



Department
for Education

Working lives of teachers and leaders:

Qualitative insight into teacher and leader workload

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Definitions

- **Early Career Framework (ECF)** - a set of standards which sets out what Early Career Teachers are entitled to learn about and learn how to do, when they start their careers.
- **Early Career Teacher (ECT)** - teachers starting induction on or after 1 September 2021 are known as 'Early Career Teachers'. ECTs now serve an extended induction over 2 school years. During their induction period, they are entitled to a 2-year training programme based on the Early Career Framework.
- **Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP)** - a legal document which describes a child or young person's (aged up to 25) special educational needs, the support they need, and the outcomes they would like to achieve.
- **Initial Teacher Training (ITT)** – training required to become a qualified teacher. The Department for Education (DfE) is responsible for managing grant funding associated with school Initial Teacher Training (ITT) courses.
- **Multi-academy trust (MAT)** – a group of academies in partnership with one another.
- **Planning, Preparation and Assessment (PPA)** - time which is set aside for teachers during a timetabled day to allow them to carry out teaching and learning related tasks.
- **Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)** - a child or young person has SEN if they have a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her. A child of compulsory school age or a young person has a learning difficulty or disability if he or she has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age, or has a disability which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of educational facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream schools or mainstream post-16 institutions.

Executive Summary

Introduction

This report details findings from the qualitative strand of the Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders survey (WLTL), conducted by IFF Research and IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, on behalf of the Department for Education (DfE). As part of the Year 3 wave of the WLTL survey, this research took place in autumn 2024 and focused on teacher and leader experiences and opinions related to their workload.

Fieldwork involved a total of 100 depth interviews, conducted by IFF and IOE researchers. The focus was on teachers and leaders currently working in the profession on a full-time basis and reporting average or higher than average working hours in the Year 3 wave of the WLTL survey. This was to ensure that any associated concerns around workload could be explored in sufficient depth.

Workload perceptions

Reflecting the fact that the sampling for this research focused on teachers and leaders reporting at least the average or higher working hours for their role, the majority described their workload as unmanageable. Participants noted difficulties with the volume and mix of tasks falling under their remit. Indeed, many described the need to work outside of school hours to keep up with their workload, both in the evening, over the weekends and out of term time. The associated impact on mental health and wellbeing was often noted in this context.

Teachers and leaders were also asked to comment on the extent to which they felt they had control over their workload. The responses given were mixed, with some differences in views according to job role. Teachers described having limited levels of control, with reasons for this often mirroring their feedback around their workload feeling unmanageable. They also noted the urgency that came with certain issues, such as behavioural or safeguarding issues, and the fact that these often required an immediate response. This would often displace tasks for which they had set time aside in the evenings and weekends, limiting perceived levels of control. While leaders described similar challenges around urgent tasks, some reported a greater sense of control more generally. In this context they noted greater levels of experience and time in the school, the option to delegate tasks to support staff/other leaders and fewer teaching responsibilities.

Most teachers and leaders reported that there were fluctuations in workload throughout the academic year. Both the start of the academic year and summer term were often cited as more intense, the former due to time spent settling pupils into a routine and the

latter due to the requirements of exams, data management, and preparation for the new academic year.

Workload management

As noted, teachers and leaders often saw working excessively outside of school hours as a necessary means of coping with their workload. This was particularly true for those with both teaching and senior or middle leadership responsibilities, who felt it was the only way to effectively deliver their full range of tasks. Other teachers and leaders talked about managing their workload by shifting from a more idealistic and optimistic mindset to one of pragmatism. This involved adjusting their expectations around the quality and quantity of work they could realistically complete. However, this was not seen as an ideal solution, as it involved coming to terms with producing work that was lower in quality.

Other approaches to workload management included the use of personal planning tools, knowledge sharing across colleagues, delegation and the use of AI and technology. School-level examples included different policies around marking and feedback, most notably the use of live marking, and the introduction of new approaches to planning, such as providing banks of ready-made resources. Ready-made resources were not always favoured, as many teachers wanted to retain planning of their own lessons.

Key drivers of workload and high-value tasks

For teachers and middle leaders, tasks directly related to pupils' learning, such as planning and marking, were key drivers of their workload. However, they were also the tasks they perceived as having the most value. This was because these tasks reflected their purpose and aspirations which initially motivated their choice of profession. Indeed, the majority reported a desire for more protected time within their working week to complete these tasks.

In terms of marking and feedback specifically, the amount of time spent on this was heavily driven by school policy. More light-touch approaches to marking such as live-marking were seen as favourable and appeared to be growing in usage, particularly in primary settings. By contrast, teachers and middle leaders who applied retrospective marking (e.g., marking in pupils' books) saw the process as far more time-intensive and felt the merit was more limited.

Other drivers of workload discussed by teachers and middle leaders included support for pupils with additional needs (including Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND)), alongside pupil counselling and safeguarding. Teachers also talked about the need to respond to behavioural issues as well as parental expectations and associated communication, notably email traffic. There was a general sense that parental

communication, and email traffic from internal and external contacts, had risen in recent years.

There was less of a consensus among senior leaders on the specific tasks that took most of their time. This seemed to depend on school-level priorities and other factors, such as the time of year. Nevertheless, senior leaders reported spending a lot of time working on staff management – including recruitment and retention, and performance management and mentoring – alongside data analysis and communication with external bodies and parents. Among this participant group, there was a feeling that school administrative workload had increased for senior leaders, at the same time as a reduction in funding for both schools and external services. Whilst some saw time on internal school administrative tasks as well spent, others wanted to spend more time working strategically and carrying out better quality staff development.

Sector level changes in workload over time

There was a general consensus that teacher and leader workload had become less manageable in recent years, with several factors perceived as contributing:

- reductions in funding for schools and local services;
- the rising number of children with additional needs¹, particularly in mainstream schools;
- staff shortages;
- the rise in poor behaviour among pupils;
- greater safeguarding responsibilities;
- increased accountability.

Often, teachers and leaders reported that several of these factors interacted to result in an increase in workload. For example, the reported increase in children presenting with additional needs in mainstream schools in tandem with a lack of funding for external services (e.g. the local authority) reportedly resulted in higher levels of administration (e.g., applying for Education, Health and Care plans (EHCPs)) work with external bodies and the recruitment of support staff. This was particularly felt among senior leaders. For teachers, it also meant an increase in time spent planning for specific children and navigating parental expectations and communication.

¹ Additional needs is used as an umbrella term within this report to cover a broad range of different needs – which includes and is not limited to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), mental health issues, safeguarding needs/concerns and school readiness.

Introduction

Background, aims and objectives

DfE is committed to reducing excessive and unnecessary workload. As part of this commitment, the department has commissioned a number of surveys and qualitative research projects that have provided valuable insights into teachers' and leaders' working hours and perceptions of workload.

The Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders (WLTl) survey was launched in spring 2022. It includes a module on teacher and leader workload, providing a regular source of data on this topic which can be analysed alongside other key topics included in the survey (e.g., pupil behaviour, continuing professional development (CPD), views around pay and future career plans). It is a five-year longitudinal study conducted by IFF Research and IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society, on behalf of the DfE. More broadly, the study is intended to help DfE to design policies that better support teachers and leaders. The study consists of two core elements; a quantitative survey carried out in the spring of each year and follow up qualitative research with willing survey participants. The quantitative findings for the first three waves of the survey can be found on Gov.uk², with this report detailing findings from the first qualitative strand, carried out in the autumn term of 2024.

While there is some evidence from the WLTl survey of recent reductions in working hours and time spent on non-teaching activities, teachers and leaders continue to work long hours:

- Leaders reported working an average of 56.6 hours per week in 2024, slightly down from 57.4 hours in 2023 and similar to the 56.8 hours in 2022.
- Teachers reported working fewer average hours than leaders, with a slight decrease in recent years:
 - 48.7 hours per week in 2022
 - 49.4 hours in 2023
 - 48.1 hours in 2024

From the WLTl survey, many teachers and leaders report spending excessive time on non-teaching tasks such as general administration, behaviour management, and data recording. However, there is limited evidence on the specific nature of these activities, how they are carried out, and how responsibilities are distributed within schools.

² The findings from the first three years of the quantitative strand are detailed on gov.uk: [wave 1](#), [wave 2](#), [wave 3](#).

To address these gaps, the DfE commissioned IFF Research to conduct this qualitative research as part of wave three of WLTL, providing deeper insights into the workload challenges faced by teachers and school leaders. Thus, the focus for this piece was on teacher and leader workload, complementing other recent DfE research, such as the report on teachers' administrative time.³

The specific research questions feeding into the design of this research were:

1. What are the factors that contribute to workload by role (i.e., teachers, middle leaders and leaders)? What are the perceptions of control over these factors?
2. Where do teachers/leaders perceive the factors that contribute to high workload to originate from?
3. What non-teaching tasks do teachers/middle leaders/leaders feel make up the most significant part of their workload and why?
4. Do teachers/leaders perceive any new drivers of workload/changes to tasks undertaken and how has this impacted their workload?
5. What types of marking and feedback do they undertake in their role and how do they perceive this to impact on their workload?
6. To what extent do they perceive that their workload is related to tasks they undertake specific to their subject taught?
7. How do teachers/leaders manage their workload? How effective are their management strategies at reducing their workload and why?

Fieldwork

A total of 100 participants were recruited to take part in a one-hour depth interview with IFF Research and IOE researchers, after completing the Year 3 WLTL survey. The fieldwork period ran between 23rd of September and the 8th of November 2024, with interviews conducted online via Teams. Each participant received a £25 incentive for taking part in the interview.

Sampling

The sampling criteria focused on those reporting average or higher than average working hours in the Year 3 wave of the WLTL survey. This was to ensure that any associated concerns could be explored in sufficient depth. The specific focus on working hours covered those who reported working hours that were equal to, or higher than, the rounded mean for their role in the Year 3 survey.⁴ These are shown in Table 1.

³ The exploring teachers' admin time report can be found [here](#)

⁴ The sample selection for the qualitative exercise took place during the data processing and cleaning period for the WLTL Year 3 survey. As such, the means found in this table do not match the final published figures used in the associated reporting outputs.

Table 1. Average hours worked by different full-time roles

	Hours worked
Teacher	51
Middle Leader	53
Senior Leader	57
Mean across roles	52.6

Alongside working hours, other sampling criteria included:

- All currently working in the profession on a full-time basis at the time of interview
- An equal split of leaders, middle leaders, and teachers interviewed⁵
- A range of participants by:
 - School phase – primary, secondary, special educational needs (special), alternative provision (AP), and pupil referral unit (PRU)
 - Region
 - School type (Academy/local authority maintained)
 - Individual characteristics (age, ethnicity, gender)

The final breakdown of participants by role and phase is outlined in Table 1. The more detailed breakdown across the remaining criteria can be found in the Annex.

Table 2. Table of role and phase of respondents

Role	Primary	Secondary	Special / PRU / AP	Total
Teacher	15	15	5	35
Middle Leader	14	14	5	33
Senior Leader	13	14	5	32
Total	42	43	15	100

⁵ Please refer to the Annex for full detail on sample characteristics.

The topic guide

The topic guide began with unprompted and overarching views around workload, before focusing in on specific tasks and factors known to contribute to this, as well as any other key areas participants felt the list did not cover. The full list of tasks – which can be found in the Annex – focused on slightly different areas depending on role. The teacher and middle leader list focused on elements associated with classroom teacher and pupil management, for example, while the leader list included overarching areas such as school management, recruitment and responding to government policy. This list was produced using the pre-code list from Question D3 in the WLT survey.

When discussing each task or factor, the topic guide covered views around the time required/spent in fulfilling these responsibilities. Where the respondent outlined a task that they spent a lot of time on, they were asked additional questions around the task's value and impact of the task on their work and wellbeing (for example, the extent to which tasks and factors carried a mental load). The term "mental load" carried a range of connotations. Typically, teachers and leaders associated this with tasks that required in-depth thinking, required a large amount of time and/or space to work through or were deemed stressful or carrying high-stakes (e.g., responding to safeguarding concerns).

