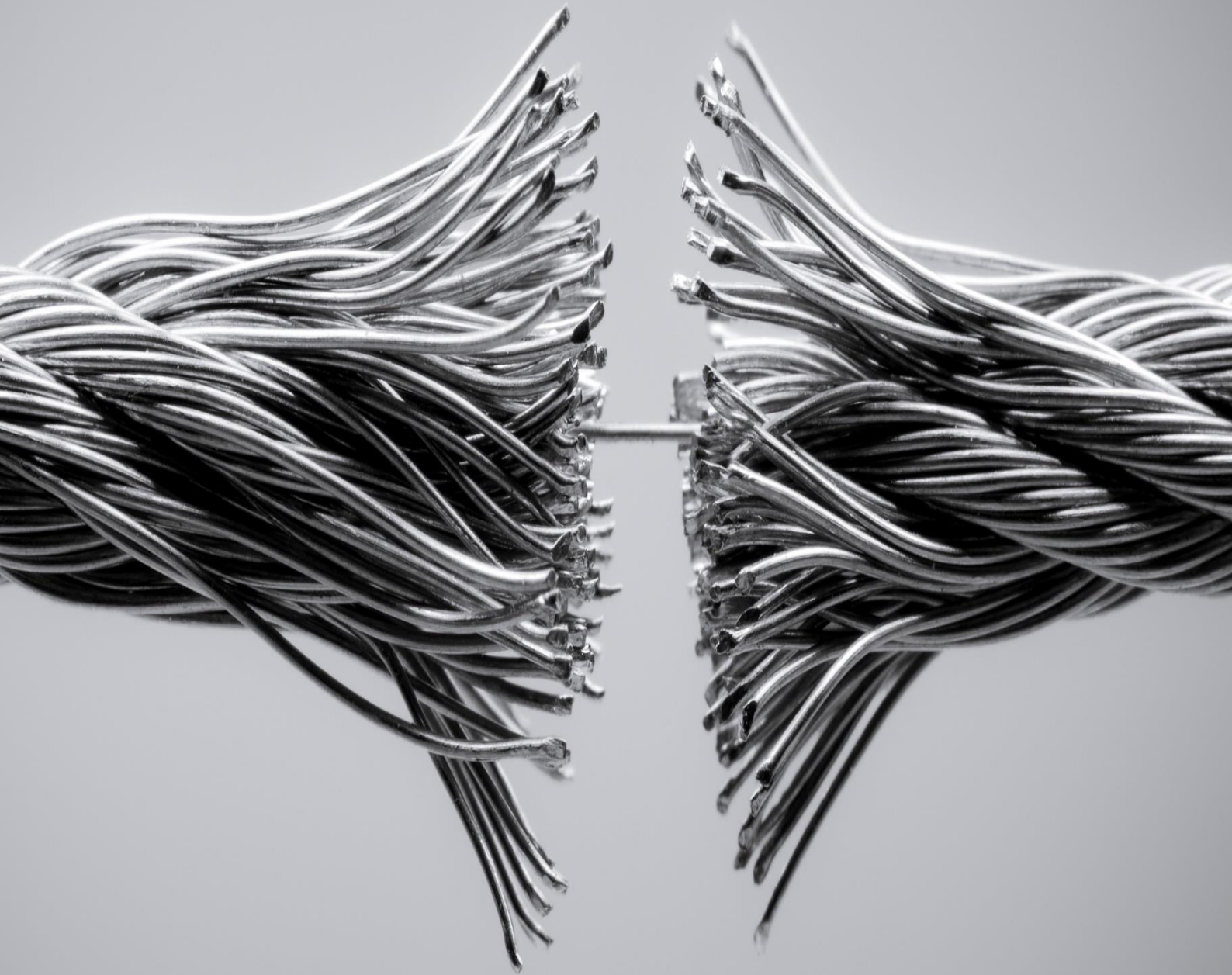


Headrest



Annual Headteacher
Wellbeing Report | 2022



Headrest Annual Headteacher Wellbeing Report

January 2022

Introduction

Headrest started its work in October 2020. We are an entirely voluntary operation designed to offer a confidential listening ear to headteachers. We receive no funding, and the team that provide the service are all experienced former headteachers who give up their own time to help. We are only able to exist because of the generosity of a number of supporters who cover our operating costs through donations, such as the cost of the website and phone line.

