

# Headrest



## **Annual Headteacher Wellbeing Report**

**2026**

# Introduction

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When Headrest first opened its phone line in October 2020 we were responding to an immediate crisis. School leaders were navigating the most turbulent educational landscape in living memory and many simply needed someone to listen. What began as a voluntary act of solidarity among former headteachers has since evolved into a steady and trusted presence for those who shoulder the complex and often isolating demands of headship.

Headrest remains entirely voluntary and unfunded. Our small team - all experienced former heads - continue to give their time freely offering confidential support to those still in post. We are sustained solely by the generosity of individuals and organisations who cover essential running costs such as our phone line and website. Their ongoing belief in our mission makes our work possible and we are deeply grateful.

Now in our fifth year we find ourselves both humbled and saddened that the demand for our service endures. None of us imagined, back in 2020, that as 2026 approached there would still be such persistent need for our wellbeing helpline for school leaders. Yet the calls keep coming - each one a reminder of both the strain within the system and the courage of

those who continue to lead schools with compassion and integrity.

This fifth annual wellbeing report reflects on the themes raised by callers in 2025 and links these to the patterns we have seen since Headrest's inception. It outlines the key stressors that have emerged over the past year and concludes with recommendations for what must change if we are to make meaningful progress in supporting those who lead our schools. As always, the confidentiality of our callers is paramount; what follows focuses on themes, not individual stories.

Throughout 2025, Headrest has continued to contribute to the national conversation about school leadership wellbeing. Our colleague Andrew Morrish's book *Beyond Belief* - featuring chapters from members of our team and other respected contributors (including a foreword by Rt Hon Lord Jim Knight) - explored how current models of school accountability might evolve into something more humane and sustainable. The ideas in that book - and the debate it has sparked - reflect our ongoing commitment to both challenge and reimagine what effective accountability can look like.

The Headrest team also provided evidence to the Dame Christine Gilbert Review which investigated

lessons to be learned following the tragic death of Ruth Perry. This contribution continues our tradition of advocacy, which includes involvement in national inquiries such as "Beyond Ofsted" (2023) and ongoing engagement with teaching unions, the media, and professional networks. Each of these reinforces the same reality: the wellbeing challenges faced by school leaders are systemic, not isolated, and affect far more people than those who reach out to us directly.

Headrest began as a temporary response to an emergency. It has become, instead, a needed constant. As long as there are school leaders needing a listening ear, and while national policymakers continue to underplay the human cost of leadership, then we will continue our work. Our purpose remains unchanged: to listen, to support, and to speak truth to power on behalf of those who give so much to their schools and communities.



# Headrest 2020 to 2024 | Turbulent years for school leaders

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Even before the COVID-19 pandemic the pressures of school leadership were among the most complex in the public sector. Educational leaders were already contending with overlapping responsibilities, rapid policy change, and the emotional weight of leading communities under constant scrutiny.

The pandemic intensified every one of these pressures. Leaders worked with depleted resources and unrelenting demands, often at the cost of their own health. Many were left physically and emotionally exhausted - burnt out by unrealistic expectations, burdened by growing social and welfare responsibilities, and demoralised by a national system that too often appeared indifferent to their wellbeing.

Those who enter headship do so with full awareness of its challenges. Yet the past five years have tested even the most resilient. For many, the task has felt Sisyphean. When analysing Headrest calls from our inception to December 2025 a number of distinct phases of concern and experience emerge. These include:

- Lingering legacy issues from the pandemic
- Going straight 'back to normal' during abnormal times
- Exhaustion, frustration and continued national policymaker crassness
- Ever decreasing school budgets and services
- An unintelligent and inhumane inspection process
- Too much VUCA: volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity

We cover these in detail in each of our previous annual headteacher wellbeing reports. They are all available on our [website](#) as is our book *Beyond Belief*, that seeks to bring these issues together into one place as we look to build a more holistic accountability framework. We hoped that a new HMCI and government would pave the way, at last, for a system that is fit for purpose.