Additional more targeted probing was developed for key areas of interest for the Department, namely marking and feedback and the use of AI as a workload management tool. As a result, there is more detailed analysis on these areas in the report. This does not necessarily imply that these areas were of greater importance to participants.

The guide concluded with questions around workload patterns and change over time, both throughout the academic year but also looking back more generally across the years, before a final discussion around strategies and support needs associated with workload management.

Report outline

This report explores the key factors and tasks driving teacher and leader workload. The first two chapters provide an overview of workload perceptions, major workload drivers, and the tasks educators find most valuable. Chapters 3-7 explore specific workload-related tasks, while Chapters 8-9 focus on workload management strategies and desired support from schools and the DfE.

- **Chapter 1** – Teachers' and leaders' perceptions of workload, manageability, and changes over time.
- **Chapter 2** – Key workload drivers and high-value tasks that teachers and leaders would prefer to spend their time on.

- **Chapter 3** – Classroom-related tasks, including lesson planning, marking, and data tasks.
- **Chapter 4** – Other pupil-facing responsibilities beyond teaching, such as behaviour management and additional needs support.
- **Chapter 5** – Administrative tasks for teachers and leaders.
- **Chapter 6** – Workload impact of parental communication, complaints, and changing expectations.
- **Chapter 7** – School management and administration, including funding, staffing, policy changes, and accountability.
- **Chapter 8** – Workload management strategies, including planning tools, delegation, and AI use.
- **Chapter 9** – School-level workload support, focusing on marking, planning, and additional support staff would like.
- **Chapter 10** – Conclusion and key recommendations for workload reduction.

This report includes thematic analysis of qualitative data, as opposed to quantitative measures of the findings. Where relevant and appropriate, an indication of the strength of findings is provided using the following sense of scale:

- Nearly all
- A majority
- Around half
- A few/some
- A handful

As mentioned, the sampling criteria focused on those reporting average, or higher than average, working hours in the Year 3 wave of WLTL. This was to ensure that any associated concerns could be explored in sufficient depth.

As outlined above, chapters 3-7 focus on the different tasks and wider factors that make up teacher and leader workload in more depth. To help guide the interviews, both groups were presented with a list of areas to consider, referred to as the “stimulus” in the report.⁶ All participant groups were also encouraged to discuss any other areas they felt the list had not covered. While the lists presented to teachers and leaders were different, there were some tasks that appeared on both. These included tasks associated with classroom teaching, communication with parents, behaviour management and staff training/development. As such, analysis of these areas covers feedback from both

⁶ The full list of tasks presented to both groups can be found in the Annex.

groups. Other chapters focus solely on classroom teaching or on responsibilities that those in leadership positions hold.

In this report, we refer to teaching tasks and non-teaching tasks. By teaching tasks, we mean classroom delivery, or associated activities e.g., lesson planning and marking. By non-teaching tasks, we mean wider responsibilities outside of the classroom, such as safeguarding.

Subgroup analysis

Throughout the report, the findings are split by the following groups, where relevant:

- Job role – feedback from teachers (including middle leaders) and senior leaders. This is particularly the case when the research stimulus was slightly different.
- Phase – Primary, Secondary, Special / PRU / AP (but only where feedback from those working in the latter phase significantly differed from the overarching narrative). It is also worth noting that – on the whole – differences in experiences by phase were relatively few. They are nevertheless noted throughout the report where they were apparent.

1. Workload perceptions

This chapter considers overarching views from teachers and leaders about their workload, with a focus on manageability, perceived levels of control and change over time.

As part of the WLTl survey, participants are asked whether their workload is acceptable and whether they had sufficient control over it. The latest findings from the third wave of the survey (2024) indicate a slight improvement compared to previous years:

- workload acceptability: In 2024, just over one in five (22%) teachers and leaders agreed that their workload was acceptable. This marks an increase from 17% in both 2023 and 2022.
- control over workload: The proportion of respondents who felt they had sufficient control over their workload also grew, rising to 34% in 2024, compared to 30% in 2023 and 26% in 2022.

While these findings indicate some progress, they also highlight that workload remains a challenge for many teachers and leaders. In total, in 2024, half (49%) of teachers and leaders thought their workload was *both* not acceptable and that they did not have sufficient control over it. Subsequent sections of this chapter will explore the factors influencing workload perceptions, alongside workload management strategies and associated wellbeing as well as changes over time.

Overarching perceptions of workload

Teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders were asked to describe their workload “at the moment” (i.e., at the time of the interview; September to November 2024). For context, in Year 3 of the Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders survey, two thirds (68%) of teachers and leaders in the 2023/2024 academic year disagreed that their workload was acceptable. This was a decrease from 73% as reported in Year 2 (2023), and 72% in Year 1 (2022).⁷ Reflecting the fact that the sampling for this research focused on those reporting at least the average or higher working hours for their role in Year 3 of the WLTl survey, unsurprisingly the majority of the qualitative respondents also described their workload as unacceptable.

In particular, all participant groups noted difficulties with the volume and mix of tasks falling under their remit. Indeed, many reported having to work outside of school hours to keep up with workload, both in the evening or over the weekends, as a means of coping. This was felt across all job roles and school phases (i.e., primary and secondary level).

⁷ [Working lives of teachers and leaders: wave 3 - GOV.UK](#)

[I work] Four or five hours each day, each weekday after the school day, and then I work on a Sunday as well. I work through lunch. I get there an hour and a half early for school and it might even be more than that actually. I don't think I have any control over it. Very rarely do you see any teachers in like staff room or anything because everyone's just trying to keep their head above water. – *Teacher, Primary*

I will do 2 to 4 hours work every night and then still work at the weekend. I don't know any other career that does that. I'd quite want to find one. Some days I'm really tired, I'm getting older... I haven't got the energy I did when I was a new teacher ... Burnout is definitely real. I'm exhausted. – *Teacher, Secondary*

It's relentless. That would be a word that I think most headteachers would go along with. – *Senior Leader, Secondary*

Often participants were quite matter of fact about having a high workload, describing it as 'expected' or 'the norm' for the profession. This was not without concern, the associated impact on physical and mental health was a common area for discussion. Again, this is a topic we go on to discuss in more detail in subsequent chapters.

[The] sustained workloads at that level [60 plus hours a week] for years, the impact on my health is nearly catastrophic. – *Senior Leader, Secondary*

There were a few individuals across both the teacher and leader groups who held more optimistic views around their workload. Generally, this was because either they, or their school, had put processes in place to help staff manage their workload. We explore this in more depth in chapter 9.

Perceived levels of control

Teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders were also asked about the extent to which they felt they had control over their workload. The responses given were mixed, with some differences in views according to job role.

Teachers and middle leaders

Most often, teachers and middle leaders reported having limited levels of control over their workload. Their reasons for this often mirrored their feedback around their workload feeling unmanageable, in terms of the volume and mix of tasks they needed to complete. They also discussed the urgency that came with certain issues, which could also lead to a feeling of having less control. Examples included responding to behavioural or

safeguarding issues in a timely manner, as well as completing any administration or data entry associated with these safeguarding issues. Others talked about a sense of pressure from senior leaders to work in a certain way. For example, many reported that school-mandated deadlines for completing tasks added to the intensity of their workload. Examples were often related to data entry or reporting deadlines (e.g. uploading assessment data to a centralised database). For more junior teachers and middle leaders, it did not always feel clear why something needed to be done by a certain date, which contributed to a sense of having less control.

There is an awful lot I feel I don't have control of, due to pressures from higher leads, such as head teachers and expectations from the trust. I would say that I probably put a lot of pressure on myself too, because I want to do a really good job so that I can do the best for the kids. – *Middle Leader, Primary*

We get random admin tasks, two or three a day, some are justified, some aren't. For example: "this needs doing because it's EHCP (Education Health and Care Plan) reviews" versus "fill in this random spreadsheet"... We're just told to do it. And quite often these tasks will have a very tight deadline...My limited PPA time is then taken up by finishing admin tasks and I have to do other things like planning, preparation and assessment in my own time. – *Middle Leader, Secondary*

Senior leaders

The perspective was slightly different for senior leaders. Some reported being more in control as a result of factors such as overall levels of experience and length of time in the school, the option to delegate tasks to support staff/other leaders, and having fewer teaching responsibilities. At the same time, other senior leaders felt their seniority exposed them to tasks that were often not timetabled/planned for, yet required an urgent response. Serious behaviour or safeguarding issues were often cited in this context.

You can plan to do admin tasks but if a child protection issue comes in, or police and social services walk on site, the whole day is wiped out attending to that issue. –*Senior Leader, Secondary*

Mostly it's responding to children with needs, supporting staff with children with needs, and working with parents. Yesterday I spent all afternoon with a child. It was only safe for them to be in here with me, which is why I don't get the things on your list [the stimulus] done. – *Senior Leader, Primary*

Workload management strategies and associated wellbeing

Both teachers and leaders adopted a range of different methods to manage their workload. A few talked about developing a process of coping, which involved prioritising the most important tasks and working overtime to complete the rest. This often tipped into working excessive hours, like working late into the evening, on the weekends, and during school holidays. This was particularly true for those with both teaching and senior or middle leadership responsibilities, who felt it was the only way to fully deliver upon the full range of their tasks. Senior and middle leaders often felt that they were not so much 'managing' as 'coping' with their workload.

[My workload] is really, really high all the time ... consistently high. I cope but it's not manageable, I don't think. Talking to friends and family who have other careers, teaching is one of the most intense, I think, in terms of the workload. - *Middle Leader, Secondary*

Other teachers and leaders talked about shifting from a more idealistic and optimistic mindset to one that is more focused on pragmatism, adjusting their expectations around the quality and quantity of work they could realistically complete. All participant groups recognised that this was not an ideal solution however, as it involved coming to terms with the fact that the work they were able to get done might be lower in quality and quantity than they would like.

I just prioritise what's most important and just accept that I'm never going to get through my list of things I have to do, and that's okay." – *Teacher, Secondary*

It's manageable because I just do the priority [tasks], but if I was to actually be fully on top of everything, then it isn't manageable. – *Middle Leader, Primary*

I've become quite disciplined in that I'll do two evenings a week, max. I'll get my laptop out and do something for a little bit of time if I can, but I know I need that time to myself. If that means the workload piles up, I've got better at going back to my line manager and say[ing] there's no time to do it. – *Senior Leader, Secondary*

I can't change the workload ... I mean, I've stopped working on weekends as much as possible and I'm just prioritising things and I'm accepting I won't get everything done. But also because I'm not 100% happy, I'm not willing to work on weekends because I need that time away mentally to protect myself from the job role. – *Senior Leader, Special / PRU / AP*

This shift from a more idealistic and optimistic mindset to one of pragmatism for one's own professional practice - focussing on optimisation, meeting minimum standards and protecting personal time – was mentioned across all roles. It was particularly true of senior leaders, however, along with those who had been working in the sector for a long time. For a few teachers, middle leaders, and senior leaders, this shift was very difficult, both emotionally and professionally, and a few reported severe impacts to their mental and physical health stemming from difficulties with adjusting their professional mindsets.

More generally, many teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders felt that maintaining good personal wellbeing was crucial to managing workload. This was because they considered that good personal wellbeing and mental health could protect against burnout and exhaustion, and therefore ensure they were productive and effective when working. A few individuals across all participant groups cited the importance of 'switching off' from work in this context, for example by being strict on the hours they did not work and turning off notifications and emails. Others ensured they had hobbies and weekly activities they could use to reduce stress and distance themselves from work.

Other approaches to workload management included delegation, knowledge sharing and learning from strategies/experiences deployed by their colleagues, personal planning tools (e.g., to-do lists, planners, diaries and calendars) and the use of technology. These approaches are explored in detail in chapter 8.

Nature of workload throughout the academic year

Most teachers and leaders reported that there were fluctuations in workload throughout the academic year. Across job role and phase, the autumn term was considered one of the busiest, as it marks the start of the academic year. Teachers reported additional workload resulting from the focus on settling and re-engaging pupils after the summer break. This included getting to know the new cohort, addressing learning gaps, and providing support. Support was both pastoral and more general, practical support related to the new school year.

