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## Report

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# Keeping Your Head: NFER Analysis of Headteacher Retention

National Foundation for Educational  
Research (NFER)





# Keeping Your Head: NFER Analysis of Headteacher Retention

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All views expressed in the report are those of the authors.



# 1 Key messages and recommendations

**More than 90 per cent of headteachers below retirement age are retained in headship each year. But retention rates have fallen since 2012.** Our analysis does not identify any changes in individual or school characteristics that explain this trend over time. We did not include a measure of headteacher effectiveness in our analysis and we acknowledge that some attrition could be beneficial for the system. Our analysis does provide evidence of the characteristics which are associated with headteachers being more likely to stay in the profession or leave headship early, which is informative for those who have a role in addressing this issue in the sector.

**Higher retention** is seen in: primary schools; schools rated Good or Outstanding by Ofsted; converter academies; single academy trusts; schools with higher attainment at the end of Key Stage 2 or 4; and, after controlling for attainment, in more disadvantaged schools.

**Lower retention** is seen in: secondary schools; schools rated as Inadequate by Ofsted (particularly in the first year following downgrade and if the headteacher has been in post for two years or more at the time of downgrade); sponsored academies (again

particularly at the point of sponsorship and if the head has been in post two years or more at the time of sponsorship); larger multi-academy trusts (MATs); and in schools with low levels of attainment.

While factors such as school phase, Ofsted rating, academy sponsorship and low attainment are associated with headteachers leaving headship, changes in the prevalence of these factors over time (e.g. an increasing rate of academy sponsorship) do not explain the fall in retention since 2012.<sup>1</sup>

Interviews with 22 headteachers suggest that **system instability** (the pace and nature of policy changes) and **mixed experiences of support** may contribute to some headteachers leaving the profession.

Based on our current analysis, we make a number of **recommendations** to those with a role in retaining heads or developing future leaders:

- **Clarify the career pathways of headteachers.** These pathways should allow effective heads to lead a challenging school<sup>2</sup> without a higher risk to their career and encourage more experienced headteachers into challenging schools. Headteachers should be able to move into different roles that make use of their expertise, before returning to headship. There should be clear opportunities for the future pipeline of heads to develop leadership capabilities. There should also be a clear

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<sup>1</sup> Data quality issues with the School Workforce Census (explained in Chapter 3) may partly explain why the retention rate appears to have fallen since 2012, but is not the whole story. It is likely that retention is falling

over time for reasons that are beyond the factors we could measure in our quantitative analysis.

<sup>2</sup> Often defined as schools with high proportions of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, low attainment, or a mixture of both.

way for headteachers to develop the skills they may need if moving into system leadership roles.

- **Provide more guidance to headteachers and those who hold them to account.** More information is needed on how sustainable change has been delivered in different contexts. Heads need clarity about what is expected in timescales deemed appropriate to those who hold them to account, and those holding them to account need to understand the trajectory of sustainable improvement. Guidance is needed on potential early *indicators* of improvement that change before headline results improve.
- **Support headteachers.** New heads should have access to formal induction. Leaders need practical and emotional support, as well as opportunities for peer support (such as coaching, mentoring and shadowing). Governors and MATs should foster an open culture where heads can seek support without feeling vulnerable. They should evaluate whether a leader who is not performing can be supported to improve rather than be replaced, or can be re-deployed to a different context or role within the system.

Our analysis has also identified some **additional research questions** which, if investigated on a larger scale, could help to inform policy decisions:

- Why do retention rates fluctuate over time?
- What is the relationship between headteacher *effectiveness* and retention?

- Why is lower retention associated with lower-performing schools?
- What more can we learn about the relationship between pupil *progress*, *attainment* and headteacher *retention*?
- What more can we understand about headteacher *turnover* and *why* some heads leave the profession?
- What is a realistic timescale and trajectory for improvement in the lowest-performing schools?
- Why is there lower retention in MATs?
- How are the models of headship evolving, given the changing landscape of school contexts and structures?
- What factors contribute to the higher resilience exhibited by some school leaders?
- What are the career expectations of headteachers and do their expectations match the needs of the system?
- How effective are existing interventions for headteachers?

#### **About this report**

This report presents the findings from our new research investigating the retention of headteachers within the system – whether at the same school or a different school.

It combines a quantitative analysis of School Workforce Census (SWC) data over a five-year period from 2011 to 2015, with in-depth qualitative telephone interviews with 22 headteachers.

Further methodological details can be found in the Technical Appendix.



## 2 About this research: retaining headteachers

Teacher retention has become a high profile topic in recent years, as increasing numbers of teachers are leaving the profession before retirement (Worth *et al.*, 2015 and Lynch *et al.*, 2016). Although headteachers are known to play a vital role in leading and sustaining good school performance, to date there has been little quantitative investigation in England into whether they are also leaving headship in increasing numbers.

