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Sustainable School Leadership:
Final Report

February 2026

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Contents

About this report

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Background

This report summarises findings from the Sustainable School Leadership project, a UK-wide study which explored the training, supply, retention and wider sustainability of senior school leadership across the UK. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of its Education Research Programme, the project ran from late 2022 to early 2026.

This final report draws together findings from across the various project strands, structured around a set of key themes and including recommendations for each nation studied (England, Northern Ireland and Scotland). Four separate project reports provide significant additional detail and supporting data, as follows:

- Collins, M., Greany, T., Perry, T., and Thomson, P., (2026). *Sustainable School Leadership: National technical report – England.*
- Collins, M., Greany, T., Perry, T., and Thomson, P., (2026). *Sustainable School Leadership: National technical report – Northern Ireland.*
- Collins, M., Greany, T., Perry, T., and Thomson, P., (2026). *Sustainable School Leadership: National technical report – Scotland.*
- Perry, T., Greany, T., Collins, M., Thomson, P., & Goodacre, T. (2025). *Sustainable School Leadership: UK Survey Report 2025.*

Four podcasts involving members of the project team plus guests from across the UK discussing the findings and implications are also available:

- How does identity shape school leadership?
- How does place shape school leadership?
- Why and how does school leadership today reflect an ethic of education and care?
- What can be done to make school leadership more sustainable?

These resources, together with further information on the project and links to various journal articles and a forthcoming book, can be found at: sustainableschoolleadership.uk

Suggested citation

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Acknowledgements

Ethics approval

This research was approved by the University of Nottingham School of Education Ethics Committee. In line with ethics, all individual, school and locality names are pseudonymised.

Note on data

Appropriate project data (i.e. anonymised interview transcripts) is available on the UK Data Archive.

This work includes statistical data from ONS, which is Crown Copyright. The use of the ONS statistical data in this work does not imply the endorsement of the ONS in relation to the interpretation or analysis of the statistical data and may not exactly reproduce ONS aggregates.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

Chat GPT was launched in November 2022, the same month our project funding was confirmed. Over the following three years we have all started using AI tools – Pat (Claude) and Tom (Chat GPT) were early adopters, while Toby and Mike (Co-Pilot) came later to the party. AI tools were used in the research for purposes of summarisation, language editing, and organisational tasks. These tools were sometimes used in an iterative way to support reflection and clarification during the writing process. The intellectual content, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions are all our own and responsibility for any errors or omissions lie with us.

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' (shown as a flower in Figure 3.1 on page 38):

- **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 neuroptypicality. 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 – 1,623 respondents from across the UK.

National and local contexts

In Section 4 we set out detailed findings for each nation separately. This includes a portrait of the localities in each nation, each time considering leadership plus one other 'petal' from the conceptual framework: England focuses on leadership and care; Northern Ireland considers leadership and identity; while Scotland examines leadership and place.

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.

1. Introduction

"The childhood image of a headteacher is definitely not what the job looks like now."

(Chloe, Primary Headteacher, England)

Why study sustainable school leadership across the UK?

School leadership is important. School leaders – and headteachers/principals in particular – play an essential role in shaping educational experiences and securing outcomes for children, especially in the most challenging contexts. As the late Professor Tim Brighouse[1] put it, leaders 'set the weather' in schools – by modelling the values and culture and by establishing priorities, relationships and ways of working. So ensuring that every school is led by expert and authentic leaders who feel ready, willing and able to undertake these roles is a priority for educational policymakers worldwide.

We know a lot of about successful leadership from existing research. Studies of school leadership have accumulated over several decades, leading to a high level of consensus on the features of success.[2] This consensus is supported by a series of systematic and meta-reviews which have synthesised the evidence on the kinds of leadership associated with enhanced pupil outcomes.[3] These reviews adopt differing terminologies, but the core argument is that successful school leadership combines a mix of transformational (vision and values), instructional/learning-centred (improving the quality of teaching and learning), and distributed (collective efficacy) approaches. The most recent articulation of this formula was the global review of educational leadership by UNESCO,[4] which argued that leaders should address four areas: setting expectations (i.e. transformational), focusing on learning (i.e. instructional), fostering collaboration and developing people (i.e. distributed). This global consensus has a significant influence, shaping national headteacher standards, training programmes and qualifications, appointments, appraisals and accountability.

Our purpose in undertaking the research was partly to ask whether the consensus on leadership holds true at a time when the needs of children, families and wider societies are changing rapidly. One way to understand these changes is through the notion of a polycrisis, a term coined by Edgar Morin and Anne-Brigitte Kern[5] to reflect how many global challenges are not isolated but interconnected and mutually reinforcing. These crises play out differently in different national and local contexts, with challenges in the UK that include: the long-run impact of the Covid-19 pandemic; Brexit; prolonged austerity; inflation, stagnant wages and rising levels of inequality; increased social tensions; and a rise in populist politics.[6] These issues impact on schools: sometimes directly (for example, through increased levels of migration) but mostly in ways that are cumulative and indirect, although with some children and families more clearly affected than others. We see these impacts in how schools are grappling with multiple overlapping issues, from rising mental health referrals[7] and increased rates of special needs[8], to worrying rates of persistent absence/truancy.[9]

We were interested in how these changes are impacting on leaders and how this might influence decisions on whether to stay in or leave the profession. We framed these issues in terms of sustainability, which we explore in detail in Section 3. We see this having two sides:

- **The sustainability *of* leadership** – i.e. raising questions around supply and succession planning.

- **Leadership *for* sustainability** – i.e. raising questions around what kinds of leadership are required for today and tomorrow in a polycrisis world.

We knew from previous research that the profession is under huge strain, with a clear risk that we may not have enough leaders who are willing and able to step up. It has long been recognised that teachers and leaders work long hours and that the intensity of this work has increased in recent decades.[10] A key driver of these shifts has been the increased pressure placed on schools to enact government policies and to demonstrate improvement, for example through inspections and performance in standardised tests.[11] Studies of headteacher time-use have highlighted increased administrative, managerial and accountability demands,[12] while various studies have revealed associations between work intensification and levels of stress and even burnout among school leaders.[13]

The Covid-19 pandemic piled further pressure on school leaders. Two of us undertook the Leading in Lockdown research in England, which indicated that between 30–40% of headteachers were planning to leave the profession early, due to the intensity of the pressures they were experiencing at that time (2021–2022).[14] As part of that research we interviewed over a hundred headteachers and senior leaders, revealing how a combination of extended relentless pressure, an inability to switch off, and the drain of dealing with numerous operational but often emotionally charged situations was impacting on leaders' health and wellbeing. The Sustainable School Leadership research has allowed us to understand how these issues played out over time.

The comparative UK-wide aspect of this research is also important and original. Our study has focused on leadership in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland. We had hoped to conduct an additional light touch review in Wales, but the response to the survey there was too low to include.[15] No-one has researched school leadership across the UK before, although the BELMAS (British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society) review, conducted shortly before the pandemic, included workshops on leadership and governance in each nation, so provided an important baseline for our study.[16] As we explain in Section 2, education is a devolved responsibility in each of the UK nations, meaning that each government sets its own framework and priorities, for example in relation to the curriculum, assessment, funding and the school workforce. These arrangements have evolved over time and in different ways in each nation, offering scope for rich comparative research to assess commonalities and differences in school leadership and how different frameworks operate. We believe this comparative learning can inform policy and practice, including beyond the UK.

About the research

The Sustainable School Leadership research project (2022–2026) explored two questions:

> 1. How do England, Scotland and Northern Ireland recruit, train and retain school leaders, particularly headteachers?
>
> 2. 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?

It was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council and received ethical approval from the University of Nottingham's School of Education Ethics Committee.[17]

Figure 1 provides an overview of the research design. We adopted a pragmatic and constructivist stance, seeking to inquire into leadership through the experience of leaders, collecting and synthesising data in five strands:[18]

1. **Evidence review:** This synthesised existing research on formal leadership programmes and related policy areas (for example, leadership standards, career structures, school accountability) in each nation. We searched for academic and grey literature, including government documents and guidance. Following initial screening, we reviewed 159 articles: 67 for England, 32 for Northern Ireland, 51 for Scotland, and 9 that related to the UK overall. A separate strand of work focused on books about school leadership written by practitioners.

2. **Expert interviews:** 17 international and UK experts were interviewed online between July and September 2023. The sample included: academics; policy makers; designers and providers of leadership development; and union representatives.

3. **Secondary data analysis:** The secondary data analysis drew on individual-level workforce data from England (2010–2023) and Scotland (2010–2023) alongside public statistics from Northern Ireland. The analysis covered four areas: workforce composition; supply and sustainability; development and careers; and leadership.

4. **Locality case studies:** Seven locality case studies were completed – three in England, and two each in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Table 1.1, on page 19, sets out key features of the seven localities and their pseudonyms – in Section 4 we provide further detail in the form of locality dashboards. The localities were selected based on an analysis of national data and informed by discussions with the three national advisory groups. Our aim was to visit a reasonably representative spread of contexts. In each locality we interviewed a small number of local leaders (for example in a Local Authority (LA) or Multi-Academy Trust (MAT)), employers (for example Chair of Governors) and visited a locally representative spread of primary and secondary schools, where we interviewed potential or serving heads. Each interview lasted 1.5 hours, following a semi-structured schedule. Across the 7 localities we conducted 111 interviews with 132 participants – usually individually but sometimes in small groups. We also reviewed publicly available documents and websites, for example describing local partnership arrangements.

5. **Survey:** The online survey was aimed at potential headteachers (i.e. middle and senior leaders), headteachers and leaders working across multiple schools. The survey focused on leaders' experience of recruitment, development and support and the sustainability of the role. It ran from 1/11/24 to 30/1/25, with responses from 1623 leaders, including good representation across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Table 1.1: Overview of the seven localities

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

Analysing and integrating the data from these strands was a significant task.[19] We adopted an emergent approach to theory: early in the project, informed by the literature, we developed a preliminary conceptual framework which helped us to structure the research design and analysis, but we also evolved this in line with our findings (the final version is outlined in Section 3). Each of the five strands of data were written up separately. For example, we published a separate survey report (Perry et al, 2025), while the transcripts from the seven locality case studies were cleaned and coded, with each locality case study then written up into a detailed report (all seven are included in the national technical reports). This final report draws together findings from across the five strands, using the Comparative Case Study (CCS) method outlined by Lesley Bartlett and Frances Vavrus[20] which considers change across three axes (vertical, horizontal and transversal). This enables a processual and iterative approach to analysis well suited to our study's multi-sited and multi-scalar design.

Having analysed and synthesised the data from the various strands, we ran workshops in each of the seven local case study areas in spring 2025, attended by 42 of our original interviewees. At these events we shared our emerging findings and identified potential implications and recommendations.

In autumn 2025 we ran three policy seminars, in Belfast, Edinburgh and London, attended by 115 people from a range of policy, practice and research backgrounds. At each event we shared our findings and consulted on potential recommendations for each nation.

"We adopted a pragmatic and constructivist stance, inquiring into leadership through the experience of leaders, collecting and synthesising data in five strands."

Figure 1.1: Sustainable School Leadership research design

Theoretical and epistemological orientation
A pragmatic and constructivist stance, inquiring into leadership through the experience of leaders, using a range of methods, holding paradigms in creative tension.

Conceptual Framework
Constructions and purposes of **leadership,** emergence and evolution of **identities,** experience, construction and relevance of **place,** importance of **an ethic of education and care.**

Focus on:
- The sustainability *of* leadership
- Leadership *for* sustainability

Research questions
1. How do England, Northern Ireland & Scotland recruit, train & retain school leaders?
2. How well do these approaches take account of individual, local and systemic needs?

Methods
Literature reviews, expert interviews, locality case studies, analysis of secondary data, survey of school leaders.

Comparative Logic
Paying attention to process – not simply pre-defined cases that can be studied, compared and contrasted. Attending to three axes; horizontal, vertical, transversal.

Throughout this process, we have benefited from the advice and support of our three national advisory groups (see the national technical reports for membership). Each group has included policymakers, practitioners and researchers, who have advised on all aspects of the research, helping us to ensure that the study is well grounded in each national system.

We have also shared our thinking and emerging findings at various academic and practitioner conferences and events, which has helped us to refine and sharpen the analysis.

Report structure

Section 2 sets the context by describing the key features of the three education systems – including how each system currently supports formal leadership development. This includes national dashboards, which provide system overviews as well as selected findings from the research. Section 3 provides a brief overview of the literature on sustainable school leadership and then sets out our project conceptual framework. Section 4 presents an overview of the findings in each nation, drawing mainly on the locality case studies, but also the workforce analyses, survey and expert interviews. Each summary draws on a different lens from the conceptual framework to present a portrait of leadership. We also include seven local dashboards, which provide overviews of the different localities as well as illustrative findings. Section 5 sets out and discusses the six main themes that emerge, while Section 6 provides a conclusion and recommendations for each nation.

Evidence review

Reviewed **159 articles, 67** for England, **32** for Northern Ireland, **51** for Scotland, and **9** for UK overall.

Expert interviews

17 international and UK experts interviewed.

Locality case studies

132 interviewees across **7 localities** (3 in England, 2 each in Northern Ireland and Scotland).

Survey

1,623 respondents from across the UK.

Secondary data

Analysis of workforce census data in England and Scotland and public statistics in Northern Ireland.

2. Background

"In varying degrees, the nations of the UK have distinctive education and training systems, but all belong to the same state and share its homogenising influence."

Raffe et al. (1999) The Case for 'Home Internationals' in Comparative Research

The Sustainable School Leadership project is the first ever empirical study of school leadership and leadership development across three UK nations: England, Northern Ireland and Scotland. As noted above, education is a devolved responsibility in the UK, meaning that each government sets its own framework and priorities. That said, the national systems have many similarities and operate in the context of a UK-wide state that remains highly interdependent, with many areas of social and economic policy still set in London. While the UK shares a common language (albeit with a subset of Irish, Gaelic and Welsh medium schools), each nation has its own distinctive history and constellation of cultures. These differences shape attitudes and beliefs in relation to education and, often, distinctive approaches to public sector reform. The national systems also differ widely in terms of their size and approach to the recruitment, development and support of school leaders.

School leadership and leadership development in each nation

In this section we provide a brief overview of the three systems studied, focusing mainly on the approach to school leadership and leadership development in each case.

For each nation we include a data dashboard which provides a system-level overview, drawing on existing national data and a selection of project findings.[21] The research data in each dashboard includes:

- the age profile of heads and deputy heads between 2010–2023
- factors that drain and sustain school leaders – these are themes we identified from the qualitative interviews, with the bar chart showing how many times each theme was referred to. In Box 2 (pages 98-99) we show how often leaders who completed the survey included these issues in their top draining or sustaining factors.
- responses to the question 'Which of the following best describes your own experience of working in school over the last 12 months?'

England

England's school system is by far the largest of the three UK nations studied, with around 22,600 state-funded schools. All primary schools and most secondary schools are comprehensive (with no entrance exam), although a minority of local areas allow grammar schools to select children based on an exam (the 11+). Around a third of state-funded schools are faith schools, usually attached to either the Church of England or the Roman Catholic Church.

While most schools are located in more densely populated urban and suburban areas, around a quarter of schools are in rural areas, many of which are small. England is characterised by high levels of geographic inequality, with median household wealth in London and the South East more than twice that in the North West.[22] Economic inequality intersects with other forms of inequality, for example in terms of health and life expectancy as well as educational outcomes. England is also culturally diverse, particularly in its urban centres, with around two in five pupils from a minority ethnic background.

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

The school system in England has been characterised as the most neo-liberal of the three UK nations studied.[23] For example, since the late 1980s England has adopted a quasi-market framework based on parental choice and high school autonomy and accountability. State-funded schools are held accountable through a combination of mechanisms, which include their performance in national tests and exams and periodic inspection visits undertaken by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted).

Since 2010, school governance arrangements have seen significant change and fragmentation, moving from a place-based model of LA (n=153) oversight to a model in which a majority of schools are now academies, which are funded and overseen by national government.[24] Most academies are now controlled by one of around 1,300 Multi-Academy Trusts.[25] These trusts employ headteachers and are responsible for all aspects of academy operations and performance.

England's Department for Education (DfE) provides support for formal leadership development. The National Professional Qualification for Headteachers (NPQH)[26] was first introduced in 1997 and has been through multiple reviews and revisions since then. NPQH was previously mandatory but has been optional since 2012, although public support and funding have been sustained. In 2022–23, 5,020 leaders started the programme, with 84% of them completing it.[27] The NPQH content framework is determined by the DfE with input from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), a government endowed 'what works' agency. DfE contracts national and local (Teaching School Hub) providers to deliver the programme. DfE also supports a wider suite of National Professional Qualifications (NPQs) for leaders at different stages of their careers. Most leaders and schools engage in other forms of formal and informal professional learning beyond these national programmes.[28]

In the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 survey of attainment by 15-year-olds, England performed significantly above the OECD average in mathematics, reading and science.[29] Between 2006 and 2022 England's PISA outcomes in maths, science and reading remained relatively stable, but with declines in some areas. In PISA 2022, pupils reported significantly lower levels of life satisfaction than the OECD average.

England system dashboard

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

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

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

21,644
Number of primary, secondary and special schools in England

Newcastle
York
Leeds
Manchester
Liverpool
Sheffield
Nottingham
Birmingham
Norwich
Cambridge
Oxford
Bristol
London
Southampton
Brighton

School type
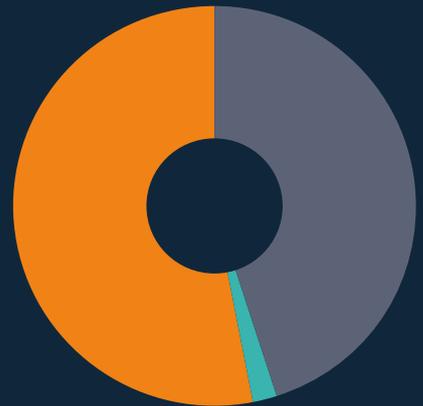
Primary
- Multi-Academy Trust 45%
- Single-Academy Trust 2%
- Local Authority Maintained 53%

Secondary
- Multi-Academy Trust 69%
- Single-Academy Trust 14%
- Local Authority Maintained 17%

Source: DfE

Average age of school leadership workforce over time

Headteachers: -1.5 years

49.5 ... 48

Deputy Headteachers: -0.5 years

44.8 ... 44.3

Average age (years)

Year
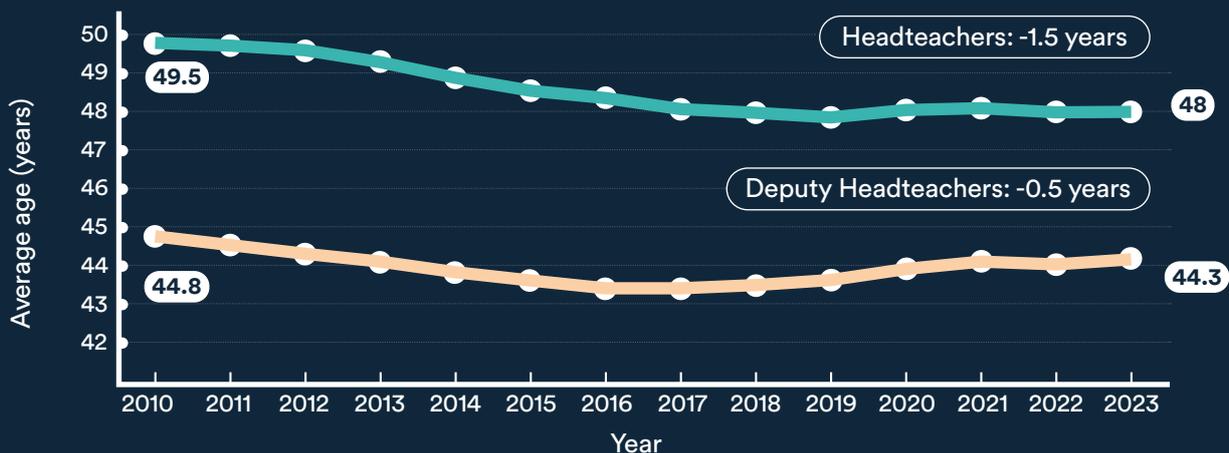
Source: Analysis of DfE School Workforce data

The issues that drain (-) and sustain (+) leaders

+ (sustain)

- Making a difference with pupil learning and growth
- Relationships
- Professional development
- Life outside work
- Leadership opportunity, autonomy, and responsibility
- Support systems
- Material benefits and job security
- Community engagement
- Ethos and moral purpose
- Work fulfilment and enjoyment
- Positive feedback, encouragement and recognition
- Good headteacher wellbeing

Scale: 140 120 100 80 60 40 20 0 20 40 60 80

− (drain)

- Conflict of values and beliefs
- Poor headteacher wellbeing
- Lack of support
- Admin and bureaucracy
- Behaviour and inclusion challenges
- Staff recruitment, resilience, and HR
- Finance and resources
- Inspection, accountability, audit
- Complaints and disputes
- Relentless workload

How are school leaders feeling?

Overall which of the following best describes your own experience of working in school over the last 12 months?
(n= 1,001 respondents)

Legend:
- Mostly thriving
- Sometimes thriving
- Mostly surviving
- Sometimes sinking
- Mostly sinking

Categories: Middle and senior leaders, Headteacher, Executive headteachers

25

Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland is the smallest of the three UK systems studied, with around 1,000 schools in total. While many schools are located in larger urban centres, including Belfast, Northern Ireland includes large rural areas, often served by small schools: for example, in 2022, 193 out of 440 rural primaries had fewer than 105 pupils.[30]

Since 1999, responsibility for education has been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly, as part of the wider Good Friday Agreement, with schools policy and implementation resting with the Department of Education NI and its arms-length bodies. However, the power-sharing agreement has been suspended at various times, including between 2017–2020 and 2022–2024, meaning that education policy has lacked sustained focus and investment. One consequence is that schools in Northern Ireland have been funded at lower rates than other parts of the UK, with the recent Independent Review describing "a financial crisis".[31] The last decade has also seen extended periods of industrial action – mostly Action Short of Strike (ASOS) – which has impacted on many aspects of school development, including inspections by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). Since the Assembly was restored, in 2024, the Education Minister, Paul Givan, has pursued an ambitious agenda – badged as TransformED[32] – to revise the national curriculum and to invest in professional development for teachers and leaders.

> "Since 1999, responsibility for education has been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly, as part of the wider Good Friday Agreement, with schools policy and implementation resting with the Department of Education NI and its arms-length bodies."

Given its small size the system in Northern Ireland is remarkably complex, reflecting historic sectarian divides, more recent initiatives to develop integrated and Irish Medium sectors, and academic selection at age 11.[33] Today, while many schools educate a mix of children from different religious communities and many families classify themselves as having no religious affiliation, school choices are still commonly influenced by sectarian and cultural differences.

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

Support for formal leadership development in Northern Ireland has been limited in recent years, reflecting the political and funding challenges highlighted above. The Professional Qualification for Headship (PQH NI) was paused in 2017 and has not yet been reinstated, although the TransformEd strategy includes a commitment to launch a new version as well as changes to how schools are supported to improve.

In the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 survey of attainment by 15 year-olds, Northern Ireland's outcomes in mathematics and science were similar to the OECD average, but significantly above the average in reading.[34] In PISA 2022, pupils reported significantly lower levels of life satisfaction than OECD average.
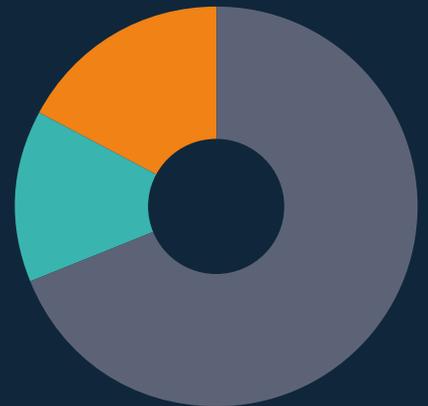
"Given its small size the system in Northern Ireland is remarkably complex."

"The last decade has also seen extended periods of industrial action which has impacted on many aspects of school development."

Northern Ireland system dashboard

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

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

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

Coleraine
Derry
Ballymena
Newtownabbey
Bangor
Omagh
Belfast
Lisburn
Enniskillen
Armagh
Newry
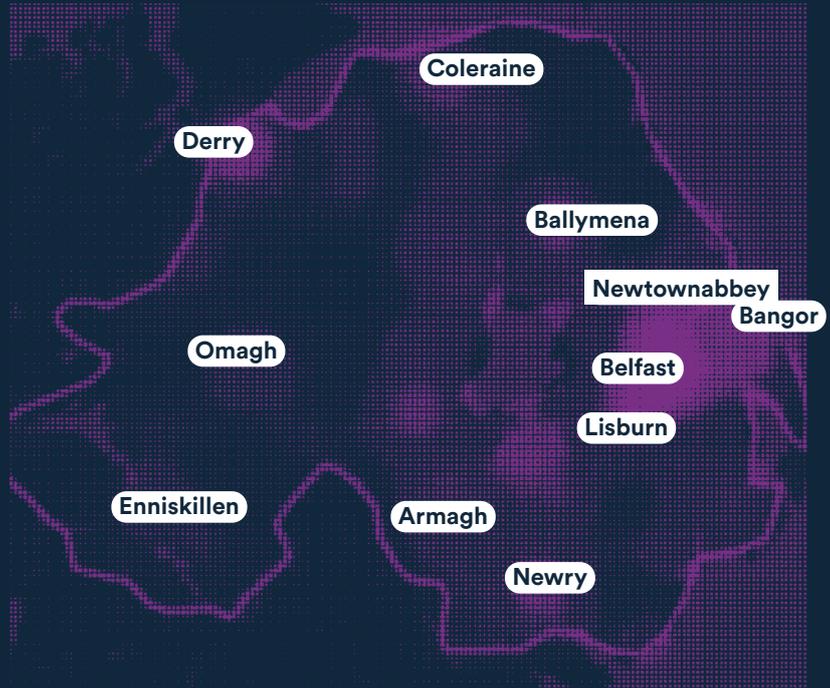
Types of schools

Primary

- Catholic Maintained 45%
- Controlled 45%
- Controlled Integrated 3.51%
- Irish Medium 3.25%
- Grant Maintained Integrated 2.99%
- Other 0.26%

Secondary

- Catholic Maintained 28.4%
- Controlled 24.7%
- Grammar Voluntary (Catholic) 15.3%
- Grammar Voluntary (other) 11.1%
- Grammar controlled 8.42%
- Grant Maintained Integrated 7.89%
- Controlled Integrated 3.16%
- Irish Medium 1.05%
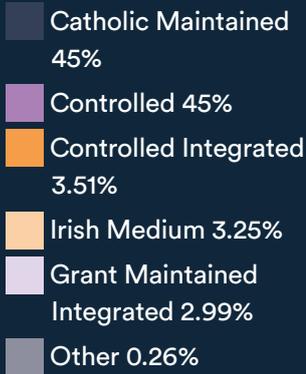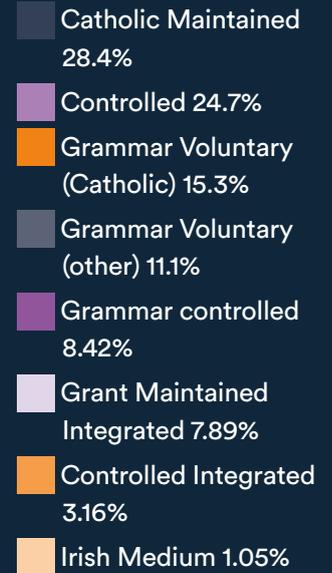
1,014 Number of primary, secondary and special schools in Northern Ireland
Source: DENI

Average age of school leadership workforce over time

Headteachers: +1 years

Deputy Headteachers: +0 years

Average age (years)

| Year | 2011 | 2016 | 2023 | 2024 |

49 ... 50 (Headteachers)
48 ... 48 (Deputy Headteachers)

Source: Education Workforce Statistics

The issues that drain (-) and sustain (+) leaders

Relationships

Making a difference with pupil learning and growth

Leadership opportunity, autonomy, and responsibility

Professional development

Life outside work

Ethos and moral purpose

Community engagement

Work fulfilment and enjoyment

Positive feedback, encouragement and recognition

Support systems

Material benefits and job security

Good headteacher wellbeing

+

140 120 100 80 60 40 20 0 20 40 60

−

Conflict of values and beliefs

Poor headteacher wellbeing

Inspection, accountability, audit

Behaviour and inclusion challenges

Lack of support

Finance and resources

Complaints and disputes

Admin and bureaucracy

Staff recruitment, resilience, and HR

Relentless workload

How are school leaders feeling?

Overall which of the following best describes your own experience of working in school over the last 12 months? (n=240 respondents)

■ Mostly thriving
■ Sometimes thriving
■ Mostly surviving
■ Sometimes sinking
□ Mostly sinking

100%

80%

60%

40%

20%

0%

Middle and senior leaders   Headteacher

29
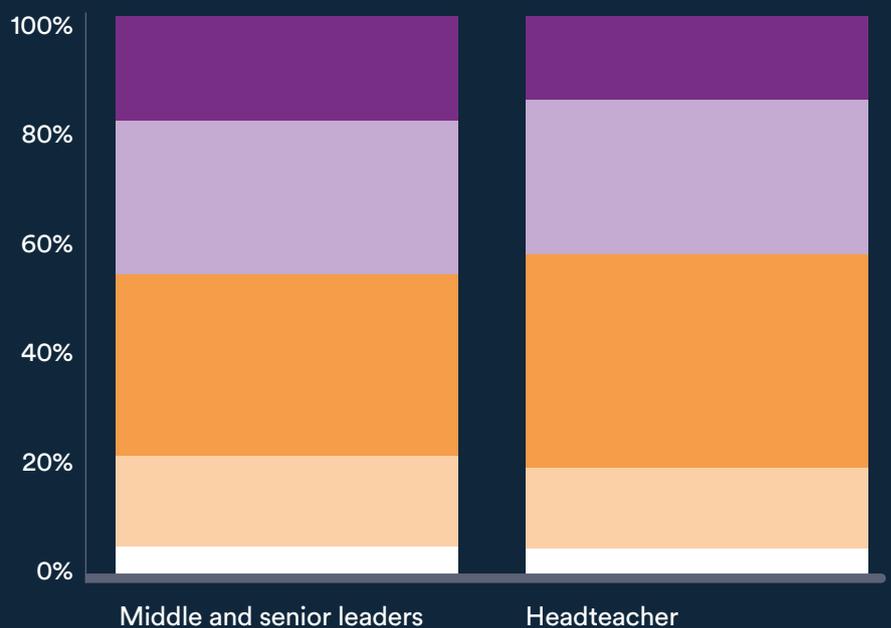
Scotland

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 2,500 schools in total, which are funded, supported and held accountable by Scotland's 32 local authorities, meaning that in governance terms the system is far less complex than either England or Northern Ireland.

In recent years the Scottish Government has pursued ambitious curriculum reforms (Curriculum for Excellence) and made significant investments in improving pupil achievement and attainment (for example National Improvement Framework, Scottish Attainment Challenge) and in overcoming disadvantage (for example Pupil Equity Funding).[35]

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.[36] 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.[37]

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, 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. In 2022 there were 253 graduates from *Into Headship*. The wider suite of programmes supported by Education Scotland includes *In Headship*, a non-mandatory postgraduate programme for new heads, as well as offers for middle leaders and serving heads.

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.[38] 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.

> "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, which is mandatory for all new headteachers."

"The school system in Scotland has been described as a coherent and consensual but relatively traditional model."

"In recent years the Scottish Government has pursued ambitious curriculum reforms and made significant investments in improving pupil achievement and attainment."

Scotland system dashboard

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

Comprehensive: limited parental choice, most serve local communities.

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

2,483

Number of primary, secondary and special schools in Scotland

Source: Scottish Government Statistics

Aberdeen

Fort William

Dundee

Perth

Oban

Stirling

Edinburgh

Glasgow

Ayr

Average age of school leadership workforce over time

Average age (years)

50.9

48.6

Headteachers: -2.4 years — 48.5

Deputy Headteachers: -3.2 years — 45.4

Year
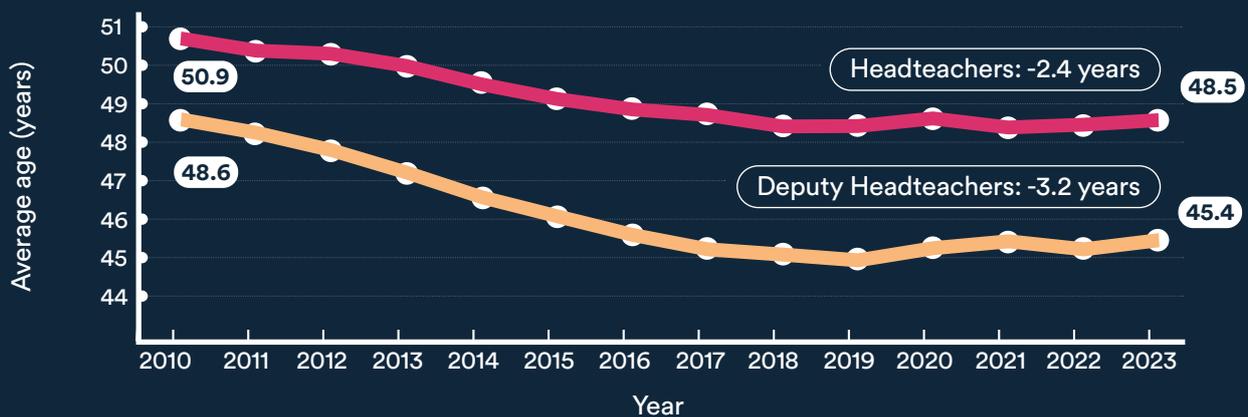
Source: Analysis of Scottish Government School Teacher Census data

The issues that drain (-) and sustain (+) leaders

Sustain (+):
- Relationships
- Making a difference with pupil learning and growth
- Work fulfilment and enjoyment
- Professional development
- Life outside work
- Leadership opportunity, autonomy, and responsibility
- Community engagement
- Support systems
- Ethos and moral purpose
- Positive feedback, encouragement and recognition
- Good headteacher wellbeing
- Material benefits and job security

Scale: 80 60 40 20 0 20 40 60

Drain (-):
- Conflict of values and beliefs
- Poor headteacher wellbeing
- Inspection, accountability, audit
- Lack of support
- Complaints and disputes
- Admin and bureaucracy
- Behaviour and inclusion challenges
- Staff recruitment, resilience, and HR
- Finance and resources
- Relentless workload

How are school leaders feeling?

Overall which of the following best describes your own experience of working in school over the last 12 months? (n=332 respondents)

Legend:
- Mostly thriving
- Sometimes thriving
- Mostly surviving
- Sometimes sinking
- Mostly sinking

Scale: 100% 80% 60% 40% 20% 0%

Categories: Middle and senior leaders, Headteacher

33
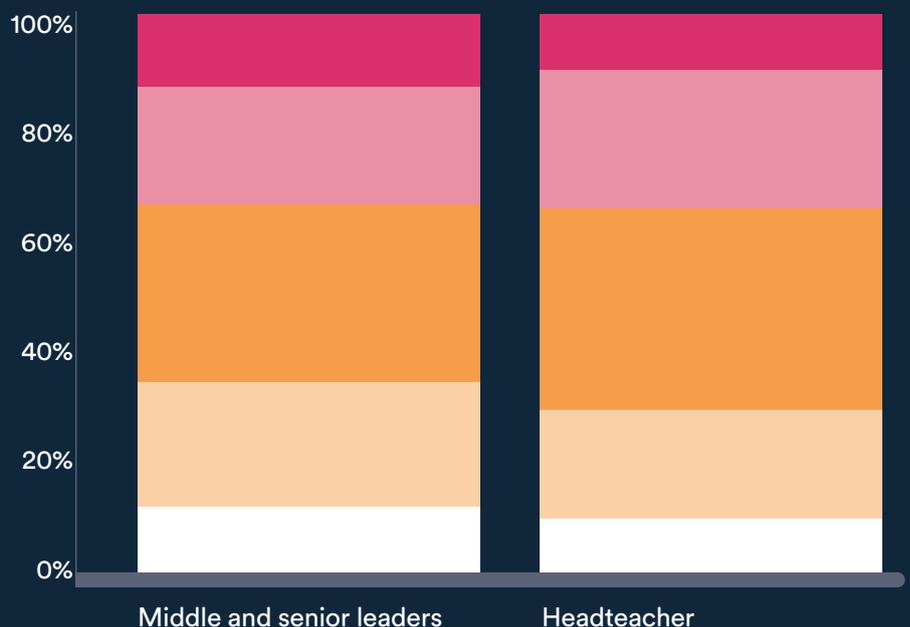
Conclusion

As these short overviews begin to indicate, there are similarities and differences among the three nations which make the comparative aspects of our findings particularly fascinating.