Some teachers and leaders reported that workload typically decreases in the spring term as pupils settle into their routines and focus on learning or exam preparations. In contrast, workload increases again in the summer term due to exams, data management, and preparation for the new academic year.

Many teachers and leaders reported that their workload remained consistently high, with the focus of their work shifting over the course of the year:

It's the sort of feeling that it will never ever end... no matter what you do, no matter how many hours you spend, it's just never going to end and there will always be something else. – *Middle Leader, Secondary*

Around half reported that Ofsted inspections contributed to workload fluctuations, with an increase in work when preparing for an anticipated or confirmed inspection. For some, especially if the Ofsted overall effectiveness judgement was 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate', there was also an increase in work post-inspection, for example implementing changes to policies.⁸

Secondary teachers and middle leaders specifically reported the greatest increase in workload coincided with the summer exam period when GCSE and A-Level exams are sat. A handful of secondary teachers and middle leaders noted that they used to have a quieter summer term after the exams finished, however they have found this is no longer the case, as their senior leaders found new tasks for them to carry out. Some middle leaders were asked to plan curriculums for the next academic year, while one teacher said they were given a specific project for this 'quieter period'. A handful of senior leaders reported additional work in the summer term related to demonstrating progress to the local authority (LA) or governing body, along with recruiting staff for the upcoming academic year.

Change over time

Alongside overall perceptions of workload and levels of control, all participant groups were asked for their views on whether teacher and leader workload had changed over time. The two main ways in which teachers and leaders conceptualised a change in their workload over time were in relation to:

- changes at a sector level, and
- changes in workload for individuals as their careers progress.

Sector level changes in workload over time

There was a general consensus that teacher and leader workload had become less manageable in recent years. Teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders identified several factors which they believed had contributed to this, including:

- reductions in funding for schools and local services;
- the rising number of pupils with additional needs;
- staff shortages;

⁸ The fieldwork period for this piece of research took place in the autumn term of 2024. This was after the announcement that Ofsted would no longer be using the single word judgement rating system as part of their inspection and reporting processes. The fieldwork period was before the announcement of Ofsted's proposal to introduce a report card with a new 5-point grading system.

- the rise in poor behaviour;
- greater safeguarding responsibilities;
- increased accountability.

Broader societal shifts, including COVID, changes in parents' expectations and attitudes toward education were considered to further compound these changes. Participants felt that parents are increasingly viewing schools as having a broader role than education. For some, there is an expectation that schools should be a place of care and have the capacity to solve issues relating to pupils' physical needs, mental health, wellbeing and behaviour. More information about parents and their evolving expectations can be found in chapter 6. All respondents who were asked found it difficult to disentangle the extent to which the COVID pandemic was the cause of the workload increase, or an exacerbator of pre-existing issues that were already increasing.

Teachers and leaders often reported that several of these factors interacted resulting in an increase in workload. For example, the perceived increase in pupils with additional needs alongside a lack of funding of external services (e.g. the local authority) was reported to have driven an increase in several tasks across the school for staff in all roles. For example, for leaders, this meant more administrative work (e.g. applying for EHCPs), collaborating with external bodies for support and recruiting support staff. For teachers, it resulted in more time spent on planning for individual pupils with additional needs and communicating with parents.

We use the term workload creep where it's essentially ... slowly, slowly, slowly more work, do more work, do more work ... I'm not really working that much harder than I was last month. But then when you look at like a year pattern, there was a very, very gradual, subtle and stealthy increase, I think actually I am working significantly longer and harder. I'm being asked to do significantly more than I was even last year. – *Middle Leader, Secondary*

We explore all of these areas in more depth at relevant points in chapters 3 to 8.

Workload changes as teachers and leaders progress and develop over time

In a few instances, teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders felt that their workload had become more manageable over time, as they progressed in their role and built up experience. They could draw on their knowledge of how long certain tasks would practically take, and when they would likely crop up, to structure their work time effectively. For example, one teacher realised that they worked far more effectively by

getting into school an hour ahead of everyone else and using the quiet time to get through a lot of tasks. Others were more comfortable taking a certain task home to complete in the evening if they felt it required less engaged thinking. Some viewed planning as easier once they had more experience and banks of lesson plans from previous years, compared to more junior staff with less experience. Finally, experience empowered a few teachers and middle leaders to be able to say 'no' more to senior staff, ensuring their workloads were more manageable.

2. Key drivers of workload and high-value tasks

In this chapter we summarise the tasks that teachers and leaders reported spending most of their time completing, alongside the driving factors. We also summarise how teachers and leaders would prefer to use their working time. All tasks mentioned in this chapter are explored in detail throughout chapter 3 to 8, with the focus here on providing a high-level and overarching view.

For context, findings from the three waves of the WLTl survey indicate that teachers and middle leaders have consistently reported spending too much time on the following tasks⁹:

- General administration: 74% in 2024 (lower vs. 2023 (75%) and in line with 2022 (75%))
- Following up on behaviour incidents: 60% in 2024 (higher vs. 2023 (57%) and 2022 (50%))
- Data recording, input, and analysis: 53% in 2024 (lower vs. 2023 (56%) and in line with 2022 (53%)).

Senior leaders, on the other hand, have been most likely to report spending too much time on:

- Responding to government policy changes: 52% in 2024 (lower vs. 2023 (62%) and 2022 (67%))
- Administration within the school: 53% in 2024 (lower vs. 2023 (61%) and higher than 2022 (50%)).
- External body administration: 41% in 2024 (lower vs. 2023 (48%) and in line with 2022 (45%)).

While some decreases may suggest improvements in workload, the data highlights that a substantial proportion of teachers and leaders still feel burdened by non-teaching tasks. Consequently, this chapter delves deeper into these issues, exploring why these tasks take up so much time and potential solutions for improving workload management.

Teachers and middle leaders

What is the most time spent on, and why?

Whilst teachers and middle leaders spent the majority of their non-teaching time on teaching-related tasks (for example lesson planning, marking), most felt they did not have

⁹ The findings from the first three years of the quantitative strand are detailed on gov.uk: [wave 1](#), [wave 2](#), [wave 3](#).

enough time to carry these out to a standard they were happy with, which was often a source of frustration. This happened when faced with competing or more pressing priorities such as behaviour management, supporting pupils with additional needs and responding to safeguarding incidents.

The lack of sufficient time to carry out teaching-related tasks was a source of frustration. On the one hand, teachers and middle leaders felt they were increasingly spending time on tasks that they still deemed important and valuable to their profession, such as pupil counselling, behaviour management and follow up, safeguarding and supporting those additional needs. However, some of these tasks had corresponding administrative burdens that teachers and middle leaders felt it was less valuable for them to be completing.

What would teachers and middle leaders like to spend more time on?

Nearly half of teachers and middle leaders said that they would like to spend more time on planning lessons, as they saw this as the most valuable non-teaching activity. Teachers and middle leaders described this as creative, enjoyable work that had an immediate benefit to pupils. While teachers wanted to spend more time on planning, they wanted this to be within the working day, and not in the evening or at weekends.

A few participants wanted to spend more time on pupil counselling, supervision and tuition, describing it as meaningful and rewarding work. They said it was beneficial for them to get to know their pupils better and helped them to understand the challenges in pupils' lives and to prevent wider challenges, such as behaviour issues.

A few teachers and middle leaders said they would like to spend more time on activities that they saw as being of direct benefit to pupils, such as trips that would broaden horizons, cultural capital, and complement in-school learning, as well as develop pupils' wider skills such as teamwork and social skills. A few teachers mentioned wanting to spend more time on marking, so that they could give better feedback to pupils and enhance their learning. A few other teachers mentioned activities related to staff development, such as mentoring colleagues or reading education research.

What would teachers like to spend less time on?

A few teachers and middle leaders did not want to spend less time on any of the tasks they carried out, because they felt they were all important. However, a similar number said that they would like to spend less time on general administration, marking and pupil performance data work. A few teachers mentioned other tasks that they would like to spend less time on, including behaviour follow up, counselling pupils, communication with parents, tasks seen as solely for the benefit of Ofsted, planning, and school internal communications.

Senior leaders

What is the most time spent on, and why?

Senior leaders attributed their increase in workload to similar factors as teachers and middle leaders, for example the increase in the proportion of pupils with additional needs and the increase in behavioural challenges. For senior leaders, staff shortages and retention issues, alongside the reduction in both school funding and funding for external services, were also felt to drive their workload, leading to an increase in the time spent on school administration. Given the wide range of leadership responsibilities, there were no clear standout tasks that senior leaders reported spending most of their time on.

What would senior leaders like to spend more time on?

A few senior leaders would like to spend more time on coaching staff, and on their own professional development. This included team teaching, modelling good practice, enabling Early Career Teachers (ECTs) to visit other schools and generally supporting the development and retention of their staff. Senior leaders mentioned a shortage of funding and time as being the main reasons they were not currently able to carry out these tasks.

A few also mentioned a desire for more time for strategic planning:

I'd love to ... have more time to think strategically. I find myself reacting to things and I just know that actually if we put plans in place earlier it could have been prevented or managed. – *Senior Leader, Primary*

Those senior leaders who had teaching responsibilities were keen to spend more time on planning their lessons and have more time to dedicate to the pupils in their classes. Other areas where senior leaders said that they would like to spend more time included:

- developing collaboration within their staff and with their governors;
- developing relationships and the culture and ethos of the school by working with pupils and their families;
- engaging with research and doing activities that they saw as being of direct benefit to pupils.

What would senior leaders like to spend less time on?

When asked which tasks they would like to spend less time on, senior leaders varied in their responses and there was no single task that all agreed on. Administration within the school was mentioned by a few senior leaders. A few also mentioned responding to

changes in government policy, or administrative and management tasks relating to external bodies. Some senior leaders said that they did not want to spend less time on any of their tasks, as they saw value in all of them.

3. Tasks associated with classroom teaching

This chapter focuses predominantly on teacher and middle leader views on tasks most directly associated with classroom teaching, namely individual lesson planning and preparation and marking and feedback. The teacher and middle leader interviews naturally focused on these areas in more depth. As such, the analysis is predominantly focused on this group. Overarching views collected from senior leaders are nevertheless summarised towards the end of the chapter.

Planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time

Several teachers and middle leaders mentioned that the allocation of PPA time on their timetable was insufficient for the amount of planning, preparation and assessment tasks they needed to do. Some full-time classroom teachers reported that the 10% of their teaching time allocated for PPA¹⁰ amounted to about 2-3 hours per week. However, they said this was not enough to complete the tasks they were expected to be able to do within this time. All teachers and middle leaders described spending time far in excess of this amount on lesson planning, preparation of resources and marking specifically. Participants described how PPA time would be eroded by other activities, such as those requiring a more immediate response (e.g., behavioural issues) displacing planning, preparation and assessment activities to after school, evenings and weekends.

It does not cover enough because most of the time in that PPA we will still be doing other things. It is supposed to be uninterrupted time but most of the time I will have had to go into class because someone has misbehaved, or I get caught up doing something else. – *Teacher, Primary*

Individual planning or preparation of lessons

The majority of teachers and middle leaders reported that most of their non-teaching time was spent on individual planning or preparation of lessons (either at school or out of school). This included planning individual lessons, sequences of lessons and longer schemes of work, preparing resources for lessons, and adapting activities and materials for individual pupils.

Teachers and middle leaders saw planning lessons as central to their role, pointing to its importance for pupil development and school performance. Nevertheless, only around half said that time spent on planning was proportionate to its value. Some expressed

¹⁰For more information about teachers' entitlement to PPA time and what this includes see section 52.5 of: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67165b0d9242e6cc6c849b4b/School_teachers_pay_and_conditions_document_and_guidance_2024_.pdf

resentment about how time taken planning took time away from their personal lives, for example reduced their time for their own families, friends and leisure activities. There was also a sense that planning could carry a high mental load¹¹, not necessarily because it was difficult, but due to the volume of planning they needed to carry out. Accordingly, a minority of teachers and middle leaders said planning was constantly on their mind.

