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INSIGHT SERIES

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## Recruitment and Retention of Senior School Leaders in Wales

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The National Academy for Educational Leadership was established in 2018, under the Companies Act 2006. As an arm's length body, its primary role is to fulfil its responsibilities set within the context of the Welsh Government's strategic aims. Its main purpose is to:

- Contribute to the development of the professional capabilities of current and aspiring leaders across the education system by providing coherence and quality assurance for the range of educational leadership development opportunities available in Wales
- Act as a thought leader; developing, articulating and implementing a vision and strategy for educational leadership in Wales
- To be a respected and active member of the education middle tier, the first point of contact for the educational workforce in regard to leadership matters.

This research was commissioned by the National Academy for Educational Leadership. The views in this report are those of the researchers and may not reflect the views of the National Academy for Educational Leadership.

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In this project, the NIESR team undertook qualitative research with school leaders and relevant stakeholders.

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In this project, the EPI team undertook the review of the existing quantitative data and evidence.

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## References

# Glossary

**Acting Headteachers** are staff who are appointed as headteacher on an interim basis. They often held the role of Deputy Headteacher at the school prior to 'acting up'. They are not required to hold an NPQH (defined below).

**Assistant Headteachers** hold similar responsibilities to a deputy headteacher, however a key difference is that they are not expected to take on the role of headteacher, should the headteacher be absent for any reason.

**Deputy Headteachers** work closely with the headteacher in the school. It is their responsibility to take on headteacher responsibilities, should the headteacher be absent for any reason.

**Middle leaders** include roles such as heads of year, department heads, learning or behaviour managers, designated safeguarding leads (DSLs) and Additional Learning Needs co-ordinators (ALNCOs).

**National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH)** – a professional qualification for school leaders who are, or are aspiring to be, a headteacher or head of school with responsibility for leading a school.

**Senior Leadership Teams (SLT)** in schools bring together senior and middle leaders to work on areas such as monitoring teaching and learning, school improvements, staff development and safeguarding.

**Senior school leaders**, or senior leaders, throughout this report refers to headteachers, acting headteachers, deputy headteachers, executive headteachers and assistant headteachers.

# Executive Summary

The role of a school leader is fundamental to shaping the educational environment and influencing the overall success of a school. Effective school leaders inspire and motivate both teachers and students, creating a vision for the school and fostering a positive and inclusive school culture. However, maintaining the supply of school leaders in Wales and across the UK is challenging, a situation that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. There is some evidence that fewer middle leaders are aspiring to become senior leaders and headteachers (NAHT, 2021), and that more teachers are leaving the profession following the pandemic (Zuccollo, 2022). These supply issues will ultimately affect pupils' experiences and outcomes.

In this context, this research aims to broaden and deepen the existing evidence base on the challenges in recruitment and retention of senior school leaders in Wales, and how those challenges could be addressed. To this end, this study aims to answer the following set of Research Questions:

- To what extent does existing data demonstrate a shortage of senior school leaders in Wales?
- What are the key factors impacting recruitment and retention of senior school leaders in Wales, as perceived by current, former and potential 'future' leaders?
- How do these factors vary by types of posts or by workforce characteristics?
- How are senior school leadership roles perceived by current, former and potential 'future' senior school leaders?
- What policies do current, former and potential 'future' senior leaders perceive to be effective in improving recruitment and retention?

To explore these questions, we take a mixed-methods approach. This research is based on a review of existing quantitative data on the supply of senior school leaders in Wales, as well as qualitative research with school leaders, to explore their views and priorities in relation to recruitment and retention. We conducted:

- 28 interviews with senior school leaders, including 19 current and 9 former senior leaders;
- 2 focus groups with 3 or 4 potential 'future' senior leaders in each, including middle leaders and teachers;
- Scoping calls with stakeholders from 9 Local Authorities (LAs);
- 2 co-design workshops with school leaders, stakeholders from the National Academy for Educational Leadership, and Local Authority (LA) stakeholders.

A key objective of this research is to set out strategic policy proposals, co-created with school leaders and other relevant stakeholders, that could help address some of the identified challenges and that are relevant, practical and achievable, with the potential to secure broad support. These proposals will inform the National Academy for Educational Leadership's policy work around Strategic Workforce Development.

## Findings

### Data review

Our review of existing data looked at the supply of senior school leader in Wales. We find that:

- The composition of the senior leadership workforce in all age schools in Wales has changed over the years. The number of assistant headteacher roles has dramatically increased, from 720 assistant headteachers in 2010 to 1,025 in 2021. This could indicate the growing range of SLT responsibilities.
- The composition of school senior leadership substantially differs across regions and Local Authorities.
- Over the last decade, the number of applicants per senior leadership vacancy has varied widely across secondary and all-age schools in Wales, with some indications of a relation between rurality and shortage of candidates.
- Our data review looked at the average number of applicants per vacancy (quantity of applicants) and the percentage of vacancies that remained unfilled after being advertised (suitability of applicants) over the last 15 years. We can conclude that only four out of the 15 years analysed had a sufficient number of suitable candidates, with high numbers of applicants and low rates of unfilled vacancies. The most recent year with data available, 2021 was one of the worst years in this respect, with a relatively low number of candidates and a significant percentage of vacancies unfilled.
- Differences in quantity versus suitability of the applicants are more pronounced in some Local Authorities. We found some evidence that rural Local Authorities struggle more to recruit. However, we found no indication from the existing data that the divergence of the Welsh curriculum from the English curriculum is having a significant impact in the recruitment success of Local Authorities adjacent to the border with England.

- Turnover varies substantially among Local Authorities, with an approximately 20 percentage point difference between the Local Authorities with the lowest turnover and the highest turnover.
- Welsh-medium vacancies are consistently harder to fill. In the last 15 years, Welsh-medium posts have significantly fewer applicants than the English-medium ones. Welsh-medium vacancies in the primary sector are particularly difficult to fill.
- Senior school leaders in Wales are getting older, with the number of senior leaders aged 50 to 59 increasing since 2019 and the number aged 30 to 49 decreasing. This suggests that higher proportions of turnover might occur in future years as more people, particularly headteachers, retire.

### Qualitative research

Our qualitative research explored questions around senior leaders' experiences in their roles, perceptions of leadership, challenges and the potential solutions that senior leaders perceive would be effective. Our findings highlight the following themes:

- When discussing entering senior leadership positions, the role of headteachers was frequently mentioned as an important factor, which can either enable or hinder progression of their staff, depending on the headteacher. Similarly, formal training was mentioned as both useful and at times insufficient to prepare candidates for the challenges of senior leadership. Hence, opportunities to learn on the job, through the delegation of leadership tasks, as well as through learning from other schools, were valued. Other factors that were mentioned as potential barriers to progression into senior leadership included a lack of representation, a lack of confidence, and negative perceptions of senior leadership roles. At the same time, some respondents also reported not seeing or experiencing any barriers.
- Current, former and potential 'future' leaders described several aspects of senior leadership that they view as highly positive and rewarding. Those included having opportunities to make a difference to children and families, developing and supporting school staff, leading changes and development across a range of priorities, having scope for whole-school impact, feeling pride in school improvements and achievements, having a passion for their chosen specialism such as the Welsh language or the special schools' sector, and having opportunities to influence policy.
- While most of the senior leaders we spoke with find their roles rewarding and fulfilling, many also reported significant and recurring challenges. The main challenges reported were high workloads, poor work-life balance, a sense of isolation in leadership roles, excessive bureaucracy and administrative responsibilities, limited funding, the roles negatively impacting on the health and well-being of senior leaders, training and development not being sufficient to prepare senior leaders for the challenges of the roles, and uncertainties around retirement and pensions.

Research participants were asked about their views on what policy or practical changes could help address those challenged that they identified. Those policy suggestions from the current, former and potential 'future' senior leaders were analysed and further discussed and developed in the stakeholder workshops, resulting in a list of co-created policy recommendations. Those recommendations covered a number of areas for policy intervention. Across this research, seven 'key challenge' areas were identified. These were: current processes within local and national government, health & well-being support, training & development opportunities, support & networking for senior leaders, workload, school funding, and acknowledgement of role senior leadership and schools play in the society. The table below summarises those co-created policy suggestions, that sought to address one or multiple of these challenge areas.

Participants also highlighted that it is important for all policy suggestions to adhere to the following: to be developed with senior leadership consultation; to recognise that the specific context of each school type, location and pupil demographic shapes the impact of policies; to not treat Additional Learning Needs (ALN) schools as an 'add-on' to the mainstream policies; and to set out a minimum standard of provision for all of Wales's schools.

## Current Processes within Local and National Government

Policy Suggestion	Further Details
<p>Take steps to make recruitment fairer and open to a wider pool of applicants.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>More involvement of governors in a fair recruitment process, such as by delivering unconscious bias training to governors.</b></li> <li>• <b>Looking outside of schools to hire senior school leaders.</b> <i>Although other participants were concerned about this suggestion as it implied a change in headteachers' remits, moving away from pedagogy and towards management only.</i></li> <li>• <b>Reviewing and reducing headteacher job descriptions.</b> <i>Or changing how these are phrased to make it clearer that some of these tasks can be delegated.</i></li> </ul>
<p>Create processes to identify and prepare potential senior leaders early in teacher training.</p>	<p>Invest in IT systems that would <b>link teacher trainees with recruitment gaps</b>, encouraging them early on to work towards roles in regions that are struggling to recruit.</p>
<p>Improve data collection to enable targeted recruitment and retention interventions.</p>	<p>Senior leaders stated it would be useful to conduct more data collecting activities, such as <b>conducting exit interviews with heads</b>. In addition, <b>interviewing deputies who hold NPQHs but haven't gone into headship</b>, to give the school an opportunity to provide support to the deputy if they did want to progress to headship but were facing barriers.</p>
<p>Address identified data gaps - Collect more information about vacancies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>The tenure of the vacancy.</b> <i>We calculated turnover rates as a headcount measure, however, a more accurate measure would be based on full-time equivalents.</i></li> <li>• <b>The type of leadership role.</b> <i>This information would be very valuable to investigate whether some roles are harder to recruit for than others.</i></li> <li>• <b>The salary of the advertised post.</b> <i>Information on salaries would help clarify whether recruitment issues are related to the remuneration offered.</i></li> <li>• <b>Whether vacancies were readvertised.</b> <i>This could help identify where shortages are concentrated, and which vacancies/roles are harder for fill.</i></li> <li>• <b>Special requirements for the post.</b> <i>As well as proficiency in the Welsh language, other details such as religion or minimum years of experience in leadership could be recorded to shed light on the expectations of schools.</i></li> </ul>
<p>Address identified data gaps - Collect more information about the applicant and the person appointed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Experience and age.</b> <i>These variables would indicate how close the applicant cohort is to retirement. For example, the information gathered might predict future peaks of turnover.</i></li> <li>• <b>Most recent/current role.</b> <i>Applicants are mostly composed of senior leaders who want to change school, and middle leaders who are looking for a promotion. This information could be used to evaluate the state of the leadership pipeline.</i></li> <li>• <b>Qualifications and other applicant characteristics.</b> <i>These variables would help policymakers understand why some posts are left unfilled.</i></li> <li>• <b>Local/non-local origin.</b> <i>This information would be useful to better understand the diversity of the pool of applicants and movement between schools.</i></li> </ul>

## Health & Well-being Support

Policy Suggestion	Further Details
<p><b>Make headteacher well-being a priority and provide proactive support.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Having one weekday fortnightly that was dedicated to mental health.</b> <i>Headteachers would be expected to use this time to complete an activity that supports their mental health. Activities suggested included; walks in nature, exercise in chosen sport/group activity, meeting with friends, and resting at home.</i></li> <li>• <b>Have processes in place to provide well-being support alongside process support.</b> <i>Particularly for scenarios identified as especially detrimental to their mental health. These included having to make staff redundancies, take staff disciplinary action, exclude students and manage angry and occasionally staff-abusive relatives/carers.</i></li> <li>• <b>Having a person to speak to informally, regularly and without judgement.</b> <i>Senior school leaders discussed that being able to ‘offload’ to someone, particularly who can relate to their problems such as an ex-head, without fear of judgement or repercussions, would be helpful in sharing burdens that could often weigh them down.</i></li> <li>• <b>Having counselling available from a professional.</b> <i>There should be therapists, counsellors or clinical psychologists available to headteachers when they are struggling, which should not require self-referral or governor approval.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Enable time out of the role by changing the culture and creating opportunities.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Change culture around taking time out of the role.</b> <i>Senior leaders said they felt they could not take time out of the role as it was difficult to then re-enter the position. It is important to encourage taking time out and ensure senior leaders feel that they will be welcomed back into their roles.</i></li> <li>• <b>Accrue time off after certain number of years in senior leader roles.</b> <i>Many suggested following policies in other countries, such as New Zealand, by allowing senior leaders to accrue time off after having worked in the roles for a certain number of years e.g. 5 years as a senior leader means you're entitled to 10 weeks out of the role/sabbatical.</i></li> <li>• <b>Enable senior leaders to go on secondments.</b> <i>Encourage senior leaders to do this, both for professional development and to give them breaks from the role.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Ensure headteachers have a voice in decision-making processes.</b></p>	<p><b>Having a clear channel of communication between headteachers and national government.</b> This would demonstrate the Welsh Government’s interest in hearing from senior leaders and provide an avenue for senior leaders to raise any concerns regarding the practicality of policies ahead of implementation.</p>
<p><b>Provide health benefits.</b></p>	<p><b>Give vouchers or subscriptions to local leisure and fitness centres</b> including pools and gyms, as well as more holistic support and wellness services such as acupuncturists.</p>

## Training & Development Opportunities

Policy Suggestion	Further Details
<p><b>Improve training and professional development opportunities for aspiring senior school leaders.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>More opportunities to shadow or temporarily step into the Headship role.</b> <i>Many senior leaders said the most valuable learning opportunity for preparing senior leaders to take on a Headship role were shadowing opportunities. However, they felt the opportunity to shadow heads was too variable across schools in Wales.</i></li> <li>• <b>Rotate between schools to shadow different Headteachers.</b> <i>Within these shadowing opportunities, it would be important to have deputies rotate between schools across Wales to experience a range of challenges specific to the context of different school types. This would help to encourage more movement between schools in Wales too.</i></li> <li>• <b>Rotate between roles in the Senior Leadership Team (SLT)</b> <i>Other interviewees felt it would be helpful for aspiring headteachers to also gain experience across different senior leadership team roles, to build up training in many specialist areas.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Further review the NPQH.</b></p>	<p>Improvements suggested for the NPQH, building on Professor Mick Waters' review, included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Ensuring there are equal opportunities and enablers to completing the NPQH across schools in Wales.</b></li> <li>• <b>Include training for self-care within the NPQH training.</b></li> <li>• <b>Ensure there are alternative pathways to headship outside of the NPQH.</b></li> </ul>
<p><b>Provide targeted training to widen the pool of Welsh-medium candidates.</b></p>	<p><b>More Welsh language training built into senior leadership training,</b> to fill these gaps. <b>Extend the 'Welsh in a year' courses to senior leaders.</b></p>

## Support & Networking for Senior Leaders

Policy Suggestion	Further Details
<p><b>Facilitate networking between senior leaders across Wales.</b></p>	<p><b>There needs to be clear funding and formal organisation for these networks to continue.</b> Senior leader networks gave them the opportunity to support one another and share best practice through forums and group feedback. This was especially important in schools with specific contexts, such as Welsh-medium schools and special schools. However, there were barriers to these networks – specifically, that the onus fell to senior leaders themselves to organise these networks.</p>
<p><b>Provide 1:1 support throughout a headship.</b></p>	<p>Having support in the form of a buddy, coach or mentor was frequently brought up as a potential solution to recruitment and retention challenges, particularly for headship. <b>Mentorship from a senior leader about to retire or recently retired.</b> Senior leaders said they would have the most relevant experience, and could either drop down to 3-4 days a week and spend the rest of the time mentoring the new head, or retire but be paid to circulate between schools as a mentor. Similarly to networking forums, some mentors already exist, but senior leaders say that this is yet to be formalised and equal across Wales.</p>
<p><b>Conduct a review of existing Local Authorities support, with more opportunities for heads to feedback.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Ensuring those providing support have the relevant experience.</b> <i>Quite a few senior leaders gave examples of situations where the individual from their Local Authorities responsible for supporting them did not have relevant experience to advise them.</i></li> <li>• <b>Support staff from the Local Authorities need to visit schools in person and be readily available to provide support online.</b> <i>Support from Local Authorities did not feel sufficient since those working outside of schools had taken up more flexible working post-pandemic. Senior leaders reported that this often led to them being unable to reach support services when schools needed them. Senior leaders further reported that those providing support felt more detached and lacked understanding of what was really happening on the ground in schools, as they had stopped coming into schools post-pandemic.</i></li> </ul>

Workload	
Policy Suggestion	Further Details
<b>Build in more Planning, Preparation and Assessment (PPA) time.</b>	It was suggested that all staff would benefit from more PPA time, and this would allow senior staff to delegate more. Senior leaders suggested <b>gradually increasing the amount of time allotted for management or PPA time as staff become more senior</b> , to serve as dedicated leadership time.
<b>Review and reduce the headteacher remit.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Bring back business managers for primary schools.</b> <i>There was much discussion by research participants around the extra responsibilities held by primary school headteachers. The solution given was to bring back bursars and business managers and to ensure these were available to all primary schools in Wales.</i></li> <li>• <b>Address the increasing expectations placed on schools and senior leaders.</b> <i>Participants highlighted that one of the main impacts of COVID-19 was the change in school and headteacher remit to address wider social issues. They suggested that the scope of the post-pandemic headteacher remit needs to be reconsidered, and more work should be shifted back to more appropriate providers of this support, such as Local Authorities or the care sector.</i></li> <li>• <b>Have more opportunities to progress in teaching that do not require a move away from teaching.</b> <i>There also needs to be more opportunities for progression within education that do not require a move away from teaching and learning.</i></li> </ul>
<b>Define clear expectations of acceptable working hours.</b>	Quite a few participants felt that clearer expectations for the working hours of headteachers and senior leaders needed to be set out at a national level, to enable a healthier work-life balance. They felt that <b>existing policies were not workable</b> as they may set out clear limits to working hours, but these are often not feasible when considering the tasks they are expected to accomplish within that time.

School Funding	
Policy Suggestion	Further Details
Increase school funding to accommodate new policy suggestions.	<b>To allow more opportunities for both potential and current senior leaders to attend professional development and networking events</b> , money is required to provide staff cover costs. Senior leaders also noted that more funding could help them to <b>expand their senior leadership teams</b> , reducing pressures on them whilst providing more opportunities for middle leaders and aspiring headteachers to develop.
Remove unnecessary bureaucracy from grant and funding applications.	Some current headteachers expressed frustrations around bureaucratic processes they had to complete to justify spending relatively small proportions of allocated funding. <b>Headteachers often felt this showed a lack of trust from the government</b> , despite the high responsibilities entrusted to them due to the nature of their roles and increased their workloads unjustifiably. <b>They felt the system would benefit from a review of these processes, and reduction in red tape around these grants.</b>
Ensure headteacher salaries reflect their increased responsibilities.	Salaries were brought up as a method for improving recruitment and retention by both current and former headteachers. Some felt their salaries were not equivalent to management roles in different sectors, nor were they sufficient compensation for the workload, pressures and accountability of the role. <b>Headteacher salaries should be reviewed and be reflective of their increased responsibilities</b> and accountability, rather than school size. <b>There should be no cases where a deputy of one school is earning more than a headteacher at another.</b>
Review the current funding system to identify where funding can be re-allocated.	<b>Senior leaders felt that the School Improvement Consortia took significant amounts of money away from schools, whilst also not providing sufficient support.</b> Participants suggested there needs to be a review of the education system to identify where money is being spent, and whether this is the best use of that funding. Many said that the consortia created unnecessary bureaucracy and only added to schools' workloads instead of reducing them.

## Acknowledgement for Senior School Leadership Roles

Policy Suggestion	Further Details
<b>Public awareness campaigns to address the negative portrayal of school workforces and senior leaders.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Public acknowledgement from the Welsh government of the vital role senior leaders fulfil.</b> <i>Senior leaders also felt it would be beneficial for there to be a wider understanding of the role headteachers fill in the community. They suggested this would be achieved by acknowledgment from the Welsh government of all the roles headteachers and schools play in supporting the community.</i></li><li>• <b>National campaign that highlights the roles that schools play in young people's lives.</b> <i>Other interviewees suggested it could be a national campaign that reminds people of their connections with school, and the vital role that schools play in supporting the next generations.</i></li></ul>
<b>Promote the positives of school leadership roles to the public and targeted groups.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Encouraging interest in school leadership from young age.</b> <i>Targeting specific groups when promoting the positives of teaching and senior leadership roles. Start as early as secondary school, by encouraging pupils to be more active in school councils.</i></li><li>• <b>Have current headteachers advocating the attractiveness of the role.</b> <i>Some felt current 'get in to teaching' adverts were too glossy, and that campaigns or adverts should better exhibit the skills and expertise of being a senior leader.</i></li></ul>

# Background and introduction

The supply of school leaders faces challenges across the four nations of the UK, which have been exacerbated during the pandemic (National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), 2021). In the context of Wales, concerns over senior school leader recruitment and retention were raised over a decade ago (Welsh Government, 2009). Recent trends have heightened these concerns: of particular note is that fewer middle leaders are aspiring to become senior leaders and headteachers (NAHT, 2021). In addition, teachers have been leaving the profession in greater numbers following the pandemic, creating new challenges for leadership supply in the future (Zuccollo, 2022).

Below we review the existing evidence on what drives shortages of school leaders, in Wales as well as more widely.

## What is a shortage of senior leaders?

A shortage occurs when there are too few prospective senior leaders willing and able to fill the available positions (Shah and Burke, 2003). Prospective leaders willing to apply for a headship or other senior role, such as a deputy head, can be:

- Those who are already in a senior role but are looking for a change in school or environment.
- Other school leaders or middle leaders who are looking for a promotion to a more senior role.
- Former teachers or school leaders returning to the profession; however, this is less common.

The demand for senior school leaders is generated by:

- Resignations of senior school leaders, which require replacements.
- The creation of new roles.

Therefore, a shortage could mean several things. First, a shortage can mean there are fewer applicants than there are vacancies. Second, a shortage can occur if the applicants are not suitable for the role, perhaps because of a shortage of skills (Murphy et al., 2003; Shah and Burke, 2003). However, candidates may still be appointed into the role if the school has no alternative.

## Why do these shortages exist?

Many countries and educational systems have experienced a downward trend in the number of senior leaders such as headteachers and principals, or applicants for headteachers and principals, due to both demographics and the changes in role requirements (Harris and Townsend, 2007; MacBeath et al., 2009; NAHT, 2021).

### Changing nature of senior leadership role

Studies into school leadership globally report that the nature of leadership roles has changed over the last decades, with the intensification of accountability, managerial and administrative tasks. Within Wales, there has been an acknowledgement of the large pressures of accountability put on senior school leaders, and has recently been a shift towards an accountability system that aims to work collaboratively with teachers and school leaders in a self-improving system (Hutt and Lewis, 2021).

In addition, post-pandemic research has shown schools' have been taking on further responsibilities outside of the typical education remit, to support other public services such as social care (Phillippo et al., 2023). More responsibility alongside an increased workload can mean those in the top positions are under more stress than they may have been in the past. This stress can cause issues with retention, such as long and short sick leave, early retirement, or changing careers. If more headteachers leave the profession, this exacerbates the shortages (MacBeath et al., 2009). In one study of headteachers within Wales, 68 per cent of headteacher respondents had their stress scores (Cohen's perceived stress scale) in the mid to upper range, with 'over 60 per cent of the headteachers reporting stress levels that can be associated with a negative effect on health' (Scott et al., 2021).

Additionally, as middle leaders have observed the increase in senior leadership responsibilities and remit, particularly post-pandemic, it is possible that those who previously felt qualified to become senior leaders may now not have the confidence in their skills or knowledge to take on a headship role.

### Perceptions of senior leadership

Some studies suggest that one of the main reasons for a shortage in headteacher roles is due to the available workforce having negative views of senior leadership and hence becoming less incentivised to progress (MacBeath et al., 2009). Senior leaders typically work longer hours and are involved in more administrative tasks than teaching (Chapman, 2005). Moreover, reports from other countries, as well as Wales, have shown senior leaders report low well-being (Marchant, 2022). Some studies also report that salary levels for school leaders are thought to be inadequate compared with the amount of

workload and responsibility (Chapman, 2005). Teachers and potential senior leaders have a direct view of the stress and workload of their headteacher, and this can mean teachers are unwilling to progress within career structures due to the perceived costs of the role versus the benefits (MacBeath et al., 2009). This has been shown historically in Wales – research from 2009 showed that two fifths of survey respondents of non-headteachers who hold a National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) thought that it was unlikely they would become a headteacher (Welsh Government, 2009). This is not something unique to Wales: in the US, a study noted that half of those in Louisiana that held a principal certification had no intention of becoming a principal (Roza, 2003).

Additionally, salary could potentially be an issue towards shortages in headships. Macbeath et al. (2006) describe that it is claimed that headteachers ‘earn less per hour than their staff as they work 30 per cent more hours in a week’.

### **Leader support and development needs**

Some prior evidence suggests that a nation-wide structured and coherent development framework for those preparing for headship may be lacking in Wales (Milton et al., 2018). The NPQH has been developed, however it does not necessarily equip candidates with the required skills for promotion. Without a consistent approach to the development of skills, this can dampen the number of applicants qualified for a promotion (Christie et al., 2016). The NPQH is being redesigned from 2023 to better reflect the needs of senior leaders.

Additionally, some headteachers feel unsupported whilst in post, and the sense of isolation can act as a deterrent to potential applicants (Milton et al., 2018). In one study, 43 out of 239 Welsh headteacher respondents (15 per cent) cited a lack of support as an underlying cause of the stress they experience. Moreover, it was described by the Welsh Government in 2009 that headteachers reported that they would value greater opportunity for networking, coaching or mentoring (Welsh Government, 2009).

### **Demographics and contextual factors relating to individual schools**

When a shortage exists, it may not be concentrated throughout the whole country, but may be limited to a few distinct areas. For example, studies from the US have shown that teacher shortages are typically concentrated in areas that are more economically deprived, or in more rural areas (Dee and Goldhaber, 2017; Roza, 2003). In more disadvantaged areas, headteachers can face higher demands to undertake mediation, intervention and negotiation with parents and social agencies (MacBeath et al., 2004).

Additionally, specifically in the Welsh context where schools can either be Welsh, bilingual or English-medium, recruitment challenges vary for different types of schools. For example, a study by the Nuffield Foundation showed that one of the most significant challenges was the appointment of headteachers to specifically Welsh-medium and bilingual schools (Ghosh and Worth, 2020).

In 2009, the most severe problems were in schools in areas where:

- there is a high number of small schools,
- there is a high number of Welsh-medium schools,
- disadvantaged areas,

areas affected by school amalgamation (Welsh Government, 2009).

