

Headrest

ANNUAL HEADTEACHER WELLBEING REPORT

2024



Introduction

At the outset of this report the Headrest team wishes to offer our deepest sympathies to the family, friends, and colleagues of Ruth Perry. The tragedy of a dedicated and proven school leader taking her life after an Ofsted inspection is heart wrenching. As a team we greatly admire the dignified and resolute manner in which Ruth Perry's family and friends have steadfastly advocated, to both Ofsted and the government, that lessons must be learnt.

This is our third annual wellbeing report the purpose of which is to provide an overview of the key issues arising in the calls we have received in 2023. 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 believe that the concerns we raise in this report will extend beyond school leaders who have called us directly.

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 provides 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 expenses through donations such as the costs of the website and phone line. We are grateful to them for their continued support.



When Headrest was set up those involved in its inception would never have anticipated that at the start of 2024 there would still be a demand for our helpline. However, there is. In 2023 we took more calls than in 2021 when COVID was at its most virulent and 2022 when exhausted school leaders, and their staff teams, were forced with an indecent haste to return to a pre-Covid "normality".

Whilst the main element of Headrest's work is the telephone helpline members of the team also endeavour to share insights with others who either have an interest in addressing school leader wellbeing or want to know more about the pressures school leaders face. Andrew Morrish was a member of the National Education Union inquiry, led by Lord Jim Knight, entitled "Beyond Ofsted". Other members of the team have shared observations with teaching unions on concerns raised by our callers. Team members have also been frequently interviewed on local, social, and national media. Additionally, several of the team have spoken at professional development meetings where wellbeing has been a theme. Involvement in these activities consistently confirm that the issues we raise extend well beyond those who call us directly.

The editor of the Times Educational Supplement, Jon Severs, at the end of 2023 wrote the following:

"... We've failed to look after our headteachers. We've failed to give them anywhere near what they need to do their jobs effectively. We've heaped more and more on

them regardless. And then we've sent in inspectors to pick them apart."(TES, December 2023)

This quote succinctly captures what we are frequently hearing from our callers. As long as this cited indifference to school leader wellbeing persists those of us involved with Headrest are going nowhere. We will continue to offer a listening ear to any school leader who calls us. We, of course, hope for the day when we can walk away secure in the knowledge that effective wellbeing practice is in-situ for all school leaders, and their staff teams, until that time Headrest will continue for as long as there is a demand for our service.



Overview

2023 saw school leaders, and their staff teams, face burgeoning pressures – some of these are listed below:

- The continued erosion of school budgets through Inflation, high energy costs, and underfunded pay rises. This concern was most often, although not exclusively, relayed by colleagues serving socially disadvantaged communities.
- Continued difficulties in retaining staff who are opting to leave the school workforce either for better pay/working conditions or for early retirement.
- The persisting challenges in recruiting staff with many no longer perceiving school-based employment as offering the working conditions they desire or deserve.
- The enduring impact of the cost-of-living crisis that sees many school leaders, and their staff teams, being the “front line” support for families struggling to make ends meet.
- Major difficulties in accessing mental health and social services support for young people.
- 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 a class as a result of staff recruitment, retention, and/or attendance pressures.
- The paucity of capital funding to ensure school buildings can be kept in an acceptable state of repair.
- An abundance of other challenges pertaining to individual schools and school types which could be readily added to this already extensive list.

Whilst many of the above were mentioned in our calls with school leaders by far the greatest number of calls involved concerns about Ofsted – often with several of the issues listed above adding to the angst around inspection.

It is not overstating the case to say we had calls from many school leaders whose wellbeing was damaged by the adverse influence of Ofsted. This included some for whom their physical and/or mental health was ravaged to such a degree they were leaving the profession. In a few instances we talked to callers who admitted they had contemplated serious self-harm, including, in a few instances, suicide. When a much-respected publication like the British Medical Journal in May 2023 publishes an article entitled *“Ofsted: a case of official negligence?”* it is surely all too obvious that the inspectorate needs considerable reform. The article offers the following chilling quote *“...In the UK we do not even know with certainty how many teachers have killed themselves in circumstances linked to Ofsted inspections, but we are aware of at least eight others.”*

This annual report will comment more fully on other stressors. However, it is our view that the damage being done by Ofsted needs to be addressed with urgency. The human cost is too great for anything other than major reform - if that means pausing Ofsted graded inspections then so be it. Indeed, what greater indicator that the concern is being taken seriously than to pause, consult, reflect, and ultimately humanise school accountability systems.

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.



The changing focus

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

Phase One | 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.

Phase Two | May 2021 to November 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. This concern with Ofsted was exacerbated in inspected schools by a significant variability in the empathy and sensitivity shown by inspection teams.

Phase Three | December 2021 to April 2022

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, recover, or review.

