



Headrest

**ANNUAL
HEADTEACHER
WELLBEING
REPORT**

2025

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 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.

This is Headrest's fourth annual wellbeing report. When Headrest was established, those of us involved in its inception would never have anticipated that at the start of 2025 there would still be a demand for our helpline. Yet still a plethora of school leader calls are taken throughout the year.

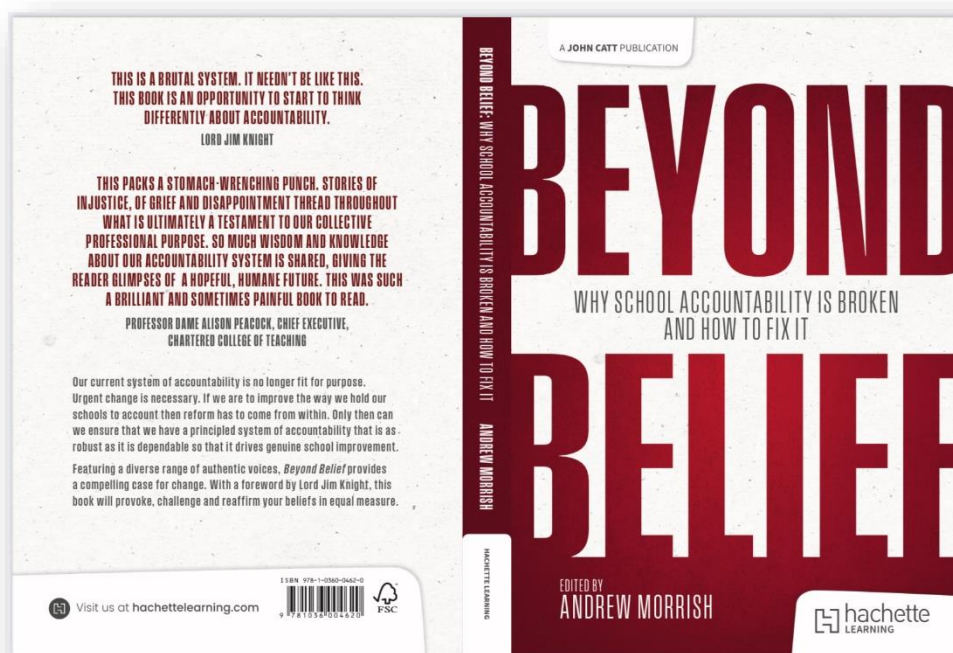
This report will provide an overview of the call themes received by Headrest prior to 2024; the key focus of calls received in 2024; and some recommendations for the future. As a helpline we fully appreciate we have a duty to respect the confidentiality of individual callers, thus this report spotlights key issues rather than individual cases.

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 headteachers face. For example, Andrew Morrish was a member of the National Education Union inquiry into the future of inspection, 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 school leader wellbeing has been a focal point. Involvement in these activities consistently confirm that the issues we raise extend well beyond those who call us directly.



As a result of our interactions and insights gained by talking to hundreds of headteachers a kernel of an idea arose – that a book should be published on school accountability. It is called “Beyond Belief: Why School Accountability is Broken and How to Fix it” and will be published by John Catt (Hachette) in January 2025. The book - edited by Headrest team member Andrew Morrish - is an anthology of voices and consists of an array of over 30 contributors from a range of educationalists. We are delighted that Lord Jim Knight and Professor Julia Waters (Ruth Perry’s sister), have written the foreword and afterword respectively. Royalties from the book will go to educational charities. You can order a copy of the book [here](#).



So, what of Headrest’s future? The consensus of the team is that as long as school leader wellbeing concerns persist, we are going nowhere. We will continue to offer a listening ear to any school leader who calls us. Ultimately, we hope there will be a point when we can walk away, secure in the knowledge that effective wellbeing practice is in place for all school leaders, and their staff teams. The book unpacks this further, but until that time Headrest will continue for as long as there is a demand for our service.