### **Structural factors**

The extent of a shortage problem may be enhanced by the current state of the senior leadership workforce. If many senior leaders leave at similar times, due to, for example, retirement age or well-being reasons, this may expand the issue of a shortage, especially if there are fewer applicants from whom to choose a replacement. In the US, teacher turnover, especially due to age, was a significant challenge to teacher shortages (Murphy et al., 2003).

Structural inequalities resulting in certain groups being underrepresented in school leadership can impact negatively on candidate aspirations, affecting women, ethnic minority candidates and other underrepresented groups (Elton-Chalcraft et al., 2018). In the Welsh context, the 2009 report by the Welsh Government stated that while nearly three quarters of teachers were female, only 60 per cent of NPQH holders were female. A 2021 Independent review for the Welsh Government found “considerable evidence to confirm racial inequality is a feature of education in Wales, relating to attainment, school policy and practices, the curriculum and the workforce” (Williams, 2021).

Finally, a shortage of teachers can also lead to a shortage of headteachers (MacBeath et al., 2009). Articles and other literature on teacher recruitment have been warning about a potential teacher shortage within Wales. In 2020, the NFER published a report showing that there has been a growing difficulty in employing enough teachers, specifically in Welsh-medium schools and in more disadvantaged areas (NFER, 2020). If teachers are not efficiently retained, and there are fewer people becoming teachers, this leads to a smaller applicant pool for headship and other senior positions.

# Methodology

To broaden and deepen the existing evidence base on the challenges in recruitment and retention of senior school leaders in Wales, our research aims to answer the following set of questions:

- To what extent does existing data demonstrate a shortage of senior school leaders in Wales?
- What are the key factors impacting recruitment and retention of senior school leaders in Wales, as perceived by current, former and potential ‘future’ leaders?
- How do these factors vary by types of posts or by workforce characteristics?
- How are senior school leadership roles perceived by current, former and potential ‘future’ senior school leaders?
- What policies do current, former and potential ‘future’ senior leaders perceive to be effective in improving recruitment and retention?

To answer the research questions defined above, we take a mixed-methods approach, outlined in detail in this section.

## Data review

We review the existing, public, quantitative evidence to provide an overview of the current state of the senior school leadership workforce in Wales, as well as identify any gaps in the published data.

### How can a shortage be measured?

There are three common indicators of shortages within schools:

- The proportion of vacant posts in comparison to total posts.
- The number of applicants received per vacant post.
- The proportion of headteacher vacancies re-advertised due to the inability to recruit on the first attempt.

It is also possible to measure the pipeline of middle leaders who could enter more senior roles (Roza, 2003). Additionally, it will be important to consider the current state of the senior school leadership.

### The data

We use information on the school workforce obtained from two publicly available datasets produced by the Welsh Government: the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC), which collects pupil and school level data, and the School Workforce Annual Census (SWAC), composed of individual level data on the school workforce.

SWAC has been collected since 2019 using more robust data collection methods than PLASC. In many respects, SWAC workforce data is more comprehensive than PLASC data, for both aggregated and individual level data (Welsh Government, 2022). For instance, with SWAC it is possible to explore the senior leadership shortage by Local Authom, brity and region for all schools, whereas with PLASC we can only explore this for all-age and secondary schools and only at the national level. Nonetheless, SWAC is still undergoing quality assurance checks before being ready to replace PLASC as the official source of school workforce statistics. In the current project, we will use both datasets to draw our conclusions.

## Qualitative research

The qualitative strand of this research is based on a range of methods:

### Research with current, former and ‘future’ senior leaders

To reflect the experiences, voices and priorities of school leaders, we conducted **28 in-depth interviews with senior school leaders**, including 19 current and 9 former senior leaders, and **2 focus groups with potential ‘future’ senior leaders**, with 3-4 participants in each, including middle leaders and teachers. The interviews and focus groups all explored the research questions defined above, with some specific further questions by role.

Questions specific to current senior leaders are:

- Have they considered leaving their roles or leaving education? If so, why?
- Have they considered succession planning for when they may leave their roles?

Questions specific to former senior leaders are:

- Why did former senior leaders leave the profession, particularly if they left ‘early’?

Questions specific to ‘future’ senior leaders are:

- How do potential ‘future’ school leaders perceive senior leadership roles?
- What would impact their decision to apply for a senior leadership position? Why may they not seek to progress into senior school leadership roles?
- What policies could help in supporting or encouraging a move to senior leadership positions?

The interviews lasted around 45-60 minutes and the focus groups lasted around 90 minutes. All interviews and focus groups were conducted online and recorded and transcribed with participant consent. All fieldwork was conducted between May and September 2023.

Interviews were conducted in English and in Welsh with the help of a translator. Focus groups were conducted in English.

Our recruitment strategy and the specific characteristics of the research participants are outlined further in the Recruitment and Sampling sections below.

### **Scoping calls with Local Authorities**

Prior to conducting interviews and focus groups, we held 15-30-minute scoping calls with stakeholders from 9 Local Authorities (LAs) in Wales. Those scoping calls were used to gain feedback and advice on the research design and methodology and to discuss local authority views on the issues of recruitment and retention, as well as potential local authority support in senior leader recruitment for this research.

For anonymity, we do not provide a list of the Local Authorities we had scoping conversations with.

### **Workshops**

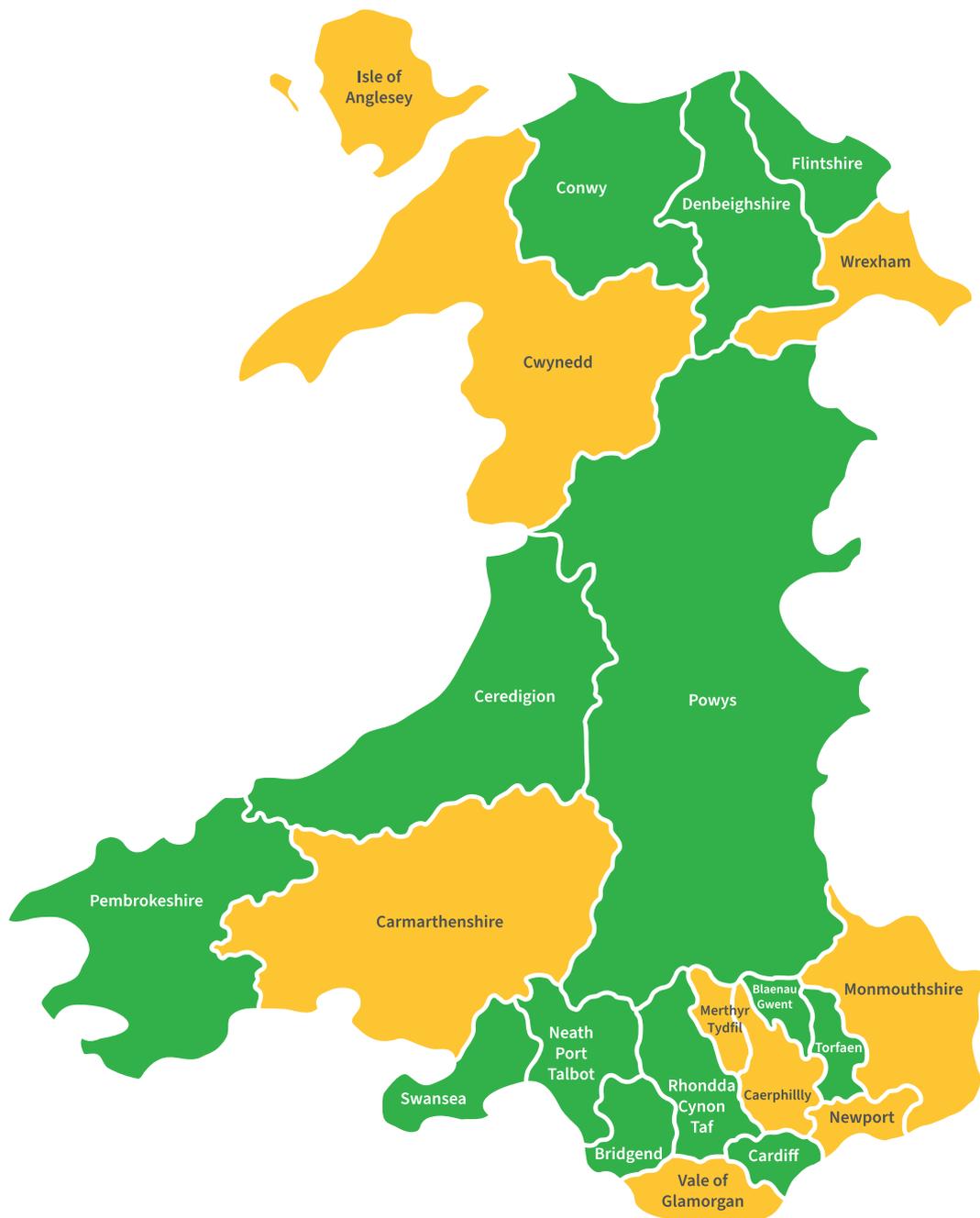
We held two co-design workshops with school leaders, stakeholders from the National Academy for Educational Leadership, and Local Authority stakeholders. The first stakeholder workshop, held in February 2023, brought together staff from the National Academy for Educational Leadership, Local Authority stakeholders and school leaders to co-define priorities for fieldwork research and co-design research questions and tools. The second workshop, held in September 2023, brought together senior school leaders to discuss and further develop the policy proposals that have been suggested during the interviews and focus groups.

### **Sampling**

To avoid reporting personally identifiable information and to ensure anonymity of the research participants, we do not provide a detailed breakdown of participant characteristics, or how those characteristics relate to each other.

Our research engaged current and former school leaders from 13 out of 22 Local Authorities in Wales, across all four regions of Wales (see the Local Authorities highlighted in green in Figure 1). The two focus groups were held in schools in two different Local Authorities, where their current senior leaders were also interviewed.

**Figure 1. Research participants' Local Authorities**



The current senior leaders interviewed included Headteachers, Deputy Headteachers and Executive Headteachers. Most had experience in multiple roles across schools and senior leadership such as being Assistant Headteachers. The former senior leaders interviewed were former Headteachers or former Executive Headteachers.

The current senior leaders we interviewed have held senior leadership positions for between 1 year and over 20 years.

Our sample of current and former senior leaders has an equal split by gender, with 14 female and 14 male senior leaders interviewed.

All senior leaders interviewed self-identified as White British, Irish, English or Welsh.

One senior leader interviewed self-identified as disabled.

**Table 1: Current Senior Leader School Characteristics**

School characteristic		Number of schools engaged in this research
School type	Primary (Nursery & Infants)	2
	Primary (Nursery, Infants & Juniors)	5
	All-Age School (ages 4-19)	1
	Secondary	9
	Special (without post-16 provision)	2
Numbers of pupils	70-150	2
	150-250	4
	250-500	3
	500-1000	5
	1000-2500	5
Percentage of FSM eligible pupils (3-year average)	7-10%	3
	10-15%	2
	15-20%	5
	20-35%	7
	35-50%	2

Source: interviews, and the information available at <https://mylocalschool.gov.wales/>

Some of the senior leaders we spoke with had worked across different types of schools throughout their leadership careers, and as a result spoke about the challenges relating to those different contexts. This was particularly the case for language medium, where some of the senior leaders interviewed had experiences of working in both Welsh-medium and/or bilingual and/or English-medium schools, and hence spoke about their views on the differences between those sectors. Table 2 shows the numbers of senior leaders interviewed who have had experiences of working in different school types by language medium.

**Table 2: Experiences of Senior Leaders Across Different Language-Medium Schools**

Language medium	Number of senior leaders with this experience
English-medium	14
Bilingual	4
Welsh-medium	4

### Recruitment

Our research had a multi-stage snowballing strategy for recruiting senior leaders. First, we contacted Education teams in Local Authorities, inviting them to take part in scoping calls and/or support participant recruitment. Local Authority stakeholders who agreed to take part in this research shared our invitation to interview with the school leaders in their Local Authority.

The senior school leaders who participated in interviews were asked to identify any potential ‘future’ leaders in their schools, including aspiring teachers and middle leaders, and any staff who have completed or were on track for completing the NPQH. We also asked senior leaders to share the information about our research with any other current or former senior leaders that they know. We are grateful to all the participating senior leaders who shared our invitation to interviews with their networks of school leaders.

To support our recruitment and cover a range of school characteristics, we also approached schools directly, using publicly available contact lists by Local Authority. In doing so, we focused on covering a range of school characteristics, including a range of regions and school types.

A number of current and former senior leaders were also invited to take part in this research through the National Academy for Education Leadership’s networks.

### Limitations

Our research with school leaders and Local Authority stakeholders relied on respondents agreeing to participate. As school leaders are difficult to engage in research due to busy schedules, and we were unable to offer reimbursement for participation, this has meant that there was an inevitable degree of selection bias in the participants we were able to speak with. Potential ‘future’ leaders being introduced to us by their schools’ senior leaders introduced additional risk of selection bias.

Some of the research and fieldwork timeline overlapped with strike action by members of a number of unions representing school workforces in Wales, which resulted in additional challenges in recruitment, as well as in less likelihood of those senior leaders participating in the strikes engaging in this research (although some participants were members of major unions).

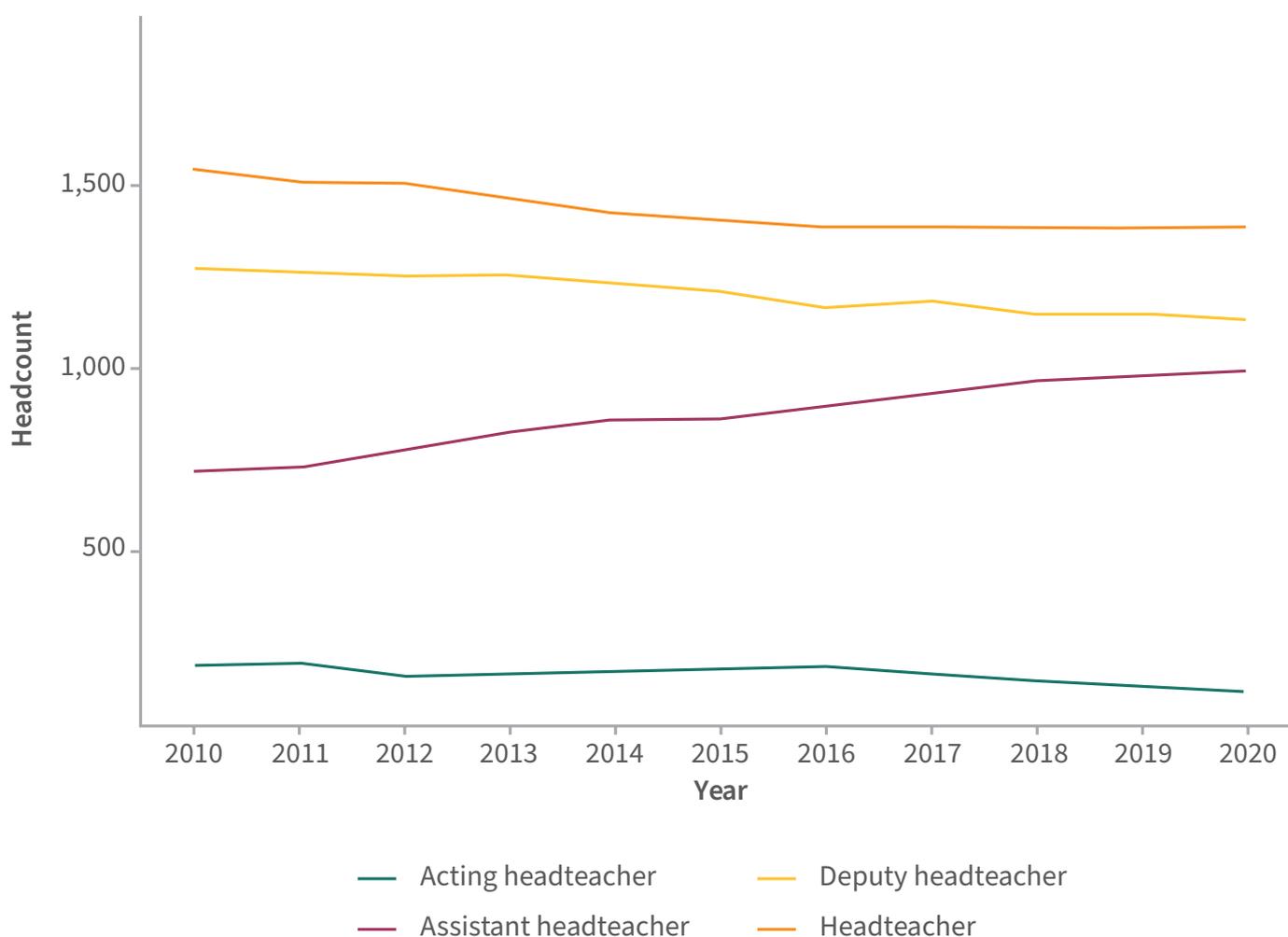
# The extent of senior school leader recruitment and retention challenges in Wales

This section presents our quantitative and qualitative findings on the extent, the nature and particular characteristics of recruitment and retention of school leaders in Wales.

## Leadership composition in schools in Wales

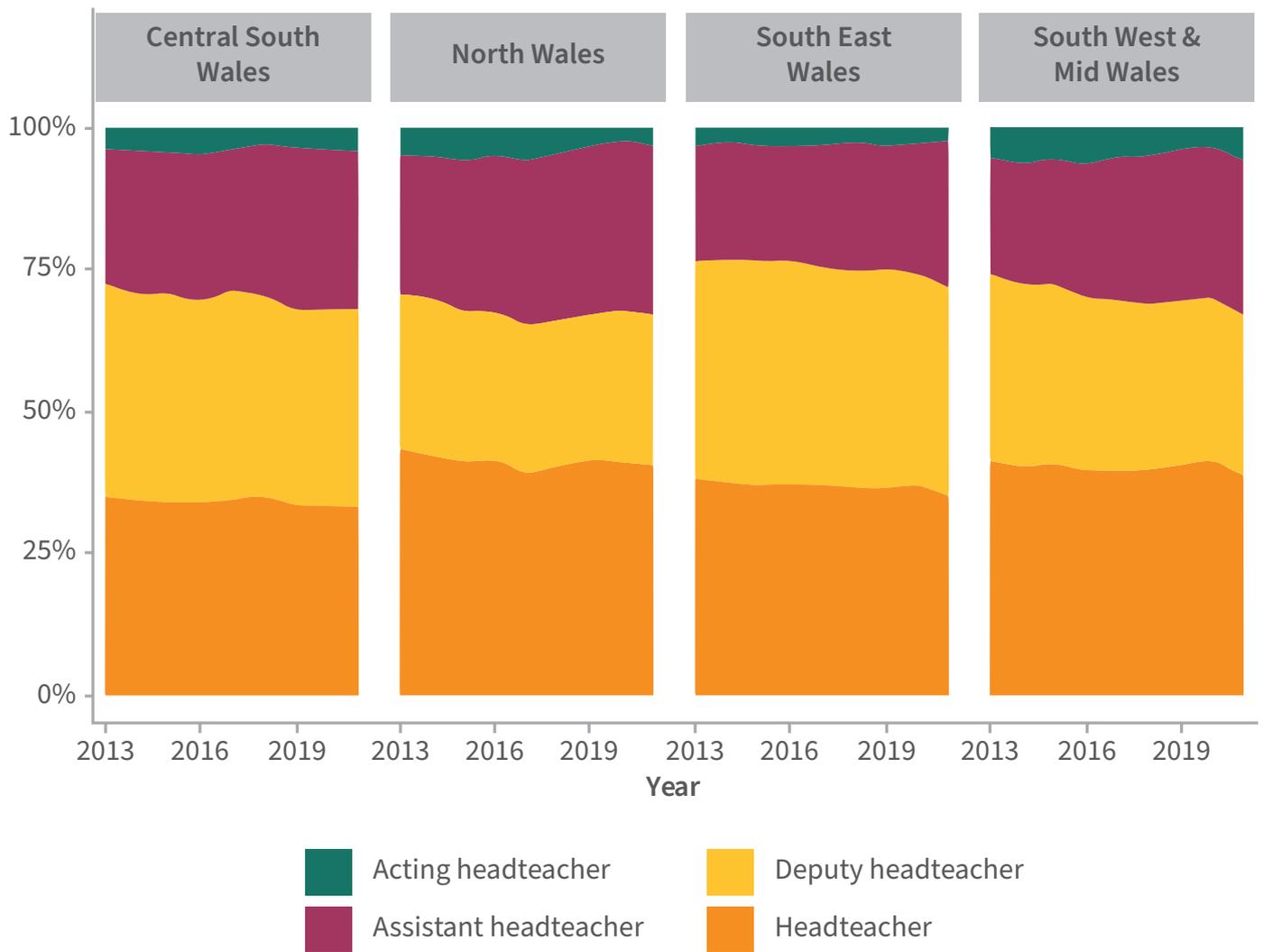
Before measuring the shortage of educational senior leaders in Wales, we examine the current and historical status of the headcount of the different types of leadership. Assistant headteacher roles have been steadily increasing over the years, with 275 more assistant headteachers by the end of the decade. This role has become a more important role in schools in Wales, nearly as common as deputy headteacher roles. On the other hand, the number of headteachers, acting headteachers and deputy headteachers has declined, with 155 fewer headteachers, 75 fewer acting headteachers, and 140 fewer deputy headteachers.

**Figure 2. The role of assistant headteachers is becoming increasingly important in schools in Wales**



Note 1. Data extracted from PLASC. All-Age and secondary schools.

**Figure 3. There are regional differences in the composition of the senior leadership in schools in Wales**



When examining senior leadership roles by region, we found some important differences and commonalities (see Figure 3). The percentage of assistant headteacher roles increased over the years in all regions, becoming a general trend in Wales. However, some trends seem to be regional. For example, in North Wales there were more assistant headteachers than deputy headteachers from 2015 onward. Additionally, the percentage of headteachers is significantly higher than deputy headteachers in North Wales and South West and Mid Wales. In contrast, Central South Wales and South East Wales present the opposite pattern: the percentage of headteachers is lower than the number of deputy headteachers. In summary, our results suggest that there are regional differences in the composition of the senior leadership in schools in Wales.

Note 2. Data extracted from PLASC. All-Age and secondary schools

**Figure 4. Local Authorities with similar number of senior leaders differ in the composition of their headship**

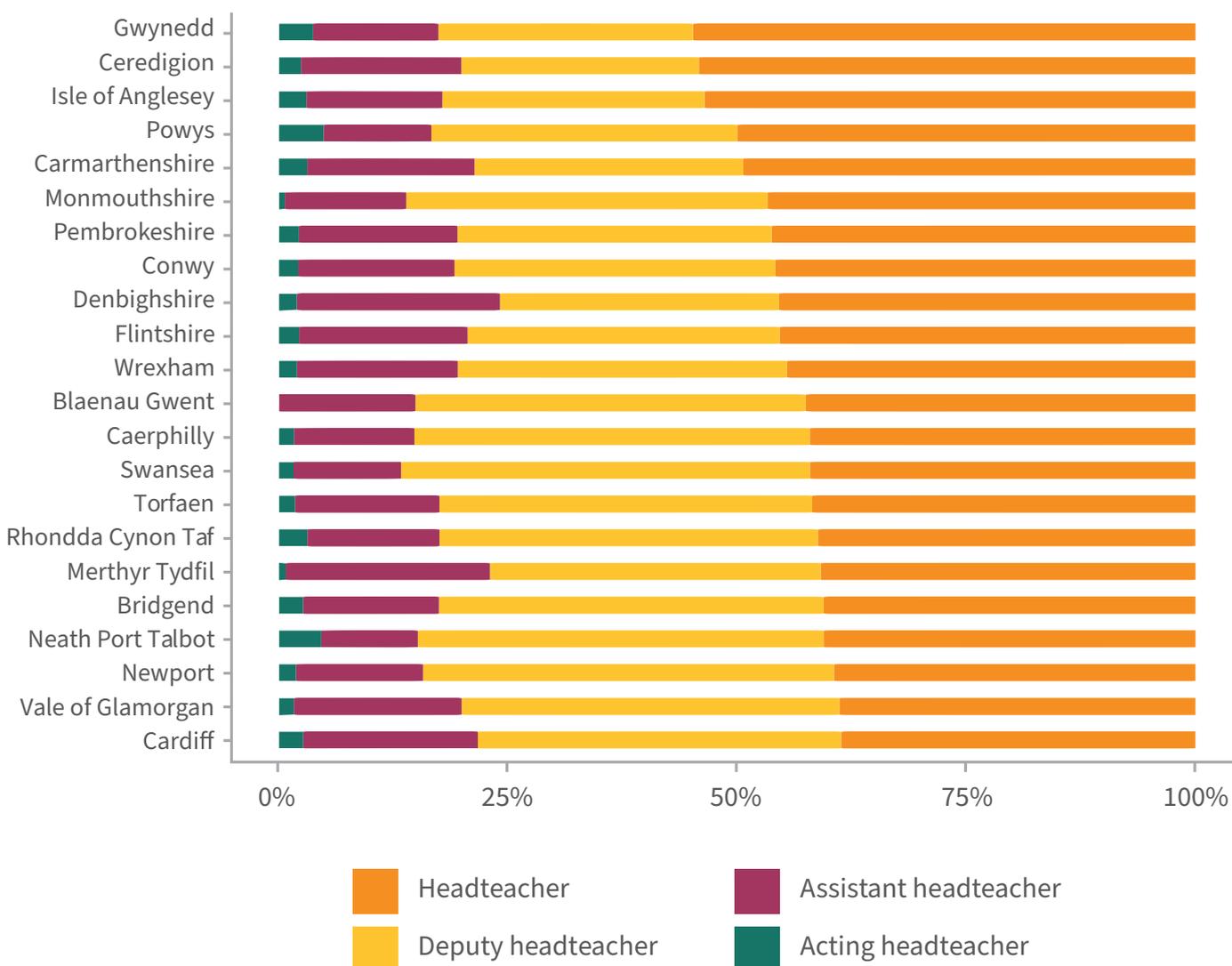
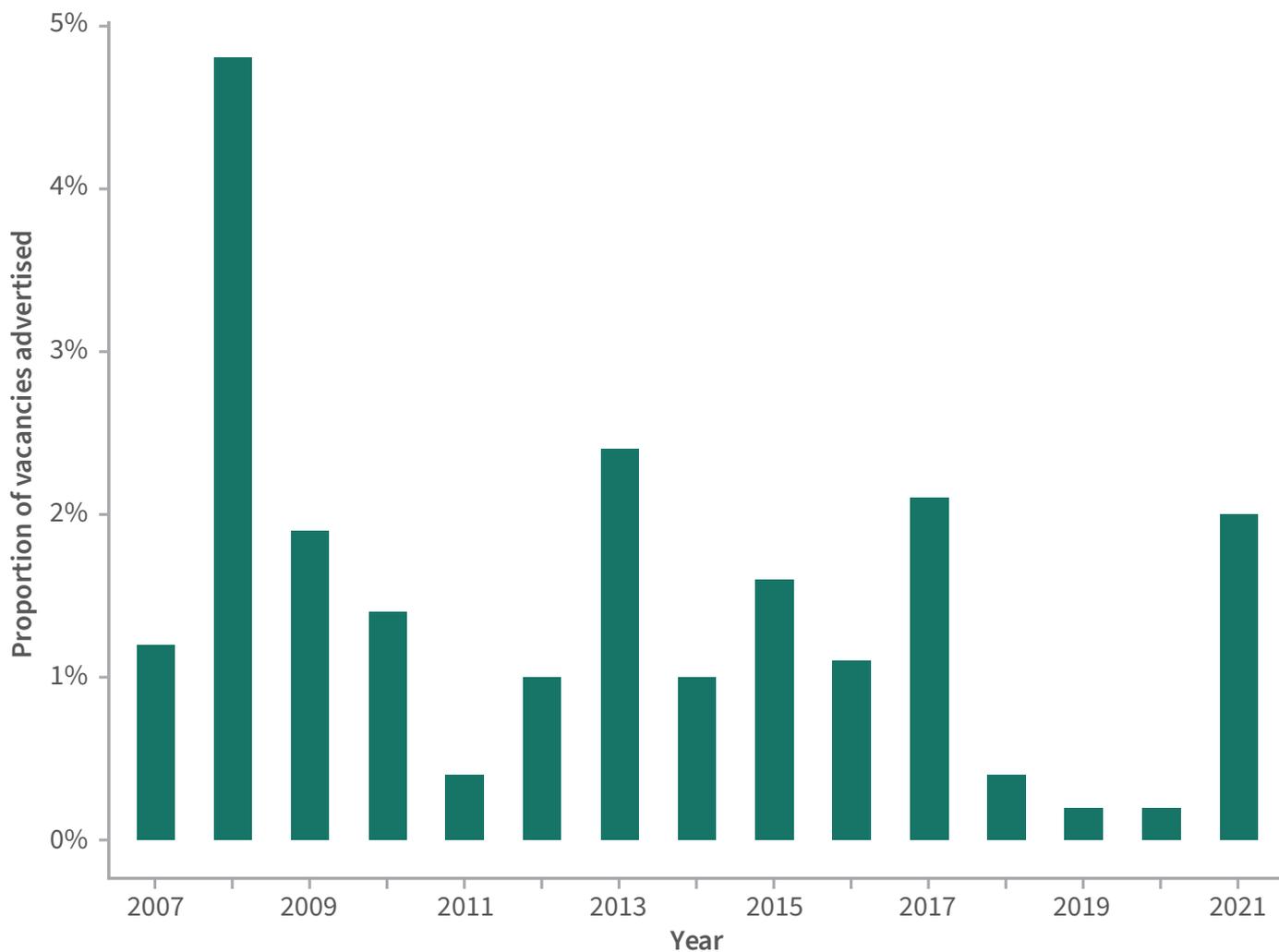


Figure 4 shows the average percentage of senior leaders by Local Authorities between 2013/14 and 2021/22. The percentage of headteachers is substantially different across Local Authorities. This can be explained in terms of transformation and school building plans, whereby schools have been reformed or rebuilt bringing together more schools, and therefore senior leadership teams. The largest difference can be seen between Gwynedd and Cardiff, with Cardiff having 16 per cent fewer headteachers. Regarding deputy headteachers, the largest difference can be seen between Ceredigion and Newport, with Ceredigion having 19 per cent deputy fewer headteachers. Similarly, there are Local Authorities that rely on more assistant headteachers than others. For example, 22 per cent of senior leaders in Merthyr Tydfil are assistant headteachers, which contrast with the 11 per cent in Neath Port Talbot. In general, acting headteachers are rarely employed, with Blaenau Gwent, having no acting headteachers.

