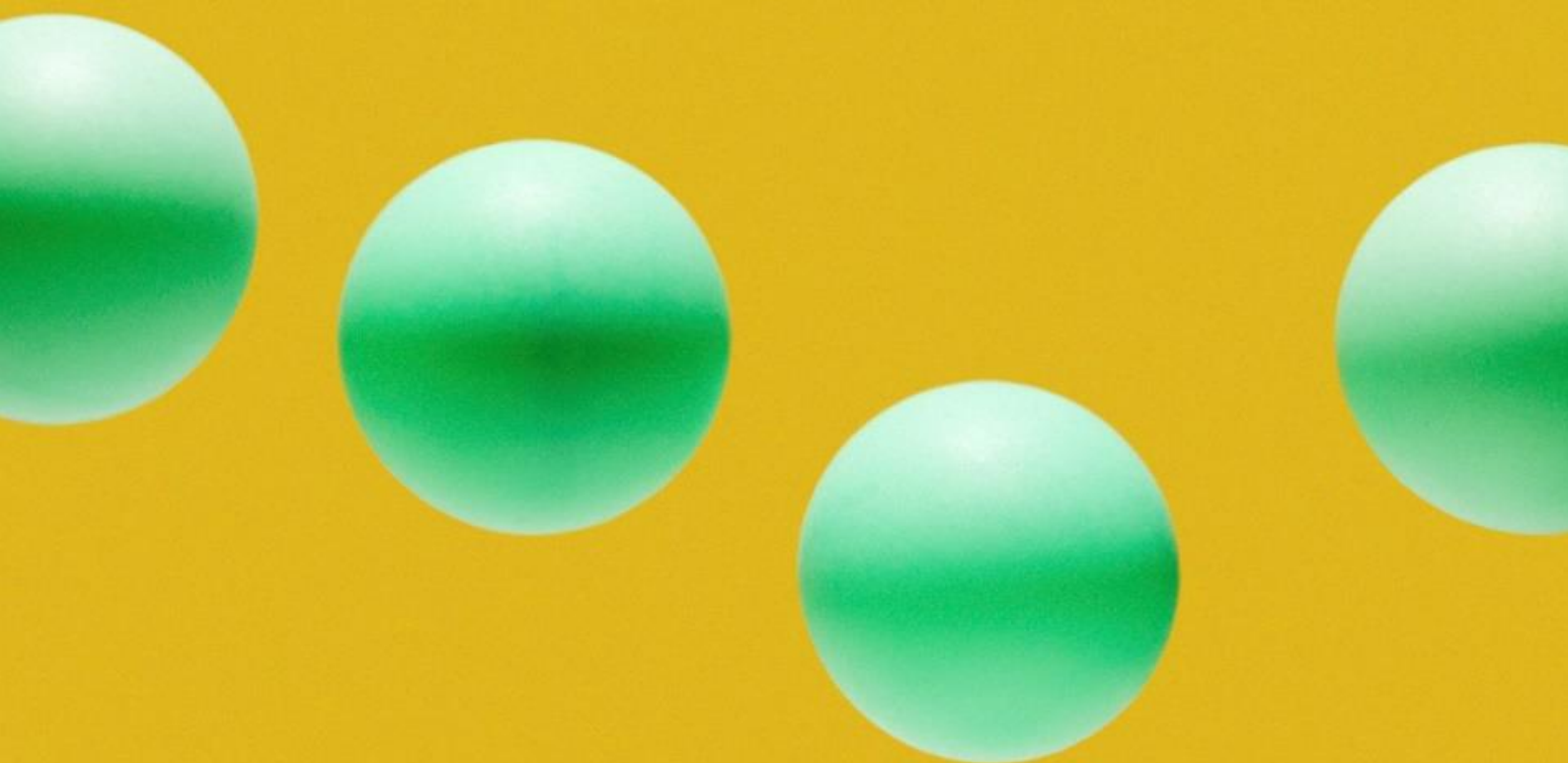


Headrest



Annual Headteacher
Wellbeing Report 2023



Headrest Annual Headteacher Wellbeing Report

February 2023

Introduction

Headrest started its work in October 2020. In March 2022, we formalised as a constituted association (or small charity). As a community group, our objects are: (1) to provide free confidential wellbeing support for headteachers, and; (2) provide advocacy for the profession in regard to headteacher wellbeing and support. We are an entirely voluntary operation designed to offer a confidential listening ear to headteachers. We receive no funding. The team that provides the service are all experienced former headteachers who are still actively involved in supporting school leadership in a variety of roles. As volunteers we work on a pro-bono basis. A core principle of our service is that we do not seek any future financial gain from our Headrest work. We are only able to exist because of the generosity of a number of supporters who cover our operating expenses through donations such as the costs of the website and phone line. We are grateful to them for their continued support. We list them at the end.

Those of us who receive Headrest calls feel privileged to speak with school leaders who have faced the challenge of leading the nation's schools through the toughest of times. We are consistently full of admiration for the fortitude and dedication this generation of school leaders has shown. The moral imperative of doing what is best for their school community is so clearly the driving force for their undertaking a school leadership role. In our view it will be an act of inexcusable folly for national decision makers to neglect their duty of care to school leaders, and other school staff, and risk losing educationalists who the nation's young people need so desperately to remain within our schools. For our part we will willingly continue to offer what support we can. However, we do hope there will be a point in the future when our service is no longer needed because the wellbeing of the nation's school workforce is appropriately and effectively prioritised.

This is our second annual wellbeing report, the purpose of which is to provide an overview of the key issues that have emerged. We, of course, have a duty to respect 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 the school leaders who have called us directly.



Overview

