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Sustainable School Leadership: Final Report

Executive Summary

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Executive summary

Background

This report presents findings from the Sustainable School Leadership project, a three-year mixed methods study which explored the training, supply, retention, and wider sustainability of senior school leadership across England, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

Policymakers around the world broadly agree on the features of successful school leadership. This is seen to combine transformational (vision and values), instructional (teaching and learning) and distributed (collective efficacy) approaches. This global consensus shapes how leaders are trained, recruited and held accountable.

Our research asked whether this consensus holds true at a time when the needs of children, families and wider societies are changing rapidly. We live in an era of global polycrisis. In the UK, this encompasses the long-term impacts of Covid-19, prolonged austerity, growing inequality, increased social tensions and a rise in populist politics. These forces impact on schools directly and in ways that are cumulative and indirect, manifesting in issues ranging from rising mental health and special needs to persistent absence and school dropout.

The pressures on school leaders create clear risks around supply and sustainability. Our previous Leading in Lockdown research indicated that between 30-40% of headteachers were planning to leave the profession early, due to the intensity of the challenges they were experiencing at that time (2021–2022).

In this context, the research addresses two questions:

- 1. How does each nation recruit, train, and retain school leaders, particularly headteachers?**
- 2. How well do these approaches account for individual, local, and systemic needs, including the sustainability of leadership supply, diversity, equity, quality and fitness for the future?**



Conceptual framework

We examine sustainable leadership through two interconnected lenses:

- The sustainability of leadership (i.e. supply and succession planning)
- Leadership for sustainability (i.e. meeting present needs without compromising future needs).

Our conceptual framework positions sustainable school leadership at the centre of four overlapping ‘petals’:

- **Leadership** is understood as a process of influence geared towards the achievement of shared goals. Such leadership is culturally situated and context specific, distributed and collective and draws on accumulated knowledges, expertise and repertoires of practice. Leadership development is viewed as career-long individual growth involving shifts in knowledge, abilities, beliefs, values, and/or identity.
- **Identity** encompasses both the substantial self, an inner core of self-defining beliefs, values and attitudes, and our situated identity, which is socially constructed through interaction and professional socialisation. These personal identities are embodied and intersectional, encompassing aspects such as class, race, gender, sexuality and neurotypicality. Our individual and collective narratives underpin how we make sense of leadership and can influence career choices and sustainability.
- **Place** includes but goes beyond geography. Leaders work within specific geographic, economic, historical, and social contexts which shape what leadership is required, who becomes a leader, how leadership is practised and whether leadership can be sustained. Places are both context-derived and context-generative, meaning they respond to globalising influences and national policies in distinctive ways, making each locality unique.
- **An ethic of education and care:** feminist care theories assert that humans are fundamentally interdependent beings who develop within relationships of care. This places the human and relational at the heart of processes of learning, challenging the separation of academic learning from a broader understanding of students’ lives. Schools have always had a duty of care, but placing an ethic of education and care at the core of sustainable leadership raises foundational questions around the purpose and process of schooling.

We identified the first three petals – leadership, identity and place – from the literature, then added the fourth – education and care – later, to reflect our empirical findings.

Research design

The three-year mixed methods study included five main strands: 1) evidence review - reviewed 159 articles, 67 for England, 32 for Northern Ireland, 51 for Scotland, and 9 for UK overall; 2) expert interviews - interviewed 17 international and UK experts; 3) secondary data - analysis of workforce census data in England and Scotland and public statistics in Northern Ireland; 4) locality case studies - 132 interviewees across 7 localities (3 in England, 2 each in Northern Ireland and Scotland); 5) survey – 1623 respondents from across the UK.

National and local contexts

England

Schools in England employ 22,455 headteachers and around 76,000 senior leaders. The average age of heads has reduced by 1.5 years over the past 15 years. Persistent gender gaps remain—especially in secondary schools—and ethnic minority representation declines sharply with seniority. Part time work is growing, particularly among primary deputies and assistant heads. Attrition has been reasonably stable over time, with 13% of heads leaving their post each year and three quarters within ten years.

Leaders are highly improvement oriented, motivated to raise pupil outcomes but constrained by tight budgets, staffing shortages and complex student needs. Ofsted continues to exert intense pressure despite recent reforms. Support structures differ sharply in the three localities we visited (England Coast, City and Shire): Coast is dominated by Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), meaning that support is more hands on but sometimes bureaucratic and controlling; City offers dense networks and partnerships, though support is uneven across different phases and governance types; Shire is characterised by sparse Local Authority (LA) capacity and dependence on informal local networks, meaning heads must be highly self-reliant.