*"The teaching profession deserves better. Children and their parents deserve better. It is beyond belief that such an inhumane accountability system was allowed to exist unchecked for so long. It is time to believe that change is coming at last. It's time to make that change happen."*

Prof Julia Waters (sister of Ruth Perry) in *Beyond Belief* (2025)



# 2025: Ofsted limbo and other stressors

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A positive feature of 2025 is that calls to Headrest dropped with a decline of approximately thirty percent. This is to be welcomed, and we hope reflects an enhanced and wider network of support being available to assist school leader wellbeing. In this latest annual report, we identify five key issues that serve as the main stressors for our callers throughout 2025.

## 1 | A year of Ofsted limbo

The removal of one-word grades in September 2024 and the subsequent suspension of routine inspections at the start of the 2025 autumn term marked a rare disruption in the normal rhythm of accountability. Alongside this, Ofsted - through its inspector wellbeing training and "The Big Listen" - seemed to be more empathetic to the reality that inspection can itself be a source of significant harm.

Headrest certainly welcomed the move away from reductive grading and the stated intention to make inspection more humane. For a moment there appeared to be recognition that the psychological impact of inspection is not a side-issue but a central design flaw. Yet as "The Big Listen" unfolded concern grew. Favourable parental responses were amplified while critical feedback from the profession seemed conspicuously downplayed. This reinforced longstanding fears of selective narrative management rather than genuine listening.

By late 2025, routine inspections were paused, and the education sector was suspended between frameworks - neither in the old world nor clearly entering a new one. That lull delivered some short-term respite, reflected in fewer Ofsted-related Headrest calls. However, uncertainty remained high, and some early



indications suggest the forthcoming framework may fall short of what leaders need and hoped for. Whether this moment becomes a turning point or simply a rebrand causing even worse pressures remains unresolved - regrettably we fear it may well be the latter.

Nor are we alone in our unease. NAHT's snap poll in September 2025 of over 1,400 school leaders found overwhelming opposition to Ofsted's revised inspection framework, with around 9 in 10 leaders against it, and the majority strongly so. Most said it would harm their wellbeing with over 90 % predicting a negative or very negative impact. Respondents cited increased stress, workload, and a system they see as a superficial rebranding. There was a strong sense the new Ofsted framework did not address deep-seated problems such as trust, context sensitivity, and accountability pressure. Many reported it could accelerate burnout or exit from the profession, and nearly 90 % indicated support for exploring industrial action if the plans proceed unchanged.

The situation reached a point where the two school leader unions (NAHT and ASCL) and the largest teaching union (NEU) sought to pursue a judicial review on this issue. When a situation reaches this point, it should surely be patently obvious to both Ofsted and the Secretary of State for Education that large parts of the profession have lost faith in their proposal.

With fewer 2025 calls related to Ofsted being received during this period of inspectorial limbo, other themes/stressors emerged. The four most frequent are cited below - often our callers mentioned the alignment of more than one of these stressors in their calls.

## **2 | Small school leadership pressures**

Headteachers of small schools face a uniquely intense and often unsustainable set of pressures. With low pupil numbers, financial resilience is fragile and even minor fluctuations in roll can trigger deficit budgets. Yet the fixed leadership demands such as safeguarding, SEND, curriculum design, Ofsted compliance, and community accountability remain identical to those of much larger schools.



In many cases the headteacher is simultaneously the Designated Safeguarding Lead, SENDCo, assessment lead, timetabler, and often a classroom teacher. This leaves little to no capacity for strategic leadership or genuine rest.

This structural overload has a direct impact on wellbeing. Leaders of small schools often describe working at, or beyond capacity, simply to maintain compliance with statutory duties. The volatility of small cohorts means that one family circumstance can radically affect outcomes and Ofsted judgments heightening stress and emotional pressure. Professional isolation is also common for small school leaders particularly where there is no substantive senior leadership team. The cumulative effect is an elevated risk of burnout and attrition, due not to lack of skill or commitment, but to systemic expectations that are simply disproportionate to the resource available. It will be imperative that the new Ofsted framework and inspection protocols show meaningful regard to the demands the inspection process poses for leaders of small schools.



