Leading in Lockdown:

Research on School Leaders' Work,
Wellbeing and Career Intentions –
Findings from the Interviews
with Headteachers

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Glossary

ADHD   Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder

ASCL   Association for school and college leaders

CAGS   Centre-assessed grades

CAMHS   Children and adolescent mental health services

CPD   Continuing Professional Development

DFE   Department for Education

FSM   Free School Meals

HR   Human Resources

IT   Information technology

KS2   Key Stage 2

LA   Local Authority

MAT   Multi-academy trust

NAHT   National Association of Headteachers

NQT   Newly qualified teacher

Ofsted   Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills

PAN   Pupil Allocated Number

PHE   Public Health England

PPE   Personal protective equipment

PR   Public Relations

PTA   Parent Teacher Association

RSC   Regional Schools Commissioners

SAT   Single Academy Trust

SATs   Statutory Assessment Tests

SEND   Pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities

TAGs   Teacher-assessed grades

1. About the research

This report summarises findings from the qualitative strand of a wider project - School Leadership in the Pandemic - which explores school leaders' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic in England, in particular how this has affected their well-being and career plans. The project is led by Professors Toby Greany and Pat Thomson at the University of Nottingham, working with Dr Nick Martindale (University of Oxford) and Dr Susan Cousin (Associate, University of Nottingham). The project has been undertaken in partnership with the two main headteacher unions, the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) and the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL). The project is supported by the University of Nottingham's ESRC Impact Acceleration Account (ES/T501992/1).

This report provides a largely descriptive summary of findings from the interviews. These findings are brought together with results from a national survey and a wider analysis informed by the literature in an overarching report (Greany, Thomson, Martindale and Cousin, 2021). See the project blog - https://schoolleadersworkandwellbeing.com/ - for further details.

1.1 Interview participants and ethics

Fifty-eight headteachers were interviewed in July 2021. These interviewees were selected from a bank of school leaders who responded to the project survey (carried out in April-May 2021) and who indicated that they would be willing to be interviewed.

A key finding from the survey was that two in five school leaders said they planned to leave the profession (for reasons other than retirement) in the next five years. Therefore, a key aim for the interviews was to talk to a mixture of 'leavers' and 'stayers' from primary and secondary schools. The final numbers interviewed in each category are indicated below:

- PHS - primary headteachers who indicated in the survey they intended to stay in the profession for the foreseeable future – n=14
- PHL - primary headteachers who indicated they intended to leave the profession (for reasons other than full retirement) within the next five years – n=13
- SHS - secondary headteachers who indicated they intended to stay in the profession – n=17
- SHL - secondary headteachers indicated they intended to leave for within the next five years – n=14.

Within each category, we sought to achieve a broadly representative mix in terms of individual and school characteristics. For example, the interviewees included one special school and one alternative provision school. Appendix B includes details of the interviewees, including the

spread in terms of: age and years of experience in headship, gender, school type, and current school Ofsted grading.

The project received ethical approval from the University of Nottingham School of Education Ethics Committee. Throughout this report we anonymise individual respondents, but we use the four category codes (PHL, PHS, SHL and SHS) to indicate their school phase and career intentions at the time of the survey.

1.2 Research approach and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted on-line, via Microsoft Teams, using a set of open-ended questions (Appendix A) which were designed to add explanatory detail to the survey results. This report is structured into sections which correspond to the interview questions.

Each interview was transcribed using the University of Nottingham's transcription software, with further corrections undertaken by members of the team (including the project administrator, Tom Lawley). The codes for analysis were drawn inductively from the data. Each transcript was coded independently by two members of the research team. Most responses were relatively evenly spread across the four categories of participant, with no clear differences between 'leavers' and 'stayers'. Where a response was indicated more frequently by one or more of the four categories (e.g. leavers/stayers, primary/secondary) this is indicated in the text. In Section 7 we focus in detail on the reasons that interviewees gave for either leaving or staying in the profession.

The research is based on relatively small numbers in each category and draws on self-selecting respondents to the survey. We recognise that this cannot represent the sum total of headteacher experiences of leading during the pandemic, but argue that responses to open-ended questions without prompts from a broadly representative group does provide a good overview of common experiences, particularly when these are combined with findings from the national survey and findings from related studies, as in the main report.

2. The Highs and Lows of being a Headteacher before the Pandemic

Overall, interviewees' responses to the questions we asked about headship before the pandemic chime with previous research in this area, both in terms of the motivation to become a head (European Commission, 2019) and the highs and lows of actually being one in England's autonomous and accountable school system and in the context of sharp austerity and cuts to wider services for children (Greany and Earley, 2021; Cousin, 2021; Greany and Higham, 2018; Thomson, 2009).

2.1   Why become a head?

We asked interviewees what had motivated them to become a head. The desire to make a difference was the most cited motivation (35/58, evenly spread across the four categories), with secondary headteachers more often including the autonomy to make their own decisions to do what they felt would have an impact. Just under half of respondents (23), evenly spread across the four groups, were driven by the belief they could do a good job and a better one than either their predecessor or, if they were deputy head in the school, someone new coming in who did not know the school as well. 'Working with children' was a main driver for primary headteachers (11/27), also mentioned by a small number (4) of secondary headteachers. 'Developing other professionals' was a secondary motivation, cited by a small number of primary and smaller number of secondary teachers.

> *When you come into education, it's not a job, it's a vocation… You've got to know that it's not a nine to five job*. PHL

2.2   The 'highs' of being a headteacher before the pandemic

Most cited for pre-pandemic highs were making a difference to young people's lives (38/58); working with children (11 times by primary heads, 4 in secondary); and developing other professionals. The pleasure of building and working in a strong team was also frequently mentioned:

> *It's just a lovely working environment, isn't it? It's not like any other- it's vibrant, it's jolly, it's full of chatter. It's very people facing - you've got your staff, you've got your parents. Then you've got the children and I'm very interested in how young children learn*. PHL
>
> *There's nothing better than seeing a smiling child and when I have spent an hour in front of the screen or I've been doing necessary paperwork, I will always make time at breaks and lunch times to go out and have a conversation with children. SHS*

Several interviewees saw headship as an extremely busy and fulfilling role, reflecting the nature of life in schools. But schools are also relatively predictable, with an established annual cycle and set of routines and relationships geared towards school development and children's learning.

> *Any leader, but a school leader in particular, by 10 o'clock in the morning you have your first cup of tea, and you've explained, you've persuaded, you've calmed, you've bridged, you have solved a little absence crisis. You've knitted everything together.* PHL

2.3   The 'lows' of being a headteacher before the pandemic

We summarise the 'lows' of headship pre-pandemic in four areas: the growing challenges associated with addressing disadvantage in a context of reducing support beyond schools; the pressures caused by England's accountability framework; the need to manage tight budgets and limited resources; and dealing with staffing and HR-related issues.

Disadvantage

Addressing 'disadvantage' was the most frequently mentioned challenge (20/58), more often by leaders who intended to leave the profession (14/27).

A combination of factors made it increasingly challenging for schools to support disadvantaged children. Securing pupil progress, closing attainment gaps and reaching expected targets were often described as increasingly difficult. Interviewees in areas of high socioeconomic disadvantage reported severe reductions in recent years in the external support available from wider services, including health and welfare, with worrying shortages of speech therapists and psychologists. However, reductions to children and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and other services were mentioned by headteachers from more affluent as well as disadvantaged areas. The increasing complexity of special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) was cited by leavers more often than stayers, as was the increase in safeguarding issues.

> *Possibly the thing that will finally drive me out is the austerity. There's an increase in safeguarding [over] the last 6 to 8 years, particularly, the normalisation of domestic abuse and the lessening of support from other agencies, be it care services and health services, is incredible. That's really changed, and schools haven't got the capacity to do it and I'm not sure whether I've got the mental capacity to keep doing that anymore. PHL*

> *The support that we require from things like CAMHS, from alternative education provision and that sort of thing has diminished so spectacularly over the last decade, to now being beyond crisis point.* SHS

Accountability

The accountability system was cited as a key challenge for pre-pandemic headship. Eighteen respondents described Ofsted as a source of stress, even outside of inspections, due to the need to respond to the outcome or prepare and wait for the next visit.

> *The worst part of my career to date, including the entire 16-17 months of the pandemic, was the two-day Ofsted inspection that we had in 2019 and I really, seriously felt like jacking it in at that point, even though we were graded Good… They showed no appreciation of our context.* SHL

Finances

Eighteen interviewees mentioned reducing school budgets as presenting a range of challenges, particularly in relation to staffing, resources and maintenance of buildings. Nine primary school leaders cited reducing PANs as a factor, while two secondary leavers explained that reducing pupil numbers was caused by expansion of other local schools or restructuring.

> *Being a school within a trust where they didn't have enough money and had to make the redundancies. 49 people lost their jobs and it wasn't really their fault and I took over a school where I couldn't understand why it was happening - people in the present had to suffer the consequences of the people in the past so that that will always go down as the worst part of all of my years teaching.* SHS

Staffing and HR issues

Finally, HR issues, including teacher recruitment and retention, capability, and sickness was seen as a 'normal' but often unwelcome part of a headteacher's role.

3. The highs and lows of leading through the pandemic

3.1 The main 'highs' of leading through the pandemic

Headteachers across the four categories described a consistent set of 'highs', or rewarding aspects, of leading through the pandemic. There were no consistent differences between 'leavers' and 'stayers' in these areas.

Pride in how the school overcame the challenges it faced

The most frequently cited 'high' was the satisfaction of a job well done (46/58 interviewees). Many interviewees expressed pride in how the school had come together, remained open and overcome the many and varied challenges presented by the pandemic. Most of the specific challenges that interviewees mentioned are referenced in later sections of this report, in particular the section on pandemic 'lows'. Common examples of the challenges that interviewees were proud to have overcome included: opening and closing the school at short notice (i.e. to non 'key worker' families); keeping children and staff safe (including managing practical issues such as Lateral Flow Testing and bubbles); moving teaching online; and working with wider services to safeguard children and support families. These challenges closely mirror the findings from the project national survey (Greany, Thomson and Martindale, 2021).

> *I really wasn't sure whether the experience would weaken the school as a community or strengthen it. But, in fact, everything that's happened through the pandemic has strengthened the school as a community. SHS*
>
> *It was amazing when we did 3000 tests in a fortnight. Rounded up a parent army of 50 volunteers, got them all through all the training, did a really good job of that. SHL*

Public service at a time of national crisis

Linked to the sense of pride in having overcome the challenges that schools faced was a wider sense of public service and collective values at a time of national crisis. Over a third of interviewees took satisfaction from being part of a collective endeavour, undertaking worthwhile work.

> *Every day I was grateful that I had a worthwhile job to do. Coming to school every day, seeing my kids, doing a worthwhile job. PHS*
>
> *The fact that we have been able to have key worker children in, to enable their parents to do really essential work in our community and keep the rest of us safe and well, or*

> *food on the shelves and things. Actually, the feeling that we are part of that contribution has been really amazing.* PHS

Strengthened school-community relationships, and positive feedback from parents

Another linked theme was how school-community relationships had been enhanced as a result of the pandemic. Almost all interviewees talked about the importance of regular communication with parents, and many described how they had worked in new ways to engage parents in dialogue, with some significant shifts as a result.

