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Leading in Lockdown:

Research on School Leaders' Work, Wellbeing and Career Intentions

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In partnership with:

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ASCL

Contents

Acknowledgements

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We are hugely grateful to the school leaders who took time to complete the survey and be interviewed. As this report shows all too clearly, the pandemic has been a highly demanding and stressful time for school leaders, and we are humbled by their commitment and patience in contributing to the research on top of everything else they have faced.
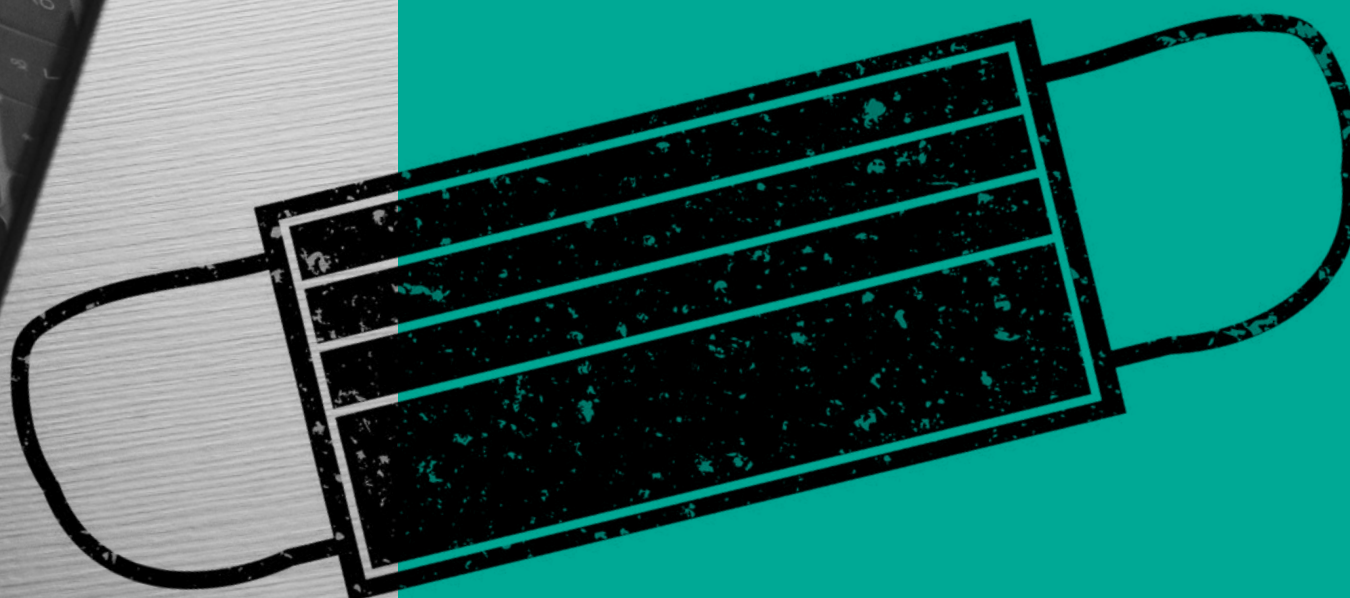
Summary and implications


School leaders' work in the pandemic:

- Almost three in five leaders (57%) stated that their school or college had been 'sometimes' (36%) or 'mostly' (21%) thriving during the pandemic. Success in meeting ongoing challenges gave most interviewees a profound sense of satisfaction in providing a worthwhile public service at a time of national crisis. Many explained that in responding to the crisis they and their teams had developed new capabilities and ways of working, for example in relation to online learning, and/or had strengthened relationships, including with children and families and with other schools and local agencies. The government's decision to pause Ofsted inspections and pupil tests was seen by many interviewees as a benefit, enabling them to focus on what they saw as the core purpose of schools – teaching, learning and meeting the needs of children and families.

- The 'lows' of leading in the pandemic largely stemmed from the external environment, in particular the perceived inadequate leadership provided by central government, which was seen as 'clumsy' and 'tone deaf', demonstrating both inflexibility and a lack of trust in local decision-making. In the survey, 'Department for Education (DfE) guidance/changes to policy on school closures' was the most stressful issue for leaders - 85% found this 'very' or 'extremely' stressful. More than nine in 10 (93%) survey respondents disagreed that the advice provided by DfE was 'timely and straightforward.' Two thirds (65%) disagreed that they trusted the advice provided by DfE.

- Other 'lows' for interviewees related to 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.

- In the survey, more than half of primary leaders and just under half of secondary leaders found 'parent-related issues' stressful. In the interviews, some leaders highlighted how a small but vocal group of parents tended to sit at either end of a spectrum in terms of their views on Covid (i.e. from 'anti-vaxxers, (to) those who want to keep children off school forever'), with some interviewees facing a 'whole barrage of vitriol.'

How has the pandemic impacted on leaders' workloads, wellbeing and health?

- Most leaders have coped with the pandemic – in the survey, fewer than one in 20 (4%) reported that they had been 'mostly sinking'. Just over a third (35%) said they had thrived to some extent. However, two in five (42%) were 'mostly surviving', while almost a quarter (23%) were 'sometimes' or 'mostly sinking.'

- The vast majority of interviewees experienced a negative impact on their workload. It was hard for leaders to switch off, including at weekends and holiday periods, so that, over time, they became ground down.

- In the survey, headteachers rated their levels of optimism about life in general, their ability to relax and switch off from work, their ability to think clearly and to solve work-related problems as worse during the pandemic than in 'normal' times.

- Interviewees described a range of negative impacts on their well-being and health, from lack of sleep, putting on weight and drinking too much, through to being hospitalised or put on
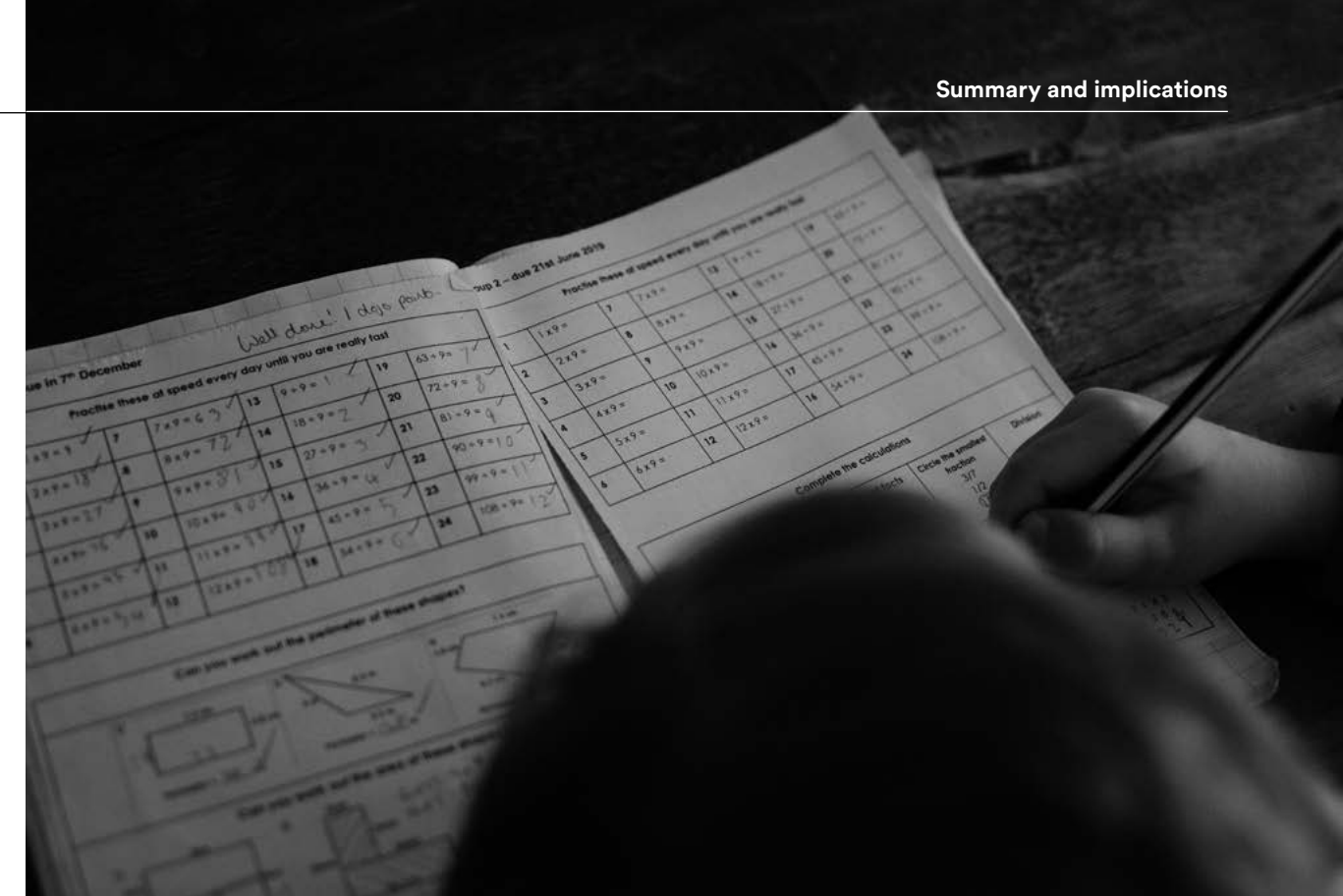
medication for depression. These impacts were more common among headteachers who plan to leave the profession than those who intend to remain.

What sustained leaders and where did they turn for support?

- In the survey, less than half (45%) of leaders agreed that they had been well supported in their leadership role throughout the pandemic, while one third (33%) actively disagreed.

- Survey respondents drew on a range of sources of advice during the pandemic and found advice from unions and professional associations the most useful and trustworthy.

- Interviewees and survey respondents highlighted additional important sources of advice and support, including local authorities, other headteachers and school-to-school networks.

The impact of the pandemic on leaders' career intentions

- In the survey, two fifths of leaders (40%) said they plan to leave the profession - for reasons other than full retirement – within the next five years. The vast majority (nine in 10) of these early 'leavers' stated that the pandemic had been either the main or a contributing factor in their career decision.

- The interviews – undertaken two months after the survey - indicated that the situation remains fluid: since completing the survey several leaders had changed their mind about whether to leave or stay. Equally, others said they might still change their mind, for example if the situation does not improve or gets any worse.

- Younger interviewees (e.g. aged under 46) faced similar challenges to their older peers, but also highlighted: 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 a view that a job outside education could offer genuine work-life balance.

- In the survey, we asked respondents what might persuade them to stay for longer. Greater trust in the profession – by government – was seen as making the greatest difference, followed by action to reduce pressure and workload, while enhancing funding and support for schools and school leaders.

- Similar themes were raised in the interviews, along with more support for flexible working, more support for headteachers (e.g. through coaching), and paying more attention to the needs and perspectives of young people.

Implications

School leaders' decisions about leaving or staying remain fluid – the government has time to avert a succession crisis by attending to four key areas:

1.

Restore trust. School leaders have been frustrated by what they perceive as a lack of trust in them. They have also lost trust in national government – the new ministerial team has an opportunity to reset this, but it requires a change of approach.

2.

Re-shape local models of support. Some leaders have had strong support, including examples from Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), local authorities and other networks. However, overall support has been patchy and, for some, non-existent. This unevenness highlights the wider ways in which the school system has lost coherence at local levels over the past decade – we must think seriously about ways to develop a more equitable and resilient system.

3.

Recognise and value community leadership. Schools have acted as anchors, in particular in the most deprived communities, through the crisis – leaders must be encouraged to see this wider role as central to their work and success in future, but a return to overly narrow accountability measures will prevent this.