National Professional Qualification (NPQ) reforms have sought to create a coherent “golden thread” of evidence informed professional development, from middle leadership through to executive headship. This approach was broadly welcomed but sometimes criticised as overly content-driven and insufficiently contextualised. Appetite for headship is mixed: one third of middle and senior leaders say they aspire to the role, yet we heard that many deputies are reluctant due to stress and workload and that recruitment has become more difficult over time, with some types of schools facing particular challenges. The level and sophistication of succession planning approaches differed widely among the three localities.

Northern Ireland

Just over 1,000 schools employ around 1,755 principals and vice-principals across a remarkably complex system reflecting historic sectarian divides, with Controlled, Catholic Maintained, Integrated, Irish Medium, and Grammar sectors.

We visited two localities – Coast and Town Rural. When we visited Coast, prolonged suspension of the Assembly (2017–2020, 2022–2024) together with extended industrial action (Action Short of Strike – ASOS) had stalled progress across the system. By the time of our second visit, to Town-Rural, the Assembly was back in session and the TransformED strategy was underway, aiming to revise the national curriculum and invest in professional development, with leaders cautiously optimistic if somewhat overwhelmed by the scale of change. However, it was unclear how long it might take for the system to fully reboot.

The leadership population has aged significantly over the past 15 years, with heads now a year older on average. Relatively few younger leaders have progressed into senior roles. Women remain under represented, relative to the proportion of female teachers, though with marked variation by school type. There is negligible ethnic minority representation, reflecting broader population demographics. Across all grant-aided schools, around three in ten principal posts remained unfilled in 2024.

School improvement work in schools had been hampered by Covid, funding constraints and ASOS. However, by autumn 2024, ASOS had been suspended and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) was preparing to restart inspections under a new framework, generating both uncertainty and renewed pressure. Wider accountability arrangements were described as complex but often light touch. Governors were generally supportive but variable in capability, while the Education Authority (EA) and sector bodies had limited capacity. Leaders perceived technical services (HR, legal, estates, SEND) provided by the EA as overstretched or inaccessible, contributing to a sense of working in a “broken system”.

Many leaders in Northern Ireland saw themselves as pastoral leaders, first and foremost, reflecting the close community relationships and cultural expectations that shape their work. Many worked in or near the communities in which they had grown up, reinforcing a ‘community anchored’ model of leadership. This anchoring fostered strong pastoral identities but also heightened expectations and visibility—especially in small communities where “everyone knows your business”.

Northern Ireland lacks a coherent pathway into headship, with the Professional Qualification for Headship (PQH NI) paused since 2017. Many leaders pursue self funded Masters degrees, although cost barriers create inequity. Careers can feel constrained: with limited movement between schools and sectors. As a result, promotion seems to rely on luck (i.e. whether or not someone above you leaves) as much as skills, qualifications or experience. Appetite for headship is seen to have declined, with small fields and failed appointments reported in some areas. A minority of schools—mostly secondaries—were developing internal pipelines, but this was far from system wide. Headteacher recruitment practices were often described as outdated.

Scotland

Scotland’s 2,445 schools are managed by its 32 LAs, working within an active national policy framework that is generally coherent and highly consensual. School leaders have notably lower levels of autonomy than in England or Northern Ireland, although this was not necessarily seen as a constraint.

The leadership age profile has shifted markedly since 2010, with fewer older leaders and greater concentration in the 40–54 age band, meaning that the average age of heads has declined by 2.4 years. Succession risks remain as a large cohort enters its early 50s and relatively few leaders stay late into their careers. Women dominate primary headship but remain under represented in secondary. Ethnic diversity in leadership is very limited.

While some Scottish leaders prioritised instructional leadership and rigorous monitoring, most approached improvement more holistically – balancing curriculum development, wellbeing and pastoral support alongside the development of classroom pedagogy and academic outcomes.

Schools are inspected periodically; inspections were described as stressful but more developmental and less punitive than Ofsted’s, often validating leaders’ priorities and informing future planning.

LAs play a central role in shaping improvement and supporting leaders, given their broad operational responsibilities for staffing, budgets and estates. The extent of LA support varied widely in the two localities we visited (Scotland City and Rural-Coast). City LA could marshal substantial resources and targeted support, while the Rural LA operated on lean capacity, with schools placed in trios to support self improvement as central budgets tightened.