Headrest 2020 to 2023 | A hellacious four years for leaders

Even before the COVID pandemic the pressures of educational leadership were amongst the most complex of any public-sector leadership role. Leaders in educational settings were faced with a complexity of demands:

Anticipation demands

- Ofsted
- Changes in legislation
- Future national initiatives
- Future budgetary threats
- Difficult meetings where tensions may arise

Time demands

- Work overload challenges
- Time management pressures
- Realistic prioritising whilst managing change
- The non-anticipatable situations that require reactive leadership

Situation demands

- Premises issues
- Budget management
- Staff recruitment and retention
- Pupil/parent issues
- Safeguarding situations

Encounter demands

- Personnel disputes
- Conflicting leadership demands
- Differing expectations of a diverse range of stakeholders
- Counteracting wariness of change
- Use of leadership styles that fall outside preferred ways of working
- Social networking comments about school, staff or themselves

In those pre-COVID days these challenges were arduous enough. However, headteachers have, in the last four years, been faced with a profusion of challenges considerably beyond those cited above.

In leading their school's through the trauma and aftermath of a once in a century global pandemic, heads have found themselves hindered by lack of resources. These include being burnt out and dispirited by the often unrealistic and unempathetic demands of some key stakeholders; overwhelmed by the provisions they lead being expected to fulfil the shortfall in support service provisions, and; exhausted by being expected to be the solution to copious societal challenges that have been inadequately addressed by national and/or local policymakers.

The reality is that those who embark on a school leadership role do so knowing the task is demanding. However, the last four years have been gruelling on the physical and mental health of so many headteachers. They will have felt that the demands upon them were Sisyphean. Analysing the focus of Headrest calls between our inception and December 2023 there have been five phases that could be identified.

Phase One | October 2020 to April 2021

Headrest calls in this period largely revolved around issues pertaining to the stresses of managing the COVID pandemic within schools. This is why we set Headrest up because heads had nowhere to go for help. The nation's school leaders were faced with having to develop new means of educating a student population unable to be onsite. At the same time there was also a requirement to provide a school-based provision for a smaller number of young people who were permitted to attend.

As the pandemic progressed more of the school student population returned to onsite provision but often the ministerial guidance on the management of this

process lacked clarity, was issued with the shortest of notice, and was often rescinded/amended within days of issue.

Alongside this, headteachers also found themselves pastorally supporting staff, students, and families who lost loved ones. The toll of this harrowing task seemed to get far too little regard from some national policymakers. It should also be remembered that some of those heads will also have had their own family members adversely impacted by COVID.

Furthermore, the impact of the pandemic on staffing numbers invariably meant that headteacher colleagues were compelled to sacrifice strategic leadership time to focus on operational tasks.

Phase Two | May 2021 to November 2021

During this period the more restrictive regulations on school attendance were relaxed. However, the COVID virus was still virulent. Student and staff absence rates remained high – particularly when new variants appeared. This meant many heads were still having to focus on the operational rather than the strategic. However, the situation was gradually moving into a new phase where headteachers were striving to recalibrate their school's offer for a post-COVID future.

At this time, school leaders might have hoped for empathy from national policymakers – perhaps even a compassionate approach that would recognise the exhaustion and stress they, and their staff teams, were reeling from. Instead, they were faced with a "tin eared" inspectorate who, in the view of many, displayed exceptionally indecent haste in deciding to start undertaking graded inspections. Schools were far from 'normal' at this time and so it was unfair to be judged using a framework that had not been sufficiently modified to reflect this.

At Headrest we received an abundance of Ofsted-related calls during this period that were quite frankly heart-rending. The reported instances of inspectors lacking respect, empathy or sensitivity genuinely shocked us. The callers citing Ofsted issues were often traumatised, and in some cases broken. It was beyond belief. Even worse, they felt powerless to challenge the inspectorate's approach with many expressing the view that any sort of querying of an inspector's *modus operandi* would merely make matters worse. Cynics will postulate that these complaints will have come from colleagues whose provisions were the recipients of critical inspections. This would be a misrepresentation of the reality. Indeed, many heads who called us were unwilling to formally raise their negative experiences with Ofsted for fear of jeopardising an inspection judgement that they were happy to accept. A significant proportion of callers were from heads receiving a favourable outcome but still felt the need to call such was the damaging effect of the process on school staff.

The substantial number of Ofsted concerns raised during this time were too plentiful to be dismissed as one-off aberrations. This was, in our view, a dysfunctional and inhumane inspectorate damaging the emotional wellbeing and physical health of frontline practitioners. It could all so easily be avoided.