This our first annual wellbeing report, the purpose of which is to provide an overview of the key issues that have emerged. We, of course, have a moral imperative to protect the confidentiality of individual callers, thus this report focuses on key themes rather than individual cases. However, we postulate that the concerns we raise in this report will go well beyond those school leaders who have called us directly.

Headrest (n): A safety device designed
to support the head.

Overview

We are aware that leading a school through a global pandemic has inflicted immense pressures on school leaders and their staff teams. School leaders, alongside their staff teams, have had to:

- co-ordinate COVID testing and, in some cases, vaccination within their schools;
- liaise with stressed families;
- support/manage bereavement situations;
- establish on-line learning and manage partial school attendance during lockdowns;
- support the well-being of colleagues and students/pupils;
- show resourcefulness in managing staff shortages;
- respond to the conflicting demands of stakeholders;
- broaden their knowledge of the management and risks of an airborne virus in schools and then use the knowledge acquired to decide on school-based approaches to COVID management;
- protect the young people, staff and wider families who are particularly vulnerable to the most dangerous consequences of the virus;
- set significant amounts of their senior leadership tasks aside to meet the core operational demand to have staff in front of classes;
- support the emotional/mental health needs of confused and fearful young people and, in some instances, parents;
- respond swiftly to Department for Education, Government and Health department guidance (often shared with them at the shortest of notice);
- manage budgets often decimated by COVID related expenditure;
- adjust their curriculum in the light of changing circumstances;

- monitor safeguarding and child protection concerns in the most unusual of contexts;
- respond to poorly communicated changes to GCSE and A Level accreditation processes;
- lift staff morale when parts of the media, and some politicians, have shamefully sought to portray the teaching profession as work shy or cowardly.

Looking at the above can anyone be remotely surprised that some school leaders, and their staff teams, are anxious, burnt out and, at times, overwhelmed.

There is a moment when a viewpoint must be proffered that is robust, even controversial. Therefore, we will be direct: some school leaders have been let down. In the early stages of the pandemic those leading schools were desperately worried about how they could manage to address all aspects of their role.

The message from national policymakers and local decision makers was that the here and now was the priority – that the strategic tasks that could not be completed should be set aside to prioritise meeting urgent pupil/student needs arising from a once-in-a-century global pandemic.

Now move forward to the second half of 2021. Whilst COVID was still prevalent in schools, OFSTED decided to restart graded inspections. We have no doubt some inspection teams have acted with empathy, sensitivity, and professionalism. However, in some instances OFSTED teams have criticised school leaders, and their staff teams, for having neglected strategic leadership. It was as if for some inspectors COVID had never happened, was an insignificant event, or was over.

We recognise that many Multi Academy Trusts, Local Authorities and Governing Bodies have offered constructive support to their school leaders. However, some

of the calls we have received would imply this has not been the case in all instances.

It is our view that some of the nation's school leaders, who have led their schools through the toughest of times, have been treated abysmally. This is not acceptable and should not be accepted.

The changing focus of calls

The areas of concern most frequently cited by Headrest callers has altered as the pandemic has evolved. These changes are summarised in the table below:

Phase	Focus of Headrest calls
<i>Phase One:</i> October 2020 to April 2021	Concerns largely revolved around issues pertaining to the stresses of managing the pandemic within schools. Alongside this there were emerging concerns of excessive, unreasonable, or undeliverable demands from a range of external and internal sources.
<i>Phase Two:</i> May 2021 to December 2021	Schools still had issues around pandemic management, but a major new source of stress and anxiety emerged with the return of OFSTED graded inspections.
<i>Phase Three:</i> January 2022	With Ofsted inspections on hold less calls were received on this issue. The main area of focus currently is Headrest callers feeling increasingly bullied/intimidated.

An overview of stressors

The most common sources of stress that are shared by callers can be summarised under six key headings:

Bullying/intimidation

Some of the most traumatic calls received are from school leaders who feel bullied and/or intimidated. Sometimes this can be from those who have some authority over them within a trust or local authority. However, there is also an emerging trend in some recent calls of school leaders feeling subjected to upward bullying where individual staff, or sub-groups of staff, are maliciously undermining them. This has included, in some instances, the use of vexatious complaints.