A group 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.

Phase Four | May 2022 to December 2022

During this period, we received numerous 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. Many of our callers at this time questioned whether they wished to remain in post.

Unintelligent accountability added significantly to this pressure. We had many calls from school leaders questioning whether they could face another high-stake Ofsted inspection. Often these callers had little faith in the current inspection framework and a wariness of inspectorial inconsistency.

Phase Five | January 2023 to December 2023

The four core sources of stress during this period were:

1. Ofsted
2. Increased instances of poor support from some of those who oversee schools locally.
3. The pressures of small school leadership
4. New school leaders feeling a sense of "imposter syndrome" and more experienced school leaders finding themselves faced with an "abyss of self-doubt".

It has been commonplace to have more than one of these concerns arise in individual calls. The above four stressors will be explored in greater detail in the next section – as will some of the less frequent sources of tension that emerged.

Stressors

The most common sources of stress that were shared by callers can be summarised under the four key headings shown below. Frequently in the calls received there was more than one of these stressors causing concern.

Ofsted

The pressure of being in the Ofsted window

It has been noticeable in many calls to Headrest how being in the Ofsted window for inspection seems akin to being in a depressing and tortuous zone of uncertainty. Several callers cite how living in a constant state of anxiety impinges adversely on their wellbeing and mental health.

The inconsistency of inspectors

Those contacting Headrest often articulate a concern about the inconsistency of inspectors. There is an acceptance from callers that many inspectors undertake their role with objectivity and an open mind. However, a high stakes snapshot inspection system where colleagues labour with a sense of foreboding that they could be unlucky in the inspector/s assigned to their school

is almost inevitably going to induce stress.

The unsuitability of a one-framework-fits-all-approach

The current inspection framework has a very strong focus on curriculum and subject leadership. Some who have called Headrest feel it fails to pay due regard to the demands of subject leadership in a special or small school setting. In such schools subject leaders may well be operating outside their area of specialism, leading several subjects, and in some instances undertaking subject leadership alongside other senior leadership responsibilities. Headrest callers working in such settings feel that their school is being penalised because they lack the subject leadership capacity of larger schools.

An inspectorate that disregards factors outside a school's control

A significant number of school leaders who call Headrest feel disillusioned with an inspectorate who they perceive to adversely judge them for national factors outside their school's direct control. These factors include underfunding, national staff recruitment and retention pressures, the inadequacy of COVID catch-up funding, the declining access to specialist sources of external support, and the adverse impact of poverty on their school's learners. There is a sense amongst many callers that whilst Ofsted appears to be exhorting them to do ever more with ever less the inspectorate is much less strident in reporting the adverse impact of government policy, and funding decisions, on the quality of provision their school can offer.

The two "requires improvement" cliff-edge

Some callers have been school leaders of schools who have had two successive requires improvement judgements. Such a situation triggers a "cliff edge" practice of forced interventions on a school. We have

had calls from headteachers in such scenarios who feel unsupported to such an extent that their mental health is undermined. In some instances, we have also spoken with school leaders coerced to resign. There are others who felt they have been made the convenient scapegoat for a Multi-Academy Trust or Local Authority that has been pressurised to demonstrate their robustness by those who are, at regional level, overseeing the forced intervention.

The inability to share an Ofsted outcome with others

Some callers have expressed a concern regarding current post-inspection restrictions on sharing the outcome with others. The isolation that comes from this has, in some cases, inhibited colleagues from accessing the personal support they felt they needed.

Differences between inspection feedback and the content of the final report

A small but increasing number of callers have expressed concern that the final report presented to them differs significantly from the verbal

feedback shared with them on the final day of inspection. Suffice it to say this does not enhance trust between a school and the inspectorate. It is concerning that some school leaders feel that raising a complaint to Ofsted about this is futile.

Inspector rudeness

Some callers to Headrest have expressed concerns about the manner in which they have been treated by inspectors. There have been reports of condescension, belittling, and bullying. As a team we recognise we have only heard the school leader's perspective. However, the number of such reports leaves us concerned that whilst most inspectors would not behave in this manner there are some who do.

The community response to an adverse report

Some who called us expressed distress that following an adverse Ofsted report they felt unable to face their school and local community. In some instances, this has led to colleagues placing themselves in a self-imposed isolation. Their situation has often been worsened by the

brutality of a one-word judgement. It should not take a great deal of empathy to comprehend how a school leader might feel who sees the school they lead summed up in a publicly reported document by the word "inadequate". When asked what support has been offered to such colleagues post-Ofsted it is harrowing to hear that often no one in the education system has sought to check their wellbeing. For a supposedly caring profession that is, quite frankly, a lamentable dereliction of duty of care.