One insight on these national differences comes from the survey, where we asked a series of questions about how school leaders understand their context and system. In Figure 2.1 we show responses to three questions, split by nation. The first asks whether leaders perceive there to be a clear local hierarchy of schools in their area, in terms of their status and popularity with parents. This is intended to probe the influence of competition, parental choice mechanisms and status hierarchies on leadership decision-making. A majority of leaders in all three nations agree that such hierarchies exist, with leaders in England the most likely to agree, followed by Northern Ireland. The second question asks whether the school primarily serves students from the immediate local neighbourhood. Once again, a majority of leaders in all three nations agree, but this time the order is reversed, with leaders in Scotland most likely to agree. The third question asks whether leaders agree that their school feels like a strong part of the local community: again, a majority of leaders in all three nations agree, but this time Northern Ireland scores highest, with almost three quarters of leaders strongly agreeing (73.7%).

These responses align with our short system outlines above – i.e. England's 'neo-liberal' framework, Northern Ireland's selective and complex but community-engaged system, and Scotland's traditional, comprehensive model – illustrating implications which we explore throughout this report.

Figure 2.1: School leader views on competition and community engagement
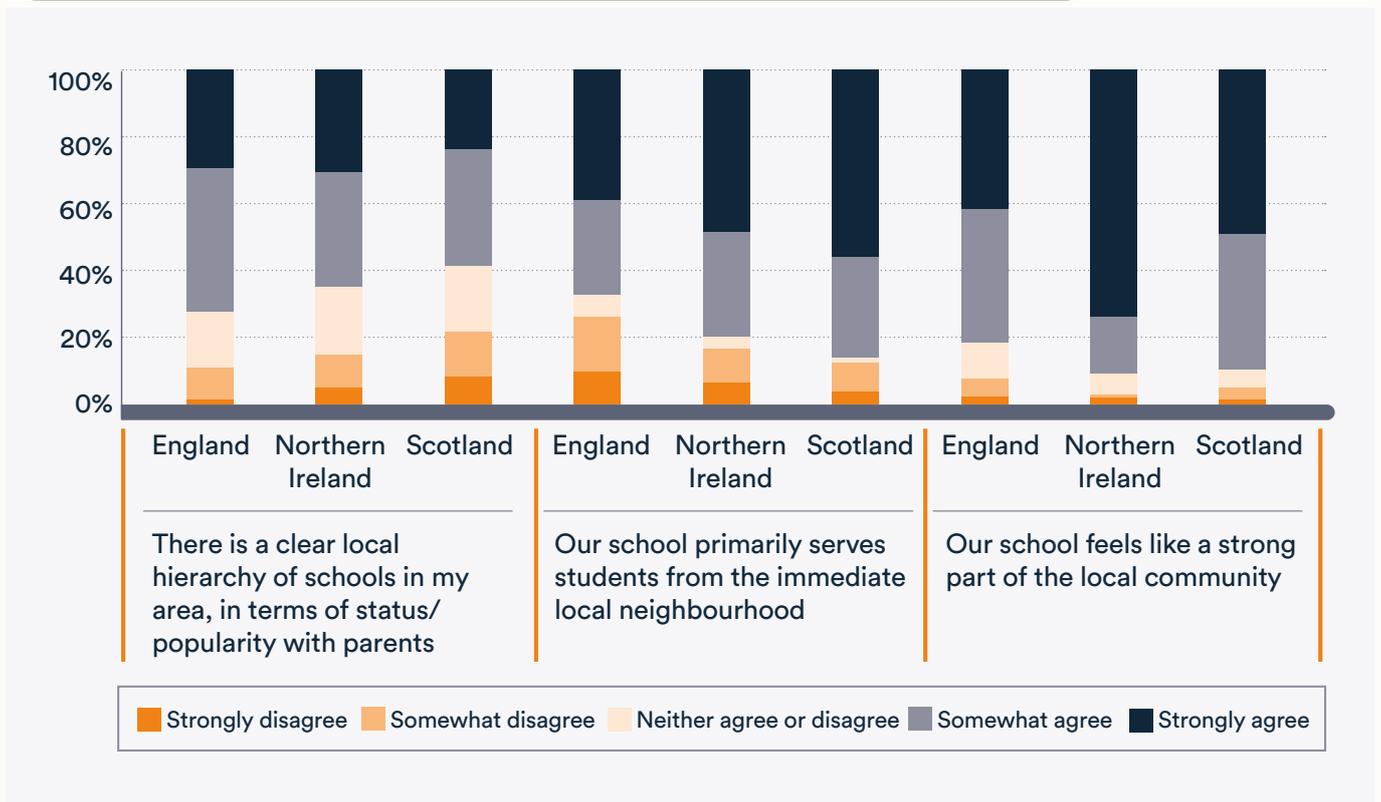
These short overviews begin to indicate similarities and differences among the three nations, making the comparative aspects of our findings particularly fascinating:

- England's improvement focused 'neo-liberal' framework

- Northern Ireland's selective and complex but community-engaged system

- Scotland's traditional, comprehensive model.

3. Conceptualising sustainable school leadership

"Sustainable educational leadership and improvement preserves and develops deep learning for all that spreads and lasts, in ways that do no harm and indeed create positive benefit for others around us, now and in the future."

—Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink (2006) Sustainable Leadership

In this section we start by briefly reviewing existing research and thinking on sustainable leadership and by outlining why and how sustainable leadership makes a difference. We position leadership for sustainability and the sustainability of leadership as separate but interconnected: with important ramifications for educational equity and outcomes in a rapidly changing world. We then set out our project conceptual framework, showing this as a flower with four overlapping 'petals' – leadership, identity, place and an ethic of education and care. Our research design and findings align with this framework – for example, through the seven place-based case studies.

Previous research on sustainable school leadership

We are not the first researchers to explore the issue of sustainable leadership. Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink's 2006 book, quoted above, drew on thinking from the environmental movement as well as from business and other sectors to assess these issues.[39] They highlighted that sustainability is about meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Furthermore, they showed that sustainability is not just an environmental issue but also involves addressing issues of social equity, economic development, cultural preservation and intergenerational equity.

Hargreaves and Fink drew on examples of school leaders they had researched to inform their analysis. This highlighted the importance of leadership continuity in schools, and why this was under threat in an era of high stakes reform, where the pressure is always on to demonstrate rapid progress. They argued that we need to keep leaders in post over time, in particular in the most challenging schools, and that school systems should pay greater attention to leadership succession so that progress can be maintained. They articulated the need for deep and broad learning for all students, going beyond tested outcomes, and argued powerfully for values-based forms of shared and collaborative leadership which prioritises the public good.

Building on these arguments, Hargreaves and Fink set out seven principles for sustainable leadership which continue to resonate 20 years later: 1. Depth: Learning and integrity; 2. Length: Endurance and succession; 3. Breadth: Distribution, not delegation; 4. Justice: Others and ourselves; 5. Diversity: Complexity and cohesion; 6. Resourcefulness: Restraint and renewal; 7. Conservation: History and legacy.

> **Box 1: Why sustainability?**
>
> Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all is one of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG4), so there is a straightforward argument for placing sustainable schooling and leadership at the heart of any discussion of contemporary education policy and practice.
>
> Within this, we see sustainable leadership as comprising two aspects:
>
> First, the sustainability *of* leadership itself, by which we mean the extent to which leaders and their teams feel ready, willing and able to lead successful schools.
>
> Second, leadership *for* sustainability, which focuses on four inter-related areas:
>
> - sustainable organisations, which nurture all staff and which seek to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs;
>
> - social sustainability, where schools actively nurture and sustain high quality relationships characterised by trust and reciprocity, both internally and across the local and wider community;
>
> - economic sustainability, which can be secured through judicious resource management, including directing resources to local providers; and
>
> - environmental sustainability, which is not only about school resources and facilities but also about the curriculum.

More recently, Mike Bottery, Wong Ping Man and George Ngai drew on portraits of individual headteachers they had interviewed in England and Hong Kong to explore sustainable leadership.[40] They highlighted how 'sustainability' has become a fashionable but often misleading term, arguing that we must pay attention to what we mean by it. Bottery and his colleagues explored common threats to headteacher wellbeing and sustainability, such as increased accountability and surveillance, excessive workloads, unequal power relationships, and the increasing complexity of the role. Their work is particularly helpful in highlighting how leadership sustainability issues and responses vary across cultures and how they play out at different levels – the individual (micro), the school (meso), and wider cultures and systems (macro).

Al-khamaiseh et al's recent systematic review of definitions of sustainable leadership in education[41] identifies seven distinct themes, which are categorised into three meta-themes: effectiveness and impact, sustainability systems thinking, and collaborative responsibility and future orientation. The authors conclude that sustainable leadership includes a:

> *"... foundational emphasis on effectiveness and long-term impact... a holistic approach, considering the past, present, and future... collaboration and shared responsibility among stakeholders... (emphasising) environmental considerations... (and) is inherently transformative, driving positive change for sustainability within educational institutions."* (2024:14)

Unsurprisingly, our thinking and work overlaps with these earlier authors. We too draw on concepts and definitions from the environmental movement and are similarly interested in the sustainability of leadership over time and at different scales (for example, from the individual, to the school and system) as well as how leadership relates to wider questions about the nature and purpose of schools.

A conceptual framework for sustainable school leadership

Our conceptual framework is shown in Figure 3.1, with sustainable school leadership at the centre of a flower that has four overlapping 'petals', highlighting how they are connected and interwoven. As we explained in Section 1, the framework has evolved iteratively through the course of the research. We developed an initial version based on our reading of the literature which encompassed leadership, identity and place. We then added 'an ethic of education and care' towards the end of the study, informed by our empirical findings. The following section provides brief descriptions of the thinking underpinning each petal.[42]

Figure 3.1: Conceptual framework for Sustainable school leadership

Leadership

"And then we put, 'we are looking for headteacher and these are the things we would like' …. (and) it was a combination of children's words, teachers, school staff and governors. So, it was things like, we would like to see someone who is curious and inclusive."

—Erin, Primary School Governor, England – Shire

Definitions of leadership are not singular or fixed, rather they evolve in line with wider societal shifts and organisational requirements. Nevertheless, at any one point in time, there is likely to be a dominant leadership discourse shaped by research, policy and practice as well as collective beliefs about what education is 'for'. This dominant discourse will have associated ethical standards, which may be more or less explicit.

As we outlined in Section 1, research into school leadership has accumulated over several decades, leading to a high level of consensus on the features of success. Such leadership is seen to combine a mix of transformational (vision and values), instructional/learning-centred (improving the quality of teaching and learning), and distributed (collective efficacy) approaches.

We see educational leadership as:

- a process of influence geared towards the achievement of shared goals
- culturally situated and context specific
- distributed and collective
- drawing on accumulated knowledges, expertise and repertoires of practice.

We see leadership development as:

- a process of individual career-long growth
- involving the development of knowledge, understanding and abilities as well as shifts in aspirations, beliefs, values and identity.

The sustainability *of* leadership includes consideration of diversity, equity, quality and fitness for future as well as the supply of leaders.

Leadership *for* sustainability is about meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, including through consideration of sustainable organisations and social, economic and environmental sustainability.

Identity

"I remember thinking we lived in a very scary council estate … 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 makes the difference."
—Secondary Head, Scotland Rural-Coast
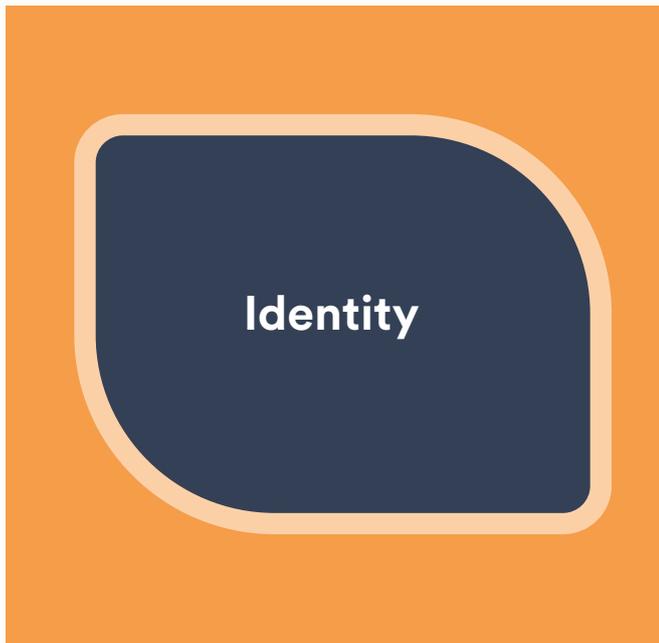
In his pioneering study of primary headship in England, Geoff Southworth[43] distinguished between a leader's situated identity and their substantial self. Situated identities are socially constructed through interaction with others, including becoming socialised into the norms, values and beliefs of the profession. Meanwhile, the substantial self reflects an inner core of self-defining beliefs, values and attitudes, which generally remain stable but not completely static.

This highlights how our professional identities are dynamic and evolving, although we might strive for a unifying sense of self through the meaning making narratives we tell ourselves and each other: my biography, my life experiences and, as a result, the kind of person I think I am, including my morals, values and beliefs. These personal identities are embodied and intersectional, bringing together aspects such as class, race, gender, sexuality, and neurotypicality.

The socially constructed nature of our identities means that they must always be negotiated with those we interact with. As Crow and Møller put it: "leaders cannot simply stamp themselves as a moral leader, an advocate, or a change agent",[44] such judgements must have legitimacy in the eyes of other, including staff, pupil and parent bodies.

A leader's professional identity also interacts with other leaders, at local and national scales, through processes of socialisation. For example, an influential mentor, the local headteacher network, or membership of a particular union might all influence how they see themselves as a leader.

These personal and collective narratives underpin how as leaders we make sense of leadership, including our ability to sustain ourselves, and can influence career choices and decisions.[45]

Place

"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 the school."
—Primary Head, Scotland – City

Places are material locations, identified by postcodes and co-ordinates on a map, each with its own geographical features. These features can shape everything from where the school is located and its design, to the bus routes that influence its intake, and the local industries that pupils may aspire to one day work in.

Places are home to communities which are networked and evolving, deeply imbued with personal and social histories, stories and meanings.

Places are connected at different scales – the nation state, the region or local authority area, the school catchment and so on – which overlap and can change, particularly in a digital age.

Places are framed by policy, for example relating to transport, housing, the dispersal of refugees, and the governance of school systems, with different policies often interacting.

Place

Indigenous perspectives on place challenge the nature-culture divide that underpins much Western thought, meaning that places can be understood as living entities with their own agency and intentions, requiring humans to develop respectful relationships of care rather than imposing meaning and use.

Places are shaped by external forces, such as globalisation, but also shape these in distinctive ways, making each locality unique – a constellation of stories. As Appadurai puts it, places are both "context derived and context generative".[46] This means that while some aspects of modern places might seem like a Russian Doll, with every high street having its replica McDonalds and so on, places also generate their own distinctive responses to globalising influences. These place-making processes are shaped by relations of power and inequality, meaning that some groups may be systematically marginalised.

So, while one school might look superficially like another, and both schools might be inspected using the same national framework, each will also have its own uniqueness within its own place, which school leaders must understand and respond to, even while working to influence and shape.

An ethic of education and care

"I also need to be there for my staff ... I have this kind of image in my head where if it's not working for them, I've definitely failed because I need them to be ready to teach the children. And I am constantly trying to provide the pastoral care for them. And I think that's a huge change in my role.... the pastoral side now."

—Primary Head, Northern Ireland – Town-Rural

An ethic of education and care

As we explained in Section 1, researchers have long argued that successful school leaders adopt an educational – or instructional – focus: working with their teams to continually improve the quality of teaching and learning and to ensure that all children are making progress.

But, in a context of global polycrisis, the needs of children and families are changing and growing, while support from wider services and agencies has commonly been stripped back. The needs of school staff have also become more complex.

Feminist care theories assert that humans are fundamentally interdependent beings who develop within relationships of care.[47] This places the human and relational at the heart of processes of learning – essential for human and environmental survival and flourishing.

Joan Tronto's framework of care ethics identifies five essential elements[48]: caring about (attentiveness to needs), taking care of (responsibility for addressing needs), care-giving (competence in providing care), care-receiving (responsiveness to how care is experienced), and caring with (solidarity and trust in shared caring).

This perspective challenges the separation of academic learning from a broader understanding of students' lives. It suggests that children cannot compartmentalise their experiences of poverty, trauma, cultural difference or family circumstances when they enter the classroom.

Schools have always had a duty of care for their students and commonly see inclusion and wellbeing support as part and parcel of their remit, but placing an ethic of education and care at the core of sustainable leadership raises foundational questions around the purpose and process of schooling.

Conclusion

The flower diagram is designed to convey how the four petal areas interact and overlap. The framework is thus endlessly flexible but also suggests that individual and collective sustainability requires a degree of alignment within and among the four petal areas. For example, while one leader with their particular identity and ethics might thrive in one school, they might not succeed in a different place without significant adaptation and support. Equally, we can apply the framework at locality or system level, asking how collective identities and leadership development and support mechanisms might need to shift to meet the changing needs of children and schools in a context of global polycrisis.
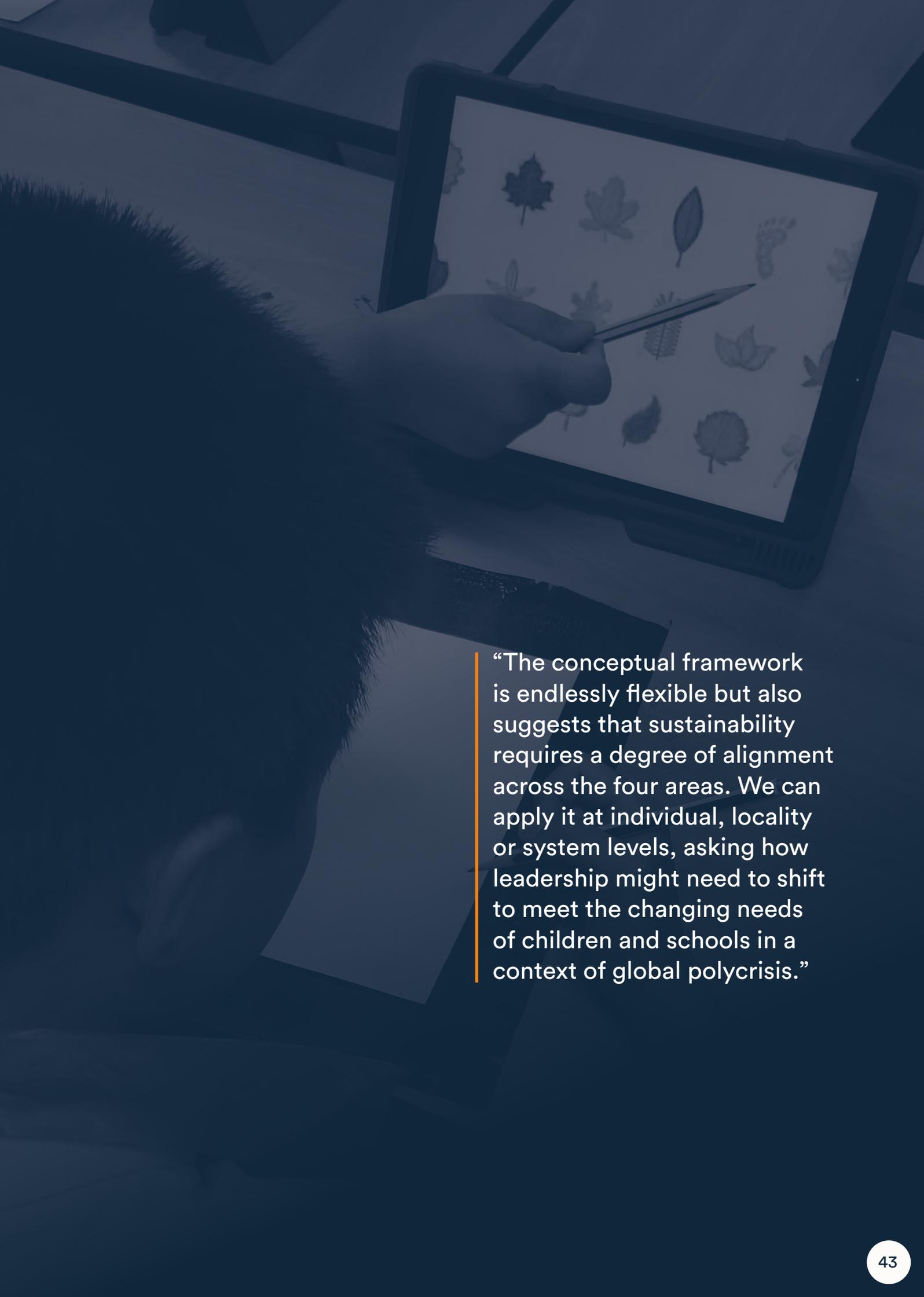
"The conceptual framework is endlessly flexible but also suggests that sustainability requires a degree of alignment across the four areas. We can apply it at individual, locality or system levels, asking how leadership might need to shift to meet the changing needs of children and schools in a context of global polycrisis."

4. Headline findings in each nation

In this section we provide an overview of findings for each nation, drawing mainly on the locality case studies but also the secondary data analysis, survey and expert interviews. These findings build on the descriptions of the three systems in Section 2 (Background), while many of the themes introduced here are extended in Section 5. The three national technical reports, published separately, provide significant further detail.

Each national summary has six elements:

- The leadership workforce. This provides an overview from the secondary data analysis.
- Leadership development, recruitment and succession planning.
- School improvement, accountability and support.
- What drains and sustains leaders?
- Locality dashboards: each dashboard highlights key features and provides illustrative quotes mapped onto the conceptual framework.
- A portrait of the localities. Each portrait considers leadership plus one other 'petal' from the conceptual framework set out in Section 3: England focuses on leadership and care; Northern Ireland considers leadership and identity; while Scotland examines leadership and place. This approach allows us to present the findings and illustrate the conceptual framework in tandem, while avoiding repetition.[49]

England

The research in England included expert interviews (n=5), secondary analysis of national census data for the leadership workforce (2010–2023), a survey of 1,001 school leaders, and in-depth interviews with 62 leaders across three contrasting localities.

The locality dashboards (pages 47, 52 and 55) indicate key features of City, Coast, and Shire, including illustrative quotes mapped onto the conceptual framework. City is a mid-sized urban authority characterised by economic disadvantage and ethnic diversity. Shire is predominantly rural with dispersed communities ranging from affluent villages to hidden pockets of poverty. Coast combines a deprived seaside town with more affluent rural areas, its landscape dominated by MATs.

The leadership workforce

England employs approximately 76,000 senior leaders (i.e. headteachers, deputy headteachers, and assistant headteachers), including 22,455 headteachers, within a total teaching workforce of over half a million across all state-funded schools.

Between 2010 and 2023 the headteacher age profile shifted markedly and is now concentrated in the 40 to 54 range, as shown in Figure 4.1. The proportion aged 55 to 59 fell from 25% to 15% over the period. Very few heads continue into their 60s, with this group making up just over 4% of the total. Around one in four heads (25.5%) is now aged 50–54. Younger age groups (16–34 and 35–39) remained small, with some modest growth. These changes have resulted in a decline in the mean age of headteachers, falling from 49.6 in 2010 to around 48 in recent years. The changes in age profile for heads and other roles are shown in the national dashboard on pages 24–25, showing that the average age of Deputy and Assistant heads has also declined.

Figure 4.1: England Headteacher age profile by year
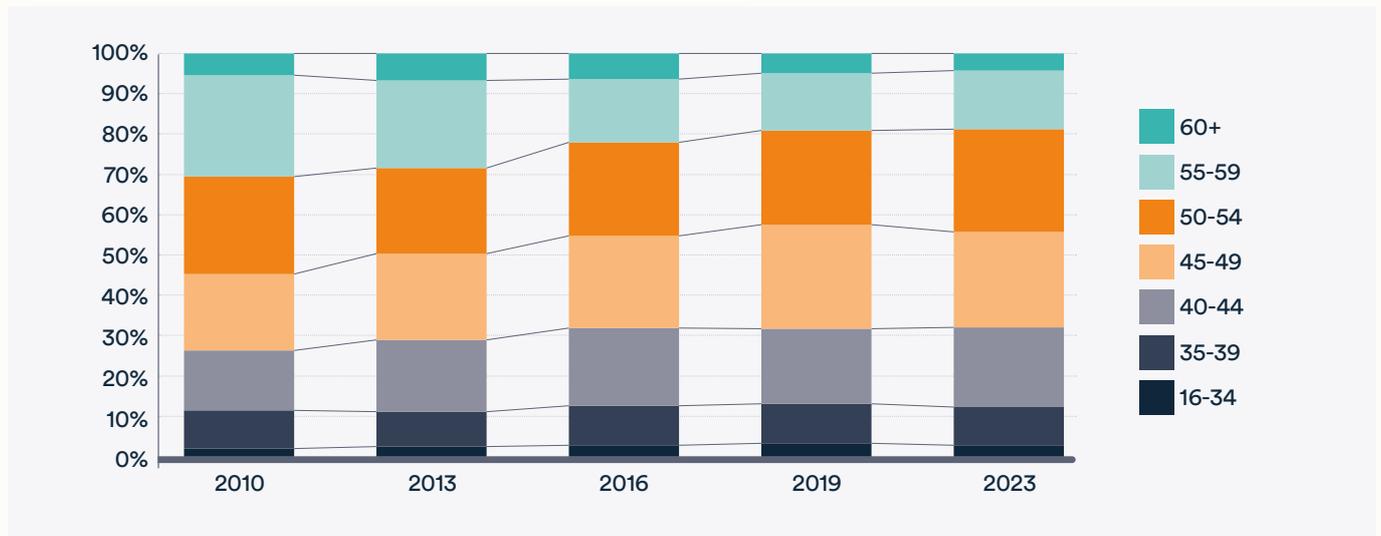
Gender gaps persist and ethnic minority representation remains low. While women comprise 76% of classroom teachers, they account for only 68% of headteachers. The difference is particularly stark in secondary schools, where women make up 65% of staff but only 43% of headteachers. There has been a gradual increase in the proportion of women in senior roles over time: for example, in primary the proportion of female heads rose from 71% in 2010 to 74% in 2023, while in secondary schools, the rise was from 38% to 43%.

Ethnic minority representation declines sharply with seniority, from 15% of classroom teachers to around 7% of headteachers who categorise themselves as non-White. For example, Black or Black British teachers make up just under 3% of classroom teachers but only 1% of headteachers, while Asian or Asian British teachers account for 5.5% of classroom teachers and under 2% of headteachers.

Leadership team size varies widely by phase. In primary schools, there are on average 1.47 deputies and assistants per headteacher. Secondary schools have far larger and more layered structures: each headteacher oversees nearly six senior leaders, rising to 6.5 in LA maintained schools. Special schools and PRUs (Pupil Referral Units) sit between these extremes, with 2.59 deputies and assistants per headteacher.
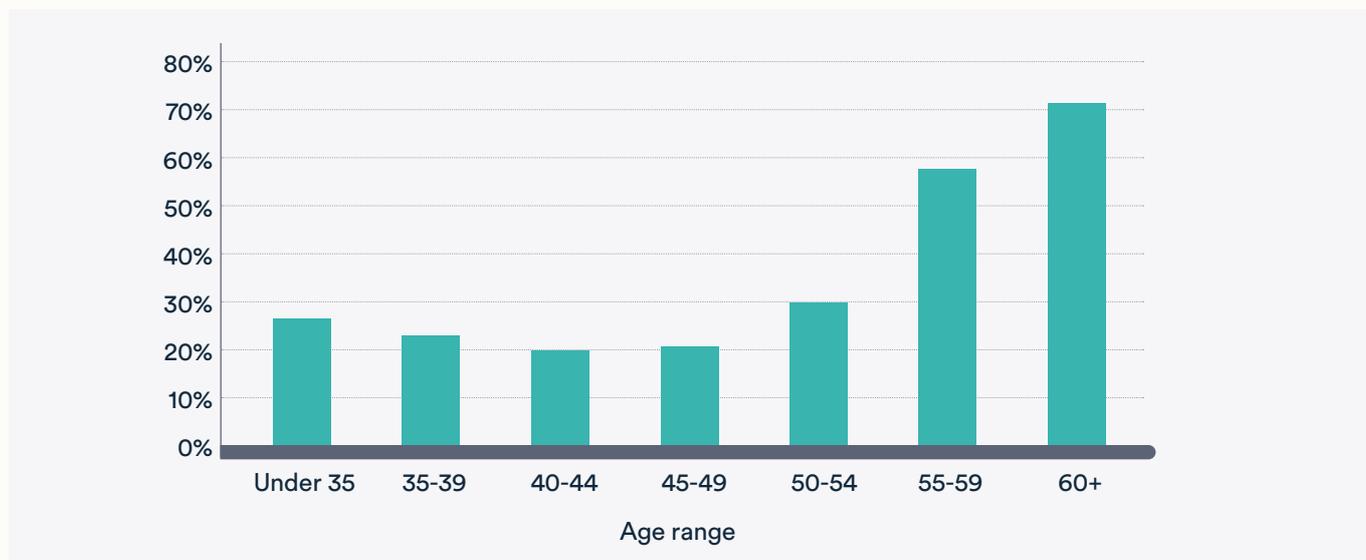
Part-time work has increased, particularly among Assistant Heads in the primary sector, but remains lowest among headteachers. In 2010, one in ten (10%) assistant headteachers in maintained primaries worked part-time, rising to one in five (20%) by 2023. Among deputy heads the rise was from 8% to 15%, while the proportion of heads working part-time rose from 3.5% to 6%. Part-time working is less common in secondary schools, although rates have increased gradually over time: for example, 6.5% of secondary assistant headteachers now work part-time.

Sickness absence spiked in 2022 but has partially recovered. Across all years, leadership roles – especially headteachers – consistently report lower sickness absence than classroom teachers. In 2019, primary headteachers reported 2.8 sick days, while secondary heads reported 1.3. There was a sharp spike in 2022, presumably reflecting pandemic-related impacts, with headteachers rising to 4.4 in primary and 2.6 in secondary. By 2023, these figures had partially recovered (3.2 in primary, 1.9 in secondary) but still remained above pre-pandemic levels.

Attrition patterns reveal a workforce that is continually needing to be replenished (NB: attrition here includes those who leave the profession, for example for early or full retirement, and those who leave headship but remain in another teaching role): looking at the entire headship population in any given year, around 13% will no longer be in a headteacher post one year later, 31% after three years, and three-quarters by ten years. This pattern has remained reasonably stable since 2010.

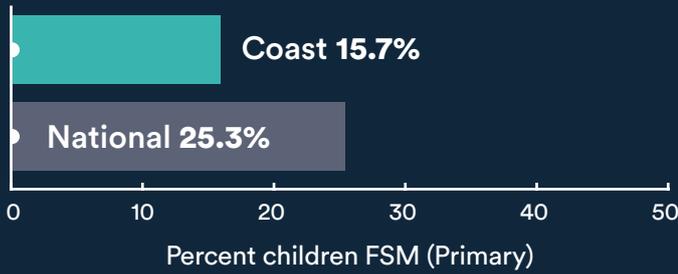Looking at three-year attrition rates for headteachers over the 2020/21 to 2023/24 period (Figure 4.2), we see that most attrition is age related. Just over a quarter (27%) of heads under 35 leave their role within three years. This then dips to around 20% of heads in their 40s, before rising sharply from age 55+ as heads take early or full retirement.

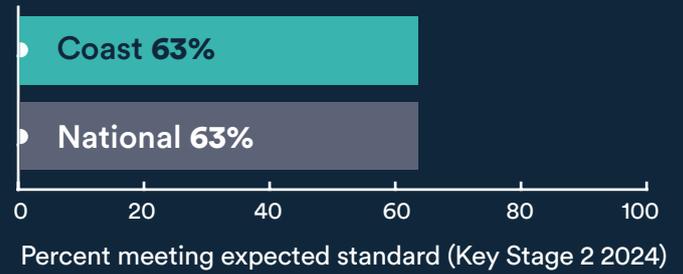**Figure 4.2: England three-year headteacher attrition rate by age (%)**
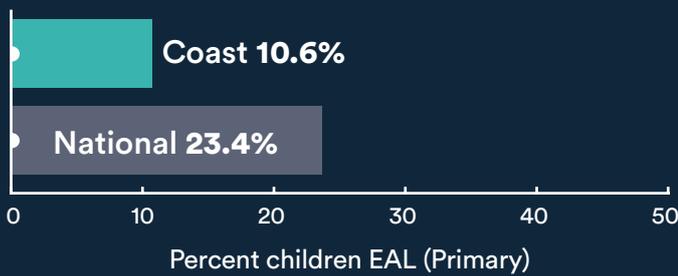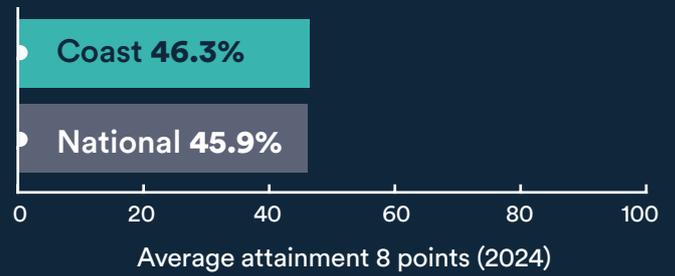
England Coast dashboard

Free school meals

Coast **15.7%**

National **25.3%**

Percent children FSM (Primary)

(axis: 0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50)

Primary pupil outcomes

Coast **63%**

National **63%**

Percent meeting expected standard (Key Stage 2 2024)

(axis: 0, 20, 40, 60, 80, 100)

English as an additional language

Coast **10.6%**

National **23.4%**

Percent children EAL (Primary)

(axis: 0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50)

Secondary pupil outcomes

Coast **46.3%**

National **45.9%**

Average attainment 8 points (2024)

(axis: 0, 20, 40, 60, 80, 100)

Data source: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/

Quotes from interviewees mapped onto the conceptual framework

Identity

"I've been here 25 years... I never thought I wanted to be a head. It was never a goal, so I sometimes call myself the accidental head... [Name] was executive head, one of the deputies went off for headship. And so it was 'OK, this is this is your moment'." — *Elijah, Headteacher, Pine Crest Secondary*

Leadership

"Resilience. Got to be so resilient and brave, you know, head teachers... Got to make decisions... They've gotta do their research and then stand with it, even in the face of adversity." — *William, CEO, Thornhill MAT*

Place

"The financial backgrounds of our families are so broad... there's some real pockets of deprivation, all families really, really struggling. And then you've got people who moved in ...[to affluent] area, which is like, houses worth millions. So, it's a real kind of mix." —*Ruby, Headteacher, Hillcrest Secondary*

Education & care

"Post Covid definitely there's a real gap in, rising mental health and all of those needs... all of our all of our leaders [in the MAT] are talking about that as being their big thing that's taking up the time." —*Teddy, CEO, Clarence MAT*

England Coast

School improvement, accountability and support

School improvement

School leaders in England are strongly focused on improving their schools, with pupil performance in national tests and exams together with periodic Ofsted inspections providing the key metrics for assessing progress. The strategies adopted to achieve improved outcomes varied quite widely, reflecting both the personal beliefs and values of individual leaders and the different contexts and needs of the schools they were working in. Common areas of focus included work to raise expectations and improve school culture, to adapt the curriculum, and to strengthen the quality of teaching. As we explore in the portrait, later in this section, there was also a focus on wider issues of wellbeing, inclusion and care.

