland

Scotland's school system encompasses the densely populated central belt, including Edinburgh and Glasgow, through to the small islands and sparsely populated regions of the Scottish Highlands. There are around 2,450 schools in total, which are funded, supported and held accountable by Scotland's 32 local authorities. In recent years the Scottish Government has pursued ambitious curriculum reforms (Curriculum for Excellence) and made significant investments in improving pupil achievement and attainment (e.g. National Improvement Framework, Scottish Attainment Challenge) and in overcoming disadvantage (e.g. Pupil Equity Funding).¹

The school system in Scotland has been described as a coherent and consensual but relatively traditional model, in which policymakers in national and local government work together to direct and oversee schools (Chapman, 2024). While there is a policy commitment to empowering schools and some operational responsibilities are devolved to school level, school leaders have relatively limited autonomy, for example compared to their peers in England. Every school is required to undertake an annual self-evaluation, and schools are inspected periodically.²

Scotland provides significant support for leadership development, orchestrated by Education Scotland - a Scottish Government agency. *Into Headship* was launched in 2015 (replacing the Scottish Qualification for Headship, in place since 1998), providing the route for meeting the General Teaching Council for Scotland's Standard for Headship (GTCS, 2021), which is mandatory for all new headteachers. The 60-credit post-graduate certificate programme is delivered through a partnership between Education Scotland, seven universities, and the local authorities.³ The wider suite of programmes supported by Education Scotland includes *In Headship*, a non-mandatory postgraduate programme for those early in post.

In the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 survey of attainment by 15 year-olds, Scotland performed above the OECD average in reading and similar to the OECD average in mathematics and science.⁴ Between 2006 and 2022 Scotland saw declines in PISA outcomes in maths and science, while reading outcomes remained more stable. In PISA 2022, pupils reported lower levels of life satisfaction than OECD average.

¹ For a detailed overview of the school system in Scotland see 'Enhancing Scotland's multi-level school improvement support system' (OECD, 2023) – available at https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/03/enhancing-scotland-s-multi-level-school-improvement-support-system_4e9c2ea1/e9326c26-en.pdf

² At the time of the research, inspections were conducted by Education Scotland. In 2025, this responsibility passed to the newly created His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland (HMIE).

³ For further details see: Greany, T. Thomson, P. Perry, T. and Collins, M. (2025) Signature pedagogies for leadership development: a comparison of headteacher preparation programmes in England and Scotland. *London Review of Education*. <https://journals.uclpress.co.uk/lre/article/pubid/LRE-23-18/>

⁴ Scottish Government (2023) 'Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2022): Highlights from Scotland's Results.'

3. The school leadership workforce in Scotland

About the workforce data:

This section draws on two main sources of information about the school workforce in Scotland:

1. Publicly available statistics published by the Scottish Government, including annual school workforce⁵ and establishment data⁶. These provide headline figures on teacher numbers, school characteristics, and workforce composition. Further details can be accessed via official government dashboards and statistical releases.
2. Individual-level Teacher Census data (2010–2023) obtained through a formal application to the Scottish Government and National Records of Scotland (SG & NRS) Data Access Panel. Access was arranged through the Scottish Analytical Workbench, with secure analysis conducted in a virtual environment hosted by the Edinburgh International Data Facility (EIDF)⁷ and accessed via the Safepod Network⁸.

The Teacher Census dataset includes detailed information on staff characteristics and roles, enabling longitudinal analysis of leadership composition and career trajectories. Key variables requested include:

- **Personal characteristics:** sex, ethnic background, age (via coarsened date of birth), and Gaelic-medium teaching capability.
- **Professional details:** grade of post and person, staff status, FTE, post start date, and subject taught.
- **Contextual linkage:** SEED code for school identification, allowing integration with school-level data on pupil numbers, deprivation, and other characteristics.

These data allow us to examine trends in leadership supply, diversity, and sustainability over time, and to link individual-level information with school and local area factors. In this report, the focus is on giving an overview of the workforce using selected variables from these data.

Workforce Overview:

Scotland’s publicly funded school system comprises around 2,500 schools, with headteachers and depute headteachers forming a relatively small proportion of the teaching workforce—approximately 9% in total (around 4% headteachers and 5% deposes). Table 3.1, below, illustrates the composition of the teaching workforce by grade and sector. The distribution of leadership roles varies by sector: primary schools account for the largest share of headteachers (1,620) and deposes (1,393), reflecting the higher number of establishments, while secondary schools employ fewer headteachers (336) but a similar number of deposes (1,216), consistent with larger school sizes and more complex leadership structures. Special schools, though small in number, have proportionally high leadership representation, with 92 headteachers and 128 deposes.

Table 3.1 – Teacher and leader workforce FTE, 2024-25

Grade	Primary	Secondary	Special
Head teacher	1,620	336	92
Depute head teacher	1,393	1,216	128
Principal or lead teacher	1,756	5,424	219
Teacher or Chartered teacher	19,698	18,012	1,700

⁵ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/teacher-census-supplementary-statistics/>

⁶ <https://www.gov.scot/collections/school-education-statistics/>

⁷ <https://portal.eidf.ac.uk/>

⁸ <https://safepodnetwork.ac.uk/datacentres/scottish-government/>

Total	24,468	24,987	2,138
-------	--------	--------	-------

Demographic Composition:

Age Profile

In 2024, most headteachers and deputies were in their 40s and 50s, accounting for around 80% of the leadership workforce (46.5% aged 40–49 and 34.6% aged 50–59). 15.1% of headteachers and deputies were in their 30s while the number under 30 was negligible.

Table 3.2 – Leader age profile (FTE) for 2024-25

Grade	Under 30	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+	All Ages
Head teacher Primary	supp	151	730	678	supp	1,620
Depute head Primary	supp	340	638	378	supp	1,393
Head teacher Secondary	0	18	161	141	17	336
Depute head Secondary	0	217	594	370	35	1,216
Head teacher Special	supp	supp	39	48	supp	92
Depute head Special	supp	supp	65	43	6	128

The age profile of headteachers in Scotland has shifted significantly since 2010, with a clear movement away from older age bands toward mid-career leadership. See Tables 3.3 and 3.4, below. These percentages are calculated from headcounts within the Teacher Census data. In primary schools, the proportion aged 55–59 has halved from 31% in 2010 to 16% in 2023, while those in their early forties have increased markedly (40–44 now 22%, up from 12%). Under-40 representation rose and fell during the period, from 10% to 15% (in 2018) and back, and therefore remains low, suggesting that a rapid early-career progression to headship is relatively rare. Secondary headteachers show a similar trend, though they continue to skew older: in 2011, more than 70% were aged 50+, including 35% aged 55–59; by 2023, this older dominance has markedly changed with just under half (49.6%) of leaders aged 50+, with just 14% aged 55–59 and a growing share in the 40–49 bracket (27%). Succession risks remain given the large cohort in their early 50s and the low rates of leaders staying to their late 50s. Moreover, under-40 leaders are still rare, which – combined with the high rates of workforce exit during the 50s – makes for a middle-heavy school leader workforce.

Table 3.3 – Age profile of primary headteachers by year

year	under40	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60+
2010	10.2%	12.2%	15.5%	26.9%	30.7%	4.5%
2011	11.1%	13.1%	17.3%	24.3%	29.3%	4.9%
2012	10.3%	15.0%	19.1%	21.3%	28.9%	5.3%
2013	9.9%	16.5%	19.6%	20.0%	28.6%	5.5%
2014	11.7%	16.4%	21.2%	19.4%	25.8%	5.4%
2015	13.2%	17.6%	21.7%	20.3%	22.0%	5.2%
2016	13.6%	16.7%	22.7%	22.8%	18.8%	5.4%
2017	14.1%	16.9%	23.9%	23.0%	16.2%	5.9%
2018	15.1%	17.2%	24.0%	22.8%	15.1%	5.9%
2019	14.3%	17.8%	24.1%	23.8%	14.3%	5.7%
2020	13.7%	17.9%	24.7%	22.7%	15.7%	5.4%
2021	13.5%	18.9%	23.9%	23.5%	16.1%	4.2%
2022	11.8%	21.3%	22.0%	24.6%	16.1%	4.2%
2023	10.3%	21.9%	22.1%	26.0%	15.9%	3.7%

Table 3.4 – Age profile of secondary headteachers by year

year	under40	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60+
2010	supp	supp	supp	supp	supp	supp
2011	3.8%	9.6%	15.3%	28.5%	34.8%	7.9%
2012	2.7%	13.2%	10.4%	29.9%	34.9%	8.8%
2013	3.9%	15.7%	11.3%	29.6%	30.7%	8.8%
2014	5.0%	14.8%	17.3%	25.6%	29.8%	7.5%
2015	5.5%	14.3%	21.8%	24.2%	28.4%	5.8%
2016	5.7%	13.5%	25.6%	24.1%	24.4%	6.6%
2017	7.1%	14.3%	28.9%	19.7%	22.6%	7.4%
2018	5.3%	17.1%	28.0%	21.3%	21.0%	7.3%
2019	6.1%	15.9%	25.3%	21.7%	23.1%	7.8%
2020	5.6%	15.2%	24.2%	24.5%	21.4%	9.0%
2021	5.2%	17.3%	24.8%	28.2%	16.7%	7.8%
2022	4.8%	17.7%	25.6%	31.0%	13.5%	7.3%
2023	5.0%	18.3%	27.1%	29.4%	14.1%	6.1%

These trends are also apparent for depute headteachers, though the shift toward younger age bands has been more pronounced. In primary schools, the proportion of deposes aged under 40 has risen slightly (from 23% in 2010 to 27% in 2023), while the share aged 55–59 has more than halved (from 24% to 10%). Mid-career bands (40–49) have grown steadily, now accounting for over 43% of the workforce. Secondary deposes show a similar pattern: in 2010, more than half were aged 50+ (57.1%, including 27% aged 55–59), but by 2023 this had fallen to 33.4%, with only 10% aged 55–59. There was growth in numbers of leaders in their 40s, in particular in the 40–44 age bracket (from 13.4% to 27.1%) but also for those aged 45–49 (from 17.1% to 20.8%, respectively), with the largest growth in the 40–44 bracket.

Overall, while headship remains dominated by leaders in their 40s and 50s, the deputy role increasingly attracts younger staff in their late 30s and early 40s, indicating its importance as a pipeline for future headteachers.

Table 3.5 – Age profile of primary depute headteachers by year

year	under40	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60+
2010	22.6%	15.9%	13.9%	19.3%	24.3%	3.9%
2011	23.6%	16.3%	14.8%	17.8%	23.4%	4.0%
2012	25.1%	18.1%	14.5%	17.0%	21.6%	3.8%
2013	29.3%	17.5%	14.8%	15.5%	18.6%	4.4%
2014	31.4%	18.9%	14.6%	14.1%	17.6%	3.4%
2015	33.3%	18.2%	16.4%	15.0%	13.7%	3.4%
2016	34.3%	18.7%	18.9%	14.0%	11.0%	3.1%
2017	35.2%	19.1%	19.3%	13.4%	10.0%	2.9%
2018	34.0%	20.7%	18.6%	14.3%	10.0%	2.3%
2019	34.0%	21.4%	17.3%	14.7%	10.2%	2.5%
2020	31.3%	23.9%	16.6%	15.7%	10.0%	2.5%
2021	28.9%	24.2%	17.3%	17.5%	10.0%	2.1%
2022	29.6%	23.8%	18.0%	16.8%	9.8%	2.0%
2023	27.4%	24.6%	18.7%	16.3%	10.4%	2.5%

Table 3.6 – Age profile of secondary depute headteachers by year

year	under40	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60+
2010	12.4%	13.4%	17.1%	24.4%	27.4%	5.3%
2011	12.5%	15.7%	16.7%	24.4%	25.3%	5.4%
2012	14.5%	17.1%	16.1%	23.2%	23.3%	5.9%
2013	15.3%	18.4%	16.9%	20.2%	23.5%	5.7%
2014	18.0%	19.5%	15.5%	20.4%	21.1%	5.5%
2015	19.8%	20.1%	17.3%	19.9%	18.3%	4.5%
2016	20.6%	19.6%	19.5%	17.9%	18.0%	4.3%
2017	23.6%	18.4%	20.7%	16.8%	16.6%	3.9%
2018	24.3%	19.5%	21.4%	16.5%	13.9%	4.5%
2019	24.1%	21.7%	20.7%	16.4%	12.7%	4.3%
2020	20.7%	24.0%	20.5%	17.6%	13.3%	3.8%
2021	20.7%	23.9%	20.9%	18.7%	12.5%	3.3%
2022	21.3%	25.8%	19.7%	18.9%	11.0%	3.3%
2023	18.7%	27.1%	20.8%	20.3%	10.0%	3.1%

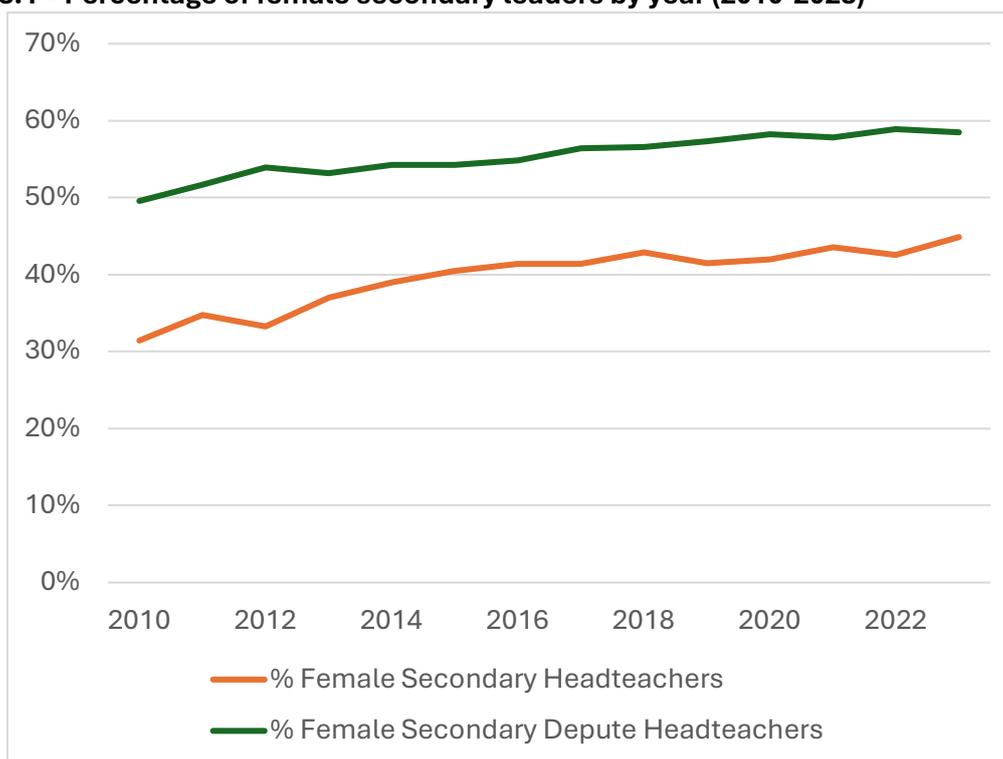
Gender Profile

Gender patterns in school leadership in Scotland show strong sectoral contrasts. See Table 3.7, below, for 2024/25 figures for the percentage of female staff by role and sector. In primary schools, leadership remains overwhelmingly female: 83% of headteachers and 88% of deputies are women, broadly (but not entirely) reflecting the teaching workforce where nearly 90% of teachers are female. In secondary schools, however, the picture is more mixed: only 47% of headteachers and 57% of deputies are female, compared with 67% of classroom teachers, indicating a gender gap in progression to senior levels. Special schools also show majority female leadership (71–75%), though numbers are small. Across all sectors combined, women account for 77% of headteachers and 73% of deputies.

Table 3.7 – Percentage of female staff by role and sector (FTE)

Grade	Primary	Secondary	Special	Centrally Employed	Total
Head teacher	83	47	75	92	77
Depute head teacher	88	57	71	75	73
Principal or Lead	87	65	76	83	70
Chartered teacher	94	55	82	88	72
Teacher	90	67	79	83	79
All	89	66	78	83	77

Trends over time show that gender disparities in leadership have narrowed slightly but remain pronounced in secondary education (see Table 3.8, below, based on Teacher Census headcounts). In primary schools, female representation among headteachers has stayed consistently high, fluctuating between 82–87% since 2010, while deputies have remained even higher at around 87–90%, reflecting the teaching workforce. Secondary schools, however, have seen gradual increases in the proportion of female headteachers which has risen from 31% in 2010 to 45% in 2023, and female deputies from 50% to 58%, yet both remain well below classroom teacher levels (about 2/3 female). The trends in increasing participation of females in secondary leader are depicted in Figure 3.1, below.

Figure 3.1 – Percentage of female secondary leaders by year (2010-2023)

Special schools have maintained majority female leadership throughout, though percentages vary year to year (75–84% for heads and 71–82% for deputies).

Table 3.8 – Percentage of female leaders by year (2010-2023)

year	Headteachers			Depute Headteachers		
	Primary	Secondary	Special	Primary	Secondary	Special
2010	84.6%	31.4%	78.9%	89.4%	49.6%	79.8%
2011	85.2%	34.8%	81.0%	90.4%	51.7%	82.5%
2012	86.1%	33.2%	80.0%	90.4%	53.9%	79.6%
2013	86.3%	37.0%	81.9%	89.3%	53.1%	79.7%
2014	86.5%	39.0%	84.3%	88.1%	54.3%	77.5%
2015	87.0%	40.5%	80.7%	87.5%	54.3%	75.2%
2016	85.9%	41.4%	79.5%	87.4%	54.8%	75.4%
2017	85.1%	41.4%	83.6%	87.6%	56.4%	71.1%
2018	84.5%	42.9%	80.0%	87.9%	56.6%	74.3%
2019	84.4%	41.5%	78.8%	87.7%	57.3%	75.6%
2020	83.8%	42.0%	81.2%	87.8%	58.3%	75.6%
2021	83.0%	43.5%	80.4%	88.3%	57.8%	77.4%
2022	83.1%	42.5%	78.6%	87.4%	58.9%	78.7%
2023	82.9%	44.9%	75.5%	87.5%	58.4%	74.3%

Ethnic Minority Representation

Ethnic diversity among school leaders in Scotland remains very limited, though there has been a slight increase over time. Caution is needed with the figures given the growing proportion of individuals whose ethnicity is not known. In primary schools, the proportion of headteachers from ethnic minority backgrounds has risen only marginally – from 1.4% in 2010 to 3.2% in 2023, with deposes showing a similar pattern (up from around 2.7% to 3.5%). These figures lag behind ethnic minority proportions in the teacher workforce (3.4% to 5.4%). Secondary schools display slightly higher representation, but still at low levels: ethnic minority headteachers account for just 4.2% in 2023, while deposes stand at 3.5%, compared with 9.4% among classroom teachers. Across both sectors, the workforce remains overwhelmingly White Scottish/British, and the pace of change has been slow, indicating persistent challenges in achieving ethnic diversity in senior positions.