Note 3. Data extracted from PLASC. All-Age and secondary schools

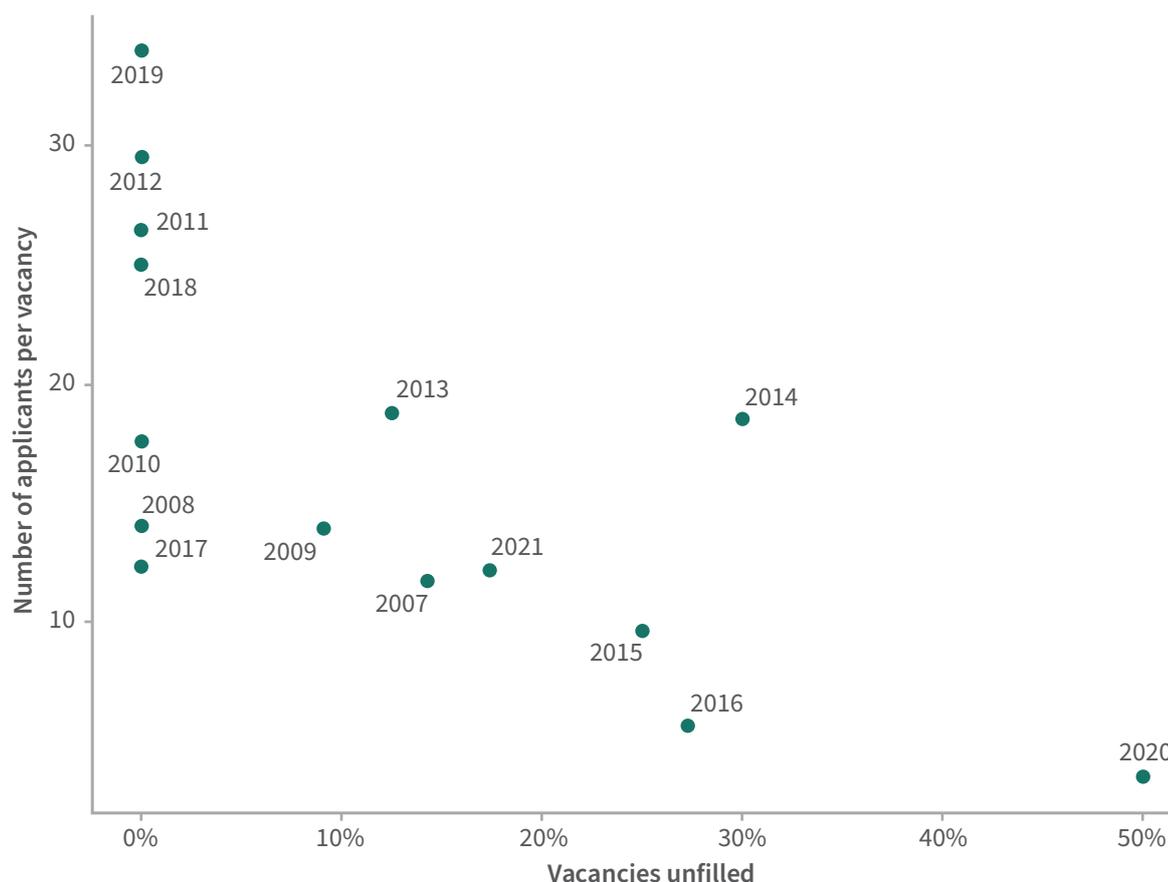
## Leadership shortage in Wales

Figure 5. Turnover of senior leaders



Measuring vacancies as per proportion of headcount gives us an indication of the level of turnover in schools in Wales. The percentage of turnover varies significantly across the years (see Figure 5). Compared to the senior leadership turnover in England, Wales experiences a lower level of attrition. However, the latest data from 2021 suggests that Wales is currently experiencing high levels of turnover relative to previous years.

**Figure 6. In the last 15 years, there were only four years in which there was a good number of suitable senior leadership candidates.**



In Figure 6 we attempt to quantify shortages in both the number of applicants and the suitability of the applicants:

- **Quantity:** the average number of applicants per vacancy quantifies the size of the applicant pool.
- **Suitability:** the percentage of vacancies that remained unfilled after being advertised quantifies the suitability of the applicants. If the applicants are weaker, it is less likely the advertised posts will be filled.

Candidate suitability may be related to their quality, readiness for the role or availability of support for progression. In our interviews and focus groups, school leaders also spoke extensively about the importance of a ‘culture fit’ between a candidate and a school.

“As a senior leader it was tremendously important that the school was *the right fit for me* and that I was *the right fit for the school*. I think increasingly people are becoming far more discerning in thinking about, ‘Hang on a sec, you know, you take it for a job any longer!’ You look very carefully at the school and *the culture of the school*, the supportive culture. I think that’s really important, because the challenges facing teachers are absolutely tremendous and school culture, and the supportive culture, I think is going to be one of the strongest weapons we have to safeguard against the recruitment and retention crisis in the workforce.” – Current Senior Leader

“[Factors that would impact a decision to apply for a deputy or a headship role are] whether you think you’re *a right fit for that school*. I’d get the feel for the school, you know, if they specialise in-, the same *values*, the same *ethos*. If they’re really old-fashioned and the headteacher is not up for any change, she or he wants everything as it is and that’s how the school works, then I’d be a bit reluctant.” – Current teacher, potential ‘future’ leader”

The measures of quantity and suitability are likely to be related as a high number of candidates increases the probability of finding a good leader within the candidate pool. Out of 15 years we explored, there were only four years in which there was a good number of suitable candidates (i.e., 2011, 2012, 2019, and 2018). Five years were particularly challenging for finding the right candidate, as a significant percentage of vacancies remained unfilled and the number of candidates was relatively low (i.e., 2007, 2015, 2016, 2020, and 2021).

Special attention should be given to 2014 where, despite the considerable number of candidates, schools struggled to fill some of their vacancies, indicating possible suitability issues with the pool of applicants.

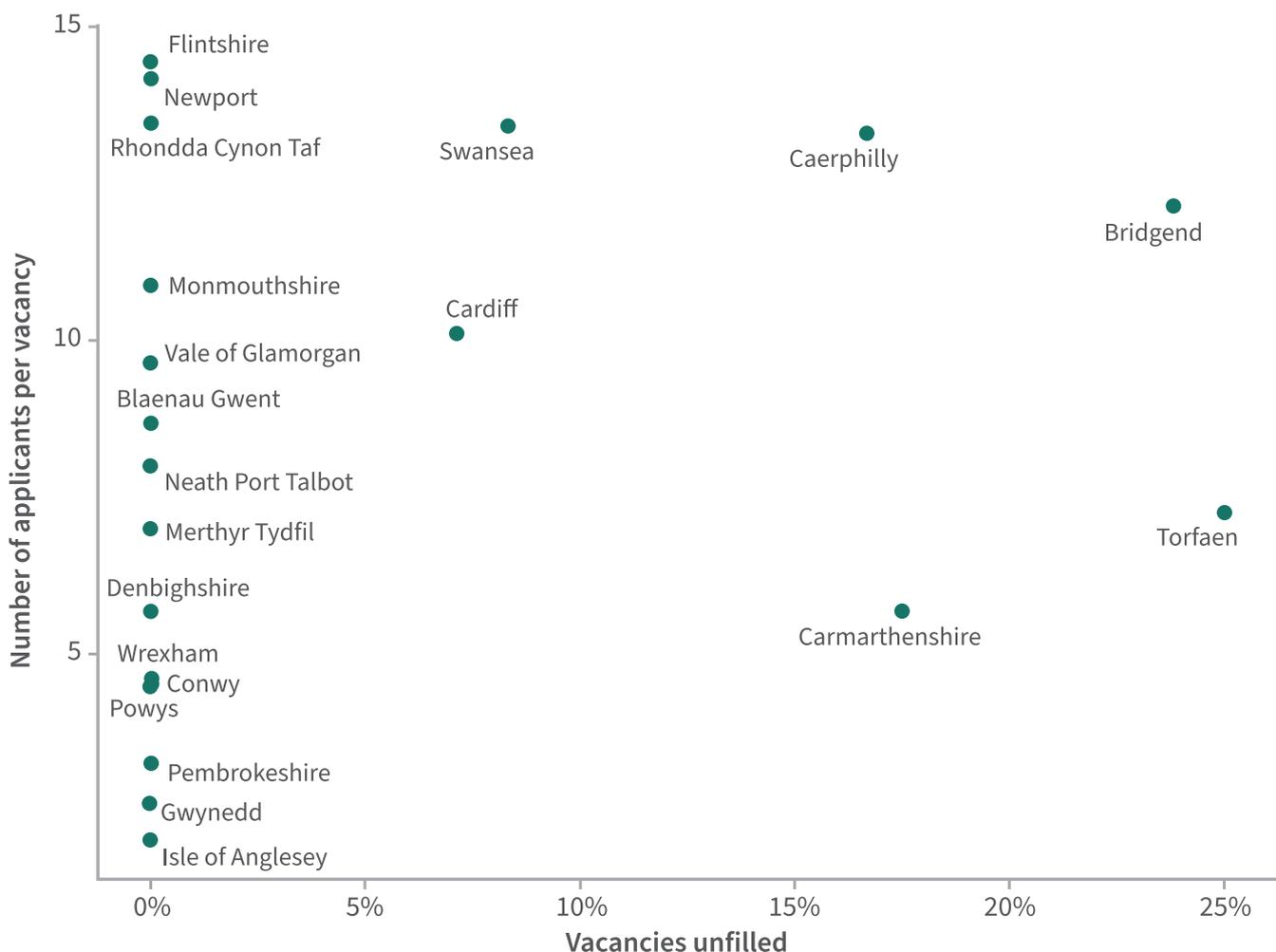
The results change dramatically between 2016 and 2017, passing from a very bad year to a good year. This is also the case for 2019 and 2020, although the difference is likely to be related to the COVID pandemic. Another big shift can be seen from 2012 to 2014, which started as a good period.

However, these findings are at a national level, meaning that even if there was a high number of candidates in a particular year, their distribution across regions is potentially unbalanced. We will examine these differences in the candidate/vacancy distribution in the next section.

### Leadership shortage by Local Authority

We previously noted when exploring recruitment at a national level that there were some years where vacancies were not filled despite the high number of applicants. In the current section, we aim to find out whether these results might be driven by differences between Local Authorities.

**Figure 7 . Some Local Authorities struggled to find the right candidate despite the high number of applicants**



Note 6. Data extracted from SWAC. Data for 2020/21 and 2021/22 was available for the following Local Authorities: Bridgend, Caerphilly, Carmarthenshire, Flintshire, Powys, Newport, Gwynedd, Powys, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Swansea, Monmouthshire, and Vale of Glamorgan. The results shown in this figure are an average of the two years.

As shown in Figure 7, Bridgend and Caerphilly struggled to find the right candidate despite the high number of applicants per vacancies. Two potential reasons to explain this result could be that applicants did not accept the role when offered, or that the applicants were deemed unsuitable for the position. On the other hand, vacancies in Local Authorities like Isle of Anglesey, Pembrokeshire, and Gwynedd were successfully filled despite the low number of applicants. In those cases, it is possible the employers had lower expectations or were facing pressure to fill these vacancies.

Finally, many Local Authorities experienced rates of success in filling posts that are likely to be related to the number of applications received. For example, there is a cluster of Local Authorities that seem to enjoy a large pool of candidates and also filled all their posts (i.e., Swansea, Flintshire, Newport, and Rhondda Cynon Taf), which contrast with those Local Authorities that received a low number of applications and subsequently were unable to fill all their posts (i.e., Torfaen and Carmarthenshire).

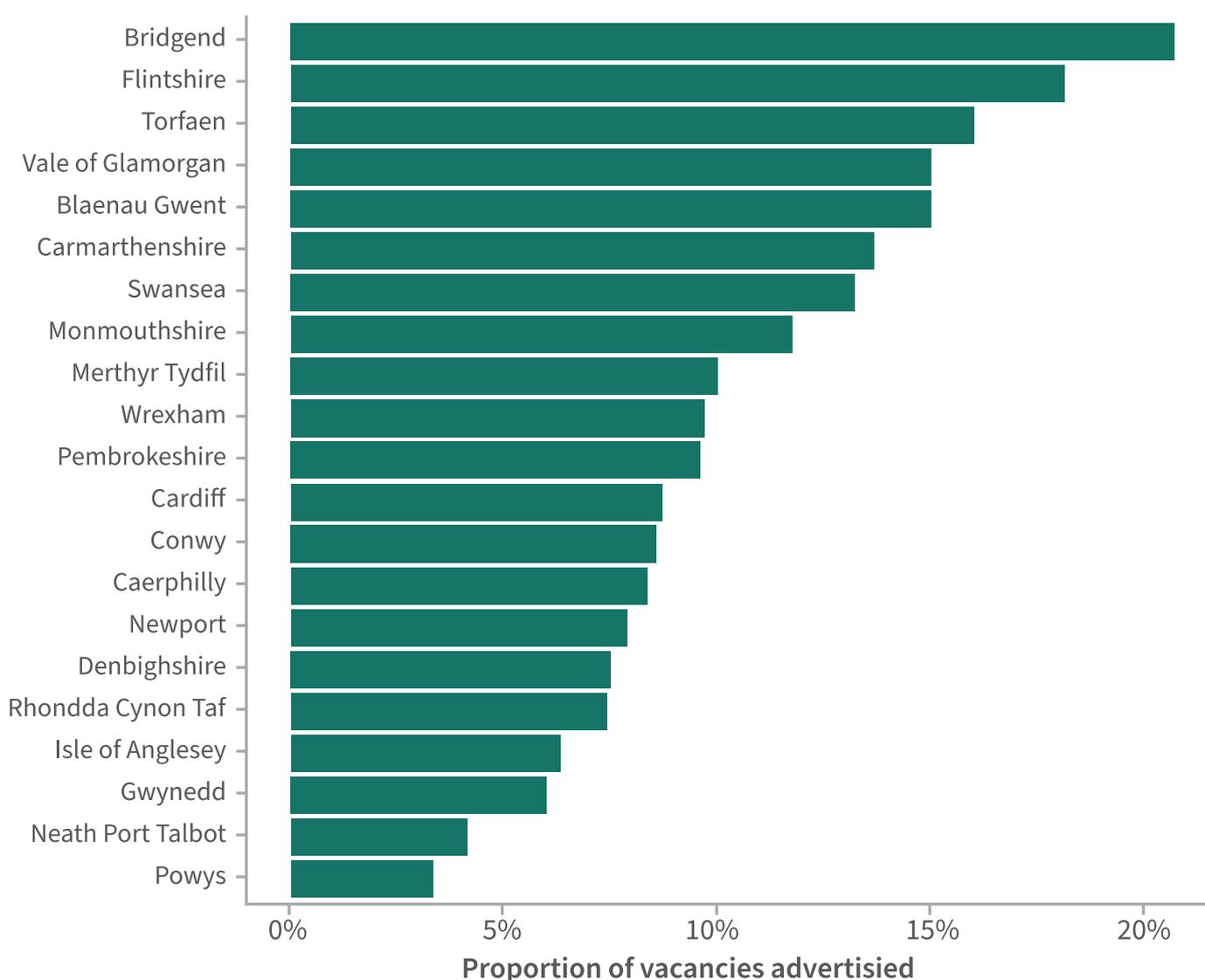
Evaluating whether rurality is associated with difficulty in recruiting is a challenging task. The main issue is to agree on a common definition of 'rural' since there are several ways in which rural areas can be identified (Welsh Government, 2008). In any case, those Local Authorities with the lowest number of applicants per vacancy displayed in Figure 6 are also Local Authorities with a population density below the Welsh average of 140 persons per square kilometre (i.e., Isle of Anglesey, Gwynedd, Denbighshire, Powys, Conwy, Pembrokeshire, and Carmarthenshire; Welsh Government, 2008). Therefore, our results show some indications of the relation between rurality and shortage of candidates.

Senior leaders we spoke to commented that rural schools find it harder to recruit applicants, as people are less willing to move to a new or remote area. Therefore, their pool of candidates is limited within their local rural area. Furthermore, rural senior leaders can be more isolated, due to geography, and this may deter potential applicants.

***“We work with other schools and certainly the geography of that location is far more rural, it's far more isolated. I can see from the support there, that we provide, that actually there are greater differences, recruitment and retention is far harder.” – Current Senior Leader, Rural School***

Historically, Local Authorities close to the English border have received applicants from adjacent English counties. However, with the national curricula now diverging, there are fewer cross-border applicants and, if they do apply, they now struggle to demonstrate an understanding of schools in Wales. However, our results shown in Figure 7 suggest that, despite the reduction in the number of applicants over recent years reported by Local Authorities, some of these Local Authorities still enjoy large pools of candidates compared to other Local Authorities. A clear example is Flintshire, which historically has seen many candidates from Cheshire interested in working in their schools.

**Figure 8. Turnover increased in 10 out of 12 Local Authorities**



As can be seen in Figure 8, turnover rates vary substantially among Local Authorities, with an approximately 20 percentage point difference between the Local Authority with the lowest turnover and the Local Authority with the highest turnover. High levels of turnover accompanied by small pools of applicants might be a way to identify areas where senior leadership roles are seen as less attractive. This might be the case with Carmarthenshire and Torfaen, which also experienced difficulties in filling many of their vacancies. However, in popular Local Authorities, like Flintshire, turnover is still an issue, with 18 per cent of senior leaders leaving their positions.

Local authority stakeholders we spoke with commented on the time and resources needed for the recruitment of senior leaders. The cost of advertising and time investment from education advisors, HR, education officers, assessors and governors were mentioned as motivating factors for tackling turnover in schools. Some Local Authorities had considered upskilling governors to take on more responsibility or were looking to start charging schools for the process.

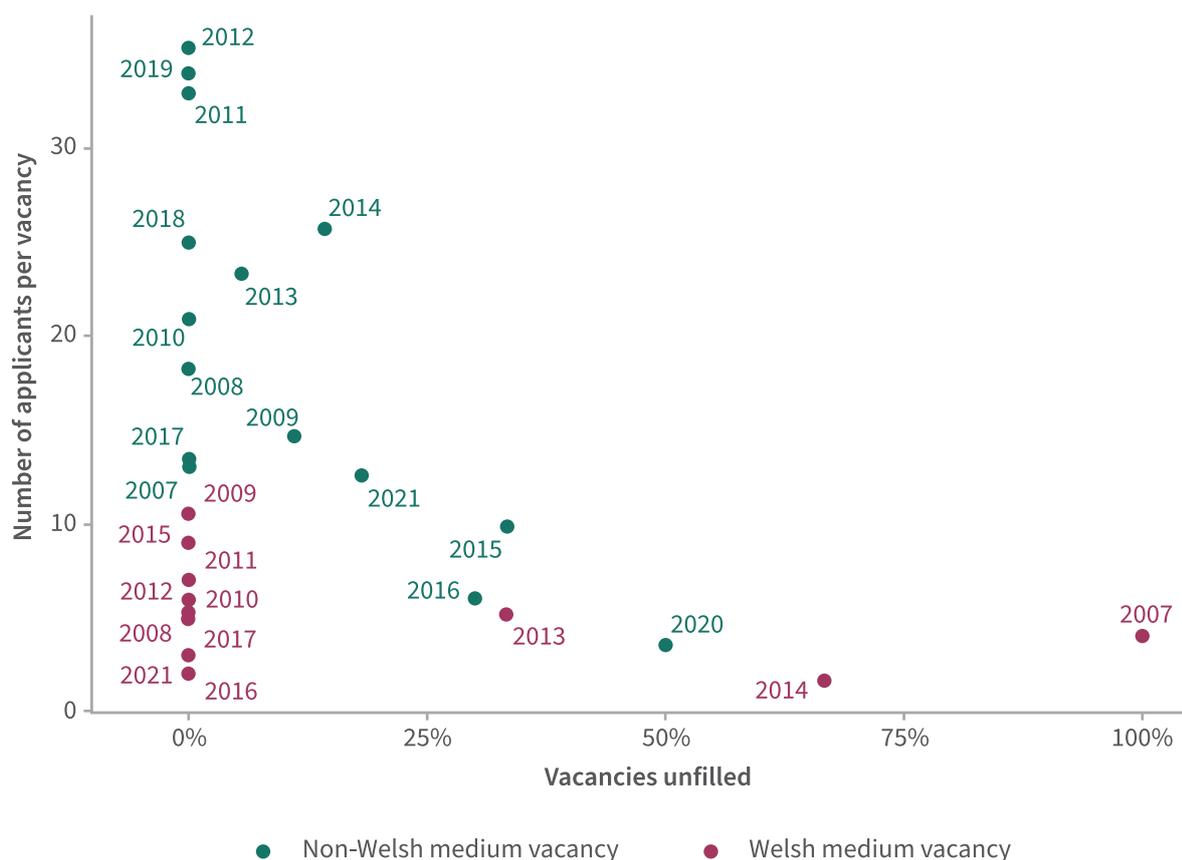
*Note 7. Data extracted from SWAC. Data for 2020/21 and 2021/22 was available for the following Local Authorities: Bridgend, Caerphilly, Carmarthenshire, Flintshire, Powys, Newport, Gwynedd, Powys, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Swansea, Monmouthshire, and Vale of Glamorgan. The results shown in this figure are an average of the two years.*

## Leadership shortage by school characteristics

### Language medium

Schools can either be Welsh-medium, bilingual, dual-stream, or English-medium. This can create challenges in recruitment for different types of schools. A study by the Welsh Government in 2009 showed that one of the most significant challenges was the appointment of headteachers to Welsh-medium schools (Welsh Government, 2009). Furthermore, the NFER recently published a report showing that there has been a growing challenge to employ enough teachers in Welsh-medium schools and in more disadvantaged areas (NFER, 2020).

**Figure 9. Welsh-medium vacancies received a lower number of candidates than non-Welsh vacancies but managed to fill most of the posts**



English-medium All-Age and secondary schools experienced good years in terms of the suitability and quantity of the applicants, as shown by the large cluster of green-coloured years in the upper-left corner in Figure 9. This contrasts with the large cluster of red-coloured years in the lower-left corner of the figure. The red cluster indicates that the Welsh-medium vacancies were easily filled regardless of the low number of candidates. Welsh and English-medium All-Age and secondary schools had some bad years, and these years do not seem to be correlated: for a specific bad year for Welsh-medium, it was a better one for English-medium.

The challenges of recruitment in the Welsh-medium sector were also highlighted in our interviews. The pool of potential candidates is smaller for Welsh-medium or bilingual schools than it is for English-medium, due to more advanced Welsh language requirements.

**“There are the barriers to get a head teacher in a Welsh-medium school or in a bilingual school, or in a school where there's 2 streams, there's a Welsh stream and an English stream, which is very common in [these two neighbouring counties], you've got to have a *fluent Welsh speaker to do that role*. That's the first requirement. And anyway, people don't want the jobs to start with.” – Former Senior Leader**

This issue of there being fewer Welsh-speaking potential senior leaders is related to the wider recruitment challenges for Welsh-speaking school staff at all levels.