Poor support from those who oversee schools locally

At Headrest we strongly believe that most Multi-Academy Trusts and Local Authorities do their utmost to support their school leaders. Alas, there is an increasing number of our callers who seem to be working for organisations less committed to such approaches. Some of the most traumatic calls we receive are from school leaders who feel bullied and/or intimidated by those who have direct authority over them

within a trust, governing body, or local authority. In the very worst cases this culminates in an attempt to oust the school leader from their post through malevolent intimidation rather than the following of established good employment practice. In such cases the maxim seems to be - "if you won't go we will make life so uncomfortable you break". It is alarming that the number of callers citing such situations has increased significantly in 2023.

Small schools

In small schools the economies of scale have meant these provisions often have fewer, or no other, senior leaders. As a result, the delegation and sharing of leadership tasks proves impossible. Leaders who found themselves the only senior leader within their school often reported feeling both isolated and overwhelmed. Several small school leaders felt the current Ofsted framework exacerbated their stress levels and was not well suited to inspecting the provisions they led. A recent submission by six former HMI to the House of Commons Select Committee suggests such fears

might be justified when they observe that – "*...in the first three years of the current framework only one primary school with under 100 pupils (NOR) was judged 'outstanding'!*"

Imposter syndrome/abyss of self-doubt

"Imposter syndrome" was particularly prevalent amongst newly appointed headteachers who found themselves faced with a myriad of stressors and thus questioning whether they had the skill set to cope. Meanwhile more experienced colleagues sometimes found themselves facing an "abyss of self-doubt" where past competence and experience did not feel a sufficient resource for them to handle the plethora of demands they currently faced. In most instances colleagues who called us with these concerns primarily needed reassurance. However, there was also an increase in the number of calls we received from those reporting worryingly high levels of anxiety, stress and/or burnout. As a team we worry there are too many good and dedicated practitioners who are being pushed to breaking point.

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

Problematic parents Most parents/carers remain highly supportive of schools. Sadly, there is a very small minority who are less so. This is an issue that has not been as frequently mentioned as it was in 2022.

Lack of specialist external support for students School leaders cited the difficulties they have accessing specialist support for their neediest students from Social Services and Child & Adolescent Mental Health. They reported how thresholds for assessments had been raised and how waiting lists for such services were lengthy. Without this specialist support they feared that their school might be unable to offer individual learners the assistance that was needed.

Family pressures 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.

Personal health 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.

RAAC Several school leaders were faced with partial or complete closure of their schools as a result of problems with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC). For those facing such a situation it was an added pressure that they could have done without. What seemed to cause them greatest concern was the expertise they were expected to personally have in an area of school buildings management that fell outside their professional expertise.

Conclusion and recommendations

As with our previous annual reports the picture we paint of school leader wellbeing is alarming. However, there is an impetus building that the wellbeing of school leaders, and their staff teams, can no longer be deemed a peripheral issue by national policymakers.

In 2024 we are likely to have a general election. The victor will have a five-year mandate that grants them the opportunity to look afresh at how we ensure that schools are places where pupils are not taught by the fraught nor led by the head in a constant state of dread. In the midst of a recruitment and retention crisis it is surely a moral imperative that the new government, regardless of their political hue, recognises that doing more of the same in terms of school leader wellbeing is, quite simply, unacceptable.

The recent appointment of Sir Martyn Oliver as His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools (HMCI) has seen some positive indicators that Ofsted is reflecting on its own approach to school leader wellbeing. The Headrest team certainly welcomes Ofsted's plans to review its approach to safeguarding; to provide training to its inspectors on handling situations of distress; to offer a clearer path as to how concerns can be raised when these cannot be resolved directly by the lead inspector; to permit school leaders to share provisional outcomes with their support

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network; and to reduce timescales for report publication.

The new HMCI has also outlined plans to hold, between March and June 2024, a comprehensive listening exercise called “the big listen”. In all honesty the Headrest team are dubious about how useful this might be. Had this exercise been undertaken in the final months of 2021, as the adverse impact of COVID was diminishing, it would have conveyed a positive message. It would, if combined with a pause in graded inspections, have given school staff, and their leaders, a sense that Ofsted really did comprehend the pressures they had been under.

Instead, Ofsted's leaders made the decision to instantly reinstate graded school inspections on school staff who were metaphorically on their knees. The damage this ‘tin eared’ decision did to the trust between the inspectorate and many school leaders and their staff teams is, in our view, irreparable. Many school leaders, and their staff teams, have frankly lost trust in Ofsted; they do not see it as a force for good; some see it as little more than the government's inspectorial enforcer to demand they do ever more with ever less; and far too many see Ofsted as an oppressive and flawed inspection system.

We do not believe that Ofsted softening the edges of its approach is now the answer. The damage has been done and what is instead needed, in our view, is a pause in graded inspections; a moratorium on how school accountability can be humanised; and a

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recognition that now is the time to move on from Ofsted to a school accountability model that places a greater emphasis on support and development.

