



Department  
for Education

# Factors affecting teacher retention: qualitative investigation

Research report

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CooperGibson Research

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

From January to March 2017, the Department for Education (DfE) administered an online survey targeted at former teachers and disseminated through Tes (formerly known as the Times Educational Supplement) and subject associations. The survey gave a quantified account of the range of reasons for leaving teaching and explored the current employment status of former teachers. Following this survey,<sup>1</sup> the DfE commissioned CooperGibson Research (CGR) to conduct in-depth qualitative research into teacher retention. The purpose of the project was to further explore and improve understanding of the reasons why teachers leave the profession<sup>2</sup> and what would encourage them to remain in, or return to, teaching.

A qualitative approach using telephone and face-to-face interview techniques was used to explore, in depth, the reasons for leaving teaching and to discuss potential solutions and ideas. The project took place over two key phases: the first was a smaller pilot phase exploring emerging findings around key drivers and reasons for leaving, and the second consisted of full qualitative fieldwork, focusing more on potential solutions. In total 101 in-depth interviews were completed via face-to-face and telephone methods – 21 interviews in phase one and 80 in phase two. The interviews were conducted with a sample of teachers who had left teaching within the last two years, selected from those who responded to the DfE's self-selecting survey of former teachers, which took place in January-March 2017. Phase one interviews took place between 20<sup>th</sup> April – 10<sup>th</sup> May 2017; phase two interviews took place throughout July 2017.

Throughout the report, former teachers have been referred to as 'teachers'.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Analysis of school and teacher level factors relating to teacher supply* (September 2017), section 4, which provides findings of the survey. Workload, government policy, and lack of support from leadership were cited as the three main reasons for leaving and 85% of respondents said that they didn't plan to or were undecided about going back into teaching. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/teachers-analysis-compendium-2>.

<sup>2</sup> The research focuses on staff who have left state-funded schools in England, including local authority maintained schools, academy schools (including free schools, studio schools and university technology colleges) and city technology colleges, special schools and pupil referral units.

## Key Findings

### Reasons for leaving teaching

Workload remains the most important factor influencing teachers' decisions to leave the profession and most suggested solutions to addressing retention were linked to workload in some way. There is evidence that early career teachers<sup>3</sup> made the decision to leave the profession quickly, typically within three months of when they first started to consider leaving. By contrast, more experienced teachers were more likely to consider their decision over one to two years.

Teachers' decisions to leave the profession were generally driven by the accumulation of a number of factors, over a sustained period of time. However, for some teachers, there had been a specific 'trigger' point, for example around teaching performance resulting in involvement from the senior leadership team (SLT), feeling undervalued after an issue had been highlighted or a specific behavioural incident involving pupils and parents/carers<sup>4</sup>.

### Possible solutions offered by interview participants

Teachers found it challenging to provide solutions to retention issues or suggestions for how issues they had faced could have been resolved. Nevertheless, they did provide some top-level ideas for consideration. It is important to note that former teachers' possible solutions cannot be considered generalisable and applicable to the wider teaching profession due to the relatively small sample of teachers that were involved in this research.

These related to:

- **Improving in-school support for teachers** – greater levels of support and understanding from SLT was needed, for example, in terms of the management of pupil behaviour, and the ability to have open and honest conversations. This would help support teachers' relationships with their SLT and reduce feelings of pressure in terms of scrutiny, accountability and workload. Considerations would be how the message to senior leaders and teachers can be strengthened to dispel the myths around inspection and the commitment to reduce workload. This would

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<sup>3</sup> Teachers who have been in the profession for less than five years.

<sup>4</sup> The DfE's survey of former teachers found that 61% of respondents said that it was a single factor or event that triggered their departure, published in [Analysis of school and teacher level factors relating to teacher supply](#) (September 2017), chapter 4.

mean giving greater confidence and support to senior leaders to address workload and well-being.

- **Greater focus on progression opportunities** - there was some evidence that the availability of wider progression opportunities may help support retention. This could be supported by communicating examples of how multi-academy trusts (MATs) have developed alternative subject progression pathways, exploring transferability to other schools and supporting schools to consider job role swaps.
- **Reducing workload at a school level** - for most teachers a significant reduction in their workload would have led them to reconsider their decision to leave. As well as supporting schools to implement recommendations of the Workload Review Groups, sharing and making accessible good practice examples of success in schools would be beneficial. Supporting teachers with confidence to plan and mark efficiently and effectively and supporting senior leaders to implement the necessary changes, would also be important contributions.
- **Improved working conditions** – flexible working and part-time contracts were generally viewed positively. Some viewed these as a way to secure a better work-life balance. Increasing opportunities for flexible working may have a role in helping to retain teachers in the profession, but offering such opportunities without addressing fundamental issues around teacher workload is unlikely to have a significant impact. Although pay was not the driver for many teachers, it was stated by most that the pay levels were not reflective of teachers' expertise, experience and dedication. Some suggestions included grants/funding for teacher training and better pay/incentives for staying in teaching.
- **Professional recognition and greater autonomy** – although teachers were unclear on how this could be achieved for the profession as a whole, it was evident that teachers feeling more respected and valued would have gone some way to retaining them in the sector. Their suggestions related to how senior leaders trusted their work and gave them freedom and autonomy to mark and plan.

Further details of these issues and concerns with considerations are provided in section 7.

## Reactions to discussion prompts

To stimulate further discussion of changes that might encourage teachers to stay in the profession, the DfE proposed some discussion prompts to facilitate discussion during the interviews. These received mixed responses from primary and secondary teachers. For most, it was unclear what impact these would have on the retention of current teachers, or whether they would attract teachers back into the profession; mainly due to the

multiple and complex reasons for teachers leaving the profession. These discussions highlighted that most teachers are not looking for a fundamental change to the teaching role and associated responsibilities, but instead are looking for solutions to be focused on reducing workload, consideration of teachers' well-being and for effective support at a school level to be available.

It is important to note that former teachers' views on these discussion prompts cannot be considered generalisable and applicable to the wider teaching profession due to the relatively small sample of teachers that were involved in this research.

Suggestions which stimulated most discussion included:

- Further **subject specialist support** being offered for early career teachers, particularly around mentoring, providing networks and resources and using a database to track teachers and offer additional support if they decide to leave. Concerns were around not duplicating what was already available, having the time to use elements of the support package, confidentiality and independence of mentors, and the availability of mentors at a suitable time prior to making a decision to leave. Some also suggested the support package would be useful for those slightly later in their careers.
- A **commitment from schools** to implement the recommendations from the three [Workload Review Group reports](#) appealed to most teachers, with evidence suggesting this assurance would be more likely to have an impact on retention/returning to the profession. There were concerns raised as to whether the recommendations would be implemented, and as such there could be a need to review progress across schools and support schools in communicating their workload reduction successes. Schools may also need support in overcoming some of the practical challenges of reducing workload.
- Early career teachers viewed the prompt around **removal of pastoral responsibilities** positively; however, many felt that it was an integral part of the role. A '**sympathetic timetable**' (focusing on fewer year groups as an early career teacher) was viewed positively by around one-third (n=20) of secondary teachers. Considerations included how flexibility could be offered to early career teachers who want broader teaching experience, how pastoral responsibilities could be gently phased in and how these could be managed practically in school.

## Likelihood of returning to teaching

Half of the teachers (n=40) who were interviewed in phase two would never consider returning to the profession, fundamentally due to feeling that the issues that had caused them to leave the profession were still there. However, nearly one-fifth of teachers in



phase two were still working in education – either undertaking supply roles, or they had moved to the independent sector<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, many primary and secondary teachers had not completely ruled out going back into teaching and some were exploring potential opportunities to return in a different context.

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<sup>5</sup> This figure is lower than published elsewhere: see the DfE's survey of former teachers which found that over 60% of respondents had remained in the education sector, published in [Analysis of school and teacher level factors relating to teacher supply](#) (September 2017), chapter 4; and NFER's (2015) [Should I stay or should I go?](#) which found that 51% of teachers who leave teaching remain in the sector.

# 1. Introduction

From January to March 2017, the Department for Education (DfE) administered an online survey<sup>6</sup> targeted at former teachers, which was disseminated through Tes (formerly known as the Times Educational Supplement) and subject associations. The survey gave a quantified account of the range of reasons for leaving teaching and explored the current employment status of former teachers. The survey found that workload, government policy, and lack of support from leadership were the three main reasons why teachers were leaving the profession. The findings also showed that 85% of respondents did not plan to, or were undecided about, returning to teaching. The findings of the survey are informing the Department's work to support the retention of teachers and in attracting ex-teachers back into the profession.

Following this survey, the DfE commissioned CooperGibson Research (CGR) to conduct in-depth qualitative research into teacher retention. The purpose of the project was to further explore and improve understanding of the reasons why teachers leave the profession,<sup>7</sup> and what might encourage them to remain in, or return to, teaching.

## 1.1 Methodology

A qualitative approach using telephone and face-to-face depth interview techniques was used to explore the reasons for leaving teaching and to discuss potential solutions and ideas. The project took place over two key phases, the first being a smaller pilot phase exploring emerging findings, and the second consisting of full qualitative fieldwork.

### 1.1.1 Phase one

The aim of phase one of the research was to conduct 20 qualitative interviews with former secondary teachers, across secondary subjects, different types of schools and with varying amounts of time in teaching. Phase one was a pilot study which was used to test the semi-structured topic guide and also the methodological approach (telephone versus face-to-face depth interviews). The primary focus of the qualitative interviews in phase one was to explore:

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<sup>6</sup> See *Analysis of school and teacher level factors relating to teacher supply* (September 2017), section 4, which provides findings of the survey. Workload, government policy, and lack of support from leadership were cited as the three main reasons for leaving and 85% of respondents said that they didn't plan to or were undecided about going back into teaching. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/teachers-analysis-compendium-2>.

<sup>7</sup> The research focuses on staff who have left state-funded schools in England, including local authority maintained schools, academy schools (including free schools, studio schools and university technology colleges) and city technology colleges, special schools and pupil referral units.

- Motivations for going into teaching initially, when the choice was made and the reasons.
- Expectations of the teacher role and perceptions of themselves as a teacher prior to starting out, and how expectations differed from the reality of teaching.
- Feelings and experiences as a new teacher, and prior to leaving, any changes in feelings and what contributed to the change.
- Initial triggers for considering leaving teaching and final triggers, key factors and considerations in the choice to leave teaching.
- Support, changes to the role and/or intervention either offered or taken up to help deal with any issues or concerns (i.e. what might have helped teachers to remain in role).
- Current role, reasons for moving into this type of role, and comparison with teaching.