Note 8. Data extracted from PLASC. All-Age and secondary schools

“There are *shortages for actual teachers teaching Welsh* and that automatically means, if you have a smaller pot of teachers, you're going to get a smaller pot of middle leaders and *a smaller pot of senior leaders.*” – Former Senior Leader

This challenge for Welsh-medium schools also ultimately relates to the teacher shortages across all schools. One current leader of an English-medium school explained this issue:

“I think that there are *particular and specific challenges* for recruitment and retention in Welsh-medium schools, and I think they are going to become significantly worse before they get better. We struggle with recruitment and retention. So, we're in [a city] and the school is [well connected to transport links], a leafy suburb, it's quite high-status, a well-known school for various reasons, and we struggle. Sometimes we put an advert out for a teacher, and we get, maybe, 1 person apply, maybe 2, and we have got all the advantages you could possibly have when you are going into a recruitment round. If you are a Welsh-medium school, looking for a physics teacher who can teach *physics with a medium of Welsh*, or a maths teacher to teach *maths with a medium of Welsh*, how on earth they do it I don't know, because we would struggle to get a physics or maths teacher currently.” – Current Senior Leader, English-medium school

Welsh-medium schools are also more likely to be smaller schools, with fewer students enrolling, hence facing budget issues that smaller schools face.

“The Welsh-medium challenge is our recruitment, you know, *at all levels*. At headship level. At senior leadership level, at teacher level, at admin, everything. You know, it is a real challenge there at the moment and *budget in a smaller school* as well is a challenge. So, I think those 2 things make it more difficult.” – Current Senior Leader, English-medium school, previously Assistant Headteacher, Welsh-medium school

“*Financially* it can be quite challenging because not all young people pick Welsh-medium education. So, it means that it's not every time we get all the young people coming to Welsh-medium.” – Current Senior Leader, Bilingual school, previously a senior leader in a Welsh-medium school

Smaller budgets also lead to additional pressures on current school staff and senior leaders, as they are limited in their ability to hire additional staff. Some senior leaders we interviewed also felt that English-medium schools benefit from greater ability to coordinate work and administrative responsibilities, due to there being a greater number of them, compared to Welsh-medium schools. This relative lack of support and funding, leading to additional responsibilities and stress may deter potential applications away from Welsh-medium senior leadership roles.

“You have officers within the county who coordinate work within the English-medium sector. They create a collaborative timetable. They also pay for transport, for learners. And they've also invested money in technology to commit or to allow hybrid lessons. But with us in the Welsh-medium sector, *we just have to do it all ourselves*, and so we have to make all of the arrangements, all of the chasing, *that it takes up a lot of work* and it also means that I have to add responsibilities to the work of the senior management team and the admin without additional finance, without additional money either.” – Current Senior Leader, Welsh-Medium School

Some current leaders of English-medium schools that we interviewed reported that they would potentially be interested to move to the Welsh-medium sector but highlighted that a lack of opportunities to learn or improve Welsh is a barrier. Meanwhile, there are not the same barriers for staff to move from Welsh-medium schools into bilingual or English-medium schools.

As the data analysis shows, despite facing this challenge of a smaller applicant pool, Welsh-medium schools seem to have higher chances of filling leadership vacancies. Interview findings suggest a number of reasons for this. Some interviewees suggested that the widespread knowledge of the recruitment crisis in the Welsh-medium sector results in Welsh-medium schools placing greater emphasis on offering professional development and progression opportunities, to develop ‘future’ leaders.

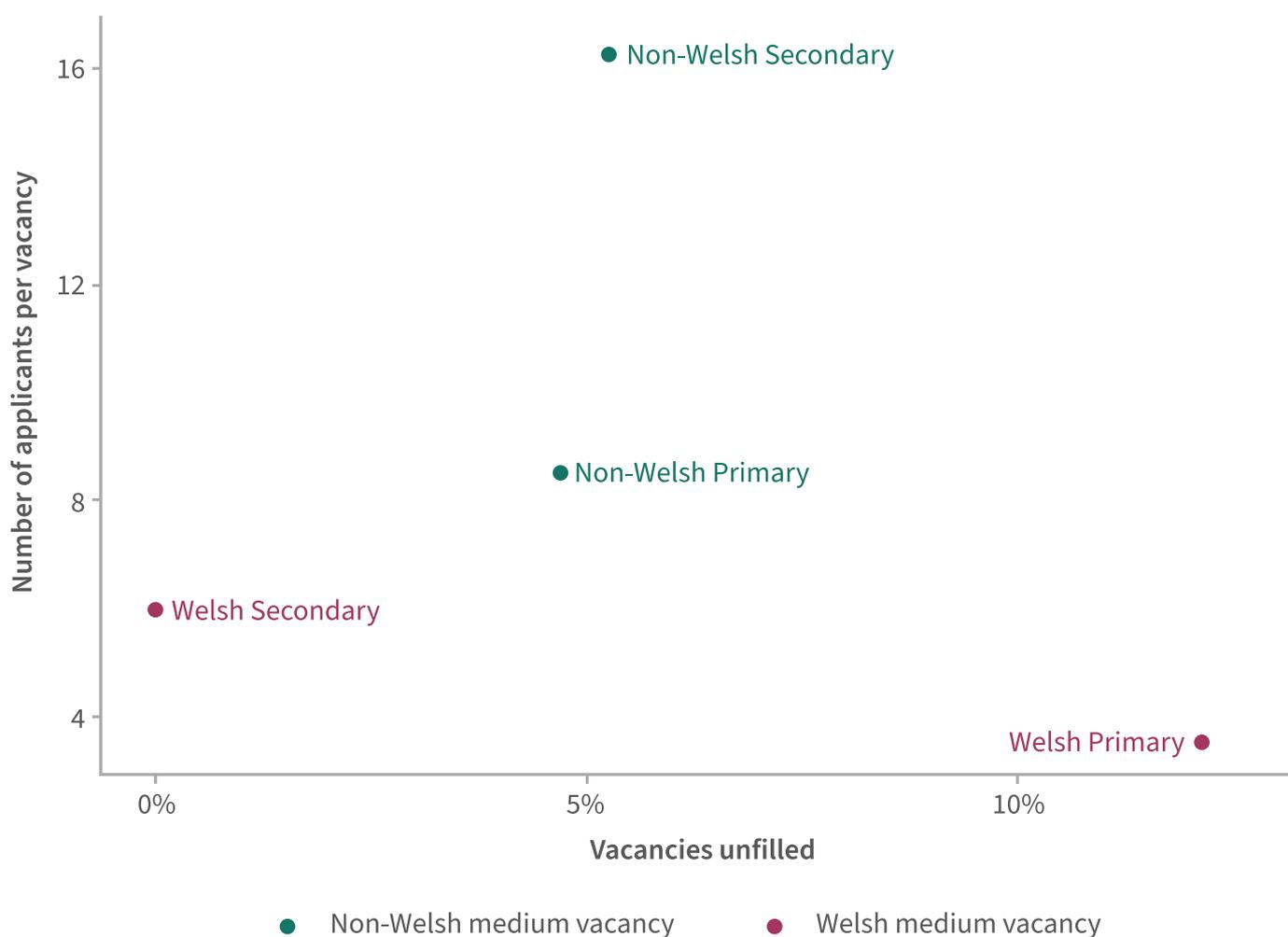
“I think that there's *a greater focus* [on progression opportunities] in the Welsh-medium sector because there are fewer people and so we *have to be careful* that we don't find that there will be some, sort of, a void of future leaders because the sector does not have the sufficient number of people there.” – Current Senior Leader, Welsh-medium school

However, it is also possible that this awareness of the applicant pool being smaller pushes Welsh-medium schools to accept the candidates they get, even if they are not fully suitable. One current headteacher suggested this may be partially explained by lower standards in recruitment, as schools are desperate to fill the posts:

“When I applied to be the head teacher at [this town], *not one Welsh speaking applicant applied*. There's a really beautiful Welsh-medium school in [another town, different Local Authority] and the head left to become a head of a bilingual school in [this Local Authority], they had *no applicants*. Headteachers, you're getting no applicants, you stick Welsh on it as well and you're down to 3 people. Honestly, the *recruitment crisis for Welsh speaking leaders is huge* and we're *accepting lower quality* than we used to, because even though they're lower quality, they're the best quality that you're seeing.” – Current Senior Leader

## Intersecting characteristics: primary, Welsh-medium, and smaller schools

Figure 10. Welsh-medium primary schools struggle to recruit senior leaders: fewer applicants and of lower suitability



Our results shown in Figure 10 confirm the struggle of getting a large pool of candidates for Welsh-medium posts. This was particularly difficult for primary Welsh-medium vacancies, which also found it hard to find an adequate candidate. In contrast, Welsh-medium vacancies for secondary schools filled all their posts with a small pool of candidates. Despite English-medium vacancies receiving a higher number of candidates than Welsh-medium vacancies, some posts were left vacant. In sum, our data suggests the two factors associated with difficulty in recruitment are small schools, and Welsh-medium.

Our interview findings suggest that primary and Welsh-medium schools are more likely to be smaller schools, and hence face intersecting challenges such as budget constraints.

To overcome challenges in recruitment, one local authority we spoke with had begun linking a small school with a larger school, with one headteacher managing both schools. This was understood to be an attractive way to reduce turnover in small schools, as it would bring the additional new opportunities of working with a larger school.

### Faith schools

Qualitative findings also highlighted particular challenges in senior leader recruitment in faith schools. Interviewees in this research particularly highlighted those challenges for Catholic schools, based on their personal experiences, however the same challenges may equally apply to other types of faith schools.

In Catholic schools, there is a requirement for leadership positions, including for headteachers and deputy headteachers, to be filled by a practising Catholic, as an exception allowed by Equalities Act 2010 (Catholic Education Service, 2023). This results in a smaller pool of eligible applicants, consequently exacerbating recruitment challenges.

Note 9. Data extracted from SWAC. These results are an average of years 2020/21 and 2021/22.

“One of the requirements [for deputy headship and headship in Catholic schools] is that you have to be **practising Catholic**. I think the best way to describe it is as an active part of the faith and community. And what that basically means is that there are a lot of, you know, potential applicants in headship positions or deputy headship positions who, well, **technically can't apply** because they're **not eligible** for the role.” – Current Senior Leader, with experience of leadership in both faith and non-faith sectors

Our interviewees shared examples of the different strategies that Catholic schools adopt in response to not being able to fill senior leadership roles due to a smaller pool of eligible candidates. For example, in one case, two Catholic schools were merged into one. In another example, candidates who are not practising Catholics were appointed as acting headteachers instead of headteachers.

We spoke with one local authority who had been struggling to recruit senior leaders in their Catholic schools. Their long-term strategy is to create a federation with all their Catholic schools. There would then be a few executive headteachers managing various schools, reducing the demand for senior leaders.

### Special schools

Schools that specialise in providing education for children with special educational needs and disabilities have their own unique contexts and demands from leadership positions. One current senior leader of a special school explained their view that candidates with experience in this specialist sector are best suited for senior leadership roles in special schools:

“If you're really committed to this sector, I think there are **sector-specific skills** that are required within to become a senior leader. [...] I think it's really important that you have people who have been within the sector make senior leadership and school leadership roles. And I know in other areas that hasn't happened, people have been parachuted in, you know, who haven't had that experience. And that's fine, I'm not saying that shouldn't happen, but there are **certain pressures within the sector** dealing with multi-agencies, as I say, having relationships [with families] and attending social service meetings, attending health meetings, having a much more holistic approach is something that probably senior leaders in a mainstream school wouldn't get involved as much.” – Current Senior Leader, Special School

Another senior leader commented that historically there have been no clear pathways into working in special needs schools. Although this is starting to change, the historical barriers to commencing a career in this sector have impacted the pool of candidates at middle leadership level to enter senior positions.

“In terms of special needs schools, it's **a much smaller sector** and historically, there **hasn't been an easy route** for people to go. If you knew from the word go that you wanted to work with children with special learning needs, it's quite hard to even get a foot in the door in that sector. You can't train to be a teacher in a special school. So, you have to go and do your PGCE somewhere else or your BEd. They're starting now to change that process. So, you are able now to do that. And again, if you're a teaching assistant, you aspire to work purely in the special sector. It's been really hard to get appropriate training.” – Current Senior Leader, Special School

At the same time, while the pool of candidates with this relevant experience may be smaller, there are also fewer leadership opportunities within the specialist sector, since there are fewer special schools than mainstream schools. Hence, our interviewees also reported experiencing limited progression opportunities for middle leaders in the specialist sector who would like to stay in the sector. Furthermore, special schools tend to be smaller and face budget and support challenges. One senior leader feared losing promising middle leaders to other sector schools due to the limited budgets at his school and limited opportunities in special needs schools across Wales.

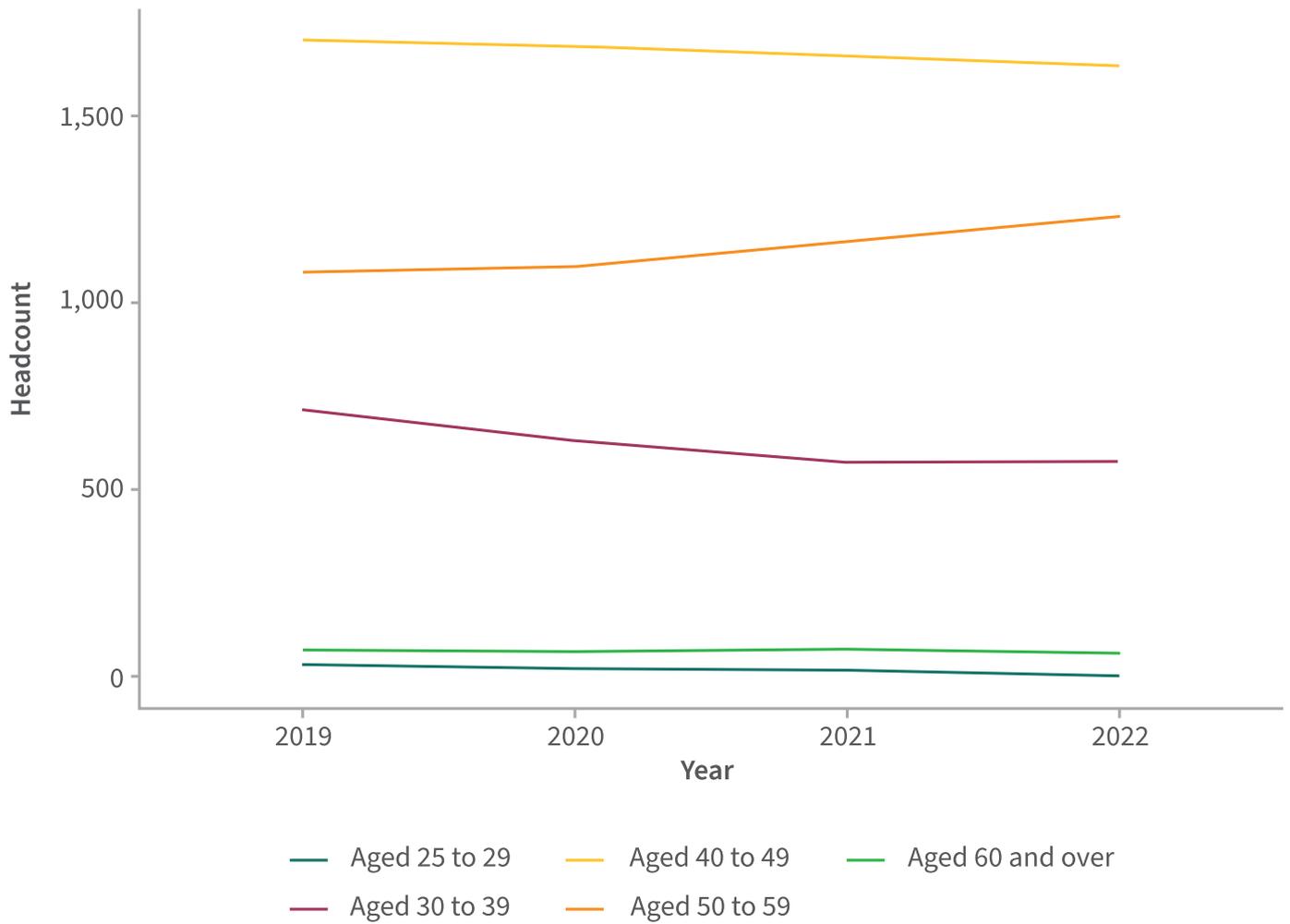
“We've only got 41 opportunities [special needs schools] across the whole. So, if you're really committed to this sector, it's quite hard to have those senior leadership opportunities. There are 2 assistant headteachers, both teaching, and we have 2 senior leaders, who sit underneath them. Scale wise, we haven't got any more opportunities, and I feel for those 4, because I don't want to lose them, they're fantastic. You know, it's **very limited, in terms of the opportunities that are available.**” – Current Senior Leader, Special Needs School

In summary, certain school characteristics – Welsh-medium, Catholic denomination, a focus on additional learning needs – result in smaller pools of candidates with suitable relevant skills, expertise or characteristics. Sectors respond to the challenges of smaller applicant pools in different ways, including by proactive succession planning, by changing the nature of the posts (e.g., appointing acting headteachers instead of headteachers), or by lowering standards in recruitment.

### Will turnover due to retirement increase?

Figure 11 shows that the number of senior leaders aged 50 to 59 has been increasing since 2019, while the number of younger leaders has been decreasing. That is, the number of senior leaders approaching retirement is increasing, which suggests that a higher proportion of turnover in the coming years will be related to retirement<sup>1</sup>. Figure 12 suggests that most leaders in the 50 to 59 age range are headteachers, indicating that vacancies due to retirement of a headteacher role are likely to increase more than for other senior leadership positions.

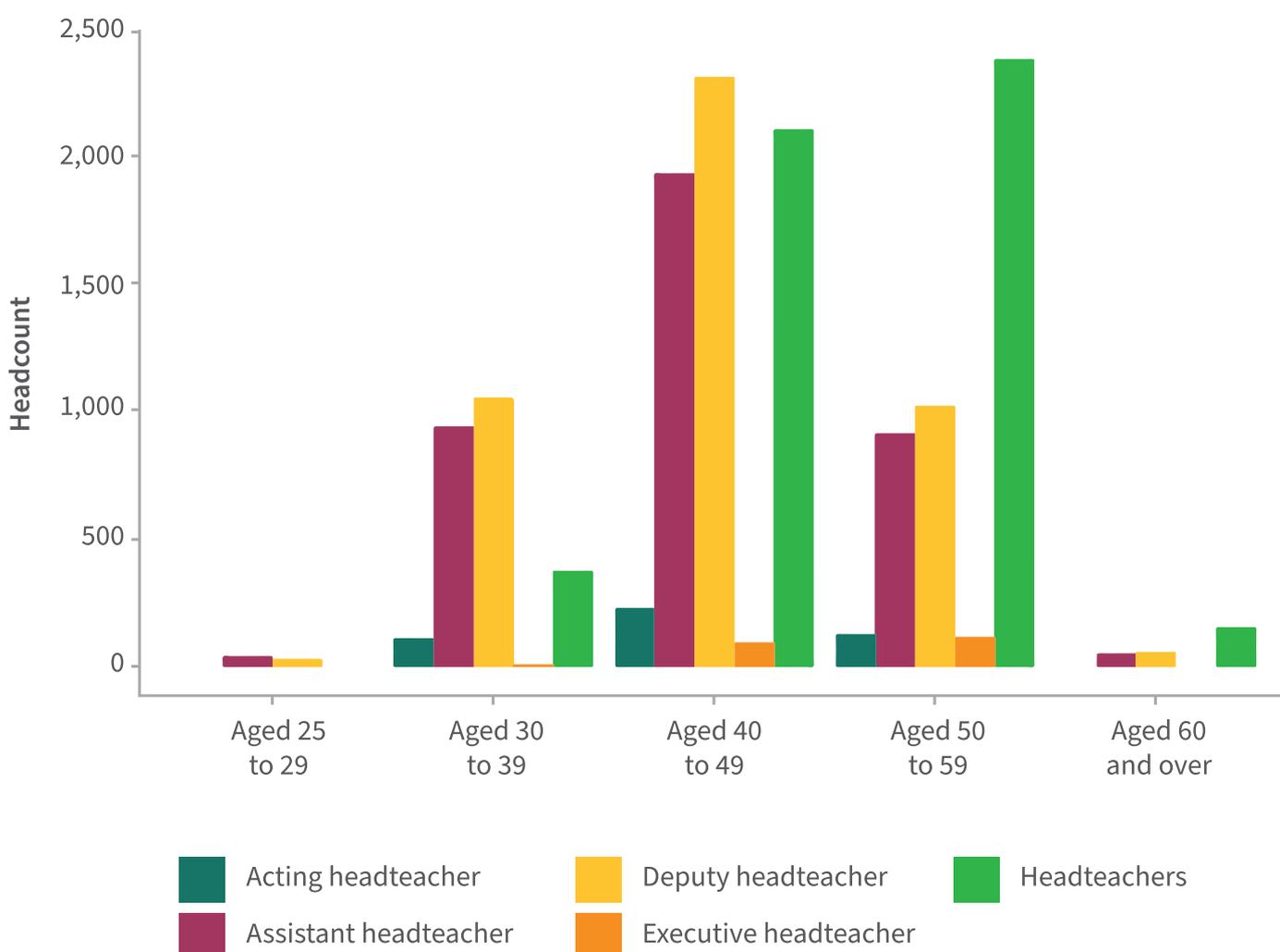
Figure 11. Senior leaders aged 50 to 59 have been increasing since 2019



Note 10. Data extracted from SWAC. All schools included.

<sup>1</sup> The retirement age is currently 66 years old in the UK, which is the minimum age to claim the State Pension, though an increasing number of headteachers are taking early retirement.

**Figure 12. Headteachers are closer to retirement than other senior leaders.**



Interviews with current senior leaders show that some of them are acutely aware of these concerns<sup>2</sup>.

**“They now have data which shows that around 30% of the workforce are over the age of 50. So, *what are we going to do over this next 10 years?*” – Current Senior Leader**

Some senior leaders are delaying retirement, due to their concerns about potential challenges of replacement, and due to their passion for their roles and schools. However, this is not a sustainable long-term solution.

**“We tend to stick around for quite a while. There's a headteacher in [a nearby town] who said she was retiring 2 years ago and is still here, and we're, like, 'Are you going yet?' And she's, like, 'Oh, maybe 1 more year.' And it is that kind of commitment to your school, *above and beyond* possibly, because you *invest yourself* so much in the staff and the pupils.” – Current Senior Leader**

Note 11. Data extracted from SWAC, averaged across four academic years: 2019 to 2022. All schools included.

<sup>2</sup> In Wales you can take your teaching pension at age 55. State age pension in Wales is 60.

# Experiences of school leadership

This section presents our qualitative findings on the perceptions of senior leadership by current, former and potential 'future' leaders, as well as on their experiences in their roles. We asked the interview and focus group participants about their views on the availability of opportunities to progress into senior leadership and whether there are any barriers for progression. Participants also shared their experiences of leadership roles, including both the positive and challenging aspects.

## Entering senior leadership

Senior leaders with whom we spoke considered the roles of their headteachers, support networks, self-confidence and their own perceptions of senior leadership to be the key factors that influence their readiness to progress into senior leadership roles. This varied between positions, with the progression from deputy headship to headship characterised as a 'big leap' in terms of responsibility and accountability. We also spoke to senior leader who reported not feeling that they were 'ready' when they entered into these positions, which then impacted negatively on their well-being. These leaders also commented, however, that well-being support and training opportunities helped them to gain experience and confidence.

### Role of headteachers as both enabling and potentially restricting

The role of headteachers was frequently brought up by respondents as a key factor that can either support or hinder progression into senior leadership.

Participants told us that supportive headteachers are vital in providing their staff with better understandings of the role and equipping them to progress into senior leadership positions. The availability of training and development opportunities was often perceived to depend on their headteachers. One current senior leader reflected on the support of other fellow female senior leaders who encouraged and supported her.

**"I've been blessed with 2 very *supportive head teachers*, [who] encouraged and nurtured me and any talent that I had." – Current Senior Leader**

One potential 'future' senior leader we spoke to, reflected that proximity to senior leaders afforded her a window into their roles. With this, she had a greater appreciation of what the roles entailed and how senior leaders managed their responsibilities. With this knowledge she was able to decide that it would be of interest to her, and was working as a middle leader, building her expertise to one day apply for a senior leadership position.

**"My office is across the road from the headteacher and the deputy's. So, I've learnt a lot, I've *looked at how they deal with things*, how they deal with parents, how they deal with bigger school issues." – Potential 'Future' Senior Leader**

However, some current and former senior leaders we interviewed also shared their experiences of having worked with headteachers who were unable or unwilling to provide such support or to delegate responsibilities. Such cases were seen to impede staff's professional development.

One headteacher we spoke to explained that it can be challenging to justify providing training opportunities to their staff, due to the cost of providing the training and finding a replacement in the classroom. It was also thought to risk reducing standards of teaching in the classroom.

**"So, if there is the middle leadership course or a deputy head course, then that involves some time out of the classroom. So then that has a financial impact because unless the school has the budget to allow this to happen, or they don't have the staffing capacity to, sort of, back fill to allow the leaders to re go at some of these courses that take a bit longer time." – Former Senior Leader**

**"It depends what school they're in. You might have a head that doesn't see the benefit of developing their staff. It's very different because each school is different and *it depends on the head that you're working for*. I've worked under people that don't want you to leave from [your role], because *you're going to come away from their school* which is going to impact on standards." – Current Senior Leader**

Perceived lack of interest from staff can also impede headteachers' ability to provide learning opportunities.

**"Nobody's queuing up saying please can I sort out finance, etc., etc. But I know from working with candidates on NPQH, one of the things that does hold people back is sometimes they don't get the opportunity to do things." – Current Senior Leader**

Finally, one senior leader shared her experiences of bias and discrimination hindering progression into senior leadership. This senior leader felt that her headteacher did not support women in leadership roles, and actively opposed her progression. However, with the support from the chair of the board she was able to overcome this barrier and eventually

became a headteacher herself.

“I was in a small school and the headteacher was very old school, shall we say, and *didn't like women in leadership roles*. I think that's the polite way of putting it. He opposed my first and second application to do the NPQH. Luckily for me, the chair of the board who assessed the applications knew of my circumstances, it wasn't something that the county weren't aware of, and they got me on the course. When I had to do a whole-school improvement project as part of the NPQH, he wouldn't let me do it with the whole school. So, again, the county stepped in and arranged for me to have secondment in 2 other schools to make sure that I did have that evidence, which, you know, I couldn't have done it without them. They also, then, used me to do several things in other schools that really developed my leadership skills, so I had help. They knew that the situation I was in I was never going to get those opportunities.” – Current Senior Leader, female

### Training both formally and on the job

Some senior leaders highlighted training opportunities as valuable for progression into senior leadership.