These efforts were always shadowed by operational concerns, including tight school budgets and difficulties with staff recruitment and retention. England's relatively autonomous framework, in which school leaders are often responsible for areas such as buildings, budgets and staffing, gave school leaders significant scope to make decisions that they believed would support their improvement objectives, but this breadth of responsibility could also feel overwhelming, adding to the weight of leadership.

Oliver provides a relatively extreme example of school turnaround leadership. At the time we visited him he had been headteacher of Springfield Secondary in a deprived, multi-ethnic part of England – City for four and a half years. Oliver described it as "the worst school in [City]" at the time he took over:

> *"I was the 4th headteacher in 4 years ... I had people telling me 'what on earth are you doing, taking that school, nobody can turn it around' – that kind of stuff. It was feral. There was no culture of teaching and learning. There was no culture of behaviour."*

Two and a half years later the school was judged 'Good' by Ofsted and was oversubscribed, although even after four years the exam results had not yet improved. Oliver describes his approach as "values-based" and "prescriptive". This centred on creating what he called a "warm strict" culture: "You want standards. You want expectations. You want to be clear about what you want to see, but you also want to love them at the same time." The prescription included a standard four-part lesson structure and set of routines which are applied in every lesson – "So, it's a bit North Korea." Oliver was relentless in his focus on leading change, describing it as "addictive", in particular by training his staff to apply his model: "I read a lot. I study leadership. I see leadership as a practice, as a thing that like if you go to the gym you have to develop like those leadership muscles."

Most of the leaders we interviewed across England did not work in such challenging circumstances as Oliver and did not embrace his prescriptive, turnaround approach. Nevertheless, it was clear that leaders were continually assessing the performance of their school and making more or less significant changes aimed at securing improvement. Reggie, a secondary head in Shire, indicated the breadth of areas that this might encompass:

> *"Just trying to tell people that actually you can change, and it is better. And do you know what? Maybe we do need to rethink the curriculum model, or the timings of the day and the number of GCSEs the children do and all these types of things."*

Ronnie, another secondary head in Shire, adopted a slow and steady approach to school turnaround during his nine years in post. Ofsted rated the school 'Inadequate' about a year after he started in the role, with subsequent inspections rating it 'Requires Improvement' and then, more recently, 'Good'.

The journey of improvement had included "quite a lot of staff turnover" and "battles with parents" as he worked with his team to raise expectations and improve curriculum, teaching and learning. He had worked to build a stable team and shared culture that was not exclusively reliant on his leadership:

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

Accountability

The importance of Ofsted inspections in shaping English school leaders' thinking about improvement was always apparent, particularly when compared with the very different inspection models in Northern Ireland and Scotland. The tragic case of Ruth Perry, a primary headteacher who died by suicide after an Ofsted inspection downgraded her school from "Outstanding" to "Inadequate", occurred soon after the research began. Our interviews and visits thus took place as the various changes to Ofsted's framework were being introduced, including the removal of one-word judgements and the plans for a new report card.

There was little sense that these changes had reduced the impact of Ofsted: for example, various interviewees talked about "high-stakes accountability", with inspection reports described as "a stick that's used to beat people with." While this pressure was most acute during an inspection, there was a sense that headteachers could never relax: one interviewee described this as "the Ofsted Twitch, where … you're waiting for that call … every time the phone goes." This was because a poor inspection could be career ending, as Roman, a primary head, explained: "there aren't a lot of heads [whose] schools have gone into Special Measures or whatever and then they're working in another school as a head." All that said, there was no sense that removing Ofsted inspections would suddenly make school leadership feel sustainable, or even that inspections were the main driver of un-sustainability.

In addition to the national accountability framework, school leaders in England are monitored and held accountable through local governance arrangements, particularly LAs, MATs and local governing bodies. We outline these arrangements in the following section.

Support

Considering support for schools and school leaders, there were clear differences between and among LAs and MATs, with significant implications for both approaches to school improvement and, to an extent, the sustainability of leadership.

Not all MATs or all LAs are the same. For example, comparing the three LAs (Shire, City and Coast) we saw wide differences in their capacity and scope to support schools and hold them accountable. Coast LA took a strategic decision back in 2015 to encourage all its schools to join MATs and by the time of our visit this process was largely complete. The result was that:

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

The picture in Shire and City LAs was quite different, largely because both localities included significant numbers of maintained schools, which LAs have a statutory duty to support and challenge. Shire LA had a small but active LA team, but support for the county's large number of small, rural schools was stretched extremely thin, so headteachers had to be highly self-reliant, often drawing on their local networks rather than the LA for expertise and resources. One experienced Shire head characterised the support from the LA as "very light touch … unless you're causing them a problem, you're left to your own devices."

In contrast, in City, we heard of an overlapping range of education partnerships and networks, together with a still substantial LA team and support infrastructure for maintained schools, working alongside the dozen MATs that operated academies in the locality. The LA service included Improvement Advisors and Advisory Teachers, who provided (among other things) headteacher inductions and half-termly network days as well as hands on support. In addition, most local schools and academies were paying a membership fee to be part of a City-wide partnership: this network offered a range of support to member schools, including professional development programmes, school improvement advice, business support, and collaborative projects.

Just as LAs differ, MATs are similarly diverse in terms of their size, geography, the composition of the academies they support, and their ethos and approach to oversight and improvement. In our research, these differences were clearly apparent: for example, between larger regional and national MATs that could afford to employ significant central teams providing both back office (HR, finance, estates) and school improvement support to schools, through to smaller, generally more local MATs that had more limited central budgets and capacity. But size and scale were not the only differentiators: we visited MATs of similar size that had quite different cultures and approaches, for example in how far approaches to curriculum and assessment were determined centrally or left to the discretion of individual headteachers.

These differences among LAs and MATs notwithstanding, there was a general view that LAs now lack the capacity to provide significant challenge and support for maintained schools, while MATs are more likely to be "hands on" in monitoring school performance, holding headteachers accountable and providing support for improvement. One former head who had become a MAT CEO characterised the differences as follows:

> *"When we were maintained, you didn't see the Local Authority very often. As long as you had a good Ofsted, they leave you alone. Well, good trusts don't do that. Good trusts have accountability. They challenge their schools; they're working with their schools." —CEO, Thornfield MAT, Coast*

We interviewed several MATs CEOs, trustees and central team members who described their efforts to achieve a collective approach to improvement across their trusts. The MAT-based headteachers we interviewed were largely positive about the value and quality of this support, although some expressed concerns around encroaching bureaucracy and a loss of school-level autonomy. Almost all valued the back-office expertise that their MATs provided as well as the sense of shared community and networks that came from being part of a larger group. High quality professional development and, often, expert support and challenge were also generally welcomed. However, some school-based leaders described MATs that were overly heavy-handed in their monitoring and control. For example, one primary head despaired at how her time was spent dealing with "audit, after audit, after audit", while another explained "there's not an area of this trust where there isn't an audit, alright." Another primary head alluded to an overwhelming and unrealistic set of improvement expectations from her trust, describing:

> *"20 odd pages of Rapid Improvement Plan from the Academy Trust … which I don't read, I just ignore them … I know what I'm doing. But I can only do one thing at a time."*
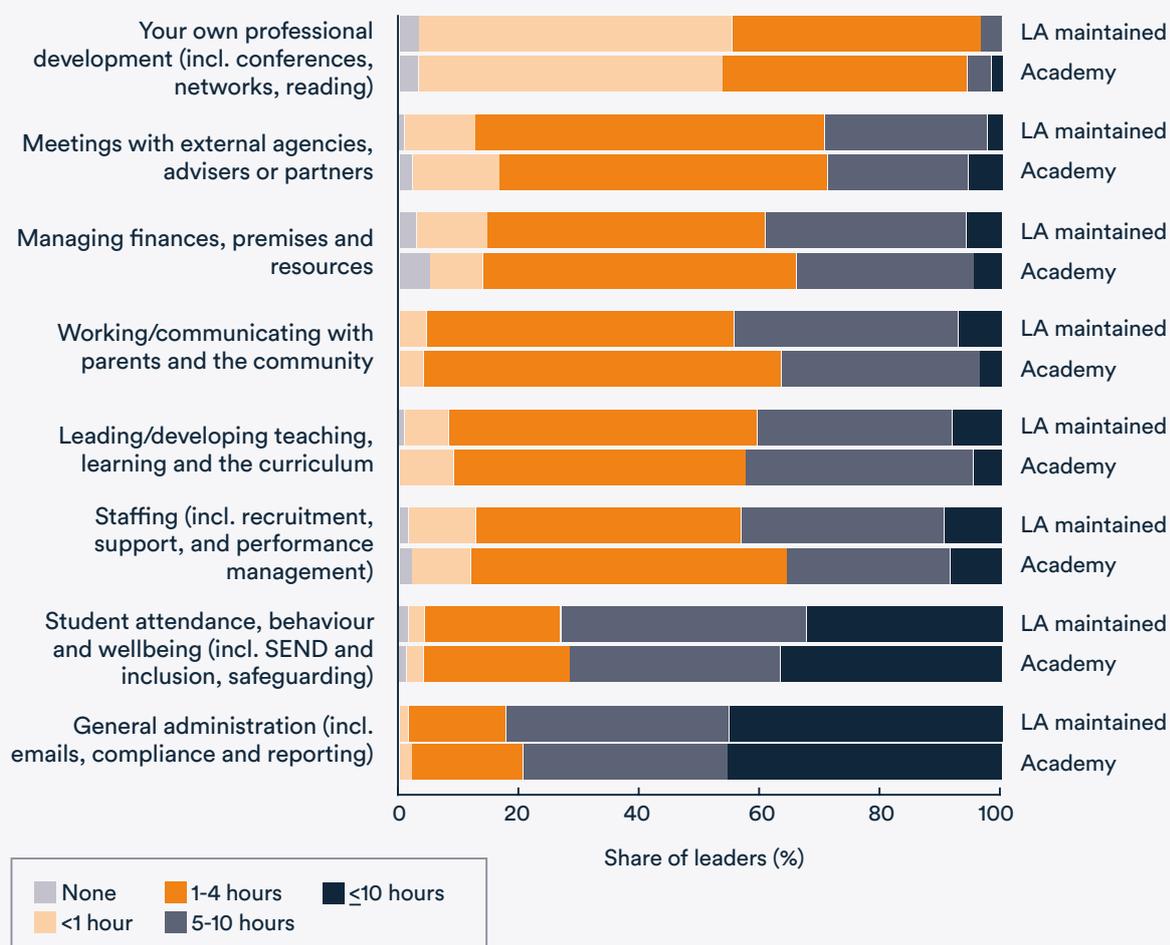
One of the key arguments made for MATs is that they can "free up" headteachers' time, by taking on back-office functions, enabling heads to focus on instructional improvement. For example, one trust leader explained:

"What we now do as a central function … is to take away some of those different elements … which then frees up the heads, as we say, to focus on the things that they should be focusing on within the schools, which is the teaching and learning side." —HR Lead, Highfield MAT, City

In the survey, we asked respondents how much time they spent on a list of activities each week (NB: we show headteacher responses to this question at national level in Section 5). In Figure 4.3 we show responses split between leaders working in academies and LA maintained primary schools. This reveals that both groups spend most of their time on 'General admin' and 'Student attendance, behaviour and wellbeing' issues, with 'Leading/developing teaching, learning and curriculum' (i.e. instructional leadership) around the fourth most time-consuming activity. Interestingly, while academy leaders spend marginally less time on 'Staffing' and 'Managing finances, premises and resources' than their LA peers, the differences are minimal – and there is no evidence that they have been 'freed up' to focus more time on instructional issues.

Figure 4.3: Time use differences between Primary Academy vs LA Maintained headteachers

England Shire dashboard

Free school meals
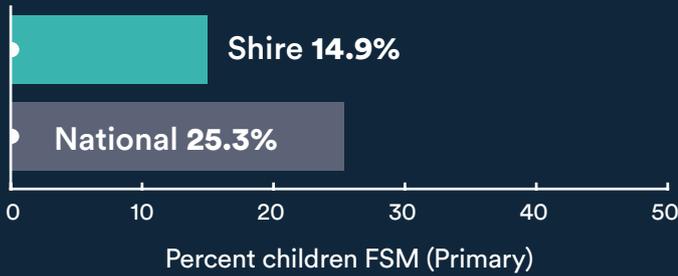
Shire **14.9%**

National **25.3%**

Percent children FSM (Primary)

Primary pupil outcomes

Shire **58%**

National **63%**

Percent meeting expected standard (Key Stage 2 2024)

English as an additional language

Shire **5%**

National **23.4%**

Percent children EAL (Primary)

Secondary pupil outcomes

Shire **45.3%**

National **45.9%**

Average attainment 8 points (2024)

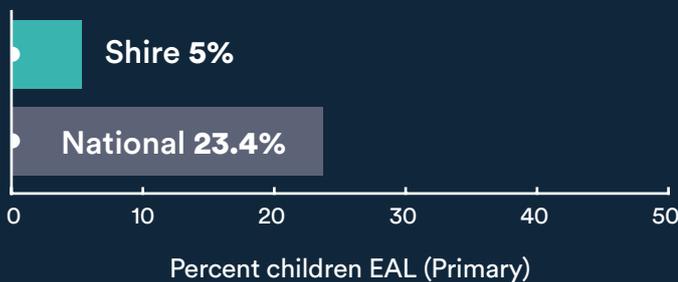Data source: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/
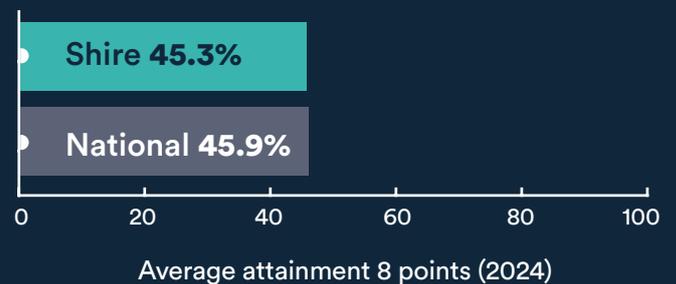
Quotes from interviewees mapped onto the conceptual framework

Identity

"Being part of that community in this place, it gives you an identity, doesn't it? And that can be a double-edged sword... People talk about the heads of village schools as if they're some sort of possession of the village. And that can be hard at times." —*Hugo, Headteacher, South Primary*

Leadership

"We talk a lot about the whole child, developing the whole child. Yeah, you'll get great exam results if you come here, fine. But you'll also have a child who's confident, articulate, kind, thoughtful, self-reliant, and has had lots of experiences." —*Ronnie, Headteacher, Meadowgrove Secondary*

England Shire

Place

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

Education & care

"Workload, well-being is the dialogue of my staff all the time. And that certainly wasn't the case before. So we're constantly having to work to support workload and well-being." —*Iris, Headteacher, Harmony Primary*

What drains and sustains leaders – findings from the case studies

In the national dashboard for England (on pages 24–25) we show how the factors that drain and sustain leaders were coded and the number of times each issue was mentioned. In this section we briefly illustrate the most common themes, drawing on the interviews. In Box 2 (Section 5) we show the drains and sustains that leaders identified in the UK-wide survey.

Drains

Across all three localities in England, school leaders described a common set of issues that drain them.[50] These revolve around the growing complexity of student needs, staffing issues, resource constraints, accountability pressures, increases in the number and intensity of parental complaints, and issues with workloads, bureaucracy and lack of support. While these issues play out in all three localities, there are also local and school-level nuances.

Leaders described increasingly complex student needs, including behaviour and inclusion challenges. Individual cases can consume significant time and capacity, often exacerbated by social media. This work was often intense and emotionally demanding, particularly where it involved dealing with child protection and safeguarding issues. One primary head described how exhausting it was to bring together and sustain relationships across home, health, social services, and community.

SEND and inclusion issues played into this, driven by rising needs and insufficient resources, particularly where local specialist places were "non existent." Maisie, a Deputy Head in Coast, highlighted structural funding issues: "the funding that comes with a child (with high needs) hardly ever covers the cost of having an adult to support that child."

Many leaders highlighted how parental expectations for SEND support could add to the strain. This was one driver of an increasing number of complaints, leading to conflict with parents – often verbal, but sometimes involving physical threats or legal disputes. An Executive Head in Coast described "parental vitriol and aggressive complaints… a petition against me… vile comments… on WhatsApp groups." Ruby, a secondary head in Coast, estimated that each formal complaint absorbs "a week's headspace." Olive, a secondary head in Shire, reflected on how exhausting this could be: "You feel like you're in battle all the time with everybody and it shouldn't be like that."

Finance and resource constraints were raised everywhere. Elijah, a secondary head in Coast, argued this is a systemic issue: "ultimately there's not enough money in the system or we're not smart enough with the money that we have." Maria, a secondary head in Shire, highlighted how funding influences all other decisions in school. However, these challenges played out differently in different contexts. For example, whereas larger schools in City and Coast described budget cuts of hundreds of thousands, for the very small primary schools in Shire, even the loss of one or two pupils could be significant.

Staffing was another common drain. There was a widespread view that staff have become less resilient post Covid, with heightened expectations: "people have re evaluated… they want a work life balance." Several interviewees described internal disputes and grievances, whether with staff or governors, as significant drains.

Finally, as we explore further in Section 5, it was common for interviewees to refer to the weight, or relentlessness, of leadership. This was about more than working long hours, although it was common for interviewees to describe 60+ hour weeks in term time. It reflected accumulated pressures, the impossibility of switching off, and the difficulty of finding personal space. Over time, this could grind down even leaders who said they loved their work.

Sustains

Turning to the factors that sustain leaders in England, the codes on the national dashboard (pages 24–25) highlight that 'making a difference and seeing pupils grow and succeed' come top, while 'relationships' come second. Also important are personal development and growth, working in a varied, fulfilling and autonomous role, having good support systems, and positive feedback, together with good pay and holidays and a balanced life outside work.

Harriet, a primary head, captured how children keep her life magical: "Ah, the children, the children, the children … I just love the children. I just think life is magical through the eyes of the children. And that makes your life magical." Similarly, for Olive, a secondary head: "it's the children that sustain you. It's the daft conversations you have on the corridor … just that whole like banter you can have with children." Beyond the sheer pleasure of spending time with children, there was satisfaction in seeing them grow and make progress, both academically and more generally. More experienced leaders told us how inspiring it can be to meet former pupils who describe the impact you had on them.

This focus on making a difference, particularly for children and in communities facing disadvantage, underpinned the moral purpose that leaders articulated as a core sustaining factor. As one secondary head put it as follows: "what sustains me is knowing that actually you can make even just a small difference in someone's life." As we explore in Section 6, this moral purpose meant that leaders commonly relished the challenges they faced and had overcome – highlighting how the drains and sustains are often interwoven. The importance of relationships highlights the point that leadership is always a collective endeavour. These relationships and teams were hugely important – "it's the relationships that sustain you". Working with a team of committed and expert colleagues across school was deemed essential – "everyone steps in and helps out". There was also great satisfaction in watching staff members develop. This was about more than simply sharing the workload, relationships with trusted colleagues helped leaders to solve knotty issues, to talk through personal dilemmas, and to keep going when times were tough. The energy of relationships was key to sustaining leadership: "the buzz of the staffroom", "being on the gate greeting everyone in the morning", being "with people with a lot of energy and a lot of positivity".
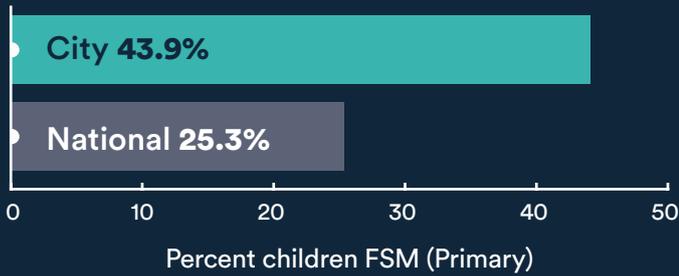
Other relationships sat within more formal support structures These structures were found within governance arrangements, whether provided by the LA, the MAT, and/or the governing body, and within organised partnerships, such as head associations, local area partnerships or cluster arrangements. These structures sustained leaders where they offered a good balance of practical support and positive feedback alongside constructive challenge. Roman, now in his third primary headship, explained how his trust advisor "challenge(s) you to be better, but they'll also remind you of what you're doing really, really well. And, you know, give you that sense of belief." In a small number of schools we heard that in addition to coaching and mentoring, leaders are now offered supervision – providing a safe space to discuss and reflect on some of the more emotionally difficult issues they deal with. Other relationships, often cited as the first port of call and the most important, operated through informal networks and friendship groups. Ruby, a secondary head in Coast, was typical: "The support, the biggest supportive factor for me or the other heads in the secondary schools." Ben, a primary head in Shire reinforced this: "I don't think I would have survived headship this far without the support of my colleagues, particularly in those early days".

Whatever structure they operated within, leaders needed sufficient trust and autonomy to feel that they could take ownership and make a positive difference. Ronnie, a secondary head in Shire, put it as follows: "Being a head's been the best I've had of all the roles I've had in school, and it's definitely the one that I've enjoyed most. I like being the boss. I like being in control of things." Similarly, Hugo, a primary head, described it as "the best job in the world … it's a real privilege to be able to steer and have that influence on a community really."
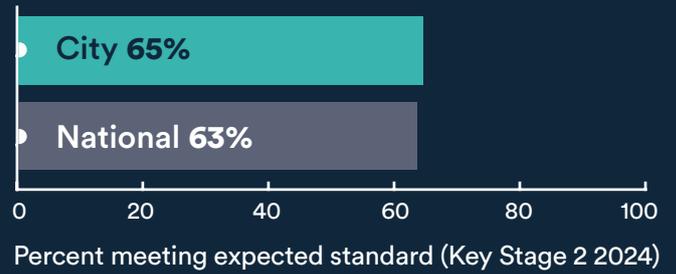
Finally, but no less importantly, leaders were clear that school leadership offers important material benefits (pay and holidays) and that their lives outside school (family, friends, personal interests, fitness routines etc.) were hugely important in sustaining them.

England City dashboard

Free school meals

City **43.9%**

National **25.3%**

Percent children FSM (Primary)

Primary pupil outcomes

City **65%**

National **63%**

Percent meeting expected standard (Key Stage 2 2024)

English as an additional language

City **30.7%**

National **23.4%**

Percent children EAL (Primary)

Secondary pupil outcomes

City **44.4%**

National **45.9%**

Average attainment 8 points (2024)

Data source: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/
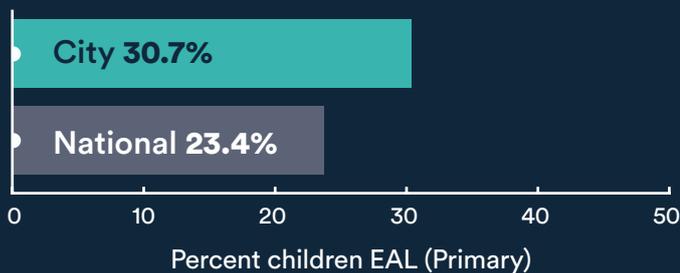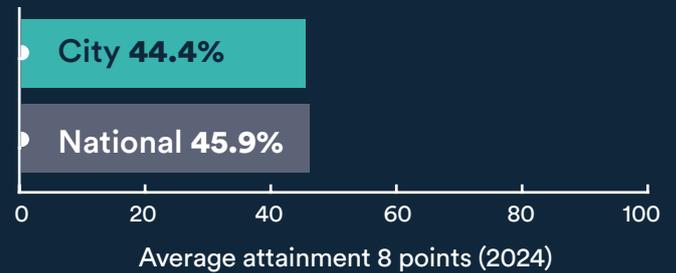
Quotes from interviewees mapped onto the conceptual framework

Identity

"I've always felt that identity with City because it's very similar to where I grew up… I love working in a deprived area. I love feeling that I've made a difference. That's really important to me." —*Rose, Headteacher, Sunnyside Primary*

Leadership

"As long as you're child focused in terms of leadership then that's the most important thing for me… And that's the thing about being a head; it's not about you." —*Finley, Headteacher, Fairview Secondary*

England City

Place

"We know that City is a very deprived local authority… there are some pockets of more affluence within City... But what we do know is the number of children with Pupil Premium Grant (PPG) is rising." —*Olivia, Local Leader, City*

Education & care

"They haven't got Christmas trees at home, so we donate, we try and do charity work, and try and get things – food banks and things like that. So it's not just the academic side of it that is challenging here." —*Mia, Deputy Headteacher, Oak Primary*

Leadership development, recruitment and succession planning

In Section 2 we described England's formal leadership development programmes – including the government funded and designed but non-mandatory pre-headship programme NPQH. In the section above we described the different governance arrangements in England, with differences between LA maintained schools and academies/MATs in terms of how school leaders are employed and supported. As we outline here, these arrangements impact on development, recruitment and succession planning. We return to these issues in Section 5, in the theme on preparing for headship.

Leadership development

One of our expert interviewees, a national policymaker, explained that there had been "a very intentional pivot" when the NPQ programmes were redesigned in 2020–21, aiming to create "a real intentional focus on making (them) domain specific, focusing in on what are the characteristics of a well-run school, rather than what you could caricature as more generic leadership." A parallel aim was to place the NPQs "into the continuum of what we call the 'golden thread'", so that school leaders would hear the same messages about "the characteristics of effective teaching" as newly trained teachers.

One of the challenges with this approach, according to the policymaker, was that the DfE and EEF were committed to only including "rigorous" evidence derived from "what works" style evaluations in the programmes, but such evidence had been hard to find. Another expert interviewee, a national provider of the new NPQs, explained that Conservative ministers in power at the time had kept a "tight grip" on the content and process of the reforms and suggested that, implicitly at least, providers were not approved by DfE unless there was "some sort of agreement around ideology".

Across the three localities we interviewed several local leaders involved in providing NPQH, for example as a Teaching School Hub. These local providers were largely positive about the overall NPQ suite of programmes, because they offered a clear and consistent pathway and set of evidence-based messages (i.e. the "golden thread") which individuals and schools were seen to value. However, there were mixed views on how far and how successfully the programmes could be adapted to meet local needs. The national provider explained that "we've really tried to make sure that our programs are not about just inculcating knowledge", including by adding in flexible sessions which local providers could offer as opportunities for participants to translate the knowledge into their context and practice. However, these sessions were "the most poorly attended part of the program".

Our school-based interviewees generally welcomed the NPQ suite as offering "free" CPD provision for their staff. Many described benefits in having a coherent pathway and set of content for staff at different stages of their career. Views on NPQH across its various iterations were generally positive, although a minority were more critical. One primary head in England Shire had been appointed to her first headship recently, having completed the new (i.e. 2020–21 designed) version of NPQH as well as an MA in educational leadership. When she reflected on the different learning, she explained: "What I always describe is my MA gave me the education, the knowledge, and the NPQH gave me the practical skills … I think they're both really valuable".

Recruitment and succession planning

Considering wider succession planning issues, the national policymaker explained that although DfE officials had periodically "been worried about the demographics of school leadership", this had "never crystallized" into an actual crisis. In their view, the government could not play a significant role in this area anyway, because it "doesn't have levers to influence the pipeline." Instead, the DfE had invested in the new suite of NPQs. The other experts were less sanguine, highlighting the "leaky pipeline" of leaders, the fragmentation of England's schooling system, and the overly "didactic" and "centralised" NPQ model as issues.

To assess appetite for headship nationally, we asked survey respondents who were not yet in a headship role 'Would you like to be a headteacher/principal yourself one day?' A third of these leaders in England (33%) said either 'Yes, perhaps' or 'Yes, definitely'. However, in all three localities we heard that motivation for the top job among senior leaders had declined in recent years. One headteacher in Shire described many of the Deputy Heads he knew locally as follows:

> "They've got no aspiration for the stress. They've got no aspiration for the leadership role. They're, in inverted commas, 'quite happy' where they are, so they're staying where they are."
> —Primary Head, Shire

On the ground, we observed clear differences in how school leaders were developed and recruited, revealing sharp, place-based inequalities. These differences were most stark when we compared Coast, the most academised of the three localities, and Shire, the least academised, with around three quarters of schools still maintained by the LA.

In Coast, most of the academies were run by one of a dozen or so MATs, each of which had a different profile in terms of the location, phase and context of the schools it ran. For example, while two MATs (Vicarage and Thornfield) focused mainly in Coast's disadvantaged seaside town, two (Laurels and Clarence) ran schools across its more rural and less disadvantaged areas. These MATs also operated at different scales: for example, while Vicarage operated over 30 schools spread across the wider region, Thornfield had less than 10 primary schools, all in Coast.

These MATs were responsible for developing and employing leaders in the schools they operated. Our interviews with CEOs and leaders across six different MATs revealed that headteacher recruitment and succession planning was seen as a strategic priority – albeit one amongst many. The 'planning' of succession was semi-formalised, particularly in the larger trusts, but even where formal processes existed, we heard that:

> "It's not actually that [i.e. the spreadsheet] that does the work, it's the intel and the connections with the leaders where we're talking to them all the time… so there's loads of soft succession planning, which is much more fruitful." —Executive Director, Vicarage MAT

Several trusts described how, having identified potential future principals, they worked to ensure these leaders had access to development opportunities which could accelerate their preparation for the role. This included formal professional development programmes, both through the NPQs and, often, through internal MAT-run programmes or external paid-for provision. Several trusts were also providing more individualised development opportunities, for example through secondments, coaching, mentoring and/or networks.

Interviewees in Coast explained that recruiting heads had become more difficult in recent years. Teddy, CEO of Clarence MAT, remembered a time "when you might have 30, 40 applicants for a job… Now sometimes you're lucky if you get an applicant". The nature of these challenges played out differently in different trusts, partly reflecting the nature of the schools they operated. For example, in Laurels MAT, we heard:

> "Headteacher recruitment is just really hard at the moment… sometimes our stronger schools are harder to recruit (for)… small schools are really hard as well to recruit for because of the salary and the location… Sometimes church schools add another dimension to it as well." — Director of Learning, Laurels MAT

One clear finding was that MATs in Coast now recruit internally for most headship posts. This decision was generally justified in terms of wanting people who understand and identify with the vision, values and culture of the trust and who are known to be effective leaders, having been observed over an extended period of time. However, a former headteacher in Coast expressed a concern that the MATs were creating "clones" – people who were "so enculturated that they're kind of unable to see other ways of doing things".

Turning to Shire, a key feature of the rural landscape was the large number of small schools. As noted above, fewer than a quarter of schools were academies and those that were tended to be either stand-alone or in relatively small, local MATs. The LA, which maintained the remaining schools, had a small but active education team.

Interviewees in Shire explained that school staff teams tended to be quite stable, partly due to the distances between schools which made commuting difficult. This lack of movement was seen to limit opportunities for dynamic staff development and career growth. Another issue was smaller leadership teams, particularly in small schools, which meant there were fewer opportunities for staff to gain experience in different leadership roles.

The kinds of formal leadership development and deliberate succession planning seen within the MATs in Coast was almost completely absent from Shire. The small and dispersed MATs in Shire lacked sufficient capacity to really support future leaders in the hands-on ways seen in Coast. Meanwhile, in LA maintained schools, each individual school's governing body (made up of local volunteers) was responsible for developing and recruiting staff, including the headteacher.

The LA's education team was working to support these maintained schools, both in the process of making headteacher appointments and through wider work, including a suite of low-cost development programmes aimed at potential and newly appointed heads. The LA officer who led this work, Rory, explained that it had helped to improve the headteacher pipeline and to reduce the number of schools with acting headteachers. However, other interviewees were less positive and we heard of one recent position that had been advertised for a third time, with no applications received.

The 'free' NPQ programmes played a more prominent role in individual and school development in Shire than in Coast, reflecting Shire's constrained funding situation. While some interviewees in Shire had undertaken self-funded Masters programmes, none had participated in the kinds of bespoke programmes that the MATs in Coast could provide.

Leadership and an ethic of education and care: City, Coast and Shire

In Section 3 we explained how we added 'an ethic of education and care' into our conceptual framework to reflect the finding that 'care' is now a key feature of leadership in schools across the UK. We set out the evidence on this more fully in Section 5, in relation to the theme that leaders are commonly working beyond their 'education' remit.

This portrait looks across the three English localities, drawing on Tronto's framework of care ethics (outlined in Section 3) to explore five interconnected dimensions: how care needs are noticed and understood; how responsibility for addressing needs is assumed; how competent care practices are enacted; how care is experienced by those who receive it; and how collective structures enable or constrain sustainable care work.

The portrait focuses mainly on the 'care' aspects of leadership, given that we focus on the 'education' aspects above in the section on school improvement. It indicates how care spans multiple aspects of school leadership practice – from pastoral, wellbeing, behaviour, safeguarding and inclusion approaches within schools, to work beyond school, for example, to support community cohesion, welfare or health-related needs. In Section 5 we explore how the educational and care-related aspects of leadership come together, and some of the tensions involved.

Caring about: attentiveness to need across contexts

The nature of need and, crucially, how needs were noticed differed markedly across the three localities, shaped by their distinct socio-economic and geographic characteristics.

One example was in relation to children with special or additional needs, which we highlighted above as a growing challenge. How this was understood varied. In City, the concentration of schools, MATs, the LA and various partnerships meant that leaders could usually identify specialist support, even if the sheer volume of need could sometimes overwhelm. In Shire, isolation and limited capacity left schools to deal with issues as best they could. In Coast, the stripped back LA's SEND provision was described by one secondary head as "virtually unnavigable", meaning that the different MATs and schools were working in their separate "bubbles" to identify and address need.

Urban concentration in City made care needs highly visible. The locality's defining features – economic disadvantage layered with ethnic diversity, with most schools serving populations where Free School Meals (FSM) eligibility exceeded national averages – created concentrated and compounding needs. Leaders articulated an awareness of the locality as a whole, as well as a finely calibrated understanding of specific neighbourhoods: "working class, generations of unemployment … and some more affluent parents from private housing", or "this is inner-city … the demographic is 60% disadvantaged."

In Shire, need was dispersed and often hidden, requiring different attentiveness. While "on average the population is fairly affluent," there are "pockets of quite intense deprivation, often dispersed and consequently less visible." Attentiveness required seeing through the "leafy, beautiful" exterior to recognise, for example, families working in the tourist industry whose children speak English as an additional language, or farming families experiencing rural poverty. The visibility of headteachers in small, isolated communities created particular issues; while community connections could provide rich information about family circumstances, this closeness could also obscure needs and make some issues harder to acknowledge, while amplifying others. Rory, the LA leader, described this as "a bit like a pressure cooker … (where) what goes on in the community quite often just spreads out." For heads who had come in from elsewhere, the process of building trust and relationships could take many years. Robyn had been the head of her small village primary school for nine years, describing the community as "very close … very insular … not very culturally diverse." At first, she felt "almost ostracised" by the community, making it hard to identify and address care issues – for example, when there were "racist incidents" in school – but, over time, she felt that parents had come to see "that we were genuine people who were here for the right reason."

Coast presented a third pattern: with stark contrasts between the deprived coastal town and more affluent rural hinterland. As one leader observed "it's a very disparate authority in terms of haves and have nots. So, there's a lot of inequalities, social inequalities, but also different views around education." One school served a catchment where many children leave for private prep schools by Year 4; another served communities where 70% of pupils were eligible for the Pupil Premium (additional funding for disadvantaged). Even within a school that, on the surface might appear well-to-do, there could be families in need, as Masie, a primary Deputy Head, explained: "We do credits for like gas and electric for some of our needy parents and I think that would surprise some people because they think 'lovely village'."