> *The highs have come when we've done some incredible things. We have learnt about parental engagement. All through the pandemic, every single family in the school would get a weekly phone call from an individual in school. We've maintained a dialogue with our community that we've never been in before. We've been listening to our families and some of the challenges they faced, and we then responded to those challenges. So we now are a food bank and we give out 60-100 food hampers every week.* SHS
>
> *We are one of the few anchors in the lives of even more of our families than I thought. You know, we've got 30-40 families that we always provide school uniform for their children, we always touch in with during holidays, but actually, I felt with the response I've had to my weekly emails to parents that it's much wider than that during these circumstances because, as society's become more fragmented over many years, school has become a place of stability for families as well as the children that we teach.* SHS

The quotes above highlight how the work of schools during the pandemic often went well beyond teaching and learning, for example through the provision of food parcels. As a result, the second headteacher quoted above reflects on the extent to which schools have become the 'anchor' for many families. Other heads reflected on how the experience had led them to re-evaluate the role of the school in the community, and the sense of satisfaction that making a wider contribution could make.

> *Our PTA set up a kindness post box so the children could drop off letters to deliver to vulnerable members of our community or people who might be lonely. Their Facebook page where they put quizzes on it and things like that. So I think that kind of shared sense of we are a village and we're going to look after each other and get through it. You take a lot from that, don't you? you can feel that kind of shared endeavour.* PHS

Reflecting the point about strengthened school-community relationships, many leaders explained that positive parental and community feedback had helped to sustain them and their teams.

> *More thank you emails and positive comments from parents than I can ever remember having in my career*. SHS
>
> *Parents were brilliant and understood the complexity. We've had loads of lovely, lovely feedback this year from parents saying how well we've coped and how clear our messages were.* SHL

Team-working and opportunities for leadership development

Achieving all these outcomes was a result of impressive teamwork, which a strong majority of interviewees highlighted as a rewarding aspect of the pandemic. Many heads had valued the support of their senior team in particular and/or had enjoyed seeing talented members of staff take on additional challenges, through which they had grown and developed as leaders.

> *I look around my leadership team and see how they've grown through this pandemic. What's been asked of them, what's been demanded of them. You know, looking at the team I've got here, we're going to have some great head teachers in the future, so it doesn't fill me with despair*. SHL
>
> *Our school leaders have been tested, are stronger and more skilled, and have more confidence in who they become in the future.* PHS

Increased expertise in remote teaching and learning

Another common theme, mentioned by 26 interviewees in total, was how the pandemic had forced schools to really grapple with how best to use technology and online learning and to develop the knowledge and skills required to do this well. Many in this group, particularly those in primary schools, noted how the school's provision improved over the course of the successive lockdowns.

> *We are really proud of what we offered… We used what the research reports are saying about effective remote education, what we know about our school community and what parents are asking for in terms of remote learning. So, our community definitely didn't want live lessons all day long. That wasn't manageable for them when they had several children at home, and were also trying to work. Also, you can't have teachers in front of*

> *a screen all day long because it's absolutely exhausting. So we developed an approach over time to reflect the best bits*. PHS

> *Our online offer was stunning. We've stuck to our curriculum. The expertise that our staff have now got with that online delivery has been really amazing. We had guided groups online, where if children needed that extra little bit of scaffolding or support, then they would go off with a member of staff and have that before re-joining the main session online. We gave out 60 devices, mainly to families with multiple children. Parents were more engaged, particularly our hard--to--reach parents, and they saw daily how we teach things such as phonics and they've been able to support their children more. PHS*

Collaboration with other schools and with wider local services

As we outline below, a majority of headteachers drew on networks with other local schools and/or with colleague headteachers for emotional as well as practical support through the pandemic. Many of these networks were well-established before the pandemic, but several heads reported that local collaboration between schools and with the local authority increased during the crisis. This strengthening of local networks enabled collective decision-making and coordinated action in the face of government guidelines that were often unclear or open to varied interpretation (e.g. face coverings). Agreeing a collective local response in these areas aimed to prevent parents from comparing schools, in order to reduce complaints and make it easier to respond to extremes of views on issues such as wearing masks. In addition, many headteachers – including in academies - reported that their local authority played an important role in convening more regular and strategic conversations in relation to public health, safeguarding and/or support and well-being for headteachers.

> *The other unexpectedly good outcome of the pandemic is that there has been much better working together of local heads.* SHL

> *Collective local decisions with local heads aligned on responses to vague government guidance on face coverings, open days, year six transition visits.* SHL

Reduced external pressure and space for innovation

Eighteen interviewees, 7 secondary heads and 11 primary, cited the government's decision to pause Ofsted inspections and pupil tests as a benefit of the pandemic. This reduction in external scrutiny had enabled them to refocus on what they saw as the core purpose of schools – teaching, learning and meeting the needs of children and families.

> *We went back to the heart of the job – teaching children and supporting parents – without the stresses of Ofsted.* PHL

Importantly, the reduced pressure to focus on meeting external accountability requirements together with the need to respond flexibly to the demands of the pandemic led many schools to innovate in ways which headteachers intend to continue post-pandemic. Examples of such innovations included: a one-way system for movement around school and staggered break times which made the school calmer; new approaches to the use of mobile phones in school; and on-line parents' evenings which increased engagement, particularly with parents who did not previously attend.

As noted above, all schools developed new skills in the use of ICT and online teaching and learning. Many had also addressed issues relating to hardware/software, broadband connectivity and/or pupil access to technology. Many interviewees said they planned to build on these developments because they saw benefits in terms of students' management of their own learning and increased confidence.

The joy of re-opening schools and surprising progress for some children

Finally, sixteen headteachers mentioned the reopening after the first lockdown as a major high, which re-enforced their commitment to the job.

> *The children continue to be a highlight - to be able to welcome them in after four months of being off school was one of the highlights of my career.* SHS

Several interviewees also expressed satisfaction that children facing additional challenges had made greater progress than expected, often as a result of the online learning and support they received in lock down. This finding is in contrast to national messages that the pandemic impacted negatively on children's learning, leading to increased gaps between more and less advantaged groups and a need for urgent 'catch up' (EPI, 2020).

> *We found new ways of working, closer ways of working with our families, which we intend to sustain, in terms of online provision. Some of our children, who are autistic or have other conditions that make it difficult for them such as ADHD, they actually made better progress with online learning than they would have done in the classroom.* SHL
>
> *Vulnerable and 'looked after' children attending school during lockdowns, as part of the key worker provision, made exceptional progress. That's because they were getting more attention, there was less distraction. In many cases they had one to one, they had the*

whole school to themselves and it worked brilliantly. It was almost like they were getting specialist provision. PHS

3.2   The main 'lows' of leading through the pandemic

Headteachers across the four categories described a relatively consistent set of low points or challenges faced during the pandemic. We summarise these lows in Figure 1 below, and then explore them in more detail in the following sections. In this section we draw together evidence from the interviews which sheds light on how and why these challenges impacted on headteachers.
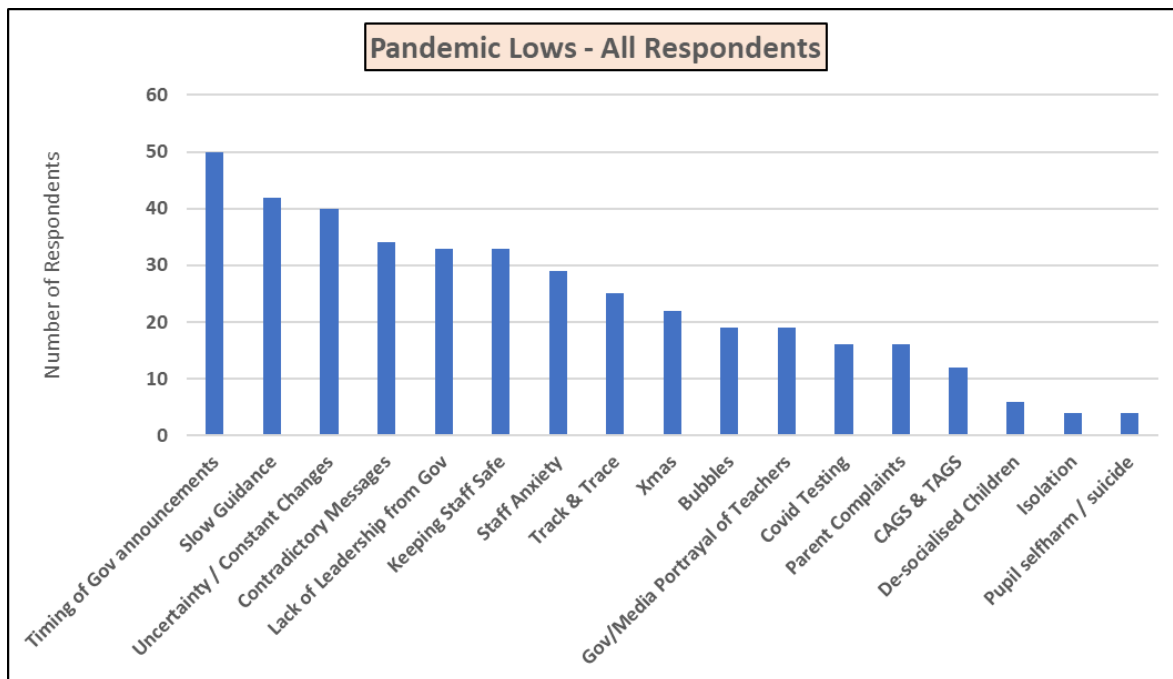
Figure 1: Pandemic lows for headteachers (Primary and Secondary)

The list of lows/challenges outlined in Figure 1 aligns with the challenges identified in the national survey (Greany, Thomson, Martindale, 2021). Many of these issues represent specific managerial challenges to be overcome, for example, how to manage bubbles, Track and Trace, or Lateral Flow Testing. As we noted in the previous section, where we explored pandemic 'highs', leaders often felt proud about how they and their teams had overcome these kinds of logistical challenges. Other lows in Figure 1 are of a different nature, for example because they: are beyond the control of headteachers to overcome (e.g. timing of government announcements); represent a particular time period when the changes were most intense (e.g. Christmas); or reflect a broader state of mind (e.g. uncertainty / constant changes).

There were no categoric differences between 'leavers' and 'stayers' in terms of the lows/challenges that they faced, although it was clear that 'leavers' were more likely to report feeling overwhelmed by these issues, as we explore in Section 7. This finding aligns with the finding from the survey that 'leavers' are more likely to have found the challenges they faced during the pandemic very or extremely stressful, although the findings here highlight that this was often for understandable reasons – for example, where the head was new to the school at the time the pandemic hit.

There were differences between phases in three areas. The first is Centre Assessed Grades and Teacher Assessed Grades (CAGs and TAGs), which only apply to secondaries (12/31 secondaries mentioned this). Secondly, pupil self-harm/attempted suicides, which were only mentioned by secondaries (4/31). Third, the administration of Lateral Flow Tests were mentioned by 13/31 secondary headteachers but only 3 primary heads.