Spirits were further sapped in June 2021 when the education recovery commissioner for England, Sir Kevan Collins, resigned in a row over the lack of "credible" COVID catch-up funding. It was readily apparent that the funding he felt was needed post-COVID was not going to be forthcoming.

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 a pre-COVID normality that was undeliverable. There almost seemed a desire from national policymakers to wish away the damage to pupil/student development of a major global pandemic. A naïve belief appeared to emerge that if everyone just returned to the adoption of

the practices of pre-COVID times the damage inflicted on school communities, their students, and their families would just dissipate. Key decision makers seemed unable, or unwilling, to countenance the reality that as well as the damage inflicted by COVID other issues were also hampering schools at this time – these included difficulties recruiting staff, the challenge of retaining staff, the enduring impact of a cost-of-living crisis, and school budgets stretched beyond their limits.

The second issue was one of callers, unsurprisingly, feeling physically and mentally burnt out from leading their schools through a global pandemic. A group particularly challenged at this time were those new headteachers who took up post during COVID and were now leading a school in a more normal mode of operation for the first time without sufficient induction or mentoring.

Phase Four | May 2022 to December 2022

During this period, we received numerous calls from headteachers 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.

Unintelligent and oppressive accountability added significantly to this pressure. We had many calls from heads questioning whether they could face another high-stakes Ofsted inspection. We know some of these colleagues, for wellbeing reasons, opted for early retirement with a heavy heart.

Phase Five | January 2023 to December 2023

The four main themes in calls Headrest received during this period are as follows:

1. Increasing unease with Ofsted.

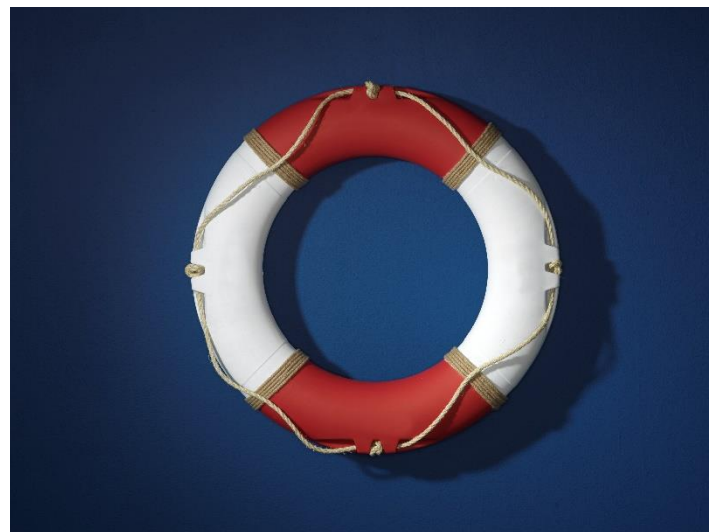
2. Increased instances of poor support from some of those who oversaw schools locally.
3. The pressures of small school leadership - this came increasingly to the fore in the calls we received.
4. New headteachers feeling a sense of "imposter syndrome" and more experienced colleagues finding themselves faced with an "abyss of self-doubt".

Unsurprisingly some of these continued to be themes in 2024.

Reflecting back on these five phases prior to 2024, the situation faced by headteachers between our inception in October 2020 and December 2023 is most aptly summed up by the editor of the Times Education Supplement, Jon Severs, who wrote:

"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)

During this period heads, and their staff teams, were the recipients of minimal levels of empathy or care from national policymakers. This lack of concern was, in our view, reprehensible. We hoped that in 2024 things could only get better.



The focus of Headrest calls in 2024

The Headrest call themes did show some changes in 2024 and are summarised below. It should be noted that often callers cited more than one of these stressors as contributing to the diminishment of their wellbeing.

Ofsted

Headrest is pleased that there has been a fall in the number of calls pertaining to Ofsted issues. We welcome this and hope it is indicative of inspector training on mental health having a positive impact. However, there is no room for complacency. We have in 2024 received calls that lead us to believe that not all inspectors have appropriately grasped how to manage staff and school leader wellbeing issues effectively. Indeed, in this calendar year we have received traumatic post-inspection calls where we have ended the conversation fearful that a repeat of the Ruth Perry tragedy might occur. Such calls confirm to us that the inspectorate still has major work to do in ensuring that all of the organisation's staff pay sufficient regard to this key issue.