From planning and preparation comes the teaching and learning and that is what teaching is all about, teaching to deliver pupil outcomes and ensure people progress ... [it's] a big and important part of my role but the demands of it in a normal working pattern are not doable. It is essential but the time it needs is very overwhelming ... lessons cannot be formed in batches because your formative assessments influence the next day ... things can change. – *Middle Leader, Primary*

Planning had a particularly high mental load where teachers were teaching pupils with SEND. Teachers reported they had a greater range of pupil abilities in their classrooms than in the past. Pupils who were working significantly below their expected age, alongside SEND pupils, needed bespoke resources and plans. This meant additional time was needed for planning.

I'm teaching year 4, which is eight to nine year olds. But I've got some children this year that are working at a level that would be more consistent with six to seven year olds. So some of them are needing lessons plans specifically for them so they can access what we're learning about. – *Teacher, Primary*

Other challenges related to planning and preparation of lessons, each mentioned by a handful of teachers and middle leaders, included:

- extensive paperwork;
- planning outside of subject specialisms;
- changes to the National Curriculum, or moving school and/or to a different exam board;

¹¹ As part of the interviews, teachers and leaders were asked, 'thinking about all of the tasks we have discussed; would you say any of these have a particularly high mental load or low mental load?'. Responses to this question suggested that "mental load" carried a range of connotations. Typically, teachers and leaders associated this with tasks that required in-depth thinking, required a large amount of time/or space to work through or were deemed stressful or carrying high stakes (e.g., responding to safeguarding concerns).

- school policies e.g., one middle leader had been asked to replan the curriculum for a whole key stage, while in another school, teachers were not allowed to use downloaded worksheets without adapting them;
- needing to create resources from scratch as there were insufficient funds to buy in ready-made resources.

Some teachers and middle leaders regarded planning as an investment, because the mental load and amount of planning reduced as they built their own bank of plans and resources over the years. Relatedly, a few teachers and middle leaders reported that they had found planning to be harder in the earlier stages of their career. A handful of teachers mentioned that collaborative planning could reduce workload, which is further explored in chapter 9.

Marking and feedback

About half of teachers and middle leaders said that marking was a task that they spent most time on. The amount of time spent on marking, and how much choice they had about how much time they spent marking, was heavily influenced by school policies and the different approaches these allowed. This in turn impacted the extent to which teachers and middle leaders saw the time spent on marking and feedback as proportionate to the value it brought regarding supporting learning outcomes. The variation in school level practice, including the rise of live marking in some schools, is discussed in further detail in chapter 9.

A few teachers and middle leaders said that marking was a task with high mental load. As discussed in chapter 1, there were certain pinch-points throughout the academic year where time spent and associated mental load was also greater. There was also some suggestion that mental load was higher for those teaching exam classes, as we go on to discuss under “Variation by pupil type”.

Those who reported a high mental load when it came to marking either explained that this was down to the sheer volume of work they were required to complete, that they simply did not find it particularly interesting or engaging, or that it could be “high stakes”. The high stakes were particularly evident for those teaching exam classes, or for those concerned about their ability to provide feedback that would sufficiently support learning outcomes.

Variation in school policies and practices

Teachers and middle leaders described a wide range of school-led practices and policies related to marking and feedback. Practices included: daily marking of all work; weekly “deep marking” of books; verbal feedback in lessons; marking of tests and other assessments; annotating spelling, punctuation and grammar in writing; using highlighters,

stickers and symbols to give feedback to children who are not able to read (e.g. in Reception or special schools); and keeping photographic records of children's learning. Further detail on how school level practices and support impacted marking workloads are covered in chapter 9.

Variation by pupil type

With regards to pupil type, teachers of year groups with national assessments, especially Year 6 and Year 11, reported having particularly heavy marking workloads. For example, one teacher of Year 11 compared their marking workload for Year 11 with other year groups:

Time spent on marking: [...] So some classes it will probably be once every couple of weeks and I'll spend maybe an hour going through their books. But then classes like my Year 11 and my Year 10 classes, I have them five times a week for an hour [marking] at a time. – *Teacher, Secondary*

Teaching exam classes was also often reported to come with a higher mental load, with concerns around whether the marking was correct or accurate enough to sufficiently support pupil outcomes.

It's quite draining – reading the same thing again and noting every child's gaps... Your head's all over the place reading it all. – *Teacher, Primary*

Amongst those teaching in primary schools, this was particularly true of key stage 2 teachers, compared with key stage 1 teachers, where there was less book-based marking because of the pupils' ages.

Teachers and leaders also pointed to more involved marking and feedback requirements when working with pupils with SEND, an area we explore in chapter 4 under "Pupils with additional needs".

Recording and analysing pupil performance data

A minority of teachers and middle leaders said that pupil performance data work was a task they spent most time on. However, this task was generally reported to be more involved for middle leaders who were more often responsible for analysis as well as data entry. This was also the case for teachers and middle leaders with SEND responsibilities. We explore SEND responsibilities in more detail in chapter 4.

As with marking and feedback, the amount of time spent was highly dependent on school policies and systems in place. All participant groups again talked about time

requirements being changing depending on the stage in the school year. Alongside this, a few teachers and middle leaders gave examples of very detailed and frequent data input and analysis tasks, which they generally saw as unhelpful.

At my school we have three different points of the year where parents are reported [to]... I think that's ridiculous. I think you're not going to see a massive change or a massive amount of progress at three different points of the year. – *Teacher, Secondary*

Teachers and middle leaders felt that pupil performance data work was worthwhile when it supported pupils' learning. A handful of teachers and middle leaders said they enjoyed data analysis, or that pupil performance data work was made easier by efficient systems, for example, when schools reduced the number of times per year that data needed to be entered, or when they had assistance from support staff.

However, data entry and analysis of pupil performance data felt less worthwhile when teachers saw it as 'box ticking', or solely for internal or external accountability. Examples of this included only doing the work for middle and senior leadership within the school, and for the academy trust and/or Ofsted outside the school. One middle leader referred to being required to evidence that academy expectations were being met, but did not believe this benefitted pupils directly. Another teacher described a school policy for recording exam preparation:

We need to log every time we do a practice question in class. They need to be collected in and marked and then you need to go to a [website] and manually tick a box for each student to say that they have done it. It's literal box ticking. The students never see it, but it's purely for middle leaders to be able to check we've done the question. – *Teacher, Secondary*

Generally speaking, recording and analysing pupil performance data did not appear to carry a high mental load. However, a handful of teachers and leaders who felt they were not particularly skilled at data analysis did report some difficulty in this regard. A similar sentiment was held among those who felt data entry was not a task that had drawn them to the profession in the first place. A further handful talked about the task carrying a high mental load where they felt accountable for high levels of pupil achievement.

Senior leader views on tasks associated with classroom teaching

The majority of senior leaders were teaching for at least part of the week. In most cases, this was timetabled teaching. For a small minority, teaching time was more ad-hoc, for

example covering absent teachers. As might be expected, only a minority of senior leaders reported that teaching was a task they spent most time on.

Specific feedback (beyond time spent on these tasks) broadly mirrored the points raised by teachers and middle leaders. Nearly all said they had no choice about the time they took on tasks related to classroom teaching, for example, and the tasks cited included planning of lessons, preparation of resources, marking and assessment.

Nearly all senior leaders said that time spent on tasks completed as part of classroom teaching, such as marking and feedback, was proportionate to their value. Only a minority reported that factors relating to teaching came with a high mental load.

4. Other pupil-facing responsibilities outside of regular timetabled teaching

In this chapter we explore pupil-facing responsibilities that predominantly take place outside of the classroom. This ranges from pupil counselling to behaviour management and catering to pupils with additional needs.

Pupil counselling

The majority of teachers and middle leaders said that providing pupil counselling, supervision and tuition was a part of their role.¹² Teachers mentioned a range of activities, including pastoral counselling and work relating to safeguarding; clubs and activities, especially in PE; and homework clubs and supervision of extra tuition. A minority of teachers and middle leaders said that pupil counselling, supervision and tuition was an activity they spent most time on.

There was a mixed feeling amongst teachers and middle leaders as to whether they were the correct people to provide pupil counselling. A few teachers and middle leaders really valued this part of their job and said they would like to do more of it. However, others would prefer schools to be able to employ professional counsellors to fulfil this role.

Often, time spent on pupil counselling could not be planned, due to the nature of dealing with an incident in the moment. Therefore, activities like pupil counselling were sometimes perceived as in conflict with teaching-related duties, with teachers and middle leaders stopping these activities (e.g. marking or planning) in order to carry out ad-hoc pastoral support.

Teachers and middle leaders had differing levels of choice over the time spent on these activities, which was often related to their specific role within the school. For example, middle leaders with pastoral responsibilities saw this type of work as central to their role and they had little choice about completing it.

A minority of teachers and middle leaders said that pupil counselling came with a high mental load. This was particularly the case when the counselling related to safeguarding, or where they perceived that pupils had a high level of need. In these cases, the high mental load came from the high level of emotional demand on teachers, when their pupils were struggling or having very negative life experiences.

¹² When referring to pupil counselling, the topic guide gave the following examples: this includes career guidance and virtual counselling, lunch supervision, homework clubs, emotional support.

It is emotionally draining. I am in a school in a deprived area. When a student comes in with a black eye because you know they have been hit the night before, it is heart-breaking. You are able to help them, but emotionally that is one of the hardest. – *Middle Leader, Secondary*

Behaviour management

As mentioned in chapter 2, concerns around a rise in behavioural issues were common, and mentioned by teachers, middle and senior leaders alike. The vast majority of teachers and middle leaders reported they spent at least some time following up on behaviour incidents. Many described behaviour follow up as being reactive and unpredictable, meaning dealing with behaviour often fell into protected time (e.g. PPA), or lunchtime/after-school. Whilst teachers and middle leaders reported that logging behaviour follow up was time consuming, they reported it was essential, as it involved ensuring that incidents were recorded. This enables patterns of behaviour to be analysed, and to justify future actions including staff training and safeguarding. Schools often had strict timelines for this activity, for example needing to log behaviour on the same day or give a set notice period for detentions. Teachers and middle leaders spent less time following up behaviour incidents when there was a system where detentions are issued centrally and classroom teachers do not have to administrate them. The majority of teachers and middle leaders said they also spent time calling parents about behaviour, as part of their schools' policies.

Most teachers and middle leaders said that time spent following up on behaviour was proportionate to its value, but they also expressed concern about the level of behaviour problems that they experienced in school.

For context, the Year 3 WLTL survey found that over a quarter (27%) of all teachers rated pupil behaviour in their school as either “poor” or “very poor”. This was significantly higher than in 2023 (25%) and 2022 (18%), indicating that pupil behaviour seems to be getting worse over time. Leaders were more positive; fewer than one-in-ten (8%) leaders rated pupil behaviour in their school as either “poor” or “very poor”, in line with 2023, but this has still increased when compared to 4% in 2022. Around eight-in-ten (79%) leaders with teaching responsibilities reported that they felt always or mostly supported to deal with disruptive behaviour. Less than half (49%) of teachers with teaching responsibilities felt this way (this was also lower than the 52% in 2023 and 58% in 2022).

About half of teachers and middle leaders said that following up behaviour carried a high mental load. For some, this was because parents were challenging to communicate with, especially when they were unsupportive of the school, for example disagreeing with school actions. Due to this, some teachers and middle leaders found communicating with parents stressful. This is further explored in chapter 6.

A minority of teachers and middle leaders said that dealing with behaviour carried a high mental load, specifically due to the pressure and importance of logging parental contact promptly and accurately. Additionally, a handful of teachers and middle leaders found behaviour follow up tasks were emotionally draining, especially when pupil behaviour did not change as a result.