Taking care of: responsibility and its distribution

How leaders took responsibility for responding to identified needs revealed similarities and differences across the three localities.

One difference was in how parental choice operated to shape school intakes. In Coast, Chloe, the head of a primary school in the deprived, coastal town, explained that she had: "really grafted here to build a culture that we understand our community really well … And we have adapted and moulded this school to meet that need of this community." One example was that she was "not really big fussy about uniform" because "it's (about) understanding what deprivation means, what does that look like for a family":

> *"I am not going to be making a beef over wearing trainers to school because when you're a family and you've got a big pair of shoes for your children, you need to buy the pair of shoes that they can wear at the weekend and on a Monday to Friday, you know."*

Chloe's decision to shift towards a "nurture" approach to behaviour and inclusion had been successful in reducing exclusion rates and had made the school popular among parents of children with additional needs, who now tended to make it their first choice. As a result "the school has changed massively in its profile", with 37% of children now having an identified SEND need. However, "some of our counterparts (i.e. schools) in the local vicinity have not done this and they are square peg round hole schools" (i.e. non inclusive) – for example, one neighbouring school is "much more rigid with school uniform".

In City, responsibility for meeting needs was framed both as an individual moral imperative and as an increasingly institutionalised role of schools. Leaders spoke in terms that merged personal values with place-based purpose: "I love working in a deprived area, I love feeling that I've made a difference." The sense of responsibility extended beyond academic outcomes: "We do a lot of support for families… we've got a larder downstairs, (parents) just grabbing bags of food and taking them with them." Leaders positioned their schools as core providers of care: "a well-trained arm of social care." This role was seen as essential, given that children cannot learn unless their core needs have been addressed: "You've got to find money to support children … if they're not mentally in the right place… they're not going to ever learn." This responsibility often weighed heavily on leaders: one leader described a colleague's experience – "she sent that parent away with a solution … she didn't sleep all night until she knew [the child] was OK the next day."

In Shire, responsibility played differently because of scale and isolation. The long distances involved meant that most parents chose the local school, meaning that schools tended to be more comprehensive, including children with a wide range of needs. In small rural schools headteachers could rarely delegate care work: most were undertaking the care-related statutory roles, such as Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) and Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL), that in larger schools would be shared. This had a huge impact on workloads – both practical and emotional. Robyn, the primary head described above, explained: "I've never made a referral to children in mental health services up until this last week and I've made three and they're for real, real issues for our children." However, such referrals were always difficult because services beyond schools were spread thin, or non-existent. For example, Mabel, a Local Leader, stated "there is no Alternative Provision in Shire".

Care-giving: competence and the practice of care

The actual provision of care reveals how place shapes both what practices are possible and what expertise is available.

In City, care practices benefitted from the opportunities for co-ordination and collaboration afforded by concentration of need and the proximity of schools, albeit with significant resource constraints. One leader observed: "The city does not have enough provision for their SEND children, the services... they're very, very, very overstretched." Schools were making provision themselves, for example to address attendance: "We've got a pastoral manager who sometimes goes to collect them (children). So we do everything we can". One head described the scale of safeguarding needs as "unmanageable in terms of workload", so the school had appointed a full-time Safeguarding Lead.

In Shire, care competence was shaped by isolation and small scale. Headteachers had to be competent generalists to meet the needs of their comprehensive intakes. Robyn, the primary head referenced above, described herself as "Mum" to her team. Hugo, who had been head of his small rural primary school for 17 years when we visited, described how his role had broadened over time to encompass "you know, health, social care, all that. And that takes up a huge amount of admin time."

Coast illustrated how the new MAT and LA structures have disrupted care competence. With almost all schools now academies, responsibility for educational outcomes flowed through the MATs, but the LA retained a range of statutory duties in relation to SEND, social care and safeguarding. This had left significant gaps in provision, as Arlo, a MAT CEO, explained:

"The LA, which had lost schools to the academy system, had been left with some significant responsibilities, which it was very hard for them to deliver ... until a year ago there was only one person working in Educational Welfare ... the SEND function was in Ofsted special measures, as was social care."

The lack of join up between MATs and the depleted LA services had created additional challenges, particularly for schools serving the most deprived communities. Chloe, the primary head mentioned above, needed to work with LA colleagues on a range of issues, but explained "the system feels quite broken at the moment."

Care-receiving: responsiveness and experience

How care is received and experienced reveals whether care work meets needs or imposes external definitions.

In City care receiving was shaped by intense accountability pressures and by parental expectations of, and relationships with, schools. LA and partnership officers mentioned with pride the high proportion of schools with good inspection judgements, the achievement of which shaped how care was enacted. One school leader described differing parental support for attendance – from those "who bring their children to school – attendance is a big thing" to those who resisted school efforts to increase attendance. Receiving care also varied with types of need: "SEND parents are very supportive, they are very appreciative of the school because we have a really good SEND support network" although expectations could be demanding – "expecting their child to be seen yesterday." Such issues could sometimes lead to conflict and defensiveness, but City also had evidence of care being valued and seen as genuine by communities, thanks to trusting relationships built over time.

In Shire, care-receiving was shaped by school visibility in small communities and the public nature of the headteacher role. This created situations where care could be deeply relational and responsive. Hugo, the experienced head mentioned above, spoke about "being part of that community" and how this created connection. Yet visibility could also affect care-receiving less positively. For example, Robyn, the "ostracised" primary head in an isolated community, had spent nine years building trust and relationships with her community – during which time they had "made my life absolute hell."

Coast presents the most complex care-receiving landscape, partly because of its stark socioeconomic contrasts. On the one hand, Luna described how parents in her affluent and deeply conservative village primary school would send in "vitriolic" complaints around very minor issues. At the other end of the spectrum, Chloe described the frank but trusting relationship she had built with local parents:

> "They've lost a lot of trust elsewhere in community services, (but) they do trust us ... and we see them, and we recognise and hear their voices. And sometimes those voices are loud and not palatable ... And we challenge that in the right way ... But they take that challenge ... and they accept it."

Caring with: solidarity, support structures and sustainability

The collective foundations enabling sustainable care differ markedly across schools and among the three localities.

As we noted above, City operates through multiple overlapping networks and partnerships. The "rich pattern of networks and potential sources of support" includes LA support, the local school partnership, Teaching School Hubs, MATs, diocesan networks, and phase-specific groups. City's large urban schools could appoint significant leadership teams. Leaders described these relationships as sustaining: for example, one head and deputy described their long-standing partnership as a "professional marriage." Another had brought a colleague from his previous school with him, describing the skills and qualities they brought as complementary to his own. Yet this infrastructure was fragmenting, with access differing by school governance, phase, and location. Maintained school heads were acutely aware of how limited LA resource were, meaning that heads avoided asking for help when possible.

In Shire, caring with was precarious due to dispersal. The LA's "light touch" approach to working with schools meant that solidarity structures were largely informal and voluntary. Individual relationships and informal networks were crucial, but these relied on individual initiative rather than systematic provision. Some leaders were well-connected, others – most often younger and less experienced leaders – not. Changing governance threatened this networked solidarity. Where schools had joined different MATs, or when key individuals retired, then long-standing partnerships had sometimes dissolved.

Coast demonstrated how MAT structures reshape caring with, for both better and worse. The MATs were creating new solidarities among their member schools, which interviewees valued. The MAT central teams were often providing emotional as well as practical support for school leaders and their teams. Yet these solidarities were trust specific. The fragmentation meant that heads in different MATs appeared to have less connection than in the past. For example, Elijah noted how the secondary heads network had "really fragmented and broken down... you've got five MATs represented so it it's really fragmented in terms of a cohesive network."

Northern Ireland

The research in Northern Ireland included expert interviews, an analysis of public statistics on the leadership workforce, a survey of 240 school leaders, and in-depth interviews with 37 leaders across two contrasting localities.

The locality dashboards (pages 65 and 71) indicate key features of Coast and Town-Rural. Coast encompasses a scattering of seaside towns with a large rural hinterland, with schools serving communities that ranged from affluent to deprived. Town-Rural includes a large urban centre with pockets of significant deprivation together with surrounding rural areas and scattered communities. Both localities feature the full range of Northern Ireland's school types – Controlled, Catholic Maintained, Integrated, Irish Medium, and Grammar schools – reflecting the complex interplay of cultural, religious, and educational identities that characterise the system.

A note on timing: Our research in Northern Ireland took place at different points in time. We visited Coast in autumn 2023 and Town-Rural in autumn 2024. At the time of our visit to Coast, the Assembly was still suspended, the industrial action was ongoing and ETI inspections were essentially paused. By the time of our visit to Town-Rural, the Assembly was back and new policies were being developed at pace. ASOS had been suspended and ETI was preparing to start inspecting schools again, using a new framework. These changes provided an important point of difference.

The leadership workforce

Northern Ireland employs approximately 1,755 principals and vice-principals across 1,011 schools. At primary level, there are around 380 Controlled school principals, 350 Roman Catholic (RC) Maintained school principals, and 25 each of 'Other Maintained' and 'Grant Maintained (GM) Integrated' principals. At secondary, there are just over 50 each of Controlled and RC Maintained principals, 15 GM Integrated principals and a smaller number of Other Maintained principals. There are 38 Controlled special schools and a very small number of Maintained ones.

The leadership population has aged markedly over the past 15 years (Figure 4.4 – see also national dashboard on pages 28–29). Among principals, the proportion aged under 40 has fallen slightly since 2011–12, while the 50–59 group has remained consistently large and the 50–54 band had become the single largest group by 2023–24. The share aged 60 and above has declined a little but remains notable. Vice principals show a similar pattern, although with a slightly younger profile overall. Taken together, the figures suggest a leadership pipeline that is heavily concentrated in mid- to late-career stages, with limited growth in younger leaders coming through.

Figure 4.4: Northern Ireland Headteacher age profile by year
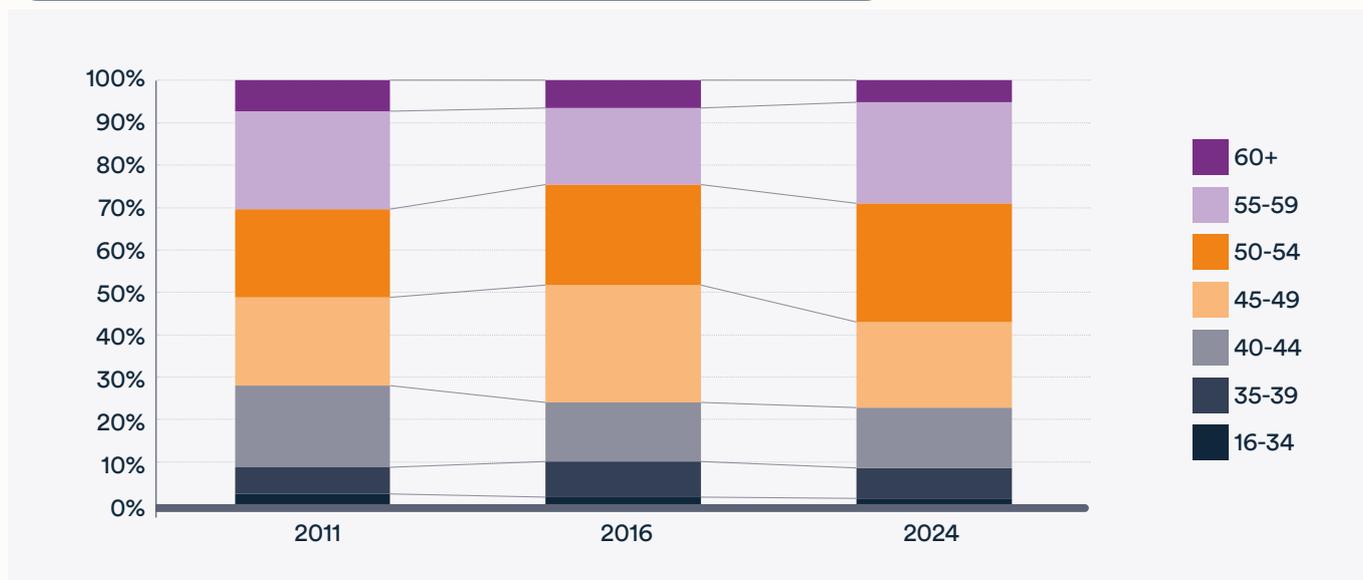
Women are under-represented in leadership roles compared to teaching, but there is appreciable variation by school type and phase. While women comprise 77% of teachers, they account for just 61% of principals and 65% of vice-principals overall. This gap is most pronounced in the post-primary (i.e. non-selective secondary) sector, where just under half (49%) of principals are female, compared with 70% of teachers. Special schools show the highest female representation among principals (69%).

No official workforce statistics on ethnicity are published, but it seems that representation of minority ethnic groups in leadership roles is negligible. The demographic profile of Northern Ireland as a whole is considerably less diverse than England or Scotland: around 97% of the population identifies as White (93% in Belfast).
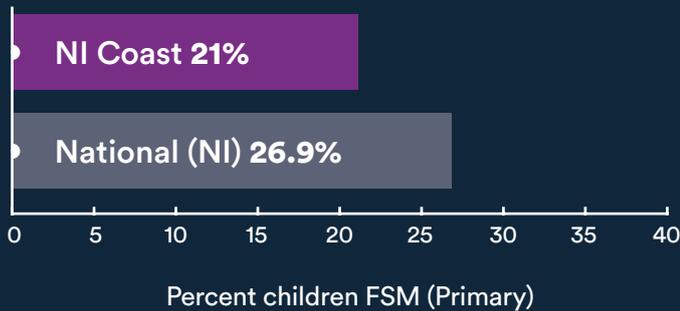
Vacancy data show persistent but uneven difficulties in filling principal and vice-principal posts across Northern Ireland. Across all grant-aided schools, principal fill rates declined from around 79% in 2010, to around 70% in 2024; indicating that around three in ten advertised principal posts remained unfilled. Primary vice-principal roles have been consistently harder to fill over the period. Some vice-principal roles are left vacant for cost reasons – reducing opportunities for leadership development.

Over the past decade, the rate at which principals and vice principals leave the profession (for example, through retirement) has exceeded the rate of new appointments. Annual leaver rates have ranged from 7.4% to 10.4%, while joiner rates have generally been lower, averaging 6.3–9.3%, albeit with a 'spike' in recruitment in 2021/22, when recruitment processes restarted after the lockdowns. The net result has been a small decline in the size of the leadership workforce since 2012, presumably reflecting a reduction in the total number of schools in this period.
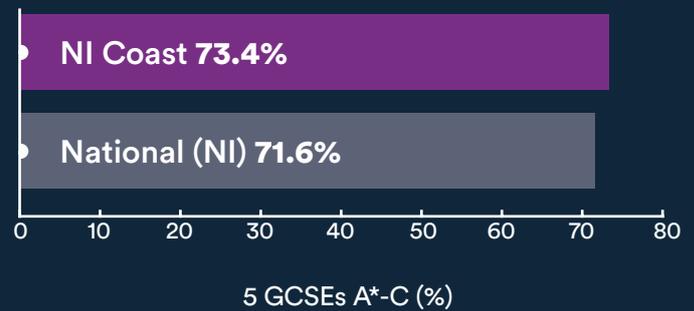
In 2024/25, principals and vice-principals lost an estimated 7 working days per person to sickness, compared with 9.4 days for teachers overall. Primary leaders averaged 7.5 days, while secondary/post-primary and special school leaders had slightly lower rates (6.3 and 6.1 days respectively).

Northern Ireland Coast dashboard

Free school meals

NI Coast **21%**

National (NI) **26.9%**

0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40

Percent children FSM (Primary)

Secondary pupil outcomes

NI Coast **73.4%**

National (NI) **71.6%**

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80

5 GCSEs A*-C (%)

Data source – https://explore.nisra.gov.uk/local-stats/

Quotes from interviewees mapped onto the conceptual framework

Identity

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

Leadership

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

NI Coast

Place

"So in a village I suppose one of the challenges in our school, or in this area, is there's actually two primary schools that serve the village … So the challenge that that brings with us is that the two schools are small." —*Harry, Headteacher, Honeysuckle, Primary*

Education & care

"I mean the pastoral needs in the school have just exploded they really have in comparison it is not the same job as what we went into you know in terms of teaching." —*Pheobe, Deputy Headteacher, Woodside Secondary*

School improvement, accountability and support

School leadership in Northern Ireland appeared distinctive when compared with England and Scotland, though there were also many commonalities. Leaders in all three nations were focused on ensuring the best possible outcomes for children and on improving the quality of their schools, but leaders in Northern Ireland were more likely to emphasise the pastoral dimensions of their role: indeed, variations on the phrase "I'm a pastoral leader" were common. We develop this assessment throughout this section, particularly in the portrait, where we focus on leadership identities and draw out the "community-anchored" nature of leadership.

Northern Ireland's distinctive context shaped leaders' educational priorities and work in multiple ways. One example was its selective (i.e. Grammar school) system; this was rarely raised by interviewees as an issue but was nevertheless key to understanding the dynamics of place-based schooling and leadership. Another example was the long running industrial dispute (ASOS), which had impacted on school inspections and leaders' ability to initiate change over many years. Third, while lack of funding and a decline in pupil numbers were issues in England and Scotland, they had a sharper intensity in Northern Ireland, partly due to an over-supply of school places in a highly complex and politicised system.

Beneath these tangible differences lay a set of more subtle cultural differences. Unsurprisingly, the nature of Northern Ireland's post-conflict society infused these, as we explore in the portrait below. One difference was in the ways that education policy and practice appear to be understood and enacted. For example, we interviewed several leaders who had spent time working in England during their careers, so could compare the two systems. One secondary principal characterised the differences as follows:

"I think if this was the English system, there's no way I'd have this much freedom. I wouldn't be given as much, I suppose it is autonomy ... I found in England that a government directive or a new initiative came straight to schools very quickly and then the schools had to jump and they were monitored and there was Ofsted and there was all the rest of it. I find here that that level, the political level, they just kind of talk a lot and make lots of things, but they don't really get it to the level of schools."

An experienced primary principal who had spent many years working in England characterised the difference in terms of the pace that staff worked at – suggesting that teachers in Northern Ireland "teach from the heart":

"In England. Yes. Pace. If I wanted, you know, if I went to the staff and said 'right ... I want to see your planners' – they'd be with me the next day. Here I might get them by Christmas ... They teach from the heart here. There's the difference."

School improvement

Across both Town Rural and Coast, school leaders' improvement work was thoughtful, pragmatic, and deeply contextual. Common themes included the need to refresh cultures, particularly in relation to behaviour, and to reinvigorate the focus on teaching, learning and pupil progress. In many schools it appeared that this improvement work had stalled in recent years, due to a combination of factors that included: Covid disruptions; an absence of national policy direction; the pause in ETI inspections; and the difficulty of introducing new initiatives during ASOS. By the time of our visit to Town-Rural (autumn 2024), ASOS had been called off and policy and inspections were re-starting, but it was unclear how long it might take for the system to fully reboot.

Several of the long-standing headteachers we interviewed described how they had worked with their teams to transform their schools over an extended period. Archie, the Principal of a now over-subscribed non-selective post-primary school, explained:

> "There was quite low expectation when I started if I'm honest with you, it was like even the walls were all grey … it was a real sense of 'we're a non-selective school' … (whereas) we will get parents now who are saying 'we don't need the transfer test because you can come here'. We wouldn't have had that even nine years ago."

Similarly, Maeve, an experienced principal in Town-Rural, explained how she had worked to shift the culture of her school over several years:

> "When I came, there'd been really poor behaviour, and I couldn't understand why in a grammar school you would have such poor behaviour and such a high rate of suspensions … But then the more I listened, I thought, well, if I was talked to like that, I would misbehave … it just needed to move with the times. So we put in new data systems, a new student council. Och, it's just totally different."

A minority of leaders described a regular, systematic process for identifying priorities, planning improvement initiatives, and then monitoring their implementation. Ellie, the head of a primary school in Town-Rural, was one example:

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

Northern Ireland has not historically undertaken regular national assessments of pupil learning at primary school or Key Stage 3, although teacher assessment and the use of diagnostic tests has been encouraged.[51] As a result, it appeared that school leaders did not have access to reliable data on pupil progress and outcomes and only a minority made reference to targeted and specific improvement priorities and outcomes. One example was Oscar, the head of a grammar school in Coast, who explained:

> "When I arrived here … only about a third of the school were qualifying to attend Queens [Northern Ireland's most prestigious university] … So, 2019, the last set of exams prior to Covid alterations, we went from about a third to two thirds, we doubled that … So the talent was here. It was just about adjusting work ethic and also about adjusting curriculum."

Also in Coast, one primary school head described how his school-wide "drive for literacy and numeracy" through "good teaching but also good use of those programmes" had meant that "results have come up". Interestingly, he saw the main benefit of this being that it was "selling our school" in a context of sharp local competition for pupil numbers.

More common was for interviewees to mention a need to improve the quality of teaching, learning and/or curriculum, and to thereby raise standards, but the aims they articulated appeared quite general. For example: a primary head in Town-Rural explained: "What's not going so well is the standards there. It has been a drop in standards without a doubt in terms of performance ... big job to do, big, big job to do."

Many leaders ascribed the difficulties they faced in leading change and improvement to ASOS. Samuel, a secondary principal in Town-Rural put it as follows: "So the teaching and learning in terms of, and I think outcomes have perhaps, aren't as strong as they could have been as a result of all those [ASOS] measures." Charlie, a primary head in Coast, was blunter: "I feel like industrial action has really stopped that." Theodore and Henry, Deputy Heads in Coast, described the delicate balance they had sought to maintain as they navigated ASOS while still moving the school forward:

"We thought, you know, we'll pull back, we'll not demand anything, we'll not put anyone in a position that, you know, clashes with their conscience ... We're not maybe pushing on with some initiatives that we would deep down like to."

Ezra, a Local Leader in Town-Rural, expressed a common concern that many middle leaders had not had opportunities to develop their skills during ASOS, so might now struggle to lead improvement: "The big elephant in the room ... [is] middle leadership capability and the ability of them to line manage according to what they should be doing." However, such views were not universal. Ellie, the primary head in Town-Rural mentioned above, described how once ASOS was paused, her middle leaders were raring to initiate change ("I have nine people coming to me with action plans as to what they want to implement"), which she was having to moderate in order to keep things manageable for her staff.

Accountability

The accountability system for schools in Northern Ireland is complicated, due to the complexity of the wider governance framework. For example, Grant Maintained (GM) schools are self-governing, while Controlled schools are managed by the EA. While both types of school have a Board of Governors, the GM Boards have greater autonomy and responsibility for managing funds and monitoring improvement.

At national level, all schools are inspected by ETI, with reports published. However, as explained above, inspections were effectively paused during ASOS. By the time we visited Town-Rural, ETI inspections were about to restart, creating a renewed sense of pressure on leaders: "If I got the phone call tomorrow... stress level through the roof" (Logan, Secondary Principal).

In addition, most schools have some level of oversight from the EA and/or the various sectoral bodies. This oversight generally includes monitoring by School Improvement Partners (SIPs), whose role includes providing challenge and support for schools. Most interviewees were reasonably positive about these arrangements, which could also provide access to advice, networks and new initiatives, although we were struck that individual SIPs often had responsibility for very large numbers of schools, stretching their time and capacity thin. In addition, school leaders were required to provide data and reports to the EA on various issues, although there was often a level of cynicism around how far such data was used. Archie, a secondary principal, was particularly dismissive:

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

School-level oversight is the responsibility of the Board of Governors. Most interviewees described their Governors as engaged, supportive and helpful. Several leaders characterised the relationship in terms of accountability: for example, "They challenge me in a very respectful way, I'm held to account." (Principal, Post-primary, Town-Rural). We interviewed the Chair of Governors in a voluntary grammar school in Coast who explained how they had developed a three-year improvement plan, which the Board was monitoring closely. Unsurprisingly, leaders explained that they needed to help their governors (who are volunteers) to understand the requirements on schools, for example in relation to the new ETI inspection framework.

However, these positive examples of active governance were far from universal. For example, this primary head in Coast described a very different experience:

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

Support

The support arrangements for school leaders in Northern Ireland largely overlap with the accountability mechanisms, augmented by support from the sector bodies. Beyond this, as we outline here, leaders rely heavily on their peers via a range of networks.

Leaders were generally positive about the support provided by their governors. Combining support and challenge together was not seen as problematic, as Darcie, a primary head in Town-Rural explained:

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

We heard a widespread view that support for operational issues from the EA (for example, HR, finance, legal, estates) as well as specialist services to support children with special needs was frequently poor or inaccessible: sometimes characterised as a "broken system". For example:

> "All of the services that we would have relied upon before are gone... the education system crumbling around you." —Theo, Headteacher, Wayside Primary

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

One implication was that leaders were often left to make decisions on difficult technical issues that were beyond their expertise, as Daisy, a Local leader, explained: "Can you suspend a teacher? Can you do this? Can you do that? What happens if? … Heads are doing that when they should be getting support from the Education Authority."

On the education side the EA's work was generally more valued, although even here the cuts meant that much of the practical support for schools was no longer available, as Ella, a primary head, explained: "We're not getting the support. The services just aren't there. We used to have literacy support, maths support … Gone. All those services are all just slashed." Views on the EA's SIPs and link officers were mostly positive; however, as Zachary, a primary head in Coast, explained, on most issues he would turn first to his peers:

> "We do have a link officer from the EA … However, when it actually comes to the nuts and bolts of the job or the emotions of the job, as it very often is, it's, it's the principal colleagues."

This view that peer networks were the most reliable, rapid and important feature of support for leaders came through consistently in both localities. These networks varied in size and strength and most leaders were members of several. Some were placed-based, such as the Area Principals' Group in Coast, although such arrangements were often complicated by sharp competition at a time of falling pupil numbers. These place-based networks often straddled the various school sectors – "everyone – controlled, maintained" meets together. The more tight-knit networks appeared to be phase or sector-specific and based on long-standing relationships. Several had emerged in response to government funding and initiatives – for example, for Shared Education or Area Learning Communities. Others were more informal, formed through friendship groups, or via Whatsapp and Facebook groups. The support that came from these networks was often practical, but we also heard examples of leaders sharing more personal and emotional challenges, helping them to keep going when times were tough.

What drains and sustains leaders – findings from the case studies

In the national dashboard (pages 28–29) we show the codes for drains and sustains from the interviews, while in Section 5 we show the responses in the survey. Here we briefly illustrate the themes, drawing on the interviews and focusing particularly on aspects that were distinctive in Northern Ireland.

Drains

There were many aspects to what drained leaders, but a common thread was the cumulative weight of responsibility and pressure they carried, which played out in heavy workloads and long working weeks. Maryam, a secondary Vice Principal in Town-Rural, put it as follows: "Just the workload, just it is relentless. You know, I could literally work morning, noon and night. You still wouldn't have all the work done that you need to do."

Archie, the head of a post-primary school with a relatively large leadership team that he could delegate many tasks to, still felt the weight of carrying the ultimate responsibility and accountability: "It's not one thing, it's just lots of one things, relentless … It's not even about lonely. It's not a lonely job, I know people say it is, but it's more you are on your own ultimately."

Linked to this was the challenge of working in busy schools with multiple, unplanned calls on your time and attention. Ellie, a primary head in Town-Rural, called this "a live environment", with the implication that: "I very rarely … get time to actually do the work we need to do … That work's done at home at night because that door never stops … people never stop needing you."

These issues were particularly acute for Northern Ireland's relatively large number of teaching principals in small schools. Heidi, a primary head in Town-Rural reflected on the challenge of juggling both a teaching and leadership role: "They're two separate jobs. And you do feel as if you're doing neither well. And you can't because you're in class… So you're just pulled in all directions."

Northern Ireland Town-Rural dashboard

Free school meals
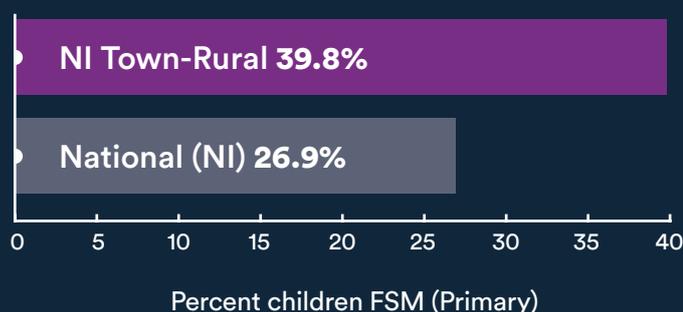
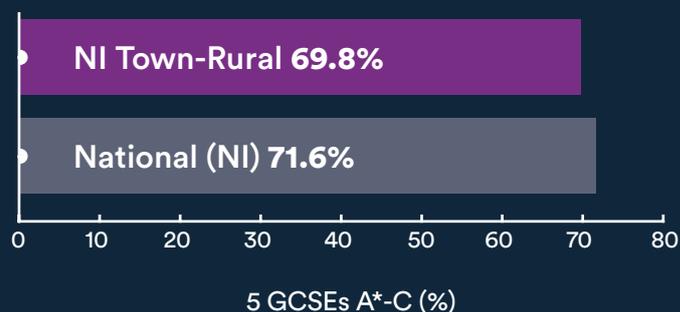NI Town-Rural **39.8%**

National (NI) **26.9%**

0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35 40

Percent children FSM (Primary)

Secondary pupil outcomes

NI Town-Rural **69.8%**

National (NI) **71.6%**

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80

5 GCSEs A*-C (%)

Data source – https://explore.nisra.gov.uk/local-stats/

Quotes from interviewees mapped onto the conceptual framework

Identity

"So in Northern Ireland I am always principal of Ravenhill. Everyone knows who you are at every time in your life… That's the Northern Ireland thing." —*Maeve, Principal, Ravenhill Secondary*

Leadership

"I am essentially a pastoral leader. You know, don't get me wrong, I'm into data and all that… (but) the closer I am, I suppose, as a leader ... to the pupils and the staff and the parents, the more accurate my decision-making is." —*Daniel, Principal, Carranmore Secondary*

NI Town Rural

Place

"It's about, you know, where do you send your child to school to hold your identity? And that's a big thing for us because integrated education is about celebrating the identity of all ... And that can be very difficult ... I suppose it's that feeling intimidated by sharing somebody else's views." —*Maryam, VP, Tullinwood Secondary*

Education & care

"I suppose it's the elephant in the room and it's the needs of the ever-changing society and children. And you're not, you're not just a teacher anymore. You're a social worker, you're a family worker…" —*Ellie, Principal, Birch Grove, Primary*

Competition for pupils in a context of declining demographics and, often, an oversupply of school places was also distinctive in Northern Ireland, most obviously at primary level. Several of the schools we visited were struggling to remain viable, helping to explain the high numbers of teaching principals. A few of primary heads we visited had decided to accept a SPiM (Specialist Provision in Mainstream) unit in their school, as a way to bolster their budget and scale. However, this could create acute additional challenges, as Ella described:

> *"We did have two Foundation Stage classroom assistants and five special needs assistants. I now have 12 special needs assistants … And that has brought a whole new level of management … staff relationships are part of that. They've been thrown into jobs … and we haven't had a chance to do the … team building because it's been 'get that unit up and running' … a few cracks are starting to appear."*

Several other challenges had a distinct Northern Ireland flavour, often related to the "broken system" issues highlighted above. These included:

- **Budgets:** "I've given up looking at the school budget because it's a joke. We'll never, you can't make your budget balance." (Primary Head)

- **Increasingly complex SEND needs, coupled with lack of support:** "For people outside of the education bubble, they're like, 'what do you mean you got hit today? That that shouldn't be right'. And it shouldn't be right, but the reality is we have kids with such extreme needs now coming in that … that is an aspect of our job." (Primary Head)

- **Parental complaints:** "[I have a] particularly difficult parent at the moment … I could have had 20 successes in that week but I can only fixate on this personal criticism." (Primary Head)

- **Staffing** – including a lack of staff resilience and the emotional cost of grievances, not helped by weak HR support.
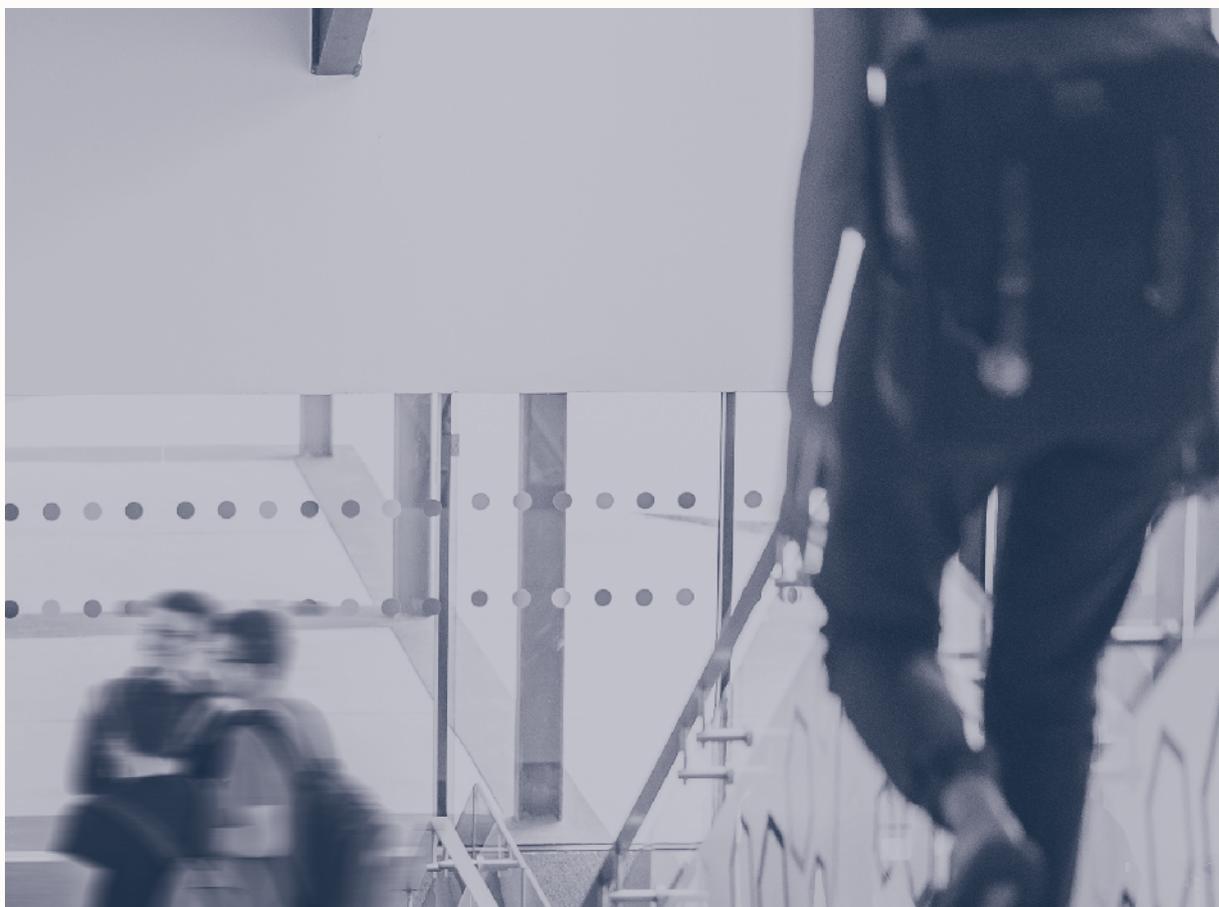
In Section 5 we share responses from the survey to the question of what sustains leaders. It is striking how similar the sustaining factors are across all three nations and across different phases and categories of leader. This is also true in the interview data, where the things that leaders in Northern Ireland described as sustaining were very similar to the themes in England and Scotland.