Small-scale surveys suggest that it is increasingly difficult to recruit headteachers (NGA, 2015 and Walton, 2014) and recent projections have suggested that, without additional actions being taken, increased demand for executive headteacher and CEO roles, early exit from headship and retirement of a predominantly older leadership pool will drive a substantial shortage of headteachers by 2022 (The Future Leaders Trust, Teaching Leaders and TeachFirst, 2016). Anecdotal evidence about the career risks of leading underperforming schools has circulated for a number of years, suggesting that this is a disincentive for potential school leaders to work in such schools (Edge, 2013). This suggests that strategies are needed to retain effective headteachers within the profession and to build a stronger pipeline of new headteachers.

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<sup>3</sup> Headteachers were recruited for interview via social media. From those who had expressed an interest in taking part in an interview, we selected those who met different criteria (including gender, length of time as a headteacher, school phase, school type, school-level attainment and

Our new research investigates the retention of headteachers within the system – whether at the same school or a different school. It addresses the following questions:

1. What are the patterns of headteacher retention and turnover rates in England?
2. What school and personal characteristics are associated with headteacher retention?
3. What factors are influencing the retention rate? Why are some leaving headship?
4. What factors might prevent effective headteachers from leaving or might encourage them to return to headship?

It combines a quantitative analysis of School Workforce Census (SWC) data over a five-year period from 2011 to 2015, with qualitative telephone interviews with 22 headteachers who volunteered for interview.<sup>3</sup> Those interviewed had either considered leaving headship (five), had already left (ten) or were satisfied in their roles – ‘happy heads’ (seven).

As for all research, this work had limitations. For the quantitative analysis, a single definition of retention was required and therefore we selected a definition of individuals leaving headship roles completely, for a lower-level role in education or a role outside of the education sector. However, we could not capture some transitions, most notably the transition of leaders from an in-school

proportion of students eligible for free school meals (FSM)). Throughout the report, the number in lighter grey font after a quotation indicates which interviewee made the comment; see the Technical Appendix for details about their profile.

role to the central teams of multi-academy trusts. Further analysis is also required to understand the characteristics of headteachers who transition to other teaching roles, heads who are retained but move between schools frequently and the types of schools heads are most likely to leave quickly.

The analysis also did not incorporate a measure of the effectiveness of headteachers who left headship and therefore we cannot make judgements about whether it was 'good for the system' that these individuals are no longer headteachers.

As the qualitative analysis uses a small, self-selected sample of headteachers, it is not necessarily representative of all headteachers and cannot provide explanations for all of the trends identified. It can, however, offer insights into the experiences of some headteachers and themes for further, larger-scale research.

## 2.1 Previous research into headteacher retention

### **Rates of headteacher turnover in England and internationally**

The focus of this research is on the retention of headteachers within headship. A considerable proportion of the existing relevant literature focuses on the turnover of school leaders between schools, regardless of destination. Where possible, we have focused on research relating to school leaders leaving headship entirely.

To date we are aware of no large-scale research into the rate of headteacher retention or turnover in England. The SWC is the main dataset that enables such research, with data collected since 2010.

Early analysis by Allen and Burgess (2012) of the SWC from November 2010 suggested that – under the former Ofsted judgement system – schools graded as Unsatisfactory or below were more likely to see a change of headteacher within two years than those graded as Satisfactory or above.

There is some evidence that increased headteacher turnover is associated with sponsored academisation in England. Eyles and Machin (2015) found that within a sample of 106 sponsored academies that became academies before the 2008-9 school year, headteacher turnover (defined as a change in headteacher at a given school) was 59 per cent higher in the year of sponsored academisation compared to schools that had not become sponsored at the time, but which went on to do so at a later date. The study found that this effect appeared to be a one-off change, with differences in turnover rates in subsequent years being statistically insignificant.

More research has been undertaken in other national settings, although comparisons need to take account of any differences in approaches to the career management and deployment of school leaders, for example, in terms of salary competitiveness, the level of leaders' autonomy and the demographic profile of the workforce. The National Center for Education Statistics' Principal Follow-up Survey (PFS), designed to measure principal retention in the United States, found that in the school year 2012-13 seven per cent of public school principals left the profession for reasons other than retirement. A further four per cent left due to retirement, and another four per cent of public principals were recorded as having left their school with unknown destinations (Goldring *et al.*, 2014). This is a minimal change on the results from the same national

survey conducted in the 2007-8 school year (Battle and Gruber, 2010). We are not aware of other national datasets designed to capture data on retention of school leaders.