### 3 | Failure of some MATs and Local Authorities to follow ethical HR practice

Whilst we acknowledge that most MATs and LAs act with integrity, even in complex personnel situations, over the last twelve to fifteen months we have heard deeply disturbing accounts from school leaders about unethical treatment.

In such cases, due process is treated as an inconvenience, empathy is absent, and leaders are driven to the point of mental or physical breakdown. Such breakdowns are often triggered by the deliberate setting of impossible demands or hellacious, and often unsubtle, workplace bullying. For a caring profession, this is inexcusable. We have seen a significant increase in calls of this nature in the last fifteen months.

### 4 | Parental/community intimidation of school leaders and their staff

In 2025, parental harassment of school leaders seems to have become an increasingly complex threat, often amplified by the speed and reach of social media. The Independent newspaper, in March 2025, reported on an NAHT survey of 1,600 school leaders and noted that 82% of surveyed school leaders had experienced abuse from parents in the past year; 68% had suffered threatening behaviour; 46% had been recipients of online abuse; 22% subjected to discriminatory language; 10% had suffered physical violence; and 4% had experienced spitting.

This means that of those 1,600 surveyed, 64 school leaders were recipients of spitting; 160 suffered physical violence; 352 suffered discriminatory language; and 672 suffered online abuse. Surely this level of human intimidation is worthy of serious and urgent legislative action by national policymakers. This is an intimidatory onslaught on school leaders that 86% of those surveyed felt had worsened in the three years prior to the survey.

Those undertaking the intimidation are a small, but increasing, vocal minority of parents who now by-pass formal communication routes and instead target school leaders personally. This can be via hostile email campaigns, defamatory posts in community Facebook groups or other such social media, or endeavours to mobilise "pile ons." These attacks are often based upon partial or inaccurate information, can rapidly escalate, and place school leaders under intense personal and reputational pressure.

The psychological impact is severe: leaders who call us on this issue describe feeling constantly belittled, unable to switch off, and fearful that any decision, however reasonable, could be publicly misrepresented in minutes. The biggest tragedy is that often these school leaders feel they have no option other than to "roll with the blows" as meaningful support from other sources is abjectly lacking.

We believe local authorities and MATs must take a robust stance on instances of parental/family harassment and be prepared to intervene early - utilising legal routes where necessary. National policymakers must also address this issue with rigour and vigour putting in stronger laws to protect our frontline school staff.

Part of the problem, in our view, is that as access to sources of external family support have diminished through "efficiency savings," more appropriately termed "cuts," school staff have become the most easily accessed public servant for the frustrated. This has certainly been the case in several of the calls we received and links very much to the next stressor that we identify.

## **5 | The moral injury of not being able to meet SEND needs within existing budgets**

An increasing number of our helpline callers describe a form of moral injury on this issue - the deep psychological harm caused not by what they do, but by what the system prevents them from doing. A growing number of them are in the unbearable position of knowing exactly what a child with SEND needs and

yet being unable to deliver it because the school's budget simply cannot stretch. This is not a matter of poor planning or inefficiency; in many cases the funding gap between statutory entitlement and actual resource is so vast that leaders are forced into impossible trade-offs.

What makes this type of situation particularly damaging is that it conflicts directly with the very values that brought these leaders into education. The moral trauma of being made complicit in failure by a system that knows it is underfunded, yet expects delivery regardless, is unsustainable for leaders, their staff teams, and the young people who depend upon them.

## Other issues

As a helpline we also received calls that fell outside the stressors outlined above. Some of these callers needed affirmation that their perception and response to a situation was apt. Other callers had reached an abyss of self-doubt and needed to hear that they were not alone in the way they felt. For some callers the issue was about school workplace dynamics that would risk making their school identifiable and thus inappropriate for inclusion in this report.



# Closing thoughts and recommendations

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Over the past year, the new government has taken several welcome steps. These include: commissioning a review of curriculum and accountability, reinstating the support staff negotiating body, investing in vocational and creative pathways, and expanding access to breakfast clubs. These are meaningful advances.

