

## Written evidence submitted by Schools North East

Schools North East is a charity set up in 2007 by schools and for schools. We are a movement for change, giving a voice to all 1,150 North East schools in the national education debate.

### Summary

*Employment environment* - Schools have found it increasingly difficult to compete with other sectors in recruiting staff. This challenge of rigidity, in setting hours, the working day, and salary ranges, takes away flexibility from schools that other sectors have, and is a key driving force behind a growing recruitment and retention crisis in education.

*Workload* - Challenges of workload, and the type of work being done, are having a significant impact on recruitment. Before the pandemic, schools were already being expected to take on significant additional responsibilities. For many teachers, workload has become more onerous because it has taken them away from the classroom and the usual work of teachers.

*Training* - Schools said that the current training system had failed to catch up with changes in education, and similarly that career professional development (CPD) offers are not as developed as they could be. The right training is central to attracting and retaining the right staff.

*Accountability and education policy* - Current education policy is seen as showing a significant lack of trust in the teaching profession. And with the significant anxieties, workload, and stress created by the accountability system, this is a key driver in the recruitment and retention crisis, especially for school leaders. Much better and active engagement with school leaders is needed when it comes to shaping standards, accountability measures, and policy.

Recruitment and retention of school staff has been a key challenge for North East schools since the pandemic. In [December 2021](#), we held a roundtable with senior school leaders, including CEOs, SBMs, COOs, and Head Teachers in the region, to discuss recruitment of staff, and challenges in accessing adequate supply. We also wrote to the Secretary of State for Education in [November 2021](#) about the urgent need to depressurise the education system, to help address the recruitment and retention crisis.

While some of the operational challenges around supply have improved, due to declining Covid-related absences, recruitment and retention has consistently been mentioned in feedback in our surveys and roundtables with school leaders in the North East.

### *Employment environment*

Schools have found it increasingly difficult to compete with other sectors in recruiting staff. While pay was not the defining feature of this challenge, it did play an important role. The lack of competitive pay in particular makes it difficult to recruit graduates.

However, teachers recognise that an unfunded pay rise would be detrimental to what schools can offer, and may mean redundancies and a reduction of support to those students with special education needs (SEND) and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

A more significant challenge for schools is the inability to offer more flexible working patterns. This is highlighted by older teachers taking early retirement, opting instead for part time work in other sectors at a reduced salary.

While other sectors have been able to adapt to changed working practices since the pandemic, with greater options for working from home, the school working week has not changed. Where schools were once seen as 'family friendly', this is now less clearly the case. While school terms and holidays used to be an attraction, there has been a change in work routines, with more potential recruits wanting flexibility for annual leave during term time. This is particularly impacting on recruitment of younger staff and teaching assistants (TAs). The private sector is also beginning to mimic school contracts i.e. term-time only working, but with higher salaries and benefits.

This challenge of rigidity, in setting hours, the working day, and salary ranges, takes away flexibility from schools that other sectors have, and is a key driving force behind a growing recruitment and retention crisis in education.

These challenges were seen across all stages, however the problem seemed more acute at secondary. STEM subjects presented a particular issue, as the sector is notably more competitive than education. Broadly, the challenge related to recruitment rather than retention, although this is not always the case. Schools are looking at what can be done to develop expertise locally, to ensure that teachers understand the needs of the local area. There are particular challenges in attracting staff to schools in disadvantaged communities and rural areas.

### *Workload*

Challenges of workload, and the type of work being done, are having a significant impact on recruitment. Before the pandemic, schools were already being expected to take on significant additional responsibilities, without relevant increases in funding or expertise in school. Since the pandemic there has been a notable increase in students with profound and very challenging needs.

With these challenges, and increased classroom sizes, schools are being expected to deliver more without increased (and often with reduced) funding. For many teachers, workload has become more onerous because it has taken them away from the classroom and the usual work of teachers.