### Phase one sample

The sample for phase one of the research was selected using a recent DfE survey conducted between January and March 2017.<sup>8</sup> Over 3,500 former teachers responded to the survey. These were filtered by the Department to select candidates for the research, to include those who have left teaching in the last two years and those who agreed to be contacted for follow-up research and supplied their contact details.<sup>9</sup> There were 842 relevant cases, of which around half consented to take part in further qualitative research and provided their email addresses. For phase one, the focus was to sample secondary teachers across a range of subjects, particularly Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and Modern Foreign Languages (MFL), due to the challenges in recruiting staff for these subjects in the secondary phase. There was also a particular focus on early career teachers<sup>10</sup> (although the sample included some with longer tenure).

The research team contacted the teachers in the sample by email and telephone to request their participation in this research. Those who agreed to participate in an

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/teachers-analysis-compendium-2>

<sup>9</sup> There were 3,347 responses to the survey. Excluding incomplete or invalid survey responses left 2,642 completed survey responses. Eliminating pre-2015 leavers, those with no subject stated and missing key demographics (e.g. gender), reduced this to 842 relevant responses. Source: DfE Delivery Unit survey of ex-teachers.

<sup>10</sup> Teachers who have been in the profession for less than five years.

interview were given the option for the interview to take place either face-to-face or by telephone.

In total, 21 interviews were carried out during phase one between 20<sup>th</sup> April – 10<sup>th</sup> May 2017. Eight were face-to-face and 13 were telephone interviews. All were with former teachers who had taught in secondary schools with sixth forms. Of the 21 interviews that were completed:

- Nine interviews were conducted with ex-STEM teachers (mathematics, physics, computing, chemistry and biology).
- Eleven interviews were conducted with other ex-English Baccalaureate teachers (including English, MFL, geography, history).
- One interview was conducted with an ex-art & design teacher.

### **1.1.2 Phase two**

The overall aim of phase two of the research was to conduct up to 80 qualitative interviews with former primary and secondary teachers. There was a slight change in focus for this phase of the research; whilst the Department wished to explore the reasons for leaving the profession, the research was also seen as an opportunity to discuss potential solutions to attract teachers back into teaching, or encourage existing teaching staff to remain in the profession.

Key interview topic areas included:

- The underlying reasons for teachers leaving the profession.
- Thought process and the journey to making a decision to leave, time taken to consider leaving teaching and key considerations at the time.
- Whether there were any particular trigger points which led to them leaving, or whether it was more of a cumulative effect.
- Factors and possible solutions that could have encouraged them to stay in teaching or might tempt them back into teaching, including possible changes to the teacher's role.
- How likely they are to return to teaching and reasons for this.
- Current job role, reasons for choice of new role and how this compares to teaching.

## Phase two sample

The sample for phase two of the research was also selected using the DfE's survey of former teachers,<sup>11</sup> to include those who had left teaching in the last two years and had agreed to be contacted for follow-up research and supplied their email addresses.

Phase two included interviews with some primary teachers; however, the predominant focus remained on secondary teachers as this was viewed by the Department as being the phase of education in which retention issues were most significant. In selecting the sample, the aim was to primarily include those that had been in teaching for five years or less. The main focus was on STEM teachers, whilst ensuring a mix across different STEM subjects (particularly sciences and mathematics), and a mix across broader subject areas (particularly including MFL), regional coverage and a range of school types.

However, whilst these criteria were key, it was also important to ensure the research explored a broad range of reasons for leaving teaching. Phase one of the research had highlighted that reasons for leaving teaching were concentrated in the sample to a few factors that participants had rated as very important in their choice to leave. It was felt that this skew in the sample could have had a research effect on the findings, giving some bias in results. To address this, a broader sample was selected for phase two. On this basis, a system was used to score the survey responses in terms of participants' reasons for leaving teaching. The sample selected therefore covered a range of scores, including those rating influencing factors as very important and those rating them of lower importance across the board. The primary purpose of this was to ensure that phase two of the research involved a broader range of respondents with a variety of reasons for leaving the teaching profession.

For phase two, 80 interviews were conducted in total in July 2017. The overall sample breakdown for this phase by subject grouping is detailed in the tables below.

The phase two sample achieved was two-thirds female (n=51) and one-third male (n=29), and the ex-teachers were predominantly over 30 years of age (20-30 n=12, 30-40 n=24, 40-50 n=17, >50 n=27). Two-thirds (n=50) worked full-time and one-third part-time (n=29), with one not providing an answer.

Over half of respondents did not provide details of their school type (n=47) or their school's Ofsted judgement (n=47). For those who did provide this information: 20 were academies, 12 were Local Authority (LA) maintained schools and one was a free school;

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/teachers-analysis-compendium-2>

eight had an 'Outstanding' Ofsted rating, 16 were 'Good', six were rated as 'Requires Improvement' and three were rated as 'Inadequate'.

**Table 1: Phase 2 sample breakdown by subject group**

<b>Phase 2: Sample split by subject group</b>	<b>Number of interviews conducted</b>	<b>Per cent of interviews conducted</b>
STEM	41	51%
Other English Baccalaureate (inc MFL)	15	19%
Primary	24	30%
<b>Total</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>100%</b>

The sample of potential interview participants was selected from respondents to DfE's survey of former teachers and participants were self-selecting in both cases. A remit of this qualitative research was also to ensure that former STEM teachers participated in interviews and that those leaving teaching in the last two years only were contacted. The sample achieved in this qualitative research, therefore, is not representative of the current teaching workforce.

The table below details the number of interviews achieved by individual subject for phase two of the research.

**Table 2: Phase 2 sample breakdown by subject**

<b>Phase 2: Sample split by individual subject</b>	<b>Number of interviews conducted</b>	<b>Per cent* of interviews conducted</b>
Biology	5	6%
Chemistry	9	11%
Physics	6	8%
Mathematics	15	19%
Computing/ICT	5	6%
English	3	4%
General Science	1	1%
Geography	4	5%
History	2	3%
MFL	6	8%
Primary	24	30%
<b>Total</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>100%</b>

\*Figures are rounded and therefore may total over 100%.

Whilst there was a focus on early career teachers, due to sampling limitations and timing (see limitations section below), a wider spread of length of service in teaching was achieved in phase two. This is detailed in the table below.

**Table 3: Phase 2 sample breakdown by length of service**

<b>Phase 2: Sample split by length of time in teaching</b>	<b>Number of interviews conducted</b>	<b>Per cent of interviews conducted</b>	<b>Proportion of teacher population*</b>
5 years or less	16	20%	76%
6-10 years	16	20%	65%
11-15 years	17	21%	57%
16-20 years	12	15%	51%
21-25 years	6	8%	N/A
Over 25 years	13	16%	N/A
<b>Total</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>100%</b>	

\*Source: School Workforce in England: November 2016, SFR 25/2017, 22 June 2017.

## **Challenges and limitations**

### **Sample limitations**

Due to the number of contacts available and timescales for the research, a broader range of ex-teachers was contacted in phase two of the research. This resulted in a sample that included more longer-term and primary teachers than anticipated. Whilst it is difficult to say the extent to which this affected the overall findings, any notable differences by length of service have been highlighted in the report where found.

### **Risks of self-selection bias**

The sample for the research is likely to be subject to some self-selection bias. The sample was taken from a list of former teachers who had already taken part in an online survey for the DfE and had then agreed to take part in further research. Furthermore, when contacted for this research, former teachers volunteered to take part reasonably quickly after receiving the email from the research team, meaning that those who were somewhat slower to volunteer were unable to take part as the fieldwork period had completed. There were also a number of former teachers who did not respond to requests to take part. It is difficult to establish if there are specific reasons that former teachers volunteered or agreed to take part in the research (for example, strength of view on topic, available time), but this may have resulted in some bias in the sample.



## Analysis

The research was conducted in two phases with different questions (phase one focused on reasons and triggers, phase two focused on solutions), therefore this has been reflected in the separate analysis of the two phases.

Interviews were analysed thematically to explore trigger points, reasons underlying ex-teachers' decisions to leave and what could have encouraged them to stay, what could attract them back into teaching or prevent others from leaving. This included analysis of their reactions to the ideas proposed for potential solutions. Differences across key variables, such as time in teaching, school type, age and gender were also explored where possible. Whilst the research was qualitative in focus, given the relatively large qualitative sample achieved in phase two, findings have been quantified where appropriate. As a semi-structured interview guide was used flexibly in the qualitative interviews, not all respondents were asked questions in the same way. As such, where findings have been quantified these should be considered indicative, rather than representative of the sample.

Throughout the remainder of the report, former teachers have been referred to as 'teachers'.

## 2. Teacher Expectations

The following section summarises the findings on teachers' reasons for becoming a teacher and expectations of the profession. This section is based on feedback gathered in phase one (n=21) since the focus here was particularly around exploring expectations and impressions of the teaching role.

### 2.1 Reasons for becoming a teacher

The most commonly cited reasons given as to why teachers had decided to go into the profession were that they had:

- Enjoyed other experiences of working with children and young people, for example, tutoring, mentoring at university, or volunteering with groups such as scouting/guiding.
- Relevant experience as unqualified tutors or working with adults, for example, working at night schools, further education (FE) etc. and decided to turn this into a new career.
- Parents/carers who were teachers and they felt that this had given them an awareness of the profession and what it entailed.

### 2.2 Expectations of teaching

Generally, teachers felt that they had been prepared for teaching to be 'hard work' and that they were 'not going into it blind'. However, several mentioned that they did not expect the level of detail that was required, particularly in terms of planning. A number of teachers commented that they had not expected to have to plan lessons afresh, and that instead there would be existing schemes of work or lesson plans which they could adapt. For example, one secondary teacher said that they were spending more time writing lesson plans than they were teaching lessons.

Some mentioned that they had expected teaching to be a creative profession, with freedom to develop their own style. In practice, they felt more restricted than this – there were instead tight structures of teaching and learning set out by school leaders. Even those teachers who were planning lessons afresh found it difficult to be creative in their planning and teaching, due to being hindered by time or challenges around pupil behaviour.