Inadequate leadership from central government

The five most frequently mentioned sources of frustration and anger (see Fig. 1) reflected perceived inadequate leadership from central government, whose 'refusal to make decisions' placed additional stress on headteachers. Most interviewees prefaced their comments in this area by acknowledging that the pandemic presented unprecedented challenges, so it was understandable that government decision-making and guidance would be difficult, but there was universal frustration that the government's chaotic approach continued time and time again over such an extended period.

> *Whilst we all understand this is a pandemic, and that does mean things are going to be difficult, I do think that the quality and timeliness of guidance from the DfE could have been immeasurably better. The absolute low point was Christmas – and when Williamson stood up in Parliament and said parents could shop schools to Ofsted*. SHL
>
> *I think the leadership from the Secretary of State for Education has been totally and utterly misplaced. They've not given me the impression that they really understand what life is like in schools... One piece of advice for sixth form to early years…. Lack of clarity, right through to the end it's been 'shut your school, open it up again, shut your school, open school for a day. Shut it again!' - and it's us that have got to front that up to all the different people we deal with*. PHL
>
> *The DfE have created an absolute carnage of the situation.* SHL

One particular frustration was that announcements were made to the public at the same time as headteachers, who were then faced with immediate questions from staff, parents and pupils, all of whom expected headteachers to have answers.

> *Finding out guidance about how I should be running my school from the 6:00 o'clock News on the BBC. At the same time as everybody else. That again, I suppose that's part of eroding your sense of self-worth. It wasn't just once, it was over and over again.* PHL

The timing of announcements, often coming after the end of the school day on a Friday or at the start of - or during - a holiday, resulted in headteachers and their teams working during evenings, weekends and holidays. Several reported having had no break since the start of the pandemic, nearly a year and half earlier. A further issue was that the guidance provided was often issued several days after a relevant announcement and/or provided in unwieldy documents

> *So that separation between work and home has been badly damaged, and that's been exacerbated by DfE updates coming out at midnight on the night you're breaking up, just before Christmas and things like that. That, I think, shows a bit of contempt for the profession - that hasn't been healthy.* SHS

The constant changes in guidance and/or failure to deliver on existing commitments increased workload exponentially. Heads had often spent many hours planning one approach, only to then have to revise it, often after parents had been informed. Specific examples included: Christmas 2020, Covid testing and Track and Trace, food vouchers/holiday meals provision, Government laptops not arriving on time, and exams/CAGs/TAGs. In addition, the centralised guidance reflected a lack of flexibility or understanding of how schools in different phases and contexts operate.

> *Christmas was insane. We had no holiday at all at Christmas, nothing. The plans changed four times over the holiday. The mass testing was utterly unreasonable. I mean, the idea that you were going to have it up and running, by Monday, the 4th of January, having been told two weeks before and the guidance only started really appearing on the 30th of December.... It was an absolute insult to the profession. SHL*
>
> *The DfE guidance – there was a lot of it and we have to go through it and work out what you need as a special school. The guidance wasn't realistic for special schools. E.g. Kids must socially distance. If you've ever seen kids in a special school, you will know that's*

> *just not something that they understand. And the timing, I mean it was just bonkers.*
> SHS
>
> *They did ask us to do some ridiculous things… and that added to the stress, for example,*
> *the idea that somehow in a 210 school with no extra classrooms I was going to have*
> *bubbles of 15.* PHS

The slow and contradictory nature of the guidance was contrasted with the speed at which headteachers were expected to implement announcements. One of the most stressful aspects of this for headteachers was when the guidance was unclear, requiring significant interpretation before any action could be decided upon, especially when this was in areas – such as public health and staff and pupil safety – where heads felt both ill-equipped to make decisions alone, and also highly accountable. The lack of expertise or data on which to base decision-making caused anxiety to headteachers who generally prefer to make considered judgements following a period of consultation and planning.

> *DfE guidance was vague and left a lot to headteacher decisions. I found it stressful being*
> *accountable for decisions without knowing they were right and without any support to*
> *make them. PHL*
>
> *The speed at which decisions had to be made about things we'd never done before – I*
> *didn't have a template and nor did anyone else. So, for lateral flow tests, the guidance*
> *on whether or not you close a bubble following a positive LFT was unclear and I tried the*
> *DfE helpline, the LA Health advisor, PHE, a doctor, nobody knew, so I made the decision*
> *with my Chair of Governors and 3 weeks later the DfE clarified the guidance and we*
> *found we'd done the right thing.* PHS

Overall, the national government's approach was seen by many interviewees to have been clumsy and tone deaf, demonstrating both centralised inflexibility and a lack of trust in local decision-making. Several interviewees expressed anger at the refusal to listen to the profession, for example on the exams Artificial Intelligence algorithm following Scotland's experience in summer 2020. Another example was the government's refusal to listen to local public health advice, for example threatening Greenwich LA with legal action before Christmas 2020, when high case numbers caused them to advise schools to close. At the opposite end of the spectrum, one interviewee in Cornwall was frustrated by the lack of flexibility to take account of low Covid numbers locally in the early stages of the pandemic, driving what they saw as unnecessary school closures. The cumulative impact of these issues was a loss of trust in the

government's advice and guidance - a finding that chimes with the results of the national survey.

> *It's hard to overstate how much harder they made an incredibly challenging experience by not trusting us and by being so over-directive and not allowing us to do what we could see needed to be done*. PHL
>
> *I would like to emphasise the difficulty I have faced - being a leader in education - when the DfE and various other people in power have lacked leadership themselves… to have the number of shifts and changes in guidance and in policy that we've had to deal with, and a lack of respect for the profession where you are getting diktats being released on Friday, or, during the holiday. I will be inspected by Ofsted and one of the areas that they will be inspecting me on is how I have managed the work life balance of my members of staff. Well, it feels pretty, disheartening, when it feels like the DfE have no real respect for our work life balance*. SHS

Government and media portrayal of the profession

The frustration at the lack of leadership from national government was exacerbated by anger at how schools were portrayal by Government ministers and the media. Examples given included: blaming headteachers for school closures when they were following government guidance; the rhetoric about school closures when the majority of schools were open for key worker and vulnerable children throughout the lockdowns; and the negative rhetoric about 'learning loss' and 'catch up' when so much work had gone into adapting for remote learning and lessons had been taught throughout. Several interviewees expressed a view that the government was looking to blame and threaten the profession, rather than work collaboratively with school leaders: 'all the language they were using to us, wasn't collaborative at all – it was all about threats' (SHL).

> *I work in public service and I really believe that that's my job to serve the community and to keep people safe. And I don't mind any of it. But what I really struggle with is the denigration of the profession in the press and by the DfE. I just find it unacceptable that you do all of this and you do it for your community. And I'm not looking for a biscuit or a star but you know, just not to be hung out to dry all the time would be nice.* PHS
>
> *The way we are talked about is unbelievable – we're seen as a sabotage to their plans rather than as people who help children.* PHL

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These issues were compounded by a sense that the work of schools was not valued by policy makers. For example, several interviewees expressed hurt that teachers were placed after other key worker groups for vaccinations, even though they were working on the front line every day. One interviewee highlighted how the weekly 'clap for NHS workers' promoted by the government never included teachers.

> *The profession hasn't had enough acknowledgement for demands from the DfE. You know when we were coming out to work when everybody else was staying at home - that's been very much forgotten. Staff feel neglected. The vaccines weren't rolled out to teachers, even though they were asked to be in work still.* PHS
>
> *I had 70 key worker and vulnerable children in during the lockdown and all teachers came in on a rota. And then Ministers criticise headteachers for sending home more pupils than they needed to. How dare they! I have done everything I could to keep my children in school, to make sure that they were engaged*. PHS

Frustration was repeatedly expressed about the lack of awareness of how the pandemic impacted on disadvantaged communities, with stark implications for schools in these areas. Some interviewees highlighted how professionals in other services for children and young people, such as social workers, speech and language therapists, physiotherapists, and educational psychologists, worked from home throughout the lockdowns, leaving schools on their own to support the most vulnerable children.

> *The cases in this area were nightmarish - and I don't use that word lightly - before Christmas. The North West of England was particularly badly hit and I just felt like we were shouting into a void. It wasn't happening where anybody who's had an influence seemed to hear about it.* PHS

These issues led some interviewees to express a degree of political anger. Equally, others suggested that, as public trust in the government wore thin, the level of trust in schools as local institutions that were doing their best to support their communities increased.

> *I'm left very cross with how the government's absolute disregard for our profession has just manifested itself over and over again, with their crappy guidance thrown at us at the wrong times…. I'm left more politically cross than I've ever been in my life*. PHL

> *The trust in our national government has been rocked at times… so I think people have looked for who they can trust and where that trust sits, and I think schools across the country have benefitted in some ways from that. SHS*

Keeping staff and students safe

The second cluster of challenges for interviewees was around managing staff and parental anxiety and shouldering the weight of responsibility for people's health, often without sufficient expertise or support to take such critical decisions. This was felt keenly and led to sleepless nights and constant anxiety.

> *I can cope with making decisions about attendance. I can cope with making decisions about curriculum, about behaviour, because that's in my remit. I've trained to, I can cope with making decisions about finance, about staffing. What I can't make decisions about is public health. And that's what I feel like I've been made to do, and I'm still made to do all the time and that's put me under horrendous pressure*. PHL
>
> *I think the government left us in some very difficult positions and knowing how safe we were at some points was really, really difficult. You don't come into this job to make decisions about the life and death of your staff*. PHS

Most interviewees discussed the challenge of balancing the pressures on staff during a pandemic, many of whom were anxious, home schooling, caring for vulnerable family members and/or suffering bereavement, with the need to keep the school open and to offer remote learning. The DfE's determination to keep schools open at all costs after the first lock down was seen to place additional pressure on leaders, who had to balance staff absences with the practical challenges of running the school.

> *Getting emails like "I am three months pregnant, so do I have to come into school? Can you clarify exactly how you can guarantee the safety of me and my unborn baby?" Well no, I can't really - we are in a pandemic. But obviously as Head trying to reassure the staff and the students and their parents the best you can. But that's an awful lot of pressure when you end up with two thirds of the group out, but you've got to keep going even though you're 10 teachers down. That was just so challenging. DfE were very, very reluctant to close bubbles or give us permission to close bubbles*. SHL

The main strategy during the first lockdown was to operate a rota for staff to come into school, which was felt to be fair to all. However, one or two of the more well-established headteachers had the confidence to take a more flexible approach.

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> *I think the group that's been hammered are those with young children teaching live lessons while also home-schooling – we adjusted their timetables down. And where I've seen schools come unstuck is where they just said everybody must do this, and actually it doesn't work like that in a pandemic because some people can and some people can't. Or some people are really worried and some people are not. In some of the lockdowns when we were open for key worker and vulnerable children, we had a list of 20 staff that were desperate to be in school – single people in flats who didn't want to be at home and just wanted to work. So, we adjusted timetables and resources to take account of individual circumstances.* SHS

At the time of the interviews, in July 2021, headteachers reported feeling even more stressed than they had earlier in the pandemic, due to rising cases and political pressure which left them unable to take the decisions they felt were needed to keep children and staff safe.