4.

Rethink leadership. The pandemic has revealed a need for a broader view of leadership than one that is purely technical and managerial – in complex times we need leaders who can also work flexibly and with moral purpose. Broadening out our notion of successful leadership might also attract a wider pool of leaders into headship in future.

1. Introduction

This report draws together findings from a two-stage mixed methods research project exploring school leaders' experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic in England, in particular how this has affected their work, well-being and career plans.

In the first stage of the project, an online survey was distributed to members of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) and the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) between 12th April and 10th May 2021. A total of 1,491 leaders completed the survey. The findings are drawn on here, with more in-depth findings and further details on the survey methodology available in a separate report (Greany, Thomson and Martindale, 2021).

In the second stage, fifty-eight headteachers were interviewed online in July 2021. These interviewees were selected from a bank of school leaders who responded to the survey. A key finding from the survey was that two in five school leaders said they planned to leave the profession (for reasons other than full retirement) in the next five years (See Section 5 for details). The interviewees included an even mix of 'leavers' and 'stayers' from primary and secondary schools. In addition, we sought to achieve a broadly representative mix in terms of individual and school characteristics – e.g. school type (maintained/academy, mainstream/special), school Ofsted grading, interviewee gender and years of experience in headship. The interview findings are drawn on here, including through a series of prose poems, in which we draw out quotes from a single interview transcript to reflect a vignette of their experience (see Richardson, 1997), an approach that is similar to that used to develop verbatim theatre. More in-depth analysis of the interviews together with further details on the methodology is available in a separate report (Cousin, Greany and Thomson, 2021).

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

Additional details are available on the project blog - https://schoolleadersworkandwellbeing.com/.

1.2 Leadership in the pandemic: learning from the literature

Before reporting our findings, we outline here the understandings we have brought to the project - from our own previous work and from the wider literature.

Links between work, wellbeing and career intentions

We have been interested in school leader's work, wellbeing and career intentions for some time. We know from research, including our own, that these are not three separate matters, but are interconnected. There is both international and national evidence to indicate that school leaders work long hours, that they multi-task constantly, and that much of their work is focused on leadership and management which makes it possible for teachers to teach and students to learn (Robinson and Gray 2019; Liebowitz and Porter 2019; Leithwood and Day, 2007; Pont, Nusche and Moorman, 2008). However, because the effectiveness of the school and its continued improvement is strongly tied to their practices, leaders must meet significant challenges. This is particularly the case in decentralised school systems, such as England, in which school-level leaders are responsible for most operational matters: increased autonomy has led to work intensification for heads (Gronn, 2003). In addition, leaders must respond to policy-driven changes and accountability pressures, for example to close pupil attainment gaps, but these requirements can create tensions and pressure for front-line leaders as they seek to adapt them to the needs of specific contexts and communities (Greany and Earley, 2021; Greany and Higham, 2018). Many leaders experience 'change fatigue' (Bernerth, Walker and Harris, 2011).

International and national research shows that many leaders find the pressure and sheer volume of work has a negative effect on their sense of wellbeing (Bingham and Bubb, 2021; Dolan, 2020; Riley and See, 2019; Thomson 2009). For some, the pressures also take a toll on their mental and physical health (Education Support, 2019). Regular surveys by school leader unions (e.g. NAHT, 2017, 2018) show that concerns about wellbeing and work-life balance often translate into a recruitment and retention problem. These issues can mean that potential future headteachers become reluctant to apply for the 'top job', while those in charge might decide to retire early. However, shortages are not distributed evenly around the country or across all schools. They disproportionately affect schools that serve deprived urban communities, along with some rural and faith schools. Additionally, recruitment and retention dovetails with the need for the school leader cohort to become more broadly representative of the rich diversity of the English population.

We wanted to know how leaders' work, wellbeing and career intentions had changed during the pandemic. In addition, we wanted to explore the impact of the pandemic on existing issues with school leader recruitment and retention.

Leading through crises

England has been living with Covid-19, through peaks and troughs, since March 2020. School staff have continued to work throughout, providing

face to face education for children of 'key workers' during three periods of hard lockdown while also offering online learning to children and young people at home. England's school leaders have had to cope with continuous change on multiple fronts. The curriculum had to be digitised and teaching moved largely online. The management of people, time and space has been particularly challenging, especially for those working in over-crowded and/or run-down buildings with poor ventilation. Pupils have been placed into class or year level "bubbles" in some periods, making it possible for discrete groups to be quarantined if there is an outbreak of the virus. Schools have had to regulate movement in corridors and avoid crowded playgrounds to prevent transmission. Masks were mandatory in secondary schools for most of the 2020-2021 school year. In 2021 schools were integrated into local test and trace systems, with routine lateral flow testing administered to both staff and students. Meanwhile, numerous changes in government policy and advice together with logistical issues in accessing government commissioned systems for free school meals and laptops for disadvantaged children have all taken up leaders' time and emotional energy, as we outline in detail in this report.

As Shufutinsky et al. (2020: 25) argue, the Covid-19 pandemic represents 'the epitome of complexity… (but that) using the same, habitual leadership styles and practices is often inadequate in such mass-scale disruption'. Harris and Jones (2020: 246) come to a similar conclusion in relation to leadership in schools, arguing that 'a new chapter in educational leadership is currently being written because of Covid-19… This leadership has no national standards, no guidelines, no stipulations no rubrics, at least not for now'. Thus, the pandemic situation has not been 'normal', so leaders have not been able to respond to the challenges in the planned and logical ways that existing change and implementation literatures would suggest (Sharples, Albers, and Fraser, 2018). Similarly, as we consider the challenge of educational recovery, it seems unhelpful to assume that a return to 'business as usual' domain-specific instructional leadership will be sufficient, given the scale of the pupil learning and system issues that have been identified (DfE, 2021).

We therefore looked at the international disaster recovery literature to see how it might be instructive (e.g. Clarke, 1999; Ripley 2008; Sylves, 2018).

Firstly, the literature showed that responses to disaster are systemic in nature. At particular issue are:

- the applicability, or not, of risk management plans to the actual situation as it unfolds

- the sources of information that are used to guide actions

- communication channels which support both top down and bottom-up feedback

- the locus of decision-making and levels of delegation, with the balance of local autonomy, central control and middle tier mediation being critical to effective action on the ground

- systemic capacity to get crucial equipment and material to where it is needed in a timely fashion

- the production of a credible public narrative about events, recognising difficulties and giving assurance and praise where appropriate, without spin.

Our research findings show that all of these factors were problematic for school leaders during the pandemic.

Secondly, recovery from disasters often requires very significant changes. One example comes from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, when enormous swathes of the city, including its schools, were destroyed (Mirón, Beabout, and Boselovic, 2015). The result was an opportunity for the newly named Recovery School District to completely rethink its school provision. Their solution was a new mix of public and private via the introduction of charter schools – schools funded by the taxpayer but operated by private organisations. Some 60% of schools in the district are now charter schools, making it something akin to the mix of academy, free and local authority schools that now exists in England. One study (Beabout, 2014) looked at post-Katrina school leaders in New Orleans. The author noted the considerable autonomy this new configuration of schools afforded. However, despite significant local differences, there were common principles that underpinned the post disaster change processes the leaders used:

- **Collaboration:** the importance of establishing meaningful collaborative practices within the school, distributed responsibilities and devolved decision-making were all key to rebuilding staff cohesion and commitment to their common endeavour. There was an inevitable tension between the need to get going quickly to meet re-imposed accountability requirements and the necessarily slower pace of addressing wellbeing and morale.

- **Community connections:** school leaders in the study saw connections with parents and community organisations as an essential part of rebuilding community, accessing expertise and support, (re)generating a positive school reputation and ensuring local solutions for local needs.

- **Generating public support:** linked to the need for re-establishing strong local bonds was a need to address the poor reputation of pre-hurricane urban schools. This required collective political action on school boards and in the state legislature, as well as in media.

- **Meeting student needs:** because of the terrible damage done to homes and health, school leaders saw the non-academic needs of their students as crucial. Addressing trauma and regaining a sense of belonging and wellbeing were seen as vital accompaniments to improvements in learning.

- **Setting goals and meeting them:** the leaders in the study had very different approaches to planning, but all paid serious attention to the management of staff, time, space and resources. Getting the infrastructure working to support other aspects of change was a key part of leaders' work.

- **Improving instruction:** the post-hurricane period created an opportunity to revisit previously taken for granted teaching and learning practices, to support and resource carefully staged and supported instructional innovation.

Understandings from the disaster literatures helped to inform the ways in which we designed the study; in particular, the interview questions about system functioning, the work that leaders prioritised during the various lockdowns and their views on how this might change in future. These literatures also informed the analysis of our data.

Researching leadership in the pandemic

Finally, we have kept a careful watch on international and national research into schools and leading during the pandemic.[1] Understandably, most studies published so far focus on the impact on pupils, and their learning, progress and well-being. Others focus on related issues, such as online teaching and learning or how the pandemic has affected school budgets. A third group of studies focus on school and leadership-related findings, including:

● **Policy overload:** Fotheringham et al. (2021) show how an 'avalanche of daily information' from the national Department for Education (DfE) frequently overwhelmed school and Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) leaders, with 201 policy updates issued by the DfE over a 90-day period, including 11 documents on one single Sunday in April 2020.

● **Schools have struggled to pivot in the context of existing system pressures and issues:** Nelson et al. (2021) identify issues for schools stemming from lack of funding, an overcrowded curriculum and an overly tight accountability framework. In a similar vein, Moss et al. (2021) include a range of findings on how primary schools are responding, but conclude that 'the pandemic reveals just how patchy forms of support have become and how dependent on local connections and charitable giving schools now are'. Similarly, Jopling and Harness (2021:13) focus on school leaders' well-being and vulnerability in the pandemic, but conclude that 'What is more surprising is that leaders interviewed felt that, rather than being overwhelming in itself, the pandemic had had an amplifying effect on the greatest challenges they faced, which remained finance and accountability'.

● **School leaders have needed to prioritise flexible, values-based responses:** Beauchamp et al. (2021) interviewed school leaders across the UK in the early stages of the pandemic. They highlight how responding to the challenges

required considerable versatility and adaptive leadership. Many heads reported a need to distribute leadership more, as they sought to work flexibly and at speed. At the same time, they had to work hard to maintain a sense of 'collective "us-ness" and commitment to shared values, which required transformational and values-based leadership backed by strong communications. Longmuir (2021) similarly found that leaders have prioritised the pastoral and that this shift provided a firm basis for a transformed approach to recovery, in which strongly human-centred values and practices trumped efficiency and competition. However, in Australia, the pressures of pivoting during long lockdowns have worsened stress levels of school principals (Arnold, Rahimi and Riley, 2021).

● **Leadership beyond the school, changing school-community relations.** Striepe and Cunningham (2021) found that leaders extended pastoral care to the community, increased the frequency and modes of communication to the school community and beyond, and developed more collaborative leadership practices within and beyond the school. Striepe and Cunningham contend that school leaders were moving towards becoming community leaders.

● **MATs have adopted robust, centralised approaches:** Day et al. (2021) studied responses within a sample of Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), showing how they adopted robust, centralised approaches to supporting member academies while seeking to ensure collective, efficient and effective approaches to student engagement and learning.

As we show throughout this report, these themes resonate with the results of our own research.