Commonly, they had been aspirational (some referred to themselves as 'idealistic') and felt that when they were first entering the profession they would be:

- 'Firm but fair'.
- Approachable – the type of teacher that young people can turn to for advice.
- Able to motivate pupils and make a difference.

They often mentioned wanting to emulate the example of a good teacher that they had known during their own schooling/education – inspiring young people and engaging them with a subject.

Although a small number (n=5) had anticipated some pupil behavioural issues, they had expected that they would be 'respected' as teachers. However, when in the role, some perceived that this was not always the case (see 'during teaching' below).

## 2.3 Impressions of the teaching role

The most common impressions of the teaching role itself were:

- **Working environment:** Supportive colleagues and senior leadership teams (SLTs) that encouraged collaboration between teachers appeared to be the elements of the working environment that had the most positive impact on teachers. Where teachers experienced a 'lack' of support from leadership, feeling isolated or criticised bluntly following peer observation, these factors led to a negative impression of their working environment. This seemed to have a particular impact on those that had experienced different schools during their teaching career. For example, several reported that they had questioned later why they had left a school they had felt happy in (often only moving due to family reasons rather than a career choice). Changes in working environment such as change in leadership/culture, or where the school had gone into special measures, were also perceived to have a negative impact on teachers.
- **Pupil behaviour and impact on pupil outcomes:** Teachers commonly reported the 'high' of seeing young people make progress or connect with a subject, such as a lesson that they felt had gone well and where pupils demonstrated that they had understood the content. The attitude of pupils had a large influence on these teachers; where young people were motivated to learn or were enthusiastic, teachers reported that this increased their positivity towards their role. Where there were disciplinary issues, this proved challenging in terms of maintaining an effective lesson, but also created additional workload when communicating with parents/carers and logging behavioural issues on a central system. A small number had enjoyed the challenge of working with pupils with complex behavioural issues, to help support them and make a difference.

Workload, targets and class size were also commonly mentioned during phase one when teachers were asked about their impressions of the teaching role. Much of this relates to issues that are discussed in more detail later in the report (Section 3), particularly around workload being onerous, an increased focus on meeting targets and the challenges in managing large class sizes.

### 3. Reasons for Leaving Teaching

The following findings are based on interviews conducted in phase two with primary and secondary teachers (n=80) and including, where relevant, responses from teachers in phase one (n=21).

The reasons for leaving teaching were complex and multifaceted. Teachers cited multiple contributing factors, although generally there was a key reason which was more prominent than others<sup>12</sup>. The issues cited reflect the findings of previous research such as the [Workload Challenge](#)<sup>13</sup> and the [Workload Review Group reports](#) and as such the findings have been summarised in order to set the context for identifying solutions.

#### 3.1 Workload

Two-thirds (n=53) of teachers from phase two (of 80 interviews) felt that the level of work a teaching role required was unsustainable, reporting they had felt 'overwhelmed' by the amount of marking, planning and data tracking expected. Workload was a factor for primary and secondary teachers irrespective of their length of service.

- Many teachers reported that workload levels negatively impacted on their ability to maintain an appropriate work-life balance, stress levels and general well-being, and that this was the main contributing factor in their decision to leave the profession.
- The level of workload was exacerbated by curriculum changes. Examples included the introduction of the new A Level and GCSE specifications, which added to teachers' workload due to the need for the schemes of work to be re-written. Two Information and Communication Technology (ICT) teachers commented that changes to their subject had meant that the content of the curriculum had changed, and it had become "a different subject to teach".
- A small number (n=3) of ICT and physics secondary teachers had been the only specialist subject teachers within their department, which had increased levels of workload. For example, an ICT teacher commented that as the only subject specialist in their Department, they had been responsible for marking all pupil work.

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<sup>12</sup> The DfE's survey of former teachers found that 61% of respondents said that it was a single factor or event that triggered their departure, published in [Analysis of school and teacher level factors relating to teacher supply](#) (September 2017), chapter 4.

<sup>13</sup> Also see the Government Response to the Workload Challenge <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/workload-challenge-for-schools-government-response>

- Workload was also reportedly higher in secondary schools that were in special measures or in the process of academisation.

Examples of specific elements of workload that had been instrumental in teachers' decision to leave included:

- **Marking:** many primary and secondary teachers felt there was too much emphasis on marking and that the volume was too great. Secondary schools were viewed as having marking policies that were not effective or beneficial to teachers or pupils. A small number of secondary teachers gave examples of their school introducing new marking practices or policies that had increased their workload, or that had resulted in their marking practice being scrutinised.

“There were ridiculous marking schemes, eight coloured pens and five symbols, it took me three hours a day to get through all the marking.” (Secondary science teacher)

- **Planning:** whilst planning was seen as a necessary and essential part of the job, it was extremely time-consuming. Primary teachers reported that the documenting and re-writing of lessons plans could be reduced. In particular, they suggested having more flexibility to write lesson plans to a level of detail that suited them, schools investing in off-the-shelf planning and resourcing tools, and more opportunities for lesson plans to be shared and discussed internally. Secondary teachers stated that the provision of weekly lesson plans asked for by their SLT, which was perceived as mainly for Ofsted accountability purposes, was very time-consuming and many felt it was unnecessary.
- **Duties beyond their teaching role:** primary and secondary teachers were asked by their SLT to take on roles in addition to their subject teaching, which also added to their workload, for example, pastoral duties, school councils, behaviour management.
- **Excessive number of hours spent working:** many primary and secondary teachers had spent a significant amount of time (within and out of school) on their teaching role, and for most this infringed on their work-life balance. Teachers described issues such as working full-time hours on a part-time-contract, working at home during the evenings or at weekends (limiting their ability to spend time with family and children), or being asked by their SLT to undertake tasks or attend meetings that were viewed as unnecessary.

## 3.2 Stress and ill health

Around one in five primary and secondary teachers involved in the research reported that they suffered stress and health issues due to heavy workloads and a lack of support shown by their SLT. Sleeping problems, panic attacks and anxiety issues contributed to

their decision to leave. Amongst primary teachers, this primarily affected those who had been in the profession for over 15 years (mentioned by six of the 11 primary teachers with more than 15 years' experience). They also reported issues with their physical health and their memory due to the stress they were experiencing at work.

### 3.3 School leadership, policy and approaches

Around one-third of secondary teachers in phase two (out of 56), and particularly those who had been in teaching for more than ten years, reported a perceived lack of support or trust from the SLT and ineffective school management and policies, as key contributing factors in their decision to leave. Over half of primary teachers in phase two (out of 24) also reflected this view. There were a range of common themes:

**A perceived lack of support from the SLT.** Most primary and some secondary teachers experienced a lack of SLT support for issues including workload, pupil behaviour and progression, and did not feel they had access to other sources of advice and support. A few secondary teachers felt that the SLT had not always listened to their views and solutions to addressing school issues or that they were unsympathetic towards workload issues.

**Issues with accountability and scrutiny.** Almost half of primary and almost one-quarter of secondary teachers did not feel they were being trusted to do their job and that levels of scrutiny into lessons and teaching styles were too high. Classroom observations were felt to be intrusive, unconstructive and feedback could be demoralising.

There was recognition that the level of scrutiny and accountability teachers had faced was due to the increased pressure that SLTs were perceived to be facing in terms of Ofsted and pupil performance and progress. However, the level of pressure from SLTs was perceived to be disproportionate, or not accompanied with sufficient support for teachers to resolve issues. This was particularly evident amongst primary and secondary teachers with more than ten years' experience, who felt trust should be placed in their professional experience.

“They say you have flexibility but in reality you haven't. Your professional judgement doesn't matter. At the start of my career, my opinion as a professional mattered. I was trusted to have the basic tenets of teaching in mind, children having fun and learning, but that really tailed off towards the end”. (Primary teacher)

Teachers with five years or less experience felt that the level of accountability and scrutiny contributed to increased stress and worry about their ability to do their job. A small number of STEM teachers from 'Outstanding' schools reported an immense pressure as a result of maintaining standards.

**Ineffective school leadership.** This was mentioned by almost two in five secondary teachers. A minority of primary teachers felt that SLTs had lost touch with classroom practice and were making decisions and setting policies without being directly in contact with teachers and pupils. Teachers perceived some leaders as only taking forward their own ideas, rather than a shared vision for the school. A small number of secondary teachers perceived SLT members as being promoted into positions they were not qualified or experienced enough for.

Other school leadership issues mentioned by a small number of teachers were:

- **Ageism:** three older, more experienced secondary teachers and one primary teacher believed they had experienced ageism from SLTs when applying for promotion and new positions. Others that came into teaching later in their careers also felt they experienced discrimination due to their age, with schools favouring younger applicants.
- **Pupil behaviour issues:** some secondary teachers and one primary teacher described issues arising from poor pupil behaviour. Affected teachers had to deal with high levels of poor pupil behaviour, and low-level disruptive behaviour. These teachers felt they were spending an increasing amount of time dealing with poor behaviour, which was not always dealt with effectively by school leaders.
- A minority of teachers felt that a culture was being developed in schools whereby teachers were not supported sufficiently by parents/carers who instead sided with their children, rendering discipline difficult. One primary teacher described the situation being so severe that they were afraid for their own safety.
- A small number of teachers reported a lack of effective behavioural management policies, which increased pressure and stress within the classroom. Some teachers had been concerned about how poor pupil behaviour had reflected on them as a teacher.
- Those who had been teaching for less than five years found poor behaviour particularly difficult to manage and felt the SLT did not support their needs.
- Investigations after reported allegations against staff were also extremely stressful, and even when cleared of wrongdoing teachers felt the damage had been done.

“We had children with significant behavioural difficulties, children who were probably acting out older sibling gang-related stuff. Children wanting to run the class themselves, very oppositional and defiant, very aggressive. This is [the] first time I have felt personally afraid... The main issue was the parents were angry with the school, it showed how the school hadn’t managed to keep the trust of the parents.” (Primary teacher)



“There was disruption and idleness. If you have to constantly sort this out, you have no energy to do the job properly. Four or five lessons a day with bad behaviour drains you”. (Secondary mathematics teacher)

- **Bullying:** a small number of primary (n=4) and secondary school (n=8) teachers described situations where they had felt bullying had occurred by members of the SLT and by other teachers. One teacher described how they were made to feel like they didn't 'fit in' by other 'cliquey' groups of teachers. A small number of teachers experienced controlling behaviour, shouting and being over-scrutinised by more senior members of staff. Other teachers described situations where they felt victimised or humiliated by SLT members in front of colleagues and pupils.