Table 3.9 – Ethnicity profile of primary staff by role by year (2010-2023)

year	Headteachers			Depute Headteachers			Teachers		
	White Scottish/British	Ethnic Minority	Not Known/Refused	White Scottish/British	Ethnic Minority	Not Known/Refused	White Scottish/British	Ethnic Minority	Not Known/Refused
2010	98.0%	1.4%	0.5%	supp	supp	supp	94.7%	3.4%	1.9%
2011	97.3%	1.8%	0.9%	96.4%	2.7%	0.9%	93.0%	4.7%	2.4%
2012	97.0%	2.3%	0.7%	96.7%	2.5%	0.8%	92.7%	4.4%	2.9%
2013	96.8%	2.3%	0.9%	96.7%	2.2%	1.1%	92.1%	4.8%	3.1%
2014	96.7%	2.1%	1.2%	96.4%	2.5%	1.1%	91.7%	5.0%	3.3%
2015	96.8%	2.0%	1.2%	96.8%	2.0%	1.2%	91.0%	4.7%	4.3%
2016	96.5%	2.1%	1.4%	95.6%	2.6%	1.8%	89.5%	5.0%	5.5%
2017	96.5%	2.0%	1.5%	95.8%	2.8%	1.4%	89.4%	5.2%	5.3%
2018	96.1%	2.4%	1.5%	95.8%	2.7%	1.5%	88.8%	5.3%	5.9%
2019	96.2%	2.1%	1.6%	95.5%	2.8%	1.7%	88.4%	5.4%	6.2%
2020	96.4%	2.3%	1.4%	94.9%	3.0%	2.1%	88.9%	5.5%	5.6%
2021	96.2%	2.3%	1.5%	94.5%	3.0%	2.6%	88.7%	5.5%	5.8%
2022	95.8%	2.7%	1.5%	94.6%	3.1%	2.3%	89.5%	5.5%	5.0%
2023	95.4%	3.2%	1.3%	94.4%	3.5%	2.1%	89.2%	5.4%	5.4%

Table 3.10 – Ethnicity profile of secondary staff by role by year (2010-2023)

year	Headteachers			Depute Headteachers			Teachers		
	White Scottish/British	Ethnic Minority	Not Known/Refused	White Scottish/British	Ethnic Minority	Not Known/Refused	White Scottish/British	Ethnic Minority	Not Known/Refused
2010	supp	supp	supp	96.7%	1.5%	1.7%	90.5%	5.8%	3.8%
2011	supp	supp	supp	95.1%	2.6%	2.2%	88.5%	7.0%	4.5%
2012	supp	supp	supp	95.7%	2.1%	2.3%	87.8%	7.0%	5.3%
2013	supp	supp	supp	95.9%	1.7%	2.4%	88.0%	7.1%	5.0%
2014	supp	supp	supp	95.8%	2.3%	1.9%	88.0%	7.3%	4.7%
2015	93.7%	3.0%	3.3%	94.5%	2.6%	2.9%	87.1%	7.4%	5.5%
2016	94.0%	2.9%	3.2%	94.2%	2.9%	2.8%	86.6%	7.5%	5.9%
2017	93.7%	3.1%	3.1%	94.1%	3.0%	2.9%	85.6%	7.8%	6.7%
2018	93.0%	3.1%	3.9%	93.5%	3.3%	3.3%	84.9%	8.1%	7.0%
2019	92.5%	3.1%	4.5%	93.9%	3.2%	2.9%	84.0%	8.6%	7.3%
2020	92.4%	3.4%	4.2%	94.2%	3.3%	2.5%	83.6%	9.0%	7.4%
2021	91.6%	3.2%	5.2%	93.4%	3.7%	2.9%	83.2%	9.2%	7.5%
2022	90.7%	4.5%	4.8%	93.5%	3.5%	3.0%	83.8%	9.3%	6.9%
2023	91.7%	4.2%	4.2%	93.6%	3.5%	2.9%	83.4%	9.4%	7.3%

Sustainability Indicators:*Leaving Rates*

Table 3.11, below, shows the proportion of headteachers in Scotland who were no longer in any headship role after a given number of years, based on the workforce in each starting year. For example, of those in headship in 2010, 16.3% had left after one year, 53.3% after five years, and 79.0% after ten years. These figures track whether individuals remained in any headship position within the system, not necessarily the same school, so moves between schools count as retention. This approach reflects system-level continuity rather than tenure in a specific post, meaning school-level departure rates would be higher. It also does not measure time from the first year of headship but from the current workforce at each base year. The data show a clear pattern of attrition from headship over time. On average, around 15% of all headteachers leave headship within the first year, rising to 25% after two years and 34% after three years. By five years, roughly half (50%) have exited, and by seven years, close to 63% are no longer in any headship role. After a decade, nearly four-fifths (78%) have left headship altogether.

Table 3.11 – Proportion HTs no longer in any HT post by base year and duration

Yrs	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Average
10	79.0	77.9	77.4	76.3										77.6
9	76.4	73.8	73.7	72.9	70.5									73.4
8	71.9	71.0	69.2	68.3	66.6	64.6								68.6
7	67.0	65.4	65.7	63.2	61.6	60.0	57.2							62.9
6	60.9	60.1	60.1	59.9	56.2	53.7	51.4	51.1						56.7
5	53.3	53.1	53.6	53.9	52.0	47.7	44.9	45.0	42.7					49.6
4	44.7	45.0	46.4	46.5	45.2	43.2	38.5	37.5	36.5	36.4				42.0
3	35.2	36.0	37.4	38.5	37.5	35.1	33.2	30.8	28.4	29.7	30.3			33.8
2	25.4	25.4	27.2	28.4	28.5	26.8	24.4	24.7	20.9	20.3	22.4	21.9		24.7
1	16.3	14.7	15.5	16.9	16.4	17.0	15.1	14.9	14.0	11.3	12.7	13.6	13.6	14.8

Looking across base years, the pattern of headship attrition in Scotland shows a gradual improvement from 2010-2019, but with a suggestion of a recent worsening since then. Early cohorts (2010–2013) experienced very high leaving rates, with around 16% exiting after one year and more than half (53%) leaving within five years. However, later cohorts show lower attrition: by 2019, one-year exit rates had fallen to around 11% before climbing to 13.6%. The five-year rates in 2016-2018 have dropped to the low to mid 40s from the low 50s between 2010-2014. Overall, despite these overall improvements, attrition remains significant, particularly beyond the five-year mark.

Variation in 3-Year Leaving Rates

With access to individual-level data, we can examine rates of leaving headship and how these vary across the system and workforce. This section focuses on major differences in three-year survival rates, exploring variation by gender, school type, part-time contracts, ethnic minority status, and – most significantly – age. In all cases, figures are based on the leave rate of HTs from the 2020/21 to the 2023/24 academic years.

Gender

Three-year leaving rates are slightly higher among women than men: 30.8% for women compared with 28.3% for men, a gap of about 2.5 percentage points. While the difference is modest, given that women make up the majority of headteachers, this pattern has a notable impact on overall attrition.

Table 3.12 – 3-year HT attrition rate by gender (%)

		Female	Male	Total
Leave	n	589	157	746
	%	30.8	28.3	30.3
Stay	n	1,322	398	1,720
	%	69.2	71.7	69.8
Total		1911	555	2466

School type

Leaving rates vary by school type. Headteachers in special schools have the highest attrition, with 36.6% leaving within three years, compared to 31.8% in secondary schools and 29.4% in primary schools. This suggests that headship in special schools is notably less stable, while primary headteachers show the lowest rate of departure.

Table 3.13 – 3-year HT attrition rate by school type (%)

		Primary	Secondary	Special	Total
Leave	n	581	112	37	730
	%	29.4	31.8	36.6	30.0
Stay	n	1,396	240	64	1,700
	%	70.6	68.2	63.4	70.0
Total		1977	352	101	2430

Part-time contract status

Headteachers on part-time contracts have a slightly higher three-year leaving rate than those on full-time contracts: 31.8% compared with 29.4%. Part-time arrangements are therefore modestly associated with a greater likelihood of leaving headship within three years. It is important to note, however, that the option to work part-time may be a factor *supporting* retention as well as one correlated with higher rates of leaving.

Table 3.14 – 3-year HT attrition rate by part-time contract status (%)

		Full-time	Part-time	Total
Leave	n	474	272	746
	%	29.4	31.8	30.3
Stay	n	1,136	584	1,720
	%	70.6	68.2	69.8
Total		1,610	856	2,466

Ethnic Minority Status

Leaving rates show small differences by recorded ethnic minority status. Headteachers recorded as White Scottish/British have a three-year attrition rate of 30.3%, compared with 26.7% among those recorded as ethnic minority. While the ethnic minority group has the lowest leaving rate, the numbers are very small (60 individuals), so caution is needed in interpreting this difference.

Table 3.15 – 3-year HT attrition rate by ethnic minority status (%)

		White Scottish / British	Ethnic Minority	Not Known or Refused	Total
Leave	n	714	16	16	746
	%	30.3	26.7	33.3	30.3
Stay	n	1,644	44	32	1,720
	%	69.7	73.3	66.7	69.8
Total		2,358	60	48	2,466

Age

Attrition varies substantially by age, showing a clear gradient. Headteachers aged 40-44 and 45-49 have the lowest rates of leaving at 15.2% and 16.6%, respectively – the most stable groups in the workforce. Younger heads, aged under 40, have a slightly higher rate of 24.2%. Once heads get into their 50s, rates of leaving increase. For those aged 50-54, nearly one in four (23.8%) leave within three years. Beyond this point, attrition accelerates dramatically: 61.7% of headteachers aged 55-59 and 77.9% of those aged 60+ exit headship within three years. These figures indicate that age is the most significant factor influencing headship stability, with younger and mid-career headteachers far more likely to remain, while older cohorts show very high turnover, reflecting (early) retirement patterns and late-career exits.

Table 3.16 – 3-year HT attrition rate by age (%)

		under40	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60+	Total
Leave	n	73	65	101	134	253	120	746
	%	24.2	15.2	16.6	23.8	61.7	77.9	30.3
Stay	n	229	363	507	430	157	34	1,720
	%	75.8	84.8	83.4	76.2	38.3	22.1	69.8
Total		302	428	608	564	410	154	2,466

4. Selected findings from the survey in Scotland

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 considerably more detail on the methodology and findings, including on many areas not covered here.⁹

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. 332 leaders from Scotland responded to the survey, including 232 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. While 57.5% of headteachers in Scotland agreed with this statement (and only 21.8% disagreed), the level of agreement was lower than either England (72.2%) or Northern Ireland (64.9%). The third item asked whether leaders agreed or disagreed with the statement: 'Our school primarily serves students from the immediate local neighbourhood.' Levels of agreement with this

⁹ For details see: Perry, T., Greany, T., Collins, M., Thomson, P., & Goodacre, T. (2025). *Sustainable School Leadership: UK Survey Report 2025*. Sustainable School Leadership Project. <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/research/groups/crelm/documents/sustainable-school-leadership.pdf>

statement were higher in Scotland (85.7%) compared with England (67.5%) and Northern Ireland (79.8%). Taken together, these items indicate that while school leaders in Scotland do perceive status hierarchies to exist, student intakes are seen to be more local and (perhaps) more comprehensive than in either England or Northern Ireland.

Leaders in all three nations generally agreed with the fourth item ('Our school feels like a strong part of the local community'), but school leaders in Northern Ireland were notably more likely to strongly agree (73.7%) compared with their peers in Scotland (49.1%) or England (41.8%). On the fifth item, heads in 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. Headteachers in England are the most likely to agree that school inspections provide an accurate picture of their school (49.2%) (vs 45.2% in Scotland and 32.9% in Northern Ireland¹⁰) but are the most negative about their value; only 26.6% agree they learn new things from the process. In Scotland, a small majority (54.4%) agree that inspections provide a learning opportunity.

TABLE 4.2 – LEVEL OF AGREEMENT WITH SCHOOL AND PLACE-FOCUSED STATEMENTS (%) (HEADS ONLY)

		Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Schools in my area face distinctive challenges, compared to other areas	England	2.3	8.1	20.7	37.3	31.6
	Northern Ireland	2.0	5.9	20.3	39.9	32.0
	Scotland	2.2	12.2	20.0	35.2	30.4
	Total	2.2	8.7	20.5	37.2	31.4
There is a clear local hierarchy of schools in my area, in terms of their status	England	1.7	9.5	16.6	43.0	29.2
	Northern Ireland	5.3	9.9	19.9	34.4	30.5
	Scotland	8.3	13.5	19.7	34.9	23.6
	Total	3.9	10.5	17.8	39.7	28.1
Our school primarily serves students from the immediate local neighbourhood	England	9.7	16.8	6.1	28.7	38.8
	Northern Ireland	6.5	10.5	3.3	31.4	48.4
	Scotland	3.9	8.7	1.7	30.0	55.7
	Total	7.8	13.8	4.6	29.5	44.3
Our school feels like a strong part of the local community	England	2.6	5.4	10.7	39.6	41.8
	Northern Ireland	2.0	1.3	5.9	17.1	73.7
	Scotland	1.3	4.0	5.3	40.4	49.1
	Total	2.2	4.4	8.7	36.2	48.6
Schools in our area regularly collaborate with each other	England	5.5	16.4	10.0	45.7	22.3
	Northern Ireland	4.0	3.3	10.5	49.3	32.9

¹⁰ Note – due to an extended period of Action Short of Strike (ASOS) by the teacher unions in Northern Ireland, the Education and Training Inspectorate there has not been able to conduct full school inspections for significant periods in the last decade.

		Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
	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
As a school, we learn new things from school inspections	Northern Ireland	12.4	12.4	35.3	34.6	5.2
	Scotland	5.3	12.3	28.1	42.5	11.8
	Total	19.8	21.6	23.3	29.1	6.3

Views on school culture and practices

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

While leadership cultures are perceived positively by headteachers in all three nations (notably more so than their middle and senior leader peers), there are some variations between the nations. Headteachers in Northern Ireland, for example, are less likely to 'strongly agree' that teachers feel empowered to take on leadership roles (15.6%) compared to their counterparts in England (29.4%) and Scotland (30.0%). Perceptions of trust and collaboration are strongest among headteachers in England, where 58.1% 'strongly agree' this is the case, compared to 39.7% in Scotland. Headteachers in England are considerably more likely to 'strongly agree' that their staff draw on research evidence (33.9%) than those in Scotland (20.2%) or Northern Ireland (18.4%).

Table 4.3: LEVEL OF AGREEMENT WITH LEADERSHIP-FOCUSED STATEMENTS (%) (HEADS ONLY)

		Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Teachers feel empowered to take on leadership roles within the school	England	1.4	7.6	7.9	53.7	29.4
	Northern Ireland	9.1	12.3	11.7	51.3	15.6
	Scotland	3.5	6.5	7.4	52.6	30.0
	Total	3.1	8.1	8.4	53.1	27.3
	England	0.5	2.6	3.8	35.0	58.1
There is a strong sense of trust and collaboration among staff members	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
	England	0.4	0.9	1.2	28.9	68.7
The school has a clear set of values	Northern Ireland	1.3	0.0	3.3	27.3	68.2

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Scotland

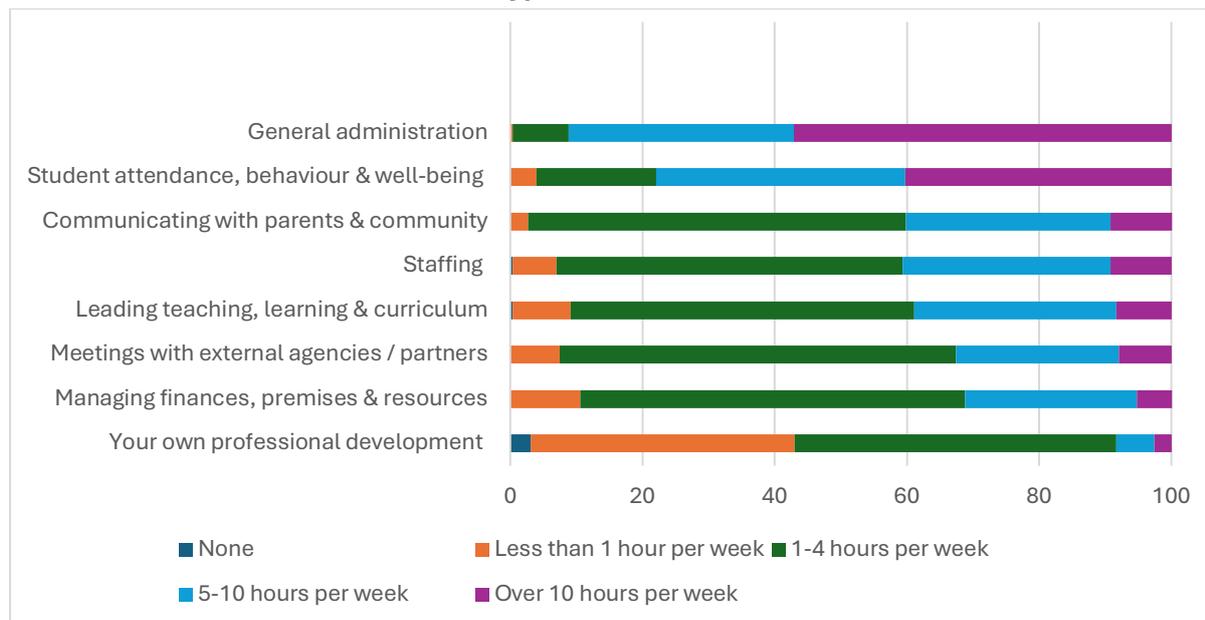
		Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
that are consistently upheld	Scotland	0.9	1.7	3.9	37.8	55.7
	Total	0.6	0.9	2.2	30.8	65.5
Leaders and staff draw on research evidence to inform their practice	England	1.2	5.6	6.4	53.0	33.9
	Northern Ireland	4.0	9.9	12.5	55.3	18.4
	Scotland	0.9	5.3	12.7	61.0	20.2
	Total	1.6	6.2	8.9	55.2	28.1
Teachers and staff are encouraged to experiment with new teaching methods	England	0.7	4.3	7.6	49.7	37.6
	Northern Ireland	2.0	7.1	7.1	39.6	44.2
	Scotland	1.7	3.5	6.5	47.0	41.3
	Total	1.1	4.6	7.3	47.5	39.5
There is a culture of continuous improvement within the school	England	0.5	2.1	3.6	31.0	62.7
	Northern Ireland	2.0	3.3	4.6	33.6	56.6
	Scotland	0.9	0.9	2.2	43.0	53.1
	Total	0.8	2.0	3.5	34.3	59.5
School leadership has become more difficult since Covid	England	1.2	3.6	8.1	23.3	63.7
	Northern Ireland	1.3	0.0	6.5	20.9	71.2
	Scotland	1.3	2.2	8.7	18.7	69.1
	Total	1.3	2.7	8.0	21.8	66.2

Headteacher time use

In the survey we asked how much time leaders spent in a typical week on a list of activities we had derived from the qualitative interviews in the locality case studies. Chart 4.4, below, shows the responses from headteachers in Scotland.¹¹ The responses show that Scottish 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 Northern Ireland). 'Your own professional development' comes bottom (as it does in all three nations, although leaders in Scotland are far more likely than their peers in England and Northern Ireland to say they spend some time on this). In between, we see relatively small differences in the time spent on the other five areas. What is notable is that leaders in Scotland (like England and Northern Ireland) are spending relatively limited time on 'Leading teaching, learning and curriculum', despite this being seen as the core of instructional leadership and key to school improvement.

¹¹ In the survey, the wording of some of these categories provided more detail than is shown here – e.g. 'Student attendance, behaviour and wellbeing (including SEND and inclusion, safeguarding)' - reduced for reasons of space. See Perry et al, 2025 for full versions.

Chart 4.4: headteacher time use in a typical week in Scotland



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 4.5 shows the results for headteachers in each nation. It shows that leaders in Scotland report the most challenging experiences, with a combined 29.2% describing themselves as ‘mostly’ or ‘sometimes sinking’, compared to 21.9% in England and 19.1% in Northern Ireland. Around a third of leaders in all three systems describe themselves as ‘mostly surviving’ (England - 33.9%; Scotland – 36.1%; Northern Ireland – 38.2%). Leaders in Scotland (34.8%) are also the least likely to describe themselves as ‘sometimes’ or ‘mostly thriving’, compared to England (44.2%) and Northern Ireland (42.7%).

Table 4.5: 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.¹²

Responses for all leaders in each nation are shown in Table 4.6. This shows that the ‘drains’ in Scotland are similar, but slightly different, to the drains in England and Northern Ireland. ‘Staffing issues’ come top in Scotland, followed by ‘Poor work-life balance’ and ‘Special educational needs and inclusion challenges’. ‘Behaviour challenges’ come fourth in Scotland – which is notably higher than either England or Northern Ireland.

¹² 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.

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

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

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

Table 4.7: 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 4.8, below, shows the three options and responses, broken down by nation. The most common pathway into headship in all three nations (59% in Scotland) is one where the aspiration for the role emerges over the course of a career in schools. In contrast, a much smaller proportion (9.9% in Scotland) stated that they had "always wanted to be a head" since starting their careers. Meanwhile, a surprisingly large proportion of heads (31.1% in Scotland) described their route as more accidental, agreeing with the statement "I never really intended to be a head – it just happened".

TABLE 4.8 – 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 4.9, below, shows the responses to the question, ‘Would you like to be a headteacher/principal yourself one day?’ Encouragingly, aspiration is highest in Scotland, where 39% say ‘Yes, perhaps’ or ‘Yes, definitely’, compared to 33.1% in England and 24% in Northern Ireland.

TABLE 4.9 – 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 4.10, 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 4.10 – 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 Scotland – City and Rural/Coast. Each case study focuses on recruitment, training and retention for a sample of schools and individual leaders, together with an exploration of wider needs, provision and sustainability across the locality. We explored how people had become headteachers in each locality, how they characterised and understood the area, how leaders and schools are supported, and what drains and sustains them. We also wanted to understand how leadership development works in the area, if and how schools work together and leaders support each other, and who takes on what roles.

Methodology:

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

In each locality we interviewed a small number of local system leaders (e.g. Local Authority, leadership development providers) 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 thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)¹³. 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)¹⁴.

¹³ BRAUN, V. & CLARKE, V. 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.

¹⁴ Bartlett, L., & Vavrus, F. (2017). Comparative Case Studies: An Innovative Approach. *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education (NJCIE)*, 1(1).

Table 5.1: The seven localities

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

Locality Case Study: Scotland – City

Introduction

Scotland - City is an urban area marked by wide economic contrasts, with wealthy residential areas and areas with significant deprivation. Generational changes in patterns of employment as industries and the wider economy have evolved, occurred alongside migration and changes in demographics. Like many cities, there is a relatively young, increasingly culturally and ethnically diverse population. Although there has been recent investment intended to regenerate areas of the city, large inequalities remain and at the time we visited, the cost-of-living crisis and its impact was spoken about regularly. The city has good transport links to the rest of Scotland, the UK and internationally.