The *Into Headship* programme and active LA support create systematic development pathways. City LA offered the most comprehensive approach, including targeted initiatives to support under represented groups. Aspiration for headship was higher than in England or Northern Ireland, yet many potential leaders hesitated due to workload, responsibility and limited financial incentives. Recruitment was reasonably robust in City but more precarious in Rural Coast, where small applicant fields, subject shortages and geographical isolation constrained appointments. Strategies such as co headships or executive arrangements were being explored, though could be resisted by local communities.

1. The nature of school leadership is widely seen to have changed in recent years

Leaders in all three nations explained that their role has changed significantly in recent years. While incremental change would always be expected, these changes have been sharp and substantial, with the pandemic lockdowns marking a particular hinge point in the minds of leaders, accelerating longer-term trends. The vast majority (88%) of survey respondents agreed that leadership has become more difficult since Covid, with two-thirds (66%) strongly agreeing. Key drivers of these changes include the increased scale and complexity of student needs, staffing issues, resource constraints and parental complaints. Meanwhile, levels of institutional support for schools have reduced across the UK.

2. Schools working beyond their ‘education’ remit – an ethic of education and care

A phrase we heard several times was “everything rolls downhill to schools”. As children’s needs have grown and as wider services have been stripped back, many schools have taken on care roles, such as running a food bank, that most people would not typically think of as ‘education’. Meanwhile, the complexity of inclusion, safeguarding, behaviour and pastoral needs within schools has increased, while staff are widely seen to have become less resilient. These issues are generally more acute in schools serving disadvantaged communities, but they impact on leaders in all types of schools (i.e. more and less advantaged, urban and rural, and so on).

The education and care role of schools encompasses three overlapping areas: a) within school (creating inclusive, relational cultures that support educational outcomes); b) beyond school (working with families and communities); and c) across school (supporting staff wellbeing).

Schools have a ‘duty of care’ and many aspects of this work, such as inclusion and safeguarding, are legally mandated and regulated. Beyond this, leaders’ motivation was partly pragmatic (i.e. if a child is hungry, is not attending school, or is dysregulated, then they cannot learn) but also a deeply human response to need.

Leaders are spending much less time on instructional leadership (teaching, learning and curriculum) than on care, inclusion and well-being. This was not the case in previous surveys of head teacher time use over the past 20 years, further emphasising the extent of recent change and challenging the global consensus on instructional leadership.

How leaders balance their care and instructional roles reflects both individual preferences and place-based factors, with clear differences between localities and among the three nations. A subset of leaders choose to prioritise the instructional aspects of their role. More commonly, leaders attempt to encompass education and care together, but such efforts are rarely straightforward. Care leadership is often emotionally and physically demanding. Where leaders have established trauma informed, nurture or restorative approaches this can help them and their staff to see how education and care are an integrated whole.

3. It's not a pipeline crisis (yet) – it's a sustainability crisis

Our analysis of school workforce data reveals key trends and issues facing the leadership pipeline. These trends differ somewhat across the UK, with different implications for succession planning: for example, while the average age of heads in England and Scotland has reduced over the past 15 years, in Northern Ireland it has increased.

The appetite for headship among middle and senior leaders is widely seen to have diminished, with many put off by the demands of the role. Employers in all three nations report reduced numbers of applicants for headship. Nevertheless, most schools have been able to recruit in recent years, even if some places (for example rural, remote) and types of school (for example small, faith, higher performing) have faced greater levels of challenge. For this reason, we argue the UK does not face an immediate pipeline crisis – with 'yet' as a crucial caveat, signalling significant risks.

Key among these is that school leadership – particularly headship – is widely seen as unsustainable. The proportion of heads who say they are 'mostly' or 'sometimes sinking' range from nearly a third in Scotland (30%), to around one in five in England (22%) and Northern Ireland (19%). Around a third of leaders in each system describe themselves as 'mostly surviving'. Approximately 15% of heads plan to leave the profession within the next two years, with another 4-7% expecting to reach full retirement age.

Common drivers of unsustainability include: poor work-life balance and unreasonable workloads; issues with staff; finance and resource constraints; and SEND, behaviour and inclusion challenges. But the list goes on – accountability pressures, parental complaints, lack of support, toxic workplace cultures, lack of autonomy and so on – all of which can make 'the weight of leadership' too much.