Other Ofsted-related issues that have featured in our calls are concerns around the inspection of EYFS and small schools.

In terms of inspection, we are in a period of stasis as the newly elected government and Ofsted decide between inspectorial tinkering, rebranding, or more meaningful reform (we unpack this fully in 'Beyond Belief'). It certainly remains to be seen whether Ofsted's pledge for meaningful change is matched by its future actions. That said, initiatives like the mental health training and the removal of one/two-word overall judgements are positive steps in the right direction.

SEND pressures

An increasing theme emerging in calls to Headrest entails schools struggling to meet SEND pressures.

This is invariably down to diminished funding, reduced staffing due to recruitment/retention issues, the demand for support exceeding a school's capacity to cope, and local and national SEND infrastructures that are, quite obviously, imploding.

Several headteachers cited the difficulties they have experienced in accessing specialist support for their neediest pupils. They relayed how CAMHS thresholds for assessments had been raised and how waiting lists for such services were lengthy. Without this specialist input they felt their school was severely hampered in offering some SEND learners assistance.

A major area of concern has been around the recruitment and retention of teaching assistants. This has been a particular problem in special schools and some mainstream schools serving socially disadvantaged communities. The COVID pandemic has seen an increasing number of non-education sector employers adopting parent-friendly employment practice. These employers have often combined this with remuneration rates that exceed

those that schools can offer teaching assistants. The net result of this is that many teaching assistants have, for understandable fiscal reasons, left school posts. Alongside this, the number and quality of applicants to replace them has demonstrably declined.

Interestingly, and occurring prior to government proposals on VAT and independent schools, we received several calls from leaders of independent special schools. They expressed concerns about numbers on their roll decreasing as local authorities sought to retain and/or recall more SEND pupils into borough/county provisions.

Budget concerns

With increasing frequency, we are receiving calls from heads grappling to balance budgets alongside meeting the demands of their staff teams, students, parents, and other stakeholders. Many headteachers in such calls feel that they are wrestling with finding the least bad solution rather than what they believe is needed to meaningfully address issues. The moral injury these

colleagues feel at not being able to deliver what is required is clearly damaging to their morale and general mental wellbeing.

Alongside these, reductions in capital spending allocations for schools means many headteachers are having to oversee buildings that are, as in the case of those with RAAC, visibly crumbling before their eyes.

Small schools

Headteachers in these provisions face a unique combination of demands. They often lead with no other senior leaders to support them and with larger teaching commitments than many of their school leader colleagues in bigger settings. In our calls it was not uncommon to find these leaders were also the business manager, SENDCO, caretaker, designated safeguarding lead, and additionally had several subject leadership responsibilities. With such a range of duties it is easy to envisage how daunting an Ofsted inspection would be. Against such a background it is unsurprising that Headrest has received an abundance of calls from

leaders of small schools in recent years.

Crass governance

Most school governors are dedicated, effective, and empathetic in supporting the emotional wellbeing of their school's leaders. However, calls where governance is a concern have increased in frequency. When the situation goes awry it often entails Chairs, or other governors, not grasping the difference between operational and strategic matters. This leads to a frustration that the headteacher is being micro-managed and, in the worst instances, undermined.

School leader wellbeing

Most local authorities and multi academy trusts discharge their duty of care towards headteachers responsibly. However, we are receiving an increasing number of calls where some executive leaders in MATs/LAs clearly do not see leader wellbeing as a significant issue. On occasions the reported treatment of headteachers appears sufficiently malevolent to be deemed workplace intimidation. It

most certainly appears to fall outside the remit of effective and humane personnel practice.

Parental pressure

Most parents/carers are exceptionally supportive of schools. However, there has been an increasing number of callers expressing concern around apparently unreasonable parental behaviours. In some, but not all instances, this has involved either the misuse of social media and/or the use of vexatious complaints – often aligned with a threat to notify Ofsted.

Heads tell us it is clear that this has gone well beyond dealing with an agitated and/or fraught complainant looking for genuine resolution. It has instead moved into heads facing threatening and intimidatory behaviours. It is clear to us that these school leaders often feel they lack sources of impactful support in such circumstances.

