



Department
for Education

Working lives of teachers and leaders

**Qualitative insight into experiences of
leavers and those considering leaving
the English state school sector**

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Definitions

Teachers – where the report refers to a teacher, this includes all who specified in the WLTL survey that they were one of the following: leading practitioner, middle leader, classroom teacher (non-early career teacher); classroom teacher (early career teacher), or; unqualified teacher.

Leaders – where the report refers to a leader, this includes all who specified in the WLTL survey that they were one of the following: executive headteacher; headteacher; deputy headteacher, or; assistant headteacher.

Classroom teachers (non-ECTs) - where the report refers to a classroom teacher, this includes all teachers who specified in the survey that they were a classroom teacher, but who were not Early Career Teachers (ECTs).

Early Career Teachers (ECTs) - where the report refers to Early Career Teachers (ECTs), this includes all teachers who are in the first 2 years of their teaching career after qualifying and are participating in Early Career Framework (ECF) based training.

Those with teaching responsibilities – where the report refers to those with teaching responsibilities, this includes all who reported their current job role was best described as classroom teacher or who indicated that their responsibilities included classroom teaching. This includes those who specified that they were leaders but undertook classroom teaching.

Leavers –defined as teachers and/or leaders who had left teaching in the English state school sector between wave 3 and wave 4 of the WLTL survey. This group excludes those who had retired or were on parental leave during this time period.

Those considering leaving - The considering leaving sample is defined as teachers and/or leaders who reported in wave 4 of the WLTL survey that they intended to leave the English state school sector in the next twelve months, excluding retirement. This group also reported in the wave 4 WLTL survey that they were satisfied with their current job “occasionally”, “rarely” or “not at all”.

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.

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.

Senior Leadership Team (SLT) - The SLT is a team of school leaders at different levels that involve themselves in the daily management and running of the school to help it reach its business objectives. The SLT can consist of different roles in each school.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) - the term 'SEND' refers to pupils who have a learning difficulty and/or a disability that means they need special health and education support.

Executive summary

Introduction

The WLTL study is conducted by IFF Research and UCL Institute of Education on behalf of the Department for Education (DfE). The WLTL study comprises an annual longitudinal survey, conducted each spring since 2022, and a follow-up qualitative component undertaken every autumn since 2024. Interviews for the qualitative component are conducted with survey participants who have consented to take part. This report details findings from the second wave of qualitative research. This research explored the experiences and motivations of teachers and leaders who have left or who were considering leaving the sector, and what might encourage them to stay or return.

The study involved 60 in-depth interviews that took place in autumn 2025: 35 with those who had left their teaching or leadership roles and 25 with those considering leaving. Interviews explored career journeys, reasons for leaving, and views on retention and return.

The views gathered from these groups consist of their experiences and the challenges they have faced which have led them to leave or consider leaving the state school sector in England. The findings from these interviews are not reflective of the entire teacher and leader population.

Experiences of teaching

In wave 4 of the WLTL survey, teachers and leaders were asked how important different drivers were in their decision to leave or consider leaving. Teachers and leaders considering leaving the state school sector most commonly cited high workload and stress and/or poor wellbeing as reasons for potentially leaving (both 89%). Similarly, among those who did leave the state school sector between 2024 and 2025, the top two reasons given were high workload (74%), and stress and/or poor wellbeing (73%).

This trend mirrors the qualitative research findings. Nearly all teachers and leaders said that high workload, and stress and poor wellbeing were very important drivers in their decision to leave or consider leaving the state school sector. Consistently, teachers and leaders reported that their workload was unmanageable due to the complexity and intensity of their role. This was most often reported by leaders, those who have been qualified for more than 10 years, ECTs, and those with dependent children. Similarly, nearly all teachers and leaders described high stress as a feature of daily life in their role. In a few instances, teachers felt their stress and poor wellbeing was exacerbated by their senior leadership team (SLT), who they felt were unable to effectively address issues relating to stress, poor wellbeing and mental health.

A range of other drivers were mentioned which frequently related to either high workload or stress and poor wellbeing or both. In addition, each of these other drivers were often closely related, and for all teachers and leaders, their decision to leave or consider leaving was made up of multiple drivers rather than just one. A driver that had high importance for a majority of teachers and leaders in their decision to leave or consider leaving included a lack of state school funding. Teachers and leaders noted that a lack of funding for SEND support staff had a particularly negative impact on their experience in the state school sector. Other drivers with high importance included pressures relating to Ofsted inspections and pupil outcomes, school initiatives and government initiatives and policy changes.

As well as this, other drivers which had medium importance, in relation to their decision to leave or consider leaving the state school sector included an increase in poor pupil behaviour, and an increase in dealing with complaints and requests from parents and carers. Additionally, teachers and leaders reported that a lack of support and strained professional relationships was a driver for leaving or considering leaving.

Transitions out of the profession

Only a few participants described mitigation attempts, as many saw their challenges as rooted in systemic pressures beyond the control of individuals or schools. School-level mitigation attempts included efforts to improve pupil behaviour and SEND provision. Personal mitigation attempts included establishing clearer boundaries or reducing hours, which offered limited and often temporary relief.

Those considering leaving took personal fulfilment, finances, personal interests and flexible working into account in relation to a new role. Teachers and leaders who were considering leaving were at varying stages in their transition away from teaching roles in the state school sector. Some reported only early or tentative steps regarding future employment, while others had undertaken more substantive actions.

The majority of leavers in employment were in education-related roles, especially supply teaching, with a few working in other sectors. A handful of those considering leaving were also exploring education-related roles, but many expressed a particular interest in roles outside education. Often leavers believed that teaching had provided them with a wide range of transferable skills, although they felt that this was not always recognised outside the education sector.

Leavers described the benefits of their new roles as including clearer responsibilities, more defined working hours, more manageable workloads, greater flexibility, greater autonomy, feeling more trusted by managers and having access to professional development. They also reported having more time for personal wellbeing, and while a handful said that they

had been concerned about having less holiday, in practice they found that other improvements in conditions compensated for this.

Intentions to stay or return

Those considering leaving the profession often expressed some uncertainty about their intentions. Many of those considering leaving intended to do so when circumstances aligned with the transition, particularly personal and financial circumstances or finding a suitable new role. A majority of those considering leaving, highlighted pay and transparency of teacher pay scales as significant reasons to stay in the state school sector. Positive relationships with colleagues and a sense of moral obligation to stay for their pupils were other reasons for staying.

However, teachers and leaders considering leaving identified a number of specific triggers that they thought would prompt their departure from the profession. This included any further increase in their workload, further decline in support from senior staff, or if they received a job offer.

Nearly all leavers reported that they had no intention to return to teaching in the state sector currently. A minority said that they would consider returning if it became necessary for financial reasons, but this was not regarded as returning to a teaching career, rather as doing some fixed term or flexible work in teaching (e.g. as a supply teacher or consultant, or part-time) in order to meet financial needs.

A few leavers said that they would consider returning should the wider policy context for the state school sector change significantly but nonetheless regarded their return as improbable. Others mentioned that they missed working with children, but that this was not a sufficient incentive to return to teaching.

Incentives to stay or return

Teachers and leaders highlighted some factors that might encourage them to stay in or return to teaching. Most commonly these centred on aspects that would improve workload. Specifically, those with teaching responsibilities proposed that reduced contact time and increased protected planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time would provide them with more time to plan, teach and complete administrative tasks without working into their evenings and weekends. Other incentives to stay or return included flexible working, which a few leavers noted had had a positive impact on their life.

Other factors mentioned included improving provision for children with SEND, better partnership working with external agencies, an increase in autonomy, and increased

funding for additional school staff. As well as this, a handful mentioned more funding for teacher wellbeing initiatives.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background, aims and objectives

The Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders (WLTL) survey was launched in spring 2022. It is a five-year study of teachers and leaders in state schools in England, conducted by IFF Research and UCL Institute of Education (IOE), on behalf of the Department for Education (DfE). The study covers elements such as workload, wellbeing, working arrangements, professional development and career plans of teachers and leaders, and is intended to support the DfE to design policies that better support teachers and leaders.

The WLTL study consists of two core elements; an annual longitudinal quantitative survey carried out in the spring of each year, for the past five years; and follow up qualitative research with willing survey participants in the autumn of each year, for the past two years. The quantitative findings for the first four waves of the survey and for the first wave of qualitative research can be found on GOV.UK¹. This report presents findings from the second wave of qualitative research, carried out in the autumn term of 2025.

The main aim of this qualitative research was to understand teacher and leader attrition within the English state school sector, namely the reasons for teachers and leaders leaving or considering leaving the state school sector. More specifically, the research explored:

- experiences and motivations of leavers and the factors that influenced their decision to leave the sector or were causing some to consider leaving the sector
- non-financial incentives that could encourage teachers and leaders to stay in or return to teaching and leadership within the sector
- how teachers and leaders choose new roles and how these experiences differed from teaching
- if leavers would, or had, considered returning to the education sector since leaving, and why this was the case or otherwise

Given the aims of this research, participants were purposively sampled to consist of those who have more acute experiences of dissatisfaction than is typical across the wider teacher and leader workforce.

¹ The findings from the first four years of the quantitative strand are detailed on GOV.UK: [wave 1](#), [wave 2](#), [wave 3](#) and [wave 4](#) and the qualitative strand for [wave 3](#).

Methodology

Fieldwork

This research was conducted using qualitative depth interviews. The research covered teachers and leaders who had left teaching in the English state school sector (termed ‘leavers’ throughout this report) and those who were considering leaving (termed ‘those considering leaving’). A total of 60 participants were recruited to take part, including 35 interviews with leavers and 25 with those considering leaving. The interviews were scheduled for an hour and were conducted by IFF Research and IOE researchers.

The fieldwork period for this qualitative research ran between 24th of October and 20th of November 2025, with interviews conducted online via Microsoft Teams. Each participant received a £25 multi-retail voucher as an incentive for taking part in the interview.

Sampling

The qualitative research participants were purposively selected from the sample of teachers and leaders who completed wave 4 of the WLTL survey, agreed to take part in follow-up qualitative research and fit into one of the following two groups:

1. **Leavers** – those who had left teaching in the English state school sector between wave 3 and wave 4 of the WLTL survey, excluding those who had retired or were on parental leave during this time period. These latter two groups were excluded given that they were less likely to produce insights that would align with the aims of this qualitative research.
2. **Those considering leaving** – those who reported in wave 4 of the WLTL survey that they intended to leave the English state school sector in the next twelve months, excluding retirement. This group also reported in the wave 4 WLTL survey that they were satisfied with their current job “occasionally”, “rarely” or “not at all”.

Further detail on the questions asked within wave 4 of the WLTL survey can be found in Annex B.

This sampling approach therefore targeted those who were likely to have experienced challenges within their career and be dissatisfied with the profession. Therefore, the findings from this research are not representative of the wider teacher and leader workforce in England.

Participants were initially classified as considering leaving the state school sector based on their survey responses. However, during interview screening, a small number indicated that they had left the sector since completing wave 4 of the WLTL survey. These participants were therefore reclassified as leavers.

Other sampling criteria were included in the recruitment criteria for the research to ensure the inclusion and coverage of different types of teachers and leaders. These criteria included:

- Current or latest role in the state school sector (Early Career Teacher (ECT), classroom teacher, leader)
- Current or latest school phase in the state school sector (primary or secondary)
- Individual characteristics (age, ethnicity, gender)
- Current or latest working pattern in the state school sector (full-time or part-time)
- For leavers: Number of years qualified and current role (not working, working outside of education, working in education)
- For those considering leaving: Whether they reported that they intended to leave the state school sector in wave 3 of the WLTL survey (in addition to reporting this in wave 4)

The final breakdown of participants by role and phase is shown in Table 1.1 and Table 1.2. A more detailed breakdown by other characteristics can be found in Annex A.