We carried out 14 interviews (15 participants) and one observation of a training activity in City. Table 5.2 shows a breakdown of the roles of people we interviewed. Table 5.3 lists the interviewees and their roles, indicating that visited a range of primary, secondary and special schools.

Table 5.2: Breakdown of interviewees by role

Depute	Employer	Headteacher	Local Leader	Grand Total
1	3	7	4	15

Table 5.3: List of Interviewees

Name	Gender	Role	School/ Organisation	Type	Time In Current post (Years)	Time in role (Years)
Esme	F	Head	Cedar Secondary	School-Secondary	0.5	0.5
Layla	F	Depute	Moon Primary	School-Primary	2	2

Name	Gender	Role	School/ Organisation	Type	Time In Current post (Years)	Time in role (Years)
Edward	M	Head	Brook Secondary	School- Secondary	4	4
Hallie	F	Head	Highclere	School- Special	4	4
Violet	F	Head	Fernwood Primary	School- Primary	7	7
Arabella	F	Head	Pines Secondary	School- Secondary	8	8
Eliza	F	Head	Gables Primary	School- Primary	3	8
Imogen	F	LA Officer	Scot-City LA	Local Authority	2	11
Ada	F	Head	Misty Haven Primary	School- Primary	3	12
Jessica	F	LA Officer	Scot-City LA	Local Authority	3	5
James	M	LA Officer	Scot-City LA	Local Authority	6	6
Mila	F	LA Officer	Scot-City LA	Local Authority	8	16
Bonnie	F	LA Officer	Scot-City LA	Local Authority	0.5	5
Eva	F	Leadership Development	Scot-City University	University	3	3
Alexander	M	LA Officer	Scot-City LA	Local Authority	2	11

Place

Schools and communities

City has more schools than the average Scottish Local Authority and the city's socio-economic diversity and inequalities are reflected in the pupil population. Headteachers and Local Authority (LA) officials were keenly aware of the overall character of City. They were very aware of the varied economic circumstances of residents, historic patterns of migrations, diversity in the general population and its sometimes rapidly changing nature.

“We also have a high number of indigenous Black Asian Minority Ethnic young people as well. And we have a high level of care-experienced young people in our city, the highest in Scotland.... You'll be well aware that there is a high level of poverty in [City].” (Jessica, Local Leader)

“Also have around 52 languages I think spoken within the school ... and a lot of young people who are who are new to the school, we've had a number of refugees. So, we've got some Ukrainian refugees but also from parts of Africa and the Middle East.” (Esme, HT Cedar Secondary)

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Scotland

Changes in the population clearly reflected events beyond City, and were shaped by government policy;

“Since 2011 the population has been increasing and the population has increased broadly in line with our foreign enrolments. So again, the projections are that that the role will decrease towards 2027 and towards 2030... it is difficult to predict ... the UK Government's push on, you know, like asylum seeker adjudication and all the rest of it and they're pushing Scottish councils to take shoulder more of the responsibility.”
(Alexander, Local Leader)

“There's been a change in the housing stock, so more and more of our children are coming who are asylum seekers and refugees with not very much English, which is a change for school.” (Eliza, HT Gables Primary)

Both LA officers and headteachers spoke in similar terms about the general characteristics of city, frequently highlighting social inequity and the demands of leadership. The experience of leading in City and the nature of schools was not uniform however. Schools, particularly secondaries, often serve neighbourhoods that are not cohesive, meaning very localised, specific, and frequently fluid circumstances combine to give each school a distinct character. Headteachers and officials recognised and were familiar with the specific, often complex circumstances around individual schools.

Some schools, such as Pines Secondary, serve disparate communities;

“Within our school community there's quite identifiable other communities ...that has a bit of an impact on the school as a group of people that all come together. It's not in a locality where there's a strong sense of ‘this is the local community.’” (Arabella, HT Pines Secondary)

Gables Primary serves two very distinct but coherent communities separated by a busy road;

“Looking at the demographics of the school... half the school sits in the most affluent in SIMD (Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation) numbers I suppose, and the other half sit in the most deprived.” (Eliza, HT Gables Primary)

Others serve a single community in which there is widespread and endemic economic hardship. Headteacher Edward identified social features in the community that have a direct effect on pupils in his school;

“There's a lot of community-based violence, ...antisocial behaviour ... a lot of challenges around parenting and role models, boundaries, crime, substance misuse and other things that... are associated, you know, with poverty, right?” (Edward, HT Brook Secondary)

In some areas, schools are embedded in the lives of generations of local residents;

“Our parents have all been, pretty much the majority of them have been [Misty Haven] and [Local secondary school] pupils in their day and so we have a lot of parents that come along to parents night who were taught by a lot of the teachers in our school of our older teachers and but it's very much at the heart of the community and as such we are really involved in our community.” (Ada, HT Misty Haven Primary)

In some schools conflicts between communities served by the school have an impact on behaviour in school;

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Scotland

“We do have some territorial issues with young people and sort of gangs which, you know ... I mean, one of the things about COVID has been that there has definitely been a resurgence of a lot of that which had been kind of dying out. I'm not saying it's a massive problem, but it is something that, as a school community, we become aware of.”
(Arabella, HT Pines Secondary School)

Taken together, leaders spoke with a strong sense of the distinctiveness of City as a place, and of the implications for school leaders. *‘It’s a hard shift’* was a phrase used repeatedly to describe the experience of leading in schools in City.

“I would say it's a hard shift in [Town] and you've got, as I say, you know, a number, you know quite a high level of children with additional support needs. Increasingly, some of that you know is COVID-related and and we're seeing more dysregulated children.”
(Jessica, Local Leader)

“The impact that we see across society in terms of family breakdown and all of that is at the front door of the head teacher. So there's more of that in City, I think, than elsewhere. So I don't think you come to be a head teacher in City because you're looking for an easy, easy number”. (James, Local Leader)

“The people are good and the people really care about our kids and they care about each other. And it's a tough gig. It's a hard place to work. It's not an impossible place to work and there are also harder places to work.” (Edward, HT Brook Secondary)

Schools, Governance, Relationships

“In Scotland.. Education still fairly monolithic is still largely run by local authorities.”
(Alexander, Local Leader)

The Local Authority’s formal role is to oversee schools in City. It plays a central role in essential administrative activities such as recruiting and employing school staff, controls and manages resources and sets out policies for schools relating to directly educational practices. Alexander outlines two areas that have been consistently prioritised by the Local Authority’s leaders over a number of years:

“(we) focused really hard on standards on the basics, but at the same time ...focused on nurture.” (Alexander, Local Leader)

Both the theme of educational achievement and the approach to working with students, described as ‘nurture’, were strongly reflected in what was said by LA officers working directly with schools and Headteachers.

“We believe in nurturing principles, about classrooms and schools being safe bases, about and, you know, a huge big drive in all behaviour is communication, and more recently I was at another conference on restorative practices.” (Jessica, Local Leader)

“We are about trying to make sure every single child in this city gets the best deal that can possibly be had by them. I presume that would be pretty universal, that every local authority. But there is a focus on destinations. You know what happens when they leave school. There's been a huge focus on raising attainment in [City].” (Arabella, HT Pines Secondary)

Awareness of the LA’s emphasis on nurture and way of talking about working with students was pervasive.

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Scotland

“There's a city you know approach to things that we want to go to build in as well. There's a real push on relational approaches.” (Esme, Cedar Secondary)

“If I hadn't taken on board all the kind of stuff about nurture and importance of it, I'd still be that person saying ‘get those gloves off’, ‘get that hat off’ and I wouldn't be getting anywhere because the type of children here will not respond to that.” (Violet, HT Fernwood Primary School)

Discussion of these approaches was usually alongside recognition of challenges presented by children and young people's behaviour, seen as a characteristic of the experience in City schools:

“There's been a shift more to more dysregulated distressed behaviour in youngsters. Probably seen that heightened post COVID and some heads struggling with that.” (James, Local Leader)

“The challenges you face in a community like ours, if you asked any member of staff, they would talk about behavioural challenges, the behaviour of young people, right?” (Edward, HT Brook Secondary)

There was nevertheless broadly a shared view amongst leaders and LA officers that there had been improvement over time. Mila's observation was typical;

“Generally across [City] the schools are good. And they are an awful lot better than they were 12 to 14 years ago.” (Mila, Local Leader)

The LA maintains area-based teams of Improvement Officers who work directly with schools, led by senior officers and overseen by Service Directors who also lead on aspects of the LA's overall strategy. Headteachers did nevertheless often speak in positive terms of being 'left to get on with it', and perceiving themselves in many ways to have significant autonomy over leading their schools.

“I think head teachers get loads of autonomy to run their schools. Right. We're not, nobody's at my back saying ‘what are you doing?’ or ‘why are you doing that?’ OK? Which I think is a real positive thing. But I think the reason that can happen is it's pretty clear as a head teacher in [City] what we're trying to achieve.” (Arabella, HT Pines Secondary)

“A model that [City]'s kind of pushing is that learning communities are your solution to your local problems, so that it's more kind of default in leadership there and a bit more autonomy.” (Eliza, HT Gables Primary)

The interaction between schools, LA policies, its officers and administrators frames and shapes very strongly the experience of being a leader in City schools, whatever the local context. There are also other significant affiliations. Many of the schools in City have a religious designation which can affect schools directly, albeit the LA remains the employer of staff and appoints headteachers. These affiliations affect for example, a school's catchment area:

“Catchment for Catholic schools, our feeder primaries are a wee bit further afield. So, we're kind of all the way over towards [Suburb name], ...so, it takes in a broader area.” (Esme, HT Cedar Secondary)

Identity

“I think there is a [City] identity, there's this, there is a huge number of teachers, head teachers, promoted posts who have always worked in [City]... here in [City] because there's an understanding of the context we work in and there's a shared view of the world amongst [City] teachers, in [City] head teachers.” (Alexander, Local Leader)

Many of the leaders we spoke to in City, both LA officials and Headteachers, articulated a strong association with City and the distinctiveness of being a leader in City. This collective identity was spoken of alongside emerging professional identities, personal and career histories and frequently, strongly asserted values and beliefs.

City Leaders

The commitment and identity as City headteachers that leaders articulated were bound up closely with strong value statements about education and reducing inequality in society.

“That kind of moral purpose of education and moral purpose of kind of educators really, really ran through me. There's more there's more to the job than just telling young people how an Oxbow lake is formed or something like that. It's that kind of bigger picture ... there's an opportunity for you know, for things to be done in schools that that help overcome barriers for young people.” (Esme, HT Cedar Secondary)

“I decided I would apply for jobs in areas of deprivation.” (Violet, HT Fernwood Primary)

Violet was making clear the active choice to seek roles in schools in particular areas of the city. Bonnie had previously been a long-standing headteacher in City, and was an example of someone who had spent most of their career in City.

“My 30 years' experience in [City], I really wanted to stay. So sometimes I know it's good to extend, but for me it's very much about having that commitment to the young people of [City]. It's it's very, very hard to walk away from.” (Bonnie, Local Leader)

The expression of a commitment to working in City was not simply linked with leadership. Interviewees referred to the commitment being part of their motivation as teachers:

“I think it's a vocational thing for me, and it always has been ... I actually ended up with the same class for a couple of years in a row because of the challenges within the class and I just, I kind of got a real sense of this is what I really, really want to do.” (Layla, Depute Moon Primary)

Identities as leaders were described as typically evolving or emerging during a career, intertwined with the strong commitment and assertion of values.

Evolving Identities

“At each level... I've become more aware of what I'm capable of and a bit more confident around that.” (Edward, HT Brook Secondary)

The opportunities for experiences that led to the increasing awareness Edward described had often, in accounts by headteachers, been the result of someone encouraging them or creating the opportunities. Violet for example, described receiving direct encouragement:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Scotland

“If it hadn't been for her and her leadership and encouragement, I never would have done it. You know, you don't know. But she saw something and encouraged me to do it.”
(Violet, HT Ferndown Primary)

Edward, who'd been asked to take responsibilities very early in his career, saw the deliberate and planned nature of the invitation when he looked back:

“I was asked to lead literacy... And that's because there were leadership models within that school. I didn't recognise them as that at the time, any kind of talent slash willingness to do, I think it was celebrated.” (Edward, HT Brook Secondary)

When leaders spoke about taking the step of becoming a headteacher, there were very different ways in which they had seen themselves and the prospect of headship. For a number of the headteachers, their decision to apply to for a headship was highly circumstantial. Some, like Violet, declared forcefully that they had never intended to become headteachers, albeit having held other leadership roles within schools.

“I never set out to be a head teacher. Never. I never set out to come out of my classroom.” Violet (HT, Fernwood Primary)

Several accounts described situations where the departure of an existing headteacher precipitated the change. In Violet's case she had worked with the same headteacher for many years:

“I worked with a wonderful head teacher who gave everybody lots of opportunities. So, although it was in the same school for a long time, I was class teacher, I was senior teacher, I was assistant head, I was deputy head... I would have stayed there forever...”
(Violet, HT, Fernwood Primary)

When that head chose to retire, Violet was clear that she didn't want to stay in the same school without that key working relationship and felt she had to seek a headship of her own:

“I don't think I would have done [it] through choice... I mean, I think I probably knew I would be able to do the job... the thought of it was just like, I don't actually really want to do this, but I felt like I had no choice.” (Violet, HT, Fernwood Primary)

For Hallie, a long-standing depute in a school, a similar situation arose when the serving head left for another role, but in her case she remained strongly tied to the school and felt pressure to apply for the headship:

“Almost without exception, everybody, every member of staff in the school came and said no, you have to. It has to be you.... why am I doing this for other people? This is crazy and yeah, but I felt it was a very warm pressure.” (Hallie, HT Highclere Primary School)

Other headteachers, more typically, described their professional identity as a leader emerging as, through experiences, they began to see themselves as a leader, or others made them aware they were seen that way:

“It was probably quite organic, really. Um, because I don't think I went into teaching thinking about wanting to be a head teacher.” (Ada HT Misty Haven Primary)

“Part of it was to do with overcoming the challenges that happened there and me feeling like I really took more of a more of a leadership role and there was that, you know, that sort of credibility and I felt like I had almost had evidence ... and all of a sudden ... it's it's

other people when they sort of see, you know, thinking about you becoming a head teacher.” (Esme, HT Cedar Secondary)

Esme described both gaining confidence in herself but also an awareness of how others perceived her. Arabella described the importance of peers in a senior team and learning as she developed in a role:

“I didn't really enjoy it initially, the depute role, ... it's quite a big team, which is great because once you're in that team you learn lots from other people and you know, they're all very encouraging.” (Arabella, HT, Pines Secondary)

In Arabella's case, the situation of a retiring headteacher also arose, but in her case, the idea of moving into headship was already there:

“I had applied for two other headteachers' posts prior to this one coming up which I didn't expect to get because I was still quite young and naive and not very good probably. And then the head teacher here was leaving and you know I suppose you would be foolish not to apply.” (Arabella, HT, Pines Secondary)

For some leaders, the idea of being a headteacher had been with them from the beginning of their teaching career and they had understood themselves to be on a path to that position as they gained experience:

“I mean, honestly, I came into teaching and you're going to be a head teacher, right? Right from the very, from the start.” (Eliza, HT Gables Primary)

Individuals also inhabited multiple, fluid identities. Family and life circumstances frequently framed professional identities:

“My aunt was a teacher, and my mum was also worked in education.” (Ada, HT Misty Haven Primary)

“Both my parents are teachers.” (Esme, HT HT Cedar Secondary)

Sometimes there was a keen awareness of the inter-play and tension between different identities:

“Seen effects of head teacher-ness on family.. I didn't want to be that mum for my children and nor did I want to be as worn out as my sister. But then it came to the crunch.” (Hallie, HT Highclere)

Most leaders articulated the idea that their experiences in leadership roles both changed them and made them more aware of what they brought to their roles. Their identity as a professional and an individual was not fixed:

“And I suppose you learn about yourself, that that was something that was really important to me, to feel part of something and feel that I belong in something.” (Eliza, HT Gables Primary)

Violet described being changed as the school worked with the children and families in the community where the school was situated.

“I'm quite a changed person... I think I've probably changed quite a bit through our journey of full school nurture.” (Violet, Ferndown Primary)

Leadership

Recruitment

Process, applications and selection

The process of recruiting and appointing school staff in City is, like all aspects of the organisation of schools, overseen by the LA. In the case of headteachers, the appointments are made by the central teams, working with a panel:

“A panel that would consist of parents, if it's a denominational post there would be a church rep there, sometimes Parish priest... then a peer head, the Link Quality Improvement Officer and [a senior LA officer].” (James, Local Leader)

James went on to explain that the panels both decide which candidates to interview based on applications (shortlisting or ‘leeting’) and conduct the interviews and that for both the secondary and primary phase, candidates attend an assessment centre where they complete relevant tasks, before being interviewed by the panels. The exact form of the assessment centre differs slightly between primary and secondary.

Headteacher posts are advertised widely beyond City, while other senior leader posts in schools tended to be advertised within the City:

“So for PTs [Principal Teachers] and DHT [Deputy Headteachers] posts they would tend to go, that'd be advertised across the city, head teachers posts advertised externally.” (James, Local Leader)

Only if posts were difficult to fill would posts be advertised more widely.

Leaders reported a variety of motivations and perceptions about the application and selection process alongside a direct desire to become a headteacher. Sometimes there was perceived to be a favoured candidate which discouraged some from applying;

“He was the depute in the school. Really, really good, really capable leader. The head teacher who was retiring was always singing his praises. Everybody knew. ... and everyone said to me there's no point applying.” (Jessica, Local Leader)

“Then one down the road came up and there was a person who had previously been a head teacher in [City] applied for that job. So, I thought, I'm not getting that, so that was fine.” (Violet, HT Ferndown Primary)

Edward felt compelled to apply for a post he might not have otherwise applied for because of judgements he felt may be made that could affect his future;

“You've been doing a job and the head teacher's post comes up and you are the person in post, you do have to go through the whole process, you do, but what are you what are you communicating if you don't apply for that job.” (Edward, HT Brook Secondary)

Decisions on applications were thus presented as an interplay between personal motivations, perceptions of the role generally and the specific context, awareness of peers, and perceptions of the views of LA officers on the panels and, to some extent, other panel members.