> *Saturday two weeks ago we had eight cases in a day, and the local public health told me they didn't speak to schools at the weekend. And then when they did speak to me, they said, no, I couldn't say to the parents that they agreed that I should close the year 10 bubble because the political climate meant they weren't allowed to say that. I've got that in writing. I mean, it's just it's appalling.* SHL

Parents at the extremes

We noted above that one of the 'highs' for many headteachers during the pandemic was that they engaged differently with parents and families, often leading to a much stronger sense of connection between the school and its community. However, a significant minority of interviewees (15/58) highlighted this as an area of difficulty.

Once schools re-opened, some headteachers felt uncomfortable acting as 'the Covid police' – constantly 'nagging' teachers and parents to observe social distancing rules, which, they felt, was detrimental to previously good relationships.

One primary executive head who works across two schools noted that the relationships were different in each case, reflecting her existing relationships with the community: 'I've been a head here a long time and have the support of the parents, but I'm also Executive Head of a Special Measures school and they've challenged everything'.

For some leaders, particularly in secondary schools, the challenges associated with parents were more significant. In these schools, a small but vocal group of parents tends to sit at either

end of a spectrum in terms of their views on Covid, as the following quotes indicate. One secondary head described the 'whole barrage of vitriol' that sometimes came from parents, for example if the school had to send their child home and this 'messed up their weekend'. Another secondary head explained how such parents 'think they've got the right to treat you like you're a piece of dirt', eventually leading them to question whether they wanted to continue in headship - 'when you're getting that on a daily basis, you start to think - why bother?'

> *On the one hand you'll get the: "Why you making my daughter wear a face covering, I'm going to sue you", to the: "why aren't you making them all do this?" It's just trying to balance those extremes.* SHL
>
> *Dealing with parental anxiety. I think the pandemic has given us more outliers at a wider distribution of extremes with a more significant minority in those outliers. And so trying to pitch the message from school of positivity and things that we must do. To cater for all those different views - anti-vaxxers, those who want to keep children off school forever - it has been difficult to gauge at times.* SHS

No let up – continuing pressures over time

The interviews took place in the last few weeks of the 2020-2021 school year, at a point when schools had been fully open since the Easter break, while national 'freedom day' (on July 19th) meant that most lockdown measures were in the process of being removed. However, headteachers did not report any sense of return to 'normality'. Many heads reported that cases in schools were rising, anxieties about safety were increasing, and that some children had returned to school with more challenging behaviour - "desocialised" after lockdown.

Headteachers in four secondary schools reported concerns about rising numbers of pupil self-harm and attempted or actual suicides, which were deeply distressing. Headteachers of schools in areas of deprivation reported how the pandemic had impacted on children's wider lives, with increased cases of domestic violence, increased poverty[1] and numbers of children taken into care. At the same time, headteachers felt the pressures of 'normal' school life were returning: they were writing self-evaluation reports, preparing for or experiencing Ofsted

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[1] Government statistics show that, following the first lockdown in March 2020, the number of children eligible for free school meals increased from 1.44m or 17.3% of the school population, to 1.74m (21%) by summer 2021. This increase represented an additional 420,000 pupils – see https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics

inspections again, and feeling the weight of accountability measures, rendered more extreme by learning 'gaps' and pupil anxiety.

> *The last 10 days I've really felt it a lot because rates have just gone bonkers again in [my city]… There was a moment last Friday morning where the emails were clicking through, another child has been told to self-isolate, another member of staff needs to go home, and I felt, the first time ever, really overwhelmed… and then this morning Ofsted rang to say that they'd like to come in tomorrow – we break up next Thursday.* SHS
>
> *The cases in schools are going absolutely crazy. We've got cases virtually every day. We've got about two or three different cases which are then resulting in a whole bunch of students self-isolating. So just when we thought we were coming out it's worse than it ever was.* SHS

4.0   How has the Pandemic Impacted on Headteachers?

In this section we start by summarising evidence from the interviews on how leading in the pandemic has impacted on heads' workloads, health and well-being. Next we explore some of the deeper factors that appeared to make the situation particularly challenging. Finally, we ask what has sustained heads and identify the main forms of support they have drawn on.

4.1 Impact on workload, health and well-being

Figure 2 shows the percentages of interviewees reporting a negative impact in each of the three areas – workload, health and well-being. It shows that a significant majority of heads in both the 'stayers' and 'leavers' groups experienced a negative impact on their workload as a result of the pandemic. In both primary and secondary phases, 'leavers' are more likely than 'stayers' to report an impact on workload, but the differences are relatively small in each case.

On well-being, well over half of interviewees in both groups reported a negative impact, with secondary 'stayers' most likely to report this.

In terms of health impact, this is less common than the other two areas, but the differences between 'stayers' and 'leavers' are more pronounced, with more than half of 'leavers' reporting an impact, compared to around a third of 'stayers' in each phase. This finding chimes with our findings in the national survey.
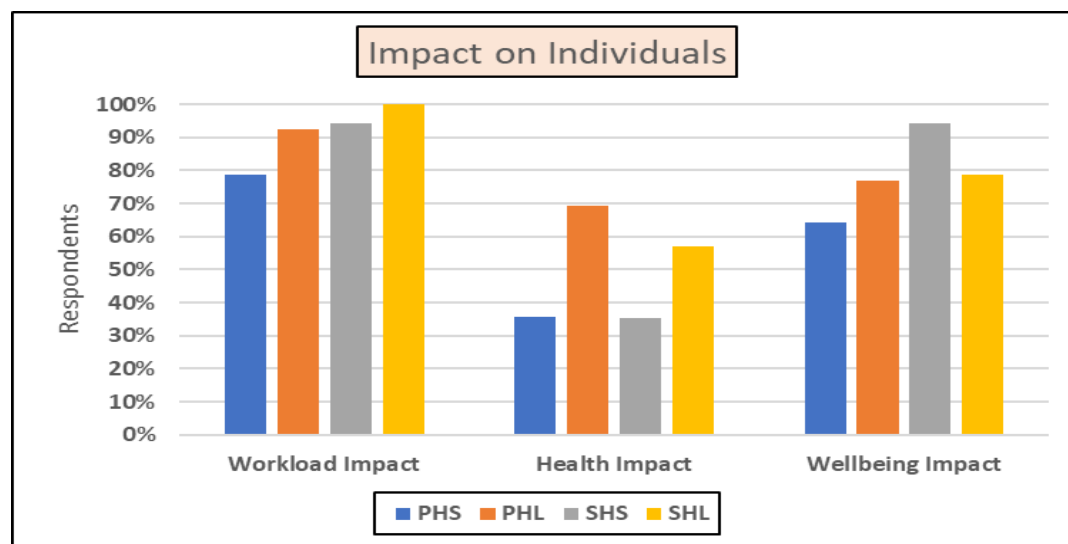

Fig. 2: Heads reporting workload, health and/or wellbeing impact as a result of the pandemic.[2]

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[2] In all other figures in this report we use the number of responses, rather than percentages, given the small size of the sub-groups. Here we use percentages on the basis that this better represents the relative size of the groups in each area.

Clearly, the main drivers of these findings are the various challenges and 'lows' that we outlined in the previous section, all of which combined to drive the perceived increase in workloads. Interviewees explained that the complex, overlapping nature of the changes required across schools coupled with the problematic approach to government announcements and decision-making meant that it was hard for them to switch off, including at weekends and holiday periods. Over time, they became ground down.

Many interviewees also faced challenges at home, for example as a result of needing to home-school their own children, look after elderly relatives, and/or deal with bereavements, all of which brought additional stress. Several interviewees indicated that their work-related stress had had a negative impact on their relationships at home, creating additional pressures and potentially impacting on the emotional support available to these heads.

It's had an impact on my marriage… I don't want to put my wife in the position of having to have that conversation with me again about being a distant husband and father. SHS

My husband, he's lost his dad to Covid during this as well. So trying - and I don't think I've got it right either - trying to get that balance between being a wife and supporting him, looking after myself so that I can support him, and then also trying to be there for school, and balance all of that has been really, really hard… But also it has been hard because I have come home from an emotionally and physically exhausting day to my husband and I can't string a sentence together. I can't even make a decision about what I want for tea and I'm in bed by 8:00 o'clock and then the next day I'm up and I'm doing it all again and not necessarily sleeping and then waking up sort of on high alert. So I wouldn't say I'm thriving. I would say I'm coping. PHS

Not surprisingly, a combination of sustained over-work, constant stress and feeling out of your depth can have negative impacts on health and well-being, as Figure 2 indicates. Some interviewees had caught Covid themselves, creating an additional challenge when there was so much do. Interviewees described a range of symptoms of how the pandemic had impacted on their well-being and health, from lack of sleep, putting on weight and drinking too much, through to being hospitalised or put on medication for depression. We explore these issues further in later sections, but provide some illustrative quotes below to illuminate the responses.

Workload:
Working hours have been incredible. My work life balance has disappeared. We're all exhausted. These last two academic years have really blended into one. PHL

> *I've worked hard all my career. But since March 2020 I've not known anything like it. You just don't switch off, because the whole track and trace business every weekend and every holiday. SHS*

Well-being

I haven't exercised at all. I've drunk too much and actually I need to spend time with my wife in the summer. SHS

I've struggled this year, more than I've ever struggled before… I've lost my power to switch off… I can't relax into a film, haven't read a book. Need to be alert in case I have to react to something. PHL

Health

Physically I'm in worse shape, I've put on weight, I don't sleep, loss of appetite... I am clinically depressed and on medication. PHL

Well, I think my alcohol consumption went up, definitely… Christmas I was exhausted and I got Covid. Then had to work in the holidays to plan the January lockdown…. Alcohol, drank more, started going for walks until I got ill. PHS

4.2 Impact on headteachers' sense of agency and identity as a leader

The cumulative impact of so many pandemic 'lows' and challenges, as outlined above, clearly left many interviewees exhausted. Many, if not most, of these challenges required wholesale change - for example staff had to move teaching online almost overnight. It is well known that leading fundamental organisational change requires sophisticated and dedicated leadership, and that even experienced leaders often struggle to lead change successfully (Hall, 2013; Day, Gu and Sammons, 2016; Robinson, 2018). However, the pandemic was not something that could be planned, staged and managed as much of the change and implementation literature (Albers and Pattuwageie, 2017; Sharples, Albers, and Fraser, 2018) recommends – rather, the changes were reactive, rapid and unpredictable. Furthermore, many of the challenges and changes that headteachers faced during the pandemic required leadership in areas that were beyond their normal expertise and experience, for example in relation to public health. In addition, the complex and fragmented nature of England's education system, in particular the extent to which national and local governance mechanisms have been disrupted in recent years, made decision-making more challenging. In this section we explore how these issues impacted on headteachers' sense of agency and identity, arguing that these factors can help to explain why some heads have not only become weary of crisis management and never-ending changes, but have become more fundamentally disillusioned as well. These are issues that we

later pick up in relation to 'leavers', but we show here that they apply equally to many of the 'stayers'.