Table 1.1 Role and phase of leavers

Role	Primary	Secondary	Total
ECT	1	6	7
Classroom teacher (non-ECTs)	12	7	19
Leader	6	3	9
Total	19	16	35

Table 1.2 Role and phase of those considering leaving

Role	Primary	Secondary	Total
ECT	2	1	3
Classroom teacher (non-ECTs)	6	7	14
Leader	5	4	8
Total	13	12	25

Limitations

Firstly, it is important to note that this sampling approach was designed to capture in-depth insight from individuals with direct experience of leaving or considering leaving the state school sector who also reported experiencing low levels of job satisfaction. The views gathered from these groups consist of their experiences and the challenges they have faced which have led them to leave or consider leaving. This means that the findings collected from these interviews are not reflective of the entire teacher and leader population.

Second, participation was limited to those willing to take part in a qualitative interview. As with all voluntary research, this introduces the possibility of self-selection bias, whereby individuals with stronger views, positive or negative, may be more likely to participate. This may therefore influence the balance of perspectives included.

Finally, qualitative samples are necessarily small. While the data provides rich insight into the experiences and reasoning of participants, findings should not be generalised to all teachers and leaders in the state school sector. Instead, they should be understood as illustrative of the themes that emerged within this group, providing depth of understanding rather than population-level inference.

Topic guide

Topic guides were used in this research to ensure consistent coverage of key themes during interviews and to provide a structure for exploring participants' experiences in depth. Two separate topic guides were created: one tailored for leavers and another for those considering leaving.

They were designed to explore participants' career journeys, motivations for leaving or considering leaving, and views on retention and returning to the sector.

The first section focused on participants' teaching journey, including how they entered the profession, initial motivations and perceptions of teaching. Participants were asked to reflect on their career progression, roles held and any breaks from teaching, with probes on what they enjoyed or found challenging and how their views evolved over time.

The next section examined decisions to leave or consider leaving. Interviewers captured unprompted, open reasons before using survey responses to prompt discussion of key factors such as workload, professional relationships, school culture, funding pressures and wellbeing. Further detail on these questions can be found in Annex B. For leavers, questions explored whether the decision was gradual or triggered by specific events; for those considering leaving, the focus was on current challenges and what might influence their decision to stay or leave.

Finally, interviews covered current roles or future plans, comparing working conditions and job satisfaction to teaching, and explored whether participants would consider returning to the state school sector and under what circumstances. Throughout, interviewers used flexible probes to ensure depth while maintaining coverage of core themes.

Report outline

This report examines the experiences and motivations of teachers and leaders who have left, or are considering leaving, the state school sector.

- **Chapter 2** – covers the experiences and perceptions of teaching in the state school sector including their career journeys.
- **Chapter 3** – covers the drivers for leaving or considering leaving, the relationship between these drivers, mitigation attempts and the cumulation effect.
- **Chapter 4** – covers how teachers and leaders seek new roles, the working conditions they prioritise and how experiences after leaving compare with teaching in the state sector.
- **Chapter 5** – covers intentions to stay in or return to the sector, and the incentives and barriers shaping these decisions.
- **Chapter 6** – examines the school-level and systemic factors that teachers and leaders believe could improve retention and re-entry to state sector teaching.
- **Chapter 7** – conclusions.

Together, these chapters provide a comprehensive view of the personal, school-level, and systemic challenges shaping participant's decisions to leave teaching in the state sector, alongside insights into retention and re-entry to the profession.

Interpreting the report

Throughout this report, the two groups of participants interviewed will be referred to as 'leavers' and 'those considering leaving'.

The 'English state school sector' is referred to as the 'state school sector' in the report for brevity.

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

The findings presented in this report reflect the personal experiences and perspectives of participants, captured through interviews. These views are inherently subjective and shaped by individual circumstances, school contexts, and career trajectories. While quotes are included throughout to illustrate key themes, they should not be interpreted as representative of all teachers and leaders in the state school sector. Instead, they serve to bring depth and nuance to the issues explored, highlighting the complexity of factors influencing decisions to leave or consider leaving the profession. This qualitative research was conducted to provide insight into lived experiences rather than statistical generalisation.

Subgroup analysis

We have identified patterns as they emerged naturally and reported subgroup differences by interview type (leaver vs. those considering leaving), role, gender, years qualified, as well as other defining characteristics (including those who have experienced parental leave).

Where differences between subgroups are discussed, these should be interpreted with caution. The sample size for each subgroup is small and purposively selected, meaning that any patterns identified are indicative rather than definitive. These observations are included to provide context and prompt further exploration, rather than to suggest widespread trends across the teacher workforce.

Chapter 2: Experiences of teaching

This chapter explores the ways that teachers and leaders entered the profession, and what motivated them to take up this career. This chapter also reflects on their career experiences whilst they have been working in the state school sector, as well as how their perceptions of the profession have changed over time.

Pathway into teaching, early intentions and perceptions

Participants varied in terms of how they entered teaching in the state school sector. While the majority joined directly after university, there were a handful who had worked in other sectors or within a school setting before deciding to become a teacher. Others had worked as teaching assistants and, having enjoyed the role, had transitioned into the teaching profession.

The majority of teachers and leaders were motivated to join the teaching profession as they had a desire to make a difference to children's lives, which they also felt would be highly rewarding. Other prominent motivations included a passion for their chosen subject, wanting to work with children because they enjoyed interacting with children and the hands-on nature of the work, and the perceived job security associated with the profession.

"My perception of teaching was to come in, support young people, change lives... really help them." **Secondary classroom teacher, Considering Leaving**

The majority of teachers and leaders also anticipated that the role would be demanding, involving high workloads and significant challenges. However, they did not view this as a deterrent at the beginning of their career, rather, they accepted that such challenges were an inherent aspect of the role.

"I did genuinely know it was going to be hard because I'd seen these amazing teachers and how hard they worked and I knew it wasn't going to be a walk in the park. You know I knew there was a lot of work, and I knew that it was quite relentless." **Secondary ECT, Leaver**

Nearly all teachers and leaders had initially viewed teaching as a long-term career goal and planned to remain in the profession for the entirety of their career. Only a handful saw teaching as a temporary role, with a couple wanting to trial the career for a few years, while others viewed it as a stable job in which to build a wide range of skills before moving on to other roles.

Career journey and experience

Leavers had different experiences in respect of the number of schools they had worked in prior to leaving the state school sector. Those who had been qualified for more than 10 years and those who were leaders were more likely than others to say they had worked in multiple schools. Those considering leaving tended to have been in their role for a longer period of time, compared to leavers, with some having been in the same school for over a decade. This was particularly true of classroom teachers who were considering leaving.

In a small number of cases, teachers and leaders had taken breaks during their time in the profession, including parental leave. These breaks were temporary periods when they were not working in the state school sector but had returned at a later point. For women in leadership roles, parental leave often led to a return to positions with reduced responsibilities, such as moving from the senior leadership team (SLT) to middle leadership or classroom teaching. They typically reported this was a personal decision coming from their desire to spend more time with their child(ren), with a few noting that it would be difficult to balance their parenting responsibilities with their high workload. Some other teachers and leaders that had taken parental leave noted that they returned to their roles on a part-time basis, working reduced hours to be able to spend more time with their child(ren).

A few teachers and leaders that had taken breaks mentioned that in this time, they had remained within the education sector but in different capacities, including holding roles in local authorities or private schools. These experiences were seen as opportunities to broaden perspectives on leadership and the wider system. However, they often reinforced a passion for teaching and the sense of community found in schools, prompting their return to the state sector.

Reflections on time in the teaching profession

Teachers and leaders interviewed reflected on multiple different positive elements of their time in the profession. Most often, they reflected on the meaningful connections they had built with the pupils at their school. Around half also mentioned that they felt that they had made a difference to children's lives, which aligned with a common motivation for joining the profession. Teachers and leaders with teaching responsibilities described classroom teaching as a key source of enjoyment. Many described the most rewarding moments as those spent actively engaging with pupils, and seeing pupils make tangible progress, both academically and socially.

Teachers and leaders also reflected on feelings of fulfilment in supporting and developing new teachers. In particular, a handful noted that acting as a mentor reinforced their sense of purpose and the value of their experience within the profession.

"I was a mentor last year to an ECT and I would go into her class and help her, and I absolutely loved that... It really reinforces why you're in the profession." **Primary classroom teacher, Considering Leaving**

A majority of teachers and leaders also reflected positively on relationships they had with various colleagues or their SLT throughout their career. As might be expected, the strength of working relationships with colleagues and senior leadership correlated with enjoying working at the school. Participants reported particular dissatisfaction when support for managing challenges or flexibility around personal circumstances was lacking. For example, one teacher who was considering leaving reported that limited flexibility around childcare at a previous school contributed to their dissatisfaction and that moving to a school with supportive leaders who had greater understanding of their personal circumstances notably improved their wellbeing.

Another aspect that teachers and leaders reflected on negatively was the high workload, which included an increase in administrative demands and non-teaching tasks, such as writing up notes from parent meetings, completing grading spreadsheets, and photocopying. Other additional demands which contributed to their high workload included health and safety processes and safeguarding responsibilities. However, these were distinct from other administrative tasks as teachers and leaders noted that they were important for the wellbeing of children and in one instance, their career progression.

"I wanted to go towards the safeguarding side because I wanted that satisfaction of helping people who perhaps had less fortunate upbringings than me, really." **Secondary ECT, Considering Leaving**

Several noted that much of this work had to be completed by working long hours, which became a source of strain. These reflections were often present, despite the majority anticipating high workload prior to entering the profession.

"When I went in, although I knew there was a lot of work, I had no idea of just how much work there was involved in being a teacher. And just when you think you've got the hang of everything, there's something else added to your workload." **Primary ECT, Leaver**

Some teachers who had been in the profession for over 10 years, reflected on how prescriptive teaching approaches had reduced their autonomy and creativity over time, and that this contrasted with the freedom they experienced earlier in their careers. These changes often made it harder to focus on what they valued most, namely the ability to make a meaningful impact on their pupils' lives.

Chapter 3: Drivers for leaving or considering leaving the state school sector

During the interviews, teachers and leaders were asked about what influenced their decision to leave or consider leaving the state school sector. First, they were asked to give an open, unprompted response. Then, they were prompted using the responses they had given to questions about this topic within wave 4 of the WLTl survey. The survey response options and question text can be viewed in Figure 1. Once the prompts from their survey responses were discussed, participants were asked if there were any other drivers not already mentioned that had influenced their decision to leave or consider leaving.

After capturing all the drivers for leaving or considering leaving, participants were asked which driver was most important. Given respondents were first asked for an open, unprompted response, it is important to note that the drivers mentioned, and language used in the interviews does not always directly align with the response options used in the survey. It is also worth noting that the drivers mentioned were often in combination with one another, so while efforts have been made during analysis to distinguish drivers, there are instances where these have been combined to ensure that the findings are accurately reflected.

As noted in the Introduction and Methodology, the findings from the qualitative interviews are from teachers and leaders who have left or are considering leaving the state school sector. The latter group is also made up of those who expressed low job satisfaction in wave 4 of the WLTl survey. As a result, the findings collected from these interviews are not reflective of the entire teacher and leader population.

This chapter explores the drivers for leaving or considering leaving the state school sector among those interviewed, the relationship between these drivers, and key subgroup differences. The first section of this chapter refers to findings from wave 4 of the WLTl survey to provide context for the qualitative findings.