Our last Annual Report coincided with a period when some of the most adverse impacts of the COVID pandemic seemed to be diminishing. As an organisation we hoped that some of the immense pressures on school leaders, their staff teams, and their pupils/students would abate. We certainly presumed there would be an awareness from national policymakers, and other key stakeholders, that schools would need time to recover from the adverse repercussions of a global pandemic. Sadly, not all seemed to grasp this seemingly obvious reality.

As a team we also anticipated that national policymakers would display a willingness to meaningfully invest in the education system's post-COVID recovery. We were thus disappointed that in 2021 the Department for Education declined to adopt the £15 billion recovery programme suggested by Sir Kevan Collins.

2022 saw school leaders, and their staff teams, face burgeoning pressures – some of these are listed below:

- The erosion of school budgets through inflation, excessive energy costs, and unfunded pay rises.
- Difficulties in retaining staff who are opting to leave the school workforce either for better pay/working conditions or for early retirement.
- Challenges in recruiting staff with many no longer perceiving school-based employment as offering the working conditions they desire or deserve.
- The impact of the cost-of-living crisis that sees many school leaders supporting families struggling to make ends meet. Indeed, in some instances, schools are facing families in hardship that has moved from deprivation to destitution.
- Difficulties in accessing mental health support for young people whose wellbeing has

been worsened by the toxic combination of a global pandemic and a cost-of-living crisis.

- Stakeholder pressures from those whose demands cannot be met by schools within their current budgets and staffing levels.
- The adverse impact of senior leadership tasks needing to be

set aside to meet the core operational demand of having staff in front of class.

- An abundance of other challenges pertaining to individual schools and school types which could be readily added to this already extensive list.

The impact of all the above is that school leaders, and their staff teams, find themselves faced with meeting an impossible complexity of demands. When a national newspaper headlines an [article](#) *"Exhausted, broken, at risk of heart attacks': UK headteachers quit as cuts push them to the edge"* we know from our own experience this is not journalistic hyperbole – this is the reality we hear regularly from those who call us. When the Education Support Service *Teacher Wellbeing Index 2022*¹ states that 87% of senior leaders say they have experienced poor mental health because of their work, and 58% say they have actively sought to change or leave their jobs in the past year, this data resonates with us.