In Section 1.1, we noted that the main motivation to become a headteacher was the sense of vocation and the desire to really make a difference for children. In addition, there was a need for autonomy, to be trusted to make decisions and to lead, in particular for secondary leaders. As we note above in relation to the pandemic 'highs', many leaders did feel able to make a difference and to overcome obstacles during this period. However, in many cases, motivations were profoundly challenged, for a mixture of reasons.

First, several interviewees explained that the pandemic had disrupted the established, predictable routines and plans that they rely on to create a sense of order and progressive improvement across the school. The disruption of these regular routines and the loss of an ability to plan for change during the pandemic appeared to be one of the most challenging aspects for some leaders.

> *We plan an academic year a year ahead. People get lead-in time to do it properly. And yet we're getting last minute vague and conflicting advice that goes against who we are. We are the sort of people who file and sort our highlighter pens by colour! People coming up with last minute info just really stresses us.* SHS
>
> *Playing catch-up - normally, we'd know what our exact priorities were for teaching and learning for the next academic year. We'd have all of our staff training calendar plan in place. All of the normal school system processes that you would do in the last three half terms have been bumped down the line. It's hard when you see things kicking off, when you see staff struggling, not to want to help out and get involved.* SHS
>
> *Finding out about what was going to happen from a leak to the press rather than giving us advance notice to plan. It really increased anxiety. They wouldn't make decisions, we were left waiting, then had to implement things within 48 hours - very confused messaging and just poor decision making. We don't operate like that. Our school is very well run, and we can't operate with uncertainty.* PHS

Second, these changes meant that headteachers had fewer opportunities to engage in the kinds of school improvement work they would normally focus on – meaning that they had fewer opportunities to feel like a professional 'expert', with all the affirmation and satisfaction that this can bring. Furthermore, headteachers struggled to find time to be strategic, because they were so often dragged into operational matters.

> *There are things I know I would have wanted to do, which haven't I got to in the same way because we have been dealing with risk assessments and tracking and tracing all the other stuff that comes with Covid*. SHS
>
> *I've not thought about teaching and learning for a long time. My focus has been trying to make sure I've got enough staff to cover classes whilst all the isolation rules are still in force. 23 staff off isolating out of 60. I'm now lunchtime supervisor! Everyone's doing different jobs. Supply staff are in short supply*. PHS

Third, a number of interviewees described being asked to make decisions that went beyond their skillset and expertise. This left them feeling vulnerable, in particular because many of these decisions stretched into areas in which a poor decision could literally be a matter of life and death: 'It's one thing if someone you know drops a couple of grades in the GCSE or doesn't like this, that and the other. But when you talk about life and death and students' health, that's what you really worry about' (SHS).

> *What I've found stressful about those decisions is where they're decisions out of my comfort zone, out of my knowledge zone. On one occasion my deputy's view was very different to mine, but neither of our views were really built on anything substantial other than our values. SHS*
>
> *I think the stress comes from having to think differently. I know how to improve learning, teaching and know how to support performance management structures. I know how to deal with difficult parents and know how to manage learning behaviour. I didn't really know how to lead the school during a pandemic, so I suppose it's been harder because you don't have that previous experience to call upon. SHS*

Fourth, interviewees described not feeling in control, often as a consequence of the way the pandemic was mis-managed by the government but also because the issues could feel so overwhelming.

> *The constant feeling of not being in control, because the relentless information that came out from the DfE, the relentless expectation on schools without any form of consultation or prior notice. The daily emails, they were just really hard to read each day.* SHS

> *You weren't in control [of the workload] – a parent would notify us, Billy's got COVID, and you have to react there and then, and sometimes it was coming through quite late at night, then from start to finish with a case it can be two to three hours before you've identified all the contacts, contacted the contacts that are then not coming into school.* SHS

The sense of not feeling in control tapped into a wider view that many leaders have less autonomy in the school system than they did in the past. For these headteachers, the centralised and over-directive nature of government decision-making during the pandemic reflected a wider trend of micro-management in education.

> *I think job satisfaction in leadership positions comes from autonomy. And the more that is taken away from head teachers then the less job satisfaction there is. There is joint pressure on autonomy from the MAT and from an increasingly prescriptive DfE, e.g. the new reading guidance is so prescriptive. I feel totally unrespected, demotivated, unvalued and I can tell you exactly how many days it is 'til my 55th birthday.* PHL

The cumulative effect of these issues was that some leaders appeared to be questioning their identity as successful leaders who have agency and can make a difference. This increased their stress and led the first leader quoted below to state 'my life has lost perspective.' Another secondary 'leaver' said 'I just don't have the heart to do it for longer', while a primary 'stayer' said 'I do think that the joy of this job has drained away horribly'. We explore these issues further, in relation to reasons for leaving, below.

> *Workload is relentless – I have worked till midnight most nights – every weekend, during every holiday – I can't not work because it could be life and death… There was the suicide of a year 9 student in the first lockdown. My life has lost perspective. I question whether I can do this job. I feel tired and worn down. It's taking its toll on relationships at home. We are expecting Ofsted. SHL*
>
> *Endless change and a total lack of control over what it is you're being asked to do. So, the absolute classic sources of stress which is change, lack of control and insane working hours. SHL*

Some leaders did seem to find ways to reduce the impact of these issues. For some, this was about remaining proactive, focusing their energy on the new, complex challenges that the pandemic threw up. For example, one secondary head explained that they phoned every member of staff at the start of the first lockdown 'so I knew their situation and how they were

feeling about things. So when we then come to make a decision as a senior team we were able to say, with clarity, we know that X will be worried about that, so we need to talk to him and understand how he's feeling and what he's prepared to do' (SHS). Another leader described a very different approach, which involved not being reactive every time the guidance changed: 'what we do now is wait for guidance, then we do nothing about it for 48 hours and we just let it settle. We wait, and see what ASCL, NAHT, the NEU say, what the local authorities say, because then there's normally a shift. We are understanding the process and therefore it's not stressful anymore (SHS).

4.3 What sustained headteachers and where did they turn for support?

Despite all the challenges, our interviewees did manage to continue working and kept their schools open throughout the pandemic. In this section we focus on what sustained them and where they turned for support.

What sustained heads?

In terms of what sustained them, the various pandemic 'highs' that we explored in Section 3.1 were hugely important, not least the joy of seeing children back in school and making progress. Underpinning these successes was the moral purpose and values which sustain teachers and school leaders in their work to support children and communities.

> *It's the deep-seated value that I believe you should try and make a positive difference to people's lives when you're here. I feel that we've done that. We've been doing that all the way. We've kept central to our values and what we believe in. It's always been a moral code for me. If I feel I'm doing that, I'm doing right by our young people and by our staff and community. That's what's guided me.* PHS

A minority of interviewees either seemed to face less intensive pressure and/or appeared to cope with the challenges thanks to particular circumstances. For example, two interviewees were co-heads, working part-time, which meant they could share the load and take some time out. Several interviewees reflected on how the pause in Ofsted inspections and national tests during the pandemic allowed them to focus on the 'real work' of headship: 'Just knowing our job was to contact the parents, talk them through the work, support them. It felt like the heart of headship and heart of teaching, which was to support families we were worried about' (PHL).

Other interviewees adopted particular personal coping strategies or organisational arrangements to help them cope. We include quotes from some of these below to illustrate their approach.

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You know I'm always quoting philosophers about 'you can't do anything about it'… So I very much feel I'm in control of my wellbeing in lots of ways. PHL

So I'm very disciplined about that. There are only a few people in the school who can get hold of me directly, so things go to my Assistant Heads, then they go to my Deputy, and then they come to me. So it works in a similar way to being a captain of a ship. So you get things filtered and dealt at the bottom of the ring, and then only the serious things get to you. PHS

Where did heads turn for support?

Figure 3 shows the frequency with which the following sources of support were mentioned. This list is very similar to the sources of support identified in the national survey. Figure 3 shows that the unions (ASCL and NAHT),[3] other headteachers and Local Authorities were most commonly cited. In addition, 22 of our interviewees were working within a MAT, of which 15 (68%) cited the MAT as a source of support, but we have not included this data in the table since it does not apply to the entire group. 'Other' here includes spouse, family, friends and Twitter.
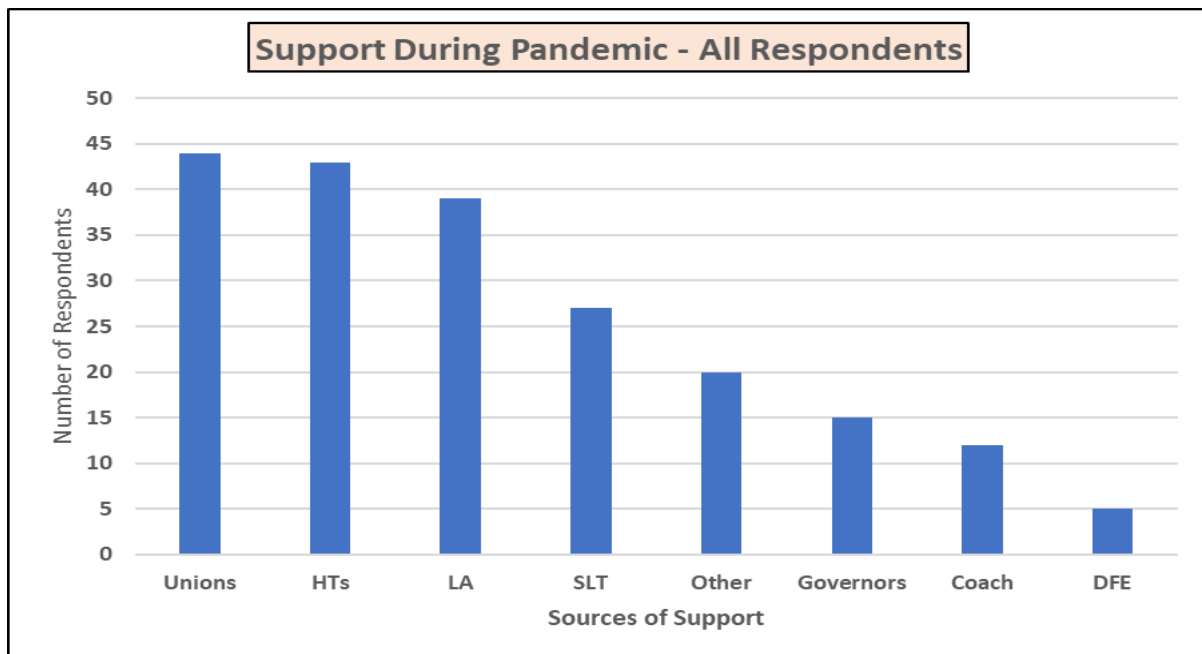

Figure 3: Headteachers' self-reported sources of support in the pandemic

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[3] It is important to note that the survey from which the interviewees were drawn was promoted by ASCL and NAHT to their members, which may mean that these responses are not completely representative of the wider population.

The majority of headteachers (44/58) described the contribution of the unions during the pandemic as 'excellent' and 'outstanding'. The unions were seen as a voice of reasonableness in a chaotic climate, and a source of mainly practical, but also moral, support.