Some affected teachers believed that the bullying behaviour was designed to force them to resign, whereas for other teachers the bullying behaviour was perceived to be as a result of pressure to achieve good results.

### 3.4 Enforcement of inflexible teaching policies

A few primary and secondary teachers had to adopt teaching practices or adhere to teaching policies that they felt were inflexible and they did not agree with. In some cases, teachers were told to teach their lessons in particular ways, which were not always deemed appropriate for all pupils.

Teachers spoke of feeling demoralised for not having their own professional judgement trusted and their experience/teaching skills undermined, and that the restrictive curriculum and teaching methods took the 'excitement' and pleasure out of teaching. This was particularly evident amongst STEM teachers. One science teacher commented on their school buying-in a private company to come in to carry out experiments with the pupils, when this was the type of lesson that they felt able (and wanted) to deliver themselves. A mathematics teacher commented that they did not have sufficient time to consider how to best apply their subject knowledge in their teaching, or to be creative in their teaching, due to the volume of information that had to be covered with pupils in lessons.

Some teachers suggested that SLTs were ineffective at interpreting the requirements from Ofsted or the Government, and that this resulted in issues such as excessive workload and increased pressure to achieve good results.

### 3.5 Government policy

Many teachers raised a number of issues related to Government policy that had impacted on their decision to leave the profession.

**Exams and data-driven ethos.** As came out of the Workload Challenge, a few primary and secondary teachers felt that the Government was placing more importance on data and results, rather than on pupils' needs and learning. Specific issues raised by secondary teachers, irrespective of length of service or subject, included:

- Too much focus on recording/inputting progress figures versus spending time teaching pupils.
- Too many tests and examinations.
- Schools being forced to push pupils onto courses that would provide the best data, not necessarily those that would suit the pupils' skills.
- Unrealistic and unreasonable targets being set for pupils, therefore having a negative impact on teachers' performance management and their ability to secure a pay increase because of this.

**Curriculum and exam changes.** Also reflecting the Workload Challenge, a few primary and secondary teachers mentioned increased pressure due to curriculum changes. National curriculum changes were perceived to be too frequent (for example, changes to GCSE and A Level specifications), particularly by primary and secondary teachers who had been in the profession for more than ten years. In secondary schools, some teachers perceived that subjects had changed so drastically they had become new subjects for the teachers to teach. Other teachers believed that the changes were not an improvement – 'change for change's sake'.

A few primary and secondary teachers felt that the curriculum was not relevant to young people and their needs, did not reflect what is required in the real world, and lacked the opportunity for creativity or for teachers to teach in an enthusing way.

Three secondary teachers talked about the transition of their school to an academy, stating that this process had increased the pressure on teachers and that policies and teaching methods were changed.

### **3.6 Professional development and pay**

**Effectiveness of teacher training routes.** Six secondary teachers with less than five years' experience who qualified via PGCE, School Direct and Teach First routes, did not feel that their training route had equipped them well enough for the classroom. These teachers felt poorly equipped to deal with poor behaviour and pupils with special educational needs (SEN).

They also reported that adequate time was not provided with mentors and time was not given to teachers to help to support Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs). Others felt there

was a disparity between the expectations of schools and teachers' capabilities from their training.

**Pay and performance management.** This was an important factor for one-quarter of primary teachers and a minority of secondary teachers. Issues they mentioned related to:

- Lack of pay portability, i.e. moving schools or roles did not mean that teachers would maintain their salary or receive a higher salary, as schools can set their own pay levels.
- Not agreeing with performance-related pay, particularly in primary schools where progress-related pay may not be completely under a teacher's control.
- Limited opportunities to progress up the pay scale because of unrealistic targets, for example, teachers perceiving that performance management targets had been set to be unachievable due to schools not being able to accommodate salary increases because of budget constraints.
- More experienced teachers reaching the top of the pay scale, and there being a lack of appropriate roles for further progression, or no opportunity for further salary increases because of the public sector pay cap.
- A lack of appropriate roles, including a lack of non-managerial progression opportunities, for example, progression within subjects, where the focus remained on teaching, rather than into traditional SLT management roles.
- Pro rata teacher pay rates perceived to be low when the number of hours actually worked was taken into account, i.e. the hours worked in the evenings/weekends/holidays.

**School funding.** A small number of teachers mentioned funding of the education sector as a factor in their decision to leave teaching. A few secondary teachers said their school had experienced budget cuts, which reduced the number of teaching roles and teaching assistants, therefore increasing class sizes and restricting the amount of funds for resources, trips and CPD.

## 4. Making the Decision to Leave Teaching

The following findings are based on interviews conducted in phase two with primary and secondary teachers (80 teachers in total).

For the majority, the decision to leave teaching was driven by the accumulation of a number of contributing factors that teachers had considered over a number of months or years, although generally there was a key reason which was more prominent than others<sup>14</sup>. Early career teachers generally made the decision to leave the profession much more swiftly than more experienced teachers, typically within three months. By comparison, those who had been in teaching for over ten years took much longer to make their decision, typically a year or more.

For some there had not been a specific 'trigger' point, but instead they had reached the point where they felt they could not continue in the profession. Most of these teachers had thought about leaving for a number of years, rather than it being a reactive decision.

However, for others, their decision to leave had been driven or confirmed by a trigger incident or health issue. For a few, this had been a trigger incident around their own teaching performance resulting in SLT involvement; a lack of recognition of their performance, or a specific behavioural incident involving parents/carers and pupils. For a few, changes to their timetable, or being asked to teach subjects or courses outside of their specialism had triggered their decision to leave.

For others, the trigger was a family issue that made them reassess their role in teaching. This included wanting to spend more time with their family and children, or a family illness or bereavement. A small number had seen alternative employment advertised that interested them. For example, a history teacher commented that they had given themselves one year to make the decision about whether to leave the profession or not and during that period they had seen a local job advertised as a teaching assistant, which had prompted them to apply.

A few teachers (particularly STEM teachers) had attempted to make changes before deciding to leave the profession completely: for example, by moving to a teaching post in another school, or becoming part-time (either in their current teaching role or in a new school). The aim of doing this had been for teachers to test whether they could resolve the issues that they were facing rather than leave the profession altogether. Also some STEM teachers commented that they were aware of the difficulties in recruiting to their

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<sup>14</sup> The DfE's survey of former teachers found that 61% of respondents said that it was a single factor or event that triggered their departure, published in [Analysis of school and teacher level factors relating to teacher supply](#) (September 2017), chapter 4.

subject and therefore felt some conflict with their decision to leave. As such, trying to resolve these issues initially without leaving the profession - by making the changes outlined above - was important to them.

Before finally deciding to hand in their notice, most spoke to their family and friends about their decision to leave. Few discussed their thoughts with colleagues or the SLT, as they either did not want their decision to be influenced or they felt that there would be a lack of support and understanding.

Views were mixed as to whether schools offered resolutions to the issues raised and tried to encourage the teachers to stay. Although some reported not being offered any incentive by their school to stay, there were a number of examples in phase two of the research, of schools offering support or solutions. This included:

- Giving the teacher the option to teach in their preferred subject.
- The opportunity to go part-time and/or take up study opportunities.
- The offer of an alternative subject specialist role.

Only a small proportion of teachers were offered an exit interview, and some of those decided not to attend the interview as they felt that their honest views might negatively impact on the provision of a good reference.

## **4.1 Considerations and concerns when deciding to leave**

Most were very upset about their decision to leave and the negative impact it would have on their pupils. Generally, it was not a poor experience with pupils that had led to their decision to leave and most were disappointed they would not be teaching anymore. Several had put off the decision, or worked a longer notice period so their GCSE and A Level classes would not be adversely affected.

Many spoke of feeling sad at the 'wealth of experience just wasted' once they had left the profession. Some, particularly mathematics teachers, felt guilty about leaving as they were aware of the shortage of teachers and the challenges of recruitment within their subject.

A small number were happy with the decision before they made it, as this was part of their longer-term career plan. For example, one returned to the armed forces once they had rehabilitated fully from injury, and another had left teaching because they wished for a new challenge and to take a direction that teaching in a school would not offer.

The role of finances in teachers' decisions to leave was variable. For many, their main concern was losing the job security of teaching. The financial impact was also a concern,

particularly for those moving to a role that would involve a pay decrease. However, most felt they had transferrable skills that would be attractive to other employers.

The financial impact was less of a concern for older teachers with more professional experience. This was due to them having fewer financial responsibilities (such as no mortgage) or believing that they would be able to minimise the financial impact. Younger, less experienced teachers minimised the financial impact of leaving teaching by having secured alternative employment, or having a clear plan for their next steps (for example, further training). The loss of pension was a consideration for a small number of more experienced teachers, although this was felt to be worthwhile.

Given that reasons for leaving teaching were often multifaceted, many teachers found it difficult to look back and consider if anything could have been done to stop them from leaving the profession. A few said that recent policy changes around workload, inspection or curriculum changes would have made a difference to their decision to leave teaching, had they been effectively applied by their SLT. However, often teachers felt that their SLT would not have done this.

## 4.2 Comparison of teaching with new job/career

Teachers had moved into a range of different jobs after leaving their role. This included four broad classifications.

**Teaching-related roles:** over one-third of primary (n=9) and over half of secondary (n=31) teachers had taken up roles which were related to teaching, such as:

- Personal tutoring.
- Delivering education consultancy/training courses for teachers/subject enrichment courses in schools.
- Museum learning team.
- Supply teaching.
- Exam marking/invigilating.
- Outreach work in higher education (HE).
- Foreign language teaching to businesses.
- Teacher training.
- Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD) mentor in a school.
- Yoga teacher.

**Subject-related non-teaching profession:** a minority of primary (n=1) and secondary (n=7) teachers had taken up non-teaching roles which were related to their subject specialism in some way, such as:

- Computer coding/programming.
- Environmental monitoring.
- Accountant.
- Local authority role.
- Therapist.
- University research.

**Non-subject-related and non-teaching related profession:** around one-third of primary (n=8) and secondary (n=17) teachers had taken roles which were not related to teaching or their subject specialism:

- Engineer.
- Head of Business Development for a charity.
- Returned to armed forces.
- Photography.
- Delivery services.
- Distribution centre worker.
- Policeman.