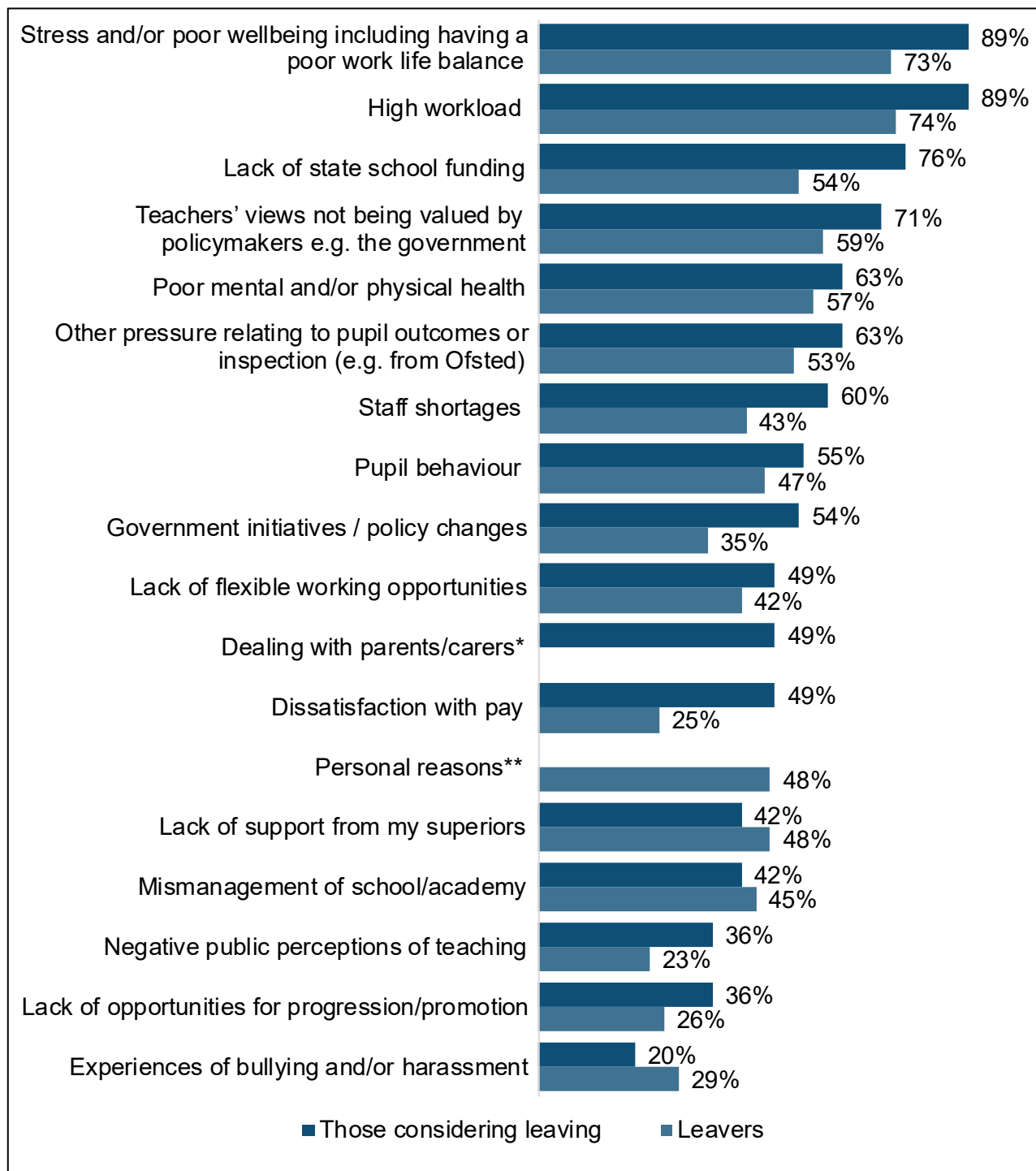
Drivers for leaving or considering leaving

Fieldwork for wave 4 of the WLTl survey took place between the 28 January and 2 May 2025.² In the survey, teachers and leaders were asked how important different drivers were in their decision to leave or consider leaving the state school sector. Teachers and leaders considering leaving the state school sector most commonly cited high workload and stress and/or poor wellbeing as reasons for potentially leaving (both 89%). Similarly, among those who did leave the state school sector between 2024 and 2025, the top two

² The findings from the first 4 years of the quantitative strand are detailed on gov.uk: [wave 1](#), [wave 2](#), [wave 3](#) and [wave 4](#).

reasons given were high workload (74%), and stress and/or poor wellbeing (73%). Figure 1 shows the survey responses of reasons ranked “important” or “very important” for leaving and considering leaving the sector.

Figure 1. Teachers and leaders’ reasons for leaving and considering leaving the English state education sector, rated as ‘very important’ or ‘important’, 2025



Source: Working lives of teachers and leaders survey. M5. How important have the following factors been in making you consider leaving the state education sector (in the next 12 months)? Single response per code. All teachers and leaders considering leaving the state education sector (wave 4, 2025, n=2,930). M6.

How important were the following factors in your decision to leave the state education sector? Single response per code. All who have left the state education sector (wave 4, 2025, n=461). *Indicates response code exclusive to M5. **Indicate response code exclusive to M6.

This trend from the survey is mirrored in the findings from the qualitative research. Nearly all teachers and leaders interviewed said that high workload, and stress and poor wellbeing were two of the most important drivers in their decision to leave or consider leaving the state school sector.

Apart from high workload, and stress and/or poor wellbeing, participants also mentioned a range of other drivers which partially aligned with the remaining response options in the survey. In addition to often being connected to either high workload or stress and/or poor wellbeing, or both, these other drivers were often also connected to each other. The connections between drivers are noted, where relevant and common, throughout this report.

The drivers in this section of the report include those mentioned by teachers and leaders during the qualitative interviews. These are ordered by how frequently each driver was reported to be highly important in influencing teachers' and leaders' decisions to leave or consider leaving. The following categories have been used to structure these findings:

- High-frequency drivers
- Medium-frequency drivers
- Low-frequency drivers

In addition to these three sections, one further section is included which covers 'Other drivers' which were less frequently mentioned and varied in terms of importance among those who mentioned them.

High-frequency drivers

High workload

As noted, nearly all teachers and leaders interviewed said high workload was one of the most important drivers in their decision to leave or consider leaving the state school sector. Consistently, teachers and leaders reported that their workload was unmanageable.³ Having a high workload was often as a result of having multiple responsibilities and competing priorities, which led to teachers and leaders working long hours.

³ Separate to this research, but as part of the WLTL series, qualitative research has also been conducted on the nature of high workloads among teachers and leaders. The findings from the qualitative strand for [wave 3](#).

“Working days at school are like working six days because of planning. Whether it's evening working or a whole Sunday, you're planning [...]. It's not just limited to the school working day.” **Secondary classroom teacher, Considering leaving**

“It would have been nice if, at any point in two years, I had anything that you could describe as a break, like a morning break or a lunch break. I never had one of those. So, you get to school at eight o'clock and you run until the end of the day. And at the end of the day, the school says “And now we'll do training for two hours”. ” **Secondary ECT, Leaver**

A majority of teachers and leaders reported how this led to a blurring of boundaries between work and their personal life. These teachers and leaders reported working on weekends and evenings, sometimes cancelling plans with family or friends. Some also noted that they were aware that their colleagues were similarly stretched and so felt guilty if they pushed back on their workload. In turn, high workload often led to stress and/or poor wellbeing, which is explored in more detail in the next section.

Teachers who had been qualified for more than 10 years and most leaders often flagged that over time they had experienced an accumulation of responsibilities. This was often due to either promotions or the need to cover multiple roles, especially within smaller schools. Further to this, teachers and leaders highlighted that new responsibilities had continually been added without any corresponding reduction in their existing responsibilities, compounding workload pressures. For example, one leader mentioned that due to a restructure at their school, they were asked to take on a ‘head of year’ role, which they felt unable to manage in combination with the rest of their workload.

Among some ECTs, the challenges with high workload that were raised, were often specifically in relation to combining their teacher responsibilities with their training.

“[During training, due to the prescriptive lesson plans that had to be completed] it would take like an hour to plan an hour class. Some teachers would be giving really detailed feedback. I did a class once where I had four A4 sheets of paper feedback and it's just far too much to even consider taking in when you're at that stage... it sets you up to already be overworking... You go into the school and suddenly you've got way more classes than you had when you were training, but you're still in the mindset of spending an hour on each class” **Secondary ECT, Leaver**

Teachers and leaders with dependent children more often reported that a high workload was a particularly important driver in leaving or considering leaving the state school sector. Some of these participants had entered the teaching profession thinking it would be family-friendly, but the reality often diverged from their initial expectations, as they experienced less flexibility around workload than anticipated. Some also said that this was school-

dependent, and that schools differed in the extent to which they were understanding and accommodating of the parental commitments of their staff. These experiences were reported by both male and female teachers and leaders.

Stress and poor wellbeing

Nearly all teachers and leaders also reported that stress and/or poor wellbeing were drivers for leaving or considering leaving the state school sector. Teachers and leaders described high stress as a feature of daily life in their role, and for many this stress did not abate over the academic year. This driver was closely connected to high workload, which exacerbated stress and poor wellbeing. Along with high workload, pressures relating to performance, pupil behaviour, and a lack of support from senior staff also contributed to stress and/or poor wellbeing amongst teachers and leaders. While this driver was experienced across all groups of teachers and leaders, this was particularly acute among leaders with a significant level of responsibility.

During the interviews, teachers and leaders typically associated stress and poor wellbeing with poor mental health, and at times used the terms interchangeably. Some teachers and leaders said their roles and responsibilities triggered anxiety, and in a handful of cases, depression. Others felt it impacted the attention they could give to their life outside of work, leaving them feeling burned out and drained. A few also noted how this had an impact on their personal relationships.

“It came to a head when I was suffering from proper symptoms of depression. My relationship with my wife was adversely affected, to put it mildly. I was drawing away from the family. I didn't want to hang out. I didn't want to do anything in the evening. I'd just take myself into a room. I just wanted to be in the dark.” **Secondary classroom teacher, Leaver**

In a few instances, teachers felt their stress and poor wellbeing was exacerbated by their SLT, who they felt were unable to effectively address issues relating to stress, poor wellbeing and mental health.

“It was like, you tick the box, you've looked at the wellbeing, but you haven't actually looked at the wellbeing [...]. Ultimately, it's just all tokenistic and it came across very fake.” **Secondary classroom teacher, Considering leaving**

Both leavers and those considering leaving viewed stress and poor wellbeing as systemic issues within the sector. However, leavers were a little more likely to describe experiencing burnout or a decline in their physical health, attributing these outcomes to an unsustainable workload and stressful working environment.

A handful of leavers reported that they only realised how stressed they had been once they had left the state school sector. These leavers noted that since moving into a new

role, there was a noticeable reduction in their stress levels and how anxious they felt day-to-day.

Medium-frequency drivers

Lack of state school funding

A majority of teachers and leaders noted that a lack of state school funding was another driver for leaving or considering leaving the state school sector. Teachers and leaders reported that they felt this had a negative impact on their school's abilities to offer good quality education to pupils.

"Ever since austerity and the coalition government, we've been cost saving. I'll be completely honest, I think there was some fat on the bone at the start, but we've now reached - I think we're well past - crisis point."

Primary leader, Considering leaving

Many teachers and leaders explained that the most significant impact of insufficient funding was staff shortages, especially support staff shortages for children with SEND. This was due to either vacancies being removed or an inability to introduce new roles in line with growing needs, due to a lack of funding. These teachers and leaders also felt that SEND provision was inadequate and that schools were not equipped to support the needs of children with SEND due to a perceived lack of funding in this area. Some teachers and leaders also reported seeing an increase in the number of children with SEND, which has exacerbated the issue.