2. The work of leading through the pandemic

In this section, we draw on the interview and survey findings to explore the work of leading schools during the pandemic, focusing on achievements and pressure points. This analysis indicates that, in broad terms, the achievements and sense of satisfaction came from successes of working internally with school staff, parents and children to address the various challenges that the pandemic threw up. Working together on these very real challenges gave leaders a profound sense of satisfaction. By contrast, most of the pressure points stemmed from the external environment, in particular the perceived inadequate leadership provided by central government, which was seen as 'clumsy' and 'tone deaf', demonstrating both inflexibility and a lack of trust in local decision-making.

2.1 What were leaders' main achievements?

In the survey, we asked respondents how they felt that their school had fared during the pandemic. Almost three in five (57%) stated that their school or college had been 'sometimes' (36%) or 'mostly' (21%) thriving. In a similar vein, in the interviews, we asked headteachers about the main 'highs', or rewarding aspects of their work, that they had experienced through the pandemic. Responses were consistent, with no clear 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 overcame the many and varied challenges presented by the pandemic. This in itself was a significant achievement.

> "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 this was a sense of having contributed a public service - of worthwhile work - at a time of national crisis.

> "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

School-community relationships have in many cases been enhanced as a result of the pandemic and many leaders explained that positive parental and community feedback had helped to sustain them and their teams. In the survey, we asked respondents whether or not they agreed with the statement 'Parents have trusted me/the school to make the best possible decisions', with 85% of respondents agreeing, indicating that most parents supported schools well.

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 work of schools during the pandemic went well beyond teaching and learning, leading one leader to reflect on the extent to which schools have become the 'anchor' for many families.

> "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

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 leaders 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

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.

"

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 leaders for emotional as well as practical support through the pandemic. Many of these networks were well-established before the pandemic, but several leaders 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). 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 leaders.

"

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

SHL

Reduced external pressure and space for innovation

Eighteen interviewees 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. This had freed up many schools to innovate in ways which leaders intend to continue post-pandemic because they see benefits in terms of students' management of their own learning and increased confidence.

"

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

PHL

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

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

"

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

Transcript poem 1: Custard and lifeboats

I've had a pandemic policy for years because it was on the list of things we had to have. But, actually, who knew that I was going to need it?

The relentlessness of it. The fact that we had no experience. We had no idea.

Such a learning curve.

Protect your staff, protect your children, protect your key workers, but at the same time insist on maintaining those high expectations.

I had staff that didn't want to come in because they thought that they would die if they came into school. We had colleagues that were hospitalised.

We were on the phones every day, we were out delivering food parcels

It was a difficult time.

We could have been in a lot worse position had we not evolved our provision as we went through. But it was the speed with which we had to change. We were literally getting information through the night before.

The pressure that we've been under, the frightening feeling of if we get this wrong, it could cost lives... that's the thing that keeps you up at night. And we felt that pressure.

When you're feeling shattered at the end of the year, you just think, you need some space.

That's what's missing. It's that headspace to be strategic. I felt I'd lost the headspace to be strategic and I was just responding to managing day-to-day.

My headspace was full of timetables, organisation, bubbles, moving. How do you feed 400 kids and not use the hall? Paper plates and can you move custard? We had a 25 minute discussion about how the hell you can get hot custard from one end of the school to the other without any health and safety. When did my life come to that? That's when you're at the lowest. And you're like 25 minutes on custard. Dear God, we're just not going to do custard. So we haven't had custard for a year. Job done.

People have left the profession. This has been for many that line in the sand - I can't go on. 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.

But I think the reason why I'm not going now and I want to give it a few more years now is that I'm slowly clawing that headspace back.

We were just literally lifeboats. Let's just stay afloat. Let's just stay afloat. Now I can see a lighthouse and I'm heading towards it, that's the difference.

PHL

2.2 What were the main pressure points?

We asked the interviewees about the main 'lows' – or pressure points -they faced during the pandemic. As we set out below, the interviewees identified a similar set of issues to the challenges highlighted in the survey (Box 1/Fig. 1).

Many of the 'lows' described by interviewees represented 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, leaders often felt proud about how they and their teams had overcome these logistical challenges. Other 'lows' were of a different nature, for example, because they were beyond the control of leaders to overcome (e.g. Timing of government announcements); reflected a particular time period when the changes were most intense (e.g. Christmas, 2020); or reflected a broader state of mind (e.g. Uncertainty / Constant changes).

There were no categoric differences between 'leavers' and 'stayers' in terms of the pressures that they faced, although it was clear that 'leavers' were more likely to report feeling overwhelmed by these issues, often as a result of the particular contexts and circumstances in which they were working, as we show in subsequent sections. However, there were some differences between phases in three particular areas. The first is 'changes to national assessments' (Fig 2) and Centre/Teacher Assessed Grades (CAGs and TAGs), which only apply to secondaries. Secondly, pupil self-harm/attempted suicides were only mentioned by secondary interviewees (4/31). Third, the administration of Lateral Flow Tests was mentioned by 13/31 secondary headteacher interviewees, but only 3 primary leaders.

In the survey, we asked school leaders to indicate the extent to which particular issues were stressful or not, with results for primary and secondary leaders shown separately below (Fig. 1).

Leaders in both phases faced similar challenges, but primary leaders were more likely to report that these issues were challenging. 'DfE guidance/changes to policy on school closures' was the most stressful issue for leaders in all schools - in total, 85%[2] found this 'very' or 'extremely' stressful. However, the responses highlight the sheer number of challenges that leaders have faced: for example, every single one of the 16 areas probed is at least 'somewhat stressful' for more than half of all respondents. This explains why 'workload/quantity of work' is a significant challenge for leaders in both phases, but particularly primary leaders.

For each issue/challenge, please indicate the extent to which this has been a source of stress for you in your role during the pandemic.
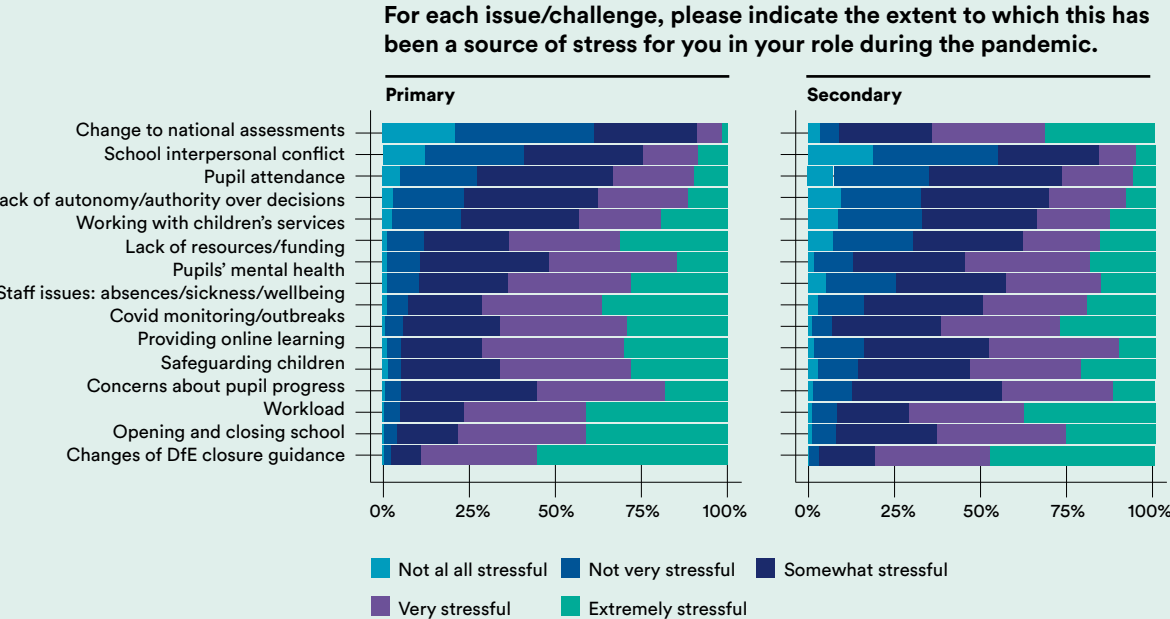

Fig 1: Extent to which different issues have been stressful for primary and secondary leaders (primary n=806, secondary n=500)

² Percentages are rounded throughout the report, so totals might not equal 100%. Please note that where charts break down responses into specific groups or roles some sample sizes are small (i.e. n=< 100), so particular care should taken when comparing responses for these groups. Where we state that differences between groups are significant it means we have tested this statistically. See Greany, Thomson and Martindale, 2021 for details on survey methodology and analysis.

> **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

Inadequate leadership from central government

In the interviews, the five most frequent sources of frustration and anger mentioned reflected perceived inadequate leadership from central government, whose 'refusal to make decisions' placed additional stress on leaders. Most interviewees prefaced their comments by acknowledging that the pandemic presented unprecedented challenges, so it was understandable that government decision-making and guidance would be difficult. Nevertheless, there was near universal frustration that the government's chaotic approach continued time and time again over such an extended period.

The national government's approach was seen 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 AI algorithm following Scotland's experience in summer 2020. 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 (Box 2/Fig. 2).

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

The constant changes in guidance and/or failure to deliver on existing commitments increased workload exponentially. Leaders had often spent many hours planning one approach, only to then have to revise it, often after parents had been informed. In addition, the centralised guidance reflected a lack of flexibility or understanding of how schools in different phases and contexts operate. One of the most stressful aspects of this for leaders 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 leaders felt both ill-equipped to make decisions alone, and also highly accountable.

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 portrayed 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).

These issues were compounded by a sense that the work of schools was not valued by policy

Box 2: Survey findings - How did school leaders rate the advice and guidance provided by DfE during the pandemic?

In the survey, we asked whether the advice provided by DfE had been 'timely and straightforward'. The response was overwhelmingly negative, with more than nine in 10 disagreeing (93%) and almost two thirds strongly disagreeing (65%). We then asked whether leaders agreed or disagreed with statements about their trust in the advice they received from DfE. The results were overwhelmingly negative, with two thirds (65%) disagreeing, of which one third (32%) strongly disagreed (Fig. 2).
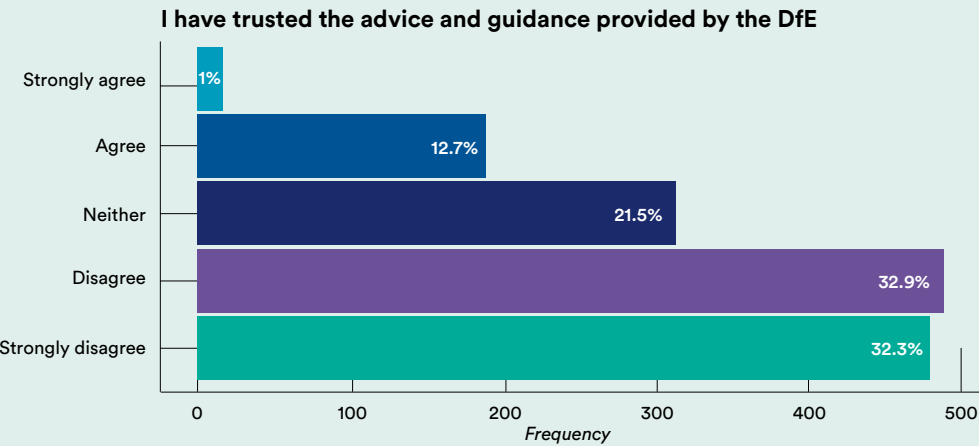
I have trusted the advice and guidance provided by the DfE

Strongly agree	1%
Agree	12.7%
Neither	21.5%
Disagree	32.9%
Strongly disagree	32.3%

Frequency (0 100 200 300 400 500)

Fig 2: Leaders views on whether they trusted advice and guidance provided by the DfE during the pandemic (n=1478)

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.

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.