It is our view that the nation's school leaders, who steadfastly led their schools through the stressful vicissitudes of a global pandemic, are now being asked to deliver the impossible. They increasingly carry the moral injury of knowing that however hard they work as an individual; however dedicated their staff teams; and however innovative they strive to be they cannot meet the needs of all the young people in their care to the standard they desire. Our callers often feel

¹ Teacher wellbeing index 2022 (Education Support – p.6-8)

emotionally crushed by the guilt that comes with this, but we do not accept it is school leaders who should bear this heavy burden of culpability.

We believe that those who hold prominent positions at national level need to urgently acknowledge and address the severity of the current crisis. To continuously exhort front line professionals to do ever more with ever less regardless of the deleterious impact this has on their morale, physical health, family life, or mental wellbeing is neither acceptable nor sustainable.



The changing focus

The main areas of concern most frequently cited by Headrest callers has altered over the past two years. These changes are summarised in the table below:

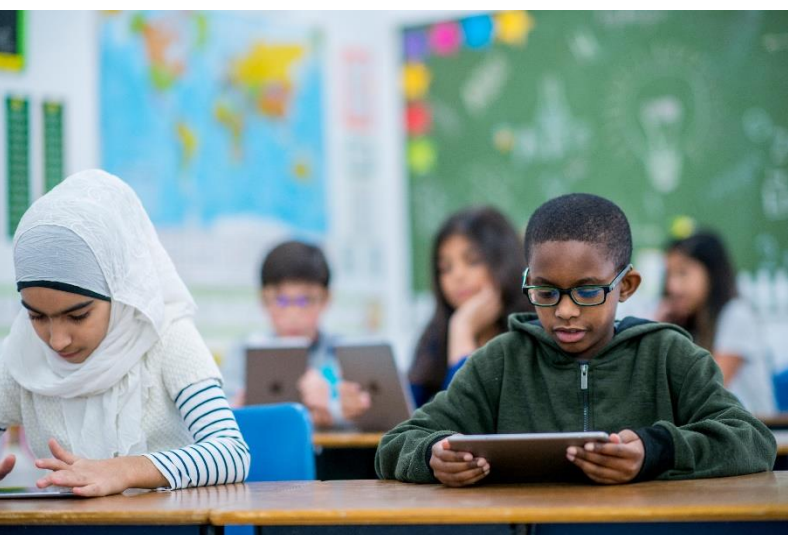
Phase	Focus of Headrest calls
<i>Phase One – October 2020 to April 2021</i>	Concerns largely revolved around issues pertaining to the stresses of managing the pandemic within schools. Alongside this there were emerging concerns of excessive, unreasonable, or undeliverable demands from a range of external and internal sources.
<i>Phase Two – May 2021 to November 2021</i>	Schools still had issues around pandemic management, but a major new source of stress and anxiety emerged with the return of Ofsted graded inspections. This concern with Ofsted was exacerbated in inspected schools by a significant variability in the empathy and sensitivity shown by inspection teams.
<i>Phase Three – December 2021 to April 2022</i>	Two key trends emerged during this period. The first was a concern that some key stakeholders expected an instant return to pre-COVID normality that was undeliverable with staff absences still being significant in number. The second was one of callers feeling physically and mentally exhausted from leading schools through a global pandemic with little time to rest, reflect or review. A group who were particularly challenged at this time were those school leaders who took up post during COVID and were now leading a school in a more normal mode of operation for the first time. In some calls from this group it was evident that the support they received was minimal and the expectations placed upon them unrealistic.

*Phase Four –
May 2022 to
December 2022*

Some of our most distressing calls were received during this period. We have had an abundance of calls from school leaders who faced an abyss of self-doubt in their capabilities. Invariably this was triggered not by their lack of professional competence but because they did not have the staffing, funding, external support, or personal energy reserves to face the demands being placed upon them.

Budget and staffing constraints were increasing stresses within staff teams and school communities. This sometimes led to a minority of stakeholders becoming unexpectedly abrasive when their demands and expectations could not be met.