Teachers want more planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time, to ensure they can focus on curriculum development and pedagogy. As well as the growing complexity of student needs, this work was being undermined by the focus on exam results, with teachers too often having to 'teach to the test'.

The ability to support students is exacerbated by the challenges in recruitment and retention of TAs and support staff. Without high quality TAs, early years foundation stage (EYFS) specialists, language and communication specialists, educational psychologists, and other pastoral support roles, schools are unable to identify gaps and deliver necessary interventions. This is not just a challenge for the education sector, but those sectors outside of schools that deliver support for children and young people.

### *Training*

Schools said that the current training system had failed to catch up with changes in education, and similarly that career professional development (CPD) offers are not as developed as they could be.

Concerns were expressed about the numbers of those who started but did not complete initial teacher training (ITT). This was a notable gap in the national recruitment strategy, where the focus is on application numbers rather than completion of training. More needs to be done to attract dedicated staff, otherwise a lot of effort and funds are put into training staff that don't make it past ITT, placements, or inductions.

Too often, new recruits are not adequately prepared for the classroom. Many new teachers weren't fully aware of the challenges or intensity of school work prior to beginning training, and this was seen across all stages. Attracting the right staff with the right expertise is vital to ensuring schools can deliver the education and support children and young people need.

Schools are developing in-house CPD and training opportunities, and including this in job descriptions. This can help in recruitment, but crucially forms a central part of their retention strategies and ensuring that schools can meet student needs. For example, many schools hire TAs to train them to be higher level teaching assistants (HLTAs). 'Fit' with the school and teaching values is being prioritised over qualifications, as more and more recruits lack relevant qualifications.

On the Early Career Framework, schools are finding the mentor system an increasing challenge. For many experienced teachers, having to retrain to be a mentor was a significant obstacle, and forced them to miss out on other CPD opportunities. As such, early career teachers were not necessarily able to get the support from quality practitioners to help retention of staff. Making the ECF manageable for mentors and ECTs has been a significant challenge.

Schools wanted to see more done across training to attract both those who see teaching as a vocation, and those who see teaching as a good job. The right training is central to attracting the right staff, and the whole system needs to be under consideration, starting at ITT rather than ECT. Potential employees need clear expectations, clear routes and pathways in education, and experiences in the classroom as part of training.

*Accountability and education policy*

Current education policy is seen as showing a significant lack of trust in the teaching profession. And with the significant anxieties, workload, and stress created by the accountability system, this is a key driver in the recruitment and retention crisis, especially for school leaders.

Schools said that there had been a decline in the perceived reputation of teachers as professionals, especially within the Department for Education and Government. The challenges mentioned above all feed into this perception. Real recognition of the work schools do is needed, with better starting salaries, better training, more PPA funding, and non teaching professionals to support mental health, pastoral, and safeguarding needs.

The levels of regulation and accountability are notably 'higher stakes' in education than in other sectors, with very personal and long term ramifications for the careers of school leaders. Schools questioned what improvements had been made as a result of this accountability system. As well as questions over whether or not Ofsted measured the right things, leaders felt the impact of inspections on recruitment will damage school improvement in the long term.

As well as the high stakes nature of Ofsted inspections, there are concerns about what schools are being held to account for. Schools noted that parental complaints are rarely, if ever, related to learning or education, those elements which teachers are responsible for. Schools are being expected to take on more and more significant pastoral and safeguarding responsibilities. Greater recognition of this through more expertise, training, and funding in schools is vital, otherwise this will continue to negatively impact recruitment and retention.

The lack of trust in the profession is highlighted in various tick box exercises and unnecessary bureaucracy, seen in the ECF mentioned above, and also in other policies such as the National Tutoring Programme (NTP). Schools wanted to see a real trust in the capabilities of the profession to develop skills and leadership.

Much better and active engagement with school leaders is needed when it comes to shaping standards, accountability measures, and policy. Doing this would help restore the reputation of teachers as professionals. While teaching can be a challenging job, it can be hugely rewarding, provided the vocational nature of teaching is emphasised and supported.

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