These issues led some interviewees to express a degree of political anger: '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 survey finding that more than nine in 10 leaders did not trust the advice and guidance provided by DfE (Box 2) indicates that this anger may be widespread. That senior leaders in schools do not trust government ought to be a matter of some concern for a government which relies on them for policy implementation (Thomson, Greany and Martindale, 2021). But, equally, other interviewees 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 actually increased.

"

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

Transcript poem 2: Thank you for that Gavin

The guidance for what we should do in September came out in August.

Marvellous.

Heads were already on their knees.

We were expected to reinvent the school. Again. Get that message out to parents ready for September.

Alongside all this we've got Gavin Williamson telling parents that if they weren't happy they could complain to Ofsted.

Great. Thank you for that Gavin.

And that's just what parents did.

The day after he told them to do that, one parent from this school complained to Ofsted about the remote learning we'd put in place the day before.

That resulted in HMI phoning.

Waste of everyone's time.

There was nothing wrong with the remote offer other than the parent not liking it. Our remote offer met the criteria.

But then I never got anything back from that HMI. I never got a letter. I never got anything as a closure.

Clap for the NHS? Of course, we're going to do that. It's a wonderful service doing brilliant things.

But schools were open all the way through. Nobody thought to include schools in that. Nothing about teachers. No, we just won't mention teachers. Let's not let's not even think about that.

Teachers weren't even prioritised for vaccinations despite being front-facing.

We were vilified in the press.

Summer of 2020, the government wanted schools to reopen. And reopen.

Why use that language? We were open all the way through.

The working hours have been incredible.

I think about some of those announcements and the times that we've had to reinvent the school.

There's been this announcement at 8:30 at night.

Don't worry about it. I'm on it. I'm dealing with it.

Often messaging parents at 9:00 o'clock the same night.

Because otherwise I would have been fielding 20-30 emails saying "What are you doing about this"?

We're all exhausted. These last two academic years have really blended into one.

It's just ploughing on. Just ploughing on.

Knowing that I've done the best I can.

My work-life balance has disappeared.

I'm 54. I hadn't ever intended to leave this early.

But the way that we've been treated as school leaders over these two years … it'd push anyone over the edge.

If I think back I was probably going to go at around 59. Now it's looking like 55-56.

Here is the pension.

I've got an appointment with the pension person.

Maybe it stacks up.

And if it doesn't, then Tesco is looking quite attractive … At least there's no work to take home with you.

PHL

Keeping staff and students safe

The second cluster of pressure points 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

> **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

Most interviewees discussed the challenge of balancing the pressures on staff during a pandemic 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.

Parents at the extremes

We noted above that one of the 'highs' for many leaders 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. Similarly, in Figure 2 above, we showed the issues that leaders identified as stressful from the survey, indicating that more than half of primary leaders and just under half of secondary leaders found 'parent-related issues' either very or extremely stressful.

Once schools re-opened, some interviewees reported that they 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, the challenges associated with parents were more significant. In these schools, a small but vocal group of parents tended to sit at either end of a spectrum in terms of their views on Covid: '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). One secondary head described the 'whole barrage of vitriol' that sometimes came from some parents. 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?' See also Transcript Poem 3 – 'Just fuck off you fascist.'

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, leaders did not report any sense of return to 'normality'. Many interviewees reported that cases in schools were rising, anxieties about safety were increasing, and that some children had returned to school with more challenging behaviour - "de-socialised" 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. Leaders 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[3] and numbers of children taken in care. At the same time, leaders felt the pressures of 'normal' school life were returning: they were writing self-evaluation reports, preparing for or experiencing Ofsted 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, last Friday morning, really overwhelmed… and then this morning Ofsted rang to say that they'd like to come in tomorrow – we break up next Thursday. "
SHS

Transcript poem 3: "Just fuck off you fascist"

I could have easily resigned several times.
There were times when you're ready to do it.

You're trying to do the right thing by the school
and by the children.
Then you get abusive messages from parents who
don't understand or they think you're being hard
on them.
You're damaging the mental health of the children.
You're not safeguarding my children because
you're making them wear masks.
You're overstepping your mark as a head.

I've come to the conclusion I'm damned if I do,
and damned if I don't.
A lot of parents are very supportive,
But then you get those that are totally against
anything you say or do.

I spoke to Governors about it.
The governors did write a letter to say this is
what we're doing, this is why we're doing it.
To try and be supportive.

But we've had a message in today when we've
sent a letter home saying we've had a Covid case.
Excuse me for swearing now, the response
came back
"Just fuck off you fascist"
And I'm thinking "I'm only trying to inform you
of the situation".

But when you're getting that on a daily basis,
you start to think,
Why bother?
If it was one parent, you think OK
But actually it's a small minority
They seem to think that they can speak to you
that way
When you're only doing the job and
you're only trying to protect the children
and give them an education,
and they think they've got the right to treat
you like
you're a piece of dirt.
It's not right.

I tried to take a break in October,
I tried to get a holiday
Tried to get a break away from everything
That didn't happen.
We all tried to take Easter.
I definitely stepped away from school and I
actually took some days away from everything
at Easter
That was definitely needed.
I'm really concerned around summer now.
There's going to be work to be done before
September.
I'd like to have a good couple of weeks break
But I can see there's going to be a huge amount
of work to do before we come back.

There was a point in time when I would have
just given up the job and gone and worked in a
supermarket.
I'm not joking,
There were real times when I'd just had enough.
I was working 15 hour days and being absolutely
exhausted.
You weren't living, just surviving.
Come in, go home, eat, then fall asleep. Get up
and do it on repeat the next day.

But that's not the way I want to live.

Am I feeling that I desperately need to leave now?
No, I think that's passed a little bit.
But I am definitely looking to go as soon as I can.
As soon as I can take early retirement, take my
pension, I will.
I'm not going to be in for the long haul.
I put my house on the market so I can reduce my
mortgage. I can actually take a pay cut.

So the pandemic has definitely changed what was
going to be a vocation.
I could see myself being here till I was 60 years of
age. But I'm disillusioned. I know it's supposed to
be a noble profession, is supposed to be trying to
help people, to move them forward
But I just don't feel valued
I will get out as soon as I can.

SHL

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[3] 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

3. How has the pandemic impacted on leaders' wellbeing?

In this section we start by drawing together evidence from the interviews and survey on how leading in the pandemic has impacted on leaders workloads, health and well-being. We then explore some of the deeper factors that appeared to make the situation particularly difficult for many leaders. We suggest that the nature of the changes - often in combination with the particular circumstances that leaders were working in - left some feeling isolated and out of their depth, which in turn had an impact on their established identities as leaders, all of which made the situation more difficult.

Box 3: Survey findings – were leaders thriving, surviving or sinking?

Most leaders have coped with the pandemic - fewer than one in 20 (4%) reported in the survey that they had been 'mostly sinking' (Fig 3). Just over a third of leaders (35%) said they had thrived to some extent, with around one in 10 (11%) saying that they had been 'mostly thriving'. However, the corollary of this is that almost two thirds of leaders had not been thriving. The largest group, just over two in five (42%), said they had been 'mostly surviving', while almost a quarter (23%) had been sometimes or mostly sinking.

For those who said they had been either 'surviving' or 'sinking', the top factors that made leading during the pandemic difficult were: lack of timely resources from the Department for Education (DfE) (69%); constant change and uncertainty (69%); lack of straightforward resources from DfE (46%); worrying about the health of children and/or staff (43%).

Overall, which of the following best describes your own experience of leading during the pandemic?
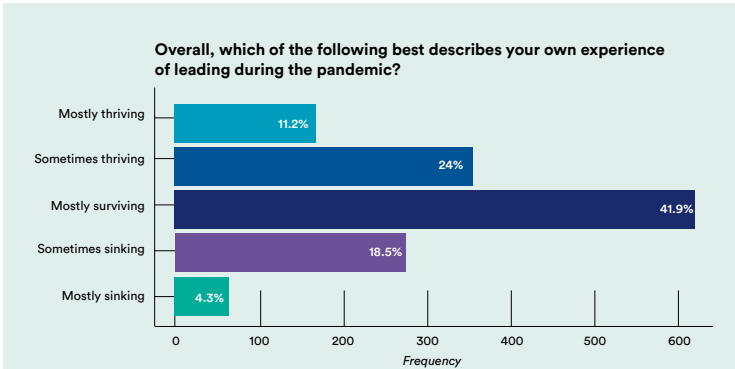

Fig 3: Leaders' overall experience of the pandemic (n=1478)

Figure 4 shows these responses differentiated by school phase. Compared with leaders in primary, leaders in all-through and secondary schools are significantly more likely to say they have thrived and significantly less likely to say they have been sinking.
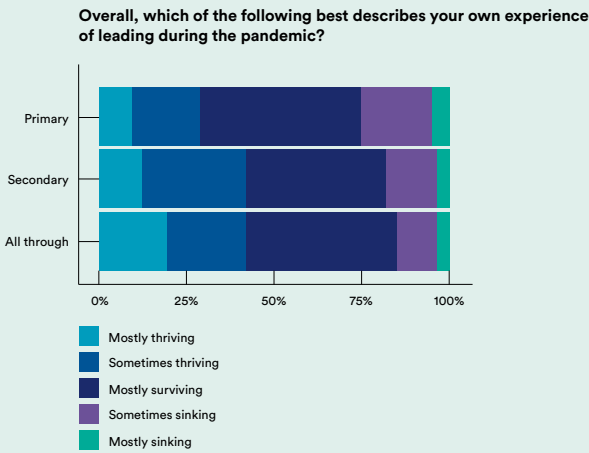
Overall, which of the following best describes your own experience of leading during the pandemic?

Fig 4: Leaders' overall experience of the pandemic by school phase (primary n=806, secondary n=500, all-through n=120)

3.1 Impact on workload, health and well-being

In the survey (Box 3), just over two in five (42%) leaders said they had been 'mostly surviving' during the pandemic, while almost a quarter (23%) said they had been 'sometimes' or 'mostly sinking'. Leaders in primary schools were the most likely to say they had been sinking (Fig. 4), just as primary leaders were more likely to report most Covid-related challenges as either 'very' or 'extremely stressful' (Fig. 1). In the interviews, leaders across both primary and secondary schools reported a similar set of challenges and a similar impact on their health and well-being overall. Nevertheless, we conclude that the smaller size of primary schools meant that the pressures were felt more acutely by these leaders, because they had less opportunity to distribute leadership and share the load.

Figure 5, below, shows the percentages of interviewees reporting a negative impact in each of 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.
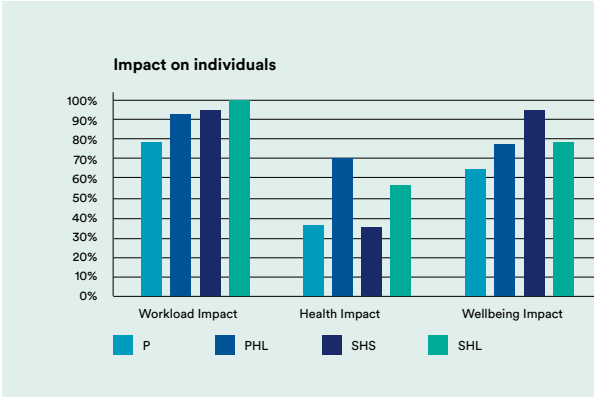
Box 4: Are leaders who suffered poor health during the pandemic more likely to leave?

School leaders reported in the survey that their personal health was worse during the pandemic. Nearly nine in 10 (88%) respondents rated their health as either 'good' or 'very good' in 'normal' circumstances, but this declined to just over half (53%) during the pandemic. Leaders who reported that their health became worse during the pandemic were more likely to report that they were sinking. Furthermore, Figure 6, below, shows a clear association between leaders who reported worse personal health and leaders saying that they planned to leave the profession early.