School leaders increasingly called us questioning whether they even wished to remain in post. In these cases they were invariably exhausted and burnt out by the remorseless pressures they faced. Unintelligent accountability adds significantly to this pressure. We have had many calls from school leaders who are questioning whether they can face another high-stake inspection. Often they have little faith in the current inspection framework and a wariness of inspectorial inconsistency.



Stressors

The most common sources of stress that were shared by callers can be summarised under the six key headings shown below. Frequently in the calls received there was more than one of these stressors causing concern. (Please note that although we report them largely in the past tense we most certainly recognise that they will remain problematic issues in 2023.)

Moral injury

This was one of the most common sources of stress in 2022. School leaders were often faced with having to make decisions that went against deeply held beliefs and principles due to budget limitations, staffing shortages and/or other constraints. They increasingly found themselves having to opt not for the best option but what they deemed the "least bad choice". For professionals who entered school leadership with a drive to improve provision and pupil outcomes this constant barrage of decision making on a "least bad" basis was dispiriting. It has led to an increasing number of our callers facing an abyss of self-doubt and questioning if school leadership is a role they wish to continue to fulfil.

Anxiety, burnout, and stress

Being a school leader over recent years has been physically and emotionally draining. The increasing number of calls we have received in recent months from colleagues reporting either high levels of anxiety, stress, or burnout is alarming. Additionally, more of our callers appeared to have sought specialist medical or counselling support. We see it as a strength in their self-awareness that these colleagues have acknowledged the benefit of seeking such help. However, the fact it is often workplace triggers that have compelled them to do so should be a source of concern for politicians, the Department for Education, and others who seek to hold schools, and their leaders, to account.

Bullying/intimidation

Some of the most traumatic calls we 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, governing body, or local authority. There has also been an increased trend of school leaders feeling subjected to upward bullying where individual staff, or sub-groups of staff, are deliberately undermining them.

Staff retention

This is a major concern in many calls we received. Callers cited how they are losing significant numbers of staff who were either taking early retirement or seeking employment in sectors that offer preferential remuneration and/or terms and conditions – such as home working. Many callers expressed concern about how difficult it was to retain teaching assistants. Whilst this was most certainly an issue of concern for several mainstream school leaders it was a particularly strong source of worry in calls we received from special school headteachers. Specialist provisions were often experiencing teaching assistants leave in educationally damaging numbers. Often departing teaching assistants left with deep regret, their decision being driven by the need to secure enhanced remuneration in a cost-of-living crisis.

Staff recruitment

Closely aligned to the challenges around staff retention is the problem of staff recruitment. In our conversations a frequent theme that emerged is skills dilution. Increasingly when posts are advertised the fields are less strong than in previous years. This means school leaders often face a double stressor – they have lost an effective member of staff and are faced with replacing them from a weaker field of applicants. If they are lucky they have the good fortune to have at least one strong candidate. Increasingly callers cited that they were often met with a "least bad choice" of either employing someone whom they would not have appointed previously or not appointing at all. The frustration of losing experienced colleagues and the challenge of replacing them from

weaker, and sometimes non-existent fields, is worsened further by the difficulties in recruiting supply staff to fill vacant posts in the short term. Resolving staffing recruitment difficulties has stretched some school leader's resilience to breaking point.

Unintelligent accountability

It is concerning that many who called Headrest have major misgivings about the school inspection process. Some callers are wary of the "one model fits all" inspection framework; others cagey about inconsistency in inspection teams; and some fearful that their schools are at risk of being adversely judged for national factors outside the school's direct control. These factors include underfunding, national recruitment and retention pressures, the declining accessibility of specialist sources of external support, and the adverse impact of poverty on their school's learners. It is noticeable in many calls received how being in the Ofsted window for inspection seems akin to a spirit sapping stress stimulating "sword of Damocles" that hovers oppressively over school leaders and their staff teams.