### **School characteristics and underlying influences on retention**

There is minimal recent research into the underlying influences on headteacher retention in England, other than the study of sponsored academies cited above. Analyses of longitudinal administrative data in three US states have found lower rates of principal retention to be associated with high schools (as opposed to middle or elementary schools), low attainment, higher levels of disadvantage within a school and low accountability grades (Béteille *et al.*, 2012, DeAngelis and White, 2011, Fuller and Young, 2009). Other small effects have been found in US settings relating to principal age, race, gender, teaching and principal experience, leadership and decision making, influence, education, school urbanicity, principal salary and school climate factors such as trust within the school (Goldring *et al.*, 2014, Baker *et al.*, 2010, Battle and Gruber, 2010, Fuller and Young, 2009).

Turning to evidence from England on retention of classroom teachers, research indicates that retention rates vary by school phase, disadvantage and Ofsted rating. While headteacher retention may not be influenced by the same factors as teacher retention, the two may interact. Analysis of the Labour Force Survey (Worth *et al.*, 2015) found average teacher turnover (defined as teachers who left the teaching profession entirely, excluding those retiring) to be 7.6 per cent and that it is lower among secondary schools compared to primary. A study of the School Workforce Census focusing on turnover between schools (Allen *et al.*, 2012)

found the same trend across school phase and also found average teacher tenure to be lower among schools in more deprived areas. Recent longitudinal analysis of the SWC (Sims, 2016) examined the impact of Ofsted ratings between 2006 and 2013 on turnover between schools, and found that schools reclassified from Requires Improvement to Inadequate saw a significant, three percentage point increase in classroom teacher turnover.

### 3 Trends in headteacher retention in England

#### Key messages

Excluding those who retire at normal age, around 90 per cent of headteachers are retained in the system from year to year.

Retention rates are higher in primary schools than secondary schools

Seven per cent of primary school heads and ten per cent of secondary school heads are, however, leaving headship each year before retirement age.

Retention rates have fallen between 2012 and 2015, particularly in secondary schools.

Our analysis of the School Workforce Census has explored the annual movements of 29,807 primary headteachers and 6,652 secondary headteachers in England between 2011 and 2015. For every headteacher recorded in a November census, we have analysed what that headteacher is doing in the following census (i.e. from year to year): whether they are still a headteacher (in the same school or a different one), if they have changed role (to an assistant headteacher, for example), retired (either early or at normal age<sup>4</sup>) or if they are out of service.<sup>5</sup> We also look at what

<sup>4</sup> We defined normal age retirement as being age 60 or over when retiring and early retirement as being under age 60 when retiring.

<sup>5</sup> 'Out of service' includes any headteacher no longer in the SWC data and therefore not in the state-funded education sector. This could include

headteachers are doing according to the census collected two and three years later.

#### **More than eighty per cent of all headteachers are retained in their school each year and around five per cent move schools**

Table 3.1 summarises the destinations of headteachers of mainstream primary and secondary schools from year to year, using data averaged over the years 2012-15. Overall more than eighty per cent of all headteachers remain as the headteacher in their school from year to year, and a further five per cent move to a different school each year. About three per cent of primary school headteachers and five per cent of secondary school headteachers move out of service each year. Just under one per cent change to a lower-level role each year. About three per cent of primary school headteachers and four per cent of secondary school headteachers take early retirement each year, with about the same proportions retiring at the expected age.

taking up a role in an independent school or further education (FE) college, which are not covered by the SWC, and may include moving to central (in contrast to school-based) roles within a multi-academy trust.

**Table 3.1 Average headteacher retention 2012–2015, by phase**

Destination	Primary (%)	Secondary (%)
Headteacher in the same school	84.0	81.8
Headteacher in a different school	5.5	4.7
Changed role	0.9	0.9
Out of service	3.1	4.8
Early retirement	3.2	4.2
Normal age (60 or over) retirement	3.2	3.6

Note: N(primary) = 29,807 headteachers and 66,737 destinations.  
N(secondary) = 6654 headteachers and 13,597 destinations.

Source: School Workforce Census; retention after one year, using data averaged over the years 2012–2015

**Excluding those who retire at normal age, around 90 per cent of headteachers are retained in the system**

Table 3.2 shows how we have constructed a simple measure of headteacher retention from the more detailed analysis of destinations shown in Table 3.1. **Our measure captures the retention of headteachers in the school system, so those who move school are counted as retained by the system. Headteachers who step down from headship to a different role are counted as not retained** – while they do not necessarily represent a loss of a teacher for an individual school or the school system, they nonetheless are a loss to headship in the system. Our focus is on understanding the patterns of retention that could be

preventable, so we have excluded headteachers that retired at a normal age from this measure. As shown in Table 3.2, retention rates are slightly higher in primary schools than in secondary schools. Overall, about seven per cent of primary headteachers and ten per cent of secondary headteachers leave the profession earlier than at normal retirement age.