Pupils with additional needs

Within this report, pupils with additional needs include pupils with SEND, mental health needs, safeguarding concerns/needs, or limited school readiness. Whilst time spent supporting pupils with additional needs was not an explicit or standalone task covered by the interviewing stimulus, the majority of teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders mentioned the requirement to address such needs as a significant driver of their workload. Mental health was a commonly reported additional need.

Some teachers and leaders reported that a strain on support services further exacerbated this challenge. For example, teachers and leaders reported there were prolonged waiting times for assessments, diagnoses, and access to external agency support and funding, relating to SEND and mental health concerns. Teachers and school leaders therefore had to take on the responsibility of supporting pupils with additional needs alongside their existing workload, trying to bridge the gap until specialist assistance became available.

Some teachers and leaders reported that, following cuts to community services, schools faced increased expectations to fill the gaps left by social services and mental health services. As a result, they reported that schools were increasingly acting as community hubs, providing social support, mental health care, and even health care for both pupils and their families. Teachers and leaders in primary schools felt this additional pressure most acutely.

The reported rise in pupils with additional needs in mainstream schools was also reported to heighten expectations for schools to manage safeguarding matters. However, reduced funding for schools and diminished support from external agencies were felt to have made it more challenging for teachers and leaders to address safeguarding issues:

In terms of safeguarding, I think the workload this year is absolutely intense because it's something you can't put on the back burner and say I'll do that tomorrow. – *Senior Leader, Special / PRU / AP*

We're expected to have big conversations with parents, to be the lead on early help initiatives. Previously there was the early help team who dealt with this. – *Senior Leader, Special / PRU / AP*

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

Some teachers and middle leaders felt that the level of needs that they were required to meet exceeded their capacity and skills:

We've got children in our school who five to ten years ago would not have been in mainstream and now are very typical in mainstream and we don't have the skills and the expertise and the funding in order to put those things in place for them. – *Senior Leader, Primary*

A few senior leaders mentioned that applications for SEND funding used a lot of time and resource to complete. Teachers in mainstream schools experienced additional pressure in the classroom with pupils with SEND who were waiting for support, or for whom support was not available, and this increased their planning and preparation workload. A specific issue in primary schools was the lag between pupils with additional needs joining the school in Reception, and funded support only being available for them months later after successful referrals. The focus on Reception pupils reflects the fact that EHCPs are not yet in place at nursery level. It is less of an issue for secondary schools, with EHCPs more likely to be in place by Year 7.

Leaders also described a need to spend a lot of time liaising with external agencies and completing lengthy referral forms. Several leaders referred to the extensive paperwork related to SEND, both for applications for support and for reviewing and reporting on progress, and working with external agencies.

Leaders reported that there was not enough support from their local authorities (LAs), which did not have sufficient capacity to meet the demand in schools. One leader reported that their LA did not meet the required timescales or provide funding that would meet the needs identified in EHCPs. This had an effect on teacher and leader workload, as it meant they had to support children for longer without the additional resources needed, and leaders would spend time chasing up on referrals.

In my local authority, I mean, they never stick to the legal framework, it is just completely out of sync. They have got to have a meeting within, you know, 20 weeks or whatever. It can be 40 weeks, it can be 60 weeks, it can be 80 weeks, you know. Or they will say here's your money, £4,500 and this child needs 28 hours full time support. – *Senior Leader, Secondary*

Leaders also reported that parents had unrealistic expectations of SEND support and poor understanding of the EHCP process. For example, a parent might expect a child with additional needs to have one-to-one support all of the time, or request frequent changes to a pupil's EHCP. This increased workload relating to communicating with parents.

School readiness

In primary schools, there was a perceived increase in prevalence of pupils lacking school readiness. For a handful, this was a driver of an increase in teacher and leader workload. For example, a handful reported pupils arriving at school in nappies, or with limited communication skills. These teachers were unable to access additional funding or support to help with managing this. One teacher described the impact on teacher time:

If you don't do it, it will never happen, so let's sit on the toilet and look at this chart. It is not just a case of changing a nappy and putting a clean one on, it is a conversation; 'This is the toilet, this is the flush noise' – it is a teaching experience as well. - *Middle Leader, Primary*

Additionally, teachers and leaders said that they did not have the skills to provide this kind of care, which meant that more time was needed both for staff training and for providing the care.

5. General administrative work

This chapter explores teacher and leader views on their workload in terms of general administrative responsibilities. It builds on the findings of a previous report exploring teachers' admin time (DfE, 2023¹³) and provides further insights into how these tasks impact teachers and leaders.

For context, quantitative findings from all three waves of WLTL survey consistently show that administrative tasks are among the top non-teaching responsibilities that both teachers and leaders feel they spend too much time on. In 2024, 74% of teachers and middle leaders identified general administrative tasks as the most time-consuming non-teaching duty, consistent with the findings in 2023 and 2022. For senior leaders, the primary non-teaching task was responding to school-related administration, with 53% reporting they spent too much time on this task.

Given the differences in their roles, during the interviews, teachers and middle leaders were presented with a slightly different list of responsibilities to discuss:

- Teachers and middle leaders were asked to consider:
 - communication
 - paperwork
 - work emails
 - any other clerical duties related to their role.
- Senior leaders were asked to consider:
 - administration within the school (including applying regulations to the school, reporting, school budget, preparing timetables, and class composition),
 - administrative and management tasks relating to external bodies (including responding to requests from local, regional, or national education officials, social services, or other similar agencies).

Senior leaders were also asked to consider their views on time spent on general data analysis including analysis of performance data at the level of the teacher and the school and record keeping for external bodies / regulatory purposes).

General administrative work: teachers and middle leaders

Very few teachers and middle leaders reported that the time they spent on general administrative work was proportionate to its value, unless it directly contributed to pupil learning or development. Examples of valuable administration for some was related to

¹³ [Exploring teachers' admin time](#)

school trips, or wider safeguarding paperwork and processing SEND referrals. Such tasks also carried a higher mental load, due to the potential for negative consequences for the school, the teacher and for pupils, should something go wrong.

Data entry

An administrative task commonly cited as increasing workload was data entry, whether this be related to behaviour, safeguarding or assessment scores. Often, these tasks were high in volume, so naturally took a long amount of time. Added to this, was a perception from some that the school had enforced data entry requirements that 'were for the sake of it', or excessively detailed.

I'm not going to be looking at the data so I almost feel like it's pointless for me to do the data. – *Teacher, Primary*

It sort of feels like two jobs that you're doing: teaching and then on top of that, you're doing like an admin job. – *Middle Leader, Primary*

A few noted that the systems they were entering data on were very old, or not fit for purpose, which increased the amount of time spent using them. In a handful of cases, the slow speed of school internet connections meant teachers were forced to take data entry tasks home. Another example given was data entry being done on paper, and then one person entering it all on a computer. On the other hand, a few noted their school had automated some data entry, making it a quicker task.

It can be done by one person running a report on a computer. But we get given it all to do individually on paper. – *Teacher, Primary*

We have to put it into a paper copy for somebody else to import. And then the analysis comes back to us. – *Teacher, Primary*

Emails

Email communication was also a common concern, with most describing the need to process a very high volume of traffic. High email traffic originated from parents, as well as from within the school. A handful of teachers and middle leaders reported that the pressure of this was exacerbated by school policies about how quickly they should be responding to parent emails, for example, within 48 hours. At the same time, a handful of others said that their schools had rules about general administration to ease workload, such as not sending emails after 5pm. Where this policy was in place and followed, it was perceived to be useful. This issue is explored further in chapter 6.

I think we used to have a little book that we used to write in and that was better, but the emails are the bane of my life. I get 50 plus emails a day, a lot of them aren't directed at me but I am tagged in so I have to read them. – *Teacher, Primary*

Emails are a nightmare; I get people emailing and then asking why I didn't respond to an email. I don't have time to teach effectively and be reading e-mails and responding to e-mail. – *Teacher, Secondary*

General administrative work: leaders

Administration within the school

Some senior leaders said that they spent most of their time on administration within the school. This includes applying regulations to the school, reporting, school budget, preparing timetables, and class composition. These senior leaders reported that there was a particularly large volume of administrative work within the school. Nearly all senior leaders said that they had no choice in how or when this work was done. The issue that teachers and middle leaders experienced with high email traffic was also a problem for senior leaders.

[Admin] takes a lot of time and then I mean, sat at the computer. I get between 100-200 emails a day. – *Senior Leader, Primary*

A handful of senior leaders from small schools said that they felt this high volume of administration work related to the size of their school. They mentioned factors such as needing to hold multiple leadership roles within the school, smaller networks, and any staff absence having a greater impact. A few senior leaders felt that administrative work within the school was proportionate to its value, with aspects of it essential to the running of the school. Of those that were asked about the mental load of school administration¹⁴, around half felt it carried a high mental load. Poor systems and school policies, e.g. a requirement to attend all school meetings, were felt to make things worse.

Management and communication with external bodies

A minority of senior leaders reported that administrative and management tasks relating to external bodies was a task they spent most time on. This included responding to requests from local, regional, or national education officials, social services, or other similar agencies. This work was often described as reactive and dependent on the availability of external bodies. Additionally, it could be time-sensitive, for example when

¹⁴ School leaders were asked this where they reported that school administration was 'a task they spent most time on'. This meant that most, but not all, were asked about the mental load of school administration.

dealing with child protection issues. Indeed, nearly all senior leaders who provided feedback on this point said they had no choice in how and when this work was done and it was often described as carrying a high mental load. That said, more experienced senior leaders reported being able to anticipate and plan some tasks, for example they could schedule in certain external meetings in advance and plan whether or not to attend, based on previous experience.

The topic guide did ask directly about the writing and submission of referrals relating to pupils with SEND. However, this was raised as an additional area of significant workload by senior leaders, with some (particularly those with responsibility for SEND) saying it was an area they spent most time on.

Data analysis

None of the senior leaders interviewed felt they had any choice about the time they spent on data analysis, including analysis of teacher and school performance data and record keeping for external bodies / regulatory purposes. It did not appear to carry a significant burden with regards to time spent, however; only a handful described it as a task they spent the most time on. A few commented that the amount of time spent on data analysis varied throughout the year.

While data analysis did not appear to be a time-consuming task for senior leaders, only around half felt that the time spent on data analysis was proportionate to its value. This being said, as with other tasks, data analysis was seen as important when it served pupils' needs.

6. Communicating with parents

In this chapter we consider feedback from both teachers and leaders about time spent communicating and liaising with parents, alongside the associated mental load. We start with views around the levels of communication received and required, before moving on to discussion around parents' expectations and complaints.

Communication

Both teachers and leaders reported that communication with parents was a significant driver of workload. It was slightly more common for those working in secondary schools to report this. Some senior leaders spoke about trying to protect teachers from parent communications, for example with email rules, as described in chapter 5. However, nearly all teachers and middle leaders felt that time spent communicating with parents was a significant driver of workload and was seemingly on the rise.

Perceived reasons for this rise were varied. Several mentioned that the increased level of contact with parents during COVID had seemingly set a precedent for post-COVID operations, with communication from parents on the rise ever since. Others felt, however, that increased communication from parents had been steadily increasing regardless of the pandemic. The increase in communication with parents was also felt to be closely related to the reported rise in challenging behaviour from pupils (which some attributed to the long-term effects of the pandemic), as many of the phone calls and emails home related to following up on behaviour incidents.

The greater reliance on technology in schools had also made teachers more accessible. Teachers and middle leaders said there was now an expectation to be available 24/7.

Everything is on your phone now whereas before you know years ago it wasn't. I feel like your emails are always coming in weekends, mornings, nights. – *Teacher, Special / PRU / AP*

Some teachers and middle leaders talked about willingly contacting parents both to give positive feedback on pupil achievements, and to follow up on behaviour or other incidents. However, teachers and middle leaders also described the contact with parents that was a necessary part of following up on behaviour incidents as burdensome, particularly when parents were unsupportive and the contact did not result in improved pupil behaviour. In some cases, parents would challenge school decisions or disagree with how behaviour incidents had been logged.

Attitudes and expectations

Many participants believed that attitudes towards education had changed. They sensed less respect for teachers and education, resulting in reduced support from parents in relation to learning and behaviour management.