“I had *exceptional training* in my previous school, which enabled me to make the jump into this school at a senior leadership level.” – Current Senior Leader

However, many current and former senior leaders found that training tended to be insufficient in introducing the variety and complexities of the challenges of senior leadership roles. Particularly, headteachers felt that the realities of managing the school, including its budgets, HR and increased workloads, were not adequately covered in the NPQH<sup>3</sup>.

“I didn't anticipate the role to be so *business-oriented*. A lot of my job is health and safety, the management of the building, the management of keeping children safe, finance, balancing budgets. A lot of it is timetabling or problem-solving, a huge amount of it is HR. You know, it's recruitment or it's completing return to work interviews or it's supporting staff's mental health. Actually, the proportion you do in terms of teaching and learning is tiny because *there's no-one else to do all of those business orientated roles*, so you end up then delegating a lot of the teaching and learning.” – Current Senior Leader, Small School

“I've got my NPQH. In my previous school, I got to shadow on finance and stuff, but when you become a headteacher, you've suddenly got, you know, *millions of pounds that you're accountable for*, but you don't actually go through proper training at any point as to what could be done with that. You *suddenly take a jump up, and you are just expected to do it.*” – Current Senior Leader

“I think [the NPQH] very important. I will say that it's a part of the training to develop your leadership skills, but when you actually then become a school leader, *there's actually nothing much that prepares you for headship until you actually do it*. Nothing prepares you for the level of responsibility that you have when you become a head, and the level that you're working at. It's different to being a deputy head, completely. Obviously, you learn the skills when you're a deputy, but when you become a head, it is actually different.” – Former Senior Leader

Instead, learning on the job, through previous experience in leadership positions, and working in or observing leadership at different schools, were understood to improve readiness to progress into or further up senior leadership roles.

“I had a really *good experience as a deputy head*, and I'd been deputy head for quite a long time. And I'd been seconded to Estyn, so I'd been in a lot of schools, so that I could *see what the leadership was like in a lot of schools*, and I knew that I could do what they were doing. I'd had a lot of experience in different roles, so I'd done a lot in that time as deputy head. I'd also *got my NPQH*, so that was ready, but I did that a while ago, before I became head.” – Former Senior Leader

More experienced senior leaders also reflected that training and pathways into senior leadership had been improved since they had entered the role. They saw this as a positive step towards encouraging and supporting new senior leaders into these positions.

“I entered the profession when there was no [paid non-contact hours], there wasn't even the [support for newly qualified teachers] where you got that extra support for your first year, *I missed all of that*. But what I see now is on offer, especially across in our region, I think there's *good training* for newly qualified and then early teachers, then there's the middle leadership, then there's preparation for headship. Before that they do networking around here for deputies. I never had networking as a deputy. I would go along to meetings with heads, but there was nothing specific in place like there is now. So, I think *the ladder in helping people move up into senior leadership is a lot better these days* and it's a lot more formal.” – Current Senior Leader

## Importance of representation

Lack of representation was identified as a potential barrier to entering senior leadership roles. Senior leaders and potential 'future' leaders in this research reflected that representation in these roles was lacking for women, people of colour and people with disabilities.

Perceptions of the role, including high levels of responsibility, accountability and challenges maintaining a work-life balance, were understood to be more discouraging for women than men, given the apparent prevalence of traditional gender roles. Women were assumed by participants to retain childcare responsibilities and not want to lose quality family time. In a focus group with potential 'future' leaders, when asked why someone may not wish to apply for senior leadership, some respondents shared that one of the reasons may be that they are "family-oriented".

Another senior leader noted the difference between the ratios of men and women at deputy level versus headship, as and the lack of representation of senior leaders of colour.

**"Deputy headship is 50/50 male female; at headship it is 1 in 10. So, what are they doing to ensure that women are encouraged to take that final step and enabled to do it? Also, if you look at the ethnic breakdown of heads, particularly in Wales, and I know Wales is a very white country, however, *it does not match the demographics*. I sat in secondary headteacher conferences and there has been *nobody of colour at all*, and what does that say? We have to get to the point where we accept that if the only people we're interested in are men who are white and have got nothing wrong with them, or don't look like they've got anything wrong with them on the outside, then *we will get the reality we create*." – Current Senior Leader**

This senior leader added that there seems to be a set perception of what a senior leader 'should' look like, making it harder for candidates who do not fit that perception to progress.

**"Appointments to heads are done by a governing body, that *governing body have a picture of a headteacher in their head* and that headteacher tends to be a male in his 50s with a big boomy voice, so when you get [a candidate] who isn't that, they're starting to challenge your perceptions of what that person is. [...] I think there is this eschewed perception of who a headteacher is." – Current Senior Leader**

One of the potential 'future' leaders we spoke to was also concerned that their age would be a barrier to entering senior leadership. They felt that most candidates entered these positions in their 30s and 40s, and being older than this would be seen as a disadvantage.

**"I've always been ambitious. I'm looking to go that extra step to the future. Do you know what? I'm getting on and I do think the senior leadership teams now and certainly headship *it's a young man's game* or a young person's game now. I think when you look at a lot of the headteachers, male and female around our area, they're all coming between late 30s, early 40s and I'm on the wrong side of that." – Potential 'Future' Senior Leader**

Recognising the importance of representation, some of the female senior leaders we spoke who explicitly sought to encourage more women to take up senior leadership roles.

**"I think with the deputy role, I really felt I was *doing it for the women in my school*, so that they could see that we do go for senior management roles. And I felt the only reason I wouldn't [apply for senior leadership] would be personal reasons, I won't be home for the children by 6 o'clock and so forth. And, of course, men have these issues as well, I do agree with that, but I do feel that it was important for my staff to see that we are able to try for senior management roles." – Potential 'Future' Senior Leader, set to enter deputy headship in the forthcoming school year**

Some respondents also described how having representation and encouragement from fellow leaders helped their progression. One potential 'future' senior leader described being mentored by a female acting head, who encouraged her to consider applying for senior leadership positions. She reflected that women may particularly struggle with confidence.

**"I've also got a really good friend of mine who I started off in my teaching career with, who's now acting head in a large high school. And I think she is a mentor in a way, and I think *the role of a mentor is really, really important*. Somebody who'll give you, 'Just try for it. The only reason you're not doing it is because, you know, why?' And I think *that confidence just isn't there in some of us, in a lot of women to be honest*." – Potential 'Future' Senior Leader**

## Confidence, competition and the interview process

Combined with experience, confidence was identified as an important factor in applying for senior leadership positions. Self-belief in your leadership skills, your vision for the school and ability to manage the role's responsibilities are thought to impact candidates' decisions to apply for these roles, while a lack of confidence can be a barrier.

"You just think, 'no, I'm not going to be able to do this,' and *imposter syndrome is huge*. You go into work, and you think, 'I should not be doing this, why am I doing this job? It should be someone far more important than me, doing this job.'" – Former Senior Leader

Fear of the interview was believed to be a barrier to applying for senior leadership positions. The recruitment process was also a source of concern from senior leaders, emphasising that the interview process may not adequately capture a candidate's readiness for the post. Furthermore, there was a concern that they would not be able to adequately prepare for the interview due to their busy workload.

"I think people *don't want to take the risk* or the opportunity to move forward. Some feedback I get is, 'I don't want to put myself through that interview'. They just feel that *the challenge of going through an interview* and the pressures of that, and going up against somebody else, they just don't want to face that." – Current Senior Leader

"It could be they're *scared of failure* against somebody else, and also just that, you know, when you're working full-time and you want to prepare for an interview for a job, there's a lot of work involved isn't there." – Current Senior Leader

Some senior leaders found that the level of competition for senior leadership roles in Wales was higher than in other parts of the UK. This was thought to be associated with the smaller number of schools in the country and limited movement between schools at the senior leadership level.

"Fortunately, our staff stay here a long time, but I think sometimes that can be *to the detriment of their career progress*. I think sometimes it is a nature at some schools to wait for the natural circle of life. 'Yes, I am quite happy to be the head of science, but I'll wait for [the current post holder] to go, I won't actively go and look in other schools.' When I started teaching, I think we were much more prepared to move schools. I also think it's very difficult to make the progress to assistant heads, that first step onto the senior leadership team, because there's *so much competition*." – Current Senior Leader

"When the whole of Wales has the same amount of schools as there is in the greater area of Birmingham, *the opportunities for development are limited*. So, there is a high amount of competition when a post becomes available. I went out for 2 assistant head posts at my current school this year and I think we had a total of about 28 applicants, shortlisted to 7 on one day and 6 for the other post. So, the competition's really high because the posts don't come out there that much." – Current Senior Leader

## Perceptions of senior leadership

When asked to think of potential barriers for suitable candidates, some respondents reflected that negative perceptions of the role could be a major barrier.

Perceptions of high levels of workload, accountability and responsibility, and the lack of adequate remuneration make senior leadership positions less attractive to potential candidates. Senior leaders commented on the negative perceptions of the roles, which demotivated suitable candidates within their schools to move up into senior leadership positions.

"I know that *people don't want to be head teachers anymore*, they don't want that role. I've tried to persuade my senior leadership team, there's 2 of them, I've tried to persuade them for several years to do their NPQH to progress into headship. They're both more than capable, one is my deputy and the other one is a senior teacher and additional needs co-ordinator, and neither of them was willing to do NPQH because they said, we have no interest in ever becoming head teacher, *we've seen what you do and we don't want to do it*." – Current Senior Leader

"There is also the *stigma around being a head*, it's not positive. Because people do see *the stress and the workload and the accountability*. Actually, for a lot of people being a head is not something they aspire to anymore." – Current Senior Leader

As discussed earlier, some also perceive the demanding and time-consuming nature of senior leadership to be incompatible with parenthood. Some senior leaders seek to challenge this perception, through leading by example, with the right support from headteachers and governing bodies.

"I think the challenges and the main perceptions is that it's not doable with a family, when you've got children yourself. And that's not true. It is doable if you've got the right headmaster in place and we're very fortunate. I think there is a great need of explaining the role to teachers." – Current Senior Leader

“I do think there are **very specific challenges for female senior leaders**, which are sometimes not acknowledged on a national platform. You can have more than one vocation, **you can be a parent, a mother and you can be a senior leader**. It doesn't have to be either or. I feel extremely blessed to have had an extremely understanding head and governing body, who allowed me to reduce my hours following the birth of my children, and that made a huge difference to me remaining in role. [...] I think everybody's journey is different, I definitely 100% think there are specific challenges for female senior leaders.” - Current Senior Leader

### Experiences of female senior leaders

Many senior leaders we spoke with, both male and female, thought caring responsibilities could be a big deterrent for potential ‘future’ female leaders from applying for senior leadership positions. This was thought to be due to the difficulties of balancing caring responsibilities and workload as a senior leader and as a parent.

“I also just think from a domestic front, **it is quite hard for female leaders**, especially to manage the demands of work and then the demands of sometimes being the head of a family too. I think that is remarkable in terms of managing time.” – Current Senior Leader

Almost all the female senior leaders we spoke with were also mothers and found that support from their head teacher and governors during their pregnancy and maternity leave facilitated their return to work. They were also passionate about supporting their female middle leaders to enter senior leadership positions.

“Our Head here is ahead of her time, she is really really forward thinking and she's really good with understanding that **you can be a parent and be a school leader**.” – Current Senior Leader

“I've been blessed really with having a tremendously supportive head teacher. I also think too that female leaders are in a privileged position because you have the opportunity just like our head here has, to actually **set the tone for other female leaders**, whether that's a senior or middle leader level. Also for our female teachers and so that is tremendously important because it is a privilege to be in the role that we're in. I think we have a duty to other females in particular to try and-, and other parents.” – Current Senior Leader

However, many found it challenging to juggle both sets of responsibilities. Some senior leaders reported that they have had to sacrifice some of their work/life balance to be able to balance both parenthood and school leadership, such as coming into work during their maternity leave, or bringing their newborn with them to school.

“Having been on maternity, I've been very fortunate, but having said that, I did come in for inspections, so **I wasn't off entirely**. I think you have to be realistic as a senior leader, you have to be flexible, which is why **I would always work in the evenings** after I finished here as well, because I know that you've got to be really flexible, and I don't see my day as having a clear cut off. I just see it now as more of a continuum. There will be a quieter couple of hours in my day and there will be a busier couple of hours in my day when I get home, do you know what I'm saying? So it would be quieter when the children get in. It would be about 5 or 6 o'clock, depending on how busy the week is and then it will be quiet for a couple of hours and I'll start again around 8 or 9.” – Current Senior Leader

One former female senior leader we spoke to cited wanting to spend more time with her family as one of the key reasons she was leaving the profession. She felt she had spent too much time working as a senior leader and wanted to move into a new role, with less responsibilities and workload to spend more time with her family.

“Another reason why I'm leaving really because it is difficult, I'm a mum of 4 but 2 of my children are quite grown-up now, I had them when I was quite young and **always have guilt about the fact that I was pursuing my career** and felt like I didn't have enough time for them... I feel like I wasn't there enough for them. I never got to go to a sports day. I'm going to get upset now because this is **the biggest reason really for me to leave**. Because I feel like I really-, you can't ever get that back... I just feel like I need to be a mum, I need to be there more for them because it is a very busy job, and you are totally dedicated to the school because you have to be. And **it's almost like another baby** because you're just totally dedicated to the school and the children in the school and you just don't ever really switch off, it's a hard job to switch off from.” – Former Senior Leader

### Timing

Whilst readiness for the role was widely discussed amongst senior leaders, not all managed ideal timing. These senior leaders found themselves promoted from deputy headship to acting head or headship before they felt ready and without adequate support.

“Out of the blue, the headteacher decided she was going to retire, and I was asked would I just take on the role as secondment for 6 months. I started [the role] and 3 days later, started my NPQH, which I actually had applied for and got a place for prior to being offered this secondment but I **didn't anticipate to be sat in the hot seat so quickly**. Well, I fell into headship. I mean, I didn't really want to be a head.” - Current Senior Leader

This occurred in situations where existing headteachers took unexpected secondment opportunities, prior to discussion on succession planning with their senior leadership team, in instances of long-term sickness or early/unexpected retirement, and where it was challenging to recruit. Senior leaders in this position found themselves unexpectedly taking on headship responsibilities, without adequate training and experience.

**“[Under two years] after going into deputy headship, my head at the time had [a medical emergency] and never returned to work. So, I *became acting head overnight*, and then completed my NPQH, and then got the headship permanent.” – Current Senior Leader**

Senior leaders in these situations felt unprepared and found it challenging to enter these roles. However, with the support of their governors, informal support networks and Local Authorities, they successfully retained their roles.

**“When I became a deputy, the head of the school I was in went off for quite some time, so I found myself acting head in a massive school after about 3 months and didn't have a clue what I was doing, but I had a lot of *support from the Local Authority*.” – Former Senior Leader**

Stakeholders in two Local Authorities we spoke with found that a significant number of their headteachers were acting headteachers. They felt there are no adequate solutions for headteachers to take sick leave or take time off, which resulted in the need to hire less experienced acting headteachers.

### **Some respondents reported no barriers**

While this section outlines a number of challenges to progression into senior leadership reported by our research participants, many senior leaders we spoke to believed that there had not been any barriers to accessing their position.

*“I've **never experienced barriers**, I've never felt that there are things in the way of being able to move or to take up a different role or whatever any more than in any other sector.” – Current Senior Leader*

At the same time, some senior leaders found that promising members of their staff were not looking to make a move into senior leadership because they are content in their roles as middle managers and teachers. Particularly with the changes to the curriculum, many teachers felt they were adequately challenged and were looking forward to continuing working on the curriculum.

**“What was interesting about doing the [personal development] interviews with the faculty leaders. There's only one person who said they want to be a head. Others are *quite happy where they are*. [...] They've actually developed quite a lot within their role so actually they're not looking to develop anymore at the moment because the implementation of the new curriculum is actually giving them that new thing anyway.” – Current Senior Leader**

# Positive experiences and perceptions of senior leadership

Current, former and potential 'future' leaders spoke about numerous aspects of leadership that are valuable and attractive. The most common themes that were discussed were the opportunities to make a difference and support the students as well as staff, and to take ownership of whole-school improvements.

As we discuss later in the report, promotion of the positive sides of senior leadership is an area that leaders identified as a priority. Hence, this section provides extensive, rich data on what leaders value about their roles and why.

## Working with children and families and making a difference

Relationships with children and families were consistently highlighted as an important and positive side of school leadership. Many leaders we interviewed spoke particularly about their passion for making a positive difference in children's lives and supporting vulnerable children. This included school practices that support student well-being, safeguarding concerns, and preventing school exclusions. Leadership in particular, as opposed to teaching, was understood as having a far-reaching influence, allowing for opportunities to make a difference to a greater number of children.

"I love when we **make a difference**. We have a big **moral imperative** and when we can help children achieve in spite of everything that's happening to them and we can give them ways of doing that, that's **magical**." – Current Senior Leader

"The children. That's the reason, the children, fantastic. That's my-, well, I suppose that's your moral purpose of going into education and training, I like **making a difference to children**." – Current Senior Leader

"I think it's a **privilege** to work with children, and I think it's a privilege to affect some change and their life chances. We're very passionate about **social mobility**, so it's lovely to see some of our students through hard work and academic rigour really achieving all that they can in view of their God given talents." – Current Senior Leader

"Working with young people, it's a gift, it's something that has been a privilege really, over the years, to be able to do that, and to help **create an environment** where they can hopefully **flourish**." – Current Senior Leader

"I think it's one of the best jobs. What in particular? I think knowing that you're able to influence, and have hopefully a positive effect on students, you know. And **make a difference**, hopefully, to their lives, not directly, but through the work that you do as a head. I think it's very rare that you get a job that has an **influence on so many children** really, and families. I think it's a real privilege then to be able to do the job." – Current Senior Leader

"Definitely working with young people. That's the thing I miss the most. And all the lovely things, you know, the sports day, award ceremonies. You know, all those sorts of things. Taking them to netball matches, football matches, where you actually **get to really know them on a different level**. I also, I've also been passionate about maintaining a teaching commitment, because I think that if you're asking people to do things, that you should be modelling it in your own practice. So, I miss teaching." – Former Senior Leader

"There are lots of things that I like, the **being with the children** mainly and **working with parents**, being able to, I know it's a cliché but being able to **make a difference with some of our vulnerable learners**." – Current Senior Leader

## Leading a team and developing school staff

The leaders we interviewed spoke about their enjoyment of overseeing and supporting the professional development of the members of staff in their schools. They mentioned offering training to staff, as well as ownership of areas that they are interested in. They also mentioned the importance of delegating tasks and providing support. Many leaders spoke passionately about their pride in seeing their school staff progress and develop. Opportunities to work collaboratively with the wider senior leadership team were also highlighted as a positive side of the role.

Many senior leaders spoke about developing both students and staff as interrelated processes:

"Longer term I get a lot of satisfaction from **seeing the children mature** and from **seeing staff develop** as well." – Current Senior Leader

"I do like developing the curriculum and developing staff. You know, I mentioned it to them previously, that **I want the staff to shine because I want the children to shine**. I want members of the community to shine. I want them to be the best that they can be. So, that's my favourite part of the job, is other people's success." – Current Senior Leader

"The best thing is the interaction with the children, and also supporting the staff. I have a great deal of emphasis

on supporting staff, to allow them to do their job. I see it as probably my most important role. So again, it's **ensuring the staff have got the right support**, we've got the right staffing levels, any issues are dealt with. We don't get a lot of complaints, I must admit, and that's because we're very proactive in terms of our relationships with staff, with parents, with outside agencies, you know, communication is really important. So, I mean, that is key to me, in terms of enabling the staff members to do their job. You know, I've got 70 staff, it's a big staff team, it's the size of a small company, I suppose. £2.2 million budget, 70 staff, so that takes a lot of managing, really." – Current Senior Leader

"I like working with staff and **developing their pedagogy**. Ensuring that they have excellent **professional development and training**. I like seeing them progress, I like seeing them go on in terms of their career. Yes, there's not a lot I don't like about my job." – Current Senior Leader

"The best thing, I would say, is being able to **empower my staff to be leaders** in whichever bit they're doing of the school and making sure that those opportunities are available to them. I get a lot of pleasure out of that, you know, when you say to them, 'What do you want to do to develop yourself?' [...] I get a lot of joy out of **being able to provide those opportunities** for people to thrive and get a buzz out of it, yes." – Current Senior Leader

"I like working very, very closely with colleagues, particularly senior leadership team colleagues. I find it very inspiring to be in the same room as, kind of, **like-minded people** with a **common endeavour** and a sense of a **moral purpose** and determination to do the right thing for the pupils." – Current Senior Leader

"Staff development for me is really important. And that's what I've really enjoyed seeing, is **seeing staff develop** and seeing staff, you know, improve their teaching, improve their leadership, and being able to coach or ask the right questions, or do the right things that'll help them to be able to do their job better. And **create that culture in the school** where we're all here to improve, you know? We're all here to be better teachers, better leaders, whatever we're doing. We're all here to be better at what we're doing so that the students can do their best. Being able to do that, and, you know, hopefully **inspire teachers, and leaders**, and others to do as well as they possibly can in their role. And want to develop. I think that's the best bit for me." – Current Senior Leader

## Leading changes and development across a range of priorities

Senior leaders spoke about the scope that leadership offers them to have influence, introduce changes and oversee development across a wide range of areas of school improvements. Current and former leaders mentioned specific areas that they have enjoyed developing, such as student well-being strategies or curriculum development.

"I love my school. There is lots of development, lots of **exciting development opportunities**. Expansion will be really interesting and I think that will be great. I love developing staff and developing people underneath me, and again if that allows other development opportunities to take place that's great. I've been asked to take on a satellite base as well under our wing, which, again, I'll be leading that and that's a-, while it presents challenges because they never give you things that are functioning, they give you things that have got issues, it's a **good challenge** in terms of your leadership skills." – Current Senior Leader

"I did trauma-informed schools diploma last year and I got a distinction and I was really proud of that, and that has been something I've really enjoyed **implementing within the school** and my senior leadership team also did the diploma, so we've really been able to develop that throughout the school, and that's just been amazing because we have **developed a lot of the ideas and strategies** from trauma-informed schools like working with animals. So, we now have a school dog, and we have a farm, we have pygmy goats, chickens, ducks, and over the 15 years I've developed a big forest school area as well in the school that we didn't have when I started and that's **become really successful**, and I really enjoy seeing the children having fun in that area." – Current Senior Leader

"I like the opportunity, I think, to make a difference and to feel like we're **making progress** with things, we're working on various things, and we can **see the effect** that that's having." – Current Senior Leader

"I like the **influence** that the role has. I like that it is different every single day. I like the interaction with the learners. I enjoy the pace of things. I like that there's a **large scope** of, you know, what I have to look at, whether it's from a strategic point of view in teaching and learning or behaviour, or whether it's financial aspects of running the school. I like developing relationships with, you know, the feeder primaries and-, I just find it a very rewarding job." – Current Senior Leader

"I miss being involved in the **curriculum developments** at the talk phase. Because, obviously, this is an exciting time for Wales, and we were on a really good journey as a school. So, it's a shame to have stepped away at a point where, for me, the **philosophy of the curriculum is finally right**. I battled with things in the past and felt like they weren't what the young people needed. You know, they were trying to put all the young people into 1 box really and say that that was an appropriate education for all. Whereas, obviously, Curriculum for Wales enables a curriculum that can be tailored to the needs of each learner." – Former Senior Leader

## Having scope for a whole-school impact

A key difference of senior leadership compared to other roles in schools that was highlighted by the current, former and potential 'future' leaders is the scope that it offers to have influence on the whole school, and on all the students in the school. As such, senior leadership is seen as an opportunity to make a difference to a greater number of children, to have a whole-school approach, and to shape school culture in line with their own vision.

"I love the fact that I'm in a position where I can **make decisions** and make calls that have a **direct bearing** upon and **influence** upon the education, the learning, of **all the children in school**. And that's the difference between being a teacher in the classroom and being a head of department, and being a headteacher, is that your influence, it **gravitates outwards**, it reaches out into many different-, it affects all the pupils, it affects their parents, it affects the staff. So, I take that very, very seriously, and I'm very proud of the fact that I'm able to do that, but that brings its own weight with it." – Current Senior Leader

"I'm really interested in **school cultures, climates, ethos**, and what it's like to be a member of staff, what it's like to be a senior leader, what it's like to be a parent, what it's like to be a learner within the school. So that's why I think it's quite important to get out and about in a school." – Current Senior Leader

"I think what I liked about being a senior leader is the opportunity to **develop the school along your own vision**, so you're not following anybody else's decision, if you like, you're following your own. And you were making the decisions about **how the school works in total**, on behalf of each of the children that you teach. [...] Like, if you believe in equity, and that's your core value, then why are you having streamed classes, and why aren't children taught in mixed ability groupings? So, you can make decisions about how your school is structured, as a senior leader, in line with having your **core values** and how you feel that follows through within the school." – Former Senior Leader

"I think if I was to apply, mine would be purely for, like, the **impact on the whole school**. It's easy to have an impact just specifically on your year group as you're teachers, but you want that impact to spread across. And just having a part in the initiatives and things that are introduced to the school, and having your ideas-, although they're already listened to as a teacher, having more of a main say and making decisions that impact the whole school would be a reason I would want to go for it." – Potential 'Future' Leader

## Feeling pride in school improvements and achievements

Senior leaders spoke with pride of the school achievements they oversaw, measured in terms of exam results, school ratings or inspections, as well as the views and aspirations of students and parents.

"I like **seeing improvements**, so there are sometimes improvements, we had our **best GCSE and A-Level results** last year, which coming out of COVID was pretty good." – Current Senior Leader

"Recently, our school was within **the Sunday Times top 10 schools in Wales**, from the Sunday Times parent power guide, and that's really significant for us. We have very significant challenges here, [...] so to be there in terms of an independent analysis result is really important, so that's particularly gratifying for us." – Current Senior Leader

"The following year we were inspected, and of the 15 judgements then, we had 11 excellent and 4 goods. And I felt that's **good progress** in 4 years, because that's from when I started, you know." – Former Senior Leader

One former senior leader recalled a moment when they saw the parents' views of the school change and aspirations of pupils increase:

"It was a community where nearly everybody's parents had been pupils in that school when it wasn't in a good place. And the parents didn't have aspirations for their children. And **I saw that gradually change**. I can remember a dad coming up to me, and this is when I felt, 'We're getting there,' and he said to me, '**he's had all his GCSEs!**' He said, '**I can't believe it!**' And he said, 'He's had some As and he wants to go to college and he wants to do music. Do I need money for that? And if so,' he said, 'Where do I get that money?' He said, 'Because I'll find it. I'll get the money for him, how do I do that? What do I need for him?' And I realised that they didn't have a knowledge, most, perhaps many parents don't, of how the system works, you know. And the fact that someone had asked me that made me think, '**This is changing. This culture now is getting where we want it to be.**'" – Former Senior Leader

## Passion for their chosen specialism

Some of the senior leaders we spoke with have particular passions for their focus or the specific sectors they work in. This was particularly the case for the leaders of Welsh-medium schools, special schools or faith schools. Senior leaders in those sectors tend to have a moral imperative for their chosen mission.