Younger, less experienced heads arguably face the greatest challenges. Heads below age 35 or 40 are noticeably less likely to survive three years in post compared with their older peers. Our interviews revealed the significant pressures they face as they seek to establish themselves in role. Many work in small primary schools, meaning they have fewer colleagues within school to rely on, are more likely to be teaching part-time, and are more likely to be in a rural area with limited external support.

4. Leadership diversity – a problem no-one really owns

Lack of ethnic diversity in leadership across all three nations was widely acknowledged as problematic, yet no body or group demonstrated clear ownership of action to address it.

In England, approximately 7% of headteachers identify as non-White; in Scotland, 3-4%; while Northern Ireland has negligible Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) representation. Women remain under-represented relative to the teaching workforce, though with variation by nation, phase, and sector.

Three reasons were given for why more BAME leaders have not been appointed. First, the teaching population itself is not diverse, so there are generally few, if any, BAME candidates for senior roles. Second, the lack of existing BAME role models and examples makes it hard to shift the culture. Third, it comes down to the recruitment process, with employers stating they would always appoint "the best person for the job" but others citing examples of biased behaviour by recruitment panels.

Only three deliberate initiatives to enhance leadership diversity were identified across the seven localities studied – one LA-led programme in Scotland and two MAT-led initiatives in England – with limited evidence of significant progress.

5. Preparing for headship – the importance of developmental experience

A surprisingly large proportion of heads (between a quarter and a third in each nation) describe their pathway to headship as accidental – they “never really intended to become a head”. This contrasts with just 10-15% who “always wanted to be a head,” suggesting that leadership formation pathways and identity development processes need careful attention.

England and Scotland fund national headship preparation programmes, but they differ widely in their structure, scale, ethos and design. In Scotland, the mandatory *Into Headship* programme’s focus is on partnership working at national and local scales, the reinforcement of shared values, Masters-level learning, and the agentic enactment of national policy. England’s non-mandatory model (NPQH) reflects a more marketised and accountability-focused mindset, with leaders positioned as technicians delivering evidence-based improvement and a near absence of discussion around professional values and purposes.

These formal programmes are only part of the story. In all three nations, coaching and mentoring, role models, and learning on the job are seen as more effective in preparing for headship than formal qualifications. In England, we saw sharp differences among the localities in how leadership development and succession planning operate: while the MATs in Coast could offer development which goes above and beyond the national NPQ offer, in rural Shire, there was much less capacity for such enhanced provision. In Scotland, while *Into Headship* is broadly valued, its mandatory and academic nature was sometimes critiqued, creating a potential block on the leadership pipeline. In Northern Ireland, the lack of a national pre-headship programme was seen to make recruitment harder.

Serving heads are unequivocal that they did not feel fully prepared for the role when they first started. Indeed, a substantial proportion (for example 30% in England) began their headship journey lacking confidence. Serving heads see prior developmental experience as the best preparation for headship, but this is about more than just ‘time served’ – interviewees talked about times when they were stretched to develop and grow, enabling them to become confident in a range of operational and strategic areas. However, there are stark differences in the extent to which individual leaders curate their experience and careers in preparation for headship.



6. One-size policy does not fit all – a need for local solutions

Educational leadership does not occur in a vacuum. Place pervades all our findings, showing how leaders work within specific contexts which shape fundamentally what leadership is, who becomes a leader, how leadership is practiced, and crucially, whether leadership can be sustained.

Place here is multi-dimensional, including but going beyond geography. The geographic, economic, historical, and social dimensions of place do not operate independently but interact in complex ways. Urban concentration in poor communities creates different leadership challenges than rural poverty; historical conflicts intersect with contemporary economic circumstances; organisational structures either leverage or work against geographic proximity, and so on.

Yet policy discussions commonly view place as little more than a backdrop upon which leadership is performed. While policymakers might categorise schools in broad terms based on geographic and socio-economic features (for example urban vs rural, above or below average levels of deprivation), our evidence shows that even two small rural schools in the same locality might require quite different forms of leadership.

Recognising the importance of place is not the same as saying that shared frameworks, structures and policies cannot be helpful – they can. For example, in Northern Ireland, where school inspections were not occurring due to ASOS and the PQH programme was paused, leaders told us that they missed these national frameworks. But Northern Ireland also illustrates the downside of assuming that bigger is always better: the decision to close the Regional Education and Library Boards, in 2015, and to replace these with a single EA was widely seen to have been detrimental, leading to a loss of relational, place-based support.

