

Headteacher wellbeing survey –comments

General comments

The demands on a headteacher are increasing year on year. Unless you are in the role I don't think you can appreciate the toll these demands take on you and the extent that this impacts both mentally and physically on the rest of your life outside work.

The approach taken appears a binary one. Move into lockdown and all priorities are altered and the expectation that Heads are considered and supported, for their own wellbeing, is raised. Exit lockdown and there is a climate of normality in the expectations that Head's can deliver, be held to public scrutiny, and provide recovery, at a time when we have more Covid cases than ever before, more staff absence than ever before, a greater workload than ever before, and are still very much dealing with the reality of the day to day impact in the school. I am concerned for my team, and every day have to accept my own vulnerability, and put it to one side. The old adage states that you have to look after yourself first, take dedicated time, make space ... but under such challenging circumstances this is exceptionally difficult, and my presence needed more than ever to be the glue that holds the organisation together. Exhaustion levels are significant, and I think the gap between what is expected of me, and what we are able to deliver, is widening and adds to the stress. I know I will not be alone, or that this is not a nationwide issue. Now is the toughest it has been.

I consider myself to be a very positive, resilient person and I despair of people who like to dwell on the negatives of the job, however, it is extremely difficult to maintain this positivity and not get drawn into poor wellbeing. Only yesterday, I thought 'what else is there?' and if I wasn't the main earner at home, would change careers. I don't have that as a realistic option.

Although I've been a HT for 12 years I've never felt so overwhelmed as I do at the moment.

This term has been the hardest of my entire career. The pressure seems to be at a much higher level trying to manage staff- some of which have seen a different life due to COVID, and also trying to get the children ready for the SSATs when groups are out constantly at the moment due to COVID positive tests. It is hard in school at the moment.

It has been a horrendous time for all of us, everyone has had an exceptionally challenging time and the sad thing is, nobody has the answers. We continue to support each other and learn human behaviour - people really are peculiar! Added pressures from unreasonable parents who are wrongly advised by forums has made the job horrible.

Although I have not considered retiring it will lead me to retire earlier than planned.

Anecdotally, my son is 26. A few months ago, getting in from work I said 'I hate my job' and he said, 'In all my years, I have never, ever heard you say anything remotely like that about your work.'

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Being a headteacher feels like an impossible task, with pressures and accountability constantly increasing; lots of words about headteacher workload but nothing actually being done. I have very seriously considered quitting the role if anything comes my way that will pay the bills.

The last two years has been the most challenging of my career and resulted in my mental health being affected.

It was incredibly hard to rank the stressors as it depends on the day if I am being honest. I have never known a term as difficult as the first half of this term. It is the first time I have ever considered resigning from education completely.

I think it is the relentless nature of managing the organisation and the fact that we returned from the Summer so much less resilient. I also have some issues at home that I am finding less able to manage as work has been so challenging.

Such a challenging time with no end in sight.

I think the job is now so work heavy that it is impossible to do a good job without working 18 hours a day. No amount of coaching etc would change that unfortunately. I am a fairly positive individual who accesses and maintains my own mental health well but you cannot change the continuous pressures of Ofsted changes, parents and paperwork, the pressures of managing COVID has also completely changed the job for me. It is like Ofsted and the LA have completely forgotten the pandemic has taken place and it is business as usual except anyone actually working in school knows that this is not true with staff absence/wellbeing at its highest and being one person trying to manage this is unachievable.

Staff shortages have resulted in entirely untenable workloads for head teachers. Today, I am HT, DHT, SENCo and SBM, I am running the office at lunch time, teaching this afternoon and will, indubitably, be working through the night -again- to catch up on my own work. I thought it would be a good idea to complete this survey on what has become a typical day and night in the life of a Covid-era HT.

In my 8 years of headship I have never felt so demotivated and helpless. No support for SEND, increased number of displaced pupils, reduced budgets, ongoing threat of Ofsted which affects everyone. What is going to attract the future headteacher?

The job over the last 18 months has been so hard and stressful. Apart from the support of headteacher colleagues (and that is because you understand we are all dealing with the same issues) there is little support for headteachers. Parent demands have increased since Covid and LA support is negligible. We have more and more high needs pupils in our school with little no support from the LA. Our IP was on long term sick and our EP is not worth discussing. I feel more and more is put onto headteachers in regards to the whole of education and there is little support.