“That's what I'm happy at doing and, you know, I'm a Welsh speaker naturally myself and I'm quite *passionate also about the Welsh language.*” – Current Senior Leader, Bilingual school

“I'm a *champion* for the [special educational needs] sector and I think, again, there are so many areas around the sector that need to be developed such as sector specific leadership, sector specific teacher training which again we're battling for. So, there are *lots of things to be involved with.*” – Current Senior Leader, Special school

“It's really important to us that we focus as a Catholic school on the formation of individuals. Therefore, assemblies are critically important in terms of different character virtues and school values. We have very explicit reference to *school values here in the Catholic school*, and also to the virtues that we wish to see in our students, and we model those as school leaders and teachers as well. Yes, they would probably be the best parts [of the role].” – Current Senior Leader, Catholic school

## Impact on policy

Not only is senior leadership seen to offer opportunities to have influence on a whole-school level, but also on a policy level. One current senior leader explained that there may be relatively more opportunities to impact policy in Wales, compared to England:

“I must say, I really enjoy [senior leadership] in Wales, because of the scale. So, such as attending events [at the National Academy for Educational Leadership]. So, actually *having access to Welsh governments* and research groups and *national development opportunities*, is something that would never have been afforded in England, because of the scale. Even coming together as a Local Authority used to be quite difficult. Whereas, you know, I feel like we've had *a real impact*, in terms of *developing national picture* for special education. Again, there's only 41 special schools, 41 or 42, in the whole of Wales, which is tiny compared to England. It's the size of the Local Authority, again. So, you just feel like you can impact on a national level, but you've got much closer links to policy makers and policy changes, which, again, you'd never get in England.” – Current Senior Leader, Special school

# Challenges

Whilst the current and former senior leaders we spoke with enjoyed their work, there were recurring elements which they found challenging. Mainly, the pressures of being a senior leader were heightened by increasing workloads, isolation and external pressures which caused mental and physical distress.

## Workload, work-life balance and isolation

The challenges of meeting the demands of the role and maintaining a balance with personal life was particularly felt by headteachers. With the numerous responsibilities, managing their time and prioritising was seen as a source of stress to senior leaders. This also influenced perceptions of the role from potential candidates, who were discouraged from applying to senior leadership positions.

**“The main challenge is, how do you *manage your time effectively*. You know, ensuring you're making good use of your time is very important. You know, we do get called into a number of meetings, staff expect you to deal with everything, and it's making sure that staff use the systems that are available to them to, kind of, protect yourself as well. And knowing when to say no, because sometimes, you know, you can find yourself in 4 or 5 meetings a day and then you've done no work.”** - Current Senior Leader

**“People who want to be assistant heads, but they don't want to be a deputy, and then there is a glut at deputy head and they don't want to be a head. If someone watches, they'll come in and they'll see what you're doing all day every day and they'll say, *'I don't know how you do that but I know I don't want to.'* So I think the headship jobs need to be made more attractive and that's not just financially, so don't stick £20k on the pay, that's not going to do anything, there has to be something about conditions of work and workload that makes people want to move from assistant to deputy.”** - Current Senior Leader

It was also felt the headteacher salaries did not adequately remunerate the work and responsibility at this level. This was frustrating for current senior leaders, and potentially discouraged suitable candidates from applying.

**“One of the barriers is that you get quite well paid as a faculty coordinator in a comprehensive school, and when you look at what the role is of the senior leader and the level of responsibility, *I don't think that the amount of pay you get is commensurate to the role that you have.*”** - Current Senior Leader

**“To be completely blunt, you know, *headteacher salaries aren't really reflective of the work that we do* if you were to compare it to similar work in other sectors, there's lots and lots of managers in the NHS that are on six figure sums, you won't find a single primary headteacher anywhere on six figure sums, they don't exist.”** - Current Senior Leader

Many felt the hours needed to complete the role of headship also exceeded their contracts and bled into their personal lives. Senior leaders struggled to ‘turn-off’, and many struggled to stop working once they returned home. For many, this negatively impacted their physical and mental well-being.

**“I think it's that *you're on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week*. There is no shut off at all, whether that's a child protection issue, late at night. Whether it's a phone call from a staff member that's unwell, or is having a hard time. I think you are-, and regardless of distributed leadership, you are the central person. I find that hard that it's a 24 hour, 7 days a week job.”** - Current Senior Leader

Additionally, whilst many entered a role in education for their passion for teaching, many found it challenging to balance their senior leadership duties with teaching. This was perceived as a loss for many who missed engaging directly with young people.

**“I like teaching, however, I don't think it's practical for a headteacher of a school this size to be teaching, because *you cannot give 100% to the young people* because you're always pulled away to go to meetings out the school. So, those young people wouldn't get the right adequate support that they require”** - Current Senior Leader

**“When I was head of my first school, it was a teaching headship and I taught 0.6 and had headship responsibilities 0.4. *I was like a dog chasing my tail*, all day, every day. I never felt that I succeeded properly at either job and that wasn't a work-life balance at all. I vowed that that was not going to happen once I came here”** - Current Senior Leader

Female senior leaders found it particularly challenging to balance child caring responsibilities with their work. Although it was recognised men with families would face similar challenges, it was felt that the responsibilities lay mostly with women.

**“From a domestic front, it is quite hard for female leaders, especially, sometime to manage the demands of work and then the demands of sometimes being the head of a family too. I think that is remarkable in terms of managing time.”** - Current Senior Leader

In addition to large workloads, senior leaders, headteachers in particular, felt isolated in their decision-making. Many felt

that all responsibilities lay on their shoulders alone, and that they lacked adequate support systems.

**“It's a job that you can't even predict what it is because it can be different hour by hour, minute by minute, and you're meant to be the bastion of all information and all knowledge and understanding. I describe my school as my third child. You feel that level of need for it, you know, that level of protection of it, *and headship can be an excessively lonely place because nobody who hasn't done the job can understand it*”- Current Senior Leader**

Lack of support from their board of governors and Local Authority (LA) exacerbated the feelings of isolation.

**“*It is a lonely job*, and even though I have very good supportive staff the buck stops with me, and I understand that I take that responsibility very seriously, but there's only so many years of it you can take when you feel that you don't have the support of the Local Authority or the Welsh government for that matter.”- Current Senior Leader**

Some headteachers felt that their Local Authority added to their stress and that the Local Authority would criticise their work without offering support or guidance.

**“The way that headteachers have been spoken to and treated. You think, 'When I work around the clock, all day every day for our children, and you're saying I'm not doing enough' it's really quite insulting... And threats, veiled threats, the Local Authority have given us before, it's a toxic environment. And I would say, that is what puts people from taking the final step to wanting to be the headteacher for really the rubbish that is said to you, and thrown at you. People just don't want it, or need it.” – Current Senior Leader**

**“I think the issue in Wales at the present time is the balance between challenge and support. I think there's enough challenge from the Local Authority, the regions, the Welsh Assembly, Estyn. So, while I accept and think challenge is a good thing, I don't necessarily see those organisations providing the support to access avenues towards achieving those challenges which are set before schools.” – Former Senior Leader**

Others felt their Local Authorities provided additional work, which would not positively impact the schools or their pupils. This was discouraging to senior leaders, who felt they were spending time on ‘meaningless’ administrative tasks instead of focusing on their other responsibilities.

**“You go into your job and you know what you're taking on when you do it. For me, *there's lots of meaningless admin tasks* that are sent to us by Local Authority, by Welsh Government. There is always somebody who wants something and for it to be admin tasks, that could be done in 30 other quicker ways than what we're asked to do things in. Like I said, I feel most of the stuff that we're asked to do is trivial. It doesn't impact the children, that's the thing, it's admin tasks that I see no benefit to the children, but it takes up a lot of my time” - Current Senior Leader**

Several of the headteachers interviewed, both current and former, also mentioned specific scenarios that were particularly detrimental to their mental health. These were separate to ongoing workload pressures and frustrations, but instead were around the management of specific and often highly emotive and distressing scenarios. These included having to make staff redundancies, take staff disciplinary action, exclude students and manage angry and occasionally staff-abusive relatives/ carers.

**“Another very, very difficult thing that a Head Teacher might have to do is to permanently exclude a child. Again, you reference your Local Authority support representatives and your officers, and the mechanics of it are well looked after. What isn't well looked after is the impact that all of that has on the Head... But at no point does somebody say, 'How does that make you feel?' And frankly, it just makes you feel crap. There is no positive spin to put on that, you just come home feeling awful, and you go to work the following day feeling awful. And you just think, 'Oh, I just hope I can get through with this.'... That day-to-day sense of, 'Right, how do we look after the well-being of this Head Teacher?' *I just don't think it's there. I think there is an unwritten, maybe unspoken, assumption that somebody who is strong enough to get to headship is strong enough to cope with headship*, and in many cases, on most days, that's right, but not on every day.” - Current Senior Leader**

Negative perceptions also impacted the potential ‘future’ leaders we spoke with, who commented that they understood why some teachers may not be interested in entering senior leadership roles:

**“Some teachers don't particularly want to be in a management role, they're very family-orientated in the sense that-, I'm not saying the senior leaders aren't, but I mean they just want to focus on that. They want to go to school, do their job. Some staff I speak to, they just want to teach their class, they just want to teach those children, and maybe support in other ways, but they don't want the responsibility. And I guess *it is a huge responsibility being a senior leader*” - Potential ‘Future’ Leader**

**“You have more whole school responsibilities, so you're accountable not just for the 30 children in your class, *you're accountable for decisions that are being made that impact 800 children across the school*, and impact-, how many teachers have we got? Lots, 30 teachers” - Potential ‘Future’ Leader**

## Bureaucracy and funding

Bureaucracy and funding pressures were also cited as key challenges for senior leaders.

"We've got all this paperwork to do and who sees it, at the end of the day? You've got consortium and you've got the Estyn, the inspectorate. I think the feeling generally is, do we actually need both in the capacity that they currently are?" – Current Senior Leader

**"I hate the paperwork element** of it and the, you know, the elements that you have to do stuff for the sake of doing it. And I don't know how many people read some of the things that I'm led to, you know, have to produce, and you don't really get any feedback on that kind of thing" – Current Senior Leader

Lack of funding, and uncertainty on future funding made it difficult for headteachers to make long-term plans and invest in their pupils and staff. Many we spoke to managed their budgets with limited or no support from a business manager or their Local Authority. This created additional pressures and stress.

"The budget is frustrating, you cannot plan anything and the way I deal with that now is-, I go from year to year and you can't plan ahead and therefore **you don't feel that you're able to do the best there for staff or for the children** because you know you're only appointing someone for a year maybe which then affects recruitment because we've grants or whatever it is and you know that you're not going to get the best or you can't necessarily do the best" – Current Senior Leader

**"The one thing that does give me sleepless nights is the school budget.** That's a big worry of mine. We've only had a business manager for 5 weeks this year, for various reasons. I've got an advert out again, so the burden of the budget has fallen on me, day to day as well." – Current Senior Leader

"The free school meal PDG grant and it sometimes wasn't worth the time that you needed to spend on the response to the grant to say how it was being spent than the actual figure you were getting. It would have been easier to say, **'Forget it, I don't want the money because I haven't got time to fill in that paperwork.'**"

The cost-of-living crisis has also created additional stresses, as the price of energy has increased, but school budgets have not. This has meant redistributing already diminishing funding away from pupils and staff into their energy bills.

"You can see **I have no lights on in my room.** The budget is a real struggle at the moment. You know, there isn't fair funding for schools. And I'm so concerned about the energy costs that we are literally sitting with no lights on in many parts of the school. The corridors don't have lights on, **I just cannot stomach the increases in [energy] costs...** That is teacher's salaries that, so we've had to make redundancies. That's heart-breaking."- Current Senior Leader

## Health and well-being

The combined pressures outlined above have resulted in negative consequences for senior leaders' health and well-being. Some senior leaders we spoke with found it increasingly challenging to deal with the demands of the role and had been diagnosed with a variety of conditions ranging from anxiety, heart palpitations, and high blood pressure.

"During Covid when we had to do the grade, I was responsible for sending all of the information out to the staff, to lead that process and for pulling the grades back in, so liaising with each of the middle leaders and make sure that it was an appropriate process in place and make sure that they had validity. **It was a very clear to me when I was having palpitations and I did need to really carefully think about my health.** I'm afraid to say that it's becoming more common actually. Also, I think many senior leaders you might know have lunch until about 5 o'clock in the day when the school is quiet, so just basic things like that, it's an unhealthy lifestyle in terms of eating and keeping yourself well. **Certainly, the physical effects in terms of palpitations, increased blood pressure,** I did go to the doctor about increased blood pressure around that time, so that was quite serious" – Current Senior Leader

"In terms of mental health there have been times when I've struggled with that, and that's been work-related, and yes, and that very often communicates itself in a physical way, doesn't it? But yes, things like **back problems, sciatica,** the classic things that people often get when they're tense and stressed. But yes, certainly it has, there have been times when **it has affected my mental health.**" – Current Senior Leader

"[COVID] was just a completely new way of working and of course, at the time nobody really knew what was going to happen so it was a really uncertain time, so I think that was probably when my anxiety, **I've never suffered with anxiety before** until then, and then it's not left me since even though we have returned now to more normality. But the effects of Covid are still there"- Current Senior Leader

Carrying the weight of decisions alone and feeling isolated as a headteacher was also detrimental to health. A sense that schools are often perceived negatively by the media, parents and local government can also impact senior leaders and wider school staff.

**“The behaviour of learners and the behaviour of parents, and so some of the attitude and the-, just negativity, particularly from parents, that you have to deal with, which is not always rational. It's fine for people to make judgements, but when they don't do it on specific information or they're coming from a very emotive place, it can add stress on myself or leadership or any of the teachers or support staff in the school, which I don't think is fair. And then there's the element to it as to, *I don't feel the profession is regarded as highly by the general public as it used to be.*” – Current Senior Leader**

**“And the increasingly pernicious influence of social media, and with the job it's very, very difficult to manage and like, and I don't like it. *Dealing with unreasonable parents has become much more of a factor since COVID*, so you know, that's something that I don't think anybody particularly likes. And, well, the feeling in a, kind of, wider sense of sometimes education and schools being almost like a political football, and politicians who don't necessarily understand schools making decisions that have a bearing upon schools, on the day-to-day life of schools. And again, that can be difficult... all I can do is react, and you just hope that you react accordingly and in the best way for the school” – Current Senior Leader**

In addition to work-related health conditions, senior leaders with pre-existing health conditions struggled to balance work with managing their health, with many finding that work exacerbated their conditions. One senior leader also found that the menopause was not adequately discussed nor were there any formal support mechanisms in place. She reflected that this, and changing life circumstances, may be a reason for women over 45 leaving the workforce.

**“Women often reach this sort of status when they are a certain age of their lives. They're probably going through a flux of their children potentially growing up and leaving home, and also a big factor for me was the menopause. Women of this age, they're dealing also with parents who are elderly, and then they're going through a significant physical and hormonal change, which can be really challenging. And *I think having gone through it myself, I'm a much better manager now and much more supportive of my staff.* Often I'm working with staff at a similar age so I can see all the signs. *And I don't think that society in general recognises that pivotal point in a woman's career often dovetails with all of those things happening at the same time...* And I do think that we need to acknowledge that as a reason why potentially women may leave the job.” – Current Senior Leader**

Overall, the senior leaders we spoke to wanted to remain in the profession, but found increasing pressures to impact their mental and physical well-being. Without support, many worked long-hours, in stressful conditions and created coping strategies to manage the role.

**“*I'm an emotional eater*, so a tough day equals the fridge being hammered, and it's been tough, so I have certainly put quite a bit of weight on, since I've undertaken the role, because, as I say, if I'm stressed or if I've had a hard day, my comfort is food. So, that's one thing which isn't healthy. Secondly, *I've had 2 bouts of shingles, which I certainly attribute to stress*, and thirdly, my mental health has not been great. You know, *there are times when I've been quite low* and found it a real challenge to face that alarm clock at 6 o'clock and getting in the car and coming to work, but I feel that's down to a lot of the conflict [in schools]. When people are being unpleasant to you and taking what you have to do and follow policies and procedures very personally and making it very personal against you, that's hard and *that has upset me and made me low*, on top of just the *sheer volume of work and being quite overwhelmed* by it at times” – Current Senior Leader**

## Retirement and pensions

Despite the challenges experienced by senior leaders, most we spoke to wished to remain in their leadership positions. Many wished to continue until they retired, as they felt a responsibility towards their schools.

**“I'm nearly 58, so I've only got 2 more years until I'd finish, *I can hold on in for those 2 years.* But I would say that this year, with regards to the budget, it has been exceptionally challenging. And disheartening really, when you're seeing money fritted away for things that just aren't going to impact and make a big difference, and it's really frustrating.” – Current Senior Leader**

**“*There are days when it takes every ounce of everything you have.* It's usually, driven by the behaviours of parents, not the behaviours of children or staff. That's what we're trained to do, but *where somebody just wants to threaten and scream and shout at you for their own satisfaction* and not achieve anything for their children, that can be absolutely draining. And it never lasts, It's never-, *I will retire from this job*, it's how long I can keep going before that happens that is the thing that I have to consider” – Current Senior Leader**

"It's a case of age and I was looking to retire naturally with age and being 60 before COVID but with COVID coming along then *I didn't feel it was appropriate to leave and there's a moral obligation to stay* and a moral purpose to stay to see the schools through. And I felt that this September was the most optimum time. Schools were getting back to some degree of shape or normality." – Former Senior Leader

The biggest concern was age, with senior leaders expressing concerns over staying in post until retirement. They feared not being able to be able to meet the demands of the role but could not retire due to a sense of obligation or the financial constraints afford to retire early. Many also felt there were no pathways out of headship and did not want to 'start over' and face a salary reduction.

**"The reality is there are days when it's just too much** and what tends to happen is those days get more often, and when the number of days when it's just too much is too much for me to deal with, that's when I'll retire. I will go by 60, luckily because I've been a headteacher for a long time *I've got a pension that will allow me to do that*. But where I would always have thought I could go to 65, to be a head for 20 years, which I'll have been when I retire, is-, it drains, *it's not a job that you can do long term*." – Current Senior Leader

**"Do I want to be here for another 8 to 10 years until I retire? Possibly not!** Do I know what I'm going to do next? Not a clue." Yes, I mean, I am getting to the point now, I'm 52 and thinking, 'What is next?' And I'm not sure that there are any natural roles that come after experienced headship. You know, *there's no natural pathway*, I think, so, you know, for me, if I went into the consortia, which a lot of my colleagues do, number 1 that would be a wage drop, which I'm not prepared to do a wage drop." – Current Senior Leader

**"Being in SL role too long and burning out: I must confess,** I became a headteacher aged 38 so I have to remember that I need to officially work until I'm 67. Well, you know, *being in a headteacher role for 30 years is impractical* because of the pressure so I'm using myself as an example in this respect." – Current Senior Leader

Most former senior leaders we spoke to had left their post to retire. One exception was a senior leader who left due to a lack of support, budget constraints and wanting to spend more time with her family. Despite wanting to remain in the role, she felt she had been pushed out and was unable to continue.

**"I'm leaving because it's the lack of external support,** I think that's the biggest thing. Budget constraints as well, the schools are not funded adequately enough to do what we need to do, especially when it comes to additional needs." – Former Senior Leader

"Another reason why I'm leaving really because it is difficult, I'm a mum of 4 but 2 of my children are quite grown-up now, I had them when I was quite young and always have guilt about the fact that I was pursuing my career and felt like I didn't have enough time for them... *I feel like I wasn't there enough for them*, I never got to go to a sports day, you can't ever get that back... I just feel like I need to be a mum, I need to be there more for them because it is a very busy job and you are totally dedicated to the school because you have to be. And it's almost like another baby because you're just totally dedicated to the school and the children in the school and you just don't ever really switch off, it's a hard job to switch off from." – Former Senior Leader

# Policy Proposals & Discussion

This section will set out policy suggestions to address the key recruitment and retention challenges explored in this report. These have been collated directly from interviews, focus groups and the stakeholder workshop group, as well as from our own analysis of the evidence presented above. We begin this section by outlining the key takeaways for policy makers, as well as features that our participants have identified should be applicable to all policies. Below this, we summarise all the policy suggestions made by research participants, having grouped these into the following ‘challenge areas’ impacting recruitment and retention: current processes; health & well-being; training and development; support and networking; funding and salaries; and acknowledgement and understanding of the role. We will also cover any discussions that participants had regarding the positives and negatives of these suggestions.

## Key Takeaways for Policy Makers

In this section, we have summarised the key take aways for policy makers. We have highlighted the policies that are most viable and had the most support from research participants across group.

**Across all policies, senior leaders highlighted it is important these:**

- **Are developed with senior leadership consultation;**
- **Recognise that the specific context of each school type, location and pupil demographic shapes the impact of policies;**
- **Do not treat Special educational schools as an ‘add-on’ to the mainstream policies;**
- **Set out a minimum standard of provision for all of Wales’s schools.**

Senior leaders want policies that address the key challenges of their roles by improving current processes within local and national government, providing health & well-being support, improving training & development opportunities, improving support & networking for senior leaders, clear steps taken to reduce workload, reviewing and re-allocating school budgets and funding, and clear acknowledgement of the vital role senior leadership and schools play in the community. The main policies to address these are set out below.

### Improve Current Processes

- **Improve data collection** to identify areas in Wales with specific recruitment and retention challenges, to enable targeted recruitment and retention interventions.
- **Collect more data** (specified in ‘identified data gaps’ section). This would include regularly conducting exit interviews with headteachers, and interviewing NPQH holders who do not move into headship after 2 years, to see if they can be supported into the role.

### Support Health and Well-being

- **Make headteacher well-being a priority** by providing proactive support. This could include sabbatical offers, 24/7 therapy access and/or introducing a buddy programme with recently retired headteachers.
- **Build in support provision and well-being checks** for headteachers during specified, highly emotive scenarios including staff disciplinarys, redundancies and pupil exclusions.
- **Supply headteachers with vouchers or memberships** to gyms or other wellness centres.

### Expand Training and Development

- **Improve training and professional development opportunities for aspiring senior school leaders** by creating shadowing opportunities with current heads, that will entail rotating through different school types across Wales.
- **Have more training for self-care** and how to build supportive networks with other headteachers included in NPQH training. It was also suggested to introduce alternate pathways to headship as an alternative to the NPQH.

### Formalise Support and Networking

- **Facilitate senior leader networks and working groups** by having Local Authorities in all regions regularly organise and fund time for these.
- **Utilise recently retired heads** to provide one-to-one support for headteachers by paying to keep them on as part-time mentors who can circulate between schools in a region.
- **Conduct a review of existing Local Authorities support**, where senior leaders can feedback on the effectiveness of current support modes.

- **Ensure those employed in Local Authorities to support senior leaders have the relevant experience**, are regularly going into schools, and are always available during work hours either via phone or email.

### Reduce Workload

- **Assign more PPA time**, or an equivalent, for senior leaders to use as dedicated leadership time.
- **Review and reduce the headteacher remit**, including shifting responsibilities to Local Authorities, bursars, business managers and applicable services such as social care.
- **Define clear expectations for working hours of senior leaders** and set out steps to make these workable, such as TOIL for working weekends or reducing the senior leader remit.

### Increase Funding and Salaries

- **Remove bureaucracy around grant and funding applications** for schools.
- **Ensure headteachers salaries effectively reflect their heightened responsibilities** and accountability by supplementing headteacher salaries across Wales to ensure none are below deputy salaries.
- **Review the current funding system** to identify where funding can be re-allocated, particularly looking at the effectiveness of the consortia and middle tier in supporting schools.

### Acknowledge and Address the Reputation of the Role

- **Create public awareness campaigns for ‘zero tolerance’ of abuse of teaching staff.**
- **Encourage interest in senior leadership roles from a young age** by creating leadership opportunities in school, such as school council. In addition, have more opportunities for older students to learn from and experience senior leadership.

## Key Features for All Policies

Throughout this research, participants highlighted that all policies that aim to address senior leadership recruitment and retention challenges in Wales should also always meet the following criteria:

### Be developed with senior leadership consultation.

It was highlighted across this research that there was often a feeling from senior leaders, along with wider teaching staff, that policies tended to be put upon them without proper consultation or consideration for the wider practical implications of these. This led to frustrations and role dissatisfaction for many participants, who said it showed a lack of respect and understanding from the government. This often negatively impacted senior leaders’ well-being and views of the role.

It is therefore crucial that senior leaders, as well as other stakeholders, continue to be consulted for policy co-production, as this leads to more effective solutions with buy-in from those who will be directly impacted. One senior leader described how this research was already a step in the right direction, and that they were happy to give their time to contribute to this research. They hope that by doing so, this will lead to real, impactful change:

“I'm just really pleased that this level of research is happening and that-, you've apologised a couple of times for taking up my time, and I don't mind you taking up my time because I think it's very valuable what you are doing, and I think it's very important. I think that if I can make a contribution to that, then that would be a valuable use of an hour of my time, and I'm happy to do so. I'm just really pleased it's happening, and I hope that it *leads to actual change on the ground*, that's what I would like to be able to see, obviously.” - Current Senior Leader

### Recognise that the specific context of each school type, location and pupil demographic shapes the impact of policies.

Whilst many participants across school types faced similar challenges, it was acknowledged some challenges can also vary between school types, and there can't be a ‘one size fits all’ solution:

“You see, *schools are all different* and I think people generalise schools as all looking the same, and I think what heads are passionate about is understanding the nuances of their school and what their school needs. And that will depend on where that school is located, what the demographic is like in that area. If you're in an affluent school and I've worked in affluent leafy lane schools, the pressures are very different to the school that I'm in now.” - Current Senior Leader

### Not perceive Special educational schools as an ‘add-on’ to the mainstream policies.

This research also highlights the importance of ensuring that special schools are considered properly, as the school and pupil needs can vary a lot from other schools in Wales. One interviewee felt that within this research special schools had

not been initially considered in their own right, and that moving forward this should be a recommendation made to policy makers:

**"I think *special schools historically have always been an add on*, and it was a bit like in the meeting, even in the initial slides there was not really a mention of that separate context. It's not just in that instance, it's right across the board that we're always a little footnote at the end. And actually, these are the most vulnerable children in society. These are the children that probably struggle the most to become citizens. We talk about citizenship, don't we, as being one of the drivers of what we aspire ... Well, surely, we should be putting the money and the time into those children that are going to struggle to become citizens because of the barriers they've got to learning." - Current Senior Leader**

### **Whilst policies should be contextualised to individual school needs, there also need to be minimum standards established for all of Wales's schools.**

Following on from the above points, senior leaders frequently mentioned that there needs to be more equal opportunities and support across Wales. Many research participants gave examples of the variation in Local Authority and government support and training available to senior leaders in Wales. Senior leaders highlighted that, moving forward, there needs to be more formal processes for support, and that there needs to be a minimum level provided Nationally. This was also the case for training and professional development opportunities, as leaders noted these are often individually led and more ad-hoc, driven by headteachers themselves, rather than following clear minimum standard expectations set by the government.