Local Leader James indicated that as well as considering the capabilities and understanding of applicants, the idea that qualified candidates may not ‘fit’ successfully in a particular set of circumstances was also sometimes a consideration:

“I can think of some candidates who I guess would have all of the qualifications in terms of the academic qualifications. But you can just tell from interview they're not going to work with the staff in that particular (school).” (James, Local Leader)

Violet, discussing the panels, expressed an idea expressed more than once, that the views of other members of the panel, parents in particular, were also very influential:

“... I think one other head teacher, the councillor. And two parents. Sometimes three parents. And somebody from the education department. And the councillor always tends to go with the parents, right?” (Violet, HT Fernwood Primary)

Supply

When it came to attracting applicants and appointing headteachers, accounts of local leaders and headteachers suggest that headteacher posts are usually filled:

“At headteacher level ... we are still seeing a healthy number and we struggle a wee bit more with our denominational sector... at least twelve applicants for that secondary headteacher post, at least that. So you know that that for me is still a sign we have people who want to be leaders at that level.” (Jessica, Local Leader)

There were some specific types of schools for which it was reported as more difficult to recruit:

“It's a bit more challenging to get a Catholic head teacher and [many] of our schools are Catholic schools here in [City]” (Alexander, Local Leader)

“One of our recruitment challenges. It's in Gaelic-medium education.” (Jessica Local Leader)

Overall, local leaders, who were responsible for recruiting and appointing headteachers, were consistent in being confident that posts would be filled. They repeatedly indicated however, that it was often not easy, and that notwithstanding the situation that Jessica described of a good number of applications, it was not uncommon for there to be small fields of candidates or repeated attempts to appoint:

“I think recruitment has its challenges but I think we can recruit.” (James, Local Leader)

“We usually we usually get somebody, but there are occasions when we readvertised a couple of times or put an acting person in to do a ‘suck it and see’ kind of thing.” (Mila, Local Leader)

Diminishing Appetite for Headship

Alongside these accounts were the reflections of headteachers who were aware of senior leaders with potential for headship, who were reluctant to apply and of situations where it had been difficult to appoint someone to the role;

“Definitely an issue with getting head teachers to do the job. Increasingly in [City] there's right, these executive heads so they've got two schools, or they've got three schools ... I think it's just and it's a hard job.” (Hallie, HT Highclere)

The point being made was that having seen the demands of the role and what headteachers were doing day to day, deputies were unwilling to put themselves forward:

“My two deutes here could be head, head teachers ... [Name] sent them the, like the link for the Into Headship and they're like absolutely not. A deputy is a nice place to be.” (Eliza, Gable Primary)

Layla, herself a Depute and quite firm that she did not wish to apply for headship, reflected on her peer group:

“And I would say my friends and my peers, colleagues, there are two people that I know who'd be interested out of probably 15.” (Layla, Depute Moon Primary)

Another aspect, particularly mentioned in relation to primary schools and raised by Layla, was the sometimes small difference between deputy and principal pay:

“I just I think it's just and to be honest, like to get really frank about it, it's not that much more money like it's as if you're taking on a huge chunk of responsibility for not a significant amount of a change in pay.” (Layla, Depute Moon Primary)

James spelt it out further:

“If you're a DHT 6 [senior depute] in a primary school, you would be getting paid more than the head teacher of some of our smaller schools where there was maybe only 100 kids.” (James, Local Leader)

Headteacher Turnover

Whilst there was generally confidence in being able to appoint new headteachers, there were several references to quite large numbers of heads moving on;

“There's always a big churn in City, you know, so turnover is turnover.” (Mila, Local Leader)

James' estimation of the number of appointments with which he'd been involved pointed to quite a large proportion of City's headteachers changing over a six year period:

“Primary posts, which are where the majority of appointments take place.... would say in six years.... appointed to a large number in six years, probably around 50, I would say. So there's been that kind of turnover.” (James, Local Leader)

Although not directly spoken about, the question of how long headteachers stay in post was indirectly observed, for example when numbers of new heads were discussed and James went on to pose a question:

“I think retention is an issue. I think I don't know ... I mean have we got an issue with retention in City?” (James, Local Leader)

Diversity

There was keen awareness and discussion of the diversity of school leaders in City schools, particularly in terms of ethnicity and in comparison to the population of City more generally:

“And so, in terms of [City], we have no black ethnic minority, Asian, nobody of colour who is a head teacher and it's just ridiculous.” (Mila, Local Leader)

Local Leaders and headteachers described an initiative of the LA's to work with a group of middle and potential senior leaders in order to give them opportunities to progress. Alexander suggested a longer term pattern contributed:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Scotland

“I think we've got an issue bringing BME candidates into the profession. And then if there are fewer of them, there are gonna be even fewer gonna make it through to being principal teachers and deputies.” (Alexander, Local Leader)

At school level, headteachers recognised the challenge, but could not see ways to overcome limited numbers - if any – in terms of applicants for senior posts:

“Because people are not likely to be what they don't see. So, suppose it's that... How do you do that [appoint staff] without making sure you've got the best person? I don't know.” (Eliza, HE Gable Primary)

Jessica observed that in terms of gender, senior roles were more reflective of the workforce:

“I mean the vast the vast majority of our primary headteacher colleagues are female, but also in secondary in [City], [City] predominantly has women as headteachers as well.” (Jessica, Local Leader)

Training

Leadership Programmes and CPD

City LA officers described a significant investment in formal programmes to develop leaders. Developing the capacities of senior leaders as well as headteachers was spoken of as a deliberate, concerted strategy:

“There is a tremendous um um resource in leadership development at all levels as well too, because that for us is about that capacity building.” (Jessica Local Leader)

“We have leadership programs that run from probationers right through to experienced heads.” (Bonnie, Local Leader)

“The professional learning offer that's on the table in City is a rich one. I would come back to the point that I think if you become a head teacher in City you won't be on your own.” (James, Local Leader)

In addition to the city's own offer, the nationally funded masters level programme Into Headship was taken up widely. A large cohort of senior leaders were interviewed and accepted onto the programme each year. Headteachers and LA officers discussed some of the complexities of the programme being the only route to achieving the mandatory Standards for Headship.

Hallie, who was appointed before she did the programme, had to achieve the standards in order to continue in her role:

“Getting appointed, I had to do Into Headship as a requirement to keep the job. What would they have done if I didn't get it right enough, chucked me out? So, yeah, then I had to go and do that...and that was a hard year doing that at the same time [as starting headship].” (Hallie, HT, Highclere)

LA officers acknowledged that the potential benefits notwithstanding, the mandatory requirement potentially reduced the pool of candidates:

“Into Headship so that added extra layer of difficulty to recruitment... and continues to be tricky, although most of our heads, you know most of our deputies apply for it, but you're thinning down that pool will be bit for a period of time.” (Mila, Local Leader)

Headteachers did speak positively about the emphasis of the In Headship programme on values, and ideas about leadership despite the demanding nature of the programme alongside school leadership roles. Esme's thoughts were representative:

"...Into Headship getting you into sort of the research and policy also the thinking about the role. I think that's the bit that that you don't, you don't really need to get your head into as much as a middle leader or as a deputy head. That kind of that political aspect of it ... but also you know the kind of 'get the big picture stuff', 'what's your kind of bottom line?' and your moral 'what's that line you won't cross?'" (Esme, HT, Cedar Secondary)

Esme went on to reflect that the programme had provided her with some thinking and confidence as she started in her role:

"And for me that's made some of the decisions and some of the conversations I think it has made, you know, some of the challenge a little bit easier. And that's kind of come from experiencing Into Headship." (Esme, HT, Cedar Secondary)

Hallie's characterisation of the demand of academic writing was quite typical:

"So, enjoy the lectures and enjoy going and discussing all of that and talking about, I hated the academic writing. With a passion. It's not my thing. So really, I really struggled with that because it, just didn't like it, was like pulling teeth but managed to do it."

She too however, reflected that the programme had contributed to increasing self-confidence, despite her 'personal demons':

"I think the inspection and the Into Headship course have helped make me battle some of my own kind of more personal demons about it [headteacher role] right, and have probably helped me settle." (Hallie, HT Highclere)

Informal Development and Experience

Formal programmes, whether the nationally funded programmes or those offered by the LA, were not the only forms of development leaders spoke about. Most heads spoke both of training of teachers, but also developing their senior teams, noticing staff they considered to have potential as leaders and planning for opportunities for them.

Arabella describe prioritising learning with her senior team;

"We have professional learning every week... we try and really push ourselves to get in amongst some of the stuff that's out there." (Arabella, HT Pines Secondary HT)

More generally, experience of leading teams and working across a school was spoken of as an important part of developing as a leader both in terms of capabilities and self-awareness and confidence:

"You don't think you can do something until you have to do it... that sort of experience and the feedback from staff made me think, maybe I can." (Esme, HT Cedar Secondary)

Violet spoke of supporting a particular individual:

"She wasn't the person I thought would get the job... but she blew me away at interview. I've given her lots of opportunities for leadership." (Violet, HT Ferndown Primary)

Local leader James described another headteacher who had actively supported someone to potentially take on the their role:

“He's developed the capacity of a DHT there who's now ready to pick that up and run with it because he has had a thought to succession planning. It's not every head operates in that way.” (James, Local Leader)

Edward spoke more generally of actively developing staff with a point of view that wasn't simply related to the immediate benefit of the school.

“I think that most of the senior leaders that I've worked with have been long sighted enough to know that that you know, it might affect their school in the short term, right, because somebody moves on and does something else. But ... that to be driven entirely by holding your best people to protect your school isn't necessarily a model that's fair or that distributes leadership either... You've got to have a system that supports leadership development and succession planning.” (Edward, HT Brook Secondary)

Both were using the idea of succession planning in terms of trying to ensure there were leaders who were sufficiently prepared for headship when opportunities arose.

Other LA officers spoke of a co-ordinated approach to giving people experience of leading schools:

“We also have a pool of acting heads who we interview annually, who can then be called upon if we need somebody short-term for a couple of months in the middle of the year.” (Mila, Local Leader)

“They're waiting to be head teachers. They're eager to be head teachers, and so when we know our colleague's off long term, we then put them into a school.” (Jessica, Local Leader)

No one in City spoke explicitly of succession planning as a strategy across the city. There was, however, a widespread emphasis on professional learning, a planned approach to leadership development by the LA, and a commonly held view that developing aspiring leaders was an important, albeit as James noted, not all heads prioritised this.

Practices

School Improvement & Leadership of Learning

Attainment and Progress

Both LA officers and headteachers spoke of the role of headteachers in relation to learning and attainment in curriculum subjects.

Jessica spoke more generally about improvement and the role the LA would play:

“It mainly is about linking in with schools and working with them in terms of developing their leadership capacity ... I'm involved in looking at our whole supporting improvement framework and how supporting improvement can really make an impact on schools... one that interests many head teachers because .. it's actually looking closely at what makes a difference when you're trying to drive improvement in a school.” (Jessica, Local Leader)

James was quite specific about how he and other officers might relate to schools:

“So depending on what we identify as the area that needs focus, is it literacy and numeracy, is it health and well-being, is it leadership? We try and pull together a package of support.” (James, Local Leader)

Headteacher Edward was clear that his role when joining his school entailed ‘increasing and improving standards’, and that one of the measures of success for his secondary school was the standards students achieved in exams at the end of their schooling:

“I have definitely been a driving force in terms of attainment, right. Systems and inputs, increasing standards, improving standards, we’re now ahead of virtual comparator on most measures.” (Edward, HT Brook Secondary)

Primary Headteacher Eliza described a similar focus:

“There’s actually quite a good Scottish standard that we could use... So, there’s been a lot of work around that standard. So, there’s been challenging quite a lot of ‘we’ve always done it this [way]’ and it’s been quite successful, not successful enough. I still don’t think attainment’s where it should be, but yeah so that’s right.” (Eliza, Gable Primary)

Teaching and Learning

Headteachers spoke about the importance of teaching and what happens in class rooms in connection with improvement. Primary headteacher Ada was quite specific:

“improvement priorities are based around that pedagogy and thinking about for example, we started by looking at questioning and how we use questioning in the classroom and different types of questioning to encourage deeper thinking amongst the children.” (Ada, HT Mist Haven Primary)

In Secondary schools HTs were not necessarily so directly involved in teaching and learning. Esme spoke about working with a group of staff:

“Look at learning and teaching, we look at self-evaluation, we look at things... I’ve got one particular member of staff who is really keen to get you know a working group together and let’s look at what how we could target our learning and teaching strategy.” (Esme, HT Cedar Secondary)

Edward spoke directly about a slow process of change in his school, in how staff worked together on teaching:

“So observing lessons is a standard part of every school, right. And every school’s got a version of that, right... It took probably about 18 months to get the right people around the table to agree to any model.” (Edward, HT Brook Secondary)

Planning the Curriculum

Another feature of the headteacher role highlighted by Bonnie, which - she suggested – is a somewhat distinctive feature in City, was leaders and their schools taking responsibility for planning their curriculum structure:

“Like one of the closest neighbouring local authorities will have the same curriculum structure for every school, whereas [City] is very much, talking secondary just now, we had autonomy. And schools still do design our curriculum as appropriate to the context.” (Bonnie, Local Leader)

Accountability

There was a clear articulation of the oversight and hierarchy in terms of monitoring schools and accountability.

Local Authority oversight

Alexander referred to the LA using data, albeit suggesting that there was not a great range available:

“Scotland generally is a data desert. And but [Name], used things like attendance data, exclusions data, SQA and all the exam data.” (Alexander, Local Leader)

James set out how he saw the role of LA officers working with headteachers and the expectations of headteachers:

“QIOs (Quality Improvement Officers), so primarily their role is to ensure that head teachers are fulfilling that quality assurance function. So and we would like to think, we would like to think that we have a good handle on where the risk is greatest in terms of the quality of what's being delivered.” (James, Local Leader)

James' description was reflected in what Headteachers said:

“The challenge is there from the Authority, it's not because they're making the challenge but because there's a challenge being put on them.” (Esme, Cedar Secondary)

Esme was alluding to national policies and Eliza went further, referring to specific initiatives for example regarding attainment:

“It's an SNP initiative that Nicola Sturgeon wanted to close the poverty-related attainment gap... each local authority had an allocated attainment advisor.” (Eliza, Gable Primary)

Hallie described some of the ways in which City officers monitored and asked schools to document their work:

“The city want your School Improvement Plan. They want your Education Perspective Report. They want the Standards and Quality reports.” (Hallie, HT Highclere School)

Arabella articulated clearly her understanding and agreement for the focus on pupils progress the quality of the school's work:

“Like we're expected to be able to be so aware of our progress and tracking and self-evaluation. We should know.” (Arabella, Pines Secondary)

Inspection

In addition to LA oversight, Scottish schools are subject to inspections by external inspectors from Education Scotland. Headteachers were keenly aware of the process and requirements. Although relatively infrequent, when they do occur, they were experienced as challenging and stressful:

“First day back after Christmas holidays the inspectors walked in. But actually, in the kind of weeks leading up to the inspection you're kind of gathering all your information your evidence.” (Esme, HT Cedar Secondary)

“I'm very proud of that so, I mean that is a team thing but even just surviving that as a head teacher.” (Hallie, HT Highclere)

Hallie, too described the process of collecting evidence in advance. In her case she had had slightly more notice of the inspection than was usual:

“You have to find all the evidence. So, the first thing is a big so self-evaluation of the school... those six weeks were hell.” (Hallie, HT Highclere)

Despite the challenge of the process, Esme was positive about the results and saw the external view of the school has helpful to her in her role:

“Inspection report really clarified that and really confirmed you know some of the things that I've been, I've been thinking about. And now that it's there, you know published in black and white, it certainly made the kind of forward planning for next year and for the next three years and discussing that with staff far easier job.” (Esme, Cedar Secondary)

There were nevertheless mixed views about inspections. Eva reported headteachers feeling a tension between the standard set of expectations and what may be priorities in their own schools:

“They'll want from head teachers what is going to satisfy their remit, whether it's important or not to the school community. This is what HTs tell me... So, there's conflict between what ... people get excited about and what they then are expected to do or produce.” (Eva, Local Leader)

The tension applied also to Local Authority oversight Eva suggested.

Stakeholders

Bonnie highlighted another, less direct, source of accountability that headteachers experienced:

“People that will be asking questions of your school or, you know, over and above the, you know you, you then have 4 councillors. There'll be an MSP [Member of Scottish Parliament]. There'll be an MP [Member of Westminster Parliament], so you have a lot of political interest in education.” (Bonnie, Local Leader)

Parent Councils in school do not have a formal governance role, nevertheless, as Eliza described, they too were an important group that at times asserted themselves:

“There was about half a dozen men on the parent council. So, it was almost like a Board of Governors, and they like to keep tabs on the previous head teacher.” (Eliza, Headteacher, Gables Primary)

Care

Headteachers and Local Leaders were both very clear that schools' priorities and their roles extended well beyond the focus of pedagogy, curriculum, attainment and academic progress.

Additional Support Needs

An area every leader spoke of was about children with additional support needs (ASN). There was a wide consensus that the number of children with additional needs had increased, and that the perception was that this had accelerated since the COVID-19 pandemic. Jessica summed it up:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Scotland

“You've got, as I say, you know, a number, you know quite a high level of children with additional support needs. Increasingly, some of that you know is COVID-related and we're seeing more dysregulated children.” (Jessica, Local Leader)

Children's additional needs were very frequently linked in discussions with their capacity to manage and regulate their own behaviour.

Hallie, now a headteacher in a Special School, took a longer view and discussed not only the number of children, but also the nature of their needs:

Highclere one to one support to access anything and take part in anything or cope with taking part in something like that. So, there's a massive shift in the way the children are presenting. Right. The complexity is getting more complex.” (Hallie, HT Highclere)

Hallie spoke from the perspective of a leader in specialist provision, but was also aware that there were increasing numbers of children with additional needs in mainstream schools. Eliza described the situation in a small school for which she had temporary oversight:

“There's a number of children with quite distressed behaviours and a number of teachers who are needing a lot of support. So, there if you're there on your own, you're on the floor all the time. It's not settled. It's not a stable school.” (Eliza, HT Gables Primary)

More generally, headteachers spoke of needing support and devoting resource and time to working with a changing cohort. As well as perceived changes in the population in terms of increasing numbers of children with additional needs, the changes in schools were also linked by both headteachers and a local leader to changes in policy and the 'presumption of inclusion' in a mainstream context:

“It is to do with presumption of mainstreaming. And obviously there's been lots of changes, certainly during my career. Yeah, we have a lot more children in schools nowadays with quite significant needs, and there are a huge amount of children with additional needs, who absolutely thrive in the mainstream setting and there are other children who we have bespoke programmes for and very much individualised support plans.” (Ada, HT Misty Haven Primary)

“Some heads struggling with that and probably presumption of mainstreaming a big part of that as well. So government policy around presumption of mainstreaming has created a pressure within the system.” (James, Local Leader)

Inclusion and Responding to Students' Behaviour

Another theme discussed extensively by headteachers was challenges presented by students' behaviour and approaches to responding it.

Alexander described the long standing stance of the Local Authority which:

“Focused really hard and standards on the basics, but at the same time they focused on nurture.” (Alexander, Local Leader)”

As we've already described in the section on Place, it was a statement of values well understood by headteachers:

“So, we know that's what the city is about. It is about inclusion and doing the very best you can. So given that and knowing that that's what your job is, you're given quite a lot of

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Scotland

autonomy to then run the school in the way that you think is going to get that goal.”
(Arabella, Pines Secondary)

The autonomy Arabella spoke of was evident in different approaches taken by headteachers responding to the particular circumstances they faced:

“And what the staff will say to you in a in a place like this is that behaviour's their main concern, right? ... ‘Can we just get this right first?’” (Edward, Brook Secondary)

Edward was the fourth headteacher of his school in five years when he arrived and took an approach of setting and enforcing clear rules with students:

“I know it all sounds like draconian right? But it works, right and we sweat the small stuff. We deal with behaviour ... it's about culture, about behaviour management, right? Support your staff, deal with the things that people care about, right? Because that builds consensus, that builds relational trust.” (Edward, Brook Secondary)

Violet had also faced a challenging situation when she started as headteacher of her primary school:

“When I came here, at first it was quite a culture shock because I had never experienced the level of aggression or violence or a kind of anger from children towards me.” (Violet, HT Ferndown Primary)

She adopted a different approach:

“Started a programme called Paths, which is Positive Alternative Thinking Strategies... used the pupil equity fund money ... three-year coaching model where the staff were trained.” (Violet, HT Ferndown Primary)

She went on to say:

“So that is fully embedded now in the school because we're seven years down the line and it has had so many positives because now children know it's OK to be angry, but it's not OK to pick up a chair and throw it. And I'm not saying it doesn't happen, but it rarely happens.”

Arabella, who had adopted a similar approach to Violet's in her secondary school described both changes in culture and approach, and some difference of view within a large staff body:

“So, we're about inclusion, not exclusion. That brings its own challenges. I would say that 80% of the teachers are fully on board with that.” (Arabella, HT Pines Secondary)

She also highlighted what she experienced as a tension between priorities, especially when resources were limited:

“It's an interesting job that we're trying to do because on the one hand we're trying to be, you know, gaining huge amounts of qualifications. But it's quite hard to do that in a context of inclusion, because resources inevitably are going to have to be directed in different places and it's a real tension.” (Arabella, HT Pines Secondary)

Well-Being

An area that leaders suggested had grown in importance was considering the general well-being of staff.

Alexander suggested that for some headteachers the amount of time they needed to devote to this was unexpected:

“A few of them have reflected that they didn't realize they would spend so much time on teachers' mental health and so they need their ability to relate to people.” (Alexander, Local Leader)

Generally there was recognition of the issue as important both in the instrumental terms of a school running well and as an important value in caring for people. Layla spoke of encouraging individuals to care for themselves:

“We speak about often as a team like and in a system ... (a school) might really miss you, might really feel that loss, but at the end of the day ...there's no point putting your health at risk, putting your family dynamics at risk, your mental health.” (Layla, DHT Moon Primary)

Edward spoke clearly of being proactive as a school:

“My approach, supported by COVID, has been to look after the staff and you know be there for them, set up structures.” (Edward, Brook Secondary)

There was also some recognition of the need to consider the well-being of headteachers, but less discussion of specific actions:

“One of the things that's coming forward to the fore just now is about head teachers' health and well-being. So I'm, I'm not sure that we're doing enough in that area.” (James, Local Leader)

“And could I say they care too much? ... They talk about the rucksack that everyone throws things into at the end of the day, and then they all disappear home and that's very much what I'm hearing about ... everything that a head teacher goes through in a day that others have no cognisance of.” (Eva, Local Leader)

Extended support by schools

Headteachers also spoke about how schools have responded to issues affecting young people, families and the community that extend well beyond the school:

“All schools have become much more hubs but certainly [Cedar Secondary] has become a real kind of almost a community hub... a wider hub that's kind of supports not just the young person but the family around it. Because sometimes that family support makes it easier for the young person to be able to, you know, engage in schools.” (Esme, HT Cedar Secondary)

Other schools described similar initiatives utilising additional monies received from the Scottish Government:

“Health and well-being is at the core of everything. ... when we got the PEF [Pupil Equity Fund] money and we did the review. What was their poverty related attainment gap? It was readiness to learn... if the children are not in a place to be engaged, you can forget it.” (Violet, HT Ferndown Primary)

“So, what the one of the first things I did when we came out of lockdown was to appoint a family well-being worker. So, we've got a family worker here who started off with eight families on our caseload and now has forty families.” (Eliza, HT Gables Primary)

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Scotland

Local Leaders from the LA also described the same issues. Mila talked in terms of a wider system.