Almost every leader spoke about children and young people first – spending time with them, seeing them grow, and a sense of care for their education and wellbeing:

> *"Do you know, standing putting the lights on that Christmas tree today and seeing the children's faces as they walk past, you know what? That's why I do what I do." —Primary Head, Coast*

> *"The children are what keeps you in leadership. I love the buzz." —Secondary Head, Town-Rural*

Linked to this was the sense of satisfaction and values-based purpose that came from making a difference to children's lives:

> *"In terms of sustaining, I am enjoying what I do. You do have that sense of achievement. There are, there are so many times during the school year when you're kind of uplifted by things that have happened and things that go well." —Secondary Head, Town-Rural*

Logan's quote above hints at how the ability to make a difference depends on having autonomy and the resources required to lead successful change in schools. Pheobe spells this out more clearly:

> *"And I do think I am in a position and a privileged position where you can lead, you can make changes, you can do things in school for the children. And I think that I get a lot of pleasure from that." —Secondary Deputy Head, Coast*

Almost all interviewees mentioned their colleagues and the importance of having a good team – not just to share the work, but because this brought energy and shared purpose, while also providing important emotional support for many.

The importance of having a wider network of peers and colleagues beyond school was also mentioned often. Another theme was the importance of feedback – whether from colleagues, Board members, parents or former pupils: "Something that sustains me is, you know, specific, recognisable praise. OK. And I don't mean I'm all about the glory!" (Primary Head, Coast).

Finally, we were surprised that not a single respondent in Northern Ireland included 'My life outside work' as a top sustaining factor in their responses to the survey (Box 2 – pages 98-99). Certainly, in the interviews, the importance of these aspects came through strongly.

Leadership development, recruitment and succession planning

Northern Ireland's complex governance arrangements mean that school leaders are employed by different bodies, which influences where responsibility lies for developing leadership and for recruitment and succession planning. In broad terms: in Controlled schools the Education Authority employs the headteacher, although the school Board makes the final decision on their appointment; in Catholic Maintained schools, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) employs the head, although the school's Board of Governors appoints them; while in Voluntary Grammar and some GM schools the school Board recruits and employs the head.

Leadership development

In Section 2 we explained that the Professional Qualification for Headship (PQH NI) was paused in 2017, although plans are in place to launch a new version as part of TransformEd.

In recent years, both the EA and the various sector bodies had been working to provide leadership programmes or wider professional development opportunities for schools. These were geared mainly towards either middle leadership development (for example, Steps into Leadership, Senior Pathways) or whole school improvement (for example, school ethos, group coaching), with no provision aimed specifically at preparation for headship.

The lack of any clear pathway to prepare for leading a school was articulated a number of times:

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

Several interviewees had undertaken PQH before it was discontinued, which most had valued – "rigorous, but beneficial" (Secondary head, Coast). The loss of any opportunity to engage in a system-level headship preparation programme was widely seen as problematic – "not being trained ... I have a bugbear about that" (Primary head, Coast). It was notable that a high proportion of leaders in Northern Ireland had undertaken Masters study on their own initiative, with many highlighting the value of such academic study. However, the self-funded required meant that not all leaders could afford it, creating an inequitable landscape: "I need(ed) professional development. Nothing. Master's, that's all you can do. And I couldn't afford it" (Primary Principal, Town-Rural). Some of the newly appointed heads we interviewed had participated in reasonably comprehensive induction programmes, but it was unclear whether such provision was widely available.

Recruitment and succession planning

The picture on recruitment and succession planning in Northern Ireland was mixed. While several interviewees expressed concerns around declining appetite among potential heads and reduced application fields, most schools did seem able to recruit. At the same time, restrictive recruitment processes appeared to constrain some leaders' careers, while appointment processes for headship posts appeared somewhat outdated in some contexts.

Teaching has historically been seen as a popular career choice in Northern Ireland: "There aren't many jobs here. So when you get your job, you hold on tight and there's definitely not that same availability" (Primary Head, Town-Rural). As a result of historic difficulties in finding a first job, several of our interviewees had left to work elsewhere – most often in England – then returned later to seek a more senior role. More recently, however, several secondary principals reported difficulties in recruiting staff, particularly to some specialist subjects.

Ellie's comment ("you hold on tight") spoke to a relatively static labour market, with limited movement between schools. Even less common was movement between sectors. This combination of a stable and siloed labour market meant that career development in Northern Ireland could feel constrained, sometimes relying on luck as much as skills, qualifications or experience. A further issue was that most roles below Deputy Head level are not advertised externally, meaning that aspiring teachers can usually only apply for a more senior role within their own school. Theodore, a Deputy head in Coast, described the impact as follows:

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

Turning to headteacher recruitment processes, we heard about different models. In Controlled schools:

"EA deal with all of that. So they do all the advertising and all of that and they set it up and they liaise with the Board of Governors and get a recruitment panel in place ... at the end of the day it's the Board of Governor's decision." —Local Leader, Coast

For most leaders, the recruitment process itself involved an application followed by one or two interviews. Ella, a primary head in Coast, compared this with processes she had previously experienced in England, which had been considerably more demanding:

"So over there [England] I was going through two days of rigorous interviews, tasks, challenges. Here I had a 20-minute interview up at the church with tea and coffee and then once I was put through for that, had another interview at the EA again, but 20 minutes. Job done. Very different. And that's still, that's still the way."

In contrast, we heard that CCMS had adopted a competency-based approach to recruitment for Catholic Maintained schools, which was seen to be more effective. Meanwhile, in one GM school where we interviewed the Chair of the Board, we heard how he had formed a committee to oversee headteacher recruitment, supported by an external consultant, with a process that included: "a series of interviews ... role play, presentations, data analysis, strategic thinking."

In terms of appetite for headship, there was a widespread view that this had declined in recent years. Application fields for Vice-Principal roles were often described as healthy, whereas headship was seen to bring heavy workloads and stress. We heard several examples of small fields and schools failing to appoint, as Oscar, a grammar school head in Coast, described:

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

We did not hear of any co-ordinated strategic efforts to ensure a supply of school principals in either locality. However, some school leaders – particularly in the secondary sector – did talk about how they were working to grow their staff internally:

"When I got this role, I'm very conscious that you have to be developing people all the time because you don't know what's going to happen. And yes I am enthusiastic and you know, but other people need develop too." Secondary Head, Coast

In some cases this included specific initiatives aimed at giving potential heads the range of experience and support they would need to be ready to apply. For example, a couple of secondaries had Associate SLT models:

> *"We have a programme in school called Associate SLT. So we bring somebody up onto SLT for a year who's a middle leader to develop their leadership skills to help them with greater understanding of the school." Secondary Principal, Town-Rural*

However, these deliberate approaches were relatively uncommon. Such opportunities were far more constrained in smaller schools, where there was less scope for staff movement. ASOS had also limited scope for such developmental approaches in recent years.

Leadership and identity: Coast and Town-Rural

The two localities in Northern Ireland share system-level features but diverge in important ways, as indicated in the locality dashboards (pages 65 and 71). In this portrait we use the lens of identity to compare the two localities and identify implications for leadership.

In Section 3 we outlined Southworth's distinction between a leader's situated identity, which is socially constructed, and their substantial self, reflecting an inner core of beliefs, values and attitudes. We highlighted how our identities are dynamic and evolving and the meaning making narratives we tell ourselves and others in order to give them shape. Our professional identities are shaped through processes of socialisation and must always be negotiated with those around us.

This portrait illuminates these features and shows how identity is also constructed through interactions with place, community, the profession, and the system – influencing who becomes a leader, what leadership means in practice, how values are enacted, and ultimately, whether leadership can be sustained.

Biographies and professional identities

The leaders we interviewed across both localities frequently rooted their professional identities in biographical narratives that connected personal experience to educational mission. These narratives reveal a 'substantial self' – an inner core of self-defining beliefs and values that, while evolving, remains relatively stable over time.

In both Coast and Town-Rural, many leaders articulated identities forged through their own personal experiences of education, explaining how this had unlocked opportunities that had enabled them to become who they are today. Sienna, in Coast, spoke of being "someone that would be from a working-class background" who "didn't have a mum or dad that went to university." For her, this created a particular kind of educational commitment: "I don't ever want a child to feel that they can't achieve because of their background or their family circumstances." Such biographical anchors create a sense of mission that is both deeply personal and professionally orienting: a commitment to providing opportunities that they themselves had benefitted from.

For other leaders, their own educational experience had motivated them to provide something different. Logan explained that "I failed my 11 plus, so I feel very passionate that, you know, I had that label at 11 where you failed." This experience had led him to work in a non-selective all-ability school.

In addition to stories about their own education, leaders described various other ways in which their biographies had shaped their substantial selves and their career choices. Many came from teaching families, with parents and relatives who had helped inculcate a commitment to education and public service. Place and community were also centrally important, with a majority of interviewees working in or near where they had grown up. Heidi, the head of an Irish Medium school explained: "I'm from an Irish speaking area. Irish is my first language". Elsie explained that she had been a pupil at the school where she was now the head: she hopes that her own children will attend the school one day.

Religion and the nature of Northern Ireland's sectarian history was an important aspect of biography and identity for most leaders. Some referenced the role of education in the broader struggles. For example, Leo, the head of a Catholic primary, explained:

"There's a lot of history ... The rationale and reason, you know, for nationalism was that the way we get out of this is we educate our kids and it's through our education, we don't get treated as second class citizens ... I firmly believe in Catholic education."

More common was for interviewees – particularly older leaders – to explain how their own educational experiences had been shaped by their family and community background in a highly segregated system. Ellie described this as follows:

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

Ellie's faith continues to motivate her today: "If I wasn't a Christian ... I would not have sustained this journey and I would not be here." Other interviewees implied that faith, while still important, did not underpin their identity in the way it might once have done, although their religious community remained important. Daniel, the head of a Catholic post-primary school, described his own faith as follows: "Whether I've strong faith is debatable, but I have a good faith. Like I practise every Sunday, and we pray every day." Characterising his staff team, he explained that only "maybe two or three" were not from the Catholic community, but that relatively few were practising.

These examples begin to illustrate how personal biography becomes educationally meaningful. The stories leaders tell themselves about who they are and why education matters create the foundation for how they lead.

Evolving identities throughout a career

If the substantial self provides an inner anchor, one's situated identity emerges and evolves through the course of a career, shaped by experience.

Appointment to a first formal leadership role marks a critical transition point. One trajectory is that leaders then grow in self-confidence and become increasingly comfortable with their leadership identity as they experience success. Organisational cultures, practices and relationships all influence this process, for good or ill. Oscar, the head of a grammar school, explained how his experience as a Deputy Principal had shaped his identity:

> "She [the Principal] was influential in that we had a terrible relationship, really terrible ... she and I could not get on and I did not agree with how she ran the school ... and that, perversely, had the biggest impact on my leadership style, that negative experience."

Other newly appointed leaders can struggle, experiencing identity confusion as they navigate the shift from peer relationships with teachers to line management, with increased responsibility and accountability. Faced with such demands, new leaders can experience self-doubt, or imposter syndrome, which can be debilitating. Overcoming such confusion requires structured and supported opportunities to step up, developing the skills and confidence required. However, a common concern we heard in Northern Ireland was that the prolonged period of ASOS meant that many middle leaders had never had these opportunities, so might struggle to take on more senior roles: "ASOS has been going on for so long that there'll be lots of people maybe never had to make a parent phone call."

The process of identity formation continues after appointment as a headteacher. Experienced headteachers often reflected on the sheer intensity of the first year or two in post, following which they had generally learned to step back and distribute leadership more. Daniel described a different process of coming to terms with his principal identity, showing how the substantial and situated selves are always in dialectic: "My biggest concern, going into principalship, was 'will I need to change?'" In the event, he actively chose not to:

> "When I took over as permanent principal ... [I thought] I'm not going to buy a book ... I'm going to be myself ... And I have been. And because I've been true to myself, I feel comfortable."

Professional identity formation and socialisation

In both Coast and Town-Rural, leaders' professional identities were shaped by influences beyond their immediate schools: the system itself, school sector affiliations, and local relationships and networks. This context creates distinctive conditions for identity formation. Unlike Scotland's relatively unified national framework or England's fragmented but highly centralised system, Northern Ireland's siloed system means that professional socialisation occurs largely within distinct sectoral communities – Controlled, Maintained, Irish-Medium and so on.

Each sector has its own educational traditions, which leaders are required to adopt and uphold. For example: Catholic schools offer the sacraments, Irish Medium schools must develop their own curriculum resources, while Integrated schools have distinctive approaches to building mutual respect and understanding between faith groups. These sectoral identities are further reinforced by the different governance arrangements that schools work within.

The sectors are not completely segregated: many of the schools we visited had intakes from both the Catholic and Protestant communities. Nevertheless, leaders' formation and socialisation was distinctive, making it difficult to jump across to work in a different sector: "It probably was unusual for a teacher, particularly in leadership here … to jump from a grammar sector to the non-grammar sector" (Daniel, secondary head, Town-Rural). That said, there was some evidence that these ties had loosened somewhat for younger leaders. For example, MaryAm, a Deputy Head in an Integrated College, had grown up in a Catholic family, but explained: "I'm 40, so I didn't really grow up in a time of immense Troubles … So when it came to getting a job, I literally, literally went, that school's closer to me, I'm going to go there."

In parallel with these sectoral arrangements, professional identities in both localities were shaped collectively, through peer networks, as outlined above. These networks provided more than advice and support; they helped to socialise leaders into shared understandings of what principalship means in Northern Ireland, indicating how professional identity is collectively as well as individually sustained.

Community anchored leadership

In Section 3 we quoted Crow and Møller, "leaders cannot simply stamp themselves as a moral leader, an advocate, or a change agent", such identities must have legitimacy in the eyes of staff, pupils, and parents. Professional identity is thus not only formed through biographical experience and professional socialisation but must be continually negotiated with local communities.

In both localities, we saw how leaders' identities were deeply embedded in the communities they served, creating what might be called 'community-anchored' professional selves. This anchoring reflects the trends we noted above: for leaders to work in schools in or near where they grew up, and in schools that reflect their own religious faith and cultural identity. The local knowledge and cultural alignment that this brought was important for leaders, helping them to establish and sustain their credibility and connection with staff and local communities. Indeed, we heard about leaders from outside Northern Ireland who had been appointed into senior roles, but who had struggled to establish themselves. One such had come from England and "tried to introduce some of these English things like zero tolerance and all the rest of it and the community went, no we're not doing that." This suggests that being 'community-anchored' is about more than just local knowledge and networks, it involves identities that are shaped by and accountable to a community's values and expectations, with leadership not as an external intervention but as community stewardship.

The 'community anchored' nature of leadership in Northern Ireland might explain the tendency for leaders there to describe themselves as "pastoral leaders", as we explained above. Many leaders seemed to see maintaining good relations with parents and staff as their main priority, particularly in contexts where they were competing with other local schools to attract pupils.

But community embeddedness and stewardship was not always easy or cosy. Indeed, many interviewees positioned themselves as agents of change, with a remit to challenge their pupils and wider communities on issues such as racism or unhealthy sectarianism. This could create tensions and professional dilemmas: for example, Maryam's Integrated College has a remit to attract a balanced intake of students from different sides of the community, but the challenges of doing this in practice mean that the school is not full:

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

More generally, community embeddedness makes leaders highly visible in small communities where "everyone knows your business." For some, this visibility affirms identity – you are the principal, a respected community figure. For others, just as in rural areas of England and Scotland, this visibility and scrutiny could be uncomfortable.

Identity negotiation in practice

The socially constructed nature of identity means it must be continually enacted and validated through daily practice. In both localities, we saw leaders negotiating their professional identities through the choices they made, the values they enacted, and the battles they chose to fight.

This process of identity construction was partly individual and internal – as leaders reflected on their experience in negotiation with their substantial self. For example, Maryam, the Deputy Head quoted above, described how she had gained confidence in challenging community stereotypes:

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

Many leaders across both localities constructed their identities around "being there for children" or "making a difference to young lives." This identity as child-advocate provided both moral purpose and professional validation, helping to sustain them through the challenges they faced. Yet this child-centred identity had to be negotiated in a system that, as we outlined above in relation to the "broken system", demanded significant attention to bureaucracy, compliance, and accountability. Several interviewees described a tension between the identity they wanted to enact and the identity the role demanded of them. For example, Leo in Coast expressed frustration that "I find myself at times acting as just a post box for EA". This creates what might be called 'identity dissonance', a misalignment between the leader one wants to be and the leader one must be to survive in the role.

Different leaders manage this dissonance differently. Principals in small schools had little choice but to absorb the tension, experiencing it as exhausting but unavoidable. Others had begun to question whether this is "a job you do for 30 years", suggesting that sustained identity dissonance may ultimately drive leaders from the profession.

Professional identity shapes whether leadership can be sustained. As we indicated in the section on 'drains', leaders spoke of the role's increasing intensity. Whether this led to burnout or renewed commitment depended partly on the extent to which professional identity remained intact.

For some leaders, their individual and collective professional identity provided resilience even in difficult circumstances. Sienna described feeling sustained by "the ethos of that group" of principals who support each other, suggesting how collective identity can buffer individual strain. Harry spoke of how, despite feeling "alone a lot of the time," "one message on WhatsApp or one coffee with a friend makes you realise it's not". These leaders experienced their professional identities as bigger than their individual struggles, anchored in relationships and shared purpose that outlast daily difficulties.

For others, however, the conditions of the role increasingly undermined the professional identities they wanted to enact. Lyra, a primary head, put it as follows:

> "Part of me feels I can't keep putting the level of work into this job without it killing me … it is hard because you're trying to do your best at everything and you're never getting the best at everything."

It seems that sustainability requires leaders to negotiate an identity that is sufficiently in balance that it can sustain them through challenges without driving them so hard they lose perspective. This is a complex and continual process, encompassing the deeply personal substantial self as well as one's situated professional identity. As we have illustrated, it spans home and work, school and community, beliefs, values and practices and much more.

Many of the experienced leaders we interviewed described times in their career when the balance had not been right, but they could also articulate how they had achieved more sustainable ways of leading. One example was Oscar, who had been a secondary head in Coast for nine years. Early in that time the balance was not right: "It was personally damaging. My marriage failed, all those types of things … I was doing 70, 80 hours a week standard." Over time he had developed his team and learned to delegate more, with a clear set of values that underpinned his decision-making. Ultimately, in his view, a balanced identity was about "strength of character":

> "You can't leave every day beating yourself up about difficult conversations you have. Because I will have a difficult conversation every day … And if you can't cope with that level of challenge, headship is not for you."
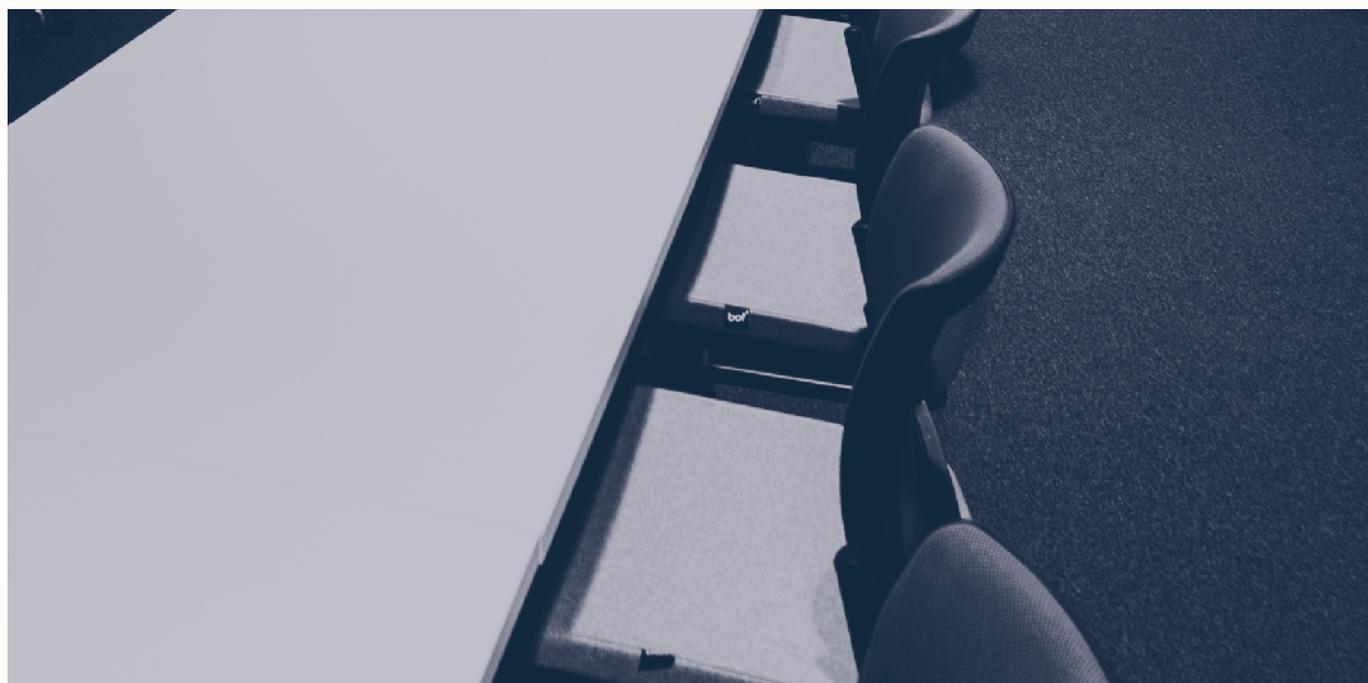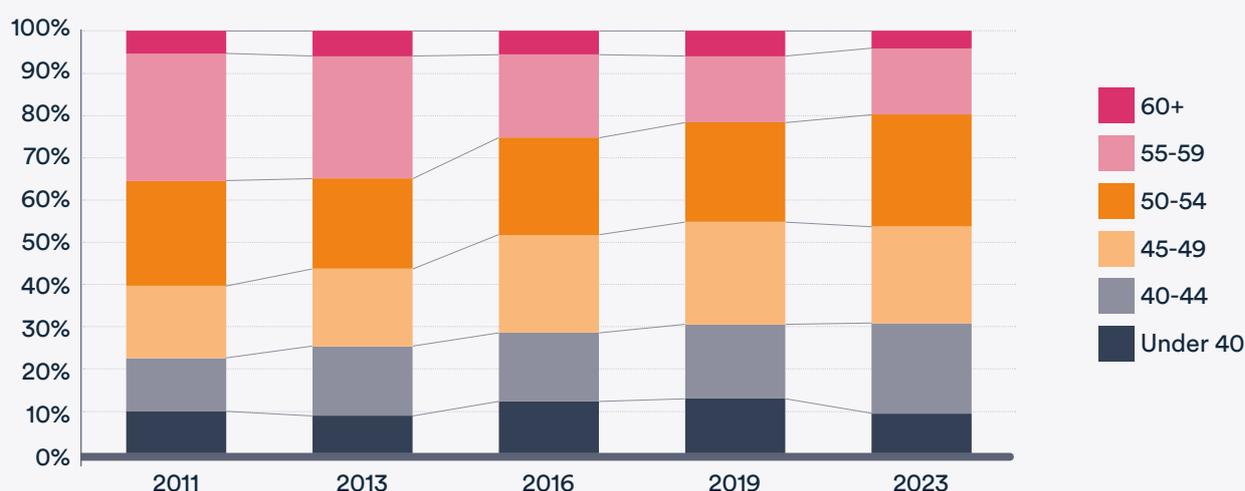
Scotland

The research in Scotland included expert interviews, secondary analysis of national census data for the leadership workforce (2010–2023), a survey of 332 Scottish leaders, and in-depth interviews with 28 leaders across two contrasting localities – City and Rural-Coast.[52]

The leadership workforce

Scotland's 2,445 schools are 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 towards mid-career leadership (Figure 4.5). 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 depute headteachers, though the shift towards younger age bands has been more pronounced.

Figure 4.5: Scotland Headteacher age profile by year

Across Scotland, women account for 77% of headteachers and 73% of deputes. There are significant differences between sectors. In the primary sector, 83% of headteachers and 88% of deputes are women, broadly (but not entirely) reflecting the teaching workforce where nearly 91% of teachers are female. In the secondary sector, 68% of classroom teachers are women, but only 45% of 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 are no longer in a headship position over time; 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, following by a slight worsening in recent years.

Looking at three-year attrition rates over the 2020/21 to 2023/24 academic years, we see that most attrition is age related, with younger and mid-career headteachers far more likely to remain, while older cohorts (aged 55+) show very high turnover, reflecting early and full retirement patterns (Figure 4.6). This pattern is similar to England's, but retention is higher among younger leaders in Scotland.

Figure 4.6: Scotland three-year headteacher attrition rate by age (%)
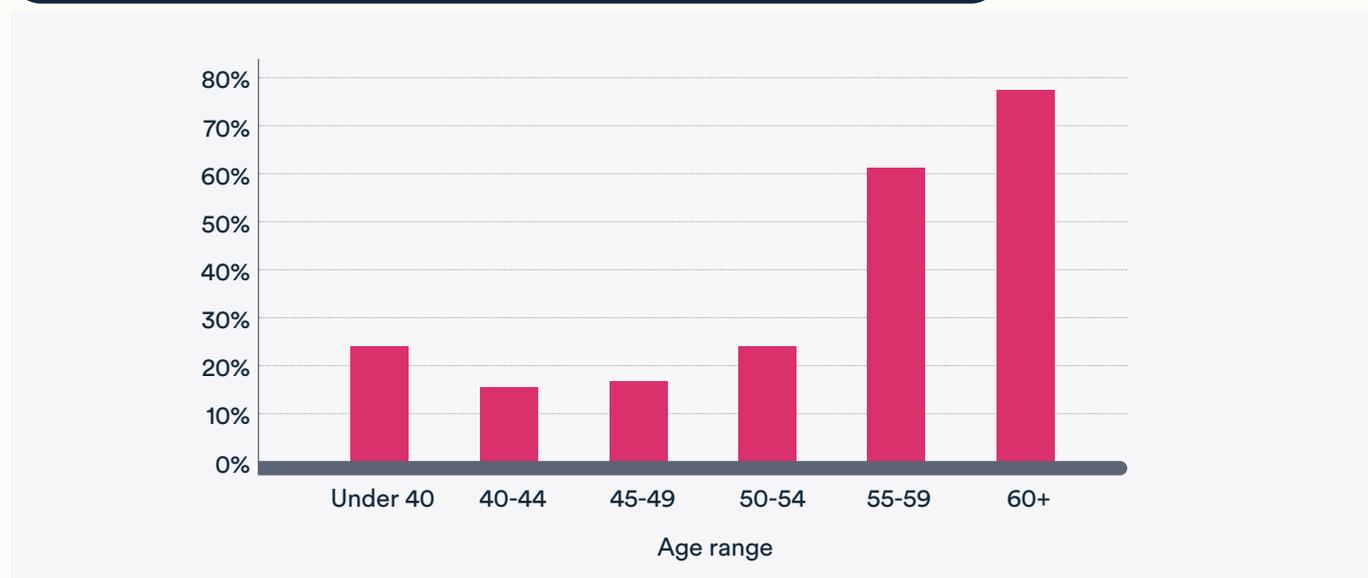
School improvement, accountability and support

School improvement

Almost every interview in Scotland – as in England and Northern Ireland – included multiple references to children's learning and progress and to aspects of instructional leadership, such as school improvement planning informed by data, lesson observations, professional development, and curriculum change. For a subset of heads in Scotland, improving academic outcomes through instructional leadership was clearly the main priority:

> *"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, Secondary head, City*

Achieving this impact had required Edward to challenge and gradually change the culture of his school when he had taken on the headship four years earlier. For example, he explained:

> *"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."*

In Coast LA, Ayla, a secondary head, had a clear focus on sustaining excellent educational outcomes. She argued that "the key to leadership is clarity and having a vision as to where you want to go because there's so many things we're getting bogged down a bit with just now in Scotland." In line with this belief, her work in the school was focused and strategic: "When I'm talking about the vision and values of [Copperhill Secondary], I'm always talking about ambition, growth, success. And our young people come here because they know that we promote attainment, learning." She described how she uses the How Good is Our School tool developed by Scotland's inspectorate to identify her school's improvement priorities each year and was proud of her school's "high attaining" performance. She allocates clear remits to each member of her senior team, while she takes a "helicopter view", keeping the focus on quality education. In addition, she described an active role in monitoring the quality of education across the school: "I will be in classes, and I will observe learning." In addition to her work within school, Ayla had led work to establish an LA-wide collaborative model for offering vocational qualifications, providing an alternative to the standard academic qualification pathway.

Most of the leaders we interviewed in both City and Rural-Coast did not have the same relentless focus on academic outcomes and instructional leadership as Edward and Ayla. These leaders tended to position improvements in learning and outcomes as emerging from a holistic educational ethos and approach that aligned wellbeing and pastoral support, professional learning for staff focused on improving the quality of teaching, and a broad and balanced curriculum. One example of this more holistic approach came from Esme, a secondary head in City:

"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."

Accountability and support

The impetus for improving outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged pupils (known as the poverty-related attainment gap), came from the national government, generally translated via the LAs. As we explore in the portrait on place, below, there were some clear differences in how the three LAs worked to support improvement: for example, City LA had a long-standing commitment to an inclusive, nurture approach, while Rural LA leaders described the need for "flexibility within a framework … because you've got such diverse contexts".

Schools in Scotland are subject to periodic formal inspections. Views on these inspections were mixed, but the general sense was they invoked less fear than Ofsted's equivalents in England. For example, in the survey, respondents in Scotland were notably more positive than their English peers about the scope for inspections to provide a learning opportunity (54% agree vs 27% in England). Interviewees commonly described the process as stressful, requiring weeks of preparation to prepare data and undertake school self-evaluation. Equally, there was often an acknowledgement that the process could be helpful in clarifying priorities as a basis for change, as Esme explained:
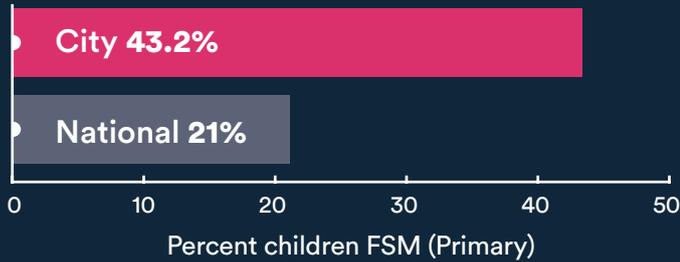
"[The] inspection report really clarified that and really confirmed you know some of the things that I've been, I've been thinking about. And now that it's there, you know published in black and white, it certainly made the kind of forward planning for next year and for the next three years and discussing that with staff far easier job."

Scotland City dashboard
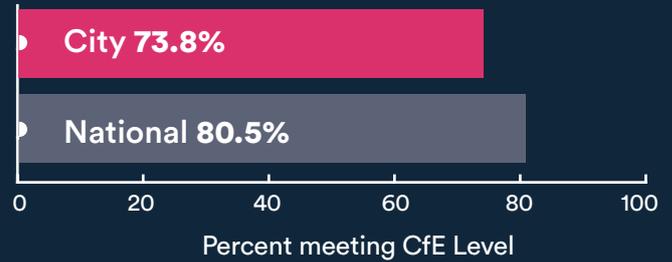
Free school meals

City **43.2%**

National **21%**

Percent children FSM (Primary)

(x-axis: 0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50)

Primary pupil outcomes

City **73.8%**

National **80.5%**

Percent meeting CfE Level

(x-axis: 0, 20, 40, 60, 80, 100)

English as an additional language

City **28.8%**

National **8.9%**

Percent children EAL (Primary)

(x-axis: 0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50)

Secondary pupil outcomes

City **62%**

National **67%**

% 5 SQF at Level 5

(x-axis: 0, 20, 40, 60, 80, 100)

Data source – https://education.gov.scot/parentzone/my-school/school-information-dashboard/
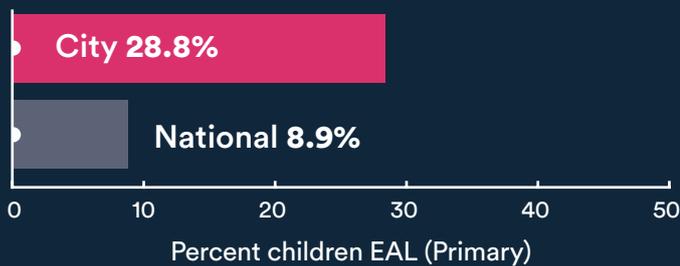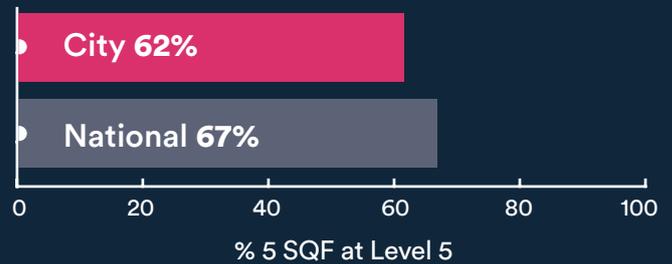
Quotes from interviewees mapped onto the conceptual framework

Identity

"I think it's a vocational thing for me, and it always has been …... I kind of got a real sense of this is what I really, really want to do." —*Layla, Depute, Moon Primary*

Leadership

"To have the team with me and to be able to empower the team… devolved and distributed leadership." —*Ada, Headteacher, Misty Haven Primary*

Scotland City

Place

"The impact that we see across society in terms of family breakdown and all of that … there's more of that in City… I don't think you come to be a head teacher in City because you're looking for an easy number." —*James, Local Leader*

Education & care

"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." — *Esme, Headteacher, Cedar Secondary*

Each LA monitors school performance and provides a combination of support and challenge to the schools it operates. The three LAs all employed teams of Quality Improvement Officers (QIOs), generally former headteachers, who had responsibility for tracking school performance and providing support and challenge for headteachers. These officers worked to hold school leaders accountable for planning and tracking their school improvement efforts: "The City (LA) want your School Improvement Plan. They want your Education Perspective Report. They want the Standards and Quality reports" (Hallie, Secondary head, City). This accountability role was combined with the kind of pastoral support that might be provided by the Chair of Governors in England or Northern Ireland: for example, Jessica, an LA Leader in City, described undertaking "regular pastoral check-ins" with heads.

The level and intensity of hands-on support for schools differed widely between City and Rural-Coast. In City, an LA leader described how they could marshal significant resources, providing differentiated support for schools in specific areas:

> *"Depending on what we identify as the area that needs focus, is it literacy and numeracy, is it health and wellbeing, is it is it leadership? We try and pull together a package of support."*
> *—Local Leader, City*

In contrast, in the Rural LA, while the model was ostensibly the same, the level of capacity was spread more thinly. The QIO team in Rural LA was split into "three teams, North, Central, South … and they provide that kind of line management to the Headteacher, support for the (primary) Headteachers, dealing with disciplinaries, grievances." However, due to limited resources this support was differentiated, with higher performing schools receiving less: all headteachers were required to undertake an annual self-assessment of their school, with only those considered most at risk receiving targeted or intensive support.

Both the Rural-Coast LAs had placed schools into trios, with an expectation that they would visit each other and become more self-improving in a context where LA budgets and capacity were reducing, as Max, a Leader in Rural LA, explained:

> *"The job (i.e. headship) has just become increasingly demanding. It's changed, as local authorities have shrunk … Less central support available from the Local Authority. And Headteachers will say they sometimes feel unsupported."*

LAs in Scotland directly run schools; for example, employing staff and deciding how to allocate them. Similarly, on budgets, we heard that there was little incentive for headteachers to generate a surplus because this would most likely be taken back by the LA at the end of the year. However, as we show in Section 6, there is no evidence that school leaders in Scotland are spending significantly less time on operational issues than in England or Northern Ireland.

School-based leaders in all three LAs did sometimes express frustration in relation to operational issues, but there was also an acceptance and, generally, a good level of support for the model. One example of this view came from Violet:

> *"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, Primary Head, City)*

What drains and sustains leaders – findings from the case studies

We included the key drains and sustains codes from the case study interviews on Scotland's national dashboard (pages 32–33). We also show Scottish leaders' responses to the drains and sustains question in the survey in Box 2. Here we highlight some of the key themes from the interviews, focusing on areas that appeared distinctive in Scotland.