They do not, however, alter a hard truth: **school leader wellbeing remains in a state of unacceptable jeopardy.**

Headrest continues to hear from leaders leaving post within five years - a loss of skill and vocation the system cannot afford. More troubling still is the growing number of highly experienced headteachers choosing early retirement. Their reasons are consistent: exhaustion and fear. Fear of one final Ofsted inspection. Fear of reputational harm arising from what many describe as an inspectorial lottery with no independent route of challenge. For too many, the emotional cost has become too great.

There were early signs of hope from Ofsted: the introduction of wellbeing training for inspectors; the "Big Listen," and; the removal of single overall grades. Yet as the new inspection framework has emerged, the opportunity to construct a genuinely humane accountability model appears to have been missed.

Feedback gathered from Headrest's networks of school leaders - including MAT CEOs, headteachers, and inspectors - indicates significant concern about the new framework. Rather than easing existing pressures, the emerging picture suggests that it may intensify stress levels for school leaders and their staff.

Fundamental questions have also been raised about the framework's development and consultation. Many in the sector are troubled by the extent to

which Ofsted shaped the framework without meaningful external challenge, and by a consultation process that appears, to some, to have discounted substantial professional feedback. Some inspectors have also expressed concern that the associated training has been inadequate.

Objections from school leaders should not be misinterpreted as resistance to scrutiny. Effective leaders value robust and intelligent accountability when it is purposeful, proportionate, and focused on improvement. The proposals currently advanced by Ofsted - and endorsed by the Secretary of State - do not, we fear, meet that standard.

There is a substantial risk that the new framework will further compromise the wellbeing and mental health of school leaders and their teams. Should this risk materialise, the Secretary of State for Education must act quickly and decisively. Any delay would heighten the likelihood of further and avoidable harm.

Additional stressors continue to weigh heavily on school leaders. These include dysfunction within the SEND system; mistreatment by a minority of local oversight bodies; and the persistent overlooking of the specific pressures faced by leaders of small schools. Particularly concerning is the public and online abuse directed at headteachers by a small but growing minority of parents and carers. This has now crossed into territory that no profession should be expected to endure.

It is within this context that Headrest sets out the following eight urgent and essential recommendations for 2026.

**One |** Implement the Dame Christine Gilbert Review in full, including the establishment of independent external oversight for contested Ofsted inspection outcomes.

**Two |** Subject the new Ofsted framework to active wellbeing monitoring, with a clear duty to revise it immediately should evidence of harm to school leader wellbeing emerge.

**Three |** Embed mental health and wellbeing training as a permanent core element of Ofsted workforce development.

**Four |** Require every MAT and local authority to appoint a named headteacher wellbeing lead, who submits an annual statement of wellbeing support as part of headteacher performance management.

**Five |** Ensure Ofsted inspections of MATs and local authorities explicitly examine how effectively they support and enhance the wellbeing of the leaders in their care.

**Six |** Commission an independent national review into the wellbeing of leaders of small and special schools, identifying their unique pressures and sharing examples of effective and innovative practice.

**Seven |** Introduce legislation providing stronger legal protections for school leaders and staff against vexatious, abusive, threatening, or intimidatory behaviour. This should also include a statutory duty on social media platforms to remove harmful content swiftly.

**Eight |** Ensure any future SEND reform is fully and realistically resourced, ending the cycle of rising expectation without the funding or external agency support required to deliver.



To those leading schools today: your steadiness through the turbulence of recent years commands our deep respect.

You have sustained your commitment despite unprecedented demands on your physical and emotional wellbeing. It is now time — unequivocally — for those with responsibility for the system to place your wellbeing not at the margins of policy, but at its centre. Failure to do so would represent a serious breach of moral leadership and an unacceptable failure in the duty of care owed to you.



# Acknowledgements

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The team at Headrest would like to thank a number of organisations and individuals for their support. Although some prefer to remain anonymous, a full list of our supporters can be found on our website. In particular, we thank Navigate NDC who pay for the 0800 freephone service that ensures all calls to Headrest are free. 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.



# HEAD 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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