**Not working:** over one-quarter were not working at the time of the interview. Some had returned to study, some had taken early retirement and others were taking time out of work and considering their options.

Many reported that they missed the interaction of the classroom and making a worthwhile or meaningful contribution to young peoples' lives. Most said that they had taken a reduction in salary in their new roles, and in some cases teachers had left teaching with no new job to move onto. However, all agreed they felt 'less stressed' and as a result of working fewer hours they had time to spend with their families, or doing other things. They enjoyed the flexibility of their new roles, with less pressure and the ability to manage workload or prioritise tasks effectively.

## **5. Incentives to Remain in or Return to Teaching**

This section explores the range of feedback from teachers in relation to possible solutions to improve the retention of teachers. It starts by detailing general feedback and ideas that teachers suggested for addressing retention issues. It then explores some discussion prompts proposed by the DfE to stimulate discussion and to test views and responses.

The following findings are based on interviews conducted in phase two with primary and secondary teachers (80 teachers in total). Whilst this has provided interesting insights, it is important to note that former teachers' potential solutions and views on the discussion prompts cannot be considered generalisable and applicable to the wider teaching profession due to the relatively small sample size.

### **5.1 Potential solutions for supporting the retention of teachers**

Teachers often found it challenging to provide potential solutions to retention issues and practical solutions to addressing workload issues. Teachers' reasons for leaving and the issues they had faced were often very emotive, making it difficult for them to be objective. They also found it difficult to provide suggestions for how the issues they had faced could have been addressed at the time, to encourage them to stay or to attract them back into teaching now.

As discussed earlier in the report, the reasons for teachers leaving the profession were often complex and multi-layered. As such, although the potential solutions presented in this section are useful for understanding ways in which teacher retention could be supported, it is less clear how much they would in practice contribute – i.e. whether they would have encouraged the teachers to stay in the profession or whether they would encourage them back.

#### **5.1.1 Improving in-school support for teachers**

Many felt that teachers needed greater levels of support and understanding from their SLT, for example, in terms of the management of pupil behaviour, and the ability to have open and honest conversations. Teachers believed that their skills, professionalism and experience should be valued and trusted, not scrutinised or undermined and a better, more respectful working environment needed to be created.

They reported that the health and well-being of staff needed to be a key focus, with primary teachers commenting that there should be regular checks to assess how teachers are feeling. They felt that SLTs should provide support for teachers dealing with stress, illness and performance issues, following stress policy procedures.



Specific examples given by teachers about how this could be achieved included:

- **Schools being more flexible and willing to adopt a culture change** to help reduce workload for teachers, particularly around challenging the myths related to what Ofsted inspectors actually want.  

“Busting the myths surrounding what inspectors want should be supported. It’s a big culture change that needs to happen. You’ve got lots of good MATs that are doing this, but you’ve got lots of isolated schools where it takes somebody brave to say this is what we should do, even though that’s not what we’ve done for years”. (Secondary mathematics teacher)
- **Greater planning by SLTs** when implementing new policies within school and their potential impact on the workload of teachers. Also, allowing more time for new policies and strategies to embed, reflecting on the effectiveness of new approaches before making further changes.
- **Focus on recognising and valuing staff**, and staff knowing where to go for help when needed. For example, introduction of a Human Resources (HR) department, someone within school with whom teachers can openly discuss grievances or issues like workload and bullying.
- **Implement effective behavioural policies** without teachers having to spend considerable time overseeing detentions or being ‘worn down’ by poor behaviour.
- **Introduce SLT promotional guidelines** with more stringent guidelines and training for promotion into the SLT, ensuring that individuals can effectively and professionally carry out their role. In addition, a quality standard for SLTs was suggested, with all SLT members undergoing leadership training.
- **Provision of external support** was important to primary teachers, who felt that there should be timely access to support from external agencies such as social workers and case workers. This was particularly in relation to schools in areas of high deprivation or vulnerable pupils.

### 5.1.2 Greater focus on professional development

**Improved access to professional development opportunities:** A number of teachers believed there should be more CPD opportunities available, but provided limited information on what the focus of these should be. Specific suggestions included opportunities that allowed reflection on the importance of planning quality lessons, in a non-judgemental and supportive way. They suggested that professional development should be focused on working with colleagues, collaborative planning and teaching together to learn from others’ practice, which also helps in reducing workload.

**Maintain focus on subject specialism:** Secondary teachers were often frustrated with having to teach outside of their subject specialism, as they felt poorly equipped and it increased their workload considerably. Having the opportunity to only teach their subject specialism, would be appealing for many, and particularly STEM teachers. For example, a physics teacher commented on having to teach biology without appropriate support and did not feel able to ask for help.

Other suggestions provided by teachers around teacher training and professional development, which they felt would support retention, included:

- **More support/training for NQTs.** Adequate time provided with mentors/experienced teachers to build skill sets. Provision of lesson plans to help NQTs when they first start. Feedback provided more often than once a week on lessons.
- **Opportunity for job/role swaps.** Opportunities for teachers to go on sabbaticals or school swap schemes, access to different opportunities and to allow individuals to feel reinvigorated.
- **More subject progression opportunities outside of traditional leadership roles.** The opportunity to be able to progress outside of traditional SLT/managerial roles was important for some primary and secondary teachers. For example, secondary teachers mentioned that the MAT model of leadership progression could be particularly useful for those who are subject specialists, but who do not want to go into a traditional leadership role (for example, Deputy or Assistant Head). This was because there tends to be alternative subject progression opportunities at a similar leadership level within MATs (for example, strategic mathematics lead).

### 5.1.3 Reducing workload at school level

Reducing workload was a key suggestion by primary and secondary teachers as a way to support retention. Most of the suggestions related to freeing up more time, or reducing the burden of planning and marking, reflecting the findings from the Workload Challenge and [Workload Review Group reports](#).

**Reduction in contact time:** Secondary teachers suggested that reducing timetables would help increase the planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time available for planning/marking, which would help reduce workload (for example, five teaching and one free period per day). It was suggested that support staff could be better used to release time for teachers, for example, administrative or support roles covering examination organisation, behaviour management/detentions. Although this was happening in some schools, there were examples of support staff time not being protected and their resource being required in other areas of the school (for example, to cover staff absence), which impacted on the workload of the teacher they were supposed to be supporting.

**Review of marking policies:** Reduction in the amount of marking required. Suggestions included a focus on marking for the benefit of the pupils, rather than just for SLT or accountability purposes. For example, this could include refocusing assessment or only marking key pieces of work/assessment, and the abolishment of triple marking schemes.

“My idea of marking is...going around [in lesson time], reading kids’ work and giving them oral feedback as [they] go...so they are changing things and rethinking as they are writing”. (Secondary English teacher)

**Reduction in data and assessment requirements:** Examples include longer teaching time between assessments, minimising the generation of data that is perceived to be of no real use and the introduction of quicker and more effective ways of assessing and monitoring progression.

**More stability and sufficient time to implement changes:** Teachers felt that changes in curriculum or school policy/initiatives needed time to embed and changes should not be made too frequently, allowing sufficient time for improvements to be effective. Primary teachers with over ten years’ experience most commonly mentioned this.

**Reducing the planning workload:** Primary teachers suggested this could be addressed by reducing the need to re-write lesson plans, allowing for plans to be adapted and annotated instead. Primary teachers felt that there was often undue pressure put on them by their school for accountability purposes, and to plan to a level of detail that was perceived to be unnecessary (i.e. seen as required for Ofsted and their SLT). The provision or sharing of resources would also help, according to primary teachers. Secondary teachers suggested that the development of a centralised scheme of work would help with the planning workload.

“One thing that would help would be knowing exactly what the curriculum was and having a form of centralised scheme of work; the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority key stage 3 scheme was great. It was fantastic to have suggested resources and lesson outlines that you could take and adapt.” (Secondary chemistry teacher)

**Reduction in class sizes:** a few secondary teachers (n=9) felt that class sizes of above 28 were too large to be conducive to a good learning environment (this was predominately a mix of mathematics and chemistry teachers). Some teachers had experienced class sizes in excess of 30, which were challenging to manage. Some teachers commented that it was more difficult to develop relationships and connections with pupils in larger classes and that workload (marking and providing feedback) became onerous. Three of these teachers felt that disruptive behaviour was more likely to be associated with larger class sizes.

## 5.1.4 Improved working conditions

Teachers made suggestions in relation to improving opportunities for flexible working and increased pay.

**Increased opportunities for flexible working:** Teachers wanted more opportunities for part-time teaching roles. This was particularly important for teachers later in their careers who wanted to reduce to a part-time role, for younger less experienced teachers with family responsibilities, or for those who were considering a family. It was important to teachers that they were not penalised for taking up part-time contracted roles, in terms of salary or the opportunity to keep responsibility points. One secondary MFL teacher commented that taking on a part-time role had led to losing a management position.

“As soon as you decide to become part-time you lose any ability to have a good salary because you lose any management position. They aren’t happy having people in management who are part-time. I find this very undermining to lose your position and have to go back to just being a classroom teacher”. (Secondary MFL teacher)

Primary teachers with families asked for increased flexibility to enable them to balance home life and work, such as opportunities for part-time work (including for management). They suggested ensuring that those working part-time were not having to compensate by working longer hours, or on their non-work days. They also asked for support with childcare, for example, extended daily support (i.e. before 8.30 and after 5.30), and evening childcare for parents’/carers’ evenings.

**Increased pay:** Although pay was not the driver for many teachers, most felt the salary was not reflective of teachers’ expertise, experience and dedication. It also did not match the workload and number of hours that the profession required. Some teachers felt that teaching should be more in line with the pay and conditions of that within commercial organisations. Others mentioned that teachers should not have to find their own lesson cover when they are ill and they should be able to take two to three days of holiday within term time. Other suggestions included:

- **Provision of grants/funding for teacher training**, re-introducing the repayment of the teachers’ loans scheme so training is less of a financial burden.
- **Better pay/incentives** for staying in teaching, (for example, wiping study debt off after five years).

## 5.1.5 Professional recognition and greater autonomy

A number of teachers reported that increasing respect for the profession would support retention, believing that levels of respect needed to be improved across society, the

media, young people, graduates, and parents/carers. Teachers felt there needed to be more understanding of teaching and the expertise and dedication of those that teach. Although there were no suggestions as to how this could be achieved, it was clear that teachers feeling more respected and valued would have gone some way to retaining them in the sector.