"[In] my first classes, I would have maybe one child with an EHCP when I was starting. [...] Now, last time I taught, I had a class where 50% of the students out of 32 had SEND needs, and we had four or five EHCPs in that one class." **Secondary leader, Considering leaving**

A handful of teachers and leaders expressed concerns about the challenges of supporting pupils with SEND whose needs went beyond what their schools were able to provide. A few of these teachers and leaders noted how their concern for children with SEND has exacerbated their stress and poor wellbeing.

As well as this, some teachers and leaders with teaching responsibilities reported that over time there was a reduction of support staff for children with SEND that meant that it was more difficult to teach their whole class.

"[When you first joined the sector] you knew child X, Y and Z had that need, but you had the physical right people in your classroom to be able to help you do that support while also teaching, and you felt like you were actually getting somewhere. Children were making progress. By the time I left this year, all of that support had gone completely." **Primary classroom teacher, Leaver**

Teachers and leaders who reported a reduction of support staff for children with SEND explained that this resulted in increased workloads, as they had to adapt classes to be in line with individual learning goals set out in EHCPs or SEN support plans, and teachers reported creating parallel or duplicate lesson plans. There were also concerns that providing targeted support for children with SEND could inadvertently reduce the time and attention available for other pupils in the class.

A handful of leaders also mentioned having less budget for classroom teachers which meant that members of the SLT in their schools had to teach lessons. As a result, they had less time to dedicate to strategic leadership work and activities, which they felt was detrimental to the overall quality of education the school was able to provide.

A handful of leaders also mentioned that pay awards were not fully funded, which in turn meant that school budgets were further stretched to accommodate salary increases. For example, one headteacher explained that in order to balance the budget for a pay award they would have to remove the assistant headteacher role. This would have a knock-on impact of increasing their workload, and in turn would impact their wellbeing.

"I voted against accepting the pay award, not because I didn't think it was enough for me, but because I knew the budget couldn't handle it. I'd have to lose more staff. It's a pay award, okay, but you've got to fund it."

Primary leader, Considering leaving

A handful of teachers and leaders also described how resources, such as textbooks, were outdated or in poor condition, or in some cases, absent. As a result, teachers and leaders had to fund resources themselves, or pupils went without. This added pressure for teachers and leaders, contributing to stress and poor wellbeing.

"The students suffer because they don't get brand new textbooks or new texts. We're using copies of Lord of the Flies that are falling apart. There's no money to replace those things." **Secondary classroom teacher, Considering leaving**

Pressures relating to Ofsted inspections and pupil outcomes

Many teachers and leaders reported that Ofsted inspection related requirements and the emphasis on pupil outcomes was a significant source of pressure within the profession.

Often, they also noted that the requirement to prepare for inspections and maintain compliance with external standards added to their workload and resulted in them being able to spend less time on other tasks, which they felt were a higher priority e.g. lesson planning. Among some, these pressures exacerbated stress and poor wellbeing.

Some teachers and leaders mentioned that inspectors were not familiar with the context of the school and felt it was unrealistic for them to gain an accurate understanding of a school during a short visit. As a result, some of these teachers and leaders believed that inspections did not always accurately capture the standard of education the school provided and risked undervaluing the efforts of teachers. These teachers and leaders felt that inspection judgements had not sufficiently considered their school's context, meaning the resulting recommendations that came out of the Ofsted inspection were not useful or practical. As a result, some felt the significant stress and pressure associated with inspections did not feel justified.

"We had an Ofsted in [the] late summer of 2023, and it was one of the most horrendous experiences I've ever been through... The team came to our school came with very, very fixed ideas, and no matter what we said, it was not going to make a single bit of difference." **Primary leader, Leaver**

School initiatives

Some teachers and leaders explained that school initiatives were a factor in their decisions to leave or consider leaving the state school sector. This was more common among teachers. These included any changes schools introduced in response to inspections, or initiatives that had been created by SLTs or trusts in order to bring about improvements. Examples included collecting more data on pupil performance, more frequent testing, and adjusting lesson plans to fit into new templates. These teachers and leaders felt that these initiatives added to their workload, while taking time away from tasks which they felt were more worthwhile.

"There's so many elements of [this job] that make the job incredibly unsustainable, the biggest part being this obsession with data I would say, and I think it becomes a business and not what teaching should be about, which is helping kids grow." **Secondary ECT, Leaver**

Some of these teachers, and in some cases, leaders, were also frustrated by these initiatives, not because of the initiatives themselves, but with the number of changes and the frequency with which new initiatives were implemented. They reported these were difficult to keep up with and found constantly changing expectations frustrating. These views were more likely to be held by those who had been in the profession for more than ten years who often noted that there had been an increase in paperwork and bureaucracy.

A few teachers also felt that their SLT were not in touch with the reality of classroom teaching, and therefore the initiatives they introduced were not informed by what was going on “on the ground”. Associated with this, a handful of teachers reported feeling that their school was being mismanaged, and they did not trust their SLT to make changes that were in the best interest of teachers. A handful of teachers also noted that this created tensions with leaders at their school.

“I saw a lot in the schools that I worked at. People would have these big ideas because they’d read it in a book, but the ideas wouldn’t work in that school, but they’d still insist on [doing it] because they’d read it... completely inflexible when something wasn’t working but blame everyone else for it not working.” **Secondary classroom teacher, Leaver**

Curriculum and assessment

Some teachers and leaders flagged that government initiatives and policy changes were also drivers for leaving or considering leaving. Most often, teachers and leaders discussed this in relation to the national curriculum. They felt that following reforms under previous governments, the curriculum covered too many topic areas and had become too complex.

Primary teachers and leaders, in particular, often felt frustrated about aspects of the curriculum they were teaching their pupils. A few reported that they did not think the topics they were teaching were worthwhile and they felt this was unnecessarily adding to their workload. Specifically, these teachers and leaders noted that what was required for teaching Maths and English was too complex.

“I think there’s far too much to [cover in the curriculum]. And because there’s far too much to do, we’re not doing it very successfully. And as a teacher, that makes me quite sad. But, it’s the reality of trying to get through the curriculum, especially when you’re teaching in a test year and the school is going to get [judged] and it’s going to be a reflection on... the teacher or the pupils.” **Primary classroom teacher, Considering leaving**

A few teachers and leaders also noted that the number of exams required at GCSE and A Levels added pressure to their workload. As noted previously, the emphasis on pupil outcomes also exacerbated the stress and poor wellbeing that some teachers and leaders were experiencing.

“The government has worked very hard to insist that everybody has to do everything based on scores in exams, [but] the kids get taught to do lots of things that are completely irrelevant in order to be able to score in the exam. I found that very uncomfortable.” **Secondary classroom teacher, Leaver**

A handful of teachers and leaders mentioned the recent Curriculum and Assessment Review⁴ and expressed concerns that the additions could add to their high workload, which may exacerbate the stress they were already experiencing.

“They've just done the curriculum review, haven't they? The fact that they're saying ‘We've got this curriculum, it's brilliant. We want to add in this, this and this to it’ [but] what are [the government] taking away from our plates?” **Primary classroom teacher, Considering leaving**

Lack of professional agency

In connection with pressures relating to Ofsted inspections and pupil outcomes, school initiatives, and government initiatives and policy changes, some teachers and leaders reported that they felt they lacked professional agency in their role. These teachers and leaders often felt increasingly constrained by these pressures, and unable to moderate the impact that they were having on their role. A handful of teachers and leaders reported that they did not feel as though their views were listened to by their school or by policymakers. For a few teachers, feeling a lack of professional agency contributed to stress and poor wellbeing.

“It had already been made very clear that I didn't have a voice at this school where I was.” **Primary classroom teacher, Leaver**

Similar to leavers, many of those considering leaving also noted a gap between their motivations for joining the profession and what is required of them in their role. Those considering leaving reported that this gap, alongside a lack of professional agency and being unable to create change, diminished their enjoyment of teaching and belief that they could make a difference.

Low-frequency drivers

Pupil behaviour

Some teachers and leaders noted that pupil behaviour was an important driver in their decision to leave or consider leaving the state school sector. Some teachers and leaders felt that pupil behaviour had worsened over the course of their careers, particularly by those who had been in the profession for over 10 years. They suggested a correlation with the rise of smartphones and social media, the underfunding of mental health services for children, and the perception that parents expect teachers to provide pastoral care beyond what they would consider to be their role. A handful of teachers also suggested that

⁴ Please note that some fieldwork took place prior to publication of the recent [Curriculum and Assessment Review](#) in November 2025.

worsening pupil behaviour was, in part, due to leaders being unable to provide sufficient guidance on how to deal with behavioural incidents.

“I think I went the first 10 years of my career without ever being assaulted. I've now been assaulted on numerous occasions, but I think that's the symptom. I think the cause is there's an underlying mental health crisis, but access to those services is very difficult to organise because they're also overwhelmed.” **Primary leader, Considering leaving**

“The behaviour used to be silly or maybe throwing things around or swearing at each other or misdirecting energy, but the attitudes [have switched] to being quite divisively, manipulatively directed towards teachers more personally and there seemed to be a culture of entitlement that was being backed up by parents and by social media.” **Secondary classroom teacher, Considering leaving**

Some teachers and leaders with teaching responsibilities noted that poor pupil behaviour was worsening and disrupting their ability to teach. A handful noted that this resulted in additional administrative burden which added to their existing workload. In a handful of more extreme cases whereby teachers and leaders experienced violence or harassment themselves, this exacerbated their stress and poor wellbeing.

Dealing with parents/carers

Some teachers and leaders also reflected on how their role increasingly involved dealing with parents and carers. This additional pressure contributed to their workloads, and their stress, and has driven their decision to leave or consider leaving the state school sector. These teachers and leaders noted how their time spent dealing with parents and carers has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Parents had access to us 24/7 through COVID. And the boundaries about saying we don't work past seven o'clock or I'm not going to argue, it didn't matter. You'd get this most horrendous email [in the] evening on a Sunday that you'd then literally [be] stewing for the next several hours. And so all of those little things were like erosions into me as a person” **Secondary leader, Leaver**

A handful of teachers and leaders suggested that in the past, when discussing behavioural incidents, parents viewed them as being in a position of authority and typically agreed with their view of an incident. However, now parents tended to defend their child by default and question their authority, often creating adversarial situations with teachers. These teachers and leaders further reflected on how this can make them feel undervalued by parents.

"I just don't think we're trusted to do a good job. I think it's so scrutinised all the time and it's part of the culture within schools, but I suspect that comes from elsewhere and then because [the lack of trust is] also very public, I think it rubs off on parents and so I think that insecurity [has] become really pervasive, I don't think it's a very highly respected profession." **Primary teacher, Leaver**

Lack of support from superiors

Some teachers and leaders reported that a lack of support from and strained professional relationships with superiors was a driver for leaving or considering leaving the state school sector. In some cases, teachers and leaders had disagreements with more senior members of staff, which created a hostile work environment, and for a few this led to stress and poor wellbeing.

"I was 24 and still kind of learning how to respond in a professional environment and that's not an excuse. My head and I, we clashed a lot [...] I just feel like I'd let the whole team down and I think looking back now I can say that mental health wise, I was probably in the lowest place I've ever been." **Primary classroom teacher, Leaver**

Some teachers and leaders described feeling generally unsupported and that there was an underlying culture within their school which did not foster collaboration or provide adequate guidance. This included a lack of support with managing high workloads, appropriate guidance on how to deal with pupil behaviour and complaints from parents, and support with stress and poor wellbeing. A handful noted that this was likely a consequence of how busy their SLT was, meaning they did not have sufficient time to support staff.

"Even when I was saying that I was struggling, everyone was too busy to help. That was the worst thing about it, there was no one [who] could help. I reached out to so many people. I spoke to senior leadership, and they'd forget that they've made an appointment with me, you know, because they were too busy." **Secondary classroom teacher, Leaver**

A handful of ECTs also reported that senior colleagues did not have enough time to support them and that they felt dismissed.