“We're in the middle of a system that that we don't have the rules around and we have now got families who we're working really close with to ensure they don't become homeless on the street.” (Mila, Local Leader)

Alexander was more questioning of the role schools were embracing, seeing a tension between the educational and wider support activities:

“Some feel, they are like a community centre, and you think actually we're teachers, you know that we're here to deliver education. We're not a Community Centre. So sometimes we have to draw the line there in terms of that moving from being a, you know, like educational establishment into being a community centre and as being social workers.” (Alexander, Local Leader)

Leadership, Values and Professional Beliefs

Leaders in City spoke about values and motivations connected with their role as well as views about how to carry it out.

Moral Purpose and Social Justice

Almost all made a very clear statement about a generalised moral purpose and vocation underpinning their motivation:

“That kind of moral purpose of education ... really ran through me. There's more to the job than just telling young people how an Oxbow lake is formed.” (Esme, HT Cedar Secondary)

“For me, it's a vocation, it's not a job. I didn't spend 4 years at university for a job. I spent four years at university because it was something that I was really, really passionate about.” (Ada, Misty Haven Primary)

Mila described the moral purpose has an unchanging 'iceberg' through a career:

“So, moral purpose would be my first and foremost one. You need that before you do anything. You know, you can reclarify values, the kind of person yes can change a bit over life. But some of those things are like that iceberg underneath.” (Mila, Local Leader)

In the sections on Place and Identity, we described the focus in City from the LA on reducing inequalities, inclusion and nurture. These were linked to moral purpose by leaders as social justice.

Mila spelt out the City LA view:

“Social justice, equalities, they're embedded into that. So that would be a high expectation and [City] we would be expecting our head teachers to have a real focus, number one, on poverty and social justice. That's hugely important for me.” (Mila, Local Leader)

School leaders often expressed their commitment in terms of the children and young people with whom they worked, or the specific locations in which they worked:

“I enjoyed working with most at [School Name], with the kind of children who came from maybe not the most affluent of homes.” (Violet, Ferndown)

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Scotland

“I think it’s a vocational thing for me ... working with children, particularly boys who are disengaged and are particularly challenging.” (Layla, Depute, Moon Primary)

Professional Values and dispositions

Leaders’ views and reflections on school leaders’ roles strongly emphasised relationships.

Relationships and sharing leadership

James was very clear:

“I think you need to be relationship-focused. I think heads will get into difficulty if they're not relationship-focused, if they're not focused on building the ethos.” (James, Local Leaders)

Heads described working closely with teams and prioritising a wider culture in schools:

“You know, normally at the end of the day we'll get together and just have a debrief of the day.” (Hallie, HT Highclere)

“I was really determined to aim for it to be that kind of family, that kind of a team atmosphere and we did manage that.” (Ada, Misty Haven Primary)

More directly in terms of leadership, they commonly spoke of many people taking formal and informal leadership roles and described this as distributing leadership and empowering staff:

“In the school, there's loads of leadership in the school. Yeah, from yes, our formal leaders, but also go to class teachers... we're really supportive of like leadership. Yeah, it doesn't have to be a formal role.” (Arabella, Pines Secondary)

“To have the team with me and to be able to empower the team... devolved and distributed leadership.” (Ada, Misty Haven Primary)

Flexibility and Learning

When speaking about sustaining leadership, a number of leaders spoke of changes over time and the need to be adaptive and ready to learn:

“I think at times you know, we're in a really uncertain time in a kind of unpredictable time just now. I think you've really got to be open to kinda challenge and maybe things that have worked... to be a successful head teacher now and one that can be sustained, you've got to be able to say, actually this isn't working anymore.” (Layla, Depute, Moon Primary)

“I think you need to be creative, and you need to be open to new ideas, open to doing things in a new way and reflecting really honestly on what's not working... But brave. Yeah. Willing to try new things.” (Hallie, HT Highclere)

Violet reflected on the implications for the leader as an individual:

“And I think as a person you evolve with your school as well... So, you've got to be a somebody who's going to, you know, think of your context and listen.” (Violet, Ferndown Primary)

Leadership in context

The point about context was taken up repeatedly and was described initially in the section above on Place. Bonnie and Eva added an extra layer to the discussion, referring to the

considerations of ‘different systems’ by which they meant the way local and national organisations worked:

“They need to ... understand the pressures and pulls of different systems.” (Bonnie, Local Leader)

“You can do what’s right for your school, but understand the policy context and challenge it when appropriate.” (Eva, Local Leader) “it will be controlled integrated and what that does, it affirms what we already do, but it’s more...intentional. It’s saying we’ve got, a big diverse, for Northern Ireland the school’s quite diverse.” Archie, Headteacher, Ivy Secondary

Violet again highlighted the way in which she felt different local circumstances may require different kinds of people:

“What kind of person do you need to be to be a good leader? Because it’s not just about the person, it’s about the circumstances as well.” (Violet, Ferndown Primary)

Resilience

Resilience as an important personal resource was spoken of in terms of continuing to work at things despite setbacks or difficulties, and withstanding pressure:

“You have to have a high level of energy. I mean, there is no doubt about that. I also think you have to have a very high level of resilience as well too and to an extent, I always say this to people, you have to be able to park it when you go home as well.” (Jessica, Local Leader)

“Resilience as well. I think that feeling of actually, you know we’re going to have to, there’s going to be ups and downs, but trying to keep things, keep things going and trying to keep that balance between leadership and management strategy and operational.” (Eliza, HT Gables, Primary)

Drains

All of the school leaders were asked about and discussed those things that drained them in their leadership roles.

In City, the accumulated burden and workload of the headteacher role was one of the most prominent themes.

Workload and Weight of Leadership

“It’s kind of a job that never ends and it never will end.” (Layla, Depute, Moon Primary)

As Layla observed, headteachers spoke of the volume and relentless nature of their jobs, addressing both day to day and longer term issues. Hallie described the responsibility as an ‘invisible weight’:

“That, the invisible weight and imposter syndrome, massively.” (Hallie, HT Highclere)

Hallie’s reference to self-doubt was common. Overall, there was a sense of having to find an accommodation with the role given the ‘never ending’ nature of the role which Layla referred to. Edward was clear that he had to choose what to prioritise:

“I’m not sure there is a model in terms of sustaining people in head teachers’ jobs...certainly now, with things being so acute in terms of resource, you’re just like

here's a list of things I'm going to completely ignore now, you know, because I'm not going to spend till ten o'clock tonight doing it." (Edward, HT Brook Secondary)

Staff resilience and HR challenges

A specific area of the role that was raised repeatedly was challenges presented by staff. One thread of this was the suggestion that all staff in schools were, particularly since the COVID 19 pandemic, less resilient. Arabella described it as fragility:

"We just seemed everything still feels much more fragile. You know that staff are much more fragile. You know, staff absence is up." (Arabella, HT Pines Secondary)

An important way the fragility manifests itself is, as Arabella suggested, in staff absence. Another frequently mentioned was in expectations and request for greater flexibility in working arrangements, something schools reported they could rarely accommodate. A second aspect of staffing that was reported as draining were staff disputes either directly with the school or as Esme described, between staff:

"One of the big things is when there's relationship breakdowns between staff." (Esme, HT Cedar Secondary)

Such disputes were frequently protracted and difficult to resolve and heads described the emotional toll of such disputes.

An issue relating to teaching staff was a consequence of the way City deployed teaching staff. Decisions about who would teach in which school and allocation of permanent positions are made by the central HR department of the LA. This was an issue officers were well aware of:

"You know, head teachers here feel they aren't. They never get to appoint their own staff." (Alexander, Local Leader)

Ada made this point clearly, expressing frustration at not having an influence of what she saw as the quality of her teaching staff:

"We don't actually. We don't really get to pick our own staff, right. I've got a couple of teachers who are amazing and I don't want to lose, but I know I can't keep them." (Ada, HT Misty Haven Primary)

Another consequence highlighted was the difficulty in sustaining practices developed with staff who were moved between schools:

"All of the development that you've done with your team, all the relationships that you've built with your team, you just lose them like that." (Layla, Depute Moon Primary)

Edward summed up the tension between knowing the rationale and the practical implications in terms of appointing staff to his school:

"I understand the equity around that. It's just frustrating, because I'm accountable for it, all right. But I don't have control over over that." (Edward, HT Brook Secondary)

Finance, Resources

Concern about limited resources and future reductions in budgets were raised by almost everyone with a range of consequences:

“Post-COVID in terms of the pressures around that and at a time now of shrinking budgets, shrinking staff resources... I don’t think there has been a harder time in terms of budgets, staffing cuts, all coming at the same time.” (James, Local Leader)

Edward focused on the impact on the number of teachers and what that meant for the way the school operated:

“We’re losing teachers. Next year, we’re losing X. The following year it’s likely to be X plus Y.” (Edward, HT Brook Secondary)

Eliza reflected on indirect impacts on workload and the strain that was placed on the schools and herself:

“The bureaucracy and with cuts ... all this stuff gets pushed onto us... people will say, you know, get your office to do it... I ran with nobody in the office from August till February.” (Eliza, HT Gables Primary)

Anxiety about the potential for further reductions in budgets and resources were spoken of in most interviews.

Additional Needs

Increasing numbers of children with Additional Needs in mainstream schools was described in the section on Leadership above. Addressing the challenges presented to schools was discussed as a drain by most headteachers. Some spoke of the difficulty of meeting the needs of individual students, particularly where they had significant and complex needs:

“She can’t speak. She’s in nappies and she bangs her head off the ground... and she’s in mainstream school with another 24 children.” (Violet, Fernwood Primary)

Another aspect was related to the concerns about resources recognising the time, cost and organisation required to make appropriate arrangements, and the implications if resources and budgets were reduced:

“We’ve got lots of things in place to try and support quite complex needs for young people at times and quite complex circumstances. So try and get the best possible outcome but without that sort of resource there that that worries me.” (Esme, HT Cedar Secondary)

Behaviour

Whilst, like Additional Needs, responding to students’ behaviour was seen as part of the role of schools that headteachers led, it too was discussed as a drain in various ways. Alexander’s observations and analysis were representative. He related the draining impact to wider societal changes including the impact of the pandemic and connected it to the way children behaved in schools:

“Pupils coming into Primary 1 increasingly not, you know, they’re still not toilet trained with extremely distressed and disregulated behaviour. These were kids who were in the one, two when all that [COVID-19] was going on, and I think we’re still seeing a lot of the consequences in terms of mental health. All these issues we’ve gone back to business as usual, like the the pandemic’s done.” (Alexander, Local leader)

Edward emphasised other impacts when schools were not able to address student’s Additional Needs:

“So what happens, there are kids whose needs aren't met. There are behavioural, not always, but there are often behavioural challenges around that, chips away at your ethos.” (Edward, HT Brook Secondary)

Sustains

The things that sustain leaders in their roles were also discussed in the interviews and some strong themes were evident.

Making a Difference

Every headteacher spoke of the significance of schools to children and young people both as something that motivated them, but also as something that sustained them, usually expressed as ‘making a difference’. One facet was the satisfaction taken from working with children:

“The key thing for me is the children. That’s why I’m here and I’m here to make a difference.” (Ada, HT Misty Haven Primary)

Making a difference was related directly to seeing changes for individual young people:

“There’s so much joy in watching young people’s progression... those positive outcomes.” (Esme, Cedar Secondary)

The difference was also related to more strategic changes for example opportunities schools could offer or achievements for whole cohorts:

“When you see those numbers... that is a huge source of motivation.” (Edward, HT Brook Secondary)

Agency, Moral Purpose and meaning

The sense of moral purpose and strongly held values such as achieving social justice were also spoken of in the Leadership section in terms of the requirements of being a leader.

Headteachers also spoke of those values and beliefs as part of what sustained them in their role. The motivation was linked in conversation to being able to act on those values and beliefs and deriving meaning and a sense of belonging:

“So that’s again why being a head teacher, is something that is important to me. There was a feeling of belonging and having autonomy.” (Eliza, HT Gables Primary)

“It’s the community... I know hundreds of young people by name. I’m so lucky I get to do that every day.” (Arabella, Pines Secondary)

Relationships

All the headteachers we spoke to referred in some way to relationships as sustaining them. Professional relationships within schools were spoken of often in relation to one or two particularly significant working relationships:

“Having that very good, easy relationship with your depute is absolutely critical... there’s a lot of trust there.” (Hallie, HT Highclere)

Immediate teams were also frequently discussed, reinforcing the discussion in the leadership section where leaders speak of sharing or distributing leadership and empowering teams:

“I do have a team of people who can chip in right. And there's a good, a good level of trust and relationships are strong enough that we can have that and that's a really good source of support as well.” (Edward, HT Brook Secondary)

More informal relationships with professional peers were almost always spoken of. For Ada, she found that within a local network orchestrated by the LA, the Learning Community:

“The head teachers within the learning community, I would say, you know, I've got really close friends with them. So, these are the people who I would first of all phone or text whether it's to let off steam or to actually look for some advice.” (Ada, Mist Haven Primary)

Other headteachers spoke of similar networks that had evolved through their careers or that had become established on programmes like Into Headship.

Another set of relationships that sustained leaders, frequently discussed were those beyond their professional role:

“My family and friends, and I do feel I've got quite a good work life balance.” (Violet, HT Ferndown Primary)

Learning and Development

Professional Learning was spoken about of in terms of being sustaining. This was both in relation to leaders' own learning and development, and also to developing others.

Arabella spoke about both being engaged in professional learning herself and working with other heads from the city to create a programme for potential senior leaders in the city.

“So, you'll get an opportunity to work with people in the project doing professional learning and that's great fun and and it's good to be part of that and the city there's lots of work in teams so I'm working on a programme called [xxxx Leadership].” (Arabella, HT Pines Secondary)

Support

LA Support Structures

In the section on Place, we outlined the organisation of the teams of LA officers who work directly with schools. From the perspective of the LA, these teams were the main vehicle for supporting headteachers:

“I do like to think we are a supportive organisation ... we work alongside our head teachers as peers.” (Jessica, Local Leader)

Jessica also described a proactive approach:

“Quality improvement officers, they do quite regular pastoral check-ins anyway, but we just you know, say like go out and see how things are.” (Jessica, Local Leader)

James also described an active role for the teams:

“Heads that need the greatest support...draw on the resource from across the city. We try and pull together a package of support.” (James, Local Leader)

In the section on Accountability James also described a role for the LA evaluating the work of headteachers. Mila recognised the dual roles as being in tension:

"You know, if you challenge a head then they will feel unsupported. But it is a balance between support and challenge." (Mila, Local Leader)

Peers and networks

The networks of peers, both formal and informal, mentioned as sustaining leaders were important sources of support:

"Informal networks that I know, and I was part of a few of these, and it tended to be with people that I trusted, who I would pick up the phone to and say, look, so something's come out from local authority. Can we have a chat about this?" (Eva, Former HT and Local Leader)

Eliza described a neighbouring head seeking her out and forming a supportive working partnership:

"He got in touch to say, you know, you're new to the area, let's do some work together. We've had a really successful partnership." (Eliza, HT Gables Primary)

Hallie described an initiative by a group of heads to create resources and advice useful to other heads:

"Complex needs head teachers got together to do an online kind of offering, right, for staff in mainstream schools ...struggling with children presenting with significant additional support needs." (Hallie, HT Highclere)

The 'online offering' had been enabled by the LA. Nevertheless, there was some recognition that not all headteachers would feel supported:

"There's limited HR support, and like probably could never be enough for HR support anyway... Not every headteacher has somebody that they can offload, share, cry, whatever. Because they take it home with them, and sometimes there are things they can't share at home either." (Eva, Former Headteacher and Local Leader)

"There is a wee bit, of kind of the wheels turning very slowly at centre. When you, you're thinking actually this is really quite important for us." (Hallie, HT Highclere)

Violet's view was quite representative however:

"I would say personally through my experience it's a great authority to work for. There is an always been plenty of support... [Name] has been out to visit and whatnot. But there's also an opportunity to have a bit of freedom." (Violet, HT Ferndown Primary)

All heads discussed, again reinforcing the point made in the Sustains section, the importance of the structure of teams and relationships within the school:

Ada made the point more than once:

"We're actually a team that everybody gets on very well. And the principal teachers are really good at seeing when we're all really particularly busy and and are very good kind of thinking on the spot and being able to provide support." (Ada, Misty Haven Primary)

"Everyone in the team for the most part would feel comfortable to come and say I need help. And I think that's kind of, I'm really proud that that's the kind of ethos that we've [built]." (Layla, Depute Moon Primary)

Locality Case Study: Scotland Rural - Coast

Introduction

The locality of Scotland Rural Coast comprises a coastal town (Coast) and a larger rural area surrounding it (Rural), overseen by a different Local Authority.

We carried out 13 interviews in Rural/Coast. Table 5.4 shows a breakdown of the roles of people we interviewed. Table 5.5 lists the interviewees and their roles, indicating that visited a range of primary, secondary and special schools.

Table 5.4: Breakdown of interviewees by role

	Depute Head	Head	Local Leader	Total
Rural/Coast	1	7	5	13

Table 5.5: Breakdown of interviewees by role

Name	Gender	Role	School/ Organisation	Type	Time In Current post (Years)	Time in role (Years)
Max	M	LA Officer	Scot-Rural-LA	Local Authority	6	9
Reuben	M	LA Officer	Scot-Rural-LA	Local Authority	10	10
Aurora	F	LA Officer	Scot-Coast-LA	Local Authority	2.5	2.5
Mason	M	LA Officer	Scot-Coast-LA	Local Authority	2.5	2.5
Scarlett	F	Senior Lecturer	Stewart University	University	2	2
Ethan	M	Head	Sponge Woods Secondary	School-Secondary	5	5
Lola	F	Head	Beatrice Primary	School-Primary	1.5	1.5
Nancy	F	Head	Ryder Vale Secondary	School-Secondary	3	3
Adam	M	Head	Wilkerson Secondary	School-Secondary	6	7.5
Orla	F	Head	Rosemary Primary	School-Primary	5	11
Ayla	F	Head	Copper Hill Secondary	School-Secondary	9	16
Rose	F	Head	Isabel Primary	School-Primary	9	9
Bella	F	Depute	Rosemary Primary	School-Primary	4	4

Place

Schools and communities

The locality of Rural-Coast consists of a large town on the coast (Coast), surrounded by a much larger, mainly rural and geographically diverse area (Rural). The town is a mid-sized Local Authority with a diverse population compared to many urban areas in Scotland. The rural area, in contrast, has a less diverse population than the national average and is much larger in terms of the number of schools and geographic area. There are significant pockets of wealth in Coast:

however, the proportion of students in the top 2 (most affluent) quintiles of the Scottish Indices of Multiple Deprivation is a lot lower than in the inland Rural area.

There has been significant change in the whole locality as long-established industries close and patterns of employment change. The economic circumstances and character of communities in the whole locality were linked in leaders' minds to historic and changing patterns of employment. Rose reflected on the differences between two schools in Town in which she had worked:

“Very different from my experience of being a teacher, you know, in an area and in in sort of in the centre of [Town] in an area of deprivation... [this] is the only school in the community... It's quite an idyllic place and safe place to raise children... it's not far, and we feel quite connected to [Town]... families moved to [Coast] or from all over the world and settle here with their families. So really diverse community.” Rose, Headteacher, Isobel Primary

More generally, Mason described longstanding patterns of employment and perceived attitudes to continuing in education:

“And there, there's also a sense in which there's quite a large, affluent blue collar and engineering kind of tradition within [Town] where the qualifications are not quite as important to families because there's that understanding that I'll be able to get myself a job.” Mason, Local Leader (Coast)

Leaders were also very aware of parts of the area in which circumstances were different. Aurora, familiar with the whole of Town, referred to Scottish Indices of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) to characterise the circumstances of families in an area, lower numbered indices identifying greater levels of deprivation:

“Other smaller communities that are around the outside of [Town], within [Area of Town] you'd have all SIMD, but the majority would be in SIMD one and two... there can be challenges around deprivation and cost of living crisis within all city schools. And I think that's sometimes missed because, particularly as [Town] is a place when COVID came and some people started to lose their jobs, they'd never been in that situation.” Aurora, Local Leader (Coast)

Ayla's school, a secondary school, was more central in Town and popular, meaning it was unable to accept all the students from the area who wished to go there:

“The dynamic of the [Town] centre is changing as well. So, there are some particular issues now. So, although we are [in] an affluent postcode, the layers beneath that in terms of the city centre and our city centre has changed... that's changed for us.” Ayla, Headteacher, Copper Hill Secondary

Ayla was suggesting, like Aurora, that there were challenges due to their economic circumstances for many of her pupils despite the apparent affluence of the area. Leaders familiar with the Rural part of the locality also spoke of a complex range of circumstances. Reuben emphasised the variety:

“It's very it's very diverse in a lot of ways. Geographically it's very diverse... we have historic communities through to [Town industry] influenced commuter, affluent locations. So there's that variation.... Rural poverty is a significant and often hidden factor because of isolation, because of lack of transport, lack of facilities, et cetera, et

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Scotland

cetera, which is isn't always picked up in the SIMD analysis.” Reuben, Local Leader (Rural)

Max made a similar point, highlighting that economic hardship was quite concentrated in some places:

“People see it as very affluent and there are areas of huge affluence. Also, areas of huge deprivation. If you go to the north [of Rural] ... you know, then you've got some SIMD2 areas, some of our, some of the lowest life expectancy for males in the country and huge issues.” Max, Local Leader (Rural)

In both the rural and coastal parts of the locality, there were long-established and stable communities as well as changes in the population whose effects were not uniform, and impacted schools differently.