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My days are still very much dominated by operational matters - some directly linked to Covid, others not. Finding the capacity for the strategic elements of headship (which I love) remains hugely challenging yet the message is very much that Covid is over, Ofsted is back and we must be accountable for everything once again. This is unrealistic, unwise and unsustainable.

As a new headteacher I find the job incredibly lonely. I work exceptionally long hours. There is little support from the LA with regards to children with additional needs or challenging behaviour. Our EP has never set foot in the school since I became a head last year. The school I am working in needs to make rapid improvements yet there is little help to support this. Alongside this the demands put on schools by the government are unrealistic and this is then combined with Covid as well. As a headteacher I deal with complaints from families continually. Staff feel under pressure and it is difficult to keep morale up. It is not how I envisaged the role would be. I had always been a determined individual who wanted to become a headteacher, I am now regretting my decision.

I absolutely love my job and I think I cope well with the pressures.

I found the above very difficult really as I feel incredibly well supported. I have a solid network of family and friends and a good range of hobbies which enable me to get plenty of brain space in my "free" time. I have professional supervision once a month with a consultant which is paid for by the governing body as part of their head teacher wellbeing responsibilities. Since the lockdown, my governors have also been very proactive in encouraging more working from home where appropriate, for example, if I have online training or a plethora of online meetings in a single day, I will take those at home as outside of the pandemic, I would have been off-site for those kinds of events in any case. I have very good relationships with local heads so if I need any support or advice, I have plenty of channels to pursue. Support from Clare Kershaw throughout the pandemic has been second to none and EPHA has provided plenty of support with webinars from a range of experts in their field which have been exceptionally useful and a real "lighthouse" in what has been an unbelievably challenging time. I have a fabulous working environment both in terms of physical space (which is often commented on during virtual meetings) and I have an amazing SLT and staff who operate within a culture of honesty and openness so we will resolve issues together where issues arise. I have learnt over a number of years how to manage the stress of my role and at the moment, I am working harder than I have had to in ten years, purely because I am transitioning to a new job in the New Year so there are tasks that are arising related to that which are taking up additional time. However, because I am excited about this new opportunity, it is a "good" busy as opposed to a "stressful" busy, both emotionally demanding and fulfilling in equal measure. I do feel it's important to provide more support for new Heads, alongside their Chair, in how to manage your own wellbeing: I think sometimes they need "permission" to do certain things. I feel this can be a real issue where governor experience and confidence in managing head teacher wellbeing can be crucial and the difference between the Head being "fired up" and "burning out..."

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Ofsted

The resumption of Ofsted has hugely increased stress - particularly with the wider window. The LA's management of this has also been unhelpful - Amber risk etc (when actually the LA had been brilliant during Covid).

A bloody hard job - but a good one. OFSTED looming causes untold damage to mental health. The 2 year extension has put more schools in the window - increase stress

The management of Covid over the past 18 months has considerably affected workload for me as a Head when I already have an extremely poor work life balance.

It has been a really hard time with dealing with everything that comes with Covid as a global pandemic, from covering staggered lunch breaks, cooking for vulnerable/keyworker children in first lockdown, allaying staff fears, supporting parents with feeding their families, providing 'learning' in school and at home and being the person trying to hold the school together and supporting our children, the families and ensuring staff and their families are ok too!

External pressures

It constantly feels like I am just doing things sent by external sectors to tick their own box. Really unhappy about being TOLD to take part in the DSL/Social worker support research (i have not got time) and then asked to complete a questionnaire whereby the first page was to tick against the statement that said 'I agree that I am voluntarily taking part' (or words to that effect). Feels like George Orwell's 1984!

The thing which is stressing me the most is the potential Federation between my employing school and another school. This is necessary as neither school can afford a full time headteacher. However, both schools need a full time headteacher - this results in an extremely heavy workload. I cannot complain about this as the Federation must go ahead for the financial sustainability of both schools. There is nowhere to turn - governors are not aware of the pressures and just add more workload. I now have a parental complaint against me, which I have never had before. Who do you tell/talk to? I do not feel there is anywhere to go and I just plough on. You don't even get a break during the holidays as Governors contact you at all times.