> *NAHT have been very good – they had our backs and a finger on the pulse of what it's like on the front line. Innovative in bringing meetings online and arranging various webinars and things like that and some of those were really useful. PHL*
>
> *ASCL have been great at saying 'well done'. Making us feel we are not on our own. The fact the Union has been lobbying DfE along the way, making it very clear what they find acceptable and not acceptable. SHS*

A similar majority (43/58) cited other headteachers as a main source of moral support and a trusted sounding-board to inform decision-making. The nature of these headteacher networks varied: many, particularly in primary, mentioned an existing local cluster or partnership group, but some also mentioned more dispersed networks of friends and former colleagues who would connect via Whatsapp or other social media channels. Similarly, as we noted in relation to pandemic 'highs', around half (27/58) mentioned a deputy and/or the senior leadership team that provided both moral support ('we moaned together for ten minutes and then got on with it'), and practical support, in dividing up tasks.

Around two thirds of interviewees (14 primary heads and 25 secondaries) cited the local authority as providing good support. Many of these comments referred to the LA's Public Health Team, but there were also regular references to how the education team and other services (such as HR on vulnerable staff, or safeguarding for vulnerable pupils) had stepped up and helped to provide a level of local coherence and support, helping to build confidence and a collaborative ethos in a nationally chaotic situation. LAs had also provided practical support, such as model risks assessments that schools could adapt. Interestingly, these comments frequently came from academy as well as LA maintained leaders.

> [Name] local authority have been excellent. There's been really good dialogue. Really good support. They've had a narrative and a plan, the local public health director and the education lead. Every two weeks we get a briefing from them and which explains what we are trying to do and why, where we sit in the national picture, acknowledge the problem and say 'this is the plan to tackle it and what we could do with schools doing is getting on board with XY or Z.' It's felt like there's some grown-ups in charge. SHS

> Our local authority has been very supportive. Although we're an Academy, you still work within the remit of the local authority on quite a lot of different things, and I wouldn't say that there has ever been a scenario where we've had disagreements with the local authority. SHS
>
> The local authority have been a massive support. They created a special place where you could email if you had an issue. They created a group [with] heads from representative areas who could look at problems. The health and safety advice we got was fantastic. The risk assessments and everything were really good. PHL

MATs were both a source of support and, for some, a source of pressure. For 15 of the 22 headteachers working in a MAT, the trust reduced much of the responsibility for making decisions and/or provided interpretations of DfE guidance and templates to adapt, such as risk assessments. MATs also provided physical resources, such as IT equipment and curriculum resources. In some cases the CEO of the trust was cited as a source of support, for example as someone to talk through issues with. For others, the conflicting advice of a regional or national MAT from that of the local authority or local public health advisor was a source of stress, with some stating they were asked to do things they didn't feel were safe. One head explained that the MAT had used the pandemic as an excuse for a 'land grab', for example by centralising the school's budget, leaving him less able to work flexibly to meet children's needs.

> *The main one really good thing about our trust is that they funded every child to have a Chromebook. Which has been amazing, especially for our kids; some were trying to do their work on their parents' iPhone during the first lockdown*. PHS
>
> *Conflicting guidance is a problem. Some of the difficulties have been when the MAT, the local authority and the DfE don't agree. So, the DfE sends out some guidance to local authorities say, well, we want everybody to do this and then the MAT they want everybody to do that. And sometimes you can feel a bit trapped in the middle. SHS*

Interviewees who had received coaching support felt it had been vital for them. This was particularly the case for young or newly appointed heads. Interestingly, female headteachers mentioned the support of a coach more frequently than males.

> *What really helped was I had a coach and I started seeing her more often. She helped me prioritise and find a balance. Actually, I think if I'd not had her at that time, I don't know what I would have done. What I needed was someone who would genuinely listen, give me space to think and help me solve the issues.* SHS

Finally, notwithstanding the issues with DfE guidance highlighted above, five headteachers did say that it was useful to some extent.

> *The DfE guidelines were useful because if anybody questions anything, then you've got that to fall back on* PHL

5.   The impact of the pandemic on headteachers' career plans

5.1   Changing intentions

As outlined above, our interviewees included an even balance of 'leavers' and 'stayers', based on responses to the online survey completed in April and May 2021. Our interview findings indicate that the situation remains fluid, and that there is the potential to reduce the number of leavers overall if the headteacher role can be made more manageable. By the same token, a failure to address the issues highlighted here and in the survey could mean even higher numbers choose to leave.

Three headteachers had changed their intentions between completing the survey and being interviewed in July: one primary 'stayer' had decided to leave, while two 'leavers' (one primary and one secondary) had decided to stay. Their reasons included changes of heart – for example feeling reinvigorated when the school reopened and they saw the children again – through to a realisation that they couldn't leave for financial reasons.

A larger number of headteachers remained 'undecided' about whether to leave or stay. This included both 'leavers' and 'stayers':

- 4 primary and 7 secondary headteachers who indicated they would stay in the survey, but then explained at interview that this was in the hope that their working conditions would improve. If not, then they would also leave early.
- 7 primary heads and 5 secondary headteachers who indicated they would leave in the survey, who explained at interview that they might consider staying if conditions improved.

Understanding the reasons for the headteachers' choices might avert the crisis which some headteachers are predicting.

> *I think we haven't seen the mass exodus from the profession that we will do in the next two or three years, because I don't think we feel that we've got through the pandemic yet, but I would suggest that in the next two or three years we will see quite a lot of very experienced school leaders who have just hit burnout, absolute burnout*. PHL

5.2   Reasons for leaving or considering leaving

We have outlined a series of issues above which impact on leaders' decisions to leave the profession. These include the specific pandemic 'lows', the impact that this had on leaders'

workload, well-being and health, and the underlying ways in which this undermined leaders' sense of agency and identity as leaders. These findings chime with the findings from the survey, for example where we identified that leaders who faced personal health challenges during the pandemic were more likely to say they would leave. In this section we build on these analyses to focus more specifically on why the 'leavers' said they were would leave. Figure 4 provides an overview of their responses when we asked why they were leaving, although it is important to note that 'stayers' gave largely similar responses to the question of what they think is needed for headship to become more manageable.
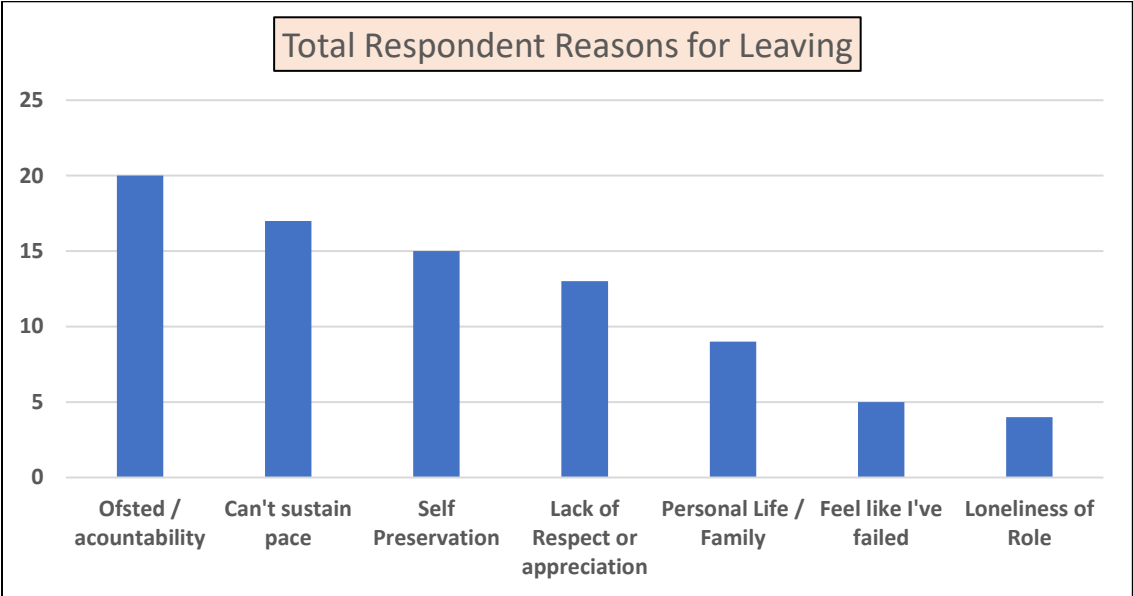

Figure 4: Interviewees' reasons for leaving

Starting with Ofsted and accountability, 16 out of 27 'leavers' (and 20 interviewees in total) said this – on top of the pandemic - was a major factor in their decision.

> I am 100% going to retire early and it is 100% down to the pandemic. I don't want to but I need less pressure from central government re standards – it will take 2 – 3 years to catch up but they judge me on Ofsted and SATs now. I would 100% stay if they removed that pressure. PHL

The second most common response was the unsustainable 'relentless' pace of work, which was cited by around a third of the 'leaver' headteachers. As we noted above and in the survey, for some, this was having an adverse effect on their health.

> *The effect of stress on your body. It's just overwhelming. There's got to be more to life than the sacrifices you make to run a school.* PHS
>
> *I am definitely taking early retirement. I'm worried about my own health. PHL*
>
> *Nothing would change my mind now.   I haven't got the energy for it and I don't want to carry on making the sacrifices. SHL*

Linked to the relentless pressure and loss of identity was a need for self-preservation, to get out before the job crushes you.

> *Headteachers are people – my in-laws both died during the pandemic – but we were treated without care or respect. The DfE held the profession in contempt.* SHL
>
> *Working 15 hour days and being just absolutely exhausted, you come in and you're just surviving. You weren't living, just surviving, go home, eat, then literally fall asleep. Get up and do it on repeat the next day. But that's not the way that I want to live. SHL*

Also linked to the above issues was the sense that the profession had been treated with contempt, in particular by ministers and the DfE, as we explored above. Several interviewees argued that the system had become overly politicised, meaning that they could work hard on behalf of children and the community, but still face the sack if, for example their school was taken over.