A deficit in pupil emotional and social development

It is unsurprising following a COVID pandemic in which young people

were deprived of time with peers and their wider family that there should be an adverse impact on the emotional/social development of pupils/students. Several headteachers cited how more secondary age students lacked the social skills required to relate with peers and the emotional resilience to handle setbacks. Meanwhile, those leading provisions for younger pupils cited comparable concerns alongside increasing trepidations that they were having to tackle other aspects of basic “school readiness” to an extent that was not the case pre-pandemic. A concern shared several times was the increased number of young pupils arriving at the school who were still not toilet trained. This was a stressor worsened by school leader fears that those who pass judgement on their establishments sometimes seemed unable, or unwilling, to accept the impact of post-pandemic developmental delay on individual and whole school progress data.

Family pressures

Some callers felt a profound sense of guilt that their workload and work induced stress levels impinge

adversely on their family relationships.

Personal health concerns

Some headteachers, in their desire to do the right thing by their school, have ignored their own medical or emotional health needs. We have received calls from colleagues who are not following medical guidance because they did not wish to "let down" their school community. The

nation's school leaders should never feel that they need to suppress their personal health needs in this manner. What an indictment of our approach to school leadership wellbeing that so many do.



Conclusion and recommendations

A newly-elected government offers an opportunity to look afresh at how we ensure that schools are places where young people are not taught by the fraught nor led by the head in dread.

Amid a recruitment and retention crisis it is a moral imperative that the new government recognises that enhancing school leader and staff wellbeing needs to be a priority. Being prepared to make courageous decisions on how school accountability can be less oppressive and more supportive should, in our view, be a major part of this process. Our book, 'Beyond Belief', shares valuable insights into how this can best be achieved by pushing beyond prevailing – and often outdated – beliefs.

Headrest is delighted that the new government has recognised the SEND pressures that schools are facing. The allocation of £740 million to create SEND places in mainstream schools is welcome with the important proviso that the placement is based on the needs of the young person rather than an act primarily focused on fiscal prudence. It is also encouraging that the new Secretary of State has swiftly recognised the urgent need for a long term SEND plan.

We also welcome that the government has: accepted the 2024 School Teacher Pay Review body recommendations in full; covered the increase arising from the budget's National Insurance rise for school employers; increased school building and maintenance funding, and: that the Prime Minister - in a speech in December 2024 - expressed a desire for his government to focus on enhancing school readiness.

Turning to Ofsted, the 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 welcomes Ofsted revising its approach to reporting safeguarding; providing training to its inspectors on mental health; permitting heads to share provisional inspection outcomes with their support network, and; the removal of one/two-word overall judgements.

Less positively we felt an unease that Ofsted's "big listen" omitted some significant questions. We thus hope the inspectorate will open-mindedly reflect upon the findings of "the alternative big listen". (We also hope they read our book.)

Headrest perceives that the restoration of trust in Ofsted is, in reality, approaching the irreversible. The adamant approach to restoring full inspections whilst headteachers and their staff teams were burned out in the COVID recovery period was, in our view, cold-hearted and insensitive.

We believe it undermined trust in Ofsted to almost irrecoverable levels. We remain of the robust belief, as outlined in our 2024 annual report, that there remains a need for there to be a pause in graded inspections; a moratorium on how school accountability can be humanised; and a recognition that now is the time to adopt a school accountability model that places a greater emphasis on support and development. We hope the new government will be courageous enough to recognise the exigency of the school accountability challenge.

It is intriguing that as we have seen a reduction in calls about Ofsted – albeit from an unacceptably high watermark – we have noted an increase in calls concerning mistreatment from those with local oversight of headteachers. This includes a small but increasing minority of MAT and Local Authority executive officers. There has also been an increase in the number of calls pertaining to insensitive and, in some instances, overbearing school governance.

The pressure on headteachers of small schools also remains a critical concern. The distinct demands faced by these school leaders seem far too often to be dismissively overlooked.