Aurora described schools generally with a growing number of pupils in [Town], attributing it in part to people moving to the area:

“The geography of the city is there's quite a high population within the city centre and there would be high demand on housing within the city centre because of the schooling there... Scotland's [school population] is on a dip, we're on an increase and that's because of the university in the area and they offered courses. So we've had an influx of international students with families.” Aurora, Local Leader (Coast)

The trend affects secondary and primary schools, but Aurora was conscious of a contrast with some more rural schools in the Rural part of the locality:

“There's nothing under 300 (pupils) whereas in [Rural] they've got small two-teacher schools, three-teacher schools that they have to find staff for and we lose people from Town to [Rural] to do those kinds of jobs because they think it's easier”. Aurora, Local Leader (Coast)

In Rural, in some places there was growth, the rural town in which Rosemary Primary was located was an example:

“So, [Village] is yes, this is a town now. It was a village that has grown, a lovely country feel... So, there's a nice community and feel there, people who are genuinely interested in the school.” Bella, DHT, Rosemary Primary

Max made clear, however, that changes in Rural's population did not necessarily mean all villages grew or that school populations increased:

“We have got an increasing population, but ... increase in the over 65s and a significant decrease in the school-age population.... we've already closed six [schools] in the past six years ... People just don't want to live there [in rural areas]. You know, people want to live close to [Town]. It's just demographics, you know? Max, Local Leader

As Max makes clear, the changing population has had a differential impact on schools with those in more remote areas sometimes very small:

“The smallest primary school... has eight children in it, our largest primary school has 550. We've got, in one part of [Area] just now, we've got three schools that are all probably within a 10 mile radius, one's got 20 children, one's got 21 children and one's got 15 children.” Max, Local Leader

Leaders' accounts highlighted that there were very local and specific circumstances affecting schools across the locality, within some quite general trends in the relative affluence of the two parts of the locality, and the changing industry and patterns of employment that affected the whole area.

Schools, Governance, Relationships

"I would start by saying there's always a tension between the role of national government and the role of local government. And then the role of schools ... We're still quite traditional in Scotland." Max, Local Leader (Rural)

Max's observation captures the key relationships for schools in the Locality, with Local Authorities overseeing and having responsibility for schools, whilst LA teams consider how the demands of national policy relate to their area. In both parts of the Rural-Coast locality, the LAs maintained teams of officers who were the main contact for headteachers, in both LAs referred to a Quality Improvement Officers (QIO).

There were some clear differences in how the two LAs worked with schools, partly reflecting differences in the size and levels of remoteness of the two LA areas. One leader, who had worked in both LAs, described the experience as being 'like chalk and cheese'.

In Rural LA, schools are separated by much greater distances and the LA covers a much larger number of schools than Coast LA. As a result, the teams were organised differently:

"Three teams, North, Central, South. ... and they provide that kind of line management to the Headteacher, support for the Headteachers, dealing with disciplinaries, grievances." Max, Local Leader (Rural)

There were aspects of school operations that both LAs controlled closely, particularly budgets and staffing. Max described an LA decision to control schools' spending for a period of time in order to balance the LA's books and acknowledged headteachers reactions:

"Some Headteachers will say, well I'm not very empowered if you're not letting me spend my devolved budget. Well, that's back to that greater good. Sometimes we all need to make sacrifices to balance the books and so on." Max, Local Leader (Rural)

More generally, headteachers spoke of being 'left to get on with it' and relying closely on networks of colleagues, particularly in Rural LA:

"The local authority and governance there does drive what we do in [Rural-Coast], and we are given that freedom as well to, to, you know, push forward what we feel is appropriate for our school. I think that we are given a wee bit of freedom within, you know, from the education authority to develop what we need for our kind of, within the bounds of the boundaries that you have. But it's not specifically directed." Ethan, Sponge Wood Secondary

Ethan felt a sense of autonomy and 'a wee bit of freedom' in how he led his large secondary school based in a rural town. There were a mixture of views, however, about how closely schools worked together or the LA directed headteachers. Reuben reflected on the need for flexibility because of the variety of contexts:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Scotland

“There hasn't been a clarity of [Rural] expectations and strategic detail. That's partly why, because yeah, flexibility within a framework would be necessary because you've got such diverse contexts. And I do think context is important.” Reuben, Local Leader (Rural)

There was sometimes a feeling that there was too little structure and direction, with individual schools then making decisions in isolation:

“There doesn't feel like an [Rural-Coast]-ness because it's like it would be doing little pockets of different things. And I'm not for one second saying that everything should be the same, but the framework needs to be there. The backbone of it needs to be there. And then how we [Rosemary Primary]-ise that is what makes it unique to [Town], you know, but the framework needs to be there.” Orla, Headteacher, Rosemary Primary

Headteachers of schools in Coast LA spoke differently about their relationships with both the LA and with their peers. There had been relatively recent changes in the leadership of Coast LA and, as a result, the approach to working with schools. Aurora described the new Director appointing a team of QIOs:

“The Director, ... picked us all based on our strengths. So all of us had been head teachers.. we would set up um working groups with head teachers so that they were part of, they were part of delivering the message, so that they're part of of um formulating the plan.” Aurora, Local Leader (Coast)

Aurora was implying that QIOs had previously, not necessarily been headteachers and was describing an effort to encourage what the LA described as a collegiate and collaborative attitude amongst headteachers. Adam recognised the shift:

“How can you help someone who's there now if you've never felt what it's like? And yeah, it was more dictatorial, I would say and ‘you will do this and you need to do this.’” Adam, Headteacher, Wilkerson Secondary

Mason suggested that some of the initiative for working together came from headteachers themselves and described a particular initiative:

“2021, around the time that that sense of collective uh collectivism was coming in from from a group of quite forward-thinking head teachers... secondary schools have agreed a broad, broadly common timetable...essentially what it means is that we collectively offer a set of courses that wouldn't run if they were just offered within the individual school.” Mason, Local Leader (Coast)

The nature of such joint working between schools was partly enabled by their relative proximity in the town. More generally, other headteachers described ways in which schools supported each other:

“So, we do to support each other... we do have that sort of support role for schools here. So we go, like for instance, the end of this month, we're going out to [School Name] to do a quality improvement visit to help them because they're preparing for inspection.” Ayla, Headteacher, Copper Hill Secondary

There were interactions between schools in Rural. Many of these were based on nearby schools:

“We meet together regularly as a group and it certainly helps to support what we do here, but also myself supporting them as head teachers too. And because the experience that I can bring to them, because a lot of them are new.” Ethan, Headteacher, Sponge Wood

There was also a more deliberate attempt by the LA to orchestrate supportive, small peer groups:

“It was kind of optional thing, so these trios through, sometimes maybe personal connection rather than just geography, sometimes geography, sometimes similar schools. So it's been a mixed economy of how, but there is now an expectation that all schools will work in this, uh, kind of self-improving context.” Reuben, Local Leader (Rural)

“So, in [Rural-Coast] we started doing trios or quads over the three areas, North, Central and South. And it's really good actually, because it just gives you that other person or two people that you can see what they're doing.” Lola, Beatrice Primary

In both LAs we also heard of more formally organised headteacher associations.

Identity

Personal, professional and collective identities featured in the way leaders spoke and had been part of their development as leaders. For some, their own background and story was a central part of their motivation and perspective:

“I remember thinking we lived in a very scary council estate in [Town], and there were two options for me to get out of there. One was to get pregnant, or two was to get an education so, I got the education And I think education is the bit that that makes the difference. And it doesn't have to be that you go to university because I think education is lots of different things.” Nancy, Ryder Vale Secondary

Ayla grew up in the locality and connected her commitment to education in the area to that fact. She also linked her background and family experiences strongly to her motivations and educational values:

“It's a roundabout answer, but I've learned a lot from having children in my own family, you see education from one angle through being a head teacher. My niece [Name], she is clever and practical, but she's not your straight five higher candidate... So that kind of seed of which has always been with me and the reason why I'm in education is how do we make sure that everybody experiences success.. it reaches back to identity and why you're doing things.... Because, you know, I come from a background that [I was] first person at university. My mother thinks I was swapped at birth, you know, all that sort of thing. So, you do it. But I had people who believed in me, that helped me get, you know, an education.” Ayla, Copper Hill Secondary

Personal identity as a parent played a part for others. Rose took a decision to seek part-time work, a relatively unusual step as a school leader:

“And there were little things that happened like the first day my daughter swam across the pool. I've been too busy with work, ... And then I missed that, and I realised I need to, I need to have a day where I can catch up on work home stuff and then have the weekends with the kids.” Rose, Headteacher, Isobel Primary

We noted in the previous section on Place that many schools in Rural-Coast are located in relatively isolated rural communities. Leaders discussed the position of the school, its importance for community identity and implications for the view of the headteacher:

“I got a feeling most schools in [Area] that sense of almost loyalty to the school as the hub of often a rural community and a really respected kind of institution. I've gotta be honest, when I became head teacher, it was one of the things I struggled with. This sense of deference.” Reuben, Local Leader

Reuben recognised the adjustment and personal challenge of taking on the role. Scarlett, who was involved in overseeing leadership programmes such as Into Headship for a university, as well as echoing the challenge for leaders who were not from a particular community, emphasised the importance of schools to the community and the concerns when they were at risk of closure:

“People didn't like the idea of losing the identity of the community because in these rural locations the school is the heart of the community. Everybody goes to the school and so when you join schools, there's a risk of becoming, you know that idea of you being absorbed by something else, other than you have your own identity.” Scarlett, Local Leader

For other leaders, these factors were positive motivators, Ethan for example, who had joined Sponge Wood Secondary when it opened, described developing a strong emotional attachment to his school and how challenging the lockdown during COVID-19 had been:

“You become emotionally attached to a school and having grown up with it from its birth to where we are now and, and having a day like ... I admitted that coming up from the car park that I actually had a few tears.” Ethan, Headteacher, Sponge Wood Secondary

Evolving Identities

Leaders described professional identities that evolved through their careers. A common account was of opportunities being created and other leaders acting as role models. Max's story was typical:

“Some really good opportunities and really good role modelling in my career and I am going back to when I was a young teacher and I was taken off timetable a couple days a week to support newly qualified teachers.” Max, Local Leader (Rural)

Orla, who came to teaching later and saw herself as a potential leader also described a headteacher recognising what she needed to do in order to progress:

“There was no way I was going to be able to progress there. But I think because of my previous management and leadership experience, and the fact that I'd spoken to the head teacher and said, ‘look, I really want to go into a promoted post’ that he assigned me into the nursery, which at first point I was like, are you kidding me? Really those people are not for me, but what it gave me was that leadership experience because it was 12 members of staff.” Orla, Headteacher, Rosemary Primary

For other leaders, their intention to be a headteacher was not so clearly formed. Aurora's experience of circumstances propelling her into an acting role as a first step was not unusual:

“Became a DHT, was a DHT for over 20 years in the same school... So yeah, that whole, there's no need, that I was fulfilled as far as my career was concerned at that point, then the head teacher left.” Aurora, Local Leader (Coast)

Others, like Adam, needed active encouragement before seeing themselves as a leader. He describes first a close family member and then his headteacher encouraging him:

“She was like, yeah, you can do this. And if I can do this, you can do this and all of that sort of stuff. So, so yeah, ... I don't think I would have gone for any of them, if I'd been left on my own ... My head teacher just before she left, we had a really good chat and she said I was ready and that made a big difference to me around thinking that I could do that.” Adam, Headteacher Wilkerson Secondary

Leadership

Recruitment

Schools in Coast-Rural were state-funded and overseen by one of the two LAs in the locality as we noted above. All staff in the schools were employed by the respective LAs, and in the case of headteachers and senior leaders, LA officers were directly involved in their recruitment. In both LAs, officers reported that they were generally able to recruit headteachers when there was a vacancy:

“We've got no acting head teachers currently. And when we advertise a post, we are managing to appoint... is it as many [applications] as I'd like? No, I think we risk breeding people who sit comfortably at depute.” Aurora, Local Leader (Coast)

Reuben, who was involved in making appointments in the Rural LA, had a similar reflection:

“We are getting usually enough applications to form a leet of quality people, but not always.” Reuben, Local Leader (Rural)

Both Aurora and Reuben qualified their remarks, indicating that appointing new headteachers was not always straightforward. We explore leaders' reflections further on reduced fields and a perceived diminished appetite for headship in sections below.

Process, applications and selection

As the employer, LAs were closely involved in the appointment of headteachers and the design of the process. Aurora outlined the assessment process in Coast:

“In terms of secondary, they have a technical panel and an interview panel, which in the interview panel will have a presentation question and then six other questions that are developed by each of the panels who come together to do the interview. So they're quite diverse, and they're based on the Quality Improvement Manager (QIM)'s knowledge of the school... No technology, because what we found was that if someone does a flashy presentation on the screen, the parents were wowed by the flashy presentation and the parents make up a third of the panel.” Aurora, Local Leader (Coast)

Ayla had been a member of panels as a headteacher:

“An assessment centre type approach, which I think it still is... I've often been on the technical panels.” Ayla, Copper Hill Secondary

Aurora also clarified the make-up of the panels:

“For secondary [LA Director of Education], QIM, peer head teacher, two parents and that's it. And then for primary, it's the QIM, uh, peer head teacher and um two parents..... councillor sorry, and a councillor on each of them as well.” Aurora, Local Leader

The process was very similar in Rural LA, which Lola described as a challenging experience:

“The most nerve-wracking thing I've ever, ever done in a long time was that interview process... you know, you're sitting in front of the six people and I also think that that's one of the hardest things because potentially four, right, of those six people... don't really know what your job entails. It's two councillors and two parents.” Lola, Headteacher, Beatrice Primary

There were a number of reflections by school leaders on how the process might narrow the range of candidates who were considered. Bella for example had the impression that someone already working in the school may be advantaged:

“And then I think a lot of the time, you know, they go to people who've maybe already been in the school at the time.” Bella, Depute, Rosemary Primary

More generally, she alluded to the idea that parents and a local community may have an idea who would 'fit' better:

“I don't know, maybe with rural schools, people are looking for... like parents have a role in selecting who it is, and maybe it's some, I don't know if somebody it's more known to the community.” Bella, Depute, Rosemary Primary

Lola echoed the point:

“Sometimes it can go down to whether parents like you or not. And that can be, that can be a challenge.” Lola, Headteacher, Beatrice Primary

A different concern was the pressure placed on making appointments by more limited numbers of applicants. Ayla compared fields to when she was first appointed:

“There was a lot of people going for head teacher jobs at that point. Whereas now there's hardly any. I mean [School Name], which is, you know, one of the the high performing schools in [Town], two applicants.” Ayla, Copper Hill Secondary

In Rural, Max emphasised the challenge of recruiting to small, village schools and discussed a specific example and challenging possibility for the communities it affected:

“We're struggling to recruit Headteachers to those three individual schools. Whereas actually, you could combine them, have one Headteacher who could get paid a bit more because it's a bigger school, maybe more attractive, but that's a really hard sell for communities.” Max, Local Leader (Rural)

He went on to speak of the implications then of appointing staff who were not necessarily considering or prepared for headship:

“Sometimes we have got some primary Headteachers that never wanted to be Headteachers, but they happened to be in a rural primary school. We advertised the Headteacher post perhaps two or three times, no applicants because of geography, salary and so on. So we tapped these teachers on the shoulder and said, you know, you've taught here 20 years, you would be a great Headteacher.” Max, Local Leader (Rural)

Mason, making a related point questioned whether what he considered the most important qualities were the focus of the assessment process:

*“Do we look for those qualities that mark someone out as being a sustainable and resilient and quality head teacher? And I think my reflection is that we're not getting that right and I'm not sure we got that right in my previous local authority either.” Mason
Local Leader (Coast)*

(Diminishing) Appetite for Headship

A number of leaders discussed why there were apparently fewer leaders willing to apply for headship roles. Bella, as a Depute, reflected directly on her own experience of considering a headship post in a small school:

“And then a few things just hit me: Of that commitment, that responsibility and doing Into Headship course when I've got young children, starting the new role as well. And I just thought, ‘No.’” Bella, Depute, Rosemary Primary

Max spelt out the particular circumstances and pressures for headteachers in small schools.

“Most of our primary schools don't have Depute Heads or Principal Teachers because they are so small.... So as a result, as demands on Headteachers have got increasingly, I don't know if they're challenging, they're just different to perhaps what they were 20 or 30 years ago, a generation ago.” Max, Local Leader (Rural)

Reuben recognised that the pressures on headteachers that potential applicants observed meant many may hesitate, delay or decide not to pursue headship:

“There is recruitment problems still in terms of getting a range of people, high-quality people to apply for senior leadership and head teacher positions. I think I think the expectation, no the, the the wellbeing aspect, the stress levels, the energy it takes, I don't think it's a job, again, this is anecdotal, I guess. I don't think it's a job you do for 30 years, OK? I just think that the pace of the job, the commitment required. It is such that longevity, I think, is a challenge for headteachers.” Reuben, Local Leader (Rural)

Rose, discussing the ambitions of one of her deputies in a large primary school, illustrated a point a number of leaders made about deputies happy to play an important role without taking on the additional pressures of headship:

“She is feeling that she is satisfied without having the ultimate responsibility. So, she is impacting, her leadership is impacting on others in a way that she feels happy without the responsibility of having to be the head. And so, I guess that she won't [apply for headship].” Rose, Headteacher, Isabel Primary

Bella raised a further point, of material disincentives to becoming the headteacher of a small school:

“I feel a bit bad for saying this, but what we get paid as a depute in a larger school is more than yeah, so for if I was to go for [School Name] ... it would have actually been a pay cut.” Bella, Depute, Rosemary Primary

A point made by several interviewees was that recruitment in the Rural-Coast locality - and other areas like it – was very different to Scotland's central belt (i.e. Edinburgh and Glasgow):

“You'll find that people tend to be in [Town] because of family, not because they've chosen to come and live in [Town], whereas if you go to Town A or Town B [towns and cities in Scotland's Central Belt,] they choose to go.” Aurora, Local Leader (Coast)

Reuben made a similar point about remoteness in relation to areas beyond the coastal town well served by transport links:

“There are geographic factors as well that influence across the piece. Um, thinking about a map of Rural-Coast, the area [describes rural area and towns], for a lot of folk it’s a long way from home. It’s past any railway connection, things like that. It’s a good hike back to Coastal Town as a centre. So across the piece, yeah, there’s geographic factors.” Reuben, Local Leader (Rural)

Secondary Teacher recruitment

A challenge mentioned repeatedly, particularly in Rural, was the recruitment of teachers to Secondary schools:

“Recruitment, headteachers not too bad, actually just now, other than in the really rural areas. Recruitment of secondary teachers is at a crisis stage, I would say. Secondary Headteachers starting to remove some subjects from the curriculum for certain year groups because they cannot get quality, actually, sometimes it’s not even quality, they just can’t get people applying for these posts.” Max, Local Leader (Rural)

Nancy noted that some employment sectors drew potential teachers away:

“Why would you come and work as a teacher when you can go and work in that sector and however many times more you know, than than than your salary here? That’s a real challenge, you know?” Nancy, Headteacher, Ryder Vale Secondary

Secondary headteachers were consistent in highlighting the issue:

“Having the right staff in place is one of the, is becoming a bigger challenge now than it’s ever been before. Specifically, the [Rural-Coast] here. We used to get really healthy numbers of people applying for jobs in the [Rural-Coast] here. Now we’re lucky if we get 5 applicants for one post.” Ethan, Headteacher, Sponge Wood Secondary

Diversity

Discussing diversity, leaders in both LAs gave a very similar account of the composition of the leadership workforce. Aurora summed it up:

“So within our head teacher group, mix of females and males. But no ethnic diversity within at all.” Aurora, Local Leader (Coast)

The lack of diversity amongst school leaders was agreed by all leaders we spoke to. Ayla expressed a common view that at the point of recruiting a headteacher, the situation was reflective of a lack of applications.

“I think I can say there is no issue around about any protected characteristic anywhere. It’s who’s best for the job. So, I don’t think there are those barriers in a sense. I think we, I think it’s just basically there’s not enough people that are that are coming through the system and to get into these roles.” Ayla, Headteacher, Copper Hill Secondary

Scarlett expressed the point forcefully about the wider teaching workforce also lacking diversity:

“Who’s giving the advice about teaching as a profession... you don’t have the pipeline coming in, and because you don’t have that, you’ll never get a head teacher. So it’s way bigger than education.” Scarlett, Local Leader

Bella, when discussing selection panels in rural schools, as noted in the section on appointment processes, was suggesting that communities' desire for familiarity when appointing was mitigating against diversity. Scarlett also expressed a view about not understanding what she could do to effect change, which was widely shared.