Other drivers

Pay

A handful of teachers said that pay drove their decision to leave or consider leaving. In these cases, they felt that their pay progression in the future, which they had learnt about

through others in the sector, would not be as much as they would have hoped. Others noted that they felt their pay did not sufficiently reflect their responsibilities.

“The pay that you get for teaching is not commensurate with the amount of hours you work and the level of professionalism and responsibility.”

Primary classroom teacher, Leaver

Bullying and harassment

A handful of teachers and leaders noted that they had experienced being bullied by peers or more senior staff, and in a minority of cases, that they experienced discrimination. Among these, it was noted that the support offered by senior staff influenced their experience of these events significantly. For this minority, these experiences were a very important driver in their decision to leave or consider leaving.

“I have quite a good view [from working across four different schools], and during my teaching training I experienced the same things (discrimination). The only difference was that the senior management team at that school, they protected me against that.” **Secondary classroom teacher, Considering leaving**

Personal reasons

During the interviews, some teachers and leaders reported other drivers which steered their decision to leave or consider leaving. A handful mentioned receiving job offers from elsewhere, experiencing bereavement, a lack of progression opportunities, and considering leaving or leaving to pursue a role which offered more flexible working opportunities.

Relationships between the drivers to leave or consider leaving

As discussed in the previous section, different drivers were reported to be important in teachers and leaders' decisions to leave or consider leaving the state school sector to varying degrees. However, it is also true that all teachers and leaders reported that their decision to leave or consider leaving was as a result of multiple drivers, rather than one sole driver.

The findings from these interviews also demonstrate that the relationships between these drivers build over a time period, often several years. Often, leavers had experienced this interplay between drivers for a longer period of time, compared to those considering leaving. Leavers often described an accumulation of negative experiences that ultimately created a ‘tipping-point’ and pushed them to leave. For some, these issues had persisted throughout their career at a range of schools, intensifying feelings of exhaustion and demoralisation.

To illustrate the relationship between drivers and the cumulative effect of drivers, two personas have been developed. These personas are composites built from recurring patterns in the qualitative evidence collected across the study, rather than representations of any single participant. They bring together the drivers most consistently mentioned in interviews, namely workload, accountability measures, resourcing, pupil behaviour, parental engagement and wellbeing. They also show how different drivers can combine in realistic ways to influence teachers and leaders' experiences, attitudes and career intentions.

Persona: Teacher 1 (Primary, Leaver)

Teacher 1 entered the profession with a strong sense of purpose and believed that teaching would be their lifelong career. In their first years in teaching, they valued the opportunity to work creatively with pupils and felt supported by colleagues and school leadership. Over time, however, their role and responsibilities changed. Tasks that were once largely focused on teaching and learning increasingly shifted towards managing complex pupil needs, responding to growing parental expectations around engagement, and completing additional administrative work, all of which substantially increased their workload.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, they noticed an increase in the number of children with SEND. However, they did not think there had been enough of an increase in SEND support staff to help manage these growing needs at their school. They noted that this made their role as a teacher very challenging as the spectrum of needs for their pupils was extensive, resulting in more time being spent on lesson planning. Alongside this, they raised that they were not confident they would be able to deliver high quality teaching to all pupils.

They also noted that since the COVID-19 pandemic, they had spent more time dealing with parents and carers. They noticed that parents were more regularly sending queries about their teaching approaches and raising concerns about their child's progress. This required time to address incidents or concerns, which consequently reduced the time available for teaching, planning and administrative tasks. On top of this, they described how a handful of parents could be rude and confrontational, which left them feeling undervalued.

In the past two years, their school also received negative feedback following an Ofsted inspection. In response, their school came up with several new initiatives which involved further data collection, more tests and more marking. They reflected on how the addition of this work inhibited how creative they were able to be with lesson planning, and it added tasks to their workload which felt unnecessary to them.

The combined effect of these drivers led to them consistently working longer hours and added to feelings of stress and poor wellbeing. Over time, they noticed that they had begun to doubt themselves and their abilities as a teacher. They described how the idea of leaving the state school sector had formed over a number of years, rather than being prompted by a single event. Their family also expressed concerns with their wellbeing, and they made the decision to hand in their notice once they had found a new position.

Persona: Leader 1 (Secondary, Considering Leaving)

Leader 1 entered the profession with a clear motivation to make a positive difference in children's lives and saw teaching as a meaningful and valued career. In their early years, they enjoyed working directly with pupils and found satisfaction in contributing to their development. Over time, they progressed through roles of increasing responsibility and became an Assistant Head in a secondary school. They valued the opportunities this role provided to influence school practice and to support in mentoring junior colleagues.

As they moved into leadership, their responsibilities naturally expanded considerably. A central aspect of their role included being involved in school level spending decisions. They described having to make difficult decisions about how to allocate limited resources, while balancing expectations from multiple directions, including other members of the senior leadership team, staff and parents.

Alongside these responsibilities, Leader 1 noted challenges relating to behaviour and parental expectations. They reported that they did not always feel confident in addressing complex behavioural issues, particularly when these required additional staffing or specialist support that the school could not easily secure. They also found managing parental expectations increasingly complex, particularly where families sought rapid resolutions or additional support that the school's resourcing did not allow for. These interactions required time and careful communication, adding to their wider responsibilities.

Leader 1 also described pressures linked to Ofsted inspections. They reflected that inspection readiness shaped much of the school's planning and decision-making which influenced how they prioritised tasks throughout the year. The need to meet or evidence compliance contributed to their workload. They felt that this limited their capacity to focus on longer-term development work or on initiatives they believed would most benefit their pupils.

Over time, these combined pressures contributed to increasing workload and reduced wellbeing. Leader 1 described finding it challenging to balance their work

responsibilities with their personal life. They reflected that, although they remained committed to their role and to supporting colleagues, they were beginning to consider whether continuing in the profession was feasible in the longer term.

Despite these pressures, they remained hopeful that forthcoming changes in the wider education system, particularly relating to funding and SEND provision might help alleviate some of the constraints they were experiencing. They explained that improvements in these areas could potentially enable them to refocus on the aspects of leadership they found most meaningful. However, they also acknowledged that without such systemic changes, they may need to reconsider their future in the state school sector.

Chapter 4: Transitions out of the profession

This chapter explores the mitigation attempts that teachers and leaders tried when faced with the various challenges which drove them to leave or consider leaving the state school sector. This chapter further goes on to detail teachers and leader's barriers to leaving the state school sector, their considerations for a career outside of the sector, and the steps they have taken to transition away from teaching roles in the sector. This chapter also covers leaver's new roles compared to their previous position in the state school sector.

Mitigation attempts

School mitigation attempts

A few teachers and leaders reported that their school had made changes to help overcome challenges they were facing. For some, improvements centred on clearer behaviour policies and more structured daily routines, supported by a stronger leadership presence that was both more visible and more actively involved in assisting teachers. For some, this included providing further support for children with SEND, often through specialist provision or external services. A smaller number described operational adjustments to free up teacher time, though these were generally modest and constrained by funding.

A handful of teachers and leaders reported that efforts to improve pupil behaviour, and to support teachers who found behaviour management more challenging, were helpful. For example, one teacher described how the introduction of stronger SLTs and the roll-out of clear daily routines contributed to substantial improvements in school culture and reduced stress among staff. Another example consisted of a primary leader who reported that their school was opening a special needs unit, which meant that the school would have more resources to help support pupils with SEND. However, they noted that the opportunities to make this kind of mitigation were limited because of restrictions on funding.

These examples indicate that, although a few schools implemented measures to help manage workload and increasing pupil needs, these actions were typically small-scale and shaped by the practical constraints of school budgets and the limited availability of external SEND and specialist support services.

Personal mitigation attempts

Personal mitigation attempts tended to focus on managing workload through adjustments to working patterns or by establishing clearer personal boundaries. For example, a few teachers and leaders mentioned putting strict workload boundaries in place, such as not

working during evenings and weekends, even if this meant pushing back against school expectations, enabling them to find a workable middle ground.

“I just sort of put the boundaries on myself in place that it was like, okay, 4:30pm, whatever happens, I’m not working past it. If something’s not marked, it will be marked later.” **Secondary ECT, Leaver**

Another example of a personal mitigation attempt came from a teacher who was considering leaving the sector, and had reduced their working hours, for a more manageable workload. Even though they still worked over the reduced hours, their stress and wellbeing had improved, and their work life balance felt more manageable.

“I technically work 3 and a half, 4 days, but I get paid for 3. But my stress levels have been so much better. I feel so much more ease.” **Secondary classroom teacher, Considering leaving**

These personal mitigation strategies provided teachers and leaders with some temporary relief, particularly when they created protected, interruption free periods for planning and marking, separate from their existing PPA time. However, without wider organisational or systemic support, their impact remained limited. This also illustrates the relatively limited scope teachers and leaders felt they had to adapt their working practices within the wider conditions of their role.

For a handful of teachers and leaders, setting these boundaries proved to be unsuccessful; for example, requests for flexible working or support were sometimes declined, and a few participants described receiving little assistance even after repeatedly raising concerns.

Overall, for many, the boundaries were difficult to maintain in the face of high workload, escalating pupil needs, and insufficient staffing, meaning that these mitigation attempts alone could not prevent them from deciding to leave, or consider leaving.

Considerations for new roles

Those considering leaving

When thinking about their next role outside the state school sector, nearly all teachers and leaders who were considering leaving had thought about how the skills they had developed through their teaching career might transfer to alternative employment. Participants described reassessing their professional identities, recognising that teaching had equipped them with a broad range of technical, organisational, and interpersonal skills that extended beyond the classroom.

“The skills that you need to be a good teacher are [...] definitely transferable skills [...] Communication, being an English teacher is fantastic... anything to do with writing reports, looking at data to analyse things, interpreting data, working on communication and marketing, that kind of stuff is all there.” **Secondary classroom teacher, Considering leaving**

Those considering leaving also emphasised the importance of fulfilment, purpose, and wellbeing in shaping future career aspirations. Leaders in particular spoke about their desire to work in roles that felt meaningful, offered a sense of community and allowed them to continue to make a difference.

“Fulfilment is important, and I don't just mean in financial terms, that's less important now. It would be about feeling that what you're doing was useful, that you could add value to what other people were doing. And for me, it would be quite important that you're working as part of a community of some sort.” **Secondary leader, Considering leaving**

Those considering leaving also mentioned the importance of managing stress and their long-term health. Most often, this was linked to workload, for example they wanted to be able to take more breaks throughout the day, work fewer hours a week, or have a well-resourced team.

In addition to fulfilment and managing their wellbeing, those considering leaving also took their finances, personal interests and flexible working into account when thinking about their next role.

“[It would be] easier for me to just do a school run in the morning, come back and do my day at work, whether it's at home or hybrid, and then carry on with that. I could make it work around the school runs because a lot of employers are okay with that.” **Secondary classroom teacher, Considering leaving**

Leavers

After reflecting on their key drivers for leaving, some leavers recalled identifying specific aspects of their role that they found particularly motivating or enjoyable, which then influenced the types of careers they considered pursuing. For example, one leader moved into software engineering, and a classroom teacher moved into fundraising and marketing for a charity.

“As part of teaching digital media, I had to teach some basic, very, very basic software engineering stuff, so I thought I liked that.” **Secondary leader, Leaver**

Other key considerations included prioritising a manageable workload, defined working hours and flexible working to support work-life balance.