> *One of my staff asked me: "why does the government hate us so much?". There needs to be a realisation that most staff in schools do a good job… if people like me are pushed out of the profession because of the political stuff, that's actually pretty wasteful. You know, the government couldn't care less if I live or die. SHS*
>
> *I hadn't ever intended to leave this early. But I think the way that we've been treated as school leaders over these two years, I think it'd push anyone over the edge to be honest. PHL*

A final important point to make about the 'leavers' is that, in the primary phase, headteachers of schools with higher levels of disadvantage were more likely to say they intend to leave the profession early (Figure 5). However, this is less marked for the secondary phase (Figure 6).
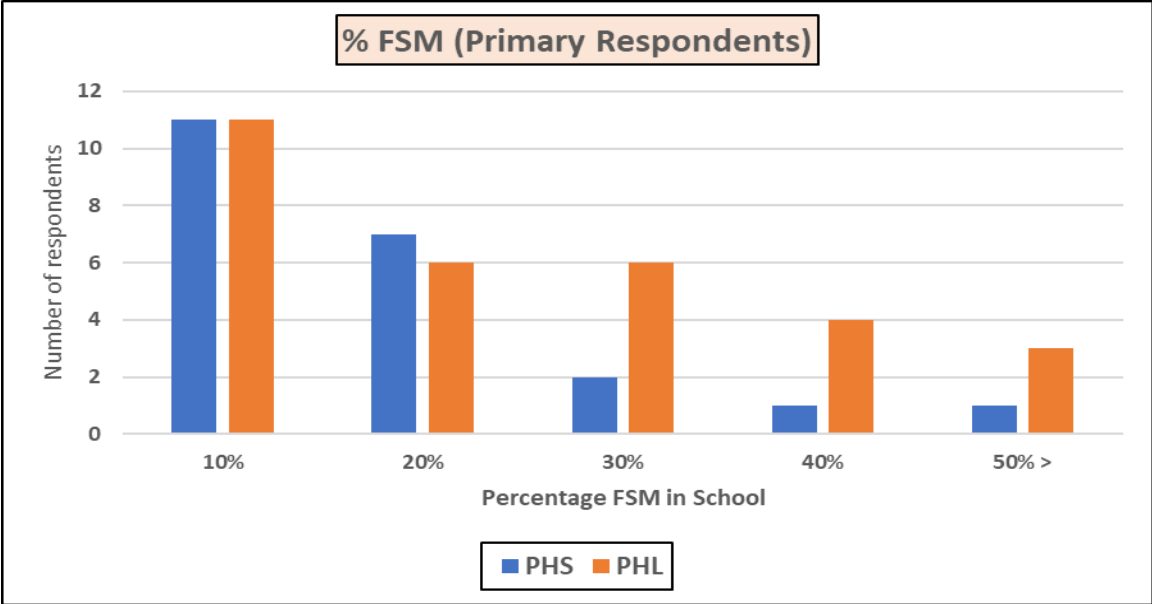
% FSM (Primary Respondents)

Figure 5: Intention to leave the profession early and levels of school deprivation (Primary)
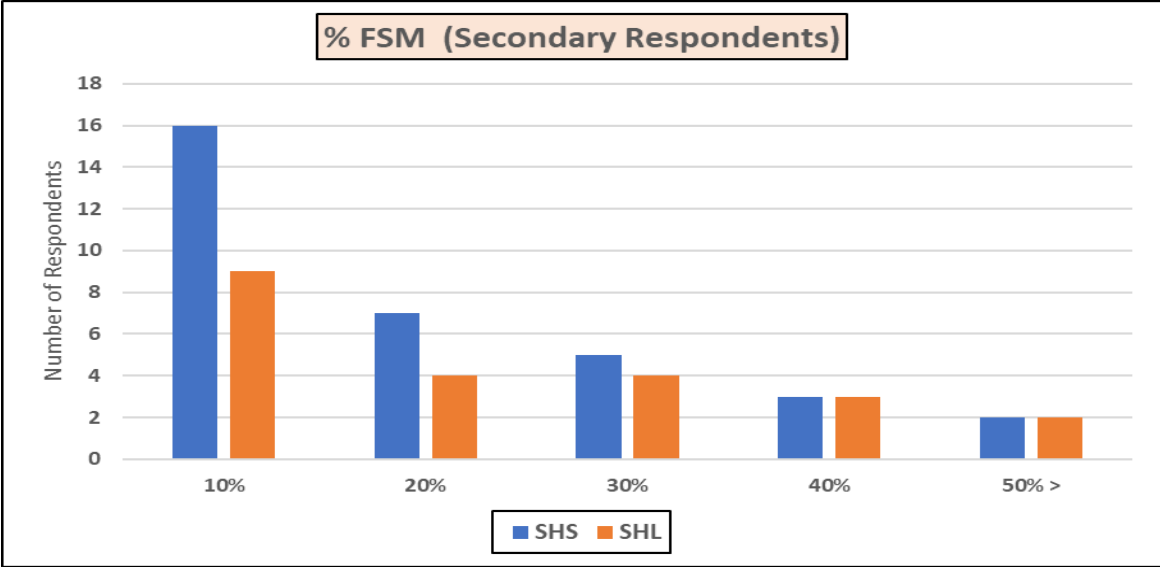
% FSM (Secondary Respondents)

Figure 6: Intention to leave the profession early and levels of school deprivation (Secondary)

5.3 Reasons for staying

The 'stayers' gave a number of reasons for wanting to remain in the profession. Many of these relate to the original motivations for headship outlined at the start of this report - moral purpose and making a difference.

> *Education is a fabulous career. Headship is a fabulous job and I don't want the sometimes negative rhetoric that you get with it to put people off, because it's been the most fulfilling role I could have had and I would want others to experience that. SHL*
>
> *The inequalities that I see, the unfairnesses that I see, the opportunities to make a difference in people's lives. For sure I still feel that as keenly today as I did a year ago. I do not feel for a second that my work is done. I know I've got a lot to offer.   SHS*

Other 'stayers' described a sense of unfinished business in their school, making them want to stay and see this through.

> *I feel I can get it somewhere with this school. I've got quite a lot of good things happening. So, I've got plans. I will stay until normal retirement age.   PHS*
>
> *I'm not walking away. I'm looking forward to not having to do track and trace, I'm looking forward to managing Covid a little bit better. I'm looking forward to actually putting things in place that can make this school a reflection of what I believe education should be about, and I know that's going to take 2,3,4 years. SHS*

Some stayers argued that the pandemic had actually reaffirmed their commitment to education and young people. For these heads, it had led them see the role of schools somewhat differently, in line with the quote in Section 3.1 which argued that schools have become 'anchors' for children and families in a context of wider services disappearing.

> *The pandemic has, if anything strengthened my understanding of my vision and values for education and the role that it plays in our wider society because it's made us look beyond just the GCSE results and made us consider what an important and central role we play in the lives of some of these families. For many of these children, and as it turns out now, their families, we are the rock that holds together - the feeding, the care, the emotional social education and learning, wider than just the curriculum. And that makes me, even more determined to make sure that this is the best school it can be to meet the needs of its diverse community. SHS*

5.4 The experiences of 'younger' heads

We focus here on the thirteen interviewees who were under the age of 46, several of whom started in headship shortly before or even during the pandemic. Of these, four intended to leave the profession, although all said they might be persuaded to stay if the 'relentlessness' of

working conditions were reduced. Clearly, if nearly a third of younger headteachers choose to leave the profession this will leave a long-term gap to fill. We include extended quotes from three of these younger heads below.

On the whole, the challenges they faced were similar to their older peers, but some distinct themes also emerge, in particular around: loneliness; being unable to imagine continuing like this for another 30 years; wanting to start a family, but seeing headship as incompatible with this; and the view that a job outside education could offer real work-life balance.

> **PHL: early thirties, LA school, rated Good, first year of headship**
> At times I've barely got through it. There's been daily tears. I haven't been able to be the head I want to be. I need to protect myself – it's almost self-preservation. I thought about walking away on many many occasions and I've been teaching for, I think, 15 years and for much of that, never thought I'd do anything else. I've felt like I'm born to teach. I've got to this point of headship, which is wonderful - it is the best job in the world in some parts, but I've never before genuinely thought of walking away and I've almost written my resignation letter on a number of occasions this year. I've felt like an NQT head and haven't had the experience to fall back on. I have not enjoyed my job this year. The constant changes have been exhausting. I feel really lonely because at the end of the day, you are the person shouldering the responsibility if things go wrong.

> **SHS: mid-thirties, MAT, rated Good, below average FSM, first year of headship**
> I had thought 'this is what I'm now going to do for a long time'. And now I think, 'how long can you sustain this level of work'?
>
> A really awful DfE decision comes and you have to kind of PR it to make it seem positive. I needed to be strong. I need to be the person that people are happy to come to. But I also still need to be a mum and a wife and a daughter and a friend and it was too much, it was just too much.

> **SHL: late-thirties, MAT, first year of headship**
> I think people like me in schools who are really struggling with low Progress 8 or being in mergers, I think they will have probably been hit harder than… those in a very good school who are so much more established as a school.
>
> I'm 38 and I just can't imagine another 30 years of this because it's all consuming… You've got to really enjoy your work, and education is something, you're not doing it for money, you're doing it because you've got to really enjoy it… Now I've got a lot of

> friends who are on similar money, similar qualifications to me, have been working from home on compressed flexi hours, having a much better work life balance and you do think… I just think in just in terms of a work life balance, I can't see how… I'd like to have children and I just genuinely don't see how I could do that as head.
>
> I'm actively looking for other jobs but at the same time, if next year was significantly better in terms of the expectations and the time scales that the DfE was expecting for things and little bit more common sense about how they did things.

6. What could improve Headteacher retention?

Finally, we asked interviewees, and particularly the 'leavers', whether anything would persuade them to stay in the profession for longer. As might be expected, their responses largely mirrored the challenges and issues highlighted throughout this report, but they also include practical measures, such as coaching and providing more active support for job-share headship. We summarise their responses briefly here.

Greater political and public recognition, in particular from ministers and DfE.
Suggestions included better consultation and listening to Headteacher representatives and a change of mindset to appreciate that headteachers want to, and do do their best for the children in their care. The lack of understanding was felt to hold especially for those serving disadvantaged areas. Guidance was felt to be secondary-centric, with little understanding of younger children, nursery schools, primaries, small schools or special schools.

> *To change my mind, it would need some sincere recognition from the people that run our country of how difficult this has been for lots of people…. Headteachers and teachers should be cherished like they are in other countries. SHL*
>
> *What would change my mind? If you knew that you were really appreciated. I've never once spoken to the RSC's office. Our local authority, they've got basically one person who's been liaising with the heads, but she lived in another county all the time because they're not coming into the office. It's a bit depressing really. SHL*

A more supportive and fairer accountability system, not least so that the stress and differential impact of the pandemic on children themselves can be recognised and not made worse.

> *I think if they made the climate more supportive of headteachers – that would definitely make me change my mind. You're always one Ofsted away from your career up in smoke. PHL*
>
> *The viability of the hard KPIs over the next 36 months has to be questioned.*
> *We've had our year 10 exams and we found that one of our students was so upset from her results today, and she's had to isolate a number of times, she took a load of paracetamol and jumped out of an upstairs window. That's the impact. SHL*

Headteachers to have a personal coach as an entitlement.

> *If there were a means of leaders being offered a designated coach to redress the fact that head teachers are, education is, one of the few professions where line managers do not have their own supervision. I need to have a safe space for me. PHS*

More scope for flexible working. Respondents who were in job shares or co-headship (where an experienced headteacher coming up to retirement works part-time alongside a deputy as part of succession planning, cited these arrangements as a critical factor in managing the stresses and workload of the Pandemic.

> *The reason why this pandemic was easier, I think for me, is because of flexible working, because I'm a co-head. I didn't have to do this alone. SHS*
>
> *Remove the prejudice against job-share headships. I know many, many talented leaders who have said to me 'I might apply for headship if I wasn't doing it by myself'. We are just losing people and, you know, I think there is a female agenda there as well. We are a female dominant profession. I'm a single parent. I've got three teenagers. I don't work full time because I can't, so I had two choices - either carry on being a head part time or stop being a head. Many people are carers for elderly parents – we need more proactive initiatives about looking at shared leadership roles in schools. SHS*
>
> *There's two of us here. If I were on my own, I'd find it particularly challenging. So we can always run things over again with each other and it really helps. PHL*

Better support for headteachers, particularly those who are young, new to headship, or new to a school. We noted some of the specific challenges that younger heads faced in the previous section. Several more experienced headteachers stated that they drew on their years of

experience to sustain them and argued for more active mentoring and support for younger heads than is currently available.