In the interviews (Fig. 5), the differences between 'stayers' and 'leavers' in terms of health impact are pronounced. More than half of the 'leavers' in both phases reported that the pandemic has had a negative impact on their health, compared to around a third of 'stayers'.
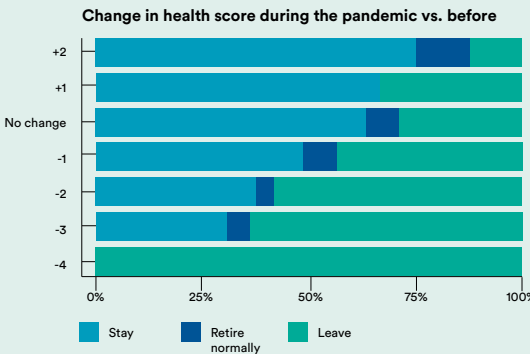

Fig 5: Headteacher interviewees reporting workload, health and/or wellbeing impact as a result of the pandemic by phase and group.[4]

Fig 6: School leaders' career intentions by change in health score before vs during the pandemic (n=1478)

[4] In most figures in this report, when we report interview responses 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 increased workloads were the various issues we outlined in the previous section. 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, meaning that, 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 leaders.

"

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 about being a distant husband and father again."
SHS

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 5 and Box 4 indicate. 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. Some interviewees had caught Covid themselves, creating an additional challenge when there was so much do. We explore these issues further in later sections, but provide some illustrative quotes below.

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

Transcript poem 4: SLT on New Year's Eve!

It's the timeliness of decision-making.

I held a senior leadership team meeting on New Year's Eve.
New Years Eve!
I got all of my senior leadership team on Teams to discuss lateral flow testing and staggered starts to the school year.
Two days earlier we would have been able to do that during term time.

Examinations in the summer last year.
I knew there was an issue
I'm just a head teacher in a secondary school.
I'm not someone important.
I'm not someone who should be keeping their finger on the pulse,
But we could see that there was going to be a backlash about an algorithm that didn't have any human interaction whatsoever.

They cancelled exams this year.
So me and my friends, my head teacher friends on our WhatsApp group
we're all whatsapping each other.
We're all searching the Internet trying to find this information somewhere on the DfE website.
Or maybe they've sent us an email with additional information.
Cancelling exams. Sounds like a really simple thing to do.
Until you get asked the very next day by the ones who matter, the children, "What does that mean, Sir?"

Now I can't see why they don't get the same information or they can't work out what's happening
same as us mere mortals.
We are just the people working in schools
But we can all see that this is going to happen
Why can't they?

That was the biggest frustration throughout the whole of this.

My school will always work - because the teaching assistants, the admin staff, support staff, the premises staff, the cleaners, the teachers, the middle leaders to senior leaders and me,
because we will not let it not work. Because we will not let the children not get 100% of what they need.

It's like the NHS.
A hospital will always work because of the nurses and the ancillary staff and the doctors.
It doesn't mean that the people at the top are doing the right thing.
It will always work, just because of the people at the bottom.

But it was absolutely relentless.
Trying to work out how we were going to do our remote education and being threatened by the government.
All the language that they were using to us wasn't collaborative at all, it was all about threats.
You know, I don't work well like that.

I don't want to wish my life away, but If I can retire in two years time I will.
But I'm not going to leave while this is still happening.
I want to leave this school knowing that I put it back to where it was.
I never want to think that I've left a sinking ship.

I want to be able to hold my head up high that I have taken us through this time,
put us back to where we need to be
The next person to be the head of the school will come in and say
"Yeah I was left with something to work with" not "God what have they left me with."

SHL

3.2 Impact on headteachers' sense of agency and identity

Many, if not most, of the challenges faced by schools in the pandemic required wholesale change: for example, staff had to move teaching and the curriculum online almost overnight. It seems that the cumulative impact of leading this level of change, especially in combination with sustained workload pressure and often worsening well-being and health, led many leaders to feel less personally effective. For example, Box 5 includes findings from the survey which show that headteachers rated their levels of optimism about life in general, their ability to relax and switch off from work, their ability to think clearly and to solve work-related problems as worse during the pandemic.

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). In England, the thrust in recent years has been on encouraging leaders to adopt logical and planned implementation processes aimed at embedding defined, evidence-based approaches within schools (Albers and Pattuwageie, 2017; Sharples, Albers, and Fraser, 2018). However, the pandemic was not something that could be planned and managed in the way that much of the change and implementation literature suggests – rather, the changes were reactive, rapid and unpredictable. Furthermore, many of the challenges and changes that leaders 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 (Greany and Higham, 2018), 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 leaders have not only become weary of crisis management, but have become more fundamentally disillusioned. 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' as well.

Box 5: How has the pandemic impacted on leaders?

In the survey, we asked headteachers (n= 909) to rate themselves in a number of areas. The questions adopted a consistent format and focused on areas adapted from the robust and widely used Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale.[5] First we asked leaders to rate themselves in 'normal' circumstances (i.e. in 2019). We then asked them to rate themselves 'during the pandemic – i.e. since March 2020'. In each case they rated themselves on a five-point scale, from 'very poor' to 'very good'.

Whereas nine in 10 (91%) heads rated their average level of optimism as good or very good in normal circumstances, this dropped to just over a third (37%) during the pandemic (Fig. 7).
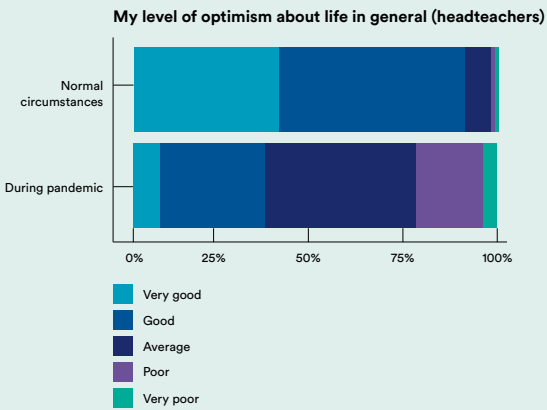
Fig 7: Headteachers self-assessment of their average level of optimisim about life, before and during the pandemic (n=909).

Heads struggle 'to relax and switch off from work' even in normal circumstances (Fig. 8), with just over two fifths (43%) rating themselves as good or very good. During the pandemic, fewer than one in 10 (7%) rated themselves as good/very good, while three quarters (76%) rated themselves as poor or very poor.
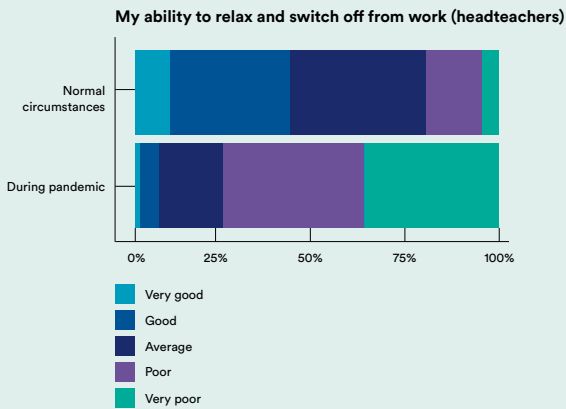
Fig 8: Headteachers self-assessment of their ability to relax and switch off from work, before and during the pandemic (n=909).

Nine in 10 (89%) heads rated their 'ability to think clearly' as good or very good in normal circumstances, but this fell to just over a third (36%) during the pandemic (Fig. 9).
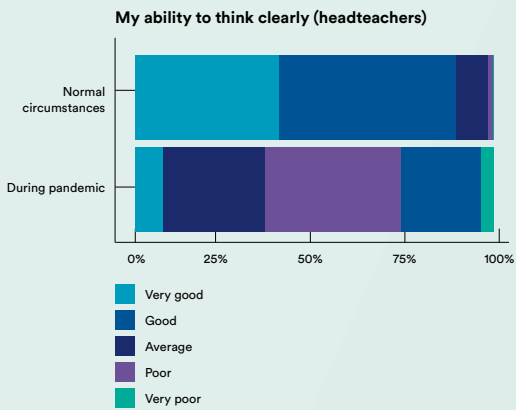
Fig 9: Headteachers self-assessment of their ability to think clearly, before and during the pandemic

Almost all heads (96%) rated themselves as good or very good at 'solving work-related problems' before the pandemic, but this dropped to just over half (54%) in the pandemic (Fig. 10).
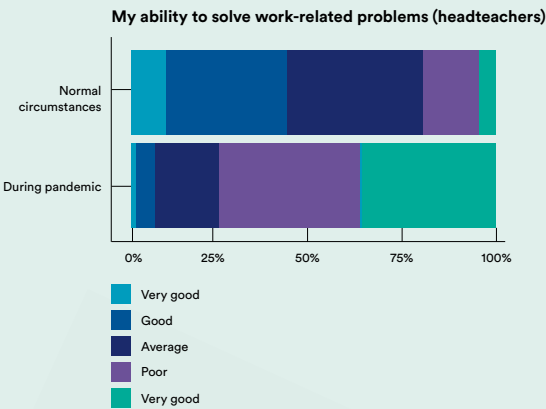
Fig 10: Headteachers self-assessment of their ability to solve work-related problems, before and during the pandemic (n=909).

[5] See https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/med/research/platform/wemwbs/about/wemwbsvsswemwbs/ for details.

Shaken identities?

In the interviews, we asked leaders why they chose to become a head. The main motivation was a sense of vocation and the desire to really make a difference for children. In addition, there was a felt need for autonomy and agency, to be trusted to make decisions and to lead. 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, these motivators were profoundly challenged in many cases, for a mixture of reasons.

First, several interviewees explained how the pandemic had disrupted the established plans and routines that they rely on to create a sense of order and progressive improvement across the school. The disruption of these routines 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

Second, these changes meant that leaders 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, leaders struggled to find time to be strategic, because they were so often dragged into operational matters.

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."

SHS

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.