The challenge of balancing agency, autonomy and prescription was equally apparent within local governance arrangements, such as LAs in Scotland and MATs in England. On the one hand we heard how shared frameworks could be helpful: for example, Scotland City LA's focus on nurture had helped to build expertise and commitment across all schools. But these local governance bodies could also constrain place-based adaptation where they sought to apply a one-size-fits-all approach.



Conclusion

- Not all school leaders are in crisis – indeed, several interviewees described headship as “the best job in the world”. Throughout the report we highlight what sustains leaders: spending time with pupils and seeing them develop, strong teams and relationships with colleagues, making a difference, and the moral purpose of educational leadership. Wider factors are also important – opportunities to learn and grow, feeling trusted and receiving positive feedback for a job well done, helping others to develop, an active and supportive home life, good salaries and extended holidays. These sustaining themes serve to keep leaders going, even when times are tough.
- In fact, for most leaders, the fact that the job is tough is what makes it so rewarding. This creates a paradox: it seems that leaders can be thriving and sinking *at the same time*, or, perhaps more accurately, thriving one day or one week, but sinking the next. Such work can be exhausting, but also richly varied and even addictive. The issue is that a particularly difficult crisis or emotional event, a change in personal circumstances, a negative inspection outcome, or simply the overall weight of leadership can become too much – the sinking outweighs the thriving. We heard numerous stories of leaders who had become “burnt out and ... left the profession.”
- Understanding why, when and how leadership becomes too much and what can be done to enhance sustainability at a time of constrained resources is challenging. Our conceptual framework offers one way to approach this, illustrating what needs to be in place for leadership to be sustainable, individually and collectively, and signalling areas that policymakers and leadership development providers might need to address.
- Challenging the global consensus – i.e. acknowledging that leadership in an era of polycrisis includes, but is not limited to, instructional improvement – seems an important place to start. The leadership of care cannot be seen as a ‘touchy feely’ sideshow, it is part and parcel of contemporary school leadership. But such work is often emotionally and physically demanding, requiring skills and qualities that are insufficiently recognised in most development programmes. A key skill appears to be knowing where to draw the line, working with parents and other agencies to agree what schools can do – and what others must pick up.
- The research also demonstrates that place matters profoundly and that generic policies and standardised approaches frequently fail to account for the radically different contexts in which leaders work. It highlights that formal leadership development programmes, while valuable, cannot alone prepare leaders for the complexities they face; developmental experiences, peer support, and ongoing coaching are equally if not more important.
- Ultimately, addressing the sustainability crisis requires urgent, coordinated action at national and local levels across all three nations, with particular attention to enhancing diversity and supporting new and struggling leaders. Without such action, the sustainability crisis seems highly likely to become a pipeline crisis, threatening the supply of expert, authentic leaders that every school and every child deserves.
- But this is not about new one-size-fits-all policies. Instead, what is needed is a ‘local solutions’ mindset which seeks to reflect and capitalise on the particularities of place. This requires an active but facilitative approach from the centre, geared towards defining core principles and then helping to stimulate networks and support local dialogue, learning and action, while accepting that different schools and localities might have legitimately different priorities and ways of working.

Recommendations

England

1. The Department for Education (DfE) should lead a national strategy for sustainable school leadership of education and care, potentially adopting a format similar to the 2014 Workload Challenge.
2. Teaching School Hubs should convene local partnerships to develop leadership succession plans, with a particular focus on enhancing diversity.
3. Leadership associations should lead campaigns highlighting the value of school leadership and encouraging all heads to access mentoring, coaching and supervision.

Scotland

1. Scottish Government/Education Scotland should work with partners to drive a national focus on sustainable leadership, building on existing working groups, with active ministerial involvement and concrete action plans.
2. Local Authorities should revamp their succession plans, strengthening opportunities for developmental experience and engaging experienced leaders in growing the next generation.
3. Leadership associations should lead campaigns on the value of leadership and encouraging universal access to mentoring, coaching and supervision.

Northern Ireland

1. The Department and Education Authority should build on the TransformEd Strategy to convene a national focus on sustainability, including through revised headteacher standards, more transparent recruitment processes and a requirement that all leadership posts should be advertised nationally.
2. Collaborative Professional Learning Cluster funding should support projects exploring sustainable models, including enhancing diversity, executive headship models for small schools, and collaborative leadership of specialist provision.
3. Unions and associations should drive a national campaign to ensure that all heads access mentoring, coaching and supervision.



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For further details and the findings in full see: Greany, T., Thomson, P., Perry, T., & Collins, M., (2026) Sustainable School Leadership UK: final report. Sustainable School Leadership Project.

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