“Something that allows me to take time when I need to take time that isn't so rigid about it. In the school system, when you do take time off and it's because of a dependent and they're unwell, it is a challenge.” **Secondary ECT, Leaver**

Transitions out of the state school sector

Those considering leaving

Teachers and leaders who were considering leaving were at varying stages in their transition away from teaching roles in the state school sector. Some reported only early or tentative steps regarding a change in future employment, whilst others had undertaken more substantive actions. These early steps included reviewing job vacancies, exploring alternative career pathways through professional networks and online communities, consulting with former teachers, attending career-related webinars, and, in a small number of cases, actively planning alternative career options.

“In all honesty, over the last few years, I have dabbled occasionally in researching what jobs you can get as an ex-teacher. I followed Facebook groups of Life After Teaching to see what other people are doing.”

Primary classroom teacher, Considering leaving

“I've written a business plan with my wife about what we'd need to get to in order to sustain 2 of us... I've made contact with somebody who works as a wedding photographer and sort of mooted the idea of just doing some weekend work to get my hand back in as a second camera on shoots. [...] Then my 2 colleagues that I work with, I would say we are plotting continuously what our offering might be in education, but we're not quite there yet, we haven't quite nailed it down.” **Primary leader,**

Considering leaving

All participants who were considering leaving the state school sector indicated that they planned to remain in employment. None reported intentions to engage in volunteering, a career break, or assume full-time caring responsibilities. A handful voiced a desire to continue working within the education sector, but in a different capacity, such as consultancy, roles within the Department for Education (DfE), Ofsted, or local authorities, or teaching in the private, further education, or higher education sectors.

“I had previously looked at roles in the DfE so through the civil service, looking at whether I could go into trying to maybe be someone who works in policy, or be someone who actually represents voices of teachers.”

Secondary ECT, Leaver

“I’m actively looking for teaching roles in the private school sector because yes, the parents will be more challenging, but overall, the behaviour will be probably counter-measured, the pay will be probably roughly the same, but it’ll be smaller class sizes, better resources, and that will make those other two things much more manageable.” **Primary ECT, Considering leaving**

Leavers

Nearly all leavers applied for alternative roles while still employed in the state school sector. A few retrained for alternative careers such as marketing or started their own businesses. A few teachers engaged in self-directed professional development alongside teaching to support a planned transition into their new role.

“I didn’t want to just leave teaching to go and do an office job or something like that. That felt like “Oh no, that’s not for me”. I started to put things in place, so I started to train to work with students who are neurodivergent, as in working one-to-one with them. I started a training thing while I was teaching, and I was just doing that in my own time.” **Secondary classroom teacher, Leaver**

A majority of leavers remained in education-related roles. These roles included teaching abroad, advisory positions within multi-academy trusts or local authorities, mentoring and school-based technical roles. A few moved into teaching roles in further or higher education, including teacher training and roles supporting ECTs.

Some leavers undertook supply teaching. Around half of those in supply roles reported that they would only accept work at the school they had left, citing familiarity and established relationships with pupils and colleagues. The remainder either chose to work as supply teachers in the private school sector or indicated that their roles in supply teaching would be temporary while they pursued opportunities outside the teaching profession. Supply teaching was viewed positively by this group, as it allowed them to continue teaching and apply their professional skills while avoiding the additional demands associated with lesson preparation and administrative responsibilities.

“There's no planning, everything's planned and resourced already. But I think even as supply, the conditions in the school are really different anyway. I mean, it's not a state school, so it's unfair to compare it, but also because it's international, it's a different curriculum and everything.”

Primary classroom teacher, Leaver

For a few leavers, the inconsistency and unpredictability of supply work was seen as a disadvantage. A few reported receiving limited or irregular work, leading them to seek full-time teaching roles in the private school sector to secure greater stability and consistency.

“I was not getting a lot of consistent work through the supply route, so I thought I'd just get back into teaching [in private schools] for a bit and see. It's a bit more consistent.” **Secondary ECT, Leaver**

A few leavers were not in paid employment and instead undertook voluntary or charity work. They highlighted a continued desire to make a difference, often describing this work as aligning with their core professional values while offering relief from the pressures of teaching.

“Again, it's making a difference to people, even if it's making them a cup of tea and asking them how they are... There's no pressure. There's no stress. There are other people there who are in charge and you can just really sit back and relax but do something worthwhile.” **Primary leader, Leaver**

A handful of leavers undertook voluntary roles in international schools, often following a partner's move abroad for work, due to visa restrictions, or because favourable financial circumstances allowed them to step back from paid employment. For some, this was viewed as a temporary arrangement, with the intention of returning to teaching in a permanent capacity either in their host country or on returning to the UK.

“I'm now living [abroad] and I do work on a voluntary basis. English conversation classes and working in a preschool. The school were sad to see me go but supportive I think, because I explained it's where I'm moving to be with my husband.” **Secondary ECT, Leaver**

Comparison of working conditions and responsibilities among leavers

All leavers in employment highlighted several key differences between previous teaching experience and their current role. A majority of leavers consistently described their current roles as having clearer responsibilities, more defined working hours, and a more manageable workload compared to teaching. Their new roles offered greater flexibility in

when and how work was completed, alongside increased autonomy and trust from employers. Opportunities for professional development were also more embedded and valued, rather than treated as an optional extra.

At the same time, some leavers in employment noted differences between their new roles and their previous roles in teaching that required getting used to. These included changes to pay and holiday entitlement, a higher level of autonomy which felt unfamiliar at first, and different forms of support compared with school environments.

The most frequently cited benefit of leavers' new roles was a significantly improved work-life balance. Leavers emphasised having greater control over their time, including flexible start and finish times, clearer boundaries around working hours, and freedom from the expectation to routinely work evenings and weekends. This flexibility allowed them to adapt work around family life without guilt or penalty.

"Work-life balance for me doesn't mean that I don't work evenings. It means that I can work an evening to make up for work I should have done during the day if something happens. Work-life balance means that some mornings I start at 10 and other mornings I start at 8." **Secondary classroom teacher, Leaver**

Nearly all leavers reported a reduction in workload and greater clarity of responsibilities in their current roles, which tended to have a well-defined remit rather than multiple competing demands. This reduced the sense of constant pressure they experienced in their teaching roles within the state school sector, and made workloads feel more achievable. A majority also highlighted that greater work-life balance enabled them to dedicate more time to personal wellbeing, including exercise, cooking, and other activities that support physical and mental health.

"I've got set hours. So, I work from half past eight till half past four. I'm not expected to work above and beyond that at all, so I have free weekends 100% of the time. It's a lot more relaxed in a way. There is still pressure, but I have one role." **Primary classroom teacher, Leaver**

In addition, a majority of leavers highlighted improved support for employee wellbeing in their new role and had greater confidence that raising concerns about workload or stress would result in practical assistance.

“Fundamentally, I don't feel like I'm being set up to fail, and I don't feel like I'm going to have a nervous breakdown just trying to do the bare minimum to stay afloat. I feel like if I expressed to anybody in my current role that I was feeling stressed or that I was worried about something, the answer would be supportive and wrapped in “Let's share the workload, let's make this more manageable” as opposed to just, “Well, that's just the job”.”

Primary classroom teacher, Leaver

In contrast, some leavers also acknowledged that their new role offered reduced pay and holiday entitlement, compared to their previous role in the state school sector. However, many leavers regarded these as acceptable trade-offs, as the reduced workload and stress meant they no longer felt as exhausted or in need of extensive recovery time.

“The pay isn't as good, the holidays aren't quite as good, but that doesn't really matter because I don't feel the need to have as many holidays as I did when I was teaching because the days are easier.”

Secondary classroom teacher, Leaver

Chapter 5: Intentions to stay or return

This chapter covers the reasons why those considering leaving had not yet left the state school sector, and what would prompt them to do so. This chapter also explores leaver's views on whether they would consider returning to the state school sector, and under what conditions.

Retention among those considering leaving

Some teachers and leaders considering leaving the state school sector were prepared to leave at the end of the academic year, however many of these had unspecified timescales, and had been considering leaving for well over a year. A few of these teachers and leaders had been considering leaving for over 5 years and were weighing up leaving, but without specific preparation or plans to leave soon.

Those considering leaving the state school sector often expressed some uncertainty about their decision. Many intended to do so when personal and financial circumstances aligned with the transition, or they found a suitable new role.

A majority of those considering leaving, highlighted pay and the transparency of teacher pay scales as significant reasons to stay in the state school sector. Teacher pensions also represented a long-term factor influencing intentions to stay, described by one secondary leader as “one of the best parts about teaching.” A handful reported that leaving teaching would likely involve a substantial reduction in income, creating additional pressure on household finances and family responsibilities. Around half of those who highlighted financial barriers noted that progression within teaching had resulted in salaries that were difficult to match in alternative sectors, making career transition financially unviable. This was a barrier particularly among leaders.

“When you've been in the sector a long time, your pay goes up.... Where can you jump to which would pay you something similar and also you won't be a complete novice? It's easy to feel trapped ... that's a real reason for not leaving.” **Secondary leader, Considering leaving**

“What's kept me in teaching? I built my salary up to a point where I can't do anything else for anywhere near the money not even close. [...] Then when you're in teaching, there's no time to train to do anything else, so it's kind of like a catch-22. Moving out of teaching, unless you have a partner who's going to support you [...] is almost impossible.” **Secondary classroom teacher, Considering leaving**

Financial considerations were not the only factor influencing retention. A majority of those considering leaving noted that the camaraderie shared with colleagues and a sense of

loyalty to their school was one of their key reasons for remaining. For them, this was often rooted in long-standing relationships with members of the SLT and other staff.

“Lunchtime and break time are kind of that time to come back together, because we always talk about teaching being quite lonely in the classroom because you're the only adult sometimes and you can feel quite alone.” **Secondary classroom teacher, Considering leaving**

Many of those considering leaving spoke of their commitment to teaching as a vocation and a strong sense of moral obligation to their pupils. They valued the pastoral aspects of teaching and reported enjoyment in sharing their knowledge and engaging with their classes, believing that they were able to make a positive difference in their roles. This was particularly acute among those working in deprived areas.

“I do love teaching, I love being in that environment, I love feeling like I am making an impact, feeling like I'm helping these children. Where I work, it is a deprived area and if I can just help those children a little bit, that makes me feel like at least I'm doing something.” **Primary classroom teacher, Considering leaving**

Some of those considering leaving also noted that timing within the school year was a critical factor in their decision-making. Contractually teachers and leaders can leave at 3 time points in the academic year (end of the spring, summer or autumn term) and they are required to give a half term's notice, with headteachers typically needing to give a full term's notice. However, leaders expressed that they felt that leaving in the summer was the only feasible option to minimise disruption and avoid a sense of “letting down” colleagues and pupils.

“Teachers really genuinely care about their students and their colleagues. And I wouldn't feel I could leave halfway through an academic year. I'd have to leave at the end of the year. So, if I don't get my financial ducks in a row by May, I'm stuck here for another year.” **Secondary Leader, Considering leaving**

Similarly, among a handful of teachers and leaders, the structure of the school calendar with its predictable schedule and holidays offered a flexibility rarely found in other sectors.

“I've got 4 kids and being able to spend 13 weeks a year with my children is a big driver. You know, they don't see me during the week really that much. So, I only get the weekends and the holidays. So, they're really important to me. Perhaps if I changed roles, I'd be more present at home during the week and therefore I wouldn't necessarily feel I might need the holidays as much.” **Secondary leader, Considering leaving**

A few teachers emphasised the importance of supportive leadership as a positive influence on their experience, acting as a pull factor that encourages retention. For example, one teacher described their headteacher as “incredible” in promoting staff wellbeing, while another highlighted an “excellent headmaster” who is compassionate, thoughtful, and creative in addressing challenges. However, both teachers acknowledged the limits of school-level leadership, emphasising that broader systemic constraints, such as funding deficits often limit potential for meaningful change.