Drains

The relentlessness and overall weight of leadership was a drain for most interviewees, just as in England and Northern Ireland. While this was partly about heavy workloads ("It's kind of a job that never ends and it never will end." —Primary Depute, City) there was also a sense that some leaders carried an *"invisible weight"* that they did not yet feel comfortable with: "That, the invisible weight and imposter syndrome, massively" (Primary head, City).

While school leaders have always worked long hours, there was a common view that the relentlessness has increased in the years since the pandemic, sometimes linked with a sense of frustration that other services (for example, social work, health) have not stepped up to the same extent: "We're the only universal service, we're the only ones that can't say no" (Secondary head, Rural-Coast).

A key driver of the increase in demands on schools was a perceived expansion in the number and complexity of children with additional needs and/or highly dysregulated behaviour: "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" (Primary head, City).

While demands on schools were seen to have increased, staffing was widely seen to have become more difficult. In secondary schools this was sometimes about teacher recruitment issues in specific subject areas. More commonly, leaders expressed a view that staff had become more "fragile", for example with multiple requests for flexible working arrangements, unauthorised time off, and internal disputes and grievances.

One contributor to these staffing issues was the impact of budget cuts, which often meant that staff were having to do more with less, with the impact being that heads and senior leaders "get bogged down in the firefighting aspect" (Primary head, Rural-Coast). These issues were often mundane, but nonetheless tiring and frustrating:

> *"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."*
> *—Primary Head, Rural-Coast*

A distinctive aspect of staffing in Scotland was the central management by LAs and consequent constraints on schools. In City, deployment below senior levels was by central HR directly, a source of frustration for some leaders: "We don't really get to pick our own staff" (Primary head, City). The model was seen to reduce leaders' ability to appoint and develop the team they really wanted: "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 that." (Secondary head, City)

Finally, while we noted above that leaders in Scotland were generally more positive about inspections that their peers in England, it was clear that for many interviewees the pressures from inspection could be intense: "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." Secondary Head, Rural-Coast.

Scotland Rural-Coast dashboard

Free school meals
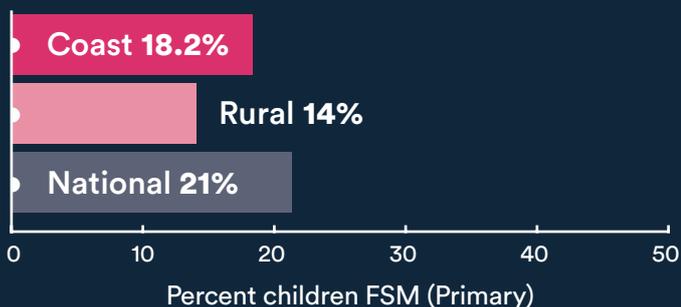
Coast **18.2%**
Rural **14%**
National **21%**

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50
Percent children FSM (Primary)

Primary pupil outcomes

Coast **75.3%**
Rural **76.6%**
National **80.5%**

0 — 20 — 40 — 60 — 80 — 100
Percent meeting CfE Level

English as an additional language

Coast **17.9%**
Rural **5.1%**
National **8.9%**

0 — 10 — 20 — 30 — 40 — 50
Percent children EAL (Primary)

Secondary pupil outcomes

Coast **66%**
Rural **68%**
National **67%**

0 — 20 — 40 — 60 — 80 — 100
% 5 SQF at Level 5

Data source – https://education.gov.scot/parentzone/my-school/school-information-dashboard/
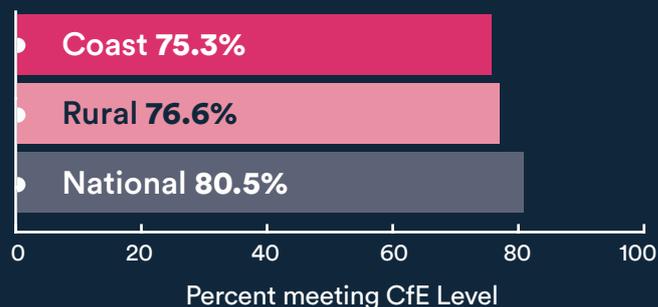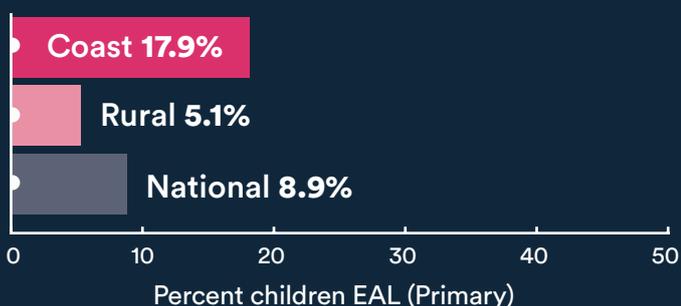
Quotes from interviewees mapped onto the conceptual framework

Identity

"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."
—*Ayla, Headteacher, Copper Hill Secondary*

Leadership

"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*

Scotland Rural Coast

Place

"Geographically it's very diverse… we have historic communities through to [Town industry]…. Rural poverty is a significant and often hidden factor because of isolation, because of lack of transport, lack of facilities."
—*Reuben, Local Leader*

Education & care

"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*

The factors sustaining leaders in Scotland overlapped strongly with their peers in England and Northern Ireland. Key to everything was making a difference for children and seeing them grow, as Rose, a primary head in Rural-Coast, explained: "Sustains for me seems quite straightforward. I love to see the impact you make to the young people."

Second, came relationships – in particular the importance of having a strong team of trusted colleagues within school, as Adam, a secondary head in Rural-Coast described:

> *"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."*

Beyond this, wider relationships – with peers in other schools and at home – were often mentioned. Other aspects, such as seeing the impact of school improvement initiatives and watching staff members develop, also chimed with the findings elsewhere.

Two aspects of the sustains in Scotland appeared slightly more distinctive. One was the importance of professional learning, both for individual leaders and for how they supported this in their schools. The second was the importance of personal hobbies outside school – such as Pilates, netball, keeping a small flock of sheep, or simply enjoying the long holidays and weekends.

Leadership development, recruitment and succession planning

Leadership development

In Section 2 we described Scotland's formal leadership development programmes (*Into Headship* and *In Headship*, together with programmes for middle leaders and serving heads), which are coordinated by Education Scotland in partnership with universities, LAs and the GTCS.

These programmes are markedly different to England's equivalent NPQs, with less emphasis on prescribed knowledge and 'what works' evidence, and more focus on "supporting people to know themselves … building self-awareness and encouraging that sense of reflection" (National Design Lead). Both Into and *In Headship* also include a focus on clarifying leaders' personal and professional values, encouraging them to consider how these might be applied in different school situations.

Among our interviewees who had completed *Into Headship*, the programme was widely valued (as was In Headship, although very few new heads choose to undertake this). Interviewees tended to highlight how *Into Headship* had given them time and space to reflect and to see the "big picture" of headship and leadership, arguing that this helped build their confidence and to be more adaptive in role. Some did also mention particular skills or knowledge they had gained, for example around finance and legal issues. That said, as in England, serving headteachers were clear that the programme could not really prepare them for the realities of the role (we return to this issue in Section 5, in the theme on preparing for headship).

Several interviewees explained that the Master's level aspect of *Into Headship* – and associated essay writing – was challenging to achieve while working full time ("I hated the academic writing. With a passion. It's not my thing"), although most felt that it had been beneficial in retrospect.

Some LA interviewees expressed a view that the mandatory requirement could also be a block on the leadership pipeline, adding "an extra layer of difficulty to recruitment" because some potential heads are put off by the demands of the programme. We heard some examples of this from potential heads as well, although *Into Headship* seemed to be one factor among many that made headship unappealing. For example, Bella, a primary school Depute in Rural-Coast, explained her decision not to apply as follows:

> *"I feel a bit bad for saying this, but what we get paid as a depute in a larger school is more than ... it would have actually been a pay cut ... And then a few things just hit me: all that commitment, that responsibility and doing the Into Headship course when I've got young children, starting the new role as well. And I just thought, 'No.'"*

The counter argument to seeing *Into Headship* as a block on the pipeline was that the programme acts as a helpful mechanism for signalling to and encouraging potential heads to see themselves as future leaders, while also ensuring that appointees have the skills and qualities required. One example was Violet, a primary head in Scotland City, who explained: "I didn't do it [Into Headship] with a view to being a head teacher... I thought, well, maybe I might want to do this in future years."

Recruitment and succession planning

All three of the LAs we visited were using *Into Headship* as a means to plan for and manage headteacher turnover. Jessica, a leader based in City LA, explained: "We've introduced a new acting pool of head teachers, which is about people who have got their Into Headship qualification." The fact that the LAs decide who to put forward for the programme (together with an endorsement from the candidate's current head and an interview) was an important enabler of such planning.

The LAs also went beyond this, albeit to differing extents, for example by providing additional development opportunities for leaders at different stages of their careers. City LA's approach to leadership development and succession planning was the most comprehensive; for example, including an initiative to increase diversity in headship by working with a group of global majority staff to support their progression. The other two LAs were less advanced, as Max, a leader in Rural LA acknowledged:

> *"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."*

To assess appetite for headship nationally, we asked survey respondents who were not yet in a headship role 'Would you like to be a headteacher/principal yourself one day?' Aspiration in Scotland (39% combined 'Yes, perhaps' or 'Yes, definitely') was higher than the other two nations. However, in both localities we heard that motivation for the top job among senior leaders had declined in recent years. The quote from Bella, above, was one of many that highlighted the reasons for this – additional responsibility and pressure, often with limited financial rewards. Eliza, a primary head in Scotland City put it as follows: "A depute is a nice place to be."

Turning to the headteacher recruitment process, this was led by LA officers in both localities, generally working with an appointment panel that might include parents, a local councillor, a peer headteacher, and a church representative for denominational schools. Leadership positions below headship level were generally advertised within the LA, while headship posts were advertised nationally. The appointment process for headteacher roles generally included assessment tasks and a panel interview, though with some differences between primary and secondary. One primary head in Rural-

Coast described this process as "the most nerve-wracking thing I've ever, ever done." However, some interviewees expressed cynicism around the transparency and effectiveness of these processes: for example, Lola, a primary head, explained "sometimes it can go down to whether parents like you or not. And that can be, that can be a challenge."

Finally, considering headteacher turnover, we saw similarities and differences across the two localities. In City most posts were being filled, even attracting a dozen applicants for one secondary headship. That said, retention was a concern, with one senior officer estimating around 50 primary appointments in six years. In this context, some schools had acting or executive heads while certain sectors – such as Catholic and Gaelic medium schools – were seen as harder to recruit to.

In Rural-Coast, recruitment was more precarious. While posts were generally filled, fields of applicants were described as shrinking, while teacher recruitment (particularly in some secondary subject areas) was verging on crisis. One high-performing secondary in the coastal town had 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 for these challenges related to the points made above: geographic isolation, relatively modest salaries for the level of responsibility, and the sheer breadth of demands on heads in small schools. A response to the challenge of recruiting headteachers for small rural primary schools had been to establish 'co-headships' with one personal responsible for more than one school, although "that's a really hard sell for communities" as Max, a local leader put it.

Leadership and place: City and Rural-Coast

The Scotland – City and Rural-Coast dashboards (pages 85 and 88) provide a snapshot of the two localities.

In Section 3 we outlined how we conceptualise place: as a material location; home to communities; connected at different scales (for example, national/regional/local/digital); framed by different policies; and shaped by external forces and by relations of power and inequality, while also shaping these in distinctive ways, making each locality unique – a constellation of stories.

In this section we develop the analysis, using the lens of place to compare and contrast the two localities and to identify implications for leadership. This shows that place is not merely a backdrop against which leadership happens. Rather, place actively constructs leadership – shaping who becomes a leader, what leadership means in practice, how policy is enacted, and ultimately, whether leadership can be sustained.

Place emerges as multidimensional in these cases, operating simultaneously as geography, economy, history, community, and organisational structures.

In City, place is dense social complexity compressed into urban space. Leaders described "wide economic contrasts," schools serving "52 languages" and communities where "generational changes in patterns of employment" have left deep marks. The physical proximity of schools allowed for what one leader calls "City-ness" – a shared professional culture reinforced by frequent interaction, strong LA coordination, and the reality that many teachers and headteachers "have always worked in City." This concentration created possibilities. Headteachers could attend meetings together, the LA organised working groups, and schools had developed shared approaches to challenges. Edward, a Secondary head, spoke of building "relational trust" in his school but he did so within a wider City ecosystem that understood what he meant by this language because the LA had "focused really hard on standards on the basics, but at the same time focused on nurture." Place here was both constraint and resource – the difficulty of the "hard shift" that is City leadership was made more bearable by collective understanding and shared infrastructure.

In Rural-Coast, by contrast, far from Scotland's Central Belt, place is dispersal and distance, coupled with community and stability. The locality stretches from a coastal town with several large schools, through to remote villages with eight-pupil schools where, as Max notes, the headteacher is "the janitor, the cleaner, they are everything." The nature of rurality impacted on leaders in multiple ways: for example, Ethan described how in his secondary school "about 85% of the pupils are transported in here … about 26 coaches arrive here every day, morning and night", with huge implications for the school's pastoral support and timetabling arrangements. Similarly, Ethan explained that the Rural LA had only two special schools, for children with complex needs, meaning that mainstream schools needed to accommodate a broad range of needs: "That all has to be taken care of within the school itself."

Here place separated schools, in the process serving to strengthen the connections between individual schools and their relatively homogeneous communities. Having two separate LAs managing different parts of the region means that, unlike City's coherent identity, as Orla observed, "there doesn't feel like a Rural-Coast-ness because it's like little pockets of different things." Geography matters materially – Reuben pointed to areas "past any railway connection" that are "a good hike back to [Coastal Town] as a centre," making teacher and leadership recruitment notably more difficult. Applying for a first headship in a small rural school might mean a pay cut for an established depute from a larger school, and the prospect of being far from family and professional support networks. Place here determined not just what leadership looks like but whether anyone will choose to do it at all.

The economic histories embedded in place shaped educational possibilities in distinct ways. City's narrative was one of industrial change and its aftermath, of communities where "generational changes in patterns of employment as industries and the wider economy have evolved", had left some neighbourhoods grappling with "endemic economic hardship." Leaders spoke consistently about poverty as the defining challenge, about pupils arriving "increasingly not toilet trained with extremely distressed and dysregulated behaviour," and about the Covid pandemic layering fresh trauma onto longstanding disadvantage.

> "In City, place is dense social complexity compressed into urban space ... In Rural-Coast, by contrast, place is dispersal and distance, coupled with community and stability."

In Rural-Coast, the economic story was more varied – Aurora described "historic communities through to [Town industry] influenced commuter, affluent locations," while Reuben warned that "rural poverty is a significant and often hidden factor because of isolation." The coastal town experienced what Ayla called a changing "dynamic" as the economy evolves, while remote rural areas faced depopulation, as Max explained: "we've already closed six schools in the past six years... People just don't want to live there." These different economic trajectories meant that while both localities grappled with disadvantage, its nature and distribution differed dramatically, demanding different leadership responses.

Place and professional identity

Perhaps nowhere was the power of place more evident than in how it shapes professional identity.

In City, there was a collective vocational identity among its many longstanding leaders. These leaders articulated their commitment in terms that merged personal values with place-based purpose. Violet spoke of making "an active choice to seek roles in schools in particular areas of the city," deliberately targeting schools in deprived communities. Bonnie, with "30 years' experience in City," expressed how "it's very, very hard to walk away from" because of "that commitment to the young people of City." This was not simply individual preference but a cultivated professional identity that the LA actively nurtured through its emphasis on "social justice" and "nurture." This shared language reflected collective knowledges, skills and professional capital: headteachers across City spoke fluently about relational approaches, nurture and moral purpose.

In Rural-Coast, identity formation worked differently, in part because the place itself is more dispersed and disparate. Some leaders, like Ayla, who worked in the coastal town, rooted their identity deeply in local connection: "I come from a background that [I was] first person at university... So that kind of seed... which has always been with me." For Ayla, being from the locality created both connection and mission: for example, she mentors less experienced heads locally. In the rural hinterlands, identities were shaped differently. Reuben described a "sense of deference" that rural communities commonly display towards headteachers, where "the school is the hub of often a rural community and a really respected institution." Here, place conferred a kind of visibility and expectation that could be hugely rewarding. For example, Ethan enjoyed the relationships he had with local parents, many of whom he taught when they were young – "I feel very, very privileged to have the position I do. And, you know, people do respect you in the community … Yeah, it's a great place to be." But this community gaze could also be uncomfortable and exclusive for those who had come in from outside. As a result, professional identities in Rural-Coast felt more individually constructed, more dependent on particular histories and community relationships, and less buttressed by collective professional culture than in City.

How place mediates national policy

Scotland operates with national frameworks – the *Into Headship* programme, national inspection, presumption of mainstreaming, Curriculum for Excellence and so on. On paper, these apply uniformly. In practice, place transforms how these policies are experienced and enacted.

The presumption of mainstreaming – a national policy requiring children with additional support needs to be educated in mainstream schools wherever possible – provides one example of how place mediates policy. In City, leaders consistently articulated this as a challenge they grapple with collectively. Violet talked about tapping into significant City LA run initiatives, such as Paths (Positive Alternative Thinking Strategies), including "a three-year coaching model where the staff were trained." The ability to organise such sustained, systematic responses reflected both the resources available in larger schools and the LA infrastructure supporting implementation.

In Rural-Coast, the same policy collided with different levels of capacity – and different patterns of need, requiring "flexibility within a framework" as Reuben, an LA leader explained. Lola, in her small school, described how "PSA [Personal Support Assistant] hours are being cut again" leaving her constantly "firefighting." Max explained the LA response: "we're expecting teachers to cope with a broader range of needs where there's no resource available," so they are "rolling out a framework across all our schools... trying to have more inclusive classrooms." This generic framework must somehow apply to everything from Rose's large primary school to Lola's tiny school where she was teaching while also managing as headteacher.

Curriculum policy demonstrated similar dynamics. In City, Bonnie noted that unlike neighbouring authorities with uniform curriculum structures, the LA encourages schools to design a curriculum appropriate to their context. This autonomy operates within a framework of LA expectations about standards and nurture. Schools have freedom, but it is freedom within an understood system. In Rural-Coast, curriculum flexibility was born of necessity. Ethan and Nancy described the difficulties they faced recruiting teachers in specific subjects, leading Max to explain that "secondary Headteachers are starting to remove some subjects from the curriculum for certain year groups because … they just can't get people applying for these posts." National curriculum expectations thus encounter place-specific recruitment crises that fundamentally constrain what schools can offer.

The organisational structure of place itself shapes policy enactment. City's LA maintains "area-based teams of Improvement Officers who work directly with schools," creating consistent oversight and support mechanisms. When James described the packages of support that City LA could deploy to schools in different curriculum areas, he was describing organisational capacity that concentrated urban geography makes possible. Meanwhile, Rural LA's support was more differentiated, with higher performing schools expected to be largely self-improving. Reuben explained that this was purely for "logistical" reasons – "never mind an educational or ethical" rationale.

The result is that Scotland's national framework, intended to create equity and consistency, actually encounters and is transformed by place. While City headteachers experienced national policy mediated through strong local infrastructure, Rural-Coast heads experienced the same policies as expectations they must somehow meet despite geographic isolation, resource limitations, and recruitment challenges that the policies themselves rarely acknowledge.

> "Both localities reported being able to fill most headteacher vacancies, yet the mechanisms and prospects for sustaining leadership differed fundamentally in ways that trace directly to place."

Place and the sustainability of leadership

Perhaps most significantly, place influences leadership sustainability. Both localities reported being able to fill most headteacher vacancies, yet the mechanisms and prospects for sustaining leadership differed fundamentally in ways that trace directly to place.

In City, the challenges of leadership were intense and consistently described. The phrase "hard shift" appeared repeatedly and there were concerns that headteacher retention rates were declining. Yet City maintained an infrastructure of support – LA officers, peer networks, shared professional development – which enabled leaders to identify and cultivate a pool of potential heads and to support those already in post. When Ada spoke of "the head teachers within the learning community... 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," she was describing a sustainability structure embedded in place. City's concentration meant that even if individual leaders struggled, there were others around who could usually step up, creating a kind of collective resilience.

In Rural-Coast, the sustainability challenge was more acute but also more invisible, because place offered fewer buffers. Geographic isolation made Rural-Coast leadership a harder sell. Max's account of "tapping teachers on the shoulder" who never wanted to be headteachers because of inability to recruit revealed a system stretched to breaking point in some locations. A leader in Rural LA explained that one response to these issues had been appoint executive heads: "we have a number of headteachers who run two schools." However, such models had met with resistance – "we have tentatively tried to explore with parents putting a headteacher in charge of three schools. That goes down like a, yeah, you know, a bucket of sick I'm afraid".

More fundamentally, the nature of the leadership work itself is shaped by place in ways that affect sustainability. In City, while the context was challenging and the demands were undoubtedly intense, schools were generally large enough to allow for distributed leadership structures. In Rural-Coast Max described how "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... challenging, they're just different." Many schools had executive heads, stretched across multiple locations. Place determines not just what leadership involves but whether it is possible to sustain.

Isolation compounds this. Where City headteachers could regularly access their peers, in Rural-Coast the LAs had to work hard to facilitate networks: "we've set up in trios, so they support each other quite a bit" (Max). Aurora in Coast LA was also building up networks, but she acknowledged the limitations: "Not every headteacher has somebody that they can offload, share, cry, whatever. Because they take it home with them." It seems that leaders in Rural-Coast must be highly self-reliant. Headteachers there spoke more than City leaders about individual strategies for wellbeing – Bella's Pilates and netball, Ethan's sheep breeding, Nancy protecting family time – suggesting that in the absence of strong systemic buffers, sustainability was more an individual project. Nevertheless, Reuben reflected how sustainability remains a concern: "I don't think it's a job you do for 30 years, OK?"

5. Six key themes across the UK

This section sets out and illustrates six key themes from the research. It draws on data from all the research strands and from across the UK, although we highlight how some of the findings played out differently in each nation.

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

"In my time as head, the things on our agenda have definitely widened … we're dealing with a lot of things day-to-day that are way outside what I'd call education."

—Hugo, Headteacher, South Primary, England – Shire

A substantially different role

Hugo, quoted above, had been the headteacher of a small village primary school in England Shire for 17 years at the time we visited him. Before that he had been the head of another local primary for four years, so he had an unusually long view of how the role had changed over two decades. The point he makes is not only that things have changed in that time but that the issues he is now dealing with have "widened", to encompass things that are "way outside what I'd call education". This is a point that we pick up and extend in the following theme.

We heard similar views from leaders in all three nations. Some of the changes that interviewees described related to generational changes in social mores: for example, several talked about how the level of deference paid by parents to teachers had reduced over time. Others talked about how the internet and social media have changed children's experience of the world, impacting on everything from attitudes towards school and learning, to how young people socialise. Another set of changes related to the economy – whether national or local – and how this had impacted on young people's aspirations: for example, Ethan, a secondary head in Scotland – Rural-Coast, explained "I have seen a shift over the last few years and the number of pupils who their aspiration is to go to university has dropped".

More experienced leaders reflected on how these kinds of societal change had shifted the professional identities and practices of school leaders. For example, Darcie, an experienced primary head in Northern Ireland, described a headteacher she had worked for earlier in her career, who had "ruled with a little bit of an iron rod", which "just wouldn't be tolerated nowadays, the way that she led her school."

Covid as a key juncture

The Covid-19 pandemic was seen as a key juncture, marking a fundamental point of change in multiple areas, from pupil and family needs, to staff resilience and expectations, to levels of institutional support. In the survey, we asked whether respondents whether they agreed with the statement 'School leadership has become more difficult since Covid': across all three nations, 88% agreed, with 66% strongly agreeing, while just 4% disagreed.

The view that Covid marked a key juncture was similarly apparent in the qualitative interviews. In primary schools this was often related to the fact that younger children had missed out on key developmental opportunities during the lockdowns. However, the impact was pervasive across all types of school, reflected in increased challenges across a range of areas – behaviour, complaints, additional needs, staffing and so on – as the following quotes, drawn from all three nations, indicate:

> *"I would say post-Covid we've really seen a difference and there's been a complete shift in focus as we came away from standards, to more of the well-being and building those relationships back again and making sure our children were safe and healthy and happy." —Ella, Primary Head, Northern Ireland – Coast*

> *"It's the all-consuming nature of the role that we hear [about], particularly since Covid, where everything closed down, but schools kept going and became the point of contact, social workers, everything." —Eva, Local Leader, Scotland- City*

> *"And so just look at today as an example. I think we had three hours of parent meetings with our Headteacher today. Now, three years ago, he wouldn't have seen a parent in two weeks, they would all have been filtered out at the level of middle leadership and we would have been able to deal with it and stop those things from rising up." —Sebastian, Secondary Deputy Head, England – Coast*

While the pandemic was widely seen to be the key juncture, many leaders recognised that the issues they were facing actually stemmed from a wider set of shifts, most of which had been apparent before the lockdowns. As one Special School head who responded to the survey put it: "The difficulties of finance, recruitment, wellbeing etc are not JUST down to Covid."

These issues have compounded to mean that school leadership in the UK today is substantially different to, say, a decade ago. While incremental change would always be expected, this change has been sharp and substantial, with the pandemic marking a particular hinge point in the minds of leaders.

Box 2: What drains and sustains leaders?: Survey findings

In our UK wide survey of leaders, we asked 'what drains (or sustains) you in leadership?' Leaders selected up to five issues from a list, shown in the tables below.

Drains: 'Poor worklife balance', 'Staffing issues', 'Financial and resource constraints', 'The weight of leadership' and 'SEND and inclusion challenges' were the top four issues across the UK overall. This highlights the personal impact of the headteacher role and how funding and inclusion issues have increased these pressures. Drains related to specific issues and operational challenges varied slightly between nations. For example, in Northern Ireland a higher proportion of leaders included 'Operational and administrative burdens' in their top five. In Scotland 'Behaviour challenges' were more common, while in England 'External pressures and accountability' stood out.

UK Survey: 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 (for example, 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 (for example, lack of autonomy, misalignment of values)	6.0%	5.0%	4.2%	5.5%

Sustainable School Leadership survey 2024-25, n=1623

Sustains: The selection of sustaining themes was far more consistent across the UK. Three-quarters of all respondents included 'Students' learning growth and success'. 'Relationships and collaboration within school' came second by some margin, highlighting the relational nature of leadership and the importance of strong teams. 'Making a difference', 'Work fulfilment and enjoyment' and 'Core values and moral purpose' were also common responses.

There was less variation across UK in sustains than drains: one exception was 'Community engagement and relationships' which was included more frequently in Northern Ireland.

A complex interplay: There is a complex interplay between these draining and sustaining aspects of leadership. For example, the qualitative interviews highlighted how addressing a 'drain' could be a prime source of satisfaction – i.e. a sustain. As we outline in this report, the burden of drains could also become unsustainable.

UK Survey: 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 (for example, 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 (for example, 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 (for example, exercise, family, hobbies)	3.0%	0.0%	1.8%	2.2%

Sustainable School Leadership survey 2024-25, n=1623

2. Schools and leaders are often working beyond their 'education' remit

"I see myself as an educationalist. How much of my time is dedicated to education – percentage wise, 5%?"
—Leo, Primary head, Northern Ireland – Coast

An ethic of education and care

Hugo's quote in the previous section highlighted how "the things on our agenda have definitely widened." The portrait of leadership in England through the lens of leadership and an ethic of education and care (pages 58-62)) serves to illustrate Hugo's point: the schools there were commonly engaged in activities, such as providing "credits for gas and electric" or trying to access specialist mental health support, that would not easily fit with what most people would think of as 'education'. We could easily have written equivalent portraits for Northern Ireland or Scotland, as the following quotes indicate:

Northern Ireland

"The last five, 4–5 years, I mean the pastoral needs in the school have just exploded, they really have, in comparison. It is not the same job as what we went into, you know, in terms of teaching, but especially sure it hasn't this last few years. Children are not as resilient and staff aren't, to be honest, haven't been as resilient after coming back after lockdown." —Joseph, Secondary Deputy Head, Coast

"It's the needs of the ever-changing society and children. And you're not, you're not just a teacher anymore. You're a social worker, you're a family worker ... people feel that they can come in and say, 'I'm low on heating oil' or 'I need uniforms' or 'I could do with a food hamper'. You know, you're trying to help them navigate and do everything." —Ellie, Primary head, Town-Rural

Scotland

"The number of children presenting with additional support needs is just blowing up. So yeah, we're finding the children are even more complex than they might ever have been ... The complexity is getting more complex." —Hallie, Special School Head, City

"The level of care needed for families and children from schools is significant including food parcels, uniform and general support. Resources have reduced ... schools are doing way more with way less." —Secondary Head, Scotland (survey)

Of course, many of the issues referenced here and in the England portrait can be categorised as 'educational'. Schools have a 'duty of care' and many aspects of this work, such as inclusion and safeguarding, are legally mandated and regulated. The challenge is partly that the scale and complexity of these issues has grown, taking up ever more time and energy, but also that wider services have been stripped back, meaning that schools are having to step into areas beyond their educational remit, such as health, welfare and community cohesion. As we heard several times: "everything rolls downhill to schools".

The result was that many leaders could not easily draw a neat line around their school's educational role. In part this was for pragmatic reasons: if a child is hungry, is not attending school, or is dysregulated, then they cannot learn, so schools were working to address these needs as a starting point. But the leadership of care was frequently about more than meeting statutory requirements or pragmatics; rather, it was a deeply human response to need.

Interestingly, while these issues were generally more acute in schools serving highly disadvantaged communities, we found that they impacted on leaders in all types of schools (i.e. more and less advantaged, urban and rural and so on). However, they often manifested in different ways. For example, in the portrait on England we described how parents in Luna's affluent village primary school in Coast would send in "vitriolic" complaints if their child's additional needs were seen as not being met, whereas Chloe's relationship with parents on her school's deprived estate was noticeably different.

Drawing this together, we suggest that the education and care role of schools can be categorised in three overlapping areas:

- **within school** – creating inclusive, relational cultures characterised by responsive pedagogies and curricula as well as pastoral systems which ensure that every child is known, is ready to learn, and can flourish

- **beyond school** – working with families, carers and communities to address students' wider needs; including, where appropriate, in areas such as health, welfare and/or community development

- **across school** – supporting staff self-care and wellbeing through the development of high trust, collaborative and enabling cultures and by maintaining institutional spaces for the negotiation of issues of purpose, power, and particularity.

These findings led us to include 'an ethic of education and care' in the project conceptual framework, as outlined in Section 2. By including education and care together we signal that the core purpose of schooling will always be educational, but that in a polycrisis world children's care needs require attention to both education and care together. The England portrait illustrates how schools are working to encompass this, using Tronto's five-part framework: caring about; taking care of; care-giving; care-receiving; and caring with.

Reduced time for instructional leadership

Leo's quote, above, highlights one key implication of these findings: how the need to provide care impacts on the time and energy that leaders can devote to instructional leadership. This appears significant given the global consensus on school leadership outlined in Section 1, which positions instructional leadership as key to success.

In the survey we asked how much time leaders spent in a typical week on a list of activities.[53] Figure 5.1, (on page 103), shows the responses from headteachers in each nation respectively. The three charts indicate clear similarities as well as some differences in time use among the three nations. For example, in all three nations, 'General administration' followed by 'Student attendance, behaviour and wellbeing' are the top two most time-consuming categories. 'Your own professional development' comes bottom in all three nations. In between, we see some differences in the time spent on other activities.

Across the eight options offered in the survey, care leadership relates most obviously to 'Student attendance, behaviour and wellbeing', but might also be seen to encompass aspects of 'Staffing', 'Communicating with parents and community' and 'Meeting with external agencies/partners'. In practice, we heard how it can overlap with other areas: for example, the paperwork associated with a safeguarding incident or special needs tribunal could be extensive, meaning that care-related work might be classed as 'General administration'.