Demands that show no understanding of context or pressures

In the pandemic's early stages this focused around COVID guidance. Now the demands causing pressure increasingly stem from other external personnel, like the inspectorate, who labour under the misperception that the pandemic is already over. The return to graded inspection was often an area of concern. Callers cited cases of inspectors lacking empathy; being overly oppressive; and showing scant regard for the well-being of staff, school leaders and, in some instances, students. Others expressed exasperation with OFSTED's response to inspection deferral requests. It should be noted that these concerns were raised by schools with a wide range of OFSTED grades.

A sense of disempowerment

Some headteachers felt their autonomy to lead their school was undermined by external diktats that diverted them from what they believe should be their core tasks/issues. These diktats could come from a range of sources. Some colleagues who called articulated the frustration of feeling "micromanaged".

Insufficient support leading to a sense of isolation, self-doubt or feeling overwhelmed

This was a concern not only for those relatively new to headship but also experienced school leaders.

Exhaustion & anxiety

Being a school leader through Covid has been physically and emotionally draining. An area of challenge is that school leaders have had to exhibit an external sense of calmness and control. However, internally they were often just as anxious, uncertain, frustrated, and uneasy as their colleagues. They also have had to contend with short term changes to their own priorities due to staff absence; the requirement for them, or SLT colleagues, to cover an absence; or the need for them to retain a high visibility around the school to support the well-being of students and staff. For schools awaiting an OFSTED inspection the anxiety of worrying about inspectorial understanding of the impact of COVID on strategic leadership tasks/priorities was a source of major angst.

Conflicting stakeholder expectations

Sometimes Headrest callers felt it was an impossibility to meet the contradictory, and often conflicting demands, that a diverse range of stakeholders were asking of them. Whilst most parents have undoubtedly been highly supportive of school leaders, and their staff teams, some calling us have cited instances where they believe some parents have used social media or vexatious complaints to either undermine or intimidate them.

In many instances the calls Headrest receives can be a combination of several of the above.

Some other common issues that emerge in our calls are shown in the following table:

Issue	Challenge it poses
Fear of strategic leadership gaps being used against them	Some callers fear that they will be adversely judged by the inspectorate, or others overseeing them, for failing to deliver all the strategic tasks they would normally have completed by a particular stage of the academic year. There is a concern that some of those external to the school do not comprehend just how pressured things have been. Some of our callers have cited such behaviour from trusts, local authorities, governing bodies, and the inspectorate.
Small schools	In small schools the economies of scale meant these schools often had fewer, or no other, senior leaders. This meant that delegation and sharing of leadership tasks was often impossible. Leaders who found themselves the only senior leader within their school often reported feeling particularly isolated.
Staffing	Many schools have found themselves losing staff to other sectors who are offering better rates of remuneration – this is particularly the case with administrative staff and teaching assistants. Some teaching staff are also re-evaluating their career and either seeking new posts; relinquishing areas of responsibility; or deciding that they wish to leave the profession. Unsuitable fields for advertised posts often makes obtaining replacement appointments impossible. Securing supply staff appears to be a major problem

	nationally. Striving to resolve staffing pressure points is posing some Headrest callers major concerns.
Family pressures	The stress of leading in these most extraordinary of times has left many senior leaders with a sense of guilt that their workload is impinging adversely on their family relationships.
Personal health	Some leaders in their desire to do the right thing by their school are ignoring their own medical or emotional health needs. There are cases of colleagues not following medical guidance because they do not wish to "let down" their school community.
Sleep deprivation	For some, the only way they can get the strategic aspects of their leadership completed is either by working ridiculously late hours or getting up at ludicrously early hours in the morning. This sleep deprivation can then impact adversely on their health and decision making.

Acknowledgements

The team at Headrest would like to thank a number of organisations and partners for their support. A full list of our supporters can be found on our [website](#), but we are particularly grateful to the lovely person who has paid for our website hosting costs for three years and who wishes to remain anonymous. Likewise, we thank Navigate NDC who pay for the 0800 freephone service that ensures all calls to Headrest are free. A word of thanks must also go to the TES for helping us get our message out there throughout our time and to NAHT for inviting us to present to headteachers across the regions. Finally, of course to all the amazing headteachers who we have the privilege to speak to. You remain an inspiration to us all and are a credit to the profession.