“The new headteacher is incredible. She really promotes staff wellbeing. I don't think she personally is going to be able to do anything to make this better. It's a bigger, wider issue than just our school. It's a whole education system issue.” **Primary classroom teacher, Considering leaving**

Future triggers to attrition

Teachers and leaders considering leaving the state school sector identified a number of specific triggers that would prompt their departure from the profession. A majority of participants indicated that any further increase in workload, or any additional deterioration in work-life balance, would lead them to leave the state school sector without hesitation.

“There's an end point because it becomes unsustainable physically or mentally or whatever. And there isn't that acknowledgement within education.” **Primary leader, Considering leaving**

A majority cited the prospect of securing the “right job” that matched their skills, interests or offered work-life balance as another important incentive for leaving, noting that they would depart once a suitable opportunity outside the state school sector arose.

“If somebody offered me a job I was interested in for even £10,000 less, I'd say yes. I've worked out how much it would take to bridge the gap with childcare and stuff. So, if somebody offered me that in a job that sounded interesting, I'd accepted straight away.” **Secondary classroom teacher, Considering leaving**

A lack of support and recognition from SLTs was also identified as a trigger for leaving the profession. In particular, a few primary classroom teachers described how repeated experiences of feeling underappreciated, unheard, or blamed for challenging situations eroded their commitment to the profession over time. One teacher explained that although a single incident might not prompt their departure, the cumulative effect of perceived disrespect or lack of acknowledgement could act as a tipping point, particularly when they felt their effort and emotional investment in the role were not recognised by their SLT.

“It’s not being appreciated. I put my heart and soul in this job and then if you get to the point where [the SLT] just say, ‘well oh actually [the student is] only reacting like that because of you’ and then I’d just say no, no I’m done, finished, that would be what would push me over the edge.”

Primary classroom teacher, Considering leaving

A few of those who were considering leaving the state school sector stated that if certain reforms did not have their desired impact, this may prompt them to leave. However, for the time being, they remained hopeful that imminent policy developments, such as the Curriculum and Assessment Review, SEND review and upcoming changes to the Ofsted inspection framework, would lead to improvements in the state school sector.

“If the situation with SEND goes the other way and the reforms make it worse, I don’t think I’ll be able to stay because I don’t want to be complicit in a system that underserves those people who it’s so vital that we get it right for.” **Primary leader, Considering leaving**

Intentions to return among leavers

Nearly all leavers emphasised that they have no intentions of returning to teaching or leadership roles in the state school sector. Those who did express some interest in returning were clear that this would be limited to supply teaching, consultancy or part-time work, primarily for financial reasons such as supplementing their income or adding to their pension.

“I might go back to supply if I need to, if [this current role] doesn’t pan out. I’d need some income while I’m trying to plan something else.”

Secondary ECT, Leaver

This suggests that for some leavers, the idea of returning to the state school sector is a practical choice rather than one driven by a desire to re-engage with the teaching profession. Supply or short-term roles were perceived as a pragmatic solution to financial necessity rather than a career choice, suggesting that the prospect of a return to long-term teaching roles is limited.

Concerns around systemic challenges, particularly those related to SEND provision and high workload, were prominent among leavers. Several noted that such structural issues are “baked in” and would deter a long-term return to the state school sector.

For some leavers, the intrinsic rewards of teaching such as building relationships with pupils and witnessing their progress, remain a meaningful source of personal satisfaction. Likewise, the social and professional support provided by colleagues and the sense of teamwork was frequently highlighted as a valued aspect of the role that they missed.

"I do miss working with kids. I do miss that. But that is the only thing I miss." **Primary classroom teacher, Leaver**

"I miss the camaraderie and all of that. I worked with some lovely colleagues in my science department where I was." **Secondary leader, Leaver**

However, these rewarding elements of the teaching profession were considered as generally insufficient to outweigh the broader challenges and pressures that led to their decision to leave the state school sector. This was particularly evident when weighed against the perceived advantages and opportunities available in their new roles outside the profession.

Chapter 6: Incentives to stay or return

This chapter explores the non-financial incentives identified by teachers and leaders that could encourage them to remain in or return to the state school sector.

Workload-related incentives

As covered in Chapter 3, across all teachers and leaders, high workload was one of the most important drivers in their decisions to leave or consider leaving the state school sector. All teachers and leaders described workload reduction as essential to enabling a sustainable work-life balance, with a majority highlighting the importance of being able to complete work within the school day. Specifically, they reported this would include a reduction in curriculum demands and scaling back routine monitoring, for example, regular data submissions, pupil-progress tracking, and evidencing work for inspections alongside an overall reduction in data collection.

“I think the curriculum is too packed. There's too much. What you're expected to cram into the same length of time school day when the children are in there... The curriculum needs seriously streamlining.”

Primary classroom teacher, Leaver

Many teachers and leaders noted that expansion of responsibilities they had been facing over the years had not been matched by reductions in teaching hours, creating a persistent mismatch between these additional expectations and the time available to fulfil them. This imbalance was frequently described as a source of work-related stress and a key factor shaping decisions about whether remaining in or returning to the state school sector would be feasible.

“I think one of the biggest problems that has happened is that teachers have taken on more responsibility... For me to contemplate going back into it, it would have to be somewhere where the teaching workload was decreased to give time for everything else that you have to do.”

Secondary leader, Leaver

“I would like to see workloads that are appropriate because in the past workload initiatives have been “you don't have to write that down” or “you don't have to fill out this spreadsheet” that's not a workload reduction initiative. Actually, appointing enough teachers to manage enough classes so everybody gets an extra hour to do their admin and marking in a day is.” **Secondary leader, Considering leaving**

A few leavers reflected that recent pay increases, while welcomed, had not addressed the underlying pressures of teaching. They emphasised that having sufficient time to plan and

deliver teaching, alongside the ability to maintain a sustainable work-life balance, were more influential incentives in their decision-making than salary levels alone.

“They have increased pay because they think that's really what teachers mind about. And although it is nice to be paid something like a professional wage, actually what I wanted was not money but time.”

Secondary ECT, Leaver

“I think if unions actually went to teachers and went, would you prefer a 20% pay rise or a 20% workload drop? Not many teachers would choose the pay rise.” **Secondary classroom teacher, Considering leaving**

A majority of leavers proposed a range of incentives to help alleviate workload. A commonly cited suggestion by leavers with teaching responsibilities was a reduction in timetabled teaching hours, with participants emphasising the importance of protected time for PPA. They reported that current amount of PPA time was often insufficient to manage the volume and complexity of required tasks. Additionally, many teachers and leaders were frequently called to cover other teachers or respond to behavioural incidents which displaced their work into evenings and weekends. Participants also indicated that additional PPA time could support improved wellbeing, reduce fatigue, and help restore clearer boundaries between work and personal life.

“The only thing I think really that could have made a difference, and that a school couldn't do, was to reduce my contact hours. To give me more time where I'm being paid to do the rest of the job.” **Secondary classroom teacher, Leaver**

A few teachers who were considering leaving also acknowledged the value of off-site PPA as an incentive but noted barriers and contrasts in availability and effectiveness between primary and secondary phases of the state school sector.

“I've asked over the course of my career about taking PPA at home, not every week, as I know that's unachievable. If there's something on, or I had a backlog of work, whether I could just have an afternoon at home so you can't be disturbed because obviously PPA is non-directed protected time.” **Primary classroom teacher, Considering leaving**

Some teachers and leaders also emphasised the importance of increased access to flexible working arrangements as a means of supporting work-life balance. They noted that greater flexibility such as part-time working, job-sharing, flexible start and finish times where feasible could help teachers and leaders better manage caring responsibilities and personal commitments alongside their professional roles. A few teachers and leaders reported that limited availability or inconsistent implementation of flexible working options acted as a barrier to retention and re-entry.

For some leavers, the ability to access flexible working arrangements was described as a key consideration in decisions about whether returning to the profession would be viable. A few noted the positive impacts they had experienced of being able to disengage from work at the end of the day and prioritise family life.

“One of the things I didn't think about when I went into teaching was the fact I'd never get to watch my child in a nativity. I'd never get to see a sports day. [...] I love now that I can go to all the sports days and all the coffee mornings and, you know, we have that flexi work, and so you can do those things.” **Primary ECT, Leaver**

A few leavers noted the positive impacts they had experienced of being able to disengage from work at the end of the day and prioritise family life.

Systemic changes

A majority of teachers and leaders reported increasing difficulty in supporting the rising number of pupils with complex SEND in mainstream schools, noting that existing support and resourcing were insufficient. They emphasised the need for reforms to SEND policy and provision, including clearer guidance, improved access to specialist support and more consistent provision across schools. Leavers and those considering leaving similarly highlighted how these unmet needs contributed to unsustainable workload and stress, identifying policy change, increased funding and additional resources as essential for retention.

“I just think there needs to be a total, utter overhaul of the state English state SEND system, the English state expectations of a school, and the way in which teaching is still carried out.” **Primary classroom teacher, Leaver**

“The current system of expecting teachers to adapt their teaching, sometimes 7 different ways, to keep the child with ADHD who's impulsive going, to help the child with autism who needs calm and routine and to keep an eye on that child who's got epilepsy because they're about to have seizure potentially at any different in stage of the day is just not manageable.” **Primary classroom teacher, Considering leaving**

A few leavers also highlighted the importance of stronger partnership working between education, health, and social care. They suggested that earlier and more co-ordinated support for families could help prevent crises, such as mental health or safeguarding for parents and children, thereby reducing additional non-teaching responsibilities and enable teachers to focus on their core educational role of teaching.

“We need better partnership working between education health and social care to ensure that families are supported earlier so that you're not always dealing with the crisis from families be it mental health, be it parenting, be it behaviour, be it anything. It's not left to the schools to deal with.”

Primary classroom teacher, Leaver

These reflections suggest that, for a few leavers, the possibility of returning is conditional on perceived improvements in policy and greater systemic support. However, the cautious approach and conditional willingness of the participants to return to the profession indicates that policy changes alone may not be sufficient to overcome broader dissatisfaction or disillusionment with the teaching profession.

Increase in autonomy and value

Around half of teachers and leaders called for changes to accountability measures and professional expectations, emphasising the importance of greater professional autonomy. A few teachers who were considering leaving the state school sector also emphasised the importance of increased professional autonomy and respect at both school and government level, identifying these factors as critical to teacher wellbeing and retention.

“Just let us be autonomous about how we manage classrooms. We're all adults, we know how to. [Teachers] are still being taught to stand in front of their classroom doors and greet students on entry and check their uniforms and ties as they're walking in one by one as though we're prison wardens rather than teachers. It just takes all the passion and the enjoyment and the joy out of the job.” **Secondary classroom teacher, Considering leaving**

“At the moment there is such little respect for the profession that the people who might be joining it are maybe put off. But we still need to be child led, child focused and vocational in the career alongside having really high professional standards and abilities.” **Primary leader, Considering leaving**

Increased funding

Teachers and leaders highlighted the need for increased funding for more staff, and among a few, an increase in funding for wellbeing support for teachers and leaders.

Improved funding was identified as a key factor in supporting teacher retention, enabling schools to employ sufficient staff, provide resources for both staff and pupils, and enhance the overall quality of education.

“For me personally, it's the way that school budgets have been cut. Schools are trying to penny-pinch to manage the budgets we've lost... The children can't achieve such high grades if they haven't got everything that they need to support them in getting there.” **Primary classroom teacher, Leaver**

A few teachers and leaders also highlighted the importance of investment in external agencies to support schools with the increasing numbers of children with SEND attending mainstream schools. Some additionally called for greater investment directly into schools so they could afford to commission these services when needed.