What is notable is that leaders in all three systems are spending relatively less time on 'Leading teaching, learning and curriculum' (between 4th and 6th most time consuming) – i.e. the core of instructional leadership – than on the various aspects of care. This appears to be a recent development: for example, Peter Earley's 2002 review of school leadership in England reported that "the majority of heads were still very much involved in the teaching and learning which goes on in their schools."[54] Various later studies of headteacher time-use, both in England[55] and elsewhere,[56] did sometimes identify pupil wellbeing as an aspect of the role, but focused mostly on the impact of accountability and increasing administrative and managerial demands as the main drivers of work intensification.[57]

In England, efforts by the MATs to "free up" heads to focus on teaching and learning by taking on operational roles had not yet proved effective, as we showed in Section 4. One MAT leader acknowledged that while their trust's central support and expertise was widely valued by its heads, it had not necessarily made finding time for instructional leadership any easier:

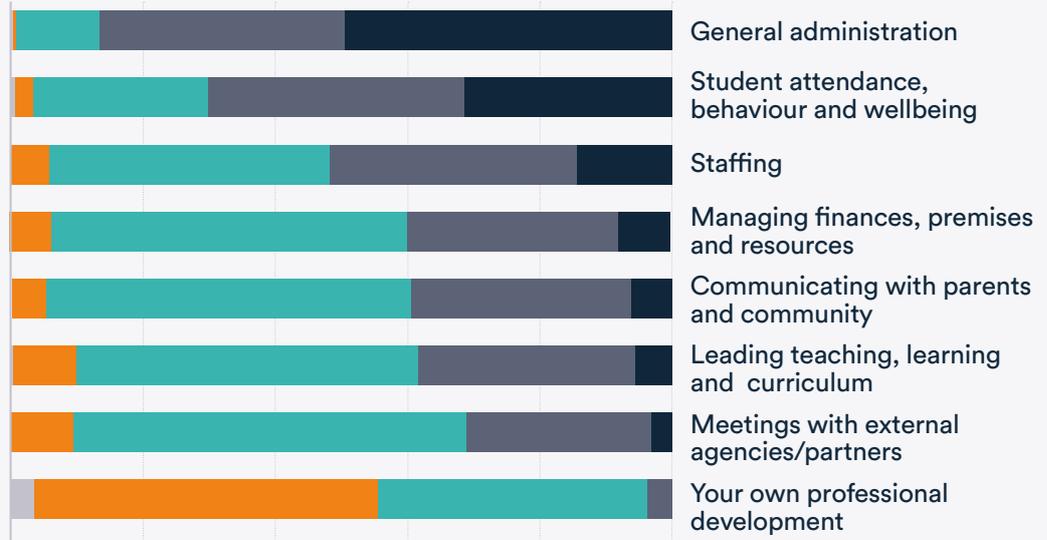*"I think it's really hard for senior leadership teams to focus on teaching and learning … And it seems absurd, particularly for heads who work within the trust model. You take away some of those other things, the clutter of your HR, and your finance, and your IT, and your estates, to allow people to focus on the thing that they're an expert in, which is teaching and learning. And yet, then, they're still sitting there … spending the whole of their weekly meeting talking about vaccinations." —Emilia, Vicarage MAT, England – Coast*

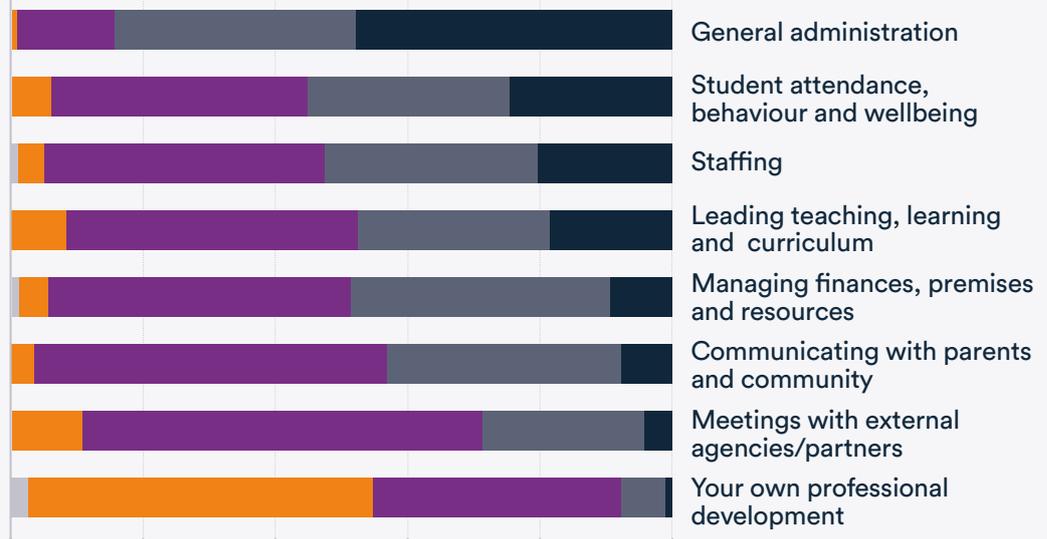Figure 5.1: Headteacher time use in a typical week in each nation

England
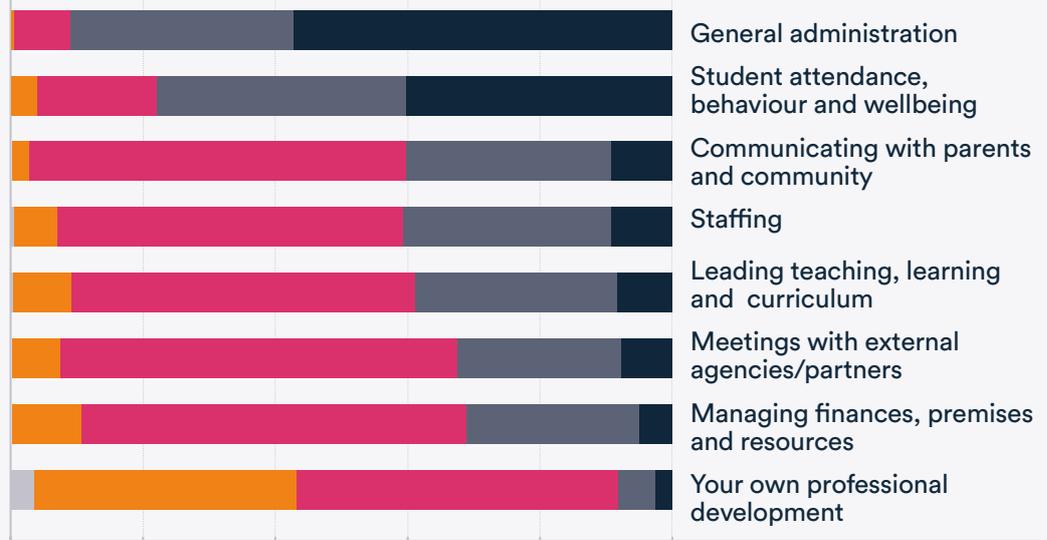
None
Less than 1 hour
1-4 hours
5-10 hours
Over 10 hours

General administration
Student attendance, behaviour and wellbeing
Staffing
Managing finances, premises and resources
Communicating with parents and community
Leading teaching, learning and curriculum
Meetings with external agencies/partners
Your own professional development

Northern Ireland

None
Less than 1 hour
1-4 hours
5-10 hours
Over 10 hours

General administration
Student attendance, behaviour and wellbeing
Staffing
Leading teaching, learning and curriculum
Managing finances, premises and resources
Communicating with parents and community
Meetings with external agencies/partners
Your own professional development

Scotland

None
Less than 1 hour
1-4 hours
5-10 hours
Over 10 hours

General administration
Student attendance, behaviour and wellbeing
Communicating with parents and community
Staffing
Leading teaching, learning and curriculum
Meetings with external agencies/partners
Managing finances, premises and resources
Your own professional development

Share of time (%)

Balancing care and instructional roles: individual and place-based differences

How leaders balanced their care and instructional roles in practice differed as a result of both individual preferences and place-based factors.

A subset of leaders in all three nations were choosing to prioritise the instructional and school improvement aspects of their role, and to actively resist what one secondary head in Scotland described as "doing … the job of social work, the job of health." We gave examples of such leaders in Section 4 in the sections on school improvement (for example, Oliver – England, Ayla – Scotland, and Oscar – Northern Ireland). These leaders were not uncaring but appeared more able to circumscribe their educational focus and role. Far more common were leaders who were attempting to encompass education and care together. These efforts were rarely straightforward or seamless; indeed, as we outline below, it was often the emotional and practical demands of care leadership that made leadership feel unsustainable. Many interviewees, like Leo, expressed frustration that they had trained as teachers and were passionately committed to education, but felt unable to prioritise instructional issues.

Some interviewees appeared more able than others to rationalise why and how care had become more central to their work in recent years, which seemed to help them see the two roles as complementary rather than in tension. Many of these leaders could articulate how they had worked to establish trauma informed, nurture and/or relational practice approaches that equipped their staff to provide education and care together. Others explained how they were working to develop a curriculum and pedagogical approaches which responded the particular needs of the children in their locality. One example was Robyn, the primary head in England Coast that we described as feeling "almost ostracised" by her remote, isolated village community, but who had spent nine years there building relationships. She was excited about the school's work to develop a more responsive curriculum:

> "Our curriculum is based on the needs of the community, the needs of the pupils and the opportunities is very much place based. So, it's not necessarily putting add-ons into a curriculum - it's looking at particular individuals, looking at cohorts … How through this are we going to help promote them to become, you know, more rounded human beings with a, a wider view of the world and actually a competence and confidence in themselves because they understand where they're coming from, what their place is."

Adapting the curriculum in this way required "knowing the children inside out and knowing the families as well." She gave examples such as work with specific year-groups to address issues of racism or misogyny, or to consider bereavements, divorce, or domestic abuse.

In addition to differences between individual leaders, there were differences in how an ethic of education and care was enacted across different places, as we showed in the England portrait. Similarly, in Scotland we observed how in Rural-Coast both schools and the level of resource available to support them were spread thinly, whereas in Scotland City we described how the LA's long-term commitment to a nurture approach had translated into a shared commitment and set of strategies across all schools. This commitment was backed by significant support for schools in the most deprived areas, such as Esme's secondary school which operated as "almost a community hub", providing access to a range of support services and organisations, including Family Liaison Workers, Youth Workers and Financial Inclusion Support Officers. In this context, expectations of educational outcomes appeared almost secondary:

> *"You're wanting to get young people in and provide some level of education for them. But sometimes it's about, you know, having an experience and having a safe place to come to … (with) free school meals … (and other) support."*

Finally, while all three nations had policies aimed at recognising and addressing the needs of disadvantaged children and, to differing extents, for providing education and care together, these initiatives were often problematic in practice. One example of this was in England: when we ran the locality workshops with our research participants in spring 2025, we heard that the government had recently launched a scheme to enlist schools in teaching children to brush their teeth.[58] Leaders at the workshops expressed frustration that this was yet another burden on schools, few of which now had access to a school nurse.

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

At headline level, we found that the appetite for headship was widely seen to have diminished in all three nations, with many potential heads put off by the demands of the role. Nevertheless, most schools in all three nations had been able to recruit headteachers in recent years, although with some places and types of school facing greater levels of challenge. For these reasons, we argue the UK does not face a pipeline crisis – with 'yet' as a crucial caveat, signalling that we see warning lights flashing everywhere. This is because the headteacher role is widely seen as unsustainable, with around one in five heads in the survey saying they are sinking. If this sustainability crisis is not addressed, it seems highly likely that a pipeline crisis will follow.

Box 3: Which leaders leave and which stay? Survey and workforce analysis

Rates of leaving headship are high, but they are not uniform. Individual circumstances matter; however, there are clear patterns that help explain who is most at risk of leaving. In this box we explore findings from the England School Workforce Dataset to illustrate variation in which leaders leave and which stay.

From leaving headship to leaving the workforce

Leaving headship does **not** always mean leaving the workforce, especially for younger leaders. However, this changes in the early 50s, when exits from headship increasingly become **complete workforce exits.**

Tracking heads from 2022 to 2023 shows:

- ■ **86.3% remained in headship**
- ■ **10.9% exited the workforce entirely**
- ■ Only small proportions moved into deputy (1.3%), teaching (1.0%), or other leadership roles (0.5%).

Large variation in headship retention

Looking at the data from England for all headteachers in post in 2020 and tracking whether they remained in any headship role by 2023 shows wide differences:

- ■ **By phase:** approximately **30%** of primary heads leave within three years, compared with **35% in secondary.**

- ■ **By local authority:** retention ranges from around **46% to 17%**, reflecting both small-number volatility in smaller LAs and real place-based variation.

- ■ **By working pattern:** around **30% of full-time heads** leave headship within three years, compared with **52% of part-time heads**. This likely reflects transitions out of headship via part-time work rather than part-time status being a direct cause.

Age matters – but not in a simple way

Leaving headship follows a **U-shaped pattern** across the career (See Figures 4.2 and 4.6):

- Rates are relatively high among **younger heads** (under 35).
- Lowest among those in their **early to mid-40s.**
- Then increase steeply from the early 50s onwards.

- **Under 35: ~27%** leave headship within three years
- **35–39:** ~23%
- **40–44:** ~20%
- **50–54:** ~30%
- **55–59:** ~58%
- **60+:** over 70%

Important intersections: gender, phase, ethnicity

Headline comparisons can obscure important differences:

- **Age and gender:** Among younger leaders (16–34), around 29% of women leave headship compared with 24% of men.
- **Ethnicity and age:** Overall differences by ethnicity are modest, but among heads under 35, ethnic minority heads show higher leaving rates (33% vs 25%). In contrast, among 50–54-year-olds, ethnic minority heads are less likely to leave than White British heads (20% vs 31%).
- Gender and phase: Women are more likely than men to leave headship within both primary and secondary phases, even though overall male and female leaving rates appear similar. This is masked by the higher proportion of women in primary schools, where overall attrition is lower.

3–Year Headship Leaving Rates	%
Female Primary	30.5
Male Primary	27.5
Female Secondary	36.7
Male Secondary	34.1

Wellbeing and thriving: the strongest signal

While many reasons for leaving are personal and contextual, wellbeing provides a powerful summary indicator.

In our survey, leaders who describe themselves as **"mostly sinking"** are **around 17 times more likely** to report plans to leave the profession (for reasons other than retirement) than those who are **"mostly thriving"** (17.3% vs 0.9%). This gradient appears consistently across other career intention measures.

In short: if we want to understand who is likely to leave, wellbeing and a sense of thriving are among the clearest early warning signs.

A leaky pipeline

In this section we adopt the image of a leadership 'pipeline' as a simple way to discuss our findings on leadership recruitment and succession. As Dean Fink[59] has observed, this metaphor suggests a somewhat narrow approach to matching supply and demand for the posts that need filling; whereas, what is needed, is a deliberate, systematic process for identifying, developing and preparing future leaders and for supporting and retaining those already in post. Such an approach would also consider strategic issues, such as the quality and diversity of leaders. Across the study as a whole we encompass this more holistic interpretation, but we focus on the more immediate 'pipeline' issues here.

Our previous Leading in Lockdown research in England revealed a clear risk in this respect, as we outlined in Section 1. However, the numbers of headteachers threatening to leave reduced somewhat once the most intense period of lockdowns had passed. In the first survey, conducted early in 2021, 40% of heads said they were planning to leave the profession (for reasons other than full retirement) within five years, but by the time of the second survey, in early 2022, this had reduced to 30%.[60] In the Sustainable School Leadership survey, conducted in late 2024 and early 2025, we asked the question slightly differently, focusing only on their plans in the next two years: this indicated that around 15% of heads in each nation are planning to leave the profession early, while another 4-7% expect to reach full retirement age in that timeframe.

In Section 4 we set out data on the school workforce in each nation, partly to assess what these demographic and recruitment trends tell us about the pipeline. The trends differ somewhat in each nation: for example, while the average age of heads in England and Scotland has reduced over the past 15 years (-1.5 years in England, -2.4 years in Scotland), in Northern Ireland it has increased (+1 year). Each of these trends might have different implications for succession planning: appointing heads at a younger age might create an unrealistic expectation that they can stay in role for a longer period, while an ageing workforce creates the risk that large numbers might retire around the same time without a supply of younger leaders who are ready to step up.

Across the UK, we see that attrition rates rise sharply once heads are in their 50s, indicating that most leaders take early retirement and relatively few continue working into their 60s. In both England and Scotland, the rates at which the leadership populations need to be replenished are broadly similar at around 13–15% per year.

"Across the UK, we see that attrition rates rise sharply once heads are in their 50s, indicating that most leaders take early retirement and relatively few continue working into their 60s."

The qualitative research revealed some UK-wide themes as well as sometimes more specific issues in each nation, as we outlined in the sections on recruitment and succession planning. Across all three nations, there was a general view that the appetite for headship among senior leaders has diminished in recent years. These observations were often backed by specific examples, such as Teddy, in England, who remembered a time "when you might have 30, 40 applicants for a job … Now sometimes you're lucky if you get an applicant". Some schools were seen to be harder to recruit for such as: small and rural schools; faith schools that had a requirement for the head to be practising; and (in England) higher performing schools.

The survey revealed a slightly less gloomy picture. We asked respondents who were not yet in a headship role 'Would you like to be a headteacher/principal yourself one day?' The proportions replying 'Yes, definitely' in each nation ranged between 8–13%, while the numbers saying 'Yes, perhaps', ranged from 16–26%. There were differences between the three nations: potential heads appeared most positive in Scotland, and least positive in Northern Ireland. However, when we split out responses only from those in the most senior roles across the UK (i.e. Deputes/Deputy Heads/Vice-Principals), who might be seen as most likely to apply for headships, the figure saying 'Yes, definitely' rose to 15% and 'Yes, perhaps' to 37%.

> "Across all three nations, there was a general view that the appetite for headship among senior leaders has diminished in recent years."

We also identified various structural and cultural issues in each nation which could make headteacher recruitment more or less challenging (NB: we address leadership development below, in the theme on preparing for headship). These appeared most significant in Northern Ireland, where the siloed nature of careers in the different sectors, the lack of a clear professional development pathway, a preference for within-school recruitment at middle leadership levels, and sometimes outdated appointment processes for headship, could all serve to stymie progression. In England, we observed the trend for MATs to recruit heads internally, creating potential new risks if the trusts become further balkanised. In Scotland, the LAs control recruitment, using the mandatory *Into Headship* requirement as a way to match supply and demand, but with some evidence that completing the qualification is a further disincentive for leaders who are already on the fence.

Taking this evidence together, it seems that most schools are generally able to recruit headteachers – we are not at crisis level … yet. Nevertheless, there are clear issues to consider and address, not least in terms of the quality of leadership: as Dean Fink notes, it is not enough to find a "warm body" for every school, relying on begging teachers to step up once a headship has been readvertised multiple times is hardly a sustainable strategy.
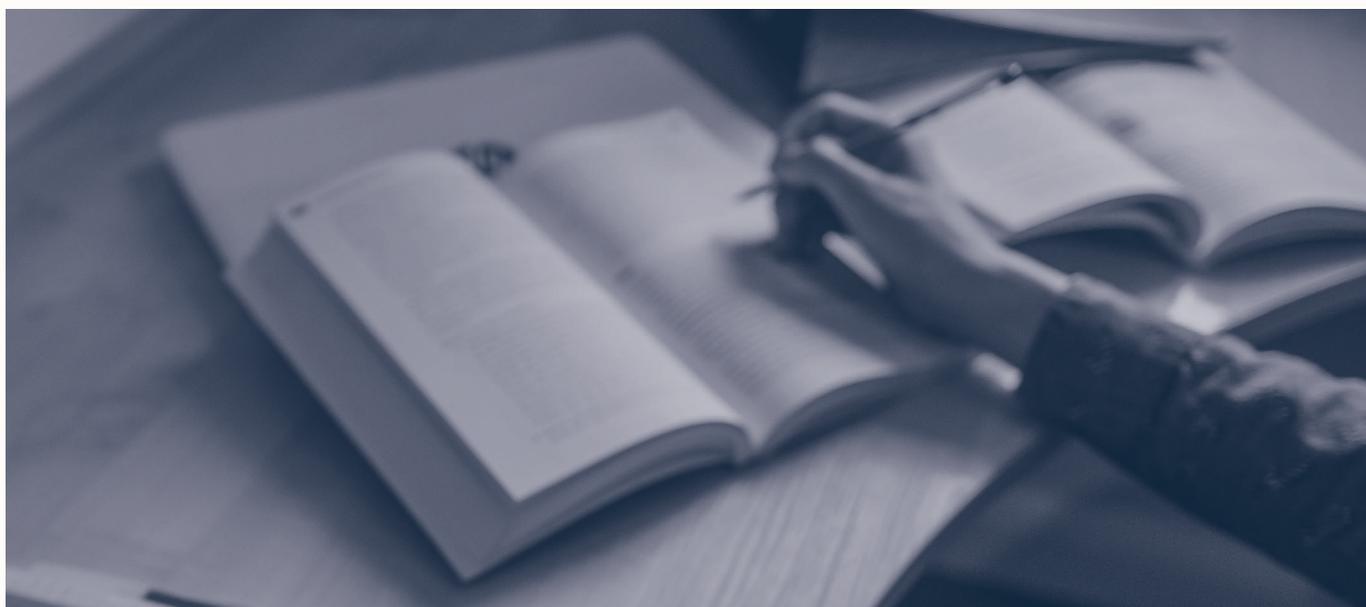
Box 4: Why are some leaders sinking? Survey findings

Leaders who describe themselves as sinking are rarely responding to a single problem. Instead, they tend to face a combination of workload pressures, emotional strain, and weakening sources of professional support and satisfaction, which together undermine their capacity to cope and recover.

Issues and circumstances associated with 'sinking'

■ **Unsustainable workload and loss of control over time**

Leaders who feel unable to control their workload, work very long hours, and rarely feel able to switch off are much more likely to describe themselves as sinking. But concerns about high workload are as much a symptom as a cause of sinking given that thriving leaders also report working long hours.

In a primary school with over stretched budgets... I fill the gaps for teaching intervention, 1:1 SEND or dealing with disruptive behaviour... I often don't start any strategic work until 4pm. My day starts at 5am and I am often working until 9pm or later, then again on a Sunday. I often feel burnt out and know this is not sustainable. (Primary Head, England, Survey – 'Mostly sinking')

■ **Burnout and emotional strain**

Feeling burnt out 'often' or 'all of the time' is one of the clearest markers of sinking. This reflects the cumulative emotional toll of leadership and care and of relentless high workloads.

"At times, it feels like we are expected to support everyone else, but it feels like there is no support for us. We are expected to deal with the endless negative comments from parents, including those made on social media, increasingly poor behaviour of some children, dealing with increasingly complex SEN needs all whilst developing teaching and learning, and trying to secure the best possible outcomes." (Primary Head, England, Survey – 'Mostly sinking')

■ **Poor leadership culture and weakening relational support**

Sinking leaders are less likely to report cultures of trust, collaboration, empowerment, and shared leadership within their schools. They are also less likely to experience clear, consistently upheld values or a strong sense of collective improvement. Feeling more isolated and worsening wellbeing go hand in hand.

"We need more training, more support and more integration with other schools and staffs. It can be a very lonely, hard, non-rewarding job. We should not be working in isolation." (Nursery head, Northern Ireland, Survey – 'Mostly sinking')

■ **Loss of work fulfilment and intrinsic reward**

Leaders who are sinking are much less likely to find their work enjoyable or fulfilling. This suggests that sinking is associated not only with pressure, but with erosion of the intrinsic rewards of leadership, such as variety, agency, and participation in school life.

"The constant moving of goal posts, scrutiny and increased workload is destroying my physical and mental health. It isn't even as though the financial reward makes it feel slightly worth it... I had such a love for the profession when I first began my journey, now I dream of the day that I will find a solution or a way out of teaching." (Middle leader, England, Survey – 'Mostly sinking')

■ **Mismatch between purpose and lived practice**

Many sinking leaders retain a strong sense of moral purpose and commitment to pupils, but feel increasingly distanced from the aspects of leadership they value most. This values-experience gap appears to be a key source of frustration and demoralisation.

"One of the hardest parts of my job is telling staff, students or parents that we can't support them any more than we already are with SEND issues as there's no capacity. It makes me feel useless." (Senior leader, England, Survey – 'Mostly sinking')

As we have sought to illustrate throughout this report, not all school leaders are in crisis. However, our findings are unambiguous: for significant numbers of leaders, the balance is not right. In the three national dashboards (pages 24, 28 and 32) we show responses to the survey question 'Overall, which of the following best describes your own experience of working in school over the last 12 months?' The proportions of heads who say that 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%). Furthermore, around a third of leaders in each system describe themselves as 'mostly surviving' (England – 34%; Scotland – 36%; Northern Ireland – 38%).

The survey findings were corroborated by the qualitative interviews in all three nations. We summarised the key 'drains' on leaders in each of the national overviews (see also national dashboards and Box 2). Common themes across the UK included: 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 add up to 'the weight of leadership' becoming unsustainable. As we described in the last section, the rise in care needs – which often took an intense emotional toll on leaders – was particularly draining.

Many interviewees described the personal cost of these issues, in terms of their health, personal lives and/or wellbeing, as the following quotes, one from each nation, indicate:

> *"I don't necessarily think I want to be a head teacher in another school. I sometimes wonder if I can continue being a head teacher here forever … I think it might finish me off sometimes. And it's felt like that very much recently … It's the first time it's ever really, I think the jobs ever really affected my mental health. I would have always described myself as super resilient." —Chloe, Primary Head, England – Coast*

> *"I'm still a long way from retirement. I'm not even thinking about retirement, but um I'm pretty done as well, do you know what I mean?… Sleep is not good. Health is not great." —Archie, Secondary Head, Northern Ireland – Coast*

> *"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 … It never stops. It's relentless." —Ethan, Secondary Head, Scotland Rural-Coast*

Chloe, Archie and Ethan were all successful leaders leading successful schools. They were proud of their schools and had many positive things to say about the experience of leading them, but they were also close to burn out. It was common for interviewees to say that they couldn't keep going for much longer, or until retirement age – the pace was simply too great, their identities as heads had become stretched too thin. Indeed, such comments appear in almost every interview. Some dreamed of reinventing themselves – for example, one head planned to become a butcher, like his father and grandfather before him – while others wanted to travel and enjoy retirement. For many interviewees, such plans still felt depressingly far off, with a mortgage still to pay, or children to fund through university. Some were planning to keep working, but in different, hopefully more manageable ways: for example, by reducing to part-time, taking a role in the LA or MAT, or by moving into consultancy or an inspection role post-retirement. There was some evidence that system leadership type roles after headship (for example, in trusts, or as Ofsted inspectors) were seen as more common in England, whereas heads in Scotland and Northern Ireland felt more trapped.

One group that we, as researchers, worried most about in terms of sustainability was younger, less experienced heads. Figures 4.2 and 4.6 show that younger heads (for example, below ages 35 or 40) in England and Scotland are noticeably less likely to survive three years in post compared to their peers who are in their 40s (NB: equivalent data is not available in Northern Ireland). Our interviews with younger heads in all three nations revealed the significant pressures they faced as they sought to establish themselves in role and to respond to the issues they faced. On any given day this might range from cows in the playground, to dealing with budgets, estates and IT systems, to managing staff members who might be considerably older and more experienced. Often these heads were working in small primary schools, reflecting how salary and career structures operate (i.e. small schools pay lower salaries, so tend to attract less experienced leaders who might then progress to a larger school later in their career). The implication was that these inexperienced heads had fewer colleagues within school to rely on, were more likely to be teaching part-time, and were more likely to be in a rural area with less active support from an external improvement advisor than their peers in larger, urban schools.

All these issues lead us to argue that school leadership – and particularly headship – is not currently sustainable across the UK. As we have noted throughout this report, there are important differences within and between the three nations, both in terms of how school leaders experience the pressure and weight of leadership and in how the different governance and support structures operate. Our recommendations, in Section 6, indicate some of the specific priorities for each nation to address these issues.

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

The lack of ethnic diversity in the leadership workforce in all three nations was widely acknowledged as problematic. The causes of this were deep set and complex, but common issues identified included a lack of diversity in the teaching workforce and a view that some appointment panels remain biased. There was little appetite for action to address this issue from either national policymakers or local employers.

A lack of diversity in the workforce

In Section 4, in each of the national overviews, we included workforce data on diversity. In all three systems, women are under-represented in headship compared to the teaching workforce, although with differences between countries, phases and sectors. Far more stark is the under-representation of global majority leaders: in England, around 7% of headteachers are not White, in Scotland it is around 3–4%, while in Northern Ireland the limited evidence available suggests that the number of Black and Minority Ethic (BAME) leaders is negligible.

We asked about diversity in our interviews without defining precisely what this might refer to. The national experts were consistent in highlighting a lack of diversity as an issue, but with some differences in how the issue was interpreted. For example, in Northern Ireland, where 96.6% of the population as a whole identifies as White, one expert suggested that the issue was commonly understood in terms of identity and gender, rather than ethnicity. This expectation was borne out in the locality interviews there, where interviewees tended to refer to whether or not staff with different religious backgrounds work across different categories of school and/or how the gender mix has become more balanced in recent years. As one secondary principal put it: "Northern Ireland in terms of ethnically diverse, where we live is virtually non-existent."

In contrast, in both England and Scotland, the clear lack of BAME teachers and leaders tended to be raised as the most significant workforce diversity issue. In Scotland, a national policymaker explained that there was a programme of work ongoing, involving multiple partners to address this, although "we're at very beginning stages, despite the fact it's been ongoing now for quite a few years." In England, one expert, a DfE official, acknowledged that this remained a "pretty stark" issue, describing it as "an incredibly challenging problem to solve". The DfE's focus was on encouraging providers to ensure the "take up of NPQs is… proportionate… (so) that the pipeline is more representative", but the other experts highlighted wider systemic issues, including sometimes discriminatory behaviours and attitudes among recruitment panels. One expert characterised what they had heard from global majority staff in schools as follows:

> *"I'm quoting here. 'I am credentialed to the hilt. You know, I've done every piece of training, I've got every qualification. I've got myself a mentor. I've done this and that. What I need is to be offered the jobs and when I apply I need to be given the job!'"*

Box 5: What have we learned about leadership diversity? Survey and workforce analysis

Leadership diversity remains a challenge across the school system. Rather than a single bottleneck, the evidence points to **attrition across the leadership pipeline,** from teaching through to headship and system-level roles.

There is a familiar pattern when it comes to ethnic minority and female representation in leadership: **as seniority increases, representation falls.**

For example, see right for the gender gap for primary and secondary schools in Scotland, and below for the ethnic minority gap across all schools in England.

Percentage of female staff by role and sector in Scotland		
Grade	Primary	Secondary
Teacher	90	67
Principal or Lead	87	65
Depute head teacher	88	57
Head teacher	83	47

Proportion of ethnic minority leaders in England

Legend: Teacher, Assistant headteacher, Deputy headteacher, Headteacher
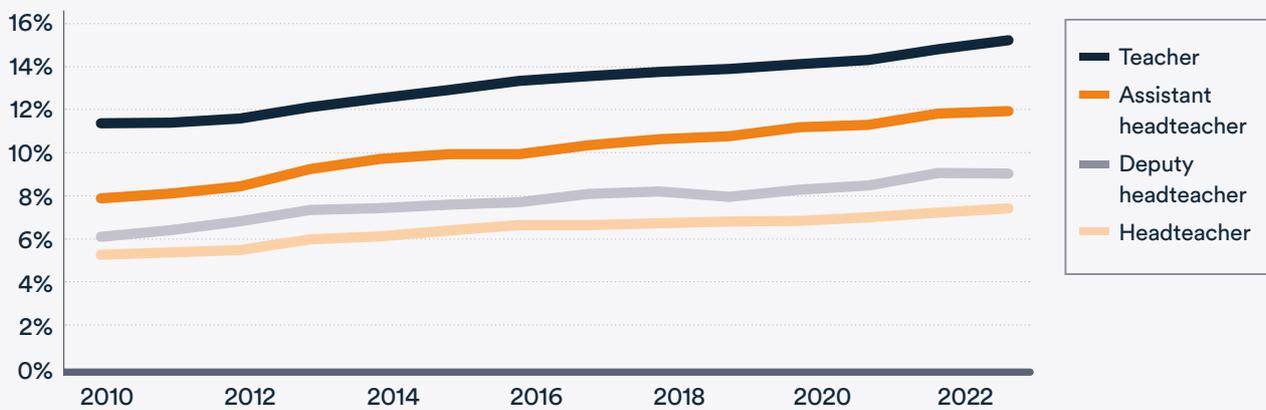
Survey insights: Ethnic minority leaders' experiences

In the survey, leaders from an ethnic minority background comprised around 9% of the total sample.

High levels of aspiration
The survey does not indicate a lack of ambition among under-represented groups. Middle and senior leaders from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely than their ethnic majority peers to say they definitely aspire to headship (16.7% vs 9.1%). However, they are also more likely to report cultural and procedural barriers to progression.

Recruitment is a critical site
Survey responses suggest that recruitment and appointment processes play a key role in limiting diversity. Leaders from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to report concerns about fairness in selection, a lack of visible role models in senior leadership, and less positive experiences of trust, collaboration and empowerment within their schools. They were far more likely to report an accidental route into headship (48%) compared with their ethnic majority peers (28%).

Everyday culture matters
Differences in how leaders experience school culture appear to shape confidence, willingness to apply for leadership roles, and longer-term retention. Perceptions of inclusion, trust and opportunity are therefore likely to play an important role in the cumulative attrition seen across the leadership pipeline

System pressures and plans to leave
Leaders from an ethnic minority background report similar 'draining' and 'sustaining' factors as all other leaders. However, they are slightly more likely than their peers to report they are 'mostly sinking' (12.4% vs 8%) and plan to leave the profession early (18.5% vs 13.5%).

A problem that no-one really owns

What struck us across all three national contexts was that, while almost all interviewees recognised this as an issue, there was no sense that any particular body or group had grasped it and was working to address it. We did hear of a smattering of initiatives, for example run by one LA in Scotland and a couple of MATs in England, but there was little sense that they were making significant progress.

Among the women leaders we interviewed there was a widespread view that the proportion of women in headship had increased in recent years. However, several referred to discrimination and barriers they had faced during their careers while a few suggested that male-dominated cultures continued to shape recruitment decisions: "It's the governors. And to them a principal is a jolly male bigger guy with a beard" (Primary Head, Northern Ireland – Coast).

Only a small minority of our interviewees self-identified as BAME, all of whom worked in urban schools. Some of these leaders reflected on their own personal experiences and on their work supporting friends in other schools who had sought promotions. One secondary head talked about his experience of overt racism growing up in the 1970s and '80s and of more subtle forms of discrimination and prejudice he had encountered throughout his career. In his view, recruitment panels remain biased:

> *"For me it is that perception ... whether in the selection process, whether it's in trustees, whether it's in boards, whether it's in governorship, whether they actually feel that someone who comes from a minority ... whether they can see someone like that leading a school. And I think sometimes people don't see that."*

These perspectives were reinforced across the interviews as a whole. Most interviewees acknowledged that a lack of diversity in the teaching and school leadership workforce was an issue. This was particularly the case in urban locations where schools commonly served highly diverse populations, so the mismatch with a predominantly White staff group was starker. Even in less diverse contexts there was generally an acknowledgement that diversity should be encouraged, for reasons of equity and because diverse teams would be more creative and open to new ideas.

The reasons given for why more BAME leaders had not been appointed tended to be threefold. First, the teaching population itself is not diverse, so there are generally very few, if any, BAME candidates for senior roles: "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" (Local Leader, Scotland – City). Second, the lack of existing BAME role models and examples makes it harder to shift the culture: "Because people are not likely to be what they don't see" (Primary head, Scotland – City). Third, and most commonly, interviewees argued that it came down to the recruitment process. This had several aspects. On the one hand, most interviewees stated that recruitment panels would always appoint the "the best person, regardless of their background" (Primary head, England – City), which was often seen as unproblematic: "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" (Secondary Head, Scotland – Rural-Coast). However, others – in line with the BAME head quoted above – argued that recruitment panels were sometimes biased:

> *"As a governor I remember at one point they were recruiting a head. I don't even want to say it was covert, it was quite overt racism in the shortlisting process."* —Secondary Head, England – City

We asked interviewees what they or others in their locality were doing to try to address these issues. The most common was response was a metaphorical shrug, indicating that no-one really saw it as their role or remit to take ownership. For example, the DfE official in England argued that the Department could not play a significant role, because it "doesn't have levers to influence the pipeline". In Scotland, a Local Leader involved in providing *Into Headship* explained:

> *"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."*

We heard of only three deliberate initiatives to address diversity, one run by an LA in Scotland and two run by larger MATs in England – Coast. The most significant of these was part of Vicarage MAT's EDI strategy, which included "trust shadowing for our ethnic minority staff at all levels", networks and *"ongoing work around cultural bias."* However, the trust's leaders acknowledged "I don't think that we've found anything that's been very successful" (Emilia, Vicarage MAT).

5. Preparing for headship – the importance of developmental experience

In Section 2 we described the formal pre-headship leadership development programmes in each nation – i.e. NPQH in England, *Into Headship* in Scotland – and that the PQH programme in Northern Ireland has been paused for several years. In Section 4 we set out our findings on leadership development and succession planning in each nation, including views on these formal programmes. This revealed distinct approaches and issues in each nation:

- In England, we saw sharp differences between the localities: for example, while the MATs in Coast could offer formal and informal development which went above and beyond the national NPQ offer, in Shire, there was much less capacity for such enhanced provision
- In Scotland, while *Into Headship* was 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 coherent professional development pathway and of any significant national provision pre-headship were seen as making it harder to recruit heads.

Boxes 6 and 7 set out further relevant evidence, drawn from the survey, on careers and recruitment and preparing for headship.

In this section we start by briefly comparing NPQH and *Into Headship*, asking what the different models tell us about the underlying logics of each system. We then consider the broader evidence we collected on headship preparation, revealing that prior 'developmental experiences' were seen as more significant than formal programmes in preparing leaders for headship. However, leaders varied widely in how far they curated and reflected on such developmental experience.

Box 6: What do leaders say about careers and recruitment?

Getting into Leadership

Our survey revealed that pathways into school leadership are diverse. Some leaders have clear ambitions early on, others develop aspirations gradually, and many arrive in leadership roles more by circumstance than design. Across all routes, aspirations and experiences vary systematically by role, gender, age, and context.

Aspirations for Headship	Pathways into Headship
Among respondents who were *not* yet headteachers, aspirations are mixed: ■ Across the three nations, only around **8–13%** say they *definitely* want to become a headteacher. ■ A much larger group are unlikely to be persuaded; typically **45–55%** say they probably or definitely *do not* want to pursue headship. ■ **Gender differences are pronounced:** men are more likely than women to say they *definitely aspire* to headship (13% vs 9%), while women are more likely to say they probably or definitely do not. ■ Aspirations peak in the **mid-career phase** (mid-30s to late-30s) and decline sharply from the late 40s onwards. Overall, the leadership pipeline is not empty, but it is fragile and unevenly distributed.	Looking at current heads and executive leaders, we see that: ■ Only a *minority* say they have *always* wanted to be a headteacher (around **10–15%** overall). ■ For most, aspirations **emerged during their career,** often through encouragement, opportunity, or changing circumstances. ■ A sizeable proportion report that they **never intended** to become a head; "it just happened". Again, **gender differences stand out:** ■ Men are roughly **twice as likely** as women to say they have *always* wanted to be a head. ■ Women are more likely to report that headship was not an original aspiration, but emerged over time or through circumstance.