One senior leader said this can come down to budget limitations. They said there needs to not only be a minimum level of support and training offered to current and 'future' leaders, but that this also needs to be accommodated by providing sufficient funds to all schools:

**"If you are in a rural school and you're the acting head, and you want to be a head, and the finance is not there for you to be released out of the classroom, then that's going to be a problem. So, it's about equal opportunities, and *are there equal opportunities throughout Wales?* I'm not sure myself. So yes, it's about being inclusive, isn't it? And that's hard, the way that we are spread out geographically." - Current Senior Leader**

## **Collation of All Senior Leader Policy Suggestions**

In this section, we have collated all policy suggestions from research participants, including their reasoning and discussions of the potential positives or negatives of these.

### **Current Processes**

#### **Take steps to make recruitment fairer and open to a wider pool of applicants.**

Both current and former senior leaders suggested changes that could be made to the recruitment process to improve school leader recruitment. These included: delivering unconscious bias training to governors; looking outside of schools to hire senior school leaders; and changing headteacher job descriptions.

Research participants further discussed how governors could be more involved in the recruitment process and highlighted that the voluntary nature of their roles may be leading to difficulties in the recruitment process; such as lack of scrutinising for suitable candidates and lack of support or feedback given to unsuccessful candidates to improve their applications for later rounds.

One current senior leader gave the example of a local school who had hired a former manager of Sainsbury's who is aiming to become a head. In this instance, the individual would be joining first as a teacher, with the intention of becoming a headteacher. However, when this idea was presented to other senior leaders in our stakeholder workshop, many raised concerns that this did not reflect what a headteacher should be. They felt that hiring headteachers outside of teaching would be to the detriment of teaching and learning.

On the other hand, there was support from the stakeholder workshop for a review of the headteacher job description. One interviewee had suggested changing the headteacher job advertisement, to make sure candidates understand that the listed responsibilities can be shared with their colleagues, so they are not overwhelmed or put off by these demands:

**"The interesting point that I personally believe at the moment is when you look at headteacher advertisements it says, 'You will be responsible for,' and it gives you massive lists of what you're responsible for. You must have these competencies and it gives you other lists. One person has not got enough time to do these things or indeed be a master of all of those competencies. *You need a team of people who can look after those competencies* across the group to be able to meet the challenges." - Current Senior Leader**

Attendees of the stakeholder workshop agreed that this can be overwhelming, and raised concerns that too many of these responsibilities were business management and administrative task that they felt detracted from the true headteacher purpose of focusing on pedagogy and teaching development. Policy suggestions to address the changing headteacher remit will be discussed further in the 'Reducing Workload' section.

### **Create processes to identify and prepare potential senior leaders early in teacher training.**

Some research participants stressed that it is not only senior leadership recruitment and retention that is a challenge but getting candidates into teaching altogether. They said that interventions to address recruitment and retention need to begin from the start of teachers' careers.

One interviewee suggested that processes could be put in place that would link teacher trainees with recruitment gaps, encouraging them early on to work towards roles in regions that are struggling to recruit:

**"Start speaking with the IT providers in possibly making those links with students in the initial teacher training and trying to match where jobs are becoming available in a year from now... Try to get those students thinking about employment within the [low recruitment] locality... There could become some chance of them progressing into full time employment through that route and that's quite a nice thing for people who want teaching practice, knowing there's a potential for a job at the end of it. It gives the incentive to work hard... So I think we need a little bit more *imaginative* [solutions for how] we get our early entrants into the profession."** - Current Senior Leader

### **Improve data collection to enable targeted recruitment and retention interventions.**

Both our research participants experiences, and our own experience, identified a need for improving data collection processes in Wales.

**"I also think, in terms of all the data collection, there's been a total *lack of investment in a national management information system.*"** - Current Senior Leader

One interviewee discussed the areas that they feel need particular focus from the Welsh government, to facilitate targeted interventions:

**"I think *analysing* the reality of the situation of retention through *data* so that you know where in Wales is this worst [is needed]. Where in Wales are we finding it hardest to recruit headteachers? Where in Wales are we finding it hard to get people to apply for senior leadership posts? Which subjects are the biggest challenge, and where in Wales is it hardest to recruit to those subjects? When we've found that out.... What can be done to support? To address those geographical, those population issues, those transport issues that cause these problems?... Once we know exactly why, and preferably statistically, then you can start to *focus on those areas that are worst affected*... if we had that interrogation of the data on these things by the Welsh Government and the Local Authorities then you'd know where to go to provide and support headteachers and governing bodies to enable them to do things like that."** - Former Senior Leader

Research participants suggested this would aid more targeted resolutions to address Welsh-specific challenges. They suggested there needs to be more research into reasons why senior leader retention is high in some schools and not others:

**"I think [we] need to look at retention strategies looking at the dates across schools and for those schools where retention is not good, that's probably something that's not being looked at in terms of Estyn or Local Authority monitoring and possibly that is something that should be happening."** - Former Senior Leader

Findings from this research suggest a lack of movement between schools due to school cultures and/or family responsibilities outside of work making senior leaders reluctant to move schools. However, there could be more learning to be done in this area, to enable sharing of good practice from schools with high senior leadership retention.

Senior leaders also stated it would be useful to conduct more data collecting activities, such as conducting exit interviews with heads. In addition, interviewing deputies who hold NPQHs but haven't gone into headship, to give the school an opportunity to provide support to the deputy if they did want to progress to headship but were facing barriers.

### **Address identified data gaps.**

Although SWAC data collection has significantly improved the quality and detail of the workforce data, we additionally identified missing variables that could provide a better picture of the current state of the shortage of senior school leaders in Wales. These were as follows:

*More information about vacancies*

**The tenure of the vacancy.** We calculated turnover rates as a headcount measure, however, a more accurate measure would be based on full-time equivalents.

**The type of leadership role.** This information would be very valuable to investigate whether some roles are harder to recruit for than others. If this data was available, we might find out that some of our findings are related to the type of

leadership role, rather than, for instance, the school phase.

**The salary of the advertised post.** Information on salaries would help understand whether recruitment issues are related to the remuneration offered.

**Whether vacancies were readvertised.** This could help identify where shortages are concentrated, and which vacancies/roles are harder for fill.

**Special requirements for the post.** As well as proficiency in the Welsh language, other details such as religion or minimum years of experience in leadership could be recorded to shed light on the expectations of schools.

More information about the applicant and the person appointed

**Experience and age.** These variables would indicate how close the applicant cohort is to retirement. For example, the information gathered might predict future peaks of turnover.

**Most recent/current role.** Applicants are mostly composed of senior leaders who wants to change school, and middle leaders who are looking for a promotion. This information could be used to evaluate the state of the leadership pipeline.

**Qualifications and other applicant characteristics.** These variables would help policymakers understand why some posts are left unfilled.

**Local/non-local origin.** This information would be useful to better understand the diversity of the pool of applicants. If we were to find that schools in a particular Local Authority receive mostly local applicants, there would be a high chance that the pool of applicants is composed of (mostly) the same people across posts advertised within the Local Authority.

Finally, the collection of some general information about the number of schools that belong to a school group would be advisable. This data could be linked to our results to find out whether the leadership composition in each Local Authority is associated with the number of schools that are part of a federation or partnership.

## Health and Well-being

### **Make headteacher well-being a priority and provide proactive support.**

Across interviews, focus groups and stakeholder workshops, participants stressed the importance of more support for senior school leaders' mental health – particularly for Headteachers. Headteachers often felt that current well-being policies are for their staff, but do not address their own lack of support. Whilst some acknowledged their Local Authorities did have support systems in place, they often felt this support was not proactive or extensive enough to be sufficient:

**“Something for well-being I think would be really *important for longevity in post and retention*, because I've never seen pressures like there are at the moment, just tremendous. The *magnitude of pressure* that we see with the children is something else.” - Current Senior Leader**

Participants often reported that the isolation and pressure of the role had been detrimental to their mental health, and many went on to suggest well-being support as a priority for addressing retention challenges. Senior school leaders also felt that if middle leaders saw there was more support for headteachers, it would help to address recruitment challenges.

Participants suggested the following as proactive support for headteachers' well-being:

***Having one weekday fortnightly that was dedicated to mental health.*** Headteachers would be expected to use this time to complete an activity that supports their mental health. Activities suggested included; walks in nature, exercise in chosen sport/group activity, meeting with friends, and resting at home.

***Have processes in place to provide well-being support alongside process support.*** Several of the headteachers interviewed, both current and former, mentioned specific scenarios that were particularly detrimental to their mental health. As mentioned in the 'Challenges' section, these included having to make staff redundancies, take staff disciplinary action, exclude students and manage angry and occasionally staff-abusive relatives/carers.

Whilst one interviewee praised the support Local Authorities provided for the administrative side of these situations, they went on to add that they did not feel they had received any or enough support for the impact these experiences had on their well-being. It was suggested that a potential solution would be to have well-being support for headteachers embedded into guidelines and processes for managing these scenarios.

***Having a person to speak to informally, regularly and without judgement.*** Senior school leaders discussed that being able to 'offload' to someone, without fear of judgement or repercussions, would be helpful in sharing burdens that could often weigh them down. One senior leader stressed that it would be most helpful for this person to have experienced senior school leadership themselves, as they would have the best understanding of their concerns:

**“I've self-referred for support when I was feeling anxious. The people that are talking to you *can't relate to the workload of what you have*. I think it's having almost *ex headteachers that have retrained to be able to***

**give you the support** or people who have worked in high pressured jobs rather than somebody who has done a counselling, 2-year degree, sat in an office. I mean it in the nicest way... But, they tell you to 'sit down and breathe'. Well, you haven't got time to breathe... Being told to 'breathe' or to 'go and take a walk', you clearly haven't been in headship." - Current Senior Leader

Another added that this support should always be available, not something that has to be sought out.

**Having counselling available from a professional.** Workshop attendees as well as interviewees also said there should be therapists, counsellors or clinical psychologists available to headteachers when they are struggling. It was again suggested this should be readily available and should not require self-referral or governor's approval. It should instead always be there to be used if needed and should be available in equal measure across schools in Wales:

"[There needs to be] a very **proactive support structure** around Head Teachers, that Head Teachers can easily refer into... Something that is absolutely upfront, click on this and there will be support available. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but certainly we would be able to get you **a referral very quickly** to somebody who will **listen**, and who might be able to give you some **good advice**, about how your physical and mental well-being interacts with the job, rather than necessarily the mechanics of the job itself.... I think until we get that [support] right we are still going to have a recruitment issue, and we are going to have a retention issue, because people are more and more going to get to my age and finish, rather than hang on until 58, 59." - Current Senior Leader

### **Enable time out of the role by changing the culture and creating opportunities.**

Many current and former senior school leaders expressed that they had felt 'burnt-out' at points, or that they would retire early as they could not keep going due to ongoing pressures and workload. One headteacher, who was about to retire early, said that if they had been able to take one or two terms out of their role as a sabbatical, they would have been able to stay on as Headteacher for longer:

"You touched on it earlier, you asked whether I had any secondments or sabbaticals. I think that something like that, **a programme that headteachers can access**, I think that would have been tremendously helpful. If I could have had a sabbatical for a term, 2 terms maybe, do some research, do some whatever. I think [I would] have [felt] refreshed, and maybe there would have been another year in me." - Current Senior Leader

Other interviewees agreed that taking time out of the roles would help in longer-term retention and this needs to be more acceptable within the sector culture if individuals are to feel comfortable doing this.

Both stakeholder workshop attendees, interviewees and focus group participants suggested to follow the model of other countries, such as New Zealand and Australia:

**FG1: I think in Australia, I might be wrong here, but for every 5 years you do as a teacher, you're entitled to 3 months sabbatical. For example, if you've done 1 years, you get half a year sabbatical. I think in Canada, I think you're entitled to a year sabbatical anywhere in your career.**

**FG2: To do what with it?**

**FG1: You can do whatever you want with it I think. You can go on holiday if you want.**

**FG2: Right, I'm going to Australia.**

**FG1: It's just kind of like, that career break might keep people going.**

**FG2: Or maybe just something different, maybe you have a secondment, sabbatical or whatever, just working for something else... Yes, I think that's not a bad idea." - Two Potential 'Future' Leaders**

The above was said in a jovial manner, but it illustrates a pattern that has been observed in Wales and across the UK, that senior leaders and teaching staff are choosing to move to other countries where the roles offer more appealing benefits and acknowledgement of their service.

**Concerns around losing staff through secondments.** However, former and current senior school leaders had some opposing views on whether time out from the role would help with senior school leader retention, particularly regarding taking time out of headship roles via secondment. One current senior leader felt that too many potential headteachers were already being taken out of teaching into the middle tier on secondments, and that this led to people leaving the profession:

"I think one of the key things they need to do is stop taking people out... They're taking people out into Local Authorities, into the middle tier... They're taking people out to the Welsh government on secondment. Estyn, you know, and all the Welsh speaking senior leaders. So many of them are finding opportunities elsewhere and I think that's a real problem... They need to look at the amount of staff that are out of school who are Welsh-medium. Teachers and leaders who could be **in this school, actually doing what's needed.**" - Current Senior Leader

Contrastingly, a former senior leader felt that headteachers were becoming heads much earlier than before, and that this was leading to early burn out and high attrition for these roles. They suggested that secondments could be a good solution to retention challenges, despite the risk that staff may not return to the role:

**“But with younger people going into the role, I think, 'Gosh, you could be 25 years doing that job. It'll kill you.' You know, and I do think for their own well-being that the younger generation of heads.... [They] do need to *consider stepping out*... Whether they'd go back, I don't know. And then they'd be a loss, wouldn't they, to the system? So, it's a bit of a risk. But ways of retaining them, I think retention is the thing.” - Former Senior Leader**

Several local authority leaders we spoke with felt that there was a stigma for senior leaders to take time out of these roles and education or stepping away for secondment. There was a sense that taking a step back was seen as a ‘failure’, and meant the senior leader was unable to cope with the demand of the role. They were interested in changing narratives on career pathways and encouraging senior leaders to see this instead as an opportunity for development and growth.

## Ensure headteachers have a voice in decision-making processes.

Across our research, another common theme raised around challenges of the role was that senior school leaders, particularly headteachers, felt like decisions from local and national government were being done ‘to’ them, instead of ‘with’ them. Participants often said this was detrimental to their mental health as they felt new policies and reforms increased their workloads unnecessarily due to ambiguity or impracticality, and they did not feel supported in implementing these:

**"Welsh government implemented the *well-being framework*, you know, the framework for embedding a whole school approach to emotional and mental well-being. But again, you know, it's just paper, and actually what it has done is had a negative impact on well-being in schools because it's just been *something else that we have to do*. It's statutory. 'You've got to implement this. You've got to follow the toolkit to evaluate well-being in your school?... So actually, it's become really onerous and difficult, and has led to negative well-being, you know, because there's not really been any support in place with it, it's just been, 'You need to-', you know, 'This is a statutory-', ... It's, like, pages and pages and pages long. Just like the new curriculum, really, so it's something else the school's worried about, really, because we've got to implement this”. - Current Senior Leader**

Many additionally said that, if they had been able to provide input on these reforms earlier, they would have felt more recognised and valued by the Welsh government:

**“So, it's about *changing policy and changing attitude*, and the whole approach of this collegial, *co-constructive approach to policy making* now where your heads are given ownership, you know, or they're encouraged to take ownership. There has to be a path for well-being really, I think, yes. Rather than being said, 'You've got to do this,' or 'You've got to do that,' it's about [headteachers] being part of the process and having a voice” - Former Senior Leader**

As a solution, participants suggested a conduit between headteachers and national government. This would demonstrate Welsh government’s interest in hearing from senior leaders, and provide an avenue for senior leaders to raise any concerns regarding the practicality of policies ahead of implementation:

**“And [we need] a conduit backwards, who would be there saying, 'Look, what you need to understand... Is that when you make this decision this is what happens on the ground. This is the impact it has on the Head, this is how it reverberates through the system!... If that could be in place, and if that could have a real robustness, in a sense I'm talking about a level of administration there, *I'm talking about people in a post*, and I think that would help.” - Current Senior Leader**

## Provide health benefits

Often interlinked with discussions around mental health, participants talked about the impacts senior school leadership could have on their physical health too. To support senior school leaders’ recruitment and retention via health support, participants mostly suggested offering more health benefits that they could use. These included vouchers or subscriptions to local leisure and fitness centres including pools and gyms, as well as more holistic support and wellness services such as acupuncturists.

**"I don't like that I have to pay quite a lot of money to do these things in order to counteract [the health impacts] being produced from my work. If I was working in industry, you'd get your private medical care, you get nothing for your working for the government... It would be lovely if there was a voucher to recognise it's a stressful job and you need some *holistic options to help your well-being*.” - Current Senior Leader**

**“Whether it's free gym membership, or do you know what I mean? Just some *incentives* that actually they're not just looking after their mental health, they're looking after their physical health as well.” - Current Senior Leader**

## Training and Development

Opportunities for training and development were other key challenges that senior school leaders felt could be impacting recruitment and retention into these roles. This included the view that current training did not properly equip staff to enter senior leadership roles, there were not enough development opportunities to keep senior leaders in their roles, and that there needs to be more continual opportunities and support for training and development of teaching staff at all levels, and across Wales.

### **Promote a supportive culture that enables people to develop.**

Both potential and current senior school leaders highlighted the importance of a school culture that enables individual growth and sustained professional development for successful recruitment and retention. This was important both for helping middle leaders to progress into senior leadership roles, as well as for keeping senior leadership feeling fulfilled in their roles, and thus remaining in them for longer.

One interviewee said this is where the National Academy for Educational Leadership is already helping, as it promotes a vision for Wales that gives staff these continual professional development experiences:

**"Again, it's about creating that culture of giving staff the experiences in order to move on, if they want to, and develop. Otherwise, people become stale. And I think, you know, this is where the Leadership Academy [National Academy for Educational Leadership] comes into its being, really. Because it *has provided opportunities and developed people*, and that's part of its vision and role for Wales." - Former Senior Leader**

### **Improve training and professional development opportunities for aspiring senior school leaders.**

Whilst research participants acknowledged the training pathways that currently exist for aspiring senior leaders, many felt that these did not equip them with all the skills that were needed for the role. Participants suggested three main activities that would help to prepare aspiring senior school leaders for headship across a range of schools: shadowing headteachers, rotating between schools and rotating between specialist leadership roles.

***More opportunities to shadow or temporarily step into the Headship role.*** Quite a few current and former headteachers felt that the best way to prepare staff to take on headship roles would be for them to either temporarily step into the role, or to have more opportunities to shadow someone already in the headship role:

**"In terms of recruitment, I think we have to have high-quality opportunities for aspiring headteachers to come out of schools and not just be deputies with teaching responsibilities, to actually come out and be mentored by somebody for a term, 2 terms, to work alongside somebody to *see what the job is actually like*." - Current Senior Leader**

Another interviewee agreed, saying that there needs to be more focus on allowing deputies to shadow headteachers to help with encouraging them to take that next step up:

**"The role of Deputy Head is important because they're the Heads of the future. And I think if you don't give your Deputy Head an insight to the role... I think the more you *build up the skills, knowledge and understanding of the Deputy Head*, the more they're likely to go for Headship." - Current Senior Leader**

One interviewee added that the main barrier to shadowing was that opportunities to shadow were not available consistently across Wales, and that there needs to be processes in place to equalise this.

***Rotate between schools to shadow different Headteachers.*** Within these shadowing opportunities, quite a few interviewees said it would be important to have deputies not just shadow the headteacher in their own school, but to rotate between schools across Wales to experience a range of challenges specific to the context of different school types:

**"We need to fund opportunities for senior leaders and middle leaders to *spend time in other schools to expand their horizons*... To not become too ingrained in one school culture and be more empathetic to challenges other schools are facing." - Current Senior Leaders**

Another interviewee added that shadowing in different schools would help to encourage more movement between schools in Wales, rather than potential headteachers remaining in their own school until their own head moved on. This could help to address recruitment challenges related to school location or demographic:

**"It used to be unheard of, years ago, to go and visit another school or go on secondment to another school. Whereas I think that needs to be improved, you know. Why not have *secondments and job swaps*? Obviously, as long as the children are catered for, you know, I think that's a good idea. Otherwise, it used to be a bit like the dead person's shoes. You didn't get to head unless somebody died or something." - Former Senior Leader**

One interviewee also felt there needs to be more training for senior leaders in how to support and develop their middle leaders and aspiring heads in key areas:

**"I think we need to be educated as headteachers, to ensure that we are *providing the right kinds of experiences and opportunities* for these people in between accessing the programmes". - Current Senior Leader**

**Rotate between roles in the Senior Leadership Team (SLT)** In addition to shadowing headteachers across different schools, other interviewees felt it would be helpful for aspiring headteachers to gain experience across different senior leadership team roles, to build up training in many specialist areas. They felt this would help to strengthen the senior leadership team as well as better preparing each SLT member for headship:

**"If headteachers ran their schools in a collegiate way... So rather than keeping everything in discrete boxes of roles and responsibilities of senior leaders, *everybody has access to everybody else's roles*. And also, you change the roles around. So, for example, in a large comprehensive school you will have somebody who's responsible for staffing, maybe teaching and learning, maybe another one would be well-being, it could be somebody else is responsible for timetabling... Whereas if everybody knows how to do another role within the school, that really helps succession management. So instead of you just knowing 1 role, you actually know 2 or 3, and you know how the school works... Whereas if you keep everybody in alignment with their own role, and they don't learn, then it becomes really hard to become a headteacher successfully without that knowledge." - Former Senior Leader**

### **Further review the NPQH**

Many of our research participants were aware that a [review of the NPQH](#) had already been undertaken by Professor Mick Waters on behalf of the Welsh Government.

The improvements to the NPQH suggested by participants in this research often echoed wider points made about how training for aspiring senior leaders could be improved, such as having more opportunities to shadow headteachers in post, and for these placements to be across different school types:

**"So actually, as part of the NPQH, for me, this should be the opportunity that if you sign up for the NPQH, you stay in your school for a year, but then you're given 2 terms out to actually *work with a recognised excellent headteacher* in 2 different demographics. A really challenging area and a more affluent area, and then just *immerse themselves in the life of a headteacher*." - Current Senior Leader**

In addition, another interviewee, a former headteacher, added that they felt there were not always enough opportunities for aspiring headteachers to take up NPQH training, and that something needed to be done to ensure there were equal opportunities across schools in Wales for those wanting to complete the NPQH to access it.

Members of the stakeholder workshop group noted that the NPQH should also contain more training for self-care and how to build supportive networks with other headteachers. Attendees said it was important to begin this training early, so that aspiring headteachers are encouraged to adopt healthy habits and create a support system from the beginning of their leadership careers.

One interviewee commented that, in addition to a review of the NPQH, there also needed to be more alternative pathways to headship outside of the NPQH, to allow more fluidity for recruitment to these roles. Another interviewee suggested removing the NPQH as a requirement altogether, so that teachers from England who hadn't completed this training could still apply for roles in Wales.

### **Provide targeted training to widen the pool of Welsh-medium candidates.**

One interviewee identified that Welsh-medium schools in particular need targeted recruitment interventions, and suggested there should be more Welsh language training built into senior leadership training, to fill these gaps. Another interviewee suggested extending the 'Welsh in a year' courses to senior leaders, to expand the pool of Welsh-speaking senior leaders and resolve some of these recruitment challenges.

## **Support and Networking**

Another challenge that faced senior school leaders was feeling isolated in their roles. Having more support and networking opportunities were often the solutions put forward by senior leaders to address these challenges.

### **Facilitate networking between senior leaders across Wales.**

When asked, interviewees often said their main source of support in their roles are their networks with other senior leaders. This was especially important in schools who had specialisms, such as Welsh-medium schools and special schools. These networks gave senior leaders the opportunity to support one another and share best practice through forums and group feedback. However, there were barriers to these networks – specifically, that the onus fell to senior leaders themselves to organise these networks. It also took senior leaders away from their daily roles, so funding would be required to cover them whilst they were attending networking events.

The impression from ‘potential’ senior leaders was that headteachers formed their own support networks, but that these were ad hoc and initiated by headteachers themselves, not by any structure support. They discussed in the focus group they were unsure where teachers’ go for their supervision, to discuss their workloads and mental health:

**“I know Head Teachers are very good in terms of *supporting each other*, certainly within our county. I know they are, because they're quite close they have a *WhatsApp group* and they can support each other there, but that's a little bit more ad hoc isn't it? It's not structured support... Supervision is the term I'm thinking of, because we all need to [have it]... Have someone who supervises us in terms of our workload, mental health, well-being. I suppose mine would be the Head Teacher, but where does he go for his supervision?”** - Potential ‘Future’ Senior Leader

One senior leader discussed how they felt Wales was already moving towards a more collegiate approach to leadership, but that there needs to be clear funding for these networks to ensure they continue. They also added how this collegiate approach will not only support retention for those in the role, but help to recruit into the role by developing leadership:

**"Wales is a very small country, and we're increasingly getting much better at *working together collaboratively*. As more headteachers open their doors and collaborate with other schools, then it becomes far less of an isolated role, and much more of a collegiate role. So, I do think that we've got a lot of potential in Wales to actually develop further, if people are prepared to give the time and the money, because it does cost money to collaborate. You have to pay supply work for your teachers who are out there. Then, *collaboration is the way ahead, really, for developing leadership*."** - Former Senior Leader

Other senior leaders spoke of having previous networks that had since been disbanded, but that they were keen to restore and expand:

**"There was a *deputy heads forum*, which worked really well and gave the deputy heads a voice and, you know, and a forum to come together and say what it was they needed in terms of training, in terms of support. Then that went years ago, but we've campaigned for this to come back in [our Local Authority], and actually, the first meeting took place last Friday afternoon, so that's really positive, because more of that needs to happen, you know, *working across schools*."** - Current Senior Leader

### **Provide 1:1 support throughout a headship.**

Having support in the form of a buddy, coach or mentor was frequently brought up as a potential solution to recruitment and retention challenges, particularly for headship. Senior leaders and potential leaders felt this one-on-one support would help to ease new leaders into the roles, as well as provide someone to ‘lean on’ and ‘offload’ to.