At the end of previous annual wellbeing reports we have offered a series of recommendations - our 2024 recommendations are as follows:

1 | **Graded inspections should be paused**, and a moratorium established that reviews how school accountability systems can be made more supportive, developmental, and humane. (We would prefer this was immediate but if it were to be an action from the HMCI's "big listen" initiative that too would be a positive outcome.)

2 | Freed inspector time resulting from any pause in graded inspection should be diverted to a non-reported and supportive **one-day Safeguarding Health Check for every school**.

3 | The two "requires improvement" cliff edge for formal intervention should be **paused immediately** with a review undertaken on how school leaders in such settings could be more effectively supported **and less frequently scapegoated**.

4 | If inspections are to continue there should be an immediate recognition by Ofsted that a **"one model fits all"** inspection framework needs immediate pause and review. The flaws in the current inspection framework also, in our view, significantly undermines the legitimacy of one-word judgements and, **as a result, these should be stopped**.

5 | The newly elected government should provide a **five-year action plan** to address the school staff **recruitment and retention crisis**.

6 | There is a need to **incentivise the recruitment and retention** of graduates to shortage roles within the public sector. Consideration should be given to writing off student loans for those who complete, or have achieved, ten years working in a public service where recruitment is an issue – this could include

education, social care, and child and adolescent mental health services.

7 | If budgets continue to be constrained, and school access to external sources of specialist support are diminished, there is a need for central government to **recalibrate its expectations of schools**. The mindset of national policy makers that it is acceptable to demand ever more of schools whilst offering reductions in real time funding and external support is unsustainable.

8 | The school building stock is, in some instances, quite literally crumbling. We should not be educating our young people in buildings that are unfit for purpose. There is a need for a **targeted programme focused on building schools for the future**.

2024 could be the year where the wellbeing needs of school leaders, and their staff teams, start to be given proper regard. If it is not then the Headrest team has little doubt that school leader recruitment will continue to be a problem; that more and more colleagues will decide enough is enough; and that increasing numbers of school leaders, and their staff, will find their wellbeing and mental health so severely damaged that they either cannot, or will not, continue in post. The situation is, in our view, that stark.

9 | Those overseeing the work of Multi-Academy Trusts and Local Authorities should be required to annually report on how they **audit and respond to the wellbeing needs of their school leaders and wider staff**.

10 | All school leaders should have the right to **access fully funded independent support for their wellbeing** - school governors/trustees should be required to monitor this.

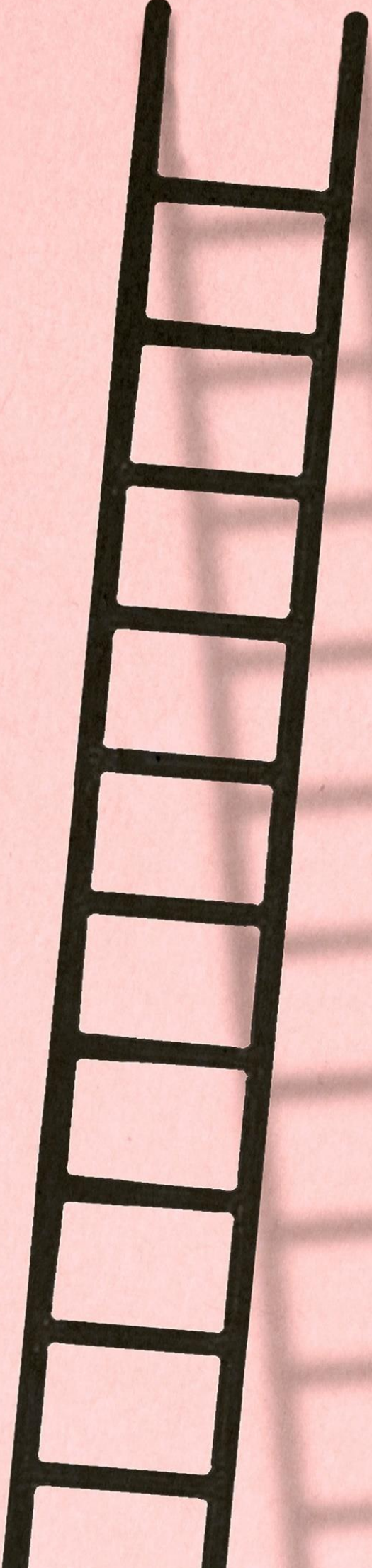
11 | An independent report should be commissioned on the **wellbeing needs of leaders of small schools**. Those commissioned to submit this report should produce action points and recommendations to ensure that the unique demands on small school leaders are properly addressed and/or supported.

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.



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REST**



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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