> *I think you get a lot of support simply from your experience. I think with experience you make better judgments in difficult situations and I wouldn't have liked to have faced this in my first couple of years as head. I would have been a lot more anxious about it because you know you do deal with major incidents over 15 years.* SHS

Adequate resourcing. Nineteen headteachers mentioned reduced funding as a challenge, mainly in the context of inadequate provision of health and welfare services. However, concerns were also expressed about the impact of cuts on the daily operation of schools, with particular criticism of the decision to cut pupil premium funding by changing the census date in 2021.

> *For me, funding is the big thing. Senior leaders are doing duties at lunchtime at break time because we don't have the required numbers of staff. We are having to make cuts and having to make frequent cuts in pastoral support, which affects children in terms of their access to social and emotional support, but the expectation is still that we have all of these things in place. But you know it's not being backed up by funding. I think that schools at this moment in time need the funding for me to be able to do my job, and then so many of the people within this school to do their job as well.* SHS

Paying more attention to the perspective of young people. Many interviewees were concerned about the impact of the pandemic on young people, including their mental health, arguing for their voices and needs to be put centre stage in the recovery period.

> *It seems the DfE just artificially tied themselves into this position about exams. The communication was terrible. They should have thought about the unfairness to pupils. I felt it betrayed a lack of understanding of what young people are going through. SHS*
>
> *The pandemic had a profoundly damaging effect on quite a lot of our students. For reasons I don't fully understand, it's clearly been a mental health disaster for a lot of young people... We have a very extensive and robust pastoral support system in school, but despite all of those things it's had a very negative impact on large numbers of students in terms of damaging their self-esteem, raising anxiety levels. We might have 50 students reporting to us now that they are self-harming and we know full well there will be students too who aren't reporting that fact and that is four times as high as we might normally experience. They feel incredibly miserable and isolated and unhappy and*

44

> *powerless. Young people have been the subject of an awful lot of regulation, manipulation, change, re-organisation and yet they have no power to influence it, they simply have to cooperate with what the adult world does or asks them to do. I absolutely understand why it may have led a lot of young people to really feel incredibly powerless. SHS*

7.   Conclusion

The study has found, in line with others (e.g. Fotheringham et al., 2021) that the demands and challenges of leading a school in a pandemic far outweigh the job resources and the sources of fulfilment. Just under 50% of headteachers interviewed who are currently intending to stay in the profession caveat this decision with the need for the role to become more manageable. They are 'waiting to see' but do not believe they can sustain current levels of pressure. Similarly, half of those intending to leave would stay if the main job demands were reduced. For leavers and stayers, the job demands are similar; they are also within the power of government to address.

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Appendix 1: Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me a bit about you:
   a. how long have you worked in education?
   b. how long have you been in your current role/school?
   c. what motivated you to become a headteacher/HoS?
   d. thinking about your experience as a leader before the pandemic, what did you enjoy most and what did you find most challenging?

2. Now tell me briefly about your school: how would you describe it to a prospective parent in a sentence or two?

3. What have been the main highs (if any) and lows of leading through the pandemic, in your experience?

4. How has leading a school during the pandemic impacted on: a) your workload, b) your personal health and well-being? How have you kept going – what has sustained you?

5. Where have you gone for advice and/or support to help you deal with (leadership) challenges during the pandemic? Which sources/types of support have been most useful/important - why? We are particularly interested in the advice and support provided by DfE and, separately, ASCL or NAHT – did you draw on these and, if so, how effective have they been in your view?

6. How does it feel now that schools are open again – would you say that things are moving back to 'normal', or is leadership still unusually challenging?

7. Has the pandemic impacted on your motivation to be a leader, or your career plans at all?
   Probes:
   If they were a 'stayer' in the survey, check if this response is consistent – if not ask why it has changed?
   Similarly, if they were a 'leaver' check consistency and any changes.
   (If planning to leave) what, if anything, might persuade you to stay for longer?

Appendix 2: Participant Characteristics

A1.1 Age and Experience of Headship

Figure A1 shows the age profile of the interviewees. This shows that 'stayers' are somewhat more likely to be younger (e.g. 19 out of 31 are ≤50 years old), while 'leavers' are more likely to be older (e.g. 18 out of 27 are ≥50 years). However, this still means that a third of the 'leavers' are younger than 50.

In addition, we asked how many years' experience interviewees had of headship. Twelve headteachers had less than 3 years' experience of headship; of these one third intended to leave the profession. Twenty-six had between 3 – 10 years' experience, with half intending to leave. 18 had between 11 – 20 years' experience of headship, with 10 intending to leave.
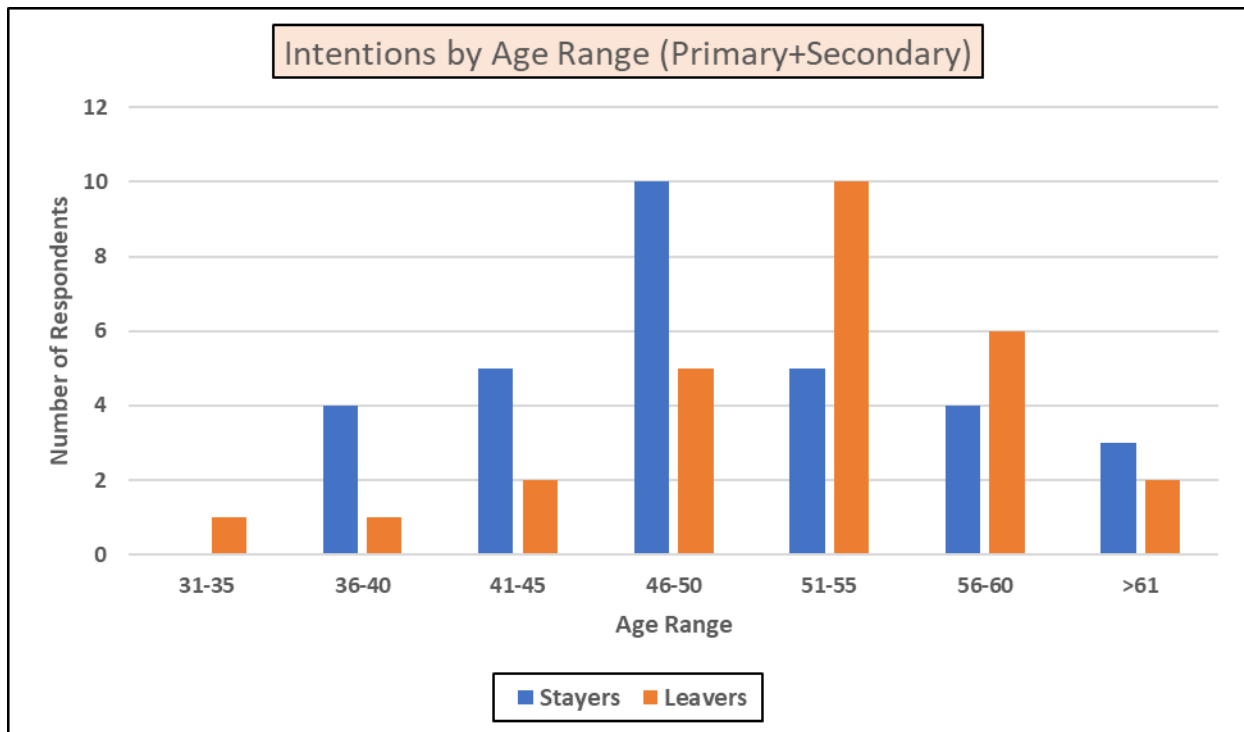

Figure A1: Age profile of respondents

A1.2 Gender

We show the gender of respondents in Figure A2, with actual numbers as follows:

- PHS   4 male and 10 female
- PHL   5 male and 9 female
- SHS   15 male and 2 female
- SHL   7 male and 7 female

According to the Department for Education (2018), 73% of all primary headteachers and 38% of all secondary headteachers in England are female.

At primary level, women are thus slightly under-represented in our sample (i.e. 67% versus 73%). The male/female ratio in each category ('leavers' and 'stayers') is similar.

At secondary level, women are more clearly under-represented in our sample (i.e. 29% versus 38%). In addition, the ratios differ, with just two out of 17 women 'stayers', compared to 7 out of 14 'leavers'. The small sample in this strand of the research means that we cannot draw generalised conclusions from these responses. In the project survey, we analysed responses by gender – including for intention to leave the profession early – but did not identify any significant differences.
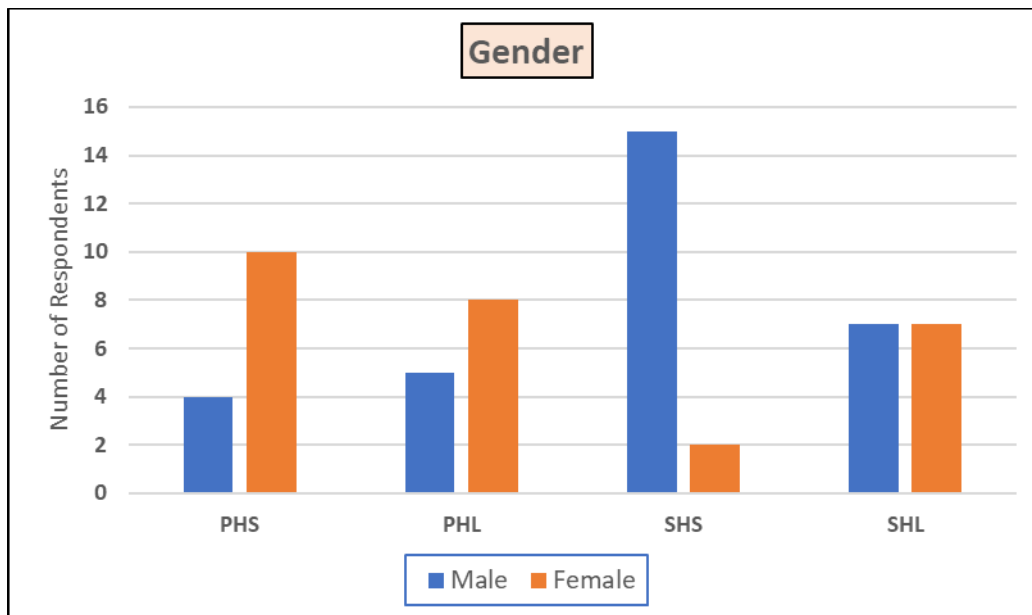

Figure A2: Gender of interview respondents

A1.3   School characteristics and Ofsted categories

Fifteen of the respondents were from LA maintained schools; 22 were in a MAT; 14 were Stand-alone academies and 10 were faith schools, including 3 LA-maintained and 1 in a MAT.

The interviewees included 7 headteacher of schools graded Outstanding by Ofsted; 4 Requires Improvement; and the remaining 47 Good.