They [parents] are less supportive. And that means we have to work twice as hard in school to kind of get the children on board. And when we haven't got a supportive parent, things like homework and exam revision don't get done. We have to adapt to that, so it leaves children with gaps in their knowledge that we have to address. – *Senior Leader, Secondary*

When discussing pupil behaviour, most teachers and leaders said that parents could be confrontational in their communication with school staff. Teachers and leaders described some parents as disrespectful and showing a lack of support for the school. A few leaders described a minority of parents as 'abusive' in their interactions with staff. Several teachers and leaders described the emotional toll of dealing with parents.

You are speaking to parents, and often you're having difficult conversations and therefore psyching yourself up to do it in the first place. [You have to] concentrate fully while you're doing it, and then you're usually berating yourself afterwards because you accidentally said something you probably shouldn't have said, or you phrased it badly and therefore they got upset. – *Teacher, Secondary*

They stick [onto] me and with a few parents, I am scared to speak with [them]. But I know I need to speak about this issue and that takes up a lot of brain space. – *Teacher, Primary*

Our parents are very challenging, very rude. It can be exhausting. To the extent that, when you've finished a meeting, you need twenty minutes just to decompress. – *Senior Leader, Primary*

The increased use of emails and phone applications to communicate meant that it was easier for parents to contact the school, and also made it more difficult for all teachers and leaders who have contact with parents to feel that they could switch off. For example, one middle leader reported:

If you get like an angry message from a parent when you're at home about something that you didn't even know happened, then that plays on your mind. – *Middle Leader, Primary*

Parent complaints

Parent complaints were a particular issue mentioned by a small number of leaders. One leader said that parents did not always know who to complain to about certain issues, so complained to the school even when it was not within the school's control to resolve. They felt this was because schools and teachers were the visible face of the frustrations that parents were experiencing, so parents would come to them to complain, as they were more accessible than, for example, the local authority. In the reverse, another described how a parent had complained to Ofsted about a matter that would have been more appropriately dealt with by the school.

Teachers and leaders described preparing for phone calls with parents in relation to complaints particularly stressful, because they did not know what the tone of the conversation would be.

Challenges for parents

Teachers and leaders observed that some parents as well as pupils were experiencing significant challenges in their lives. This included parents with mental health issues, or experiencing poverty. They felt that many parents now rely on schools and teachers to take on parental responsibilities, including caring for pupils' physical needs, mental health, wellbeing, and behaviour. Teachers and leaders reported that poor literacy among parents also drove up workload, as some parents were unable to read communications that were sent home. As a result, a few teachers and leaders reported that they spent additional time going over the content of school letters with parents.

7. School management and administration

This chapter considers school focused workload activities, from management of school funding to staff development, teacher and leader resourcing and responding to government policy.

Funding

Senior leaders observed the challenges of limited school funding. A few mentioned that they found making difficult budget choices emotionally draining, because the only cuts they could make were to staffing.

There isn't enough money in schools, so when you're setting a budget, you're actually looking at reducing number of staff and the knock-on impact in terms of that going into those discussions. Some of the HR stuff has quite significant mental drain. – *Senior Leader, Secondary*

Even where participants felt there was sufficient budget to employ staff, the salaries that schools were able to offer meant that recruitment was challenging, which meant that there was greater staff turnover and more time spent on recruitment as a result. In some cases, this meant that posts were left vacant because school leaders were unable to recruit, and this meant that the workload shifted to other members of staff. Further, participants reported that cuts in staffing resulted in larger class sizes, which in turn increased workload. We return to themes around teacher and leader recruitment later on, under “Teacher and leader resourcing”.

I think everything's been cut to the bone and that is driving the workload up as well because we're having to try and make do with less time, less money, less resources, bigger classes to account for it, less staff. When I first started here, my department was seven teachers and [it's] now five. – *Middle Leader, Secondary*

There's nothing left to cut. The only way to save that is to lose staff. The children have less support and therefore if they have less support, they have more challenges. I've got 66 staff. When I started, I had 88. Alongside this, when I started there were 430 [pupils], now there's 475. – *Senior Leader, Primary*

As noted in chapter 4, teachers and leaders reported an increase in the amount of mental health issues experienced by pupils. Leaders reported not having sufficient funds to buy in the support needed, and so instead they had to deliver the support within school.

Another challenge was the lack of funding to purchase physical teaching resources needed in school. This included stationery, textbooks and computer equipment. One leader observed that if they were unable to buy high quality lesson resources, they needed to make them themselves. Several teachers described spending time on making resources.

As well as teaching resources, limited funding meant that leaders could not invest in school systems, nor staff to manage these systems. Several teachers and middle leaders described carrying out administrative tasks such as collating information about school meal requirements, or basic data input, which could have been carried out by administrative staff if they had been available.

Other job roles in other sectors have administrative staff to do that, although we have school reception, we are the people communicating with the parents, planning parents evening, doing all of those things like that. – *Middle Leader, Special / PRU / AP*

The reduction in funding for external services also had a significant impact on workload in schools, as senior leaders had to work harder to access the limited funding that was available. Thresholds for accessing funding were reported to have been raised, so teachers described needing to support pupils with greater levels of need than would have been the case in the past. Leaders mentioned that external services had 'failed' because they were underfunded, meaning that they had to take on the roles of these services in school.

Because social workers are overworked, underpaid, yep, we are social workers. Because parents aren't supported in behaviour, we are behaviour managers ... Because the police are underfunded, we have criminals in our schools. – *Senior Leader, Secondary*

Additionally, one leader described how parents would turn to the school for support, as they felt there were no other services available to support them, with parents now even finding it difficult to get support from health visitors or doctors.

The majority of senior leaders mentioned safeguarding as a driver of workload. Leaders reflected on the need to prioritise safeguarding concerns when they came through and the reduction in support from external agencies. Some described social services as too stretched to support the school. One leader said their LA now asked the school to conduct safeguarding investigations and assess whether they met the threshold for support, a task that would previously have been done by the LA.

School leadership time

Senior leaders had lighter teaching timetables to enable them to carry out their responsibilities, and most middle leaders described having some additional leadership time.

For teachers with middle leader responsibilities, there was a lot of variation in terms of the time given to them to complete their middle leadership tasks. Most described getting some additional non-contact time on their timetable. This ranged from an hour per fortnight, to more than two hours per day. The most common allowance described was the equivalent of one hour per week. However, a handful said they were given no additional time to fulfil middle leadership roles.

A few middle leaders explained that the time they were given was not protected, and said that it was often used to cover absent teachers, attend meetings or support Early Career Teachers (ECTs). Most indicated that the time provided was insufficient to do their middle leadership role and described additional working in the evening and at weekends. A few mentioned that their middle leadership time had recently been cut to half of what they had previously been given.

It was only last year when I went to see the leadership team and said look, I'm doing all of these things. I'm having to do so much at home. I was working both Saturdays and Sundays and I just said it's really getting to me now. I'm absolutely exhausted. So now I do get half a day a week for that role specifically. - *Middle Leader, Special / AP / PRU*

Staff development and performance management

Teachers and middle leaders were asked if they undertook any staff development in their role, such as mentoring Initial Teacher Training (ITT) trainees or ECTs on the Early Career Framework (ECF). Senior leaders were asked about a more extensive list; their role involving human resource/personnel issues, classroom observations, mentoring, ITT and delivering/monitoring continuing professional development.

ITT and ECF mentoring

About half of teachers and middle leaders said that they had a formal or informal role in mentoring ITT trainees and ECTs. A few who mentored ITT trainees or ECTs reflected that the amount of time their mentoring took depended on the calibre of trainee. For example, one mentor said:

Out of every three training teachers I've had, one of them will tend to double my workload. – *Teacher, Secondary*

For teachers and middle leaders who had a formal role with ITT trainees and ECTs, there was little choice in how much time they spent on mentoring. The majority of mentors were given some time to do this, usually at least an hour a week. However, a handful were not given any time at all.

Additional staff mentoring and development

Outside of ITT trainees and ECT mentoring, it was also common for middle leaders to have some responsibility for the development of other colleagues (e.g. in their head of department role). A few middle leaders said that mentoring was a task that they spent most time on. This was especially the case if they were describing mentoring colleagues rather than just ITT trainees/ECTs.

A handful of teachers and middle leaders noted that mentoring colleagues was important, but time-consuming work. For example, one middle leader had eight members of staff in their faculty, and had regular mentoring meetings with each of them.

Staff involved in mentoring viewed it as a valuable activity, because it made a positive contribution to the smooth running of the school, in recruiting and retaining teachers, and improving pupil attainment and behaviour. Just a handful of teachers said mentoring was a task with high mental load. This could result from unpredictability in how much time would be needed.

Performance management of staff

The majority of school leaders indicated that performance management of staff was a very important part of their role. This included human resource/personnel issues, classroom observations, mentoring, ITT and delivering/monitoring continuing professional development. A minority of school leaders also mentioned their role in monitoring and supporting staff wellbeing in conjunction with this. A few senior leaders specifically distinguished between the formal performance management cycle and the ad hoc issues that would arise in managing staff, such as unexpected personal issues.

About half of the senior leaders said performance management was a task they spent the most of their time on. A few school leaders mentioned an increase in issues such as staff absence, staff having poor attitudes, poor performance, or personal issues. There was also a suggestion from some leaders that there was an increase in absence because of reported wider issues in accessing public services. For example, they reported staff needing to take absence to attend medical appointments, because there were no appointments available after the school day.

The majority of school leaders said that they had no choice in how much time they spent on performance management, and saw it as a core part of their role. Nearly all senior leaders said that the time spent on performance management of staff was proportionate to its value. This was because they saw improving staff performance as having a direct impact on the quality of teaching and learning in their school.

A minority of senior leaders felt that tasks related to performance management of staff carried a high mental load. This was partially because performance management was felt to have high levels of risk attached, as procedures had to be followed carefully in order to make sure that senior leader decisions were robust in case they were later challenged. Senior leaders also said that performance management felt high risk because it directly related to the lives of teachers and middle leaders in their school. One school leader observed that staff lives have become increasingly complicated, as well as those of pupils and their parents.

Staffing and recruitment

In this section we consider leaders' views around teacher and leader recruitment, including public perceptions, budgetary constraints and suitability of applicants. We also explore time spent arranging cover and the impact of resourcing challenges on existing teachers and middle leaders.

Teacher recruitment and retention

Management of teacher recruitment and retention was a significant driver of leader workload. It was slightly more common for those working in secondary schools to feel this was the case. Leaders reported that recruitment and retention came with a range of challenges, from negative public perceptions to budgetary constraints and a lack of suitable applicants. Alongside this, it was associated with a high emotional toll.

The recruitment... the increase in drain on that, it's unprecedented. You are constantly thinking about the fact that you might not be able to staff the school. – *Senior Leader, Secondary*

The publicity around teaching isn't great. I think it's a wonderful job, but at the moment you're asked to be too much, so you know people are talking about all financial reimbursement stuff like that. Actually, that's not what the issue is. The issue is we're being more than just teachers and that's not what people signed up for. – *Senior Leader, Primary*

As mentioned earlier on in this chapter, leaders also described the challenge of recruitment when budgets were tight. Similarly, salaries for support staff, such as teaching assistants, were no longer seen as being competitive with other jobs.

Lack of suitable applicants

A few teachers and leaders mentioned that the quality of teaching and teaching assistant applicants had declined. One middle leader reported that teaching assistants required more support because they could have less experience working in education, for example. Likewise, a leader noted that while in the past they might have received tens of applications for a vacancy, now some posts only get applicants who are not appointable.

One senior leader mentioned that being part of a Teaching School Hub was helpful for recruiting ECTs.

Staff turnover

High staff turnover also had an impact on workload in general, because there were regularly new members of staff to be inducted and learn school processes. Additionally, high numbers of ECTs in primary schools meant that there was a reduced number of teachers able to take on subject leadership, increasing the burden on others.