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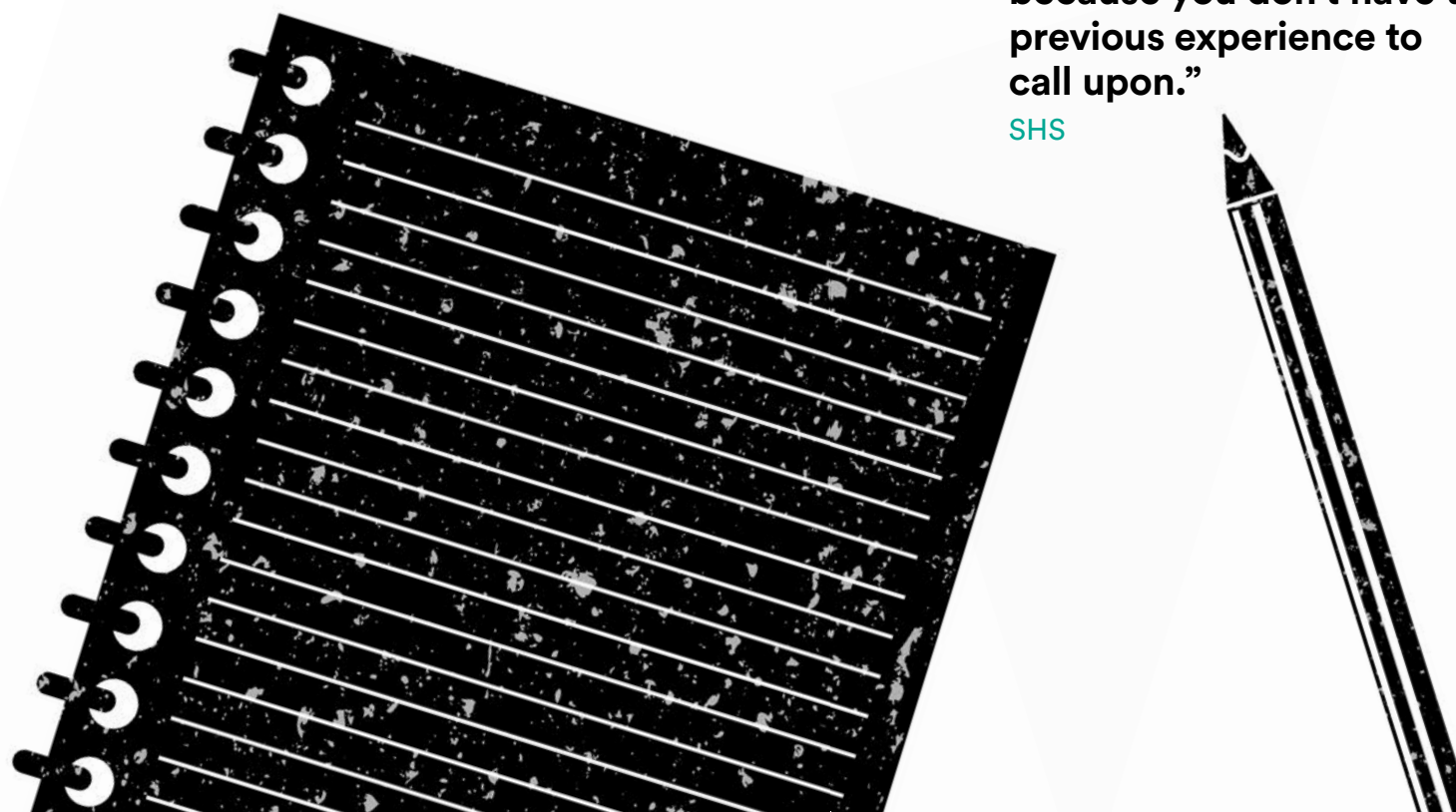
The sense of not feeling in control tapped into a wider view that many leaders have less autonomy in the school system than they did in the past. For these headteachers, the centralised and over-directive nature of government decision-making during the pandemic reflected a wider trend of micro-management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

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. One 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.
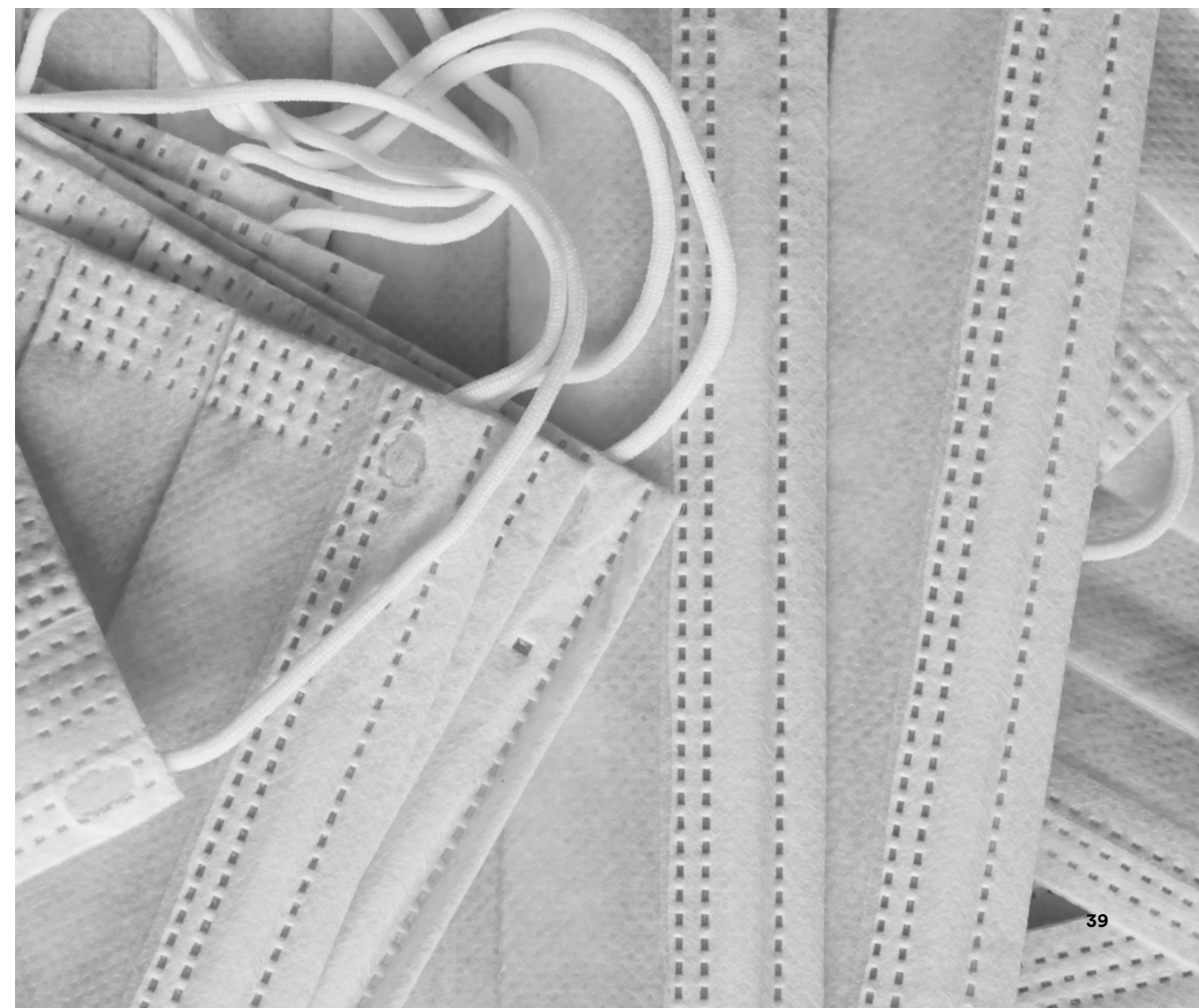
Some leaders were able to draw on support, at home, from their senior team and/or from wider networks, to help them deal with these challenges. Others found other ways to reduce the impact, for example by remaining proactive, but focusing their energy on to the new, complex challenges that the pandemic threw up. Others took a more zen approach, as the quote here indicates, refusing to react the moment 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

"

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... I feel totally unrespected, demotivated, unvalued and I can tell you exactly how many days it is 'til my 55th birthday. "

PHL

"

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."

PHL

4. What sustained leaders 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.

4.1 Sustaining leaderrs

The various pandemic achievements and resulting satisfaction that we explored in Section 2 were hugely important in sustaining heads, not least the joy of seeing children back in school and making progress. Underpinning these successes was the moral purpose and values which underpin teachers and school leaders' work to support children and communities.

Among respondents to the survey who stated they were 'sometimes/mostly thriving' (Figs. 3 and 4), the factors that helped them cope were: collaboration and problem solving with colleagues at my school (74%), my personal values and beliefs (48%), my school's positive ethos / culture (40%), feeling trusted to get on and make the right decisions (33%) and collaboration and problem solving with leaders outside my school (27%).

A minority of interviewees either seemed to face less intensive pressure and/or appeared to cope with the challenges more easily than their peers. In some cases, this reflected particular circumstances; for example, four interviewees were in job shares or working part-time as co-heads, 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. Other interviewees adopted particular personal coping strategies or organisational arrangements to help them cope. For example, one head

adopted a strict hierarchical approach to dealing with issues so that only the most significant ones fed through to them.

4.2 Sources of support for leaders

Box 6 includes findings from the survey in relation to how well leaders felt supported and where they turned for advice and support during the pandemic. Around a third of leaders actively disagreed that they were well-supported, while leaders found advice from trade unions/professional associations and local authorities most useful. As we outline below, the interviews highlighted additional important sources of advice and support, including other headteachers and school-to-school networks.
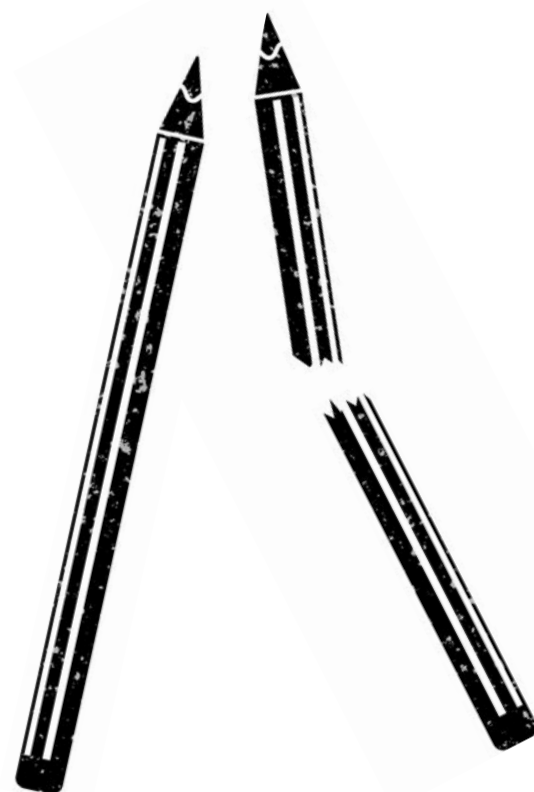
In the survey, less than half (45%) of leaders agreed that they had been well supported in their leadership role throughout the pandemic, while one third (33%) actively disagreed that they had been well supported.

School leaders drew on a range of sources of advice during the pandemic and found advice from unions and professional associations the most useful and trustworthy (Fig. 11). As we noted above (Fig. 3), leaders' views about the advice provided by DfE were overwhelmingly negative.
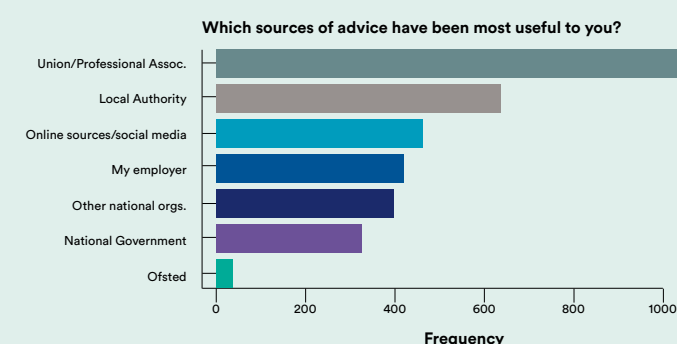
Which sources of advice have been most useful to you?

Fig 11: Most useful sources of advice that leaders drew on during he pandemic (n=1478).

In the interviews, the majority of headteachers (44/58) described the contribution of the unions as 'excellent' and 'outstanding'. The unions were seen as a voice of reason and reasonableness in a chaotic climate, and a source of mainly practical, but also moral, support.[6]

A similar majority of interviewees (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. This finding chimes with the national survey, in which a majority of leaders said that their school had collaborated well with other schools (Fig. 12) – although a sizeable minority (16% of secondaries and 14% of primaries) disagreed. As we noted above in relation to pandemic 'highs', around half of the interviewees (27/58) mentioned a deputy and/or the senior leadership team as providing moral and practical support.

Around two thirds of interviewees (14 primary heads and 25 secondaries) cited the local authority (LA) 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.

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

Box 7: Survey findings – how well have schools collaborated during the pandemic?

In the survey, two questions explored the extent to which schools have collaborated, firstly with other schools and secondly with other services for children and young people.