Parental complaints made through appropriate channels clearly deserve to be dealt with in a professional, transparent, and reflective manner. However, complaints that cross the line into the vexatious, abusive, threatening, or intimidating need a more robust response that has the formal backing of national policymakers. Currently, headteachers are an unprotected “Aunt Sally” for a small, but increasing, minority of parents/carers who opt to publicly vilify them. The stress and anguish this causes should be unacceptable.



Our previous annual wellbeing reports offered a series of recommendations that we believed would enhance headteacher wellbeing. Our ten 2025 proposals are as follows:

One | Headrest very much welcomes the findings of the Dame Christine Gilbert Review. We believe it is a necessity that its recommendations are implemented in full. We particularly value the review's recommendation on the importance of **embedding an element of independent external oversight with regards to disputes arising from inspection judgements**. We endorse equally the findings from the 'Beyond Ofsted' inquiry led by Lord Jim Knight.

Two | It is our view that regular review of the mental health training provided to Ofsted employees is critical. We recommend that there should be a **strong focus in this training on the management of the most serious situations** where the level of stress the headteacher is exhibiting poses a grave concern leading to possible self-harm or suicide risk. It is our experience, from some of the more distressing calls we received in 2024, that further work needs to be done in this regard.

Three | Headrest very much endorses the recommendation from the Dame Christine Gilbert Review that - "As part of its planning for a school report card, the government should initiate a debate about the essential elements of the wider public accountability system, of which Ofsted is a part." (p.34) We strongly believe it will be crucial that consultation on **proposals for the school report card, and wider school accountability systems, are open and transparent**. It will be vital that Ofsted genuinely engages with responses submitted by those beyond the inspectorate. Again, the Knight Review has much on this.

Four | Headrest welcomes a Prime Ministerial speech in December in which Sir Keir Starmer expressed a desire for his government to focus

on enhancing school readiness. A major success of the last Labour government, as cited by respected bodies like the Institute for Fiscal Studies, was the Sure Start programme. Headrest recommends **that the government should focus with urgency on establishing similarly successful strategies to enhance school readiness.**

Five | It is Headrest's view that the newly elected government should provide a **robust action plan to address the school staff recruitment and retention crisis** – there needs to be a particularly strong emphasis on enhancing teaching assistant recruitment and retention.

Six | The only person who appears to have a defined responsibility for headteacher wellbeing is the chair of governors/trustees. This is, in our view, an exceptionally demanding duty to place upon an unpaid volunteer. We recommend that **MATs and LAs should have a trained and named employee with responsibility for headteacher wellbeing.** We believe that this employee should submit, as part of the Headteacher's annual performance management, a statement that specifies the support that has and will be offered to enhance a headteacher's wellbeing needs. This person should also be the named source of support for chairs of governors/trustees in their oversight of school leader wellbeing.

Seven | Headrest proposes that **all headteachers should have the right to access fully funded independent support for their wellbeing.** We believe school governors should be legally required to offer this annually.

Eight | The demands upon many small school headteachers are, in our view, unsustainable. We propose that **an independent report should be commissioned on the wellbeing needs of leaders of small schools.** Those commissioned to submit this should produce action points and recommendations to ensure that the unique demands on small school

headteachers are properly assessed, addressed, and supported. Additionally, they should share models of good practice where small schools have devised innovative approaches that enable communities to retain their small school whilst also enhancing headteacher wellbeing.

Nine | Headrest recommends that **greater legal protections be put in place to protect school leaders, and their staff, from vexatious, abusive, threatening, or intimidatory actions.** This should include a legal requirement for social media companies to remove offensive or abusive comments directed at school staff with increased haste.