**More freedom/autonomy for teachers/less scrutiny:** A few teachers felt there needed to be more opportunity to teach how they thought would best suit their pupils, with fewer constraints and policies dictating how they should teach or how lessons should be planned. They asked for space for more creativity. Secondary teachers wanted the opportunity to test new teaching systems, for example, the International Baccalaureate, or to adopt systems from other countries. For example, a secondary teacher commented on their experience of working as a teacher in China and receiving much higher levels of trust in their teaching experience. Primary teachers wanted greater trust in their ability to know how a pupil is performing without the need for excessive evidencing.

**Education/Government policy:** Five teachers talked more broadly about education policy, in that they considered the only solution to addressing retention issues in the profession was to change the philosophy of education so that it was child-focussed and de-politicised.

**Less focus on targets and results:** Secondary teachers felt that the focus needed to be changed from examinations/testing and the provision of data to learning, educating and outcomes for children. Primary teachers' views also reflected this, particularly among those with over ten years' experience, as they reported a need for change away from evaluations, assessments and hitting targets.

## 5.2 Response to discussion prompts

The qualitative interviews in phase two included exploring a range of 'ideas' that could be implemented to increase retention. The purpose of testing these ideas with respondents was primarily to provoke thought and generate discussion around what solutions would most likely encourage teachers to remain in or return to the profession.

The three ideas discussed were:

- A support system for teachers in the first five years of teaching.
- Eliminating unnecessary workload.
- A trimmed down teaching post.

These are further detailed below, with feedback from respondents.

## 5.2.1 A support system for teachers in the first five years of teaching

### Description

- Teachers would be able to 'opt in' to an offer of a support package in their first five years of teaching. This may include support from a mentor and CPD in the early years of their teaching career. Other more specific support could include:
  - Special membership of the teachers' subject association, for example, Institute of Physics, Royal Society of Chemistry, Institute of Mathematics and its Applications etc.
  - Subject mentor for up to five years.
  - Access to tried and tested materials to help plan or deliver lessons.
  - Access to regional or national conferences and social media networks to develop a network of colleagues teaching the same subject.
- **DfE Database:** If the teacher on the database decides to leave teaching, they alert DfE to opt out and this triggers the offer of a meeting with their mentor. Their mentor will talk through the issues behind their decision to leave teaching with them and, if appropriate, offer help to resolve them if the teacher would like to stay in teaching. The issues are fed back to the DfE anonymously (no names or schools mentioned) to help the DfE monitor the reasons people leave teaching.

Overall, primary and secondary teachers with varying levels of experience and subject expertise positively received the idea of a support system for teachers in the first five years of the profession. Where concerns were raised by teachers about such a support system, this related to it duplicating existing support that schools already offered and the amount of time available for teachers to benefit from such a system. More experienced teachers (with more than ten years' experience) were the most likely to feel that the suggestion of a support system did not address the main issues for teachers leaving the profession.

Primary and secondary teachers' suggestions for maximising the value of a support system included widening the target group of teachers to include more experienced teachers (if they required support) and teachers returning from maternity leave. A small number of secondary teachers believed it was important for there to be a focus on dealing with pupils with behavioural issues. A small number of secondary teachers felt that it would be particularly useful as a support package after the NQT year when support diminishes.

Teachers also gave feedback on specific elements of the support package idea.

**Membership to teachers' subject association:** Secondary teachers deemed this to be potentially useful, although there were concerns about the time available to utilise such a resource. A number of secondary teachers felt that it would increase pressure on NQTs. Others thought it would be beneficial to share ideas and speak to other teachers in the same subjects.

**Access to tried/tested material:** This particularly appealed to secondary teachers with less than five years' experience, as teachers commented that not having to plan each lesson afresh would help with their planning workload. Primary teachers felt that having access to tried and tested materials would be beneficial for reducing workload, but creating plans and resources was enjoyable and they would still want to adapt any material they accessed. Many teachers felt strongly that this should already be happening and that there were considerable resources available already and sometimes it was just difficult to find them.

“When you first start teaching, everybody's teaching the same thing and you've got 10,000 teachers all sitting on their beds [searching for] the best way to teach a certain thing. It's crazy”. (Secondary mathematics teacher)

**Access to conferences/social media networks:** Secondary teachers commented this could be valuable if there was adequate time away from the classroom to attend. Others did not like the use of social media to share experiences or solve issues, as it was often used as a forum for venting anger and frustration. Some primary teachers felt that access to conferences and networks could be useful, but there were concerns about whether teachers and NQTs in particular, would have time to utilise them.

**Subject mentor:** Many secondary teachers questioned whether there would be the time to benefit from a mentor, and if the mentor would have time to give to them. However, it was recognised that mentors were very beneficial when adequate time was provided.

A few primary and secondary teachers questioned the confidentiality of the discussion with the mentor, raising concerns about their views and experiences being passed on to their SLT and these negatively affecting references or not being listened to/acted on. Some primary teachers also questioned the 'independence' of internal mentors and whether NQTs would be honest about how they were coping, suggesting that additional mentors outside of the school may be of benefit. The feedback suggests that for teachers to feel confident in disclosing issues, the mentor would need to be external and independent.

A few secondary teachers (particularly older STEM teachers) felt that having a subject mentor was not required as they were skilled within their subject area. Others felt that this

should be available within secondary schools already, or that teachers would be able to seek similar information online. For example, an experienced secondary English teacher commented on the large volume of subject specific material and support provided by an ex-colleague.

“One of my colleagues was a prolific blogger, who runs local networking [events] and hosts loads of meetings for his subject...That sort of thing is available all over the shop. Most people in my school accessed it”. (Secondary English teacher)

**DfE database and mentoring:** Primary and secondary teachers gave mixed reactions to this idea; many commented that it would be too late in the decision-making process and that intervention and support should be offered sufficiently in advance - before the decision to leave had actually been made. However, others would welcome the opportunity to have their views listened to by an independent person. Primary teachers who had experienced issues with their SLT were the most positive towards the idea and some felt that this may have helped with their situation.

“It would be useful to speak to someone about [my] reasons for leaving. I felt there wasn’t anything I could access. You should have a mediator, maybe a deputy head in a mediation role, to get involved if something has gone sour between [colleagues]. They could be in a neutral role; you need this if the relationship has [broken down].” (Primary teacher)

Most could see the benefit of a database for the DfE, and thought it would be useful to track reasons for leaving. Teachers felt that it could help to highlight the impact of Government policies and that it would be important for any school-level issues to be fed back to SLTs. However, other teachers questioned whether the Department would proactively respond to the information collected from the database to address retention issues in the profession.

## 5.2.2 Eliminating unnecessary workload

### Description

- This would involve schools making a commitment to their staff to implement the Workload Review Groups’ recommendations on eliminating unnecessary workload around marking, planning and teaching resources and data management.



## Implementation of Workload Review Group reports<sup>15</sup>

Amongst primary teachers, overall reactions to reducing unnecessary workload were welcomed. It was generally accepted that planning, marking and the production of resources were important and could be enjoyable, but that a reduction in the detail and evidencing aspect of the workload was needed. For example, an experienced primary teacher felt it would be beneficial to be able to share planning across year groups to avoid the rewriting of planning each year, but that this was not something the school was currently actively encouraging. It was uncommon for teachers to state that this would attract them back into teaching.

A few (n=17) primary and secondary teachers believed that implementing the Workload Review Group reports would positively help to reduce workload, particularly for those in the first few years of teaching, but that it would need to be compulsory and unambiguous. Other primary and secondary teachers raised concerns about how this would be implemented within school and by whom, and also the level of control the Headteacher would have to ensure that it happened. Teachers also questioned who would decide on the definition of '*unnecessary workload*'.

### 5.2.3 A 'trimmed down' teaching post

#### Description

- This could include a teaching post **without pastoral** responsibilities.
- This could also include the introduction of '**sympathetic timetabling**'. Teachers in their first two or three years of secondary teaching are given a timetable that allows them to practise teaching the same year group. For instance, instead of being given classes from year 7 – 13, they are given classes from years 7 – 9. They keep a similar timetable for the first two years of their career so they can hone their teaching skills for those year groups.

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<sup>15</sup> It is likely that some of the sample of teachers participating in this research would have left teaching prior to the Workload Review Group recommendations being published (March 2016). Whilst they were unable, therefore, to comment on any impact of these recommendations, they were able to discuss the appeal of the recommendations and how any potential changes in practice as a result, might have influenced their decision to remain in teaching (hypothetically) or return to teaching.

## **A teaching post without pastoral responsibilities**

Over one-third (n=30) of teachers in phase two did not feel that a teaching post without pastoral responsibilities was appropriate. Around one-quarter of secondary teachers commented that having pastoral responsibilities was an important part of the teaching role. It gave teachers the opportunity to build relationships with pupils that would be difficult to achieve within the classroom environment. There were also concerns about teachers either overlooking or being able to support pupils with specific issues (such as mental health, well-being, identifying safeguarding issues). For example, a secondary mathematics teacher with three years' experience commented that not having pastoral responsibilities would make it difficult to notice changes in pupils' behaviour. Another felt that it would mean that teachers did not have the opportunity to develop strong relationships with pupils. A few secondary teachers mentioned that undertaking pastoral responsibilities had added enrichment to the teaching role and they had enjoyed that element of job.

Secondary teachers with less than five years' experience, who also commented that it was overwhelming to have a tutor group at the start of a teaching career, viewed a teaching role without pastoral responsibilities positively. Secondary teachers who had previously dealt with demanding tutor groups also supported the concept because of the amount of time that was required to deal with such groups. Others commented that it would be beneficial to reduce pastoral responsibilities in the first two years of teaching, providing more time to focus on other aspects of the role. A few secondary teachers commented that giving teachers the option to take on pastoral responsibilities would be beneficial, as it would recognise that some teachers do enjoy that aspect of the role.

Most primary teachers (n=15) did not believe it was possible to have a primary teaching role without pastoral responsibilities. Primary teachers emphasised the importance of the pastoral care element of their role in developing relationships with pupils, which was considered integral to supporting them academically. Two primary teachers commented that a teaching role without pastoral responsibilities could be feasible, but that full-time staff would need to be available to deal with issues as they arose and communication between staff would need to be high. However, even those teachers felt that some pastoral involvement was necessary.