“You've got these external pressures for EDI [Equality Diversity and Inclusion], which I totally agree with, I don't disagree, but I don't understand how I can change it within my course or within my even within my portfolio... really big picture stuff is we need more diversity in the teaching profession because you can't be a headteacher unless you've been a teacher first.” Scarlett, Local Leader

Succession Planning

We did not hear of concerted, co-ordinated strategies that could be thought of as succession planning in the sense of preparing for and addressing headteacher turnover and quality. There was however discussion and thinking about the issue in different places and separate, specific initiatives to increase the numbers of potential headteachers. Max spoke of 'spotting talent' in Rural and relating that to succession planning:

“So one thing we plan to do is just to have more succession planning in place because we haven't always been very good. Secondary, we're much better at identifying our rising stars and investing in them. I think we need to do that more at primary level.” Max, Local Leader (Rural)

Charlotte observed that relatively large numbers of leaders from Rural were undertaking the mandatory headship preparation programme Into Headship, one of the ways in which Rural were 'investing' in their 'rising stars':

“I think Rural put a lot through [Into Headship] compared to other local authorities that I work with, so I think [they] are trying to get a lot of leaders who are skilled because even if you are in a depute position, doing Into Headship is not a bad thing.” Charlotte, Local Leader

Aurora in Coast LA reflected on a mixture of actions that she thought had combined to increase the number of potential headteachers ensuring that all vacancies had been filled:

“Large numbers of high-quality applicants? No. We are trying to grow that ourselves... Middle leadership training that we've got, the training that's available through Scottish Government as well in terms of Education Scotland, promoting that, promoting the training that they had available the Excellence in Headship. Heads, perhaps going to deposes who have been deposes for a long time and saying, go on, just go for it, you're ready.” Aurora, Local Leader (Coast)

Elsewhere, we heard of individual schools and headteachers thinking in terms of succession for their own institution. Ethan described listening to his former headteacher soon after joining the senior team:

“He says, ‘the first thing I ever did when I became a head teacher was look for the person who was going to take my job when I left.’ And he says, ‘I know there's somebody, sitting in the audience here, who is part of my immediate team.” Ethan, Headteacher, Sponge Wood Secondary

Training

Leaders described a number of different ways in which they had experienced professional learning, from formally organised and structured programmes to more informal and continuing experiences.

Leadership Programmes and CPD

The Into Headship programme, described above, was most discussed, being the route to meeting the now mandatory Standard for Headship. Scarlett outlined the way it was made available in the locality:

“Into Headship is obviously an Education Scotland, university and GTC Scotland combined programme... The partnership model is a historic thing.. And so [University] and ourselves kind of do the whole [area of Scotland] basically, and councils can swap in and out, depending on what they want to do.” Scarlett, Local Leader

Reuben made clear that participation in the programme requires the approval of both the participant’s school and LA. Their intentions and perceived readiness to move towards being a head were tested:

“An application form. An endorsement is needed by head teacher or other, and then there is a structured interview takes place. Umm, the interview for what it's worth, the three questions this morning were firstly, their reflections on where they are against any leadership standard, with the expectation they say, nowhere near; second question is something they've led previously and any reflections on it. ...and the third question's about professional learning they've done previously and the opportunities and challenges of Into Headship.” Reuben, Local Leader

Headteachers held a range of views about the programme. Mason’s assessment was typical:

“MSc in Education, Leadership in Professional Contexts, combined with the Into Headship programme. Did I find that an academically interesting exercise? Yes. Did I find that a really good kind of precursor and preparation for becoming a head teacher? Not really, if I'm just being honest.” Mason, Local Leader (Coast)

The point Mason made, that the value and quality of the leadership programmes notwithstanding, they did not prepare him for the reality of the job, was an assessment almost universally echoed (and not only in this locality). Often, it was practical and technical demands by which new heads were overwhelmed. Adam reflecting on his experience of the programme, initially highlighted those aspects of the course:

“Modules that everybody else thought were really boring... on the law and that, that was actually quite interesting because it was like, ‘right, I did not know that’. ... I've used that quite a bit since then because obviously the role that you're in.” Adam, Headteacher, Wilkerson Secondary

When Adam reflected further, he spoke in terms of some of the thinking and reading being elements of the programme that he drew on later when he was in his role:

“I'm not sure it's necessarily changed the way I lead, I think it's changed me being able to talk about it. So I can articulate and that's what I'm looking for... Because if you just do what you do, how adaptive are you in different situations? And I think this made me a bit more understanding of, right, I need to adapt now and go and do something else. So the

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Scotland

leadership, I loved the leadership reading, I really loved that. So yeah, it probably has made me change, in that can be more adaptive.” Adam, Wilkerson Secondary

Ethan made a similar point whilst noting the demand of the academic requirements alongside a leadership role in school:

“Talk about things that drain you, that there's no doubt that drained you when you come to do that, your 20 odd thousand-word kind of assignment at the end... but you know what, it's things that are worthwhile because it just got you into it, forced you in some ways to do this academic kind of reading and explore what else was happening. And it's something that you've always got, at the back of your mind going back to these kind of things.” Ethan, Sponge Wood Secondary

Making a different point, Scarlett was very aware of the different contexts from which leaders came, and the need for participants to consider the relevance and application of aspects of the programme:

“You know, we have [urban], but we've also then got these very rural and tiny, tiny schools. Sometimes a two-teacher school. It's nuts. It's great.... I toyed with and spoke to Education Scotland about the idea of should we be preparing rural head teachers differently from inner city headteachers, because obviously you know, they are the janitor, they are the cleaner they are, they are everything... when we're talking about anything about Into Headship, I always really, really emphasise, ‘guys, you need to take this learning and put it in your context.’” Scarlett, Local Leader

There were other formal, structured programmes referred to by leaders. Aurora spoke of a programme for middle leaders that Coast LA organised, run by a local headteacher. Bella referred to an introduction to Leadership organised by a union with a nearby University:

“They ran a really good course one day up at [non-adjacent locale] and it was through the [University Name]. And that was about leadership, recognising yourself as a leader. It's was nice and informal, you know, it was good fun. It was kind of like a team-building thing. But you learned a lot about yourself.” Bella, Depute, Rosemary Primary

Orla had participated in programmes for serving heads organised by Education Scotland:

“I did Excellence in Headship then I did Excellence in Headship Stretch. So, the excellence in headship stuff that's ongoing, you can still dip in and out to stuff.” Orla, Headteacher, Rosemary Primary

More generally, whilst most leaders had valued formal and structured learning and development, there was a strong emphasis on the importance of experience and practical learning. Ayla made the point forcefully:

“For a head teacher coming in, yes, there's Into Headship programme, but basically there needs to be more in the experiential side of it going through. People are thinking it's a hoop to jump through to get into headship and then and then it's when they're in the post they need support as well.” Ayla, Copper Hill Secondary

Experience and Informal Development

One aspect of learning through experience mentioned frequently, was taking on roles temporarily, or having responsibility for initiatives beyond an existing role. Aurora described having opportunities to lead initiatives as a depute:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Scotland

“When you're in a team like that, the motivation, you're being allowed to lead... I was being given opportunity to lead across the local authority as well. There was no motivation for me to go off and do my own thing because my ideas were incorporated.”
Aurora, Local Leader (Coast)

Ayla had been given such an opportunity within a school relatively early in her career:

“I didn't think when I was a history teacher that I wanted to be a head teacher. It was because there is, I think there's the influence of people and mentors... the head teacher said, oh we need a bit of help in the management team. Could you come in, join?” Ayla, Headteacher, Copper Hill Secondary

Ethan described planning such opportunities within his school systematically:

“We have a rotation of middle leaders come and sit in our senior management meetings, strategic ones, and they sit here, and the jaws kind of drop”. Ethan, Headteacher Sponge Wood Secondary

Both Local Authorities' officers saw short-term acting headteacher posts as an opportunity to gain experience for potential headteachers, as well as a way of temporarily addressing a vacancy:

“You go to a head teacher and you say, your depute's ready to be a head teacher? I need an acting head teacher here. Go on. Go on. Let her do it. She'll have your support. We'll be there to support.” Aurora, Local Leader (Coast)

Bella in Rural, had seen an acting role as 'testing the water':

“I did an acting head teacher position at [School Name], and it was to cover the head teacher who was covering very unexpectedly decided to return to another school. And so, they needed somebody to go the next week, umm, and see the school through for the final nine weeks. It was also a bit of like I was testing the water little bit” Bella, Depute, Rosemary Primary

More informal practices, learning on the job and drawing on advice from peers was a strong theme in leaders' discussion of their learning.

“I sometimes feel like you were learning on the job... the head teacher who was here was just down the road and I was able to just, if there was anything ... he could talk you through it.” Lola, Headteacher, Beatrice Primary

Lola was very aware of learning from doing the job. Mason stressed the value of practical advice from experienced colleagues.

“The best piece of advice, pieces of advice I got were from off-the-cuff discussions with experienced head teachers. One that sticks in my mind is, ‘don't run to a crisis.’”
Mason, Local Leader (Coast)

Other leaders spoke of models of leadership that they didn't wish to emulate as being formative:

“I've been on the receiving end of a top-down model as both in a previous life and also as a teacher ... So having experienced that as a teacher, I'm very clear in my head the way that I want to do things.” Orla, Headteacher, Rosemay Primary

Gaining and learning from experience was spoken of as a very significant part of developing as a leader. The idea of having a continuing, structured means of reflection through coaching and mentoring was mentioned frequently. Aurora felt strongly it was very important

“I believe in coaching and mentoring um as opposed to necessarily spending lots of time writing essays that say that I'm going to be a great head teacher.” Aurora, Local Leader (Coast)

Ayla echoed the point, and referred to a co-ordinated practice of identifying mentoring new headteachers in Coast LA:

“There needs to be that sitting alongside it. There needs to be mentoring of head teachers when they're going into a post so I know ... I've got three head teachers I'm mentoring just now.” Ayla, Headteacher, Copper Hill Secondary

Practices

Leaders spoke more generally of the experience of being a headteacher in Rural-Coast and the ways in which they understood the role.

School Improvement & Leadership of Learning

Attainment, Progress and Teaching and Learning

Discussing priorities for their schools, heads were unequivocal about the importance of students' learning and achievement in external assessments and public exams. Many, like Adam, took a wide view of what might contribute to students' achievements:

“We're looking at curriculum, we're looking at learning and teaching, we're looking at health and well-being. If we get all this right, we raise attainment. And look at the results, we are raising attainment.” Adam, Headteacher, Wilkerson Secondary

Ayla was forceful about the idea that the many demands on schools had the potential to lessen a schools' focus on teachers' work in the classroom:

“So, for us it's about cutting through the nonsense that is going on at the moment, roundabout so many, there's so much bureaucracy. That's not young people's fault. So, we place high value on learning and teaching and keeping learning and teaching at the core of our improvement priorities. So, we always have learning and teaching running through absolutely the improvement plan.” Ayla, Headteacher, Copper Hill, Secondary

Ethan, with a similar commitment students' achievements as Adam and Ayla, emphasised the idea that he wanted his school to enable students to succeed who had quite specific barriers:

“If you adapt your school to suit these types of young people with these kind of range of needs, then you can cater for everybody, encompass everybody. We have a high proportion of dyslexic young people in school [and staff] who have real expertise.” Ethan, Headteacher, Sponge Wood Secondary

More generally, teaching and student's learning was discussed widely. Scarlett made an observation about the different ways in which headteachers were involved:

“So some are involved in teaching and learning at the chalkface with the children, but most of them are more strategic in that policy environment space, and supporting

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Scotland

teaching and learning rather than actually doing teaching and learning.” Scarlett, Local Leader (rural)

Lola, in a very small school, was someone who was very involved in teaching:

“Our learning, teaching, assessment - I really want to focus on that. I really want to make sure it's properly embedded.” Lola , Headteacher, Beatrice Primary

Reuben reflected on ways in which some central coordination by Rural LA had been arranged, that sought to enable improvement of schools.

“Improving learning, teaching and assessment, we got nearer with that because there is now a kind of [Area] framework, there's some professional learning, being linked to it so that one is a step in the right direction.” Reuben, Local Leader (Rural)

Planning the Curriculum

Planning the curriculum was an area that a number of headteachers discussed:

“60% of our mainstream leavers go to university. So we've still got to have that in the curriculum, but, but it's only 60%. And that's the 60% that used to stay on. So what about the others? So we've changed and adapted our curriculum to make it more inclusive.” Adam, Headteacher, Wilkerson Secondary

Adam referred to a proportion of students that he perceived were not experiencing a curriculum he considered appropriate. There was a general understanding and view that a change in the nature of industries and patterns of employment in the area meant that the curriculum in schools needed to be adapted:

“A realisation that our curriculum is not fit for today. It was fit for yesterday and that we have more young people leaving and not gaining the basket of qualifications they should.... So essentially, what I would summarise that by saying is we're five years at least behind where we need to be in terms of qualifications and breadth of curriculum.” Mason, Local Leader (Coastal)

Adam and Mason were reflecting on changes that were quite specific to Rural-Coast Locality. Reuben commented on a longer-term change that was a national policy:

“Curriculum for Excellence has been a long-term project with, and change has been kind of more evolutionary, but the National Qualifications picture, umm it, staff tell me that's a never-ending moving target.” Reuben, Local Leader (Rural)

Lola discussed change and evolution of their curriculum that was very local and specific:

“Feedback before from pupils was, they wanted to do more whole school things. So, we just thought outdoor learning was one that would be brilliant to do whole school, obviously differentiated within that, but it's worked really, really well. They really enjoy it.” Lola, Headteacher, Beatrice Primary

Accountability

There was a well-understood hierarchy of accountability about which leaders spoke. A direct relationship was with the LA.

“We hold ourselves to account ... and that whole accountability is built into the local authority structure. So, you do submit your school improvement plans, you do submit

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Scotland

your quality assurance calendars, you do all that gubbins. But in terms of us and why we hold high standards, it's not because someone is going to check on that, it's because we want to deliver the best for the young people in our care.” Ayla, Copper Hill Secondary Headteacher

Ayla described some of the ways in which Coastal LA monitored her school, but she was also clear about the way she understood accountability and motivations.

Aurora describe the LAs approach more fully, mentioning also active visits that included headteachers of other schools.

“We've got a quality improvement framework that we use across all schools. And so in secondary and in primary that involves schools, headteachers from other schools being part of quality improvement visits, so they're part of the team that go in to look at the learning and teaching within the classrooms and work with the head teacher.” Auroroa, Local Leader (Coastal)

Max described a similar approach in Rural LA and a related pattern of support from LA officers that included a keen awareness of the national system of inspection.

“So we have a universal, targeted and intensive support officer offer, so all schools get support every year in writing their improvement plan and in writing their standards and quality report. Schools that we know are going to be inspected or they're on the red alert for inspection, they might get a targeted offer.” Max, Local Leader (Rural)

Headteachers in Rural were involved in visits by LA officers to schools as they were in Coast:

“I was out [School Name] the week before... part of a quality improvement visit that I had been asked to go on ... we were having a discussion around what did you see, what's your overall view of the school kind of thing? .. it was interesting to be part of that kind of discussion and kind of see whether my benchmark of where I thought things sat was with what the officers would think.” Orla, Headteacher, Rosemary Primary

Orla reports finding the experience of testing her own evaluation of a school against that of others as a valuable experience. Reuben suggested that heads and schools' own efforts to improve were important, as visits from the national inspection teams (HMI) and the LA were relatively infrequent:

“In terms of evaluated judgments on schools, well HMI aren't doing it because it's too infrequent. In-depth local authority, if you like, formal evaluative visits, have been increasingly frequent, but ultimately the services had to invest in self-improving schools purely on the logistical, never mind an educational or ethical approach.” Reuben, Local Leader (Rural)

Nancy described the anxiety staff felt when an inspection did take place and reflected on her role in managing the process:

“We're not going to panic, OK?” I said, because it's really important, because everybody looks at us to see what we think about things, you know, So when we did, when we, when I got the staff together on the Wednesday lunchtime, ... I said, ‘ we have been called for inspection... before we go off and we start to panic, I would just like to talk you through all of the things we've done.’ I had a massive list of all of the things that we'd achieved in the first year.” Nancy, Headteacher Ryder Vale Secondary

More generally, Orla echoed Reuben to some extent and a scepticism about the value and efficacy of inspection:

“I don't think the inspection model is the right model. I personally don't think, given three weeks of notice, that for people to plan something all singing, all dancing, that's not what you need to improve. You need to improve the stuff that happens every day.” Orla, Headteacher, Rosemary Primary

Care

A significant area of leaders' work that was widely regarded as an increasing and changing focus involved, in a different ways, care for students and staff.

Additional Support Needs

An aspect about which all leaders spoke was students who were assessed as needing additional support (ASN). There were a number of elements that were referred to. The first was that the nature of the additional needs and required support had changed over time, and become increasingly complex:

“What's I'm finding is the complexity of, of need amongst some young people has definitely changed over the last five years and we're seeing a needier bunch of young people.” Ethan, Headteacher, Spongebrook Secondary

Ethan's point was a typical observation and Max as a Local Leader was aware that there were not additional resources available to schools. He described a strategy that was intended to increase teachers' and schools' capability to respond to children's additional needs:

“Now we're expecting teachers to cope with a broader range of needs where there's no resource available. To provide that training and support....we're rolling out a framework just now across all our schools, and it's basically trying to have more inclusive classrooms.” Max, Local Leader (Rural)

Lola reported on the same initiative, whilst suggesting that in Rural, a type of specialist teacher was no longer visiting schools as part of the additional support:

“The Circle framework is, is basically for interventions and universal interventions in the classroom. So, at the minute [Rural] have taken out support, the intervention prevention teacher. So, because of that, they've introduced the framework so that we can look at universal support within the classroom.” Lola, Headteacher, Beatrice Primary

Rose echoed the point about increasing complexity of children's needs, and added that the numbers of children with the variety of needs was also increasing:

“So additional support needs is a huge. ... the increase in complexity of children that are coming into schools and the number, sheer number of children coming in.” Rose, Headteacher, Isabel Primary

She too noted that her school in Coast did not have additional resources and spelt out vividly examples of what that meant, and some of the tensions and challenges that the school experienced as a consequence:

“But the level of support we're going to now be working with children who are nonverbal, who are likely to not be toileted, who are non-feeding themselves. It's a whole different world from a child who was dysregulated, found school life difficult... without the resource to do that, we're going to have to have a strong look at to what or how are we

managing to support those children with complex needs to help them settle in school whilst managing to maintain high standards.” Rose, Isabel Primary

Inclusion and Responding to Students’ Behaviour

More generally, leaders spoke about challenges children faced and their behaviour in school as having become more of a priority for schools. Adam, for example, noticed a change when students returned to school after the COVID pandemic:

“So COVID brought a lot of antisocial behaviour to the fore, to be honest, that we hadn't necessarily seen pre COVID and that we found bringing that back down more difficult than than we thought might be the case and but. It wasn't two years of no education, but it was two years of a pre lousy education.” Adam, Headteacher, Wilkerson Secondary

Some leaders explicitly linked the increasing ASN with some aspects of students’ behaviour in schools. Aurora reported interest and attention from the locally elected councillors in the LA:

“In terms of ASN and behaviour, ... We've got an instruction from committee to audit what's currently in place...How [can we] ... ensure that head teachers are going to engage honestly with that audit to make sure that they see that this is something that's going to improve for them? It's not, it's not a short-term fix.” Aurora, Local Leader (Coastal)

Orla’s school was identified by the LA as one that admitted children with ASN alongside their mainstream intake, and she gave a graphic account of dealing with a child with ASN whose behaviour was very unpredictable:

“This particular child, we at the leadership team were taking turns... one person had the shirt ripped off them and somebody else had claw marks all down the face. And I've been kicked in the face and we're like, 'right, OK, this isn't working'... I had the confidence... to seek outside help and say, 'look, I need you to come in here urgently. ... I want you to watch what we're doing because it's not working.’” Orla, Headteacher, Rosemary Primary.

Orla went on to describe a carefully coordinated approach by the team that was successful in changing the child’s behaviour and exemplified the significant time and attention the work demanded.