One leader described the challenge of retaining teaching assistants. They felt that this was because teaching assistants were increasingly being asked to carry out more difficult tasks e.g. small group teaching of pupils, which was outside their expected work.

Relatedly, as already mentioned, both senior and middle leaders mentioned the impact of having to arrange cover for absent staff. Arranging cover was particularly burdensome for middle leaders who were often responsible for deploying cover staff and setting cover work.

Leaders' experiences of staffing and recruitment

Nearly all senior leaders spent time on recruitment for teaching and support staff, including agency staff. However, it was very rarely a task that senior leaders spent the most time doing. A few also mentioned that sourcing and monitoring supply staff could be time consuming. Nearly all senior leaders said that they had no choice about how much time they spent on recruitment and staffing; it was reactive to the wider education context and staff decisions about their careers. A few reported that their perception was that there were fewer, and poorer quality, candidates available in the recruitment pool. Recruitment was a high mental load task for a handful of senior leaders, because they wanted to make sure they made the right appointments and because they generally felt the strain of difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff.

Responding to government policy changes

It was most common that headteachers were the member of staff in the school to respond to changes in latest government policy. Headteachers often explained that this was not an activity that they were able to delegate to others, because they saw it as part of the role of a headteacher. If they were able to delegate tasks like this, it was often with difficulty, in part because their senior colleagues were also very busy.

A few headteachers observed that responding to government policy changes was sometimes time-critical and often business-critical. For example, reviewing policies to do with personal data, or managing attendance, to ensure compliance. As seen elsewhere with time-pressured tasks, this limited the amount of choice headteachers felt they had in how and when they would respond. Nevertheless, responding to government policy changes typically made up a small part of leader workloads. Additionally, most leaders who were asked, felt that the time spent was proportionate to the value, provided that they could see a benefit to the school and to pupils.

Although the day-to-day requirements around responding to government policy changes were limited, and senior leaders recognised the importance of these tasks, a few felt that these requirements still placed a high mental load on them. This was particularly in context of the number of new policies and the rapid implementation of changes required.

I think, you know, government policy just changes on the whim of the Secretary of State, really. And I think that's the Secretary of State and the head of various organisations, including Ofsted and the DfE both to some extent. And there's never any time to embed things properly. Nothing gets anything taken out of [what schools are required to do]. Just keep adding to it more and more. – *Senior Leader, Secondary*

Ofsted

A handful of leaders mentioned Ofsted as driving a need for documentation, either in preparation for inspection, or following up on a post-inspection action plan.

Teachers and middle leaders experienced a high mental load from Ofsted inspections. A few teachers and middle leaders described feelings of anxiety, stress and negative pressure, associated with anticipating or undergoing an inspection. A few teachers and middle leaders also mentioned administration relating to inspection, for example the creation of detailed curriculum documents and recording actions.

We're constantly told what Ofsted want to see and you know, evidence we need to collect evidence, evidence, evidence and that's really hard. That's a big mental load because you can't just do something without them. If you haven't got evidence for it, you can't say you've done it. It is constantly proving you have done stuff with the children. – *Teacher, Primary*

Senior leaders also mentioned that Ofsted had increased their workload, for example through parent complaints to Ofsted; frequent Ofsted policy changes; and the workload associated with ensuring that Ofsted get an accurate picture of the school.

Accountability

Increased focus on accountability was also reported to have driven a rise in workload across all job roles. This encompasses many of the tasks covered throughout chapter 3 to 8, related to the requirement of documentation of pupils' attainment, behaviour and needs.

It's all the admin, it's behaviour and it's recording like it's the tracking and the recording of behaviour, safeguarding and CPOMS [safeguarding and wellbeing software] and all of that stuff has shot up, when I first started there was a lot more autonomy, I think it was assumed that if the results stayed good and the kids were happy, that you must be doing everything right. – *Middle Leader, Secondary*

It's a constant battle that you need to prove yourself. – *Teacher, Secondary*

I feel that every year I am scrutinised for my job and what I do. – *Middle Leader, Secondary*

8. Strategies utilised to manage workloads

In this chapter we explore workload management strategies deployed by teachers and leaders, beyond the coping strategies and mindset shifts as discussed in chapter 1. The focus here is instead on more specific actions taken, such as the use of personal planning tools, knowledge sharing across colleagues, and delegation. Additionally, this chapter examines how Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other technologies are being used to streamline tasks and improve efficiency.

Personal planning tools

One of the most common approaches to workload management identified across all participant groups was effective time management. Teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders used a wide variety of time management tools to organise their working week and help them stay on top of work.

The most common tool used was a simple to-do list, with outstanding tasks typically ordered and prioritised by deadline (e.g. set by the senior leadership team) and / or degree of urgency. Pastoral and wellbeing concerns were typically more urgent and were prioritised. As reported in chapter 4, these were often not foreseen and jumped to the top of to-do lists when they occurred. To-do lists were often supplemented by other tools to help triage tasks more clearly. Individuals across all participant groups commonly felt overwhelmed by the number of tasks that their week consisted of. Many felt that that prioritisation was an essential part of managing workloads.

A few teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders reported utilising charts or other visual tools (such as Eisenhower's matrix and priority grids) to help with this triaging. Others opted for an approach based around carving out blocks of time for particular tasks.

As a teacher, you're always going to have a list. You [have] just got to prioritise the tasks that are the soonest ... I think by sort of having the structure for the week - do this [task] on this day, this task [on that] day, it then allows me to go: 'right these jobs need to be done first, but that task can wait, it's not important. – *Teacher, Primary*

Planners, diaries, and calendars - physical or virtual - were all commonly mentioned as essential tools for planning and workload management.

Less commonly, the DfE Workload Reduction toolkit¹⁵ was cited; teachers in particular seemed to be less aware that this existed compared to middle and senior leaders. Opinion on its effectiveness amongst senior and middle leaders who were aware was

¹⁵ [Workload reduction toolkit - Improve workload and wellbeing for school staff](#)

mixed. One senior leader said it generated more work than it saved, whilst a middle leader in a primary setting deemed many of its suggestions impractical.

Learning from colleagues

A few teachers, middle leaders, and senior leaders mentioned utilising the knowledge and expertise of others working in schools, in order to improve their work management. Knowledge sharing sometimes happened as part of informal conversations, or through more structured meetings with colleagues. In addition to sharing advice, resources, and experience, these interactions enabled teachers, middle leaders, and senior leaders to voice their concerns and frustrations. This somewhat alleviated the stress of their workloads and the feeling of being 'overwhelmed'. Additionally, a handful of senior leaders said they made sure to network with other senior leaders from nearby schools.

Delegation

Delegating tasks to limit and manage workloads was also common amongst a few teachers, middle leaders and leaders. Teachers and middle leaders reported sharing tasks with other teachers (in their faculty/across the school) and utilising the support of teaching assistants. However, many teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders noted the staff retention and recruitment problems, and the general lack of teaching assistants in the sector. Therefore, support from other members of staff was not always readily available. In a handful of cases, in both primary and secondary schools, pupils were used to support with tasks where appropriate (e.g. making display boards, marking other pupils' work).

Meanwhile, senior leaders delegated important work to other senior leaders (e.g. Headteachers delegating to Deputy Headteachers) and middle leaders, while passing on administrative tasks to secretaries and relevant support staff (where this resource was available). However, a few senior leaders said that there was simply no such staff to delegate this work to. A handful attributed this to the smaller size of their school.

Delegation ensured teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders were not completely overwhelmed and could focus their time and attention on other tasks, maximising the amount of work they could get done. However, a few felt that due to staff shortages and wider workload pressures across schools, delegation was not always possible, as covered in chapter 7, related to teacher recruitment and retention.

If I can send a task to somebody else, I do. If I can pass it on to somebody, I do ... but the downside of that is sometimes [things] get pushed back from my [other] leaders because they're also feeling the same pressure. – *Senior Leader, Primary*

Use of AI and technology

All participant groups were asked if they had used Artificial Intelligence (AI) at school to manage their workload. Around half of teachers, middle leaders, and senior leaders said they used AI to either plan out teacher time or help streamline certain tasks and reduce certain pressure points. This included the use of *TeamMate*, *CoPilot*, and *ChatGPT*. One senior leader mentioned *SLTAI*. There was a broad array of tasks that AI was used for, including:

- producing model answers or texts for pupils
- speeding up drafting of documents (such as letters to parents, paperwork around school trips, et cetera)
- creating teaching material and lesson plans
- writing initial drafts of reports
- producing more digestible versions of larger documents (such as new government policies)
- aiding with marking and assessment processes

Using AI allowed those who used it to cut down on the time they would spend on these individual tasks, enabling them to better manage their workload overall. However, views on the effectiveness of AI were mixed. Amongst both those who used it and those who had not, a recurring concern was that the material that AI systems produced needed editing and adapting in order to be usable. In a few cases, teachers and leaders felt they had spent just as long editing AI outputs as they would have creating the material themselves. Therefore, sometimes using AI was felt to be more burdensome than it was worth. This was especially true for report writing and producing lesson materials, where quality was considered very important. There was an impression amongst a few that AI might be appropriate for more administrative and straightforward tasks instead.

[An AI tool] can only do what you tell it to do, so you need that knowledge of what you want and what you want to create ... access to AI helps, but everything [that is made] through AI you have to check and double or triple check through to make sure there isn't an error. –
Teacher, Primary

A few middle and senior leaders from special / PRU / AP schools raised additional doubts over whether AI was a sensible approach to workload management. In their settings, the unique curriculums require a unique approach that they did not perceive to be possible with AI.

Because our school is so bespoke, anything like [ChatGPT] is not helpful to us. We have to do everything from scratch ... we don't follow the national curriculum; we write our own curriculum. We've got our own frameworks. So everything is from scratch. There's nothing to support us. – *Senior leader, Special / PRU / AP*

Many teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders across all phases were not ready to use AI without further training. There were doubts about efficacy and safety, in addition to more general hesitations toward using AI, especially amongst those who felt less technologically capable.

9. School level support

In this final chapter we consider school or academy driven strategies or policies aimed at reducing workload. These focused on changes related to marking and feedback systems – which teachers and middle leaders were prompted on specifically – as well as processes around planning, which were mentioned spontaneously. All participant groups were also asked to consider any other support they would like to see, both from within their own school and from DfE specifically.

Marking and feedback systems

The majority of senior leaders reported that their school had a marking policy in place. It was very common for teachers and middle leaders to report following their schools' marking policy. Policies varied in terms of marking method/style, and the regularity of marking and feedback.

A few teachers, and a leader with teaching responsibilities, reported that their school had recently 'eased' their marking policies and were happy to not be spending as much time on marking as they used to as a result. Live marking was the most common alternative marking policy in place. Live marking is an approach that involves teachers giving in person, 'on the spot' feedback to pupils during class. Teachers and middle leaders in primary schools in particular reported using live marking. This method was thought to be the most appropriate way of giving feedback to younger pupils, with marks/scoring and written feedback less accessible to the lower age groups. Teachers and middle leaders across all phases that had implemented live marking reported that this took less time than previous methods:

The shift to live marking has significantly reduced the time needed for marking outside of class. – *Middle Leader, Primary*

We do live marking now ... when I first started, we had to ensure that two or three times a week children had deep marking in their books - so going through everything with a comment and a next step. That was a long and arduous task. [Live marking] to be fair, is a change that happened that has greatly improved work / life balance. – *Teacher, Primary*

One senior leader was keen to point out that they did not rely solely on live marking, and that it was incorporated with other methods.

Other alternative marking and feedback policies in place in a handful of schools included:

- Peer marking – pupils marking each other's work/books/assessments.

- Team marking – teachers in one department coming together and sharing marking of assessment / books.
- Sample marking – only marking a certain proportion of the class's books, or certain pages of each pupil's book.
- Assessment only marking – not marking any work other than end of topic assessments.
- Self-marking – pupils marking their own work.
- Online tools which did the marking – this included carrying out homework or assessments online which were auto-marked. This was more common in secondary than primary schools.