What motivates leaders – and what puts them off?

In our survey, leaders were asked to identify their *top motivations* for leadership alongside their *key deterrents.*

Top motivations for leadership	Top deterrents from leadership
■ Shaping the strategic direction of the school ■ Having a greater impact on pupils' learning and development ■ Leading and building a collaborative team ■ Opportunities for professional growth ■ Taking on greater responsibility and influence	■ Increased stress, pressure, and emotional toll ■ Poor work–life balance and long working hours ■ Inadequate compensation relative to workload ■ Lack of opportunities for flexible working ■ Unpleasant or exclusionary leadership cultures

How motivations differ across groups:

■ Women are more likely to emphasise **collaboration and educational impact**
■ Men are more likely to prioritise **authority, progression, and pay**
■ Younger leaders place greater emphasis on **career development and responsibility.**

How barriers differ across groups:

■ Women are more likely to cite lack of **flexibility and work–life balance**
■ Ethnic minority leaders more frequently report **representation, fairness, and inclusion** concerns
■ Younger leaders report particularly high concern about **stress, culture, and development support.**

Comparing NPQH and *Into Headship*: a lens into distinct national mindsets

NPQH and *Into Headship* are both national headship preparation programmes and qualifications, but they differ surprisingly widely in their structure, scale, ethos and design.[61] We summarised key findings on how they were perceived by interviewees in Section 4, so our focus here is on what these differences tell us about the broader leadership logics in each nation.

As we outlined in Section 2, since its redesign in 2021 the NPQH framework has been tightly prescribed, centred on content largely derived from the 'what works' evidence base, and delivered via commissioned providers that are inspected by Ofsted. In contrast, *Into Headship* is less prescriptive in its content, more partnership based in its delivery, and includes a much wider range of learning processes, including a 360° assessment, mentoring from an experienced head and the completion of an in-school project. These differences did appear to translate into different experiences and outcomes for leaders, although our research was not designed to evaluate the specific models or to assess their effectiveness. For example, leaders in England who had completed the new version of NPQH valued its focus on "practical skills", whereas heads in Scotland tended to emphasise how *Into Headship* had provided space for "big picture" thinking.

Our expert interviews, outlined in Section 4, indicated that these differences reflected differences in underlying beliefs about headship and the purpose and role of national leadership development provision. England's model was deliberately designed to be technical, domain-specific and focused on school improvement and policy implementation, providing a 'golden thread' from the classroom through to instructionally focused leadership. In contrast, Scotland's model was intended to encourage reflection and self-awareness, to stimulate shared debates about the nature of professional values, and to encourage a more agentic approach to policy enactment. The two models also differ in the kinds of evidence they draw on: in England this means 'what works' evidence and a rejection of 'generic' leadership theories, whereas in Scotland the range of evidence used is much broader.

> "NPQH and *Into Headship* are both national headship preparation programmes, but they differ widely in their structure, scale, ethos and design."

These wide differences between the two models appears surprising, especially given the degree of global consensus on the features of successful school leadership that we outlined in Section 1. It seems that each model is shaped by underlying beliefs and values in each nation. In Scotland, the focus is on partnership working at national and local scales, the reinforcement of shared values around social justice and community-engaged professionals, and an espoused push for the agentic enactment of

national policy by front-line leaders. England's model reflects a more marketised and accountability-focused mindset, with leaders positioned as technicians who can deliver evidence-based school improvement, with a near absence of discussion around professional values and purposes.

Drawing a line from these underlying logics to the practice of leadership in schools is difficult. As we have sought to illustrate, leaders in both nations are motivated by deep moral purpose and an ethic of education and care, so there is as much that unites them as differentiates them. We have also emphasised how, within each nation, individual choices combine with place-based identities and governance arrangements to shape distinctive approaches. Notwithstanding these caveats, the sections on school improvement do indicate differences in how leadership is conceived and enacted at national scales: England with its knowledge-rich curriculum, teacher-driven pedagogy, and accountability-framed focus on discipline, test outcomes and inspection grades; Scotland with its emphasis on a future-focused curriculum, its less stringent assessment and accountability requirements, and its collective values-based ethos which can limit the agency of individual leaders.

Developmental experience as a foundation for headship

In Sections 2 and 4 we outlined the importance of considering leaders' individual and collective identities and how these shape values, beliefs, confidence, aspirations and approaches to leadership. These identities are shaped through processes of formation (i.e. individual biography and career-long experiences) and socialisation in role (i.e. how leaders learn to operate within a specific school, locality and professional context). In this section we highlight that formal leadership programmes, such as NPQH and *Into Headship*, are only part of the story, with most interviewees agreeing that they cannot prepare you for the complexities of the role. We explore the different pathways that leaders take into headship, the types of development they value and their levels of confidence on appointment. We argue that the breadth and depth of developmental experiences that leaders engage in on their pathway to headship is crucial, with important implications for how potential heads are supported.

Our interviews showed that formal leadership programmes, such as NPQH and *Into Headship*, play a relatively small – though often important – part in the formation and socialisation of headteachers. Box 7 sets out findings from the survey, showing that coaching and mentoring, role models, and learning on the job are seen as more effective in preparing for headship than formal qualifications in all three nations. In the interviews there was universal agreement from policymakers, providers and leaders themselves that such programmes could not fully prepare someone for headship, given the complexities of the role. The serving heads we interviewed were unequivocal that they did not feel fully prepared for the role when they first started. While some expressed views about particular areas where additional training would have been helpful, such as budgeting and HR, a more common view was that the "apprenticeship of headship" requires experience, or as a primary head in Northern Ireland put it: "it's a bit like when you pass your test

and learn how to drive you're only really learning how to drive once you're driving a real car." Given this broad level of agreement, it is important to ask what else can help prepare leaders for headship.

One finding which particularly surprised us as a team was the high proportion of "accidental" heads, who say they never really planned to take on the job. In the interviews, we noticed how some leaders described their route to headship as "accidental". A common explanation was that they had been a Deputy Head in a school where the existing headteacher left, often at short notice or unexpectedly, so had been asked (or, sometimes, pressurised) to apply for the top job. In the survey we asked serving headteachers to select one of three options describing their pathway into headship (see Box 6). The most common pathway (54% – England, 64% – Northern Ireland, 59% – Scotland) was one where the aspiration for the role emerges over the course of a career in schools. A much smaller proportion (15% – England, 12% – Northern Ireland, 10% – Scotland) stated that they had "always wanted to be a head" ever since starting their careers in teaching. Meanwhile, a surprisingly large proportion of heads (31% – England, 24% – Northern Ireland, 31% – Scotland[62]) described their route as more accidental, agreeing with the statement "I never really intended to be a head – it just happened".

> "One finding which particularly surprised us as a team was the high proportion of *"accidental"* heads, who say they never really planned to take on the job."

These pathways to headship suggest quite different leadership identities and processes of formation and socialisation. Leaders who have "always wanted to be a head" might be expected to have fewer of the identity shifts and imposter syndrome challenges we described above; pursuing promotion wherever possible, even if the new job might appear beyond their current level of experience and expertise. Their confidence and ambition might help them to cope with the demands of leadership, but it might also make them less open to admitting what they don't know or to acknowledge when they are not coping. In contrast, "accidental" leaders might feel overwhelmed if they are "thrown in at the deep end." They are less likely to have gone through the kinds of identity shifts required to prepare for the demands of headship: as a result, they might feel unable to challenge colleagues who were, until recently, their peers, or might feel particularly crushed by a negative inspection judgement.

Box 7 shows responses from the survey on how confident leaders felt when they first started in headship. We see that a substantial proportion (for example, 30% in England) began their headship journey lacking confidence. In the interviews, when we asked serving heads what had prepared them for the role, it was what they had learned through experience that they talked about most – far more

than what they had learned on formal programmes. This experience was about more than simply 'time served', although a broad and deep understanding children's lives gained across different contexts was an aspect of this. It was common for interviewees to talk about times when they had been stretched to develop and grow, often by influential role models and mentors, enabling them to become confident in a range of operational and strategic areas.

What struck us was that some leaders seemed more likely to have actively curated their experience, making sure that they had undertaken a range of senior roles (for example, teaching and learning, pastoral, timetabling) before they even applied for headship. One example was Ruby, a secondary head in England Coast. She explained how she had worked in one school for many years, taking on a range of academic and pastoral roles, but "then I decided if I was ever going to go into headship, I probably needed to get another school under my belt". In the new school she took on further roles, such as timetabling, behaviour and Designated Safeguarding Lead, and worked as an Ofsted inspector. Not all of this learning was deliberate or even positive: "I've also had two really negative leadership experiences with two people that I've worked with in the past." She had applied to become headteacher of the school we interviewed her in five years earlier but was not successful. Instead, she took on the headship of a smaller school before applying again when the post was readvertised. She reflected on how this experience had been essential for her to succeed:

> "It seems worthwhile to ask how succession planning could be strengthened by helping potential heads to curate and reflect on their experience."

"I wouldn't have been ready when I first applied for it…. I think actually to have come in here at that time, now knowing what I know, I would have just drowned, totally drowned, but I came in with loads of experience this time."

Ruby shows how leaders can build their experience by working across different schools in a range of roles, but we also heard examples of ambitious leaders who had raced through, seeking promotion wherever possible. Putting these findings together, it seems worthwhile to ask how succession planning could be strengthened by helping potential heads to curate and reflect on their experience in this way. One example of encouraging this at scale was in a previous iteration of NPQH, where leaders were required to undertake a placement in a high performing school. Several of our interviewees had experienced this and identified it as the most powerful aspect of the programme at that time.

Box 7: What do leaders say about preparing for and starting in headship: Survey findings

Leadership development – what do leaders value?

Three quarters (77%) of the headteachers who responded to the survey held a national leadership qualification (for example, NPQH, *Into Headship*). Uptake was lowest in Northern Ireland, where the PQHNI was paused in 2017. While nearly half of headteachers in Northern Ireland (49%) hold a master's or doctoral degree, the proportions are lower in England (29%) and Scotland (25%).

The survey asked serving heads to select, from a list, the types of professional development they saw as most valuable in preparing for headship, with responses shown below. Overall, the findings suggest that school leaders place a higher value on experiential and relational forms of development, ahead of formal qualifications. Coaching and mentoring, role models, learning on the job and from experience, all score highly. Heads in England were less likely to select formal qualifications (37%) compared to their counterparts in Northern Ireland (50%) and Scotland (49%).

Types of professional development valued in preparing for headship (Heads only)
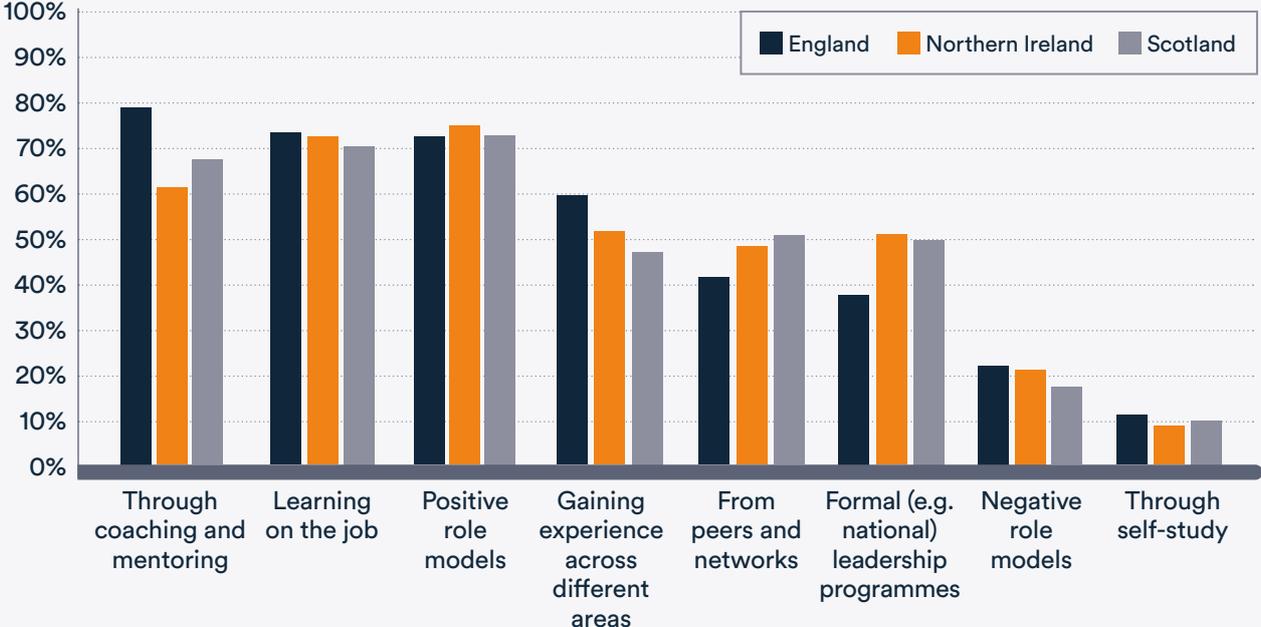
Confidence when starting in headship

In the survey we asked serving heads how far they agreed with the statement 'When I first started in headship I felt confident that I had the leadership skills, knowledge and qualities required to undertake my role successfully.' The results, shown below, indicate that while most headteachers agreed with the statement, their confidence was rarely strong; only one in 10 (~10%) chose 'strongly agree'. Heads in Scotland were the most confident (66% agree) while heads in England were least likely to be confident (56% agree).

When I started in headship I had the skills, knowledge and qualities required (Heads only)

Legend:
- Strongly disagree
- Sometimes disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

6. One-size policy does not fit all

Place and a local solutions mindset

Educational leadership does not occur in a vacuum. Our focus on place in our conceptual framework (Section 2) highlights how distinctive leadership is across different localities and contexts. This comes through most clearly in the Scotland portrait (Section 4), where we examine the two localities through the lenses of leadership and place. But place pervades all our findings, showing how leaders work within specific geographic, economic, historical, and social contexts that fundamentally shape 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. Geographic place manifests most obviously in the spatial distribution of schools and populations, from urban density to rural sparsity. Economic place shapes leadership through the material conditions that schools encounter, from the globalising impact of a McDonald's on every high street, to the specifics of how past and present industries, transport links, migration trends, housing developments and employment patterns all shape the communities that schools serve. Historical place shapes present possibilities through past trajectories, as seen clearly in Northern Ireland's still segregated system. Organisational place emerges as increasingly varied and significant, with clear differences between Scotland's LAs and England's complex MAT landscapes.

These 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. Place is equally influential when we consider the formation of leadership identities, or the demands of education and care, or how different models for leadership development and support operate to address the drains and enhance the sustains, as we illustrated throughout Section 4. Understanding how place shapes leadership sustainability means attending to how these dimensions combine and interact in particular localities.

Yet policy discussions commonly view place as little more than a backdrop upon which leadership is performed according to universal scripts. 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.
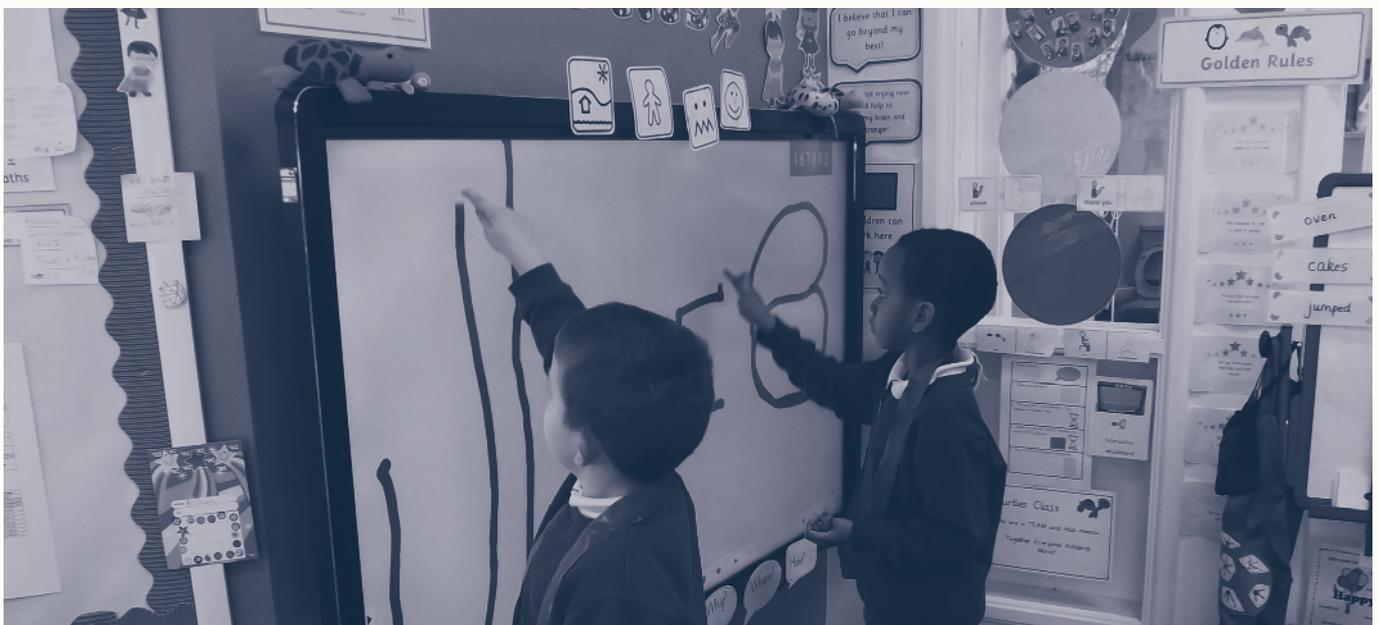
Recognising the importance of place is not the same as saying that shared frameworks, structures and policies cannot be helpful – they can. A national curriculum can clarify an entitlement for all children. National assessment models and accountability frameworks can provide benchmarks for self-evaluation and platforms for shared learning across schools. National leadership development programmes can facilitate peer networking and achieve economies of scale, and so on. In Northern Ireland, where school inspections were not occurring due to ASOS and PQHNI 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 and that place can easily be subsumed: the decision to close the Regional Education and Library Boards, in 2015, and to replace these with the single Education Authority was widely seen to have been disastrous, leading to a loss of relational, place-based support and a "broken system".

In both England and Scotland there were echoes of this debate between national standardisation and local adaptation. England has largely removed its LAs in recent years, through academisation, leading to the place-based disparities we outlined in Section 4, for example when we compared succession planning approaches in Shire and Coast. Meanwhile in Scotland we heard that:

> *"There's always a tension between the role of national government and the role of local government... I think if they got their way, they would have a national education service, you know, and they would run it and we would just be, you know, directly accountable."*

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, while in England Coast the various MATs were working to identify and support potential heads across their networks. But these local governance bodies could also constrain place-based adaptation where they sought to apply a one-size-fits-all approach. For example, Luna, a primary head in England Coast, described how the standard letter that her MAT required her to send to local parents if a child was not attending school was too heavy handed for her conservative and well-to-do village community:

> *"Those relationships that you have built up over years can be destroyed in a second by wording which might be completely acceptable in some schools, but it's not acceptable here."*

These examples all indicate the limits of standardisation and a one-size-fits-all approach to policy. Instead, what is needed is a 'local solutions' mindset which seeks to reflect and capitalise on the particularities of place. Bunt and Harris define local solutions as combining local action and national scale, but "it is not enough to assume that scaling back government bureaucracy and control will allow local innovation to flourish".[63] Rather, local solutions require 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 in line with an understanding of place, different localities might have legitimately different priorities and ways of working.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Sustainability and thriving – the need for a 'local solutions' approach

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 (see also Boxes 2 and 8). 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.

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 current sustainability crisis will inevitably become a pipeline crisis, threatening the supply of expert, authentic leaders that every school and every child deserves.

But this is not about yet more 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.
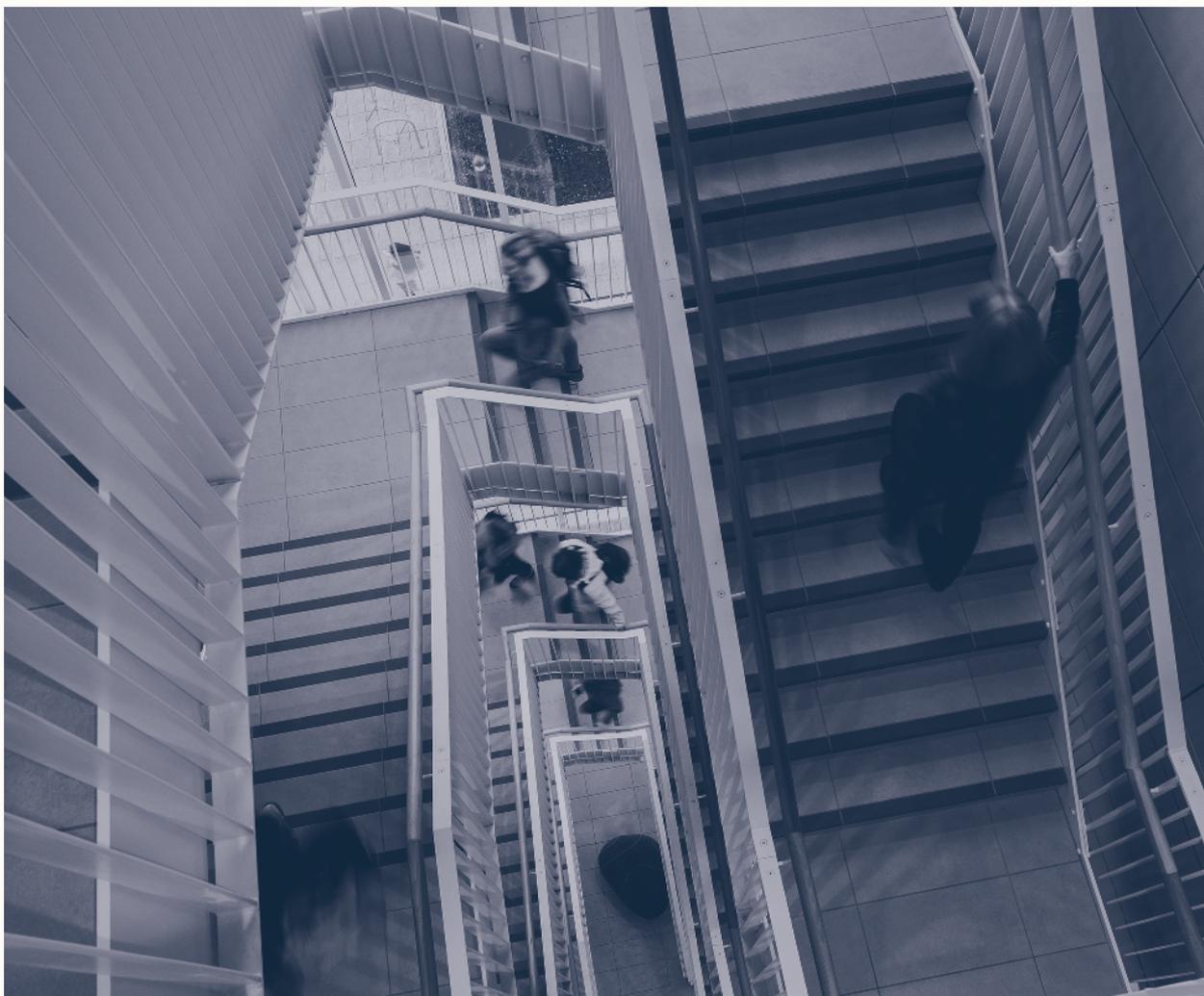
Box 8: What does thriving look like? Survey findings

Leaders who describe themselves as thriving do so in full awareness of the demands of the role. Their accounts reveal leadership that is meaningful and sustaining, but also challenging and contingent. Six features recur across their accounts.

Deeply purposeful – focused on children
Thriving leadership is strongly rooted in biography, values, and moral commitment. Spending time with children and seeing them grow is hugely rewarding:

"I am sustained by refusing to let fear into our school. We pursue our clear purpose for education. We say no to initiatives that don't align and a big yes to new ideas that deepen our vision and values. I love my role and want more leaders to feel the way I do." (Primary Head, England, Survey)

Rooted in place and identity
Thriving leaders situate their work firmly in place, particularly in contexts of disadvantage. They describe leadership as bound up with community, care, and responding to complex social need, often well beyond formal educational expectations:

"What sustains me is the hope that we are making a difference to the lives of those who live in the most challenging circumstances in society... The school I lead has grown, is healthy and has a culture of nurture and care which is palpable. Young people and their families know that we believe in them and that they have a voice which matters in our school. We hope this voice will grow as they move into society." (Secondary Head, Scotland, Survey)

Relationally supported
Beyond formal structures, thriving leaders describe the importance of trust, respect, and positive working relationships, alongside access to supportive governance and external professional networks. These relationships provide emotional, practical, and moral support that reduces isolation and sustains leaders over time:

"Being a Head has been the most fulfilling job I could ever hope to do. The lowest points of my career have been when relationships have not worked ... Without knowledgeable and supportive governors the role is impossible to do well or enjoy ... I established a network of female head who meet termly with Chatham House rules ... This has been incredibly affirming ... we gain a huge amount of practical and emotional support ... it also keeps us sane and laughing." (Primary Head, England, Survey)

Shared leadership and strong teams
A defining feature of thriving leadership is the ability to spread responsibility and share the load. Thriving leaders emphasise the importance of strong leadership teams, distributed roles, and collective ownership of improvement:

"This is the best job in the world most days. I have an amazing, young and dynamic team who work hard and have the best interests of the children at heart. I take great pride in my school and great solace from the progress we have made as a team and community together." (Primary Head, Northern Ireland, Survey)

Stretching and developmental

Thriving leaders are clear-eyed about the demands of the role, but they also relish the variety. They describe the need for self-knowledge, resilience, and conscious boundary-setting, and for opportunities to learn and grow:

"My father is part of the Windrush Generation who instilled the value of education into me and my siblings. I am passionate and committed to my work, young people and the communities that I serve. My pathway to success, as a mixed heritage individual, was not an easy one (primarily because of institutional barriers) but I was determined to succeed. I never stop learning and I am currently completing my NPQEL qualification. There is no greater reward than being approached by a successful young person or adult and being told that I inspired them!" (Secondary Head, England, Survey]

Meaningful, but not cost-free

Finally, thriving leadership is not portrayed as endlessly sustainable. Even those who love the job describe long hours, personal sacrifice, and limits to what can be absorbed over time:

"I say almost weekly that I have the best job in the world. For me, Headship suits me. I have a great team, a supportive Trust and a wonderful community of young people. It is not easy. It is all I do and does not balance with a life outside of work … With this comes personal sacrifice, my family, friends, personal interests all pay a price and are pushed out to accommodate the needs of the job. (Secondary Head, England, Survey)
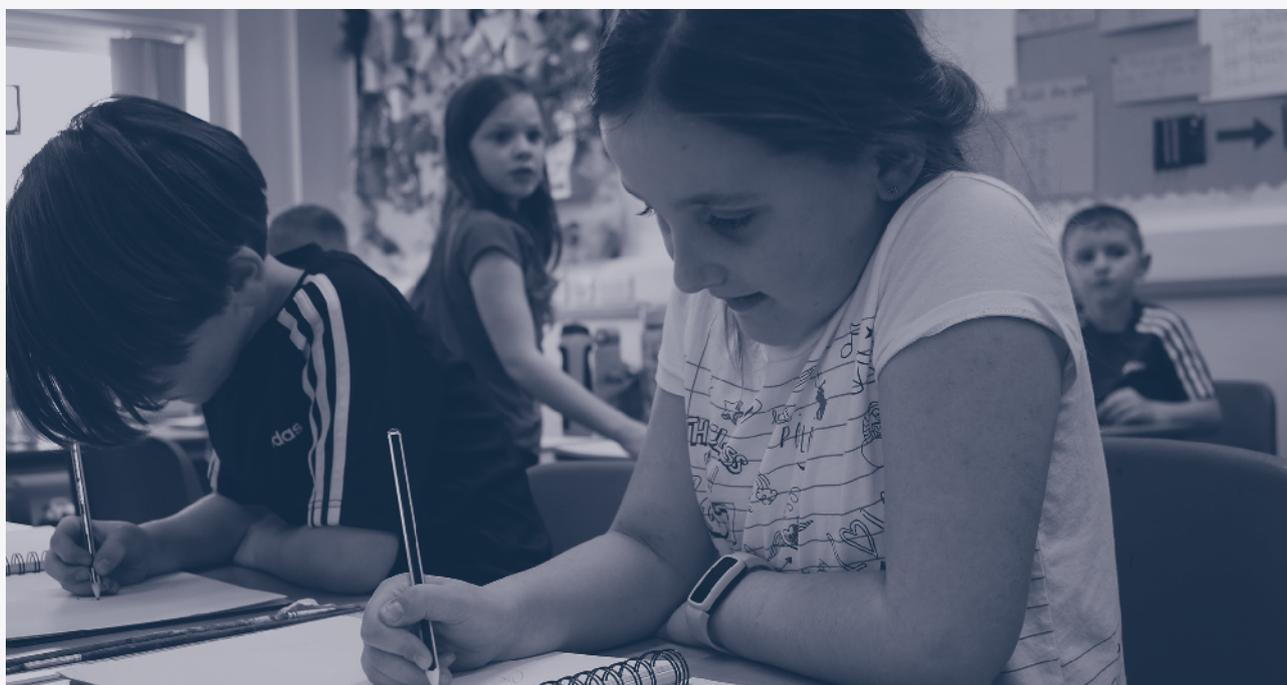
Recommendations

Based on the findings, and informed by the three policy workshops and discussions with the advisory groups in each nation, we offer the following recommendations.

England

1. **The DfE should lead a national strategy for sustainable school leadership of education and care, potentially adopting a format similar to the 2014 Workload Challenge.** This might combine a ministerial working group with regional consultation events and activities, leading to concrete proposals as well as practical resources, guidance and funding. Potential next steps might include: revised headteacher standards; further reviews of NPQ design and content; test and learn projects exploring different models for sustainable and diverse leadership in schools/localities; and funding for local plans.

2. **Teaching School Hubs should be tasked to convene local partnerships to develop leadership succession plans, with a particular focus on enhancing diversity.** These should be geared towards addressing the leadership needs of all schools, but with a focus on locally identified priorities and on proactively enhancing diversity. DfE should fund the implementation of these plans, with published annual reports on progress, including on EDI.

3. **Leadership associations should lead campaigns highlighting the value of school leadership and encouraging all heads to access mentoring, coaching and supervision.** These campaigns should build on the Excellence in Leadership offer and the work of existing networks and support groups, such as HeadsUpforHTs and Education Support.

Scotland

1. **Scottish Government/Education Scotland should work with partners to drive a national and local focus on sustainable leadership.** This should build on the existing Head Teacher Recruitment and Retention Working Group, with active ministerial involvement and an expectation that concrete proposals and action plans will be agreed and taken forward within a defined timescale. Potential next steps might include: revised headteacher standards; a review of *Into Headship* to strengthen the focus on education and care, on developmental experience and on enhancing diversity; test and learn projects exploring different models for sustainable and diverse leadership; and, potentially, funding for local/regional succession plans. Education Scotland should be required to report annually on progress towards a more diverse and sustainable leadership workforce.

2. **Local Authorities should revamp their succession plans.** The focus should be on: identifying and addressing local priorities for sustainable leadership of education and care; strengthening systematic opportunities for emerging/diverse leaders to gain developmental experience; and engaging experienced leaders in growing the next generation.

3. **Unions and associations should work together to lead a campaign on the value of leadership and encouraging universal access to mentoring, coaching and supervision for heads.**

Northern Ireland

1. **The TransformEd Strategy offers an ambitious plan to reshape many aspects of education in Northern Ireland, including the planned new qualification for headship and investments in professional learning for middle leaders and experienced heads.** The proposal to reshape the support infrastructure for controlled schools offers scope to address some of the administrative and wider challenges faced by leaders in the research. Equally, the overall funding position for schools remains dire, with a projected £300m gap in 2025–26.

   DE/EA should work with partners to convene and drive a national focus on securing sustainable school leadership of education and care across diverse localities and schools. Potential elements might include:

   revised headteacher standards

   changes to leadership recruitment processes across all schools and sectors, including: to strengthen transparency and rigour in headteacher appointment processes; and a requirement that all leadership posts below headteacher level be advertised nationally

   focusing the planned Collaborative Professional Learning Cluster funding on projects which explore and evaluate different models for sustainable education and care in schools and localities, with findings used to inform future policies and guidance. Initial priorities might include:

   strengthening the diversity of teaching and leadership pathways in schools

   reducing the demands on teaching principals in small schools through executive headship

   exploring collaborative models for sustainable leadership of Specialist Provisions in Mainstream Schools (SPiMS)

   drawing out the learning from Raising Achievement and Inspiring School Environments (RAISE) initiative to understand implications for sustainable leadership of education and care across localities.

2. **In addition, unions and associations should work together with partners to drive a national campaign** to ensure that all headteachers can and do access mentoring, coaching and/or supervision.

Endnotes

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2 The research base on school leadership is wide-ranging and nuanced. In focusing on the global consensus around successful leadership here we do not pretend to reflect the full breadth of this evidence.

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15 Due to limited resources, our project could not include in-depth research in all four UK nations. Our ESRC proposal made the case for focusing on England, Northern Ireland and Scotland, with a light touch review in Wales. This decision was partly pragmatic: at the time we wrote the proposal the Welsh Government had recently commissioned a Leadership Review, which seemed likely to introduce significant changes that would still be in train through the research period. It also reflected a maximum variation approach to sampling at system level. The BELMAS Review (Woods et al, 2020) had argued that Scotland and Wales had pursued similar 'consensual' approaches to reform. We thus selected Scotland as a 'consensual' policy environment, while England and NI represented more divergent alternatives. Our plan for the light touch review in Wales was to conduct expert interviews, the survey and a policy workshop. However, although we promoted the survey extensively in Wales, including through two emails to every school, the response rate (n=45) was too low to be used, meaning we could not complete the review.

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17 In line with ethics, we use pseudonyms for the localities and individual participants reported here.

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21 These dashboards as well as the local dashboards in the following section were conceptualised by Dr Tom Cowhitt, University of Glasgow. On the project website we provide interactive dashboards for each national system that Tom created: https://sustainableschoolleadership.uk/

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30 See: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-60031084

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33 In the National Technical Report for Northern Ireland we set out the numbers of schools in each category and the key contours of the leadership workforce.

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

35 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

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42 These outlines are necessarily brief. We develop the conceptual framework in greater depth, with references to the many researchers who have informed our thinking, in the forthcoming project book: *Sustaining Leaders, Sustaining Schools* (forthcoming) Toby Greany, Pat Thomson, Tom Perry, Mike Collins. Bloomsbury Academic.

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45 This set of definitions draws mainly on narrative identity theory, as developed by thinkers such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Marya Schechtman, but we also draw on Discursive, Social and Fluid identity theories. We develop this work in more depth in the project book.

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49 Of course, as we highlighted in Section 3, the four 'petals' overlap and intersect, applying equally to all the localities; so, while we highlight different aspects of each national case here, we see these as an integrated whole.

50 This brief outline is not intended to be comprehensive. To avoid duplication some issues are addressed elsewhere: for example, we consider the complexity of student needs in the portrait of leadership and care.

51 The new TransformEd strategy includes proposals to introduce national assessments: see https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-03/TransformED%20NI%20Ex%20Summary.pdf

52 We also undertook a focused review of the In Headship programme, on behalf of Education Scotland, drawing on survey responses, focus groups with former participants and providers, and an observation of a national event.

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61 We explore these issues in more depth in an open access article: Greany et al, (2025) Signature pedagogies for leadership development: a comparison of headteacher preparation programmes in England and Scotland. *London Review of Education.*

62 This figure seems surprising given that Scotland has a mandatory headteacher preparation programme. We heard examples of heads who had been appointed before they had completed (or even started) the programme, as well as acting heads, who might account for these responses.

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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.

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