Complaints from parents-Having to close bubbles, events not going ahead, remote learning and running two schools (face to face and virtual). That is why is is rated high though not an issue now. Current -Staffing: absence and financial strain. This is now becoming more a factor so stresses are now shifting and financial would be higher up the list. No additional money to support pupils or cover absence. Having to justify money being spent (recovery). Complicated Tutor system and having to pay a percentage. Early Years curriculum/framework, baseline, reading/phonics, whole school curriculum and Ofsted there in the background still etc having to jump through hoops upon returning. No strategy for the future it's as though the pandemic hasn't happened.

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We appreciate there is a need to share important info but email inboxes are huge. You spend your day job 'doing' - in meetings, being visible, covering duties as lack of staff etc then the only time to read/respond to email is at night so no worklife balance.

Government recognition

A challenging time... it would help if government acknowledged the pressure schools are under. We are the first stop for our communities and need the funding/ resources to do this.

For the government to recognise that gaps in learning are significant and a sticky plaster for a couple of months is not going to get all children back on track.

The ridiculous COVID guidance has made this term incredibly hard. Staff anxieties/ absence and the impact on staffing budgets is hugely stressful. Additional funding should be available for staff absence that is linked to COVID- with pupils coming in (spreading COVID) whilst waiting for results is making the situation increasingly hard. I feel that the Government are showing no concern for school staff at all.

Support

As a church school, support from the diocese (CofE) has been strong, and from peer HTs in our Catholic group of schools has been great (we meet at least termly for a day of R and R but also planning reviews and generally supporting each other). Support etc provided by CTSA is a real strength in supporting us HTs in providing access to training and updates (for ourselves and our staff), as are the EPHA updates. Pressures of accountability (OFSTED), deep dives, safeguarding, progress measures for challenging cohorts, organising extra tuition etc are all mentally draining and dis-spiriting when we are charged with creating mentally healthy places in which communities can thrive and be positive in what is frankly a bleak and depressing world. Best thing about Covid? - OFSTED and others having to keep out of schools, enabling us to concentrate on our core roles of being creators of local centres of learning. Worst thing - that we are coming out of this with greater pressures, continuing Covid challenges, continuing mental health issues, and that we are showing we have learnt nothing.....I want to end on a positive note - I love my job, love the staff and children, am continually impressed by the skill and dedication of the staff - and have a positive, on-side set of governors. It's still a great job!

Not all the SEPs have the experience or time to help support the headteachers.

I have felt well supported by my Academy Trust.

Termly updates Pam provides are fab!

Supervision would be really helpful - an opportunity to offload in a non-judgmental, confidential way to someone

Managing a school in a pandemic is very stressful and I found the LA extremely unhelpful when I was in the middle of a serious outbreak and I was teaching the affected class and she

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was suggesting I call a supply agency to get someone to teach the class. At that point, 9 staff who had been in contact with the class had tested positive so it was a ridiculous suggestion.

In the above, I didn't include my SEP. She hasn't been at all helpful. This half term has been one of the hardest. 'normal' school life pressures plus covid plus expecting Ofsted. Working in a small school I wear many hats and sometimes it feels impossible. Not sure the LA really get the pressure.

SEND and SEMH

Biggest stressor is the level of SEMH needs of the children and lack of external support / agencies. A few children/ families take massive amounts of time and resource, which drain the staff. This impacts on the quality of provision for the other children.

I would like to see fairer funding across mainstream and Send schools (to create space for additional mainstream learners)

I have been a HT for almost 20 years, and am resilient and strong. This last 18 months has been the most challenging yet, dealing with the anxiety caused by the pandemic on the staff, as well as ensuring that the ever-changing government directives keep everyone safe. The last half term has shown the true issues created from the pandemic's impact: pupils have arrived at school this term with no paediatric referrals, or high quality SEND support from settings. I have been forced to complete more fixed term exclusions this half term than ever before, in order to keep school safe. I have spent half term unable to put work out of my mind, and my own health is starting to suffer. I am now considering other options for my last ten years at work, as I am concerned for my own wellbeing and value my health. I would like to thank the LA and EPHA teams who have always been at the end of an email or phone call: thank you for helping me to keep this crazy job going.