Some other common stressors and issues that emerged in our calls are summarised below:

Occasional rogue governors	The overwhelming majority of callers acknowledge that their school governors have supported them with a commitment and compassion that goes well beyond what could be reasonably expected of volunteers. However, we have received calls from a small number of school leaders who have been faced with individual governors who they feel have undermined, micromanaged, or intimidated them. This is not by any means commonplace, but it is a trend that has increased.
Problematic parents	It seems the case that most parents/carers have remained highly supportive of schools. Sadly, there is a very small minority who are less so. This is another issue that has emerged with a greater

	<p>frequency in recent months. School leaders very much recognised that some of this parental angst may be exacerbated by pressures arising from the cost-of-living crisis.</p>
<p>Lack of specialist support for students with SEND or mental health needs</p>	<p>Another source of stress that has arisen in some calls is that of a lack of specialist support for young persons with significant individual needs. School leaders who called us on this issue invariably cited the difficulties they have faced accessing specialist services like Child and Adolescent Mental Health. They reported how thresholds for assessments had been raised and how waiting lists for such services were lengthy. Without such expert assessments they feared that their school might be unable to offer individual learners the impactful assistance they needed.</p>
<p>Small schools</p>	<p>In small schools the economies of scale meant these provisions 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.</p>
<p>Family pressures</p>	<p>The stress of school leadership has continued to leave many senior leaders with a sense of guilt that their workload impinges adversely on their family relationships.</p>
<p>Personal health</p>	<p>Some leaders in their desire to do the right thing by their school have ignored their own medical or emotional health needs. There are cases of colleagues not following medical guidance because they did not wish to "let down" their school community.</p>
<p>Changes to Initial Teacher Training</p>	<p>The overhaul of teacher training will impact adversely on some schools and local communities. There is a fear amongst some school-based teacher trainers that many providers that have been supplying provisions with excellent teachers will no longer be operating. Some schools are concerned that these changes will make it harder to recruit newly qualified teachers in their local area. Often strong links with local teacher training providers have been invaluable in enhancing recruitment.</p>

Conclusion and recommendations

The picture we paint of school leader wellbeing is concerning. However, it would be unfair not to recognise some tentative seeds of hope. Within the *“Annual Report of His Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education, Children’s Services and Skills 2021/22”* there is a particularly apt comment on the current hardships facing the education system:

“...Many of the problems highlighted in this report are either created or exacerbated by workforce and resourcing problems. If education and social care are to be resilient in the face of future challenges, these problems must be addressed.”²

We think this is a germane summary of the present situation. We therefore offer the following recommendations to obviate some of the concerns raised:

- 1 Provide a clear strategy and sufficient central government funding to address the recruitment and retention crisis.
- 2 Ensure school budgets are uplifted to take account of pay settlements and rising costs.
- 3 Review school accountability systems, remove high stakes Ofsted gradings, and ensure enhanced inspectorial awareness of staff wellbeing.
- 4 Ensure a fully funded induction and mentoring programme for all new headteachers and for those appointed from September 2019.
- 5 Direct policy and funding to develop key specialist services which support families and young people, including those for mental health.

² HMCI, [Annual Report, 2021-22](#)

- 6 Provide all headteachers with access to independent fully funded support for their wellbeing and encourage school governors to ensure this is accessed.

- 7 Initiate an immediate review of the wellbeing of school leaders in small schools.

The time for national educational policymakers to act is now. Unless meaningful action is taken the wellbeing of school leaders, and their workforce, will worsen. Some will say that in the nation's current fiscal situation what we are proposing is unaffordable. We would argue that if we do not address the issues we raise with urgency then the education system, and the nation, will pay a considerably higher societal price for decades to come.



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.



**HEAD
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Headrest is an entirely voluntary operation designed to offer a confidential listening ear to headteachers. We receive no funding, and the team that provides the service are all experienced former headteachers and school leaders who give up their own time to help. Please help us by spreading the word amongst your networks, clusters, organisation etc., so that as many headteachers as possible know we are here. Thank you.

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