One interviewee said they felt that having a coach or mentor for headteachers would be especially important in encouraging more deputies to move into headship. They suggested that deputies would see the support available in headship and be less put off by their initial impressions of the increased workload and pressure in headship:

**"You become a deputy head, and you think, 'okay, that's fine, I'm happy where I am. I don't have to take on that huge level of responsibility, and yet I'm happy in my role.' So, people become deputy heads, and then don't want to take the next step further. I think that if there was more support for headteachers, there would be more people who would be headteachers. So, if there was a better structure of support, I think that would impact. By support, I mean people like myself, working alongside headteachers, to be there as *a listener*, if you like, *a mentor, coach*. So, a strong system of coaching, to support people in their initial couple of years as headteachers."** - Former Senior Leader

They went on to add that one to one support from headteachers, similarly to networking forums, already exists in some regions in an informal way, but that this is yet to be formalised and equal across Wales. This was echoed by other interviewees, who said 1:1 support can vary a lot between Local Authorities in provision and quality:

**“I also feel that there should be *a dedicated mentor* when you're a leader, whether you're a newly qualified leader, so it could be a peer mentor... It shouldn't be down to some authorities doing it, other authorities saying, 'Yes, you crack on with it, we're not needed, we're not organising it but if you want to organise it among yourselves as school leaders then go ahead.' No, where's the equality in that?”** - Former Senior Leader

One interviewee further discussed that 1:1 support or a ‘buddy’ could help them to de-stress, and it would be important for them to come from a place outside of education, unlike having a network with other headteachers. This would be so the headteacher could feel comfortable in discussing challenges as well as positives.

There was a lot of voiced support for this idea within the stakeholder workshop, and attendees stressed that it would be most useful if the ‘buddy’ was a recently retired headteacher, who could relate to current challenges far better than a headteacher who had retired over 3-5 years ago. One attendee highlighted that any headteacher who had retired pre-pandemic could no longer sufficiently understand the headteacher role, as their remit had changed so much since the pandemic.

Another interviewee suggested making the most of headteachers who are just about to retire, offering them an incentive to stay on as a mentor who circulated between schools in the local area:

**"When you spend, like myself, twenty odd years with headship across two schools, there's an awful lot of wisdom and knowledge there.... I would like to look in the future to transitional headship that will help people to come into those roles and to have that *wraparound support* to go through what is essentially a cycle of work in a school. Schools very much run to an annual cycle, and I think it will be hugely beneficial to sit alongside and just to guide, to mentor, to coach across the twelve months until they've [new headteachers] got a full cycle under their belts... Possibly it doesn't necessarily need to be one person per school, it may be an area liaison head teacher who's looking after four, five, six schools within a geographical area." - Former Senior Leader**

Another interviewee suggested that headteachers considering retirement could work part-time as a 4- or 3-day week, and the deputy would cover the remainder of the days. They said this would help to keep the retiring head in the role longer, whilst supporting succession and allowing the deputy to experience the role of headteacher whilst keeping access to the headteacher's wealth of knowledge. Interviewees again felt this would require a shift in culture, with acknowledgement from government that shared leadership would be workable:

**"I think it needs to be *signalled from a different tier* as well, rather than it only happening because individual headteachers, kind of, raise it with their governing bodies as a possibility. I think there needs to be some signal from elsewhere that actually shared headships or things are workable. I mean, you know, we've got an increasing number of schools that have been run by exec heads who quite clearly aren't in 1 school for 5 days a week, and yet that's seen as quite a workable thing. But for some odd reason, I think, there's a general feeling that the headteacher should be in the school all the time, that it ought to be a single person." - Current Senior Leader**

### **Conduct a review of existing Local Authority support, with more opportunities for heads to feedback.**

Research participants often discussed existing support provided by their Local Authorities, and there was much variation in views of whether participants felt this was sufficient or easily accessible.

For example, one interviewee felt their Local Authority health and safety support officer was very helpful and the process of them providing support worked well. However, they felt their HR support officer wasn't providing support in a way that was useful for them. They also felt that the responsibilities that lie with the Local Authority and those that lie with the headteacher were slowly shifting towards the headteacher taking on more of this work:

**"We are lucky, we have a health and safety officer. So, I'm linked with someone in the Local Authority who's fantastic and she comes in, it's usually once a month now and supports me to go over any big policy changes, and that model, I think, when that's rolled out, it's very successful... I think where it doesn't work is where you are *left juggling all these balls*. I do have a link with HR, but again, what HR do and what the expectation of what the schools do now seems to be very much shifting over to schools... I would love it if my HR officer just rocked up and did half a day in school once a week. And then we cleared the decks. Whereas at the moment, I have a drip, drip offer and sometimes I need them and other times I don't need them for 3 weeks." - Current Senior Leader**

Participants felt it would be useful for headteachers to have more avenues to feedback on which Local Authority support is helpful, and to be able to highlight areas where more support, or different support, would be useful. One interviewee said this would help to redirect funds towards the most useful forms of support as well as identify areas of the support system that need improvement.

Participants had already identified two key areas where improvements could be made to support for senior leaders from their Local Authorities:

***Ensuring those providing support have the relevant experience.*** Quite a few senior leaders gave examples of situations where the individual from their Local Authority responsible for supporting them did not have relevant experience to advise them.

For example, one senior leader from a special school said their school improvement advisor had not worked in a special school, but it was their role to advise them:

**"Again, really important [support is from] someone who is close-ish to them [senior leader] within their career, not someone who has done it 20 years ago, or someone who is detached from their particular type of community or type of school... We have school improvement advisors, they come and they're supposed to be supportive of our school improvement plan and give us professional learning advice. But they tend to not come from people from special school background, for instance, and they can't really understand the issues we deal with [in a special school]. So, if I had a mentor or a coach who was-, well, mentor, who was more from the sector, that would be really helpful." - Current Senior Leader**

Other senior leaders from secondary schools stated that there were lots of ex-primary headteachers who had taken up advisory or support roles in the Local Authority. They were concerned that they could not provide sufficient support or advice for them as secondary school headteachers, since they were coming from different experiences:

**“It's also about *the support to match the challenge*. In Local Authorities that I'm aware of, I think there are a disproportionate number of Primary School experienced staff working in Local Authorities against secondary experienced staff. I commented earlier, I have huge regard for Primary School sector... But, the challenges one faces are different and not having people who've been there, done it... I think is having an impact. It's almost now as though the Secondary School Associations are fulfilling a role that the Local Authority, and perhaps even the Welsh Assembly, should be providing support around.” - Former Senior Leader**

Stakeholder workshop attendees supported this finding, agreeing that they often felt that their sources of support in Local Authorities lacked the appropriate experience to provide support – for example having a retired deputy giving advice to a headteacher.

***Those in the Local Authority with a role to support the education sector need to visit schools and be readily available to provide support.*** Within interviews and the stakeholder workshop, it was also discussed that the support from Local Authorities did not feel sufficient since those working outside of schools had taken up more flexible working post-pandemic. Senior leaders reported that this often led to them being unable to reach support services when schools needed them, particularly on Fridays. Senior leaders further reported that those providing support felt more detached and lacked understanding of what was really happening on the ground in schools, as they had stopped coming into schools post-pandemic:

**“There's a perception about what we did [during the pandemic] and then there's the understanding of actually what was really happening. I think sometimes, for me, it *seems very separate in terms of Welsh government's understanding*.” - Current Senior Leader**

As a solution, it was suggested that there should be an expectation that staff holding roles that require work with schools should be coming into schools too, and they should ensure they are always reachable via phone or email on the days they work from home. In addition, interviewees and workshop attendees said there should be an expectation that those who work within education departments of the Welsh government, and will be making decisions impacting schools, should be visiting schools.

## Reducing Workload

The workload of senior school leaders, and what can fall under their remit, is often cited as one of the main factors impacting senior leadership recruitment and retention. Participants suggested that more time given to leadership responsibilities, along with clearer expectations for working hours and a reduction of the headteacher and schools' remit, would help to address this.

### **Build in more Planning, Preparation and Assessment (PPA) time.**

One suggestion that was frequently mentioned as a potential solution for helping senior leaders to manage their workloads, as well as other staff members, was having more time dedicated to PPA. They agreed this would be an investment, but that it would help employment shortages across all areas of teaching, not just senior leadership:

**“If you ask any teacher, you know, 'Why would you leave teaching?', it's because of the pressure of work, not the money. I don't think we give staff enough time for PPA. The allocation has to be 10%. If you're a teacher in France, you get 50%... So, give staff or senior leadership team members the scope to be able to give staff more planning and preparing time, so then they are less stressed and feel their workload is eased, and they're supported by us.” - Current Senior Leader**

Another senior leader added that the increase of PPA time could begin gradually, and that having this dedicated time would help staff at all levels to manage their workloads more effectively:

**“Consider increasing the PPA allowance for staff to 20% as a starting point. Or, 15% of their teaching load, rather than 10%. In an ideal world, I'd love to be in a position where I could turn around to my staff and say, 'You're all going to get 4 PPA lessons a week, not 3!... But I can't do that when I've got powers breathing down my neck saying 'You've got 6 staff too many as it is.' So, yes, that would be great if I'm honest for anybody coming into the profession that they knew they had the time...Everybody knows that teaching's not 8:30-15:30 and there's an expectation that you work at home. But when that does take over your life and your family, then, you know, I think that's why we see people-, I'm losing staff out of the profession this year and I'm losing senior leaders because I think, do you know what, there's more to life than work.” - Current Senior Leader**

Another interviewee stated that building extra PPA capacity into teachers' roles would be worth the investment by what it would save in costs of poor recruitment and retention.

**Specific PPA time for senior leaders.** Additionally, one senior leader suggested there should also be a version of PPA for leadership tasks for senior leaders, giving them dedicated time for leadership tasks:

**“So, exactly like teachers have PPA then heads need leadership time. And there needs to be that built-in, whether it's built into the budget, but it's all well and good to say, 'Oh, well, my governors are really good in this school and I can have that,' that's not equitable across Pan-Wales, so just as PPA, is Pan-Wales, then dedicated leadership time should be Pan-Wales from the Government, accepted and understood by all, for leaders.” - Former Senior Leader**

Another felt that staff should be given progressively more PPA time (or equivalent) as they took on more leadership responsibilities, and that this PPA time would serve as dedicated leadership time.

#### **Review and reduce the headteacher remit.**

Some of our research participants further suggested that there needs to be a review of what falls under the headteacher remit, and this needs to be looked at and potentially reduced:

**“You've got to try and improve the system by reducing the extent to which we are occupied with fairly menial and mundane administrative work that is of no direct benefit to the school, you know, enable us to continue to focus on our core business, i.e., improving learning and teaching, raising standards etc.” - Current Senior Leader**

One headteacher expressed their frustration that, despite being supported by the Local Authority for responsibilities that fall outside of the teaching and learning remit, such as HR or building management, they still had to expend a lot of time on managing these aspects of the role. They felt this detracts too much from what should be their priorities, such as educational improvement:

**“They [the Welsh government] need to reduce the role, really, because as a head, yes, you sign into your service level agreements, and I've got an HR officer that I can pick up the phone to and she can give me advice on HR, but I'm still having to do the HR stuff and do the meetings... You're still having to keep your eye on the money, even though I've got a business manager... You're doing all these things that the people that you phone, that's their area of expertise... I think it's about time Local Authorities took some of that responsibility back off head teachers because it is all of that stuff that takes me away from the children... I didn't become a head to be reporting my leaking toilets and stuff. I became a teacher to teach children”. - Current Senior Leader**

Another interviewee also felt that responsibilities, particularly around building management and health and safety, should lie with the Local Authorities to follow up on, not the headteachers:

**“[What would help your workload?] The Local Authority taking some things out of our remit... If we could just report things to them and then they track it. What happens is, you might get somebody who comes in does a fire audit in your school and then they'll write a report for you with recommendations... The Local Authorities don't take on any responsibility for those recommendations, it's the head teachers to be chasing and making sure that work is done, but we don't hold the purse strings for that work to be done, so we need to take out the middle man and the report goes out to the authority, so they should just see it through. The authorities own the buildings.” - Current Senior Leader**

**Bring back business managers for primary schools.** There was much discussion by research participants around the extra responsibilities held by primary school headteachers in Wales in particular. The solution given was to bring back bursars and business managers and to ensure these were available to all primary schools in Wales:

**“A couple of years ago, there was a little pilot across Wales for some funding for schools to have bursars. Now, some bigger schools and secondary schools do have bursars, but your average primary school wouldn't. You know, you've got a head and a deputy and somebody in the office, and frankly anything that comes in sits with those 3 usually. That died a death, but, you know, there was a little hint there of recognition that in order for schools to actually do the amount of administrative work that we're expected to do, that requires an extra person dedicated to doing that work.” - Current Senior Leader**

There was a lot of support for this idea amongst current senior leader interviewees and within the stakeholder workshop group, which was predominantly primary school headteachers.

**Address the increasing expectations placed on schools and senior leaders.** Participants across this research also highlighted that one of the main impacts of COVID-19 was the change in school and headteacher remit to address wider social issue. During the pandemic, schools took on many responsibilities to support children, their families and communities throughout the tumultuous period. Since lockdowns and COVID measures ceased, many school staff feel that there was an expectation for schools to continue to provide the same level of support to wider communities as they had throughout the pandemic. However, participants felt that this has not been a manageable or fair expectation to put on schools. They suggested that the scope of the post-pandemic headteacher remit needs to be reconsidered, and more work should be shifted back to more appropriate providers of this support, such as Local Authorities or the care sector:

“I do think moving forward that is fundamental, important.... Yes, headteachers have the ultimate responsibility for what goes on in schools, but I don't think we make enough of it [other services]... There are other services around the education authorities and social services and it is much more of a collaborative agenda for accountability that we need possibly to get out there.” - Former Senior Leader

Some participants stated that the role of schools had changed greatly over the past years regardless of COVID, and that the school was viewed as the place to resolve many of society's challenges:

“Our job is not, and I appreciate that there are challenges for families and working time and all of that sort of thing, but that's not actually our job, we're not babysitters, childminders, creches, that's not what we do. But I think we're getting turned into that because schools have long been, and will continue to be, the go-to to solve all the ills of society. So everything that goes wrong out there becomes a school problem to deal with.” - Current Senior Leader

“We're not just teachers anymore, we're health care workers, we're psychologists, we're actually the police as well. I don't think we're appreciated by the public. We're certainly not appreciated by the media and I think a lot of work needs to be done really in raising the profile of the work that schools complete, not just Head Teachers or SLT, teachers as well really.” - Current Senior Leader

One interviewee suggested this was a result of chronic underfunding of wider public services, leading to a gap in support that was then expected to be filled by schools:

“I think all of that isn't necessarily being reflected in what our jobs look like now. We're picking up the slack from the NHS. We're picking up the slack from social services and from parents... [Parents] aren't getting the respite they need. So, we're now seeing parents more stressed, potentially some of our families living in hotels now because there's not appropriate council properties out there. That whole squeeze on everything is really hard.” - Current Senior Leader

Participants felt that the resulting additional workload and responsibility put upon schools was leading to a lot of early retirement and recruitment problems. They suggested that addressing these issues by providing sufficient funding to public services would help to ease recruitment and retention problems across sectors.

**Have more opportunities to progress in teaching that do not require a move away from teaching.** A point that was raised across interviews, focus groups and the stakeholder workshop was that there also needs to be more opportunities for progression within education that do not require a move away from teaching and learning. One interviewee explained how expectations to progress into headship sometimes left people doing work they were less passionate about, but they felt pushed in to progressing to:

“It's really hard to see a career progression. What do you do if you're a really solid practitioner and you don't want to be a head? Where do you go? In a secondary school you can become a head of department and you can earn a reasonable salary and again, you're focusing in on a very niche area of skill set. In the primary sector you're all things to everybody. You you're Jack of all trades, master of none but again, unless you go into being assistant head or a deputy, which is again you're more further away from the children, where do you progress?” - Current Senior Leader

Senior leaders described how having a review of what falls into the headteacher remit, along with more opportunities to progress in teaching without taking on business management roles, would improve retention of more expert pedagogical staff within the sector.

### **Define clear expectations of acceptable working hours.**

Quite a few participants felt that clearer expectations for the working hours of headteachers and senior leaders needed to be set out at a national level, to enable a healthier work-life balance. They felt that existing policies were not workable as they may set out clear limits to working hours, but these are often not feasible when considering the tasks they are expected to accomplish within that time.

“There probably should be a maximum number of hours that we would be expected to work, because with teachers, they've got the 1,265 hours, and I know most teachers probably go over that... But that doesn't exist for senior leaders. Head teacher directed time is what I was looking for earlier, but I've read the policy on head teacher directed time but I've never been able to work by it because there's just too much to do.” - Current Senior Leader

One interviewee added that there needs to be more workable policies for *all* staff to sustain a healthy work-life balance:

“Not just the headteacher and the deputy, everybody, you know, it is a profession that expects you to work very hard for very long hours. Does the profession need to have more rules in place and policies on a national level saying this is what's expected, and you shouldn't be doing more than that because it's not fair on you and it's a key to professional life, we have to keep that balance.” - Current Senior Leader

## Funding and Salaries

### **Increase school funding to accommodate new policy suggestions.**

When suggesting policy solutions for recruitment and retention challenges, many participants emphasised the funding that will be needed to make these possible.

As previously discussed, to allow more opportunities for both potential and current senior leaders to attend professional development and networking events, money is required to provide staff cover costs. Senior leaders also noted that more funding could help them to expand their senior leadership teams, reducing pressures on them whilst providing more opportunities for middle leaders and aspiring headteachers to develop.

Other interviewees added that more money would allow them to free up staff time more, allowing them to delegate and share those headship responsibilities with middle leaders and the wider SLT:

**"I think schools need to be better funded, because things would be able to be delegated a little bit more, if I could release staff more to have roles because we have got people here that have done middle leadership training but actually, they've got their own classes, so it's really difficult to ask them to take on things when they've got a class all day, it would be them doing stuff either after school or in their lunch time, and more money in a budget would allow, perhaps, for that to be planned in." - Current Senior Leader**

**"...Because of the constraints in the budget, my senior leaders perhaps have got a little too much contact time and therefore not the time they need to fulfil their whole school responsibilities and roles properly." - Current Senior Leader**

### **Remove unnecessary bureaucracy from grant and funding applications.**

Some current headteachers expressed frustrations around bureaucratic processes they had to complete to justify spending relatively small proportions of allocated funding. Headteachers often felt this showed a lack of trust from the government, despite the high responsibilities entrusted to them due to the nature of their roles:

**"I will get a grant through from the school improvement for 3 grand. Now, 3 grand is a lot of money, but I've got a £7.5 million budget, so 3 grand basically is nothing, and they'll want me to do 3 hours of work to write it in a grant bid. Why? Either I'm trusted to do my role and use the finances open to me appropriately, or I'm not... It did feel for a very long time that we just weren't trusted as school leaders in Wales, the relationship broke down with government and that's why we're in strike action now, or action short of strike action." - Current Senior Leader**

This was largely supported by attendees of the stakeholder workshop, who agreed that the amount of time expected to spend on these funding applications showed a lack of trust and increased their workloads unjustifiably. They felt the system would benefit from a review of these processes, and reduction in red tape around these grants.

### **Ensure headteacher salaries reflect their increased responsibilities.**

Salaries were brought up as a method for improving recruitment and retention by both current and former headteachers. Whilst some said the pay was satisfactory, others said it fell short of salaries for management roles at equivalent levels in different sectors. Many also felt it was not sufficient compensation for the workload, pressures and accountability of the role:

**"If we want the job of a headteacher to be a better one and a more appealing one, yes the pay's got to reflect the responsibilities, the time, the workload, the pressure, the stress." - Current Senior Leader**

Many headteachers stressed that the differential between a deputy role and headteacher role also needed to be more significant, to acknowledge the increase in workload and accountability:

**"I don't think Heads, particularly, are paid enough, when you consider you are 24/7, 365 days of the year [a] head... I'm not saying I'd double the wages or anything, but that differential between running a department, being as close to Assistant Head as you can, and then a Deputy then a Head. It should be disproportionately more." - Current Senior Leader**

Quite a few interviewees further argued that it is unfair that, in the current landscape, deputies of large schools can be receiving higher pay than headteachers of smaller schools. Interviewees pointed out that this could be stopping deputies from moving to headship roles if they are aware they can get more pay for less responsibility:

**"Negatively, the fact that you have not had a great change in pay from being deputy to head, and yet incredible [change to] levels of responsibility... Increasingly, there are far fewer people applying to be headteacher, because they see that the responsibility is not aligned to the level of income that you get as a headteacher... So, people become deputy heads, and then don't want to take the next step further." - Current Senior Leader**

Participants therefore suggested that headteachers salaries should be reviewed and be reflective of their increased responsibilities and accountability, rather than school size. They stated that there should be no cases where a deputy is earning more than a headteacher.

### **Review the current funding system to identify where funding can be re-allocated.**

When participants were asked which areas they felt could be streamlined to increase school budgets and reduce their workloads, many identified the consortia as an area for improvement. Senior leaders felt that the consortia took a lot of money away from schools, whilst also not providing sufficient support:

**“We need to see whether the funding that is provided to people to come into teaching is sufficient... And, also, we have to think of the cuts that are facing schools. How can we maintain the standards? How can we attract the best teachers if school budgets are being cut? And so, we have to consider whether that middle layer of bureaucracy is actually needed.” - Current Senior Leader**

Participants suggested there needs to be a review of the education system to identify where money is being spent, and whether this is the best use of that funding:

**“We do have a large number of organisations that are linked to education, and this National Academy being one of them, the regional consortia another... Do we need all of this receiving money from the government which at the end of the day is not being spent in the schools to do that day-to-day work of teaching our learners? So I do think that there's a need for a review of the whole system in order to see what's happening and then to make a decision in terms of the priorities and where the money should go.” - Current Senior Leader**

During the stakeholder workshop, attendees discussed localities who had recently chosen to leave the consortia, and many felt this had been a good decision. Many said that the consortia created unnecessary bureaucracy and only added to schools' workloads instead of reducing them. One group of attendees suggested there should be a reorganization of schools, such as combining the Head of Education into one role across Wales, so that these funds could be re-allocated to schools. Another workshop discussion group suggested that the consortia should be disbanded completely.

## **Acknowledgement and Understanding of the Role**

In addition to feeling that the remit of senior leaders, particularly headteachers, had changed in recent years, many senior leaders also felt there is a lack of understanding of what headteachers do day to day, by both the public and Welsh government. This led to conflicts including abuse towards staff and impractical reforms, that senior leaders said subsequently worsened recruitment and retention challenges.

### **Public awareness campaigns to address the negative portrayal of teachers.**

Senior leaders said that, particularly post-pandemic, the expectations carers and communities have of schools has become unmanageable. This has led to tensions between school staff and families that can spill over into aggression from families, especially towards headteachers and other senior leadership staff. Senior leaders felt that media representations of the profession cause a lot of these problems:

**“And sadly, you know, we were heroes during COVID in the eyes of the public and now we're not, we're the villains I think. Many during the strikes [were] having a go at me as a member of the education profession about, 'Oh, you just want more money, you want more money', and I said, actually, it's not about the money, it's about the time.” .... And so they don't see it, particularly parent governors, on what the leaders in a school actually do. And even the teachers, they think it's a, you know, 09:00 to 15:30 job and they don't understand or appreciate the planning and the marking and the ongoing assessment that goes into all of that. But, lots of parents think because they've been in schools themselves and they're parents that teaching is easy.” - Current Senior Leader**

In the stakeholder workshop, many attendees agreed that this was a problem, and that misunderstandings by the public led by misrepresentation in the press had led to aggression towards teaching staff. It was suggested that, as in many other organisations, there should be a campaign for 'zero tolerance' of abuse of teaching staff. Senior leaders felt this would demonstrate support from the Welsh government and set clear expectations of how teachers should be treated.

**Public acknowledgement from the Welsh government of the vital role senior leaders fulfil.** Senior leaders also felt it would be beneficial for there to be a wider understanding of the role headteachers fill in the community. They suggested this would be achieved by acknowledgment from the Welsh government of all the roles headteachers and schools play in supporting the community.

"They [Welsh government] need to actively state their respect for our profession and they need to appreciate the reality of the sodding hard work we do and the extras we do, so the children we keep out of criminality and the children we keep out of the care system, the children that we feed and clothe when the care system won't feed and clothe them, that's our reality." - Current Senior Leader

**National campaign that highlights the roles that schools play in young people's lives.** Other interviewees suggested it could be a national campaign that reminds people of their connections with school, and the vital role that schools play in supporting the next generations:

"I'm of the opinion that everyone goes through life with some, sort of, connection with a teacher and without teachers people will not develop where or what they want to develop... I think we need to remind people of the role and the importance of schools and education and teachers in order to get that respect for that profession. I don't know how to do it. Is it a national campaign to remind people of that importance? And I think people need to support the sector because in essence, what we are doing is we are developing people to become citizens, citizens who understand the values and the role of society and when those are challenged on a daily basis, it means that the role becomes more difficult." - Current Senior Leader

"There's a lot of teacher-bashing that goes on in society, but actually we perform a vital role for children, so I think maybe some type of national campaign to understand the value of teachers and the role of education in society and social mobility and improving the prosperity of communities is absolutely vital. We do that at a local level but I think at a national level and certainly addressing the view of teachers in society is important... I think it's tremendously important that teachers are valued more highly in society and I think with that comes an understanding of the pivotal role of teachers and school leaders." - Current Senior Leader

### **Promote the positives of the role to the public and targeted groups.**

In addition to public awareness campaigns to reduce the challenges senior leaders get from the public, it was suggested that these campaigns could help to demonstrate the attractiveness of the role, to aid recruitment:

"I think for recruitment, we've got to be better at promoting all the positives of the job ... So I think, for me, we've almost got to have a marketing campaign by teachers and about the wonderful things that we've got". - Current Senior Leader

"I just think in Wales we've got to do better at promoting ourselves and promoting like I said all the benefits about being a headteacher." - Current Senior Leader

One interviewee said that it would be most effective to have current headteachers advocating the attractiveness of the role:

"[Getting] people who have had really good, really positive experiences and [can] speak in a positive way... I do feel that getting some voices out there who can speak positively [would be effective]... And there are some fantastic heads." - Current Senior Leader

Another interviewee said that they felt current 'get in to teaching' adverts were too glossy, and that campaigns or adverts should better exhibit the skills and expertise of being a senior leader:

"Teaching in general I think has been massively dumbed down. I think just in society, I don't think teaching is now seen as or doesn't have the status that it did 30 years ago, so people don't necessarily choose to go into teaching... I don't think the glossy adverts of, you know, 'Become a teacher, it's amazing.' That to me, that doesn't inspire me on any level." - Current Senior Leader

**Encouraging interest in school leadership from young age.** Some senior leaders also stressed the importance of targeting specific groups when promoting the positives of teaching and senior leadership roles. One headteacher suggested this should start as early as secondary school, by encouraging pupils to be more active in school councils. Another interviewee agreed, saying that there should be more conversations had with Year 11 pupils who express an interest in teaching:

"I think there's also a huge job of work to be done around pupils in our own schools, particularly in year 11. I don't think we do enough talking with them about senior leadership whilst they're in school with us.... You put a hook in for them a little bit earlier... We often lose people from the profession or other professions, because we don't value what we do ourselves." - Current Senior Leader

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