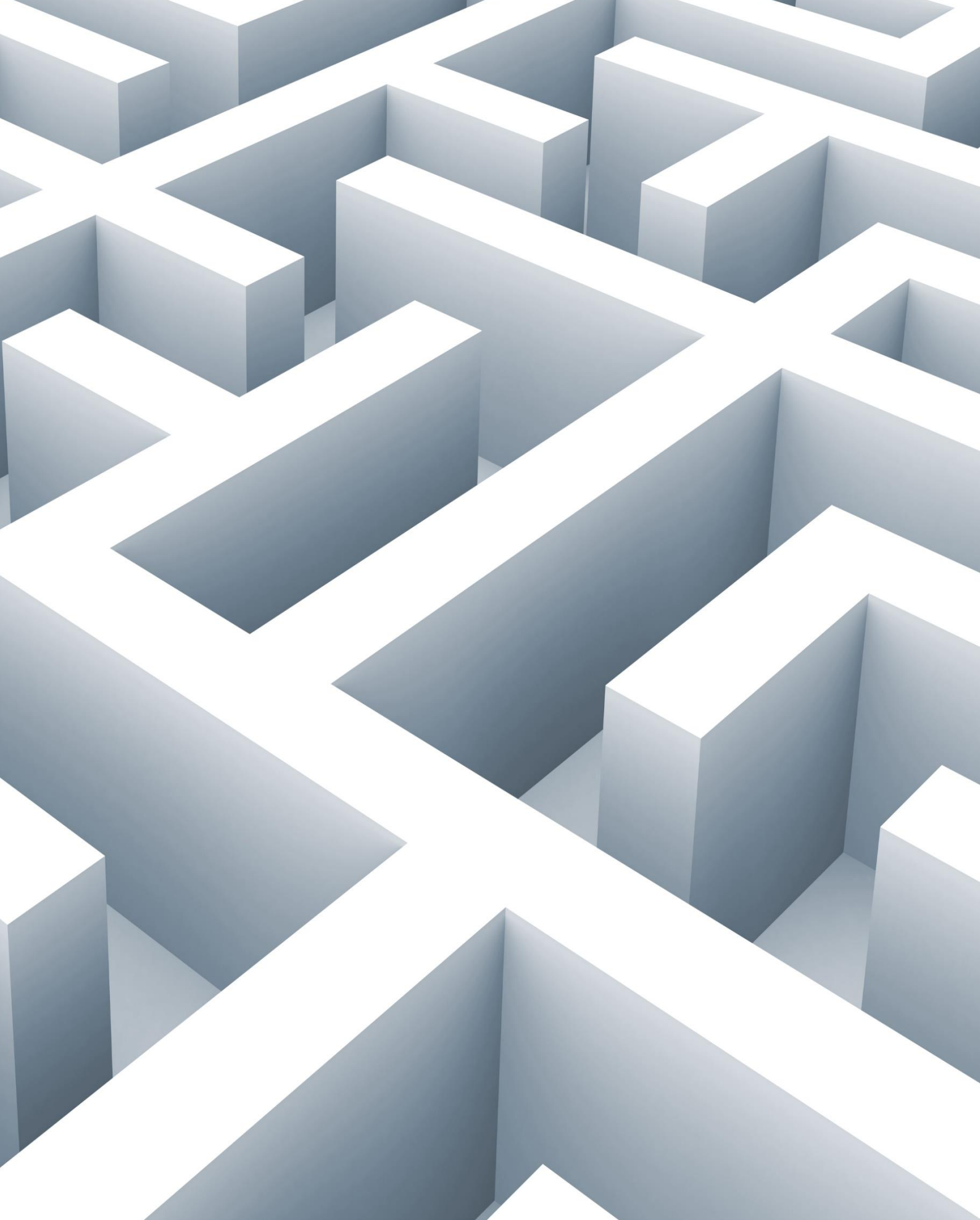
Ten | One of the major constraints in schools effectively supporting young people with SEND is the difficulty accessing assessments and support from key external agencies like CAMHS. Too many students, parents, and schools have had to wait far too long to access the expert input needed to make effective inclusion a reality. Headrest recommends **(a) an urgent review into how CAMHS can provide enhanced support to schools and (b) an injection of cash to ensure that waiting times for assessments are drastically reduced.**

In conclusion, those of us at Headrest wish to place on record our fulsome admiration of the professionalism and fortitude headteachers have shown over recent years. Our admiration combines with a sense of genuine awe that so many of our callers have retained their commitment despite unprecedented demands on their physical/emotional wellbeing. We very much hope that 2025 sees the emotional wellbeing of headteachers, and their staff teams, given the priority that their efforts over the last four years have most certainly merited.

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 continues to pay for our website hosting costs (and has done since we started) 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. We need to thank also the many people who contributed to the book, and we hope we have done justice to all you. Finally, of course to all the wonderful headteachers who we have the privilege to speak to. You remain an inspiration to us all and are a credit to our amazing profession.





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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