“There needs to be more investment in speech and language therapists, early intervention, paediatricians, more of those available... It's really sad to say that but there needs to be more investment in schools.” **Primary classroom teacher, Considering leaving**

Many teachers and leaders had observed poor mental wellbeing and low morale among colleagues or experienced it themselves. A stronger focus on funding for initiatives to support teacher wellbeing, both at the level of the school and the system, was seen by a few as an important factor in supporting retention. Participants perceived that opportunities for networking and peer support play a crucial role in building relationships and providing impartial advice.

“When I first started, we used to do something called Headspace, where headteachers all came together a couple of times a year. And it became a budgetary thing for the local authority again and it was cut. But it is that independent networking of people that you can go to for support who have experience is what [leaders] need.” **Primary leader, Leaver**

A handful of leaders noted that the combination of mandatory pay awards and constrained budgets creates challenges with staffing. They found that this directly reduced the capacity to retain essential support staff and emphasised the need for additional funding to prevent further cuts.

“The budget is not going to change next year. Teachers are going to get a pay award. Support staff are going to get a pay award. We are going to have to find the money from somewhere. So that will mean cuts elsewhere. It will mean we'll have to lose staff again. We haven't got any staff to lose.” **Primary leader, Considering leaving**

Other incentives to stay or return

A handful of leavers, particularly leaders, advocated for changes to the Ofsted inspection process to reduce stress and the additional responsibilities placed on teachers and leaders.

“I just think the Ofsted system has to change because it forces schools to do things and push things on to teachers that are unnecessary. And everyone knows they're unnecessary, but you have to do them because your Ofsted grade affects the [pupils that apply to your school] and therefore your results.” **Secondary classroom teacher, Leaver**

A handful of primary leaders who were considering leaving the state school sector also reported experiences of physical and verbal assault from pupils and feeling unsafe at work, indicating that stronger safeguarding measures are necessary to retain teachers and leaders in these schools.

“In July this year, one of my members of the support staff team had their arm broken through a physical assault from a child, but this is every day in our world.” **Primary leader, Considering leaving**

Chapter 7: Conclusions

This research found that teachers and leaders frequently enter the profession with the expectation that it will be a lifelong career. They are aware that teaching is a challenging job and are conscious of some of the typical difficulties that they may face. However, leavers and those considering leaving described the challenges as greater than expected and beyond what they were willing or able to tolerate.

All teachers and leaders reported that their decision to leave, or consider leaving, was influenced by multiple drivers, rather than a single issue. It was also evident that these drivers were often related to one another. For teachers and leaders, these drivers had built up over time, with leavers having experienced a greater accumulation of negative experiences that led to their decision to leave.

As identified in the wave 4 WLTL survey, high workload, and stress and/or poor wellbeing, were the most significant drivers in teachers and leaders' decisions to leave or consider leaving the state school sector. Teachers and leaders consistently reported that their workload was unmanageable due to the complexity and intensity of their roles, with multiple responsibilities, competing priorities, and an accumulation of tasks over time. They also described high stress as a constant aspect of their daily work. Beyond workload, teachers and leaders' stress and/or poor wellbeing was exacerbated by performance-related pressures, the challenges of managing pupil behaviour, and a perceived lack of support from senior leadership.

Other important drivers for their decision to leave or consider leaving, included insufficient state school funding, particularly for SEND support staff (seen as harming the ability to provide quality education), pressures from Ofsted inspections and pupil outcomes (adding to workload through preparation and compliance), the frequent introduction of new school initiatives (hard to keep up with), and government initiatives and policy changes (mostly discussed in respect of the national curriculum which was seen as too complex and covering too many topics). Some felt these factors therefore limited their professional agency.

Participants also discussed a few other drivers that influenced their decisions to leave or consider leaving, albeit to a lesser extent, which included worsening pupil behaviour and the need to increasingly deal with contact from parents and carers, both of which added to workload. Additionally, participants mentioned a lack of support from senior leaders and workplace cultures which did not encourage collaboration or provide adequate support. In a handful of cases, bullying by peers or senior staff was reported as a significant driver in participants' decisions to leave. Teachers and leaders typically spent a long period of time considering leaving and exploring their options before they left. This suggests that there could be opportunities to improve experiences of teachers and leaders who are already considering leaving and to retain them in the profession.

Leavers who were in employment described their roles outside teaching as being preferable to working in the state sector in terms of workload, flexibility, professional autonomy and trust, and being able to make time for self-care and wellbeing. Teachers and leaders reported that they sought roles outside teaching that had clearly defined working hours and activities, and where flexible or hybrid working would allow them to fit parenting responsibilities or personal activities around work. Though teachers and leaders felt that they had developed many transferable skills through teaching, though some felt that this was not well understood by employers outside of education.

Leavers reported that they were extremely unlikely to return to the profession, unless they had left teaching for reasons other than personal choice, for example if a partner's job had taken them overseas. However, both leavers and those considering leaving described certain changes that could be made to the state school sector that could improve retention of teachers. These changes particularly focused on making workload more manageable by reducing contact time and increasing PPA, to make it easier for teachers to complete their work within the working day. Increased flexibility was also identified as a benefit. The examples given by teachers suggested that late starts, early finishes and ad-hoc time off would be most valued. Pay was not deemed to be an important factor in retaining teachers, other than that it was seen as a problem to leave teaching for a less well-remunerated role elsewhere.

Annex A

Characteristics: Leavers

Table A.01 Leavers number of years qualified

	Total
Up to 5 years	13
More than 5 years, up to 10 years	3
More than 10 years	16
Unavailable	3
Total	35

Table A.02 Leavers age

	Total
Under 45	19
Over 45	16
Total	35

Table A.03 Leavers gender

	Total
Female	26
Male	9
Total	35

Table A.04 Leavers ethnicity

	Total
White	32
Other ethnicity	3
Total	35

Table A.05 Leavers working pattern

	Total
Full time	26
Part time	9
Total	35

Table A.06 Leavers current role

	Total
Not working	8
Working outside of education	13
Working in education	14
Total	35

Characteristics: Those considering leaving

Table A.07 Considering leaving intentions in wave 3 survey

	Total
Yes	14
Other (including No and not answered)	11
Total	25

Table A.08 Considering leaving number of years qualified

	Total
Up to 5 years	6
More than 5 years, up to 10 years	3
More than 10 years	13
Unavailable	3
Total	35

Table A.09 Considering leaving age

	Total
Under 45	16
Over 45	9
Total	25

Table A.10 Considering leaving gender

	Total
Female	15
Male	10
Total	25

Table A.11 Considering leaving ethnicity

	Total
White	24
Other ethnicity	1
Total	25

Table A.12 Considering leaving working pattern

	Total
Full time	17
Part time	7
Total	25

Annex B

Figure B.01 Survey question for those considering leaving

M5. How important have the following factors been in making you consider leaving the state education sector?

SINGLE CODE. ONE PER ROW. READ OUT. DS: ROTATE ORDER THAT CODES APPEAR.

	Not at all important Very important					DO NOT READ OUT: Don't Know
High workload	1	2	3	4	5	6
Government initiatives / policy changes	1	2	3	4	5	6
Dealing with parents/carers	1	2	3	4	5	6
Other pressure relating to pupil outcomes or inspection (e.g. from Ofsted)	1	2	3	4	5	6
Dissatisfaction with pay	1	2	3	4	5	6
Lack of support from my superiors	1	2	3	4	5	6
Lack of opportunities for progression/promotion	1	2	3	4	5	6
Pupil behaviour	1	2	3	4	5	6
Lack of flexible working opportunities	1	2	3	4	5	6
Teachers' views not being valued by policymakers, e.g. the government	1	2	3	4	5	6
Stress and/or poor wellbeing including having a poor work life balance	1	2	3	4	5	6
Poor mental and/or physical health	1	2	3	4	5	6
Experiences of bullying and/or harassment	1	2	3	4	5	6
Negative public perceptions of teaching	1	2	3	4	5	6
Lack of state school funding	1	2	3	4	5	6
Mismanagement of school/academy	1	2	3	4	5	6
Staff shortages	1	2	3	4	5	6

Figure B.02 survey question for leavers

M6. How important were the following factors in your decision to [IF LEAVER_TYPE=1: leave the state education sector / IF LEAVER_TYPE=2-4: stop teaching in a [IF PHASE (SAMPLE)=1: primary / IF PHASE (SAMPLE)=2: secondary] setting]?

SINGLE CODE. ONE PER ROW. READ OUT. . DS: ROTATE ORDER THAT CODES APPEAR.

	Not at all important Very important					DO NOT READ OUT: Don't Know
High workload	1	2	3	4	5	6
Government initiatives / policy changes	1	2	3	4	5	6
Other pressure relating to pupil outcomes or inspection (e.g. from Ofsted)	1	2	3	4	5	6
Dissatisfaction with pay	1	2	3	4	5	6
Personal reasons	1	2	3	4	5	6
Lack of support from my superiors	1	2	3	4	5	6
Lack of opportunities for progression/promotion	1	2	3	4	5	6
Pupil behaviour	1	2	3	4	5	6
Lack of flexible working opportunities	1	2	3	4	5	6
Teachers' views not being valued by policymakers, e.g. the government	1	2	3	4	5	6
Stress and/or poor wellbeing	1	2	3	4	5	6
Poor mental and/or physical health	1	2	3	4	5	6
Experiences of bullying and/or harassment	1	2	3	4	5	6
Negative public perceptions of teaching	1	2	3	4	5	6
Lack of state school funding	1	2	3	4	5	6
Mismanagement of school/academy	1	2	3	4	5	6
Staff shortages	1	2	3	4	5	6

Figure B.03 Topic guide questions on reasons for considering leaving

N1. I'd now like to discuss what has led you to consider leaving the state school sector in more detail. To start with, when did you begin to consider leaving the sector?

N2. And could you please tell me more about the reasons that are contributing to you considering leaving the state school sector?

Note for interviewer:

First, allow the respondent to provide their 'spontaneous' response. Second, use the responses they gave at M5 (i.e. the factors which were very or quite important in making them consider leaving the state education sector). Fine to let respondents know that these were their responses in the survey.

In the survey you noted that [x] was an important factor in making you consider leaving the state education sector, is this still the case? Why?

For each reason mentioned, it will be important to understand why it led them to consider leaving and any other relevant details to provide context / a deeper understanding.

Third, ask respondent if there are any other contributing factors.

Are there any other reasons that come to mind which have contributed to you considering leaving the state school sector?

N3. Of these reasons, which one is the most important in your consideration to leave the teaching profession?

Why do you think that is?

Figure B.04 Topic guide questions on reasons for leaving

O1. I'd now like to talk in a bit more detail about your (if left in the past: latest) decision to leave the state school sector in England. So, firstly, when did you decide to leave?

How long were you thinking about leaving for? Probe: Prolonged decision or snap decision prompted by a specific event?

O2 And can you tell me about the reasons you decided to leave?

Note for interviewer:

First, allow the respondent to provide their 'spontaneous' response. Probe for further reasons

Second, use the responses they gave at M6 (i.e. the factors which were 'very important' or 'quite important' in their decision to leave the state education sector), to probe – these are included in the sample. Fine to let respondents know that these were their responses in the survey.

In the survey you noted that [x] was very important in your decision to leave? On reflection, do you still feel that this is the case? Why?

For each reason mentioned, it will be important to understand why it impacted their decision to leave, and any other relevant details to provide context / a deeper understanding.

Third, ask respondent if there are any other contributing factors.

Are there any other reasons that come to mind which we haven't discussed previously?

O3 And of these, which one reason do you think had the biggest impact on your decision to leave?

Why do you think that was?

Were any attempts made at a personal or school-level to help mitigate these challenges? If yes, did this improve the situation?

[If relevant / they left the sector previously without an intention to return] How do your reasons for leaving compare to the last time you left the teaching profession?



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