## **Sympathetic timetabling**

The idea of sympathetic timetabling was primarily aimed at secondary schools, although the interviews still explored primary teachers' views on this proposal.

Unsurprisingly, primary teachers did not view this suggestion as being relevant or feasible to introduce in primary schools, due to primary teachers needing to cover all subjects and mainly spending more than one year teaching the same year group. Some

movement across year groups was viewed as important for teacher development, but this would generally not happen on a yearly basis.

“Movement is important, so you can teach the same years for 2-3 years, but it’s important to teach higher years so you know how to pull them up. It’s important for teacher development, but moving every year is too much”. (Primary teacher)

There was a mixed reaction to the idea of sympathetic timetabling amongst secondary teachers. Around one-third of secondary teachers (n=20) commented that sympathetic timetabling could be beneficial and that it was already happening in some schools. Teachers thought it was a useful approach for developing the skills to teach specific year groups and allowed teachers the time to get to know the school and role. Those teachers with less than five years’ experience mostly liked it. Views on the context in which it would most successfully operate included:

- Having two classes in the same year group, rather than teaching across year groups, would reduce planning considerably.
- Ensuring that, in secondary schools with sixth forms, teachers with the most experience of teaching post-16 provision are placed accordingly.
- Teaching the same class for two to three years to allow the teacher to build up relationships with pupils.

Where secondary teachers believed the idea would need to be adapted in order for it to be appealing, suggestions included:

- Restricting the teaching of ability groups throughout the years.
- Providing the opportunity for teachers to teach all year groups, but reducing some year group time to only a few lessons.
- Reducing the teaching timetable overall, i.e. fewer teaching/contact hours and more PPA time.

Secondary teachers raised specific concerns about the potential impact of sympathetic timetabling on NQTs, commenting that it would limit NQTs’ ability to build up their professional experience across year groups and key stages. Achieving a breadth of experience was deemed important in a teacher’s development. Others believed it was more important for NQTs to only teach their main subject, or to allocate them balanced ability sets to minimise stress and reduce workload.

“In my first year of teaching I was in a school where we only taught our specialist subject; so I only taught biology (not chemistry and physics as well) and I had three classes of year ten that I saw on a rotating basis. I effectively taught the same lesson with a bit of differentiation. It was the same with three year nine

classes I had; and the workload was much better. There's definitely something in that suggestion to make life better." (Secondary biology teacher)

A small number of secondary teachers believed that sympathetic timetabling would have a limited impact on workload, commenting that regular changes to syllabuses and schemes of work limited the timescales in which planning could be used. There were minimal concerns about sympathetic timetabling potentially limiting work opportunities and therefore progression for teachers. Others felt that for shortage subjects, such an approach might be difficult to implement due to a shortfall in subject specialist teachers.

## 6. Likelihood of Returning to Teaching

There were mixed views amongst teachers interviewed in phase two (80 teachers in total) as to whether they would return to the profession. Over half of teachers would never consider returning to the profession, even though they missed aspects of teaching and particularly the pupils. For these teachers (with a mix of experience and subjects), the fundamental reason was believing that the issues that had led to them leaving could not be resolved. For most this related to concerns about workload and feeling that going back into the profession would have a detrimental effect on their work-life balance and well-being. Other specific reasons given by teachers who would not consider returning to the profession included:

- Concerns about levels of school accountability and pressures on teachers in relation to performance management and assessment; too much focus on exams changing the focus from good teaching to exam marks.
- Promotion structure of the teaching profession not being tempting.
- Preference for current job/career.

“I won’t return to teaching. Even if things changed drastically I wouldn’t return as my self-employment is working so much better than I could have hoped for.”  
(Secondary biology teacher)

One-fifth of teachers overall in phase two of the research (both primary and secondary) had conflicting thoughts about returning to the profession, although had not ruled it out completely. These teachers had no immediate plans to return to the profession, but it was something that they may consider in the long-term. For these teachers, a number of factors including family responsibilities (such as wanting to wait until their children were older) and wanting to spend more time on their new role/career, affected their decision.

“I haven’t discounted going back to teaching but not in the short-term. I have five years of training left to do. My current profession isn’t the same as teaching, it’s not as extreme. Teaching can push you right to the bottom or it can be amazing – I wanted something more stable. I now have stability but I’m not sure I want it forever.” (Secondary mathematics teacher)

For primary and secondary teachers that were still undecided, their main concerns were about facing the same issues that had caused them to leave. However, most did not feel in a position currently to decide whether they would be willing to go back into the profession. In such instances, their decision about whether to return or not would be influenced by:

- An increased respect for the teaching profession.
- Reduction in workload - teachers being aware that workload issues had been addressed across the profession as a whole, and seeing schools offering ways to manage and reduce it (for example, part-time contracts; better work-life balance).
- Better pay and conditions - reconsideration of performance management approaches (i.e. less focus on performance related pay), opportunity for sabbaticals with a guaranteed job to return to.

Those that would consider going back for the right role envisaged it to be difficult to return as they had been out of the profession for one to two years. Some also thought that as they were more experienced (and more expensive), they would find it difficult to gain a teaching position. Teachers who had experienced significant health issues or issues with their SLT were concerned that their previous experiences would prevent them from finding another role in schools. Fear of rejection was also a concern for some of these teachers.

## 6.1 Teachers still in the profession<sup>16</sup>

Six teachers in phase two (five secondary teachers and one primary teacher) had decided to become supply teachers after leaving permanent teaching posts. Generally, their decision to continue with supply teaching was due to having to work fewer hours and not having to take work home.

There were six secondary teachers that were still in the teaching profession, but had moved to the private sector, and were now either currently teaching in a private school, or had secured a job for September 2017. Another secondary teacher had just secured a job for September in an independent school. Their reasons for deciding to work in the private sector included:

- More opportunity for progression.
- More management support.
- Less workload (particularly planning and marking).

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<sup>16</sup> The figures presented in this section are lower than those published elsewhere: see the DfE's survey of former teachers which found that over 60% of respondents had remained in the education sector, published in [Analysis of school and teacher level factors relating to teacher supply](#) (September 2017), chapter 4; and NFER's (2015) [Should I stay or should I go?](#) which found that 51% of teachers who leave teaching remain in the sector.

- Better pay and conditions – for example a teacher who had moved to a private school had been able to secure a job as a basic teacher on a salary that matched a middle manager in the state sector.

There were also two primary teachers that had secured a teaching job for September 2017 (one in the state sector and one in the independent sector).

## 6.2 Teachers actively returning to the profession

Five secondary teachers, mainly those with more experience and in STEM subjects, were actively considering going back into the profession, but were very aware of finding a suitable role. They were particularly considering the school context and the opportunity for part-time work. For these secondary teachers, it was important that they were looking for a role which they felt suited them, and that may address some of the issues that they had faced previously as a teacher. For some, this was purely about trying teaching again in another school context – whether that was in a different sector (such as further education), in a school where they felt the management would be more supportive, or in a role that would offer them the flexibility they needed (such as part-time hours).

“There are lots of jobs in teaching maths out there but I need to pick a school I want to work in. I’m looking, but I think there will be lots of applicants and they would prefer a cheaper NQT rather than me. I don’t want to choose a school where I have to battle every day with behaviour, [and] that’s badly run”.

(Secondary mathematics teacher)

There were six primary teachers who were actively considering going back into teaching. For some, they would consider going back to teaching for the ‘right role’ such as a headship or deputy headship, a school they knew well or had researched well, or a less pressured role such as a teaching assistant or support/PPA teacher. However, others stipulated that there would need to be significant changes within the profession before they would consider going back, such as: a reduction in workload, a better work-life balance, less focus on results, increased opportunities for older teachers or more flexible working.

## 7. Summary of Findings and Conclusions

Workload remains the most important factor influencing teachers' decisions to leave the profession and most suggested that the solutions to address retention also have some link to workload. Teachers' suggestions of potential solutions and their specific response to the three discussion prompts highlight the challenges in dealing with retention in the sector. More fundamentally it illustrates that for most teachers who have left the profession, the potential solution for keeping them in teaching or attracting them back is not straightforward. Most are not looking for a fundamental change to the teaching role and associated responsibilities, but instead are looking for solutions to focus on reducing workload, consideration of teachers' well-being and professionalism and for effective support at a school level to be available.

### 7.1 Reasons for leaving the profession

The reasons for leaving teaching were complex and multifaceted. Teachers tended to cite multiple contributing factors<sup>17</sup>, although generally there was a key reason which was more prominent than others. Key reasons included workload (including volume of marking and planning), stress and ill health, and school leadership, policy and approaches. Government policy and curriculum and assessment changes also played in a role in some teachers' decision to leave.

These reasons reflected the Workload Challenge analysis but the discussions showed how many different issues worked together to lead to a decision to resign over a sustained period of time. For some teachers, there had been a specific 'trigger' point, for example around teaching performance resulting in SLT involvement, feeling undervalued or a specific behavioural incident involving pupils or parents/carers. Other triggers included family issues that caused the teacher to reassess their role, or changes being made to their teaching timetable and subject focus.

Early career teachers (those who had been in teaching for less than five years) made the decision to leave the profession much more quickly (typically within three months of initially considering leaving). For them, issues escalated more quickly, or they felt less equipped to deal with them. By contrast, more experienced teachers were more systematic and reflective when deciding to leave. They were more likely to think about it

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<sup>17</sup> The DfE's survey of former teachers found that 61% of respondents said that it was a single factor or event that triggered their departure, published in [Analysis of school and teacher level factors relating to teacher supply](#) (September 2017), chapter 4.



over one to two years, or even look at adapting their teaching role, i.e. moving to another school or taking on a part-time role to try and resolve the issues.

## 7.2 The experiences of early career teachers

As noted above, early career teachers made the decision to leave the profession much more quickly than more experienced teachers. Generally, their reasons for leaving the profession did not differ compared to more experienced teachers. However, they were more likely to report that they found poor pupil behaviour difficult to manage and felt that their teacher training routes had not equipped them well enough for the classroom. Six early career teachers commented that they felt poorly equipped to deal with poor behaviour and SEN pupils.