Responses to the first question are shown in Figure 12, broken down by phase. Almost two thirds (63%) of primary leaders agree that local collaboration was strong, compared to just over half of secondary (51%) and all-through (55%) leaders. The difference between primary and secondary leaders was significant, but the difference between primary and all-through leaders was not.
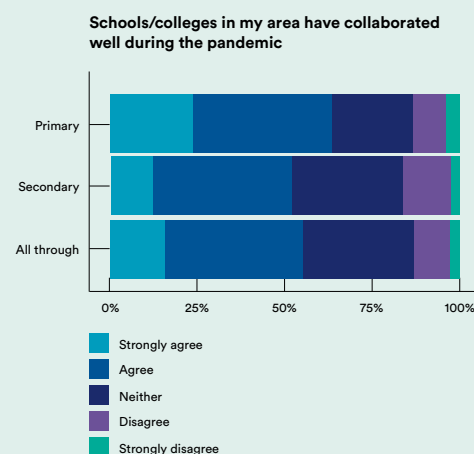
Schools/colleges in my area have collaborated well during the pandemic

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Fig 12: School leaders views on local inter-school collaboration during the pandemic (primary n==806, secondary n=500, all-through n=120).

Responses to the second question are shown in Figure 13, broken down by phase. Two thirds or more of leaders in all three phases agreed that their school had worked well with other services.

My school has worked well with other services for children and young people during the pandemic

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Fig 13: School leaders view on school collaboration with wider services during the pandemic (primary n=806, secondary n=500, all-through n=120).

For interviewees, 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. Many 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 leader 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.

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.

Finally, notwithstanding the issues with DfE guidance highlighted above, five headteacher interviewees did say that it was useful to some extent.
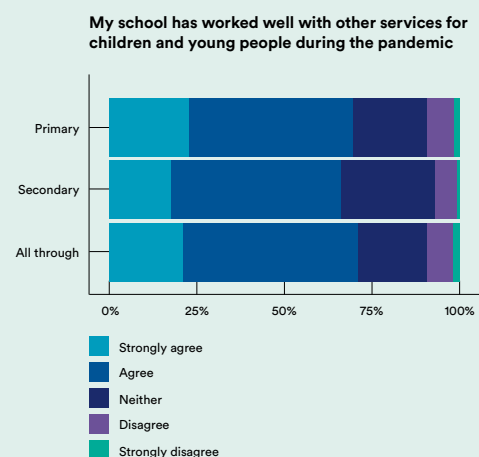
Transcript poem 5: I feel incredible pride

I feel incredible pride in the way the school has
dealt with everything that's been thrown at it.
Whether that's Heads of Year
Or catering assistants driving around delivering
meals to families on the breadline
I feel myself welling up inside
So much pride in what we achieved.

The appreciation that the local community
showed for everything that we've done
We're absolutely swamped by unsolicited
positive messages
saying what a wonderful job we've done.

All this rhetoric nationally about lost learning and
students being behind
we really don't see that.
Yes, students have learned differently.
There are somethings they've not done, practicals
in science, not enough time to practise speaking
in languages,
we can put interventions in place for that.
But we've just done our end of year assessments
in the normal way
and we're not seeing huge gaps in most subjects.
really it's not the case that there are huge gaping
gaps that are going to hold students back forever.
Just not true.

There's always a bit of politicking between head
teachers
but that's just completely gone.
Working together has been extraordinary.
The sharing, doing things together, supporting
each other
A real team spirit.
That's really helped.
And the local authority,
which schools traditionally like to moan about…
There's only one local authority secondary school
in the local authority.
It's basically all academies,
But actually the local authority have been
extremely good.
Drawing us together,
During the worst of the pandemic they had daily
meetings with head teachers to help.

We're a small MAT.
But it has been good to talk things through,
meeting at least once or twice a week during the
whole of the pandemic just to share experiences

and we were able to support each other.

Hardly a day's gone by when
we haven't had to deal with something.
And during those times when the epidemic's
been at its worst…
We've not really ever had time off.

When you've got quite a senior role, you have
experience
Either dealt with something like it before or the
same thing before or at least something that's
vaguely like it before
So you've got schema that you can rely on that
get you through,
even when you've got a really, really busy day
with lots of difficult things to do, but
But there was no schema for anything that
we've been doing.

You've had to think everything out from scratch
which
is just utterly exhausting and then couple that
with getting no notice to do it
and being expected to implement in incredibly
short time scales.
Usually over a weekend or during the summer
holiday, when you're having to drag in
colleagues for brainstorming sessions and
meetings to try and work out how or if.
That was what finally made me decide.

I'm actually an amazingly calm person
normally,
But I've felt pretty stressed at times.

That's definitely been part of my decision to
retire at the end of this year

My original plan was definitely work another
two years till my son finished university
Certainly before the pandemic I was enjoying
being a head
70 to 80% chance I would have gone on
another two years.

I wouldn't have let the school down by leaving
last year
But I feel I've got us to a place now where
it's time for somebody else to take it on.
Once you've made your mind up that you're
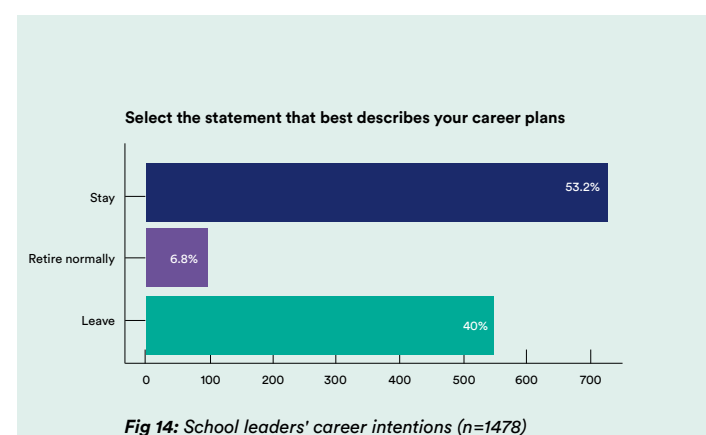going, that's it.
You just want to go.

SHL

5. The impact of the pandemic on leaders' career intentions

An important finding from the survey was that two in five leaders plan to leave the profession early (for reasons other than full retirement) over the next five years (Box 9). In this section we draw on the interview findings, in particular, to examine why headteachers choose to stay in or leave the profession. We also highlight responses from some of the younger (aged 46 or less) leaders in the interview sample, since it seems particularly important to consider whether and how this group might be supported to remain in the profession.

Box 9: Survey findings - Which leaders are planning to leave early?

In the survey we asked leaders to select the statement that best described their career intentions and plans, with eight possible statements in total.[7] Three options involved staying in the profession (stay in current role for foreseeable future, apply for different role in current school/MAT in next year or two, apply for role in different school/MAT in next year or two), while a fourth option involved retirement at normal retirement age. Three options involved leaving the profession early (within the next year, three years or five years) while a fourth involved taking early retirement within five years. The findings are included in Figure 14, with the results aggregated. This shows that two fifths of leaders (40%) plan to leave the profession - for reasons other than full retirement – within the next five years.

Select the statement that best describes your career plans

Fig 14: School leaders' career intentions (n=1478)

When we broke these responses down further, we found that:

- Leaders who have been in the profession the longest (i.e. 26 years or more) are most likely to say they will leave early.

- Leaders in executive headship (46%), headship (46%) and school business roles (39%) are significantly more likely to say they will leave early than either deputy (26%) or assistant heads (20%).

- Leaders in primary schools are significantly more likely to say they plan to leave early (46%) than those in secondaries (33%) or all-through schools (26%).

5.1 Changing intentions

Our interviewees included an even balance of 'leavers' and 'stayers', based on responses to the online survey. The interview findings indicate that the situation remains fluid, with the potential to reduce the number of leavers if the headteacher role can be made more manageable. By the same token, a failure to address the issues could mean even higher numbers choose to leave.

Three headteachers had changed their intentions between completing the survey (in April/May) 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 – through to a realisation that they couldn't afford to 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.

5.2 Reasons for staying

Among the 'stayer' interviewees who remained clear that they would definitely remain, there were a number of reasons given. Many of these related to why these leaders had originally chosen to become a head, in terms of moral purpose and making a difference.

> "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

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[7] Plus 'Not sure/prefer not to say' and 'Other'.

Some 'stayers' argued that the pandemic had actually reaffirmed their commitment to education and young people. For these leaders, it had led them see the role of schools somewhat differently.

❝

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

5.3 Reasons for leaving or considering leaving

In the survey, the vast majority (nine in 10) of early 'leavers' stated that the pandemic had been either the main or a contributing factor in their career decision. In addition, further analysis of the survey revealed that the leaders who found the various pandemic-related challenges most stressful and also those who faced personal health challenges during the pandemic were the most likely to say they would leave early.

In this section we build on these findings to focus on why the 'leavers' in our interview sample said they would leave. Clearly, this analysis builds on the series of issues outlined above - including the various pandemic 'lows' (Section 2), the impact that this had on leaders' workload, well-being and health (Section 3), and the underlying ways in which this undermined leaders' sense of agency and identity as leaders (Section 3.2) – all of which can be seen to have influenced leaders' decisions.

The issue mentioned most often by 'leavers' as a major factor in their decision (i.e. on top of the pandemic) was Ofsted and the accountability framework (16 out of 27 'leavers').

❝

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. Linked to this was a need for self-preservation, to get out before the job crushes you.

❝

I am definitely taking early retirement. I'm worried about my own health."

PHL

A further issue was the sense that the profession had been treated with contempt, in particular by ministers and the DfE, as 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, for example if their school was taken over.

❝

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, interviewees in schools with higher levels of disadvantage were more likely to say they intend to leave the profession early (Figure 15). However, this is less marked for the secondary phase (Figure 16).
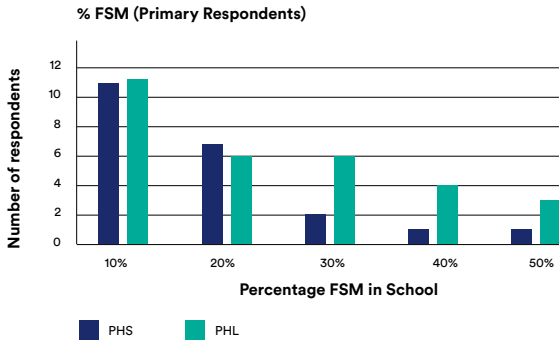

Fig 15: Intention to leave the profession early and levels of school deprivation (Primary interviewees) FSM = Free School Meals
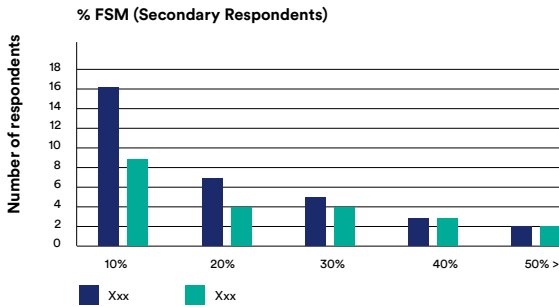

Fig 16: Intention to leave the profession early and the levels of school deprivation (Secondary interviewees)

Transcript poem 6: The nub of it for me is about hope

The highlight of my career was when I was a stand-alone head teacher in a local authority school.
I was my own boss making my own decisions in my own way, which after four years led to an outstanding outcome.
We were a good school and we were left well alone.
It epitomises what makes the job really worthwhile.

All but one of the schools in town decided to make a Multi Academy Trust together.
But Ofsted did a batch inspection and placed several in special measures.
The academy trust was closed.
We were forced into another larger academy trust.
And I basically have lost autonomy over almost everything I do.