Well-Being

Concern for staff well-being was another aspect of caring that leaders discussed. Adam related the concern in part to workload and the impact on staff:

“I am worried about how much we're asking them to do. There's no doubt about it. This you know, the nominal 35 hour week is a bit of a joke, or a lot of a joke. None of them are afraid of hard work, but I am worried for them. And you can, you see it from time to time.” Adam, Headteacher, Headteacher, Wilkerson Secondary

He reflected on what it meant for his own role:

“I've got to show it. So I've got to care about the staff. They've got to see me care about the kids. And that's really, really important. And I don't think it is for show. ... But they need to see it, it needs to be modelled.” Adam, Wilkerson Secondary

Ethan was more specific about some of the issues for staff to which he was responding:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Scotland

“Without a doubt, I think that staff's well-being, staff's mental health has really taken a toll. Dealing with a couple of mental health issues with staff at the minute.” Ethan, Headteacher, Spongewood Secondary

Orla made clear that consideration of staff well-being was a priority:

“That's kind of the way that I choose to focus... that if I can get this staff nurture right and get a staffing environment where people feel valued and welcomed and and that their opinions matter and that they'll listen to. They might not always get what it is they want, but at least if they felt listened to and part of the process.” Orla, Headteacher, Rosemary Primary

It was a priority that a number of headteachers identified. The consideration of well-being was extended to children in response to the kind of issues Orla was spelling out:

“At the moment what we're kind of coming up against more and more at the moment are mental health issues, for children, very young children, anxiety, aggression.” Orla, Rosemary Primary

Reuben suggested that increasingly, schools were seeking to reflect the priority more systematically in their work with students:

“Post-COVID several schools, several secondary schools at least have taken quite a a brave leap, some would say, restructuring the curriculum. With aspects more focused on wellbeing initially, shall we say. Umm. And that's not widespread, but certainly in in several secondary schools now, we're seeing different models emerge.” Reuben, Local Leader (Rural)

Extended support by schools

Ethan's assertion about the expanded role of a headteacher was a common reflection:

“I've become more social worker than educator, you know, the headteacher, you're policeman, you're social worker... you're educator last now I would say.” Ethan, Headteacher, Sponge Wood Secondary

He alluded to elements of the school and headteacher's day to day role that extended beyond the aspects of ASN, inclusion and behaviour and well-being. Max took a different view, suggesting a differing perspective:

“If I hear once more from a Headteacher, ‘I'm expected to be a social worker’. Well, no, you're not. You're not expected to be a social worker, um you are expected to be a Headteacher. However, you're operating within that ‘getting it right for every child’ landscape, where you need to work with a range of professionals, including police and social work and etcetera, etcetera, etcetera, health. And so you need to be part of that village around the child.” Max, Local Leader (Rural)

Leadership, Values and Professional Beliefs

Whilst discussing the practices and experience of leadership, leaders spoke of the values and beliefs they and others held about school leadership, its purposes, and the dispositions and capabilities required.

Moral Purpose and Social Justice

Scarlett summarised the motivation articulated by many leaders:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Scotland

“The biggest answer you always get is ‘I want to make a difference’” Scarlett, Local Leader

Ayla expressed more fully a sense both of internalised commitment or ‘passion’, and an identity attached to purpose:

“You’ve got to have a passion for education, you’ve got to have a passion for delivering a first-class service for young people. We are not administrators, we are educators and we are the leaders of education.” Ayla, Headteacher, Copper Hill Secondary

In the section above on Identity, we noted that Nancy linked her own personal experiences to her commitment and expressed the importance of education in terms of ‘making a difference’.

“And I think education is really important.... I think education is the bit that makes the difference.” Nancy, Headteacher, Ryder Vale Secondary

Reuben suggested that a more general focus on the idea of education has important to social aims was becoming more common:

“I think the schools are now much more aware of the significance of meeting need at all levels. ... if you like, under the equity heading nationally, much more focused than it would have been historically.” Reuben, Local Leader

Dispositions and Capabilities

There were a range of capabilities and dispositions that leaders suggested were essential to sustaining leadership. Some were very concrete and practical:

“It’s having that technical knowledge... you’ve got to have that knowledge about how a timetable works, how you design a curriculum... you’ve got to have that credibility and that comes from experience.” Ayla, Headteacher, Copper Hill Secondary

Other characteristics related to approaches to leadership. An emphasis on collaboration and relationships was a consistent theme:

“Relationships are positive in effective schools as I see them, and that engagement and collaborative working, that acceptance that the head teacher can’t do it all, that collective voice.” Reuben, Local Leader

Adam expressed the idea in terms of working through other people:

“I’ve realised, well, I just need to sit back. You need to set it up, sit back and get other people delivering.” Adam, Headteacher, Wilkerson Secondary

Ethan captured the idea of being flexible and adaptive to context:

“You can’t be the person who’s totally black and white all the time, because I see that within certain people, if they’re too black and white, you’re not going to get the gains that you could do if you, you have to be like a politician.” Ethan, Headteacher, Sponge Wood Secondary

Local Authority officers were clear that headteachers needed to understand the context of their school within a local area:

“Gotta have an understanding of the local authority policies and how they impact on what you’re doing within the school.” Aurora, Local Leader (Coastal)

Aurora expressed the idea in terms of headteachers' understanding of policy. Max also spoke in terms of more general relationships and interactions, suggesting that many headteachers had not developed the necessary awareness:

"I'm often shocked at the political naivety of some of our headteachers... some of them just don't read the room." Max, Local Leader (Rural)

Generally, reflecting on sustaining leadership, leaders spoke of resilience repeatedly:

"Resilience, I think you've got, I think you've got as a headteacher, you've got to have resilience." Ayla, Headteacher, Copper Hill Secondary

Aurora related resilience to a personal response to issues:

"Resilience as well, that ability to not take things personally in some respects." Aurora, Local Leader

Drains

Leaders discussed aspects of the role that they found draining.

Additional Needs, Inclusion, Behaviour

ASN, Inclusion and students' behaviour in schools were understood as key areas of practice for leaders, as we described in the section above on leadership practices. It was also discussed as being draining, mainly in terms of an increased role for schools:

"Things that now come into schools that we never had before, like NHS vaccinations are all done in school... other services seem to have gone back to pre-COVID delivery. We've still got everything and then more from that... schools are trying to be everything to all people rather than just education." Ayla, Headteacher, Copper Hill Secondary

Adam highlighted the perceived expectation other services had of schools and a consequently increasing workload:

"We're the only universal service, we're the only ones that can't say no.... And so the workload within the school around working with families has gone up a significant amount.... because the expectation, and sometimes they can be really blunt as well, social work and health in particular, around, 'but that's your job' and you've got no comeback. So I find that very, very draining to the point of, this is unsustainable... because it impacts on everything else we do." Adam, Headteacher, Wilkerson Secondary

The 'draining' feature of the increased role described by Ayla and Adam was repeatedly linked to insufficient resources by headteachers, a point understood by Local Leaders as we also outlined in the section on Leadership Practices:

"Budget aspects have made running schools much more difficult. The staffing levels are relatively low in [Area]. Support staff are limited." Reuben, Local Leader (Rural)

Max recognised that the headteachers perceived the increased demands and limited resources as a lack of support:

"The job has just become increasingly demanding. It's changed, as local authorities have shrunk ... Accountability responsibility is straight to schools. Less central support

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Scotland

available from the Local Authority, and Headteachers will say they sometimes feel unsupported.” Max, Local Leader (Rural)

Resources, Budgets and Admin

Lola spelt out how she saw diminished resources impacting directly on day-to-day work in schools:

“One of the struggles at the minute is support in the school. So, PSA (Personal Support Assistant) hours are being cut again, but there's more need coming into certain schools... if you're in a school where the behaviour isn't, and you don't have supportive parents on the whole and your constantly firefighting, and I can see how that can be extreme, extremely draining.” Lola, Headteacher, Beatrice Primary

Orla, whose school was designated as one that took additional ASN students but, she felt, hadn't received additional resource to work with the students, made a similar point to Lola's:

“Well, hang on a minute, you can't put that expectation on us to run that and not staff it... the stuff like the inequalities of the staffing allocation, that kind of stuff drains us, because a lot of the time we get bogged down in the firefighting aspect and, you know, supporting those children that are having, you know, escalations” Orla, Headteacher, Rosemary Primary

More generally, managing budgets was discussed frequently both in the terms already referred to of diminishing resources, but also in terms of headteachers' control over how it was spent. The close LA control was a point highlighted by Max in the section above on Place. In both Rural and Coast LAs for example, monies unspent within a year on staffing, perhaps because a teacher left and was not immediately replaced, were clawed back by the LA:

“I can't save any money off my staffing, I'm not allowed to.” Adam, Headteacher, Wilkerson Secondary

At the end of one financial year, one LA had stopped all spending in schools in order to balance the overall LA budget. Lola described the impact:

“You're not allowed to spend the March [remaining budget], new rule, budget cuts. So that frustrated me significantly because I did what I was told. I kept my school in budget. I had leftover money right to the end, going 'right that's there if anything happens.' To then get that taken away, and then I know that other schools are running in the red.” Lola, Headteacher, Beatrice Primary

Some headteachers felt the burden keenly of leading and sometimes managing directly the operations of the school:

“It often ends up on my plate. How am I, how am I organising how that teacher's getting released from class, how are they getting covered? Where in this school where there's no doors, where is that meeting taking place?... I think the low level operational tasks are the biggest drain.” Rose, Headteacher, Isabel Primary

Nancy saw those elements of the role and as making it 'difficult to do her job':

“Policies or procedures or, you know, trying to deal with budgets, you know, things that are external factors that make it really difficult for you to be able to, to, to do your job.” Nancy, Headteacher, Ryder Vale Secondary

Staffing

An area of school leaders' work that was frequently mentioned was various aspects of working with staff. Adam mentioned dealing with staff attendance, an issue a number of headteachers discussed, widely perceived to have increased post-COVID:

“Attendance of staff. So we, we have an unbelievable amount of staff who are in attendance procedures... a lot of that is in the ASN wing... So staffing is constantly on my mind. ... but it's really important that I'm on it because if you, if you drop that ball, then everything drops” Adam

Adam mentioned a specialist ASN unit as being particularly challenging for staffing. Ayla, referred to some secondary subject areas in relation to staff recruitment:

“We've got key subject areas like maths, design, technology, technology related subjects where it's very difficult to get staff.... So that means that we're constantly re-timetabling things in different ways to and that puts pressure on.” Ayla, Headteacher, Copper Hill Secondary

Bella spoke of the cumulative effect and personal impact of supporting staff:

“Sometimes with a big staff here, there's often things that you're dealing with... being supportive and, and, you know, trying to communicate with everybody. But sometimes it can be a drain on you because I suppose... like we have to model that, you know, to the rest of the staff and you know how we conduct ourselves and our positivity, you know, if we go very negative, you know, we're gonna be mood hoovers.” Bella, Depute, Rosemary Primary

Inspection

Leaders were conscious of being accountable and the pressure that results. Inspection by the national team of HMIs (His Majesty's Inspectors) was infrequent, but challenging when it took place:

“There's absolutely no doubt that an inspection is a massive pressure on a head teacher.... the pressure is immense because it's, it's out in the public domain.” Ayla, Headteacher, Copper Hill Secondary

Mason's experience reflected the point Ayla was making. He had become the headteacher of a school that was regarded as needing improvement:

“The inspection process, which is incredibly intense, personal at times, I take everything personally and I guess the tipping point for me was around middle of [year], had a couple of little weeps on my wife's shoulder.” Mason, Local Leader (Coast)

Rose reflected on the process of the inspection itself:

“The bit leading up to the inspection is really, the providing of all the paperwork, the evidence. It, it just consumes you. It absolutely consumes you.... It can be quite a brutal process, can't it.” Rose, Headteacher, Isabel Primary

Weight of leadership and headteacher well-being

When talking about what drains them in leadership, headteachers particularly talked about the weight of responsibility, the cumulative effect of pressures and the relentless nature of the role, the latter being a word used almost universally:

“There are times I drive home thinking, oh my, and it's the relentless nature of it... I think you could come to work at 7 o'clock in the morning. You could be here till 8 o'clock at night every day and you still wouldn't get everything done.” Nancy, Headteacher, Ryder Vale Secondary

Reuben was clear that pressures, whilst varying, were not unique to any particular context:

“It's certainly not uniquely geographical, political, or level of poverty related. It's not a simple equation like that. I don't even think it's just those new in the post [who] self-evidently are struggling. No, I think it's a variety of things.” Reuben, Local Leader (Coastal)

A strong link was made with individuals' well-being and capacity to sustain the role:

“We're starting to see more people who were staying in their Headteacher roles, starting to experience burnout.” Max, Local Leader (Rural)

Ethan reflected on his own health and well-being and highlighted the impact he saw in others:

“The health kind of keeps up and I've always been a healthy person. But I think that I think that stress at times takes its toll. There's no doubt about that. Probably it's been more stressful than it's ever been before. And I see that amongst my colleagues across [Rural-Coast] that that we met up last week and you can tell, you know, ... just people are drained - end of term and but just it never stops. It's relentless.” Ethan, Headteacher, Sponge Wood Secondary

Sustains

Making a Difference

As we noted in the section on Leadership and Values, leaders consistently referred to making a difference as a motivation for being a teacher and a leader, it was also frequently the first thing mentioned as sustaining them. Headteachers expressed the idea in different ways. They told stories of individuals:

“And for me, seeing the pride in her face that she got to do that, that's what I do my job for... and that girl... she still comes and checks in every day.” Orla, Headteacher, Rosemary Primary

Rose spoke of the longer-term development she could see in groups of young people:

“Sustains for me seems quite straightforward. I love to see the impact you make to the young people. You know, you, you work through the generation of children coming in as P1s ... And then when I see like my P7s... Just to see those young people that have so much opportunity ahead of them and we've shaped them, along with the parents, we've shaped them into these young people who are ready to move on to secondary school.” Rose, Headteacher, Isabel Primary

Ethan, reflecting on secondary age students, spoke both of their achievements whilst at school, but also the contribution made to their future development:

“What sustains me, young people in here and the brilliant things they do... just seeing them and thinking you're all over the world and doing some absolutely amazing things. And it all kind of started here. And that really keeps you going. And if it didn't, you

wouldn't be here and you wouldn't be associated with education.” Ethan, Sponge Wood Secondary

Adam spoke of making a difference in terms of the school as a whole and seeing improvement:

“The other thing that really sustains me is seeing the school improve ... there was a big shift in the first few years and it's now different. But just seeing the curriculum in particular and the way that that's improving, just seeing young people have completely different opportunities and seeing the parents talk to me about, we never had that when we were [at school].” Adam, Headteacher, Wilkerson Secondary

Relationships

Alongside the sustaining motivation and satisfaction of ‘making a difference’, leaders spoke of relationships in a variety of ways, as sustaining them. The working professional relationships in a school were a common thread:

“It's the team and that's all staff.... what I feel is, the whole team has got my back and, and they know I've got theirs and just that working environment... for the vast majority, I think, I just love working with them.” Adam, Headteacher, Wilkerson Secondary

The idea of teams and collaborative effort was strong. Rose suggested the absence of trusting and ‘safe’ relationships for a headteacher made the role more challenging:

“I think all the relationships... I've heard a lot of head teachers talk about the job being really lonely, really, really, lonely... I suppose it's about have they developed their relationships enough that there is a safe space to work within a team.” Rose, Headteacher, Isabel Primary

Many leaders in addition to teams, spoke of one or two close, high trust, professional relationships that were sustaining:

“I have a close deputy team here and, and you know, one of them in particular who I have a lot of trust in, and we would sit down and just talk about things during the day. And it's good to be able to do that.” Ethan, Headteacher, Sponge Hill Secondary

Relationships between groups and organisations outside the school, were also spoken of as sustaining. Lola in a small rural school, spoke particularly of parents and the organisations in that community:

“The parents are really supportive. We're doing more community links. So, yeah, it's I think for me being able to have this headship [is] really special. [this] a really special place.” Lola, Headteacher, Beatrice Primary

Adam, whose secondary school was in the urban part of Coast also spoke of community, but referred to other local schools and various organisations including businesses and employers:

“With [School] and the local primary schools, I think that collaboration is really working well, yeah and get a lot of joy out of that and actually working with parents and partners, we've got a lot of partners... It's definitely a community, community connected... working with the partners, working with communities... yeah, that makes me get up every morning.” Adam, Headteacher, Wilkerson Secondary

Personal relationships beyond schools were also important. Lola again, spoke of professional networks from local school cluster meetings and meeting peers through development and induction programmes:

“Getting that other network that's outside of your, that isn't, your cluster is brilliant, but just having the other network of people. ... the headship courses that the [Rural-Coast] put on the Fridays that helped with that as well... it was good because you knew those people were kind of in the same situation as you are.” Lola, Headteacher, Beatrice Primary

Orla spoke about the importance of informal networks both of professional peers and friends:

“You know, it's having that that network and that safe space where, you know, you can go.... and it has to be that trusted, you know, that trusted place where you know that what you say in there is not going any further, you know, and that that's with education colleagues. [I] also have a separate group of friends that's very much like that.” Orla, Headteacher, Rosemary Primary

Well-Being

Well-being was spoken of as both sustaining, and necessary to actively cultivate.

“I think it's really important to look after mental well-being... I go to Pilates and on Monday night, go to netball on Thursday night. And although outwith, I think to come in, and give your best you've got to look after yourself first. Trying to pour from an empty cup, you know, it just doesn't work.” Bella, Depute, Rosemary Primary

Nancy spoke of protecting leisure and time with her family:

“But you know, we have, we have such good holidays and things that you know, I am good at, you know, the weekend, just go.” Nancy, Headteacher, Ryder Vale Secondary

Ethan was explicit about finding ways to dissipate the pressure and stress of the role:

“You have to try to, you have to find a way to destress yourself. ...And I would just spend all the time outside. That's kind of how I kind of unwind. I breed a small flock of sheep. And now my winter months are spent outside in the shed half the time.” Ethan, Headteacher, Sponge Hill Secondary

Learning and Development

Learning and development of both themselves and others was frequently discussed by leaders. It was an example of areas of the job that leaders found satisfying and rewarding as well as helping to sustain their own leadership:

“This year we're going to do professional learning and our learning and teaching improvement plan in a completely different way. It's all going to be based around practitioner inquiry. ... that will develop the leadership of those people as well, so that really sustains me. All of that around professional developing leadership of others.” Adam, Headteacher, Wilkerson Primary

Adam spoke of an approach with the whole staff body in his school. Rose reflected on the satisfaction of individual interactions and coaching others in her role:

“I really get a lot out of coaching others in their journeys... And that obviously is for in my own school, it means a lot to see the happiness of staff where they've maybe made

improvements and that that journey that they go on, but also now beyond my own school as well I love the, the difference that you can make now you're, you're longer in that leadership journey that you can make on other people.” Rose, Headteacher, Isabel Primary

Orla spoke of the motivation and sustaining nature of her own desire for learning:

“What sustains me, it’s still my enthusiasm. I’m still enthusiastic. I still want to learn more.” Orla, Headteacher, Rosemary Primary

Support

Support for schools as organisations and headteachers individually was an important part of sustaining leadership and leaders. We have described some of the ways in which LAs seek to support leaders and schools in sections above, mainly in Place, Leadership Practice of School Improvement and ways in which leaders are sustained through networks. The mixture of accountability and support through Quality Improvement Officers, provision of training and development programmes and facilitation of networks were some of the ways described, as well direct provision of technical support for functions like finance and HR. Mason, reflecting on the work in Coast, recognised both the demand and the limitation of what the LA could provide:

“There’s been a real change in relation to the kind of support model in [Coast] so I would say that schools and school leaders are used to a much more hands-on level of support than they would be [since the pandemic]... And so that’s resulted in quite a significant, umm workload in terms of, um, disseminating advice and guidance. But that certainly results in some significant pressures and in reflecting on what we can do ... capacity wise.” Mason, Local Leader (Coastal)

In Rural, headteachers spoke of the cluster groups and headteachers’ association as important sources of support, and as we noted in the section on Place, there was a concerted attempt by the LA to establish schools in trios to support each other:

“Our schools are set up in trios, so they support each other quite a bit. And we’ve deliberately um matched them up with schools that aren’t in their local area, so they’re not, they’re not with their friends if you like.” Max, Local Leader (Rural)

Aurora described a similar approach with primary schools in Coast:

“We’ve set up head teachers in primary schools in trios... they’re three schools together, so they’re going to visit each other’s school at least once a year.” Aurora, Local Leader (Coastal)

Aurora went on to describe other local networks and the explicit intention that schools would support each other to some extent:

“So there’s a primary association network and a secondary head teacher association network which meet regularly so that they’ve got that ability to discuss things... what we’ve tried to do is build up those networks so that people have different places to go for support.” Aurora, Local Leader

Consistently, as we noted when describing what sustained leaders, local and personal networks were one of the most immediate and important sources of support for headteachers. Bella reflected on her observations from working with and taking up and acting role:

Sustainable School Leadership: National Technical Report – Scotland

“You know, if you do go to the next stage of being a head teacher, you need that head teacher support round about. So, you know, in the cluster, you know, head teachers and you know, obviously have their meetings and, and catch-ups and things. And I think they need that sort of group.” Bella, Depute, Rosemary Primary

Nancy’s example of the mixture of formally constituted groups and personal professional networks was typical:

“It was three of us who were appointed at the at the same time, myself, the head teacher [Town] and the head teacher at [Town]. And you know, there are days sometimes where I’m like, so I’ll just pick the phone up and speak to one of them. We do have that network which is the the [Rural-Coast] [Secondary Head Teachers Association]. Like we pick up the phone to each other and, you know, yeah, I think, yeah, that that’s really good.” Nancy, Headteacher, Ryder Vale Secondary