Their views on the discussion prompts to attract teachers back into the profession were broadly in line with more experienced teachers. Aspects of the discussion prompts that they particularly liked included:

- A teaching post without pastoral responsibilities - secondary early career teachers commented that this suggestion was appealing, as it could be overwhelming to have a tutor group at the start of a teaching career.
- A support system for teachers in the first five years of teaching - having access to tried and tested materials was particularly appealing to secondary early career teachers.

## 7.3 Potential solutions to encouraging teachers to stay in the profession

### 7.3.1 Teachers' suggested solutions

Teachers found it challenging to offer potential solutions to retention issues; it was difficult for them to be objective or to provide practical suggestions for how issues they had faced could have been resolved<sup>18</sup>. Much of this is likely to be to do with the multi-layered reasons for leaving, and the difficulty in envisaging workable and practicable solutions to their own experiences.

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<sup>18</sup> Whilst this has provided interesting insights, it is important to note that former teachers' possible solutions cannot be considered generalisable and applicable to the wider teaching profession due to the relatively small sample size.

## Improving in-school support for teachers

Teachers' relationship with their SLT in many cases was poor, with teachers feeling under considerable pressure in terms of scrutiny, accountability and workload. Many commented that their SLT was unapproachable and they were perceived to be making limited effort to address workload issues.

It is important to note however, that this research has only focused on where teachers felt there had been failures, rather than schools that have successfully addressed workload issues. The timing of the research could also suggest that some of the remedies put in place by the Department and Ofsted, had not had time to filter down to school level prior to the sample deciding to leave. Indeed, during the interviews some did say that they had seen new announcements about Ofsted's requirements, relating to dispelling myths that can result in unnecessary workloads in schools, but they were unsure as to whether in practice this would make a difference.

Key considerations are:

- How DfE can strengthen and reinforce the message to school leaders about the requirements of Ofsted and the commitment to reducing teachers' workload. Schools vary considerably in terms of whether they are adopting their policies and culture to support this vision.
- Better communication as to how schools are reducing workload and examples of success stories where it has worked well; this might help retain current teachers and attract others back.
- How DfE can work with senior leaders to give them the confidence and space to be able to address well-being and workload issues within their school.
- Encouraging schools to introduce and effectively implement a well-being strategy and appropriate practices to monitor well-being in schools, so that greater focus is placed on staff well-being and managing workload.

## Greater focus on professional development

Professional development was important for teachers. Teachers generally preferred teaching within their specialism and there was some evidence that the availability of wider progression opportunities may help support retention. The DfE could support this further by:

- Identifying examples of how MATs have developed alternative subject progression pathways and whether such approaches would be transferrable to non-MAT schools or partnerships.

- Considering the feasibility of schools being able to offer job role swaps and sabbaticals and the identification of good practice.

### **Reducing workload at a school level**

Workload remains a key challenge and driver in teachers choosing to leave the profession. For most, a significant reduction in workload would have led them to reconsider their decision to leave. As such, addressing teachers' workload issues remains a key focus for the Department.

In addition to the earlier suggestions around implementing the recommendations from the Workload Review Groups' reports, the DfE could also support this by:

- Collating and sharing best practice examples from other schools on how they have successfully implemented revised policies on reducing workload – ensuring they are easily accessible and promoted to schools.
- Considering how teachers can be better supported to manage their workload. For example, a focus on developing teachers' skills and confidence to plan and mark at a level that does not have a detrimental effect on their work-life balance.
- Supporting SLTs to address workload issues; giving them the confidence, time and funding to take the necessary steps to implement changes and promoting the benefits of doing so.

### **Improved working conditions**

Greater opportunities for flexible working and in particular part-time contracts were important for some teachers. Many teachers saw flexible working and part-time teaching roles as a way of reducing their workload and securing a better work-life balance. In practice, however, some of those who had moved to part-time contracts still went on to leave the profession. This was because a reduction in teaching time did not address the required issues and they were still working beyond their contracted hours. Increasing opportunities for flexible working may have a role in helping to retain teachers in the profession. However, offering such opportunities without addressing more fundamental issues around teacher workload is unlikely to have a significant impact.

To further support opportunities for flexible working the Department should consider how schools could be supported to offer flexible working arrangements, whilst exploring more fully the challenges and solutions to successfully implementing flexible working across different school contexts.

Although pay was not the driver for many teachers, it was stated by most that the pay levels were not reflective of teachers' expertise, experience and dedication. It also did not

match the level of workload and number of hours that the profession required. Other suggestions made by teachers around improving working conditions and supporting retention included provision of grants/funding for teacher training and better pay/incentives for staying in teaching.

### **Professional recognition and greater autonomy**

A number of teachers reported that increasing respect for the profession would support retention. Although there were no suggestions as to how this could be achieved, it was clear that teachers feeling more respected and valued would have gone somewhere to retaining them in the sector. With this there appeared to be a need for more trust and autonomy for teachers, with less scrutiny to allow them the flexibility to teach how they feel would best suit their pupils.

### **7.3.2 Feedback on discussion prompts**

The discussion prompts <sup>19</sup> proposed to encourage discussion of what could help teachers to remain in, or return to, the profession received mixed responses from primary and secondary teachers. For most it was unclear what impact the introduction of such suggestions would have on the retention of current teachers or whether they would attract teachers back into the profession; mainly due to the multiple and complex reasons for teachers leaving. Teachers could not see how the suggested ideas would make a substantial difference to their experience as a teacher.

Solutions to address retention issues need to be multifaceted, reflecting the complex reasons that teachers left initially. When teachers considered the discussion prompts in isolation, they found it difficult to comment on whether such changes would have made a difference to their experience, clearly indicating that the ideas themselves are not sufficient to improve retention. Instead, in addition to the elements of the discussion prompts that teachers felt would be useful, there needs to be a wider demonstration and commitment of schools to reducing workload. Schools need to be able to show teachers the changes and solutions that they have put in place to actively reduce workload and the impact that these have had.

Suggestions for further support or addressing workload issues, without it fundamentally changing the teaching role, were received positively. For example, sympathetic timetabling (i.e. timetabling that allows early career teachers to practice teaching the same year group) was perceived to potentially be of value to secondary teachers, as was

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<sup>19</sup> Whilst this has provided interesting insights, it is important to note that former teachers' views on these discussion prompts cannot be considered generalisable and applicable to the wider teaching profession due to the relatively small sample size.

schools' committing to implementing the recommendations from the Workload Review Groups' reports. Teachers welcomed more support for early career teachers, particularly the use of mentors and access to resources, as long as this complemented rather than duplicated existing support. However, concerns about teachers having the time to access such support were raised.

### **A support system for teachers in the first five years of teaching**

The suggestion of introducing a support system in the first five years of teaching received a mixed response from primary and secondary teachers. The DfE tracking database and independent mentor, in particular, were viewed as being of value. However, some felt that schools were already implementing elements of this proposed initiative.

There is some evidence that a support system could assist with retention, however some teachers viewed this as a 'useful' option, with less clarity as to whether it would have had an impact on their decision to leave the profession, or whether it could encourage them to return to the profession. In order for this support system to be successful the Department would need to carefully plan its implementation to ensure teachers were able to utilise it effectively. In particular, considerations would be:

- How schools could offer sufficient time for staff to make use of specific elements of the support package.
- The criteria for the selection of subject mentors to alleviate concerns about confidentiality.
- The potential of 'crisis' mentor input, suitably prior to the decision to leave, to resolve issues and retain the teacher in the profession.
- Consideration of widening the target group to include teachers with more experience, but who may also be in need of support (for example, those who are struggling with a particular area of teaching; returning parents).
- The potential overlap with existing support for early career teachers.

### **Eliminating unnecessary workload**

A commitment from schools to implement the recommendations from the Workload Review Group reports appealed to most teachers, with evidence suggesting this assurance would be more likely to have an impact on retention or teachers' likelihood of returning. Some teachers were concerned about whether schools would implement the recommendations. In further developing this particular proposal the Department should consider:

- Reviewing progress in the implementation of the Workload Review Groups' recommendations.

- Reviewing and updating the Workload Review Group reports to provide further detail, ideas and examples that could be used by schools to reduce workload.
- Supporting schools to develop appropriate ways to communicate their commitment to implementing the recommendations, for example, in advertisements/communications to prospective teachers and current teaching staff.
- Further research on the practical challenges of implementing the recommendations from the Workload Review Group reports and how these have been overcome, with identification of good practice case studies to support other schools.

### **A ‘trimmed down’ teaching post**

The concept of a ‘trimmed down’ teaching post received mixed reactions from both primary and secondary teachers. Some teachers, particularly early career secondary teachers, viewed removing pastoral responsibilities positively. However, for others, undertaking pastoral activities was viewed as an integral element of the teaching role. Similarly, sympathetic timetabling also received a mixed response, although some secondary teachers thought it could help reduce workload.

There is some evidence that a ‘trimmed down’ teaching post may be useful in supporting retention; however the Department should further consider the potential features of such a post and in particular the logistics of embedding such a role within schools. In planning its implementation considerations are:

- The possibility of flexibility in the approach for early career teachers who want broader teaching experience in their first two years.
- Consideration of pastoral responsibilities being phased in or reduced for early career teachers.
- Further research around the practical challenges of implementing a ‘trimmed down’ teaching post in schools and how these have been overcome, with identification of good practice case studies to support further roll-out.

## **7.4 Likelihood of returning to teaching**

Half of the teachers (n=40) who were interviewed in phase two of the research would never consider returning to the profession. This was fundamentally due to feeling that the issues that had caused them to leave the profession were still there. However, nearly one-fifth of teachers in phase two were still in the profession – either undertaking supply

roles, or had moved to the independent sector<sup>20</sup>. An additional two teachers had secured teaching roles in the state sector for the 2017-18 academic year. Furthermore, many primary and secondary teachers had not completely ruled out going back into teaching and some were exploring potential opportunities to return either in a different context (such as in the FE sector) or in a more flexible role. For those teachers, their original passion or desire to teach had not gone. Their concerns remained about workload, work-life balance, stress, accountability and scrutiny. However, this suggests that there is still the potential to attract some teachers back into the profession, by focusing on and addressing the issues that caused them to leave the profession.

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<sup>20</sup> This figure is lower than published elsewhere: see the DfE's survey of former teachers which found that over 60% of respondents had remained in the education sector, published in [Analysis of school and teacher level factors relating to teacher supply](#) (September 2017), chapter 4; and NFER's (2015) [Should I stay or should I go?](#) which found that 51% of teachers who leave teaching remain in the sector.



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