There is a real mix of Academy support and Academy challenge.

The Academy Trust has been stunningly supportive in some respects.
Where clear guidance was needed over the pandemic, the Academy Trust gave it.
They wrote template risk assessments.
I just filled in my name and checked it matched our school.
I know heads that are outside of academies. They were tearing their hair out thinking Am I doing the right thing? Who's checking what I'm doing?
I didn't have any of that. At all.
So that was really, really good.

On the other hand the Academy Trust has used this as a bit of a land grab.
My autonomy is way less at the end of this pandemic.
We're not at the end of it yet, but where we stand in the pandemic is worse than it was pre-pandemic.
Finance is one of the major things
I don't have my own budget.

We've got a few damaged children from the pandemic, children coming back wild, wrecking classrooms…
Me saying I need some extra staffing support.

The response is: "Your budget doesn't support it I'm afraid".

I ask and they say "Don't you know there's a pandemic? No, you can't spend any money"
But I don't see my school budget. I'm not shown my budget.
I have to beg for every penny that I have.

Whereas when my money was my own, I would have found that money in the curriculum budget.
I'd have found a little bit in the premises budget.
I'd have found it somewhere,
I've got the experience, I can do that.
I know. I've balanced budgets for over 20 years.

I feel totally disrespected, demotivated, unvalued.
I can tell you exactly how many days it is till my 55th birthday.
I am not doing a day beyond that for them.

There are too many things that are going in the wrong direction in education for me to find fulfilment again.

A concrete example of where things are going wrong is the reading guidance that's been sent out.
I put my head in my hands when I read that through.
You know it's so prescriptive. It's just so old fashioned in lots of respects.
Again, more steps towards the autonomy of school leadership being taken away from you.

But I'm not as stressed as I have been at other points in my career pre-pandemic.
The nub of it for me is about hope.
Hope is a massive word in my in my lexicon.
You know, have you got hope for the future?

I think job satisfaction in leadership positions comes from autonomy.
And the more that is taken away from head teachers than the less job satisfaction there is.

I've got 18 months to go.
I'm not going to be unkind to another school and apply to be their head teacher, not telling them that I don't intend to be there past 18 months.
That's not morally right.
So I just have to suck it up and get on with it for 18 months.

PHL

5.4 The experiences of 'younger' heads

We highlight here 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 four younger heads below – two 'stayers' and two 'leavers'. On the whole, the challenges they faced were similar to their older peers, but some distinct themes do 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 genuine work-life balance.

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.

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: early forties, MAT, rated Outstanding, above average FSM, second year of headship

My husband, he's lost his dad to Covid during this as well. 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 the school and balance all of that has been really, really hard and I don't think I've got it right.

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.

Transcript poem 7: I wouldn't say I'm thriving. I'm coping

I've been head for the last two academic years.
I haven't had a normal year yet.

March was really difficult when
my husband lost his dad and it was the first lockdown.
The June reopening was difficult.
September was difficult when parents didn't understand what you were trying to do

It all caught up with me in January
I hadn't properly rested.
There was all the 'school shouldn't be reopening union advice'.
So we opened for that one day 15 staff down
Then the next day we closed. We were into remote learning

At that point that whole period had caught up with me.
I just had about six weeks of very low energy.
Very low motivation. Still turning up and doing it. Not making errors or poor decisions
Just keeping going.

My husband, he's lost his dad to Covid.
So trying ... I don't think I've got it right ... 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
Balancing all of that has been really really hard.

Parents questioning decisions about one way routes and staggered start times or not having
parents at Sports Day.
Constant questioning of your decisions,
but also the few...
Well, it's not a few, it's far more regular, very aggressive outbursts from parents.

So staff have seen you as human,
whereas parents have seen you as
the face of a school that's being obstructive, difficult and annoying.

It has been hard because I have come home from an emotionally and physically exhausted 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.
I'm in bed by 8:00 o'clock and the next day I'm up and I'm doing it all again.
Not necessarily sleeping
Waking up on high alert.

I wouldn't say I'm thriving.
I'm coping.

I'm not thinking of leaving.
What I want is several years of normal.
If that is not what I expect it to be I would make a decision at that point.
But at the moment I'm very aware that I haven't had a normal couple of years.
It's been exceptional.
Heads have never had a period like this
So I almost can't make any decisions at this point
Because I almost haven't been a proper head yet.

PHS

6. What could improve school leader retention?

This section draws on the survey and interview findings to ask whether any measures could help to retain more headteachers. As might be expected, the findings largely involve ameliorating the challenges and issues highlighted throughout this report, but they do also include various practical suggestions, such as coaching and providing more active support for job-share headship.

In the survey, we asked all respondents what might persuade them to stay for longer (Box 10), with greater trust in the profession – by government – seen as making the greatest difference, followed by action on a range of areas that can be broadly characterised around reducing pressure and workload, while enhancing funding and support for schools and school leaders.

Box 10: Survey findings – what might persuade leaders to remain in the profession for longer?

We asked all respondents to the survey whether any changes would persuade them to stay in the profession for longer if they were implemented successfully, giving them the option to tick as many as applied from a list. The findings are shown in Figure 17, showing that greater trust in the profession – by government – would make the greatest difference.

Please indicate whether any of the following factors would persuade you to stay in teaching for longer if they were implemented successfully?
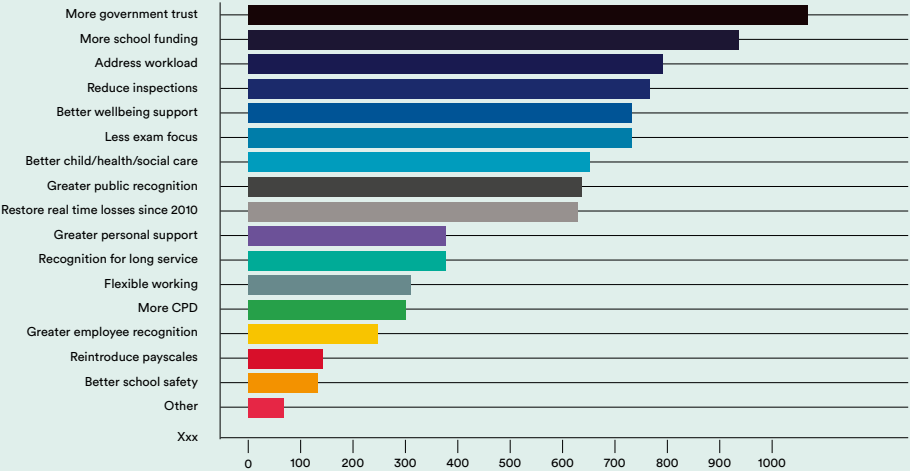
Fig 17: School leaders' views on factors that would persuade them to stay in the profession for longer (n=1478)

In the interviews we asked all heads, but particularly the 'leavers', whether anything would persuade them to stay in the profession for longer. We summarise their responses as follows.

Greater political and public recognition, in particular from ministers and DfE. Suggestions included: better consultation; listening to leadership representatives more; and a change of mindset to appreciate that leaders do their best for the children in their care. The lack of understanding by government was felt especially for interviewees serving disadvantaged communities. Government guidance was seen to be secondary-centric, with little understanding of younger children, nursery schools, primaries, small schools or special schools.

> **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. This would not only assess school contexts more fairly and in more developmental ways, but would also consider the stress and differential impact of the pandemic on children themselves.

> **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

Several interviewees suggested that all headteachers should be given a **personal coach**, as an entitlement.

> **If there was 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 the arrangement as a critical factor in managing the stresses and workload of the pandemic.

> "
>
> 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."
>
> PHS

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.

Nineteen headteachers mentioned **school funding** as a challenge to be addressed, mainly in the context of inadequate provision of health and welfare services but also the impact of cuts on the daily operation of schools.

> "
>
> 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."
>
> SHS

Finally, pay 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 to be put centre stage in the recovery period.

> "
>
> 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 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 ask them to do. I absolutely understand why it may have led a lot of young people to really feel incredibly powerless."
>
> SHS

Transcript poem 8: I got really good at doing my priorities

I had a coach.
She was originally provided by the MAT for my first two terms
it was like, a transition to headship type thing
I'd met with her the term before I started my headship. Like twice.
What I needed was someone who would genuinely give me space to think and solve.
Help me move in the right direction.
And then I met with her twice once I'd started
And then I said to her, "Am I able to do this more often?"
Then I bought into the service after that.

I was like I need to be this.
I don't need to be not emotional,
And most of all I need 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.

So I spoke to my coach more often.
She wasn't giving me any answers, she was just giving me space
And it forced me to put space into my diary every week to speak to her and to talk through
the biggest issues.
I often had like, "This is my biggest issue".
She'd just smile and be like, "Come on".
I got really good at doing my priorities.
This is urgent. This is something I want to do but can't do. This is something that I don't want to
do but I need to do.
Working through all of that was really powerful for me.

I now feel that the job as a head teacher is so much about PR
It's almost like a really awful DfE decision comes and you have to kind of PR it to make it like
"It's going to be brilliant kids. All you ever wanted to do is to come into school and have a lateral
flow test and then go home again. And yes, you can't do this, but this is going to be amazing"
I just felt that my job has been polishing turds, trying to make bad news seem positive for
people. I don't know.
I feel like there's not been that help and that support
And things have just been thrown on schools.

In the past I was "Right I will be a head teacher
and 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?"

I can't remember the last time I turned my laptop off before half ten.
I can't remember the last time I had a weekend.
I just can't remember, you know?
When I have a day where I don't work, I feel guilty.
I know that part of that is crisis management.
Covid has been a crisis and we can't downplay that.
It has been a national, global crisis.
It's not just for poor me in my school
But the expectation is now that as a head teacher I can solve problems and I can sort things.
And how long do you want to do that?
How long have I got the motivation to do that for?

SHS

6. Conclusion

There have been mixed affects flowing from the pandemic.

One the one hand, and despite the hard work involved, school leaders kept schools, an essential and important public service, open. Despite tardy and often frequently changing advice, they responded to changing circumstances at very short notice, often working on weekends and during holiday periods to do what was needed. Some of the changes they made have the potential to provide long term benefits for the school system as a whole, including: a strongly human-focused style of leadership; competence and confidence in online learning; team-work and distributed leadership within schools; collaborative work with other local leaders and agencies; and a renewed commitment to community-focused actions. Leaders never lost sight of the importance of learning, and despite disruption to some areas of the curriculum, were keen to focus strategically on recovery and a return to face-to-face teaching.

On the other hand, the pandemic exposed and exacerbated some of the existing problems within the system. The previous policy emphasis on leaders having technical skills in evidence-based management and implementation was demonstrably inadequate for the kinds of contingent and highly person–focused leadership that was required. The pre-existing problem of supply and retention of a diverse cohort of school leaders has become more pronounced during the pandemic. However, the situation is fluid and government could intervene positively to encourage more to stay on. This would mean attending to both cultural and structural questions. The lack of trust expressed by leaders in government and the perceived lack of trust that government has in them suggests an

organisational culture in need of urgent attention. The uneven nature of support for leaders from both Local Authorities and MATs and the imbalance and inefficiency between central and local decision making and delegations hampered effectiveness, indicating that organisational rethinking is required.

An equitable and effective school system is one in which support and resources are distributed evenly, and one where local services are able to provide relevant feedback to government and are trusted take action where and when required. It is clear from this and other research conducted during the pandemic that the English school system has some way to go to achieve this. Urgent discussion about moving forward is required, discussion that meaningfully involves local leaders and their unions in genuine rethinking about how to build on strengths, address the problems within and create a coherent and sustainable school system.

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