The majority of teachers and middle leaders, without a school policy of live marking, reported that they had limited choice over when they completed their marking, with many reporting evening and weekend working as a result.

A majority of teachers and middle leaders did not find writing comments in pupils' books very beneficial. One teacher felt they were 'doing it for the sake of it', rather than for the pupils' benefit. Where such marking policies remained in place, a few reported a reduction of the frequency this needed to be carried out. While it was not always explicitly explained why schools had done this, a few teachers implied these changes were made in response to workload concerns. Teachers and middle leaders both felt that the easing had improved their workload and subsequently, their wellbeing. These teachers and middle leaders did not think it affected the quality of feedback they provided, as they were still able to feedback verbally or 'live'. A few also reported that they could 'get away' with not following their school's marking policy, as the senior leadership team did not check if the policy was followed.

Not all approaches which aimed to ease marking and feedback workloads came without challenges. One middle leader in a secondary school shared that since their pupils were aware that books were being marked less often, they have become less diligent in how they present work on certain assignments (e.g. poor handwriting, drawing in books).

Planning

To a lesser extent than marking, a handful of teachers and middle leaders reported a reduction in their planning workload due to school systems. Across departments (secondary) or year groups (primary), a handful of teachers and middle leaders shared the planning of schemes of work, lessons plans and resources (either at a school or academy wide level). This meant less work for individual teachers, as the load was shared across the team. A few teachers and middle leaders reported that their school was working towards producing common lesson plans, or a 'bank' of resources that could

be adapted. However overall, planning collaboratively was not very common, and for some schools (e.g. due to one-form entry) this was not a possibility.

In a handful of instances, teachers and middle leaders reported using resources produced externally to the school (e.g. textbooks, worksheets, pre-planned lessons from online sources) to plan and deliver lessons. Similarly, a few reported using structured 'bought in' schemes of work.

With both school-produced and externally-produced planning documents and resources, a few teachers and middle leaders mentioned that having basic plans to start with was helpful. However, most still spent time making adaptations to these resources to make them appropriate for specific classes/pupils. The challenges were even greater when teaching pupils with SEND.

I think it's standard pretty much in most schools now that there is like a bank of resources that you can use. But that needs moulding. Of course it does. And part of your responsibility, as a teacher, is to shape the lessons for the students you have in front of you ... differentiation is really, really important. And I do agree with that. But then that takes time.

Teacher, Secondary

I could easily pick up the planning we are given from our trust ... in maths, the PowerPoint is given to us. I could pick that up and just teach from it ... if I don't understand the PowerPoint and go through and work out what my children can access, then I am just a teacher robot at the front ... to be a good teacher I want children to leave and be successful – it has to be adapted. – *Senior Leader, Primary*

As reported in chapter 3, planning lessons was something that on the whole, teachers and middle leaders enjoyed doing. As discussed previously in this chapter, it was not something they wanted to be replaced by AI. Many felt that they added value here, as this was their area of expertise, and that they would like to spend more time on these activities (if they were able to free time up). One senior leader commented that more centralisation, or sharing of planning across a trust (or even DfE level resources) could take away from teachers' agency/ownership of their work.

Additional support that staff would like

Teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders were asked to identify ways in which they would like further support with their workload, both from within their own school and from the DfE.

Teachers and middle leaders

Teachers and middle leaders in primary, secondary and special (including AP and PRU) schools identified various ways in which their school, and the DfE, could support them in managing their workload. These included:

- More additional staff in the school – this included teachers (to reduce class sizes), teaching assistants, administrators, and pastoral staff.
- More PPA and/or greater protection of PPA time – this was seen as hand in hand with more staff in the school, which would make PPA time more manageable. For middle leaders, there was a call for protection of management time in particular.

It was kind of clear to me, even as a brand new teacher, that if everybody just had three or four, like more free periods a week, we would all do a much better job all around. But that means employing a lot more teachers and finding them, training them and keeping them, so it's challenging. – *Teacher, Secondary*

- A reduction in the curriculum content – a few reported that the vast amount of content they had to teach created a challenging amount of work.
- Availability of standardised, low-cost resources – a few reported that they would like to see standardised resources that were aligned with the national curriculum, that their school could afford.
- An increase in funding to schools in general – that could cover some of the other suggestions (e.g. additional staff, more PPA time).

Unique to those working in secondary schools was an interest in exploring how flexible working could support with workload. Additionally, a few secondary teachers and middle leaders wanted support with the workload related to Ofsted. A few secondary teachers and leaders also expressed the need for more support with the varying requirements of different exam boards. Large differences in exam board specifications and how they operated often proved difficult to deal with. Changes in an exam board's processes could also have a negative impact.

Those working in special schools in particular wanted to see flexible working become more common, and a few mentioned that more standard SEND processes (e.g. EHCP applications) across the country would ease workload.

Senior leaders

Senior leaders often mentioned support they would like to see for the staff in their school generally. As such, suggestions were often similar to teacher and middle leader suggestions. For example, increasing protection of / enhanced PPA time and increased number of staff in the school – both of which they felt would be made possible by an increase in funding.

Senior leaders across phases wanted to see communications from DfE (e.g. new policy documents) in a more concise, easy to digest form. There was some frustration about the volume of change that DfE were seen to make, and the knock-on impact on workloads.

Primary and secondary senior leaders wanted to see an increase in specialist SEND provision (either in their own school, or more space in SEN specific schools). They felt this would help to ease the pressure caused by the increase in pupils with SEN in mainstream schools.

10. Conclusions

Overall, the research points to a range of key considerations for the sector going forward. In this final chapter, we summarise the findings around the proportionate value of different tasks – as described by teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders working an average or a higher than average amount of hours¹⁶. We also summarise the overarching factors and drivers of workload. These range from considerations around funding and staff shortages to a perceived rise of behavioural and additional needs. We conclude with a summary of different approaches to workload management at both the individual and school level, before considering recommendations for future research.

Teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders pointed to a range of different tasks and responsibilities that they valued and enjoyed spending time on. In particular they noted activities directly related to pupil learning and development, such as planning and marking. During the interviews, there was a clear desire to spend more time on such tasks however, with participants unable to due to competing priorities and the volume and mix of tasks falling under their remit. This was exacerbated by more urgent or time-critical tasks, such as the need to respond to behavioural or safeguarding concerns. Workload manageability and perceived levels of control were a clear area of concern in this context. While participants were quite matter of fact about high workload, often describing it as ‘expected’ or ‘the norm’ for the profession, the associated impact on physical and mental health was also noted.

Other tasks described as either meaningful or rewarding included pupil counselling, supervision and tuition.¹⁷ That said, some teachers and middle leaders felt that some of these activities sat outside of their core remit. A few noted a preference for schools to employ professional counsellors to fulfil this role, for example. Other tasks deemed less valuable included general administration, excessive marking and planning, management of pupil performance data work and behaviour follow up.

Among leaders there was a feeling that school administration had increased for senior leaders, in line with a reduction in funding for schools and external services. Whilst some saw this time as well spent, others wanted to spend more time working strategically and carrying out better quality staff development.

As well as a reduction in funding for both schools and local services, other wider factors seen to exacerbate workload included staff shortages, the rising number of pupils with additional needs, behavioural issues and greater safeguarding responsibilities, and a

¹⁶ As noted in the introduction to this report, the sampling criteria for the qualitative interviews focused on those reporting average or higher than average working hours in the Year 3 wave of the WLT survey. This was to ensure that any associated concerns could be explored in sufficient depth.

¹⁷ When referring to pupil counselling, the topic guide gave the following examples: this includes career guidance and virtual counselling, lunch supervision, homework clubs, emotional support.

perceived rise in accountability (such as those driven by requirements around Ofsted, DfE and local authorities). Broader societal shifts, including those resulting from COVID, changes in parent expectations and attitudes toward education were considered to have further compounded these changes. These factors were often interlinked and felt with varying levels of intensity depending on levels of experience and seniority.

Both teachers and leaders adopted a range of different methods to manage their workload. These included developing a process of coping, which involved prioritising the most important tasks and working overtime to complete the rest. Others talked about shifting from a more idealistic and optimistic mindset to one that is more focused on pragmatism, adjusting their expectations around the quality and quantity of work they could realistically complete. Views around the effectiveness and desirability of such strategies were mixed, however. The associated impact of excessive and 'out of hours' working on mental and physical health was a common area for discussion, for example, and not fully addressed by mindset shifts alone. Indeed, participants recognised that mindset shifts towards more pragmatic approaches (such as prioritising the most important tasks and working overtime to complete the rest) involved coming to terms with the fact that the work that teachers and leaders could deliver might be lower in quality and quantity than they would like.

Other approaches to workload management included delegation, knowledge sharing and learning from strategies/experiences deployed by colleagues, personal planning tools (e.g., to-do lists, planners, diaries and calendars) and the use of technology. School-level examples included the use of artificial intelligence (AI), with mixed views from participants around the efficacy of this, and policies around marking and feedback, most notably the use of live marking. Other examples of school level intervention included the introduction of new approaches to planning, such as providing banks of ready-made resources. As with the use of AI, this produced mixed feedback from teachers and middle leaders.

The findings of this report highlight several areas for further exploration. Key questions remain around how to rebalance high and low value tasks and manage the broader challenges impacting workload. The efficacy of different workload management strategies is also key, as outlined in the findings in chapter 9 in particular. For example, as demonstrated in the interviews, while the use of AI in schools seems to be increasing, there is considerable hesitancy across different phases and roles regarding how to use it effectively. Similarly, live marking has been identified as a potentially useful tool.

Other areas outlined throughout the report include the rise in additional needs, challenges related to SEND provision in mainstream schools specifically and a rise in workloads as a result of parental expectations and communication.

Annex 1. Phase of respondents

Phase	Respondents
Primary	42
Secondary	43
Special / PRU/ AP	15
Total	100

Annex 2. Size of schools where respondents worked

School size - pupils	Respondents
Quintile 1	15
Quintile 2	13
Quintile 3	13
Quintile 4	11
Quintile 5	37
Unknown	4
Total	100

Annex 3. Percentage of Free School Meals at schools respondents worked at

Free school meals	Respondents
Quintile 1	11
Quintile 2	19
Quintile 3	14
Quintile 4	23
Quintile 5	33
Total	100

Annex 4. Regions of respondents

Region	Respondents
East Midlands	12
East of England	11
London	14
North East	7
North West	11
South East	15
South West	7
West Midlands	13
Yorkshire and The Humber	10
Total	100

Annex 5. Number of years respondents have been qualified

Years qualified	Respondents
Up to one year	11
More than 1 year, up to 2	5
More than 2 years, up to 3	5
More than 3 years, up to 5	13
More than 5 years, up to 10	25
More than 10 years	38
Unknown	3
Total	100

Annex 6. School type

School type	Respondents
Academy	55
LA maintained	39
Unknown	6
Total	100

Annex 7. Stimulus

Teacher and middle leader list:

- Individual planning or preparation of lessons either at school or out of school
- Marking/correcting of pupils' work
- Recording, inputting, monitoring, and analysing data in relation to pupil performance and for other purposes
- General administrative work (this includes communication, paperwork, work emails, and other clerical duties you undertake in your job as a teacher)
- Pupil counselling, supervision and tuition (this includes career guidance and virtual counselling, lunch supervision, homework clubs, emotional support)
- Following up on behaviour incidents (this includes detentions, pupil support, administration, communication with parents')
- Mentoring ITT/ECF trainees

Senior leader list:

- Administration within the school (this includes applying regulations to the school, reporting, school budget, preparing timetables, and class composition.)
- Administrative and management tasks relating to external bodies (this includes responding to requests from local, regional, or national education officials, social services, or other similar agencies)
- Performance management of staff (this includes human resource/personnel issues, classroom observations, mentoring, initial teacher training and delivering/monitoring continuing professional development)
- Data analysis (this includes analysis of performance data at the level of the teacher and the school and record keeping for external bodies / regulatory purposes)
- Recruitment for teaching and support staff
- Responding to changes in latest government policy including, for example, centrally required policy changes
- [If applicable] Factors related to classroom teaching



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