**Table 3.2 Headteacher retention rates are higher in primary schools than secondary**

Destination	Simple retention measure	Primary (%)	Secondary (%)
Headteacher in the same school	Retained	92.5	89.8
Headteacher in a different school			
Changed role	Not retained	7.5	10.2
Out of service			
Early retirement			
Normal age retirement	Excluded from definition	-	-

Note: N (primary) = 29,807 headteachers and 66,737 destinations.  
N (secondary) = 6654 headteachers and 13,597 destinations.

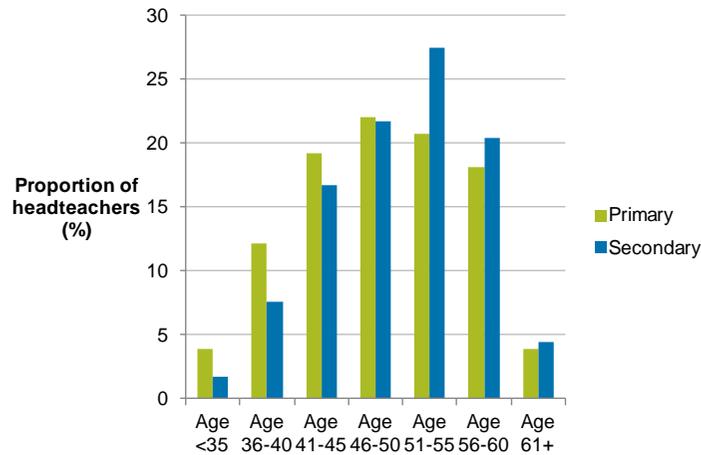
Source: School Workforce Census

### 3.1 Headteacher characteristics

The average age of a headteacher in England is around 50. Secondary school headteachers are slightly older on average than

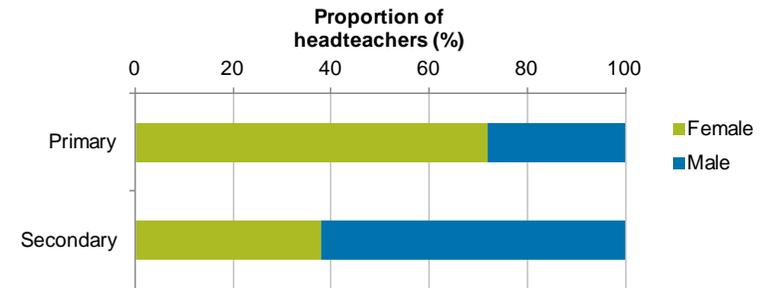
primary school headteachers: the distribution of age is shown in Figure 3.1.

**Figure 3.1 Headteachers are typically in their forties and fifties**



As shown in Figure 3.2, more than half (62 per cent) of secondary school headteachers are male whereas nearly three-quarters (72 per cent) of primary school headteachers are female.

**Figure 3.2 Secondary headteachers are more likely to be male**

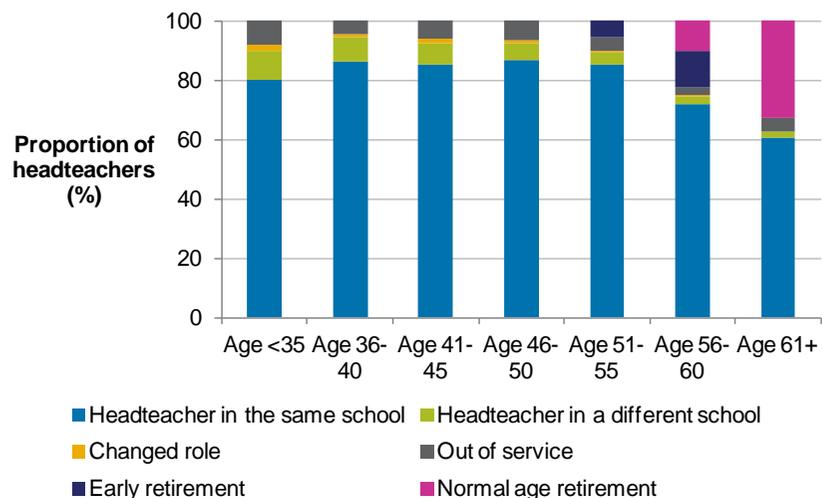


We sought a more in-depth understanding of how headteacher destinations and retention rates vary by these characteristics.

**Younger heads are more likely than older heads to move schools**

As shown in Figure 3.3 (for secondary schools – the picture is very similar for primary schools), there are several key differences in the movements of younger and older headteachers. A greater proportion of younger headteachers move school than older headteachers: eight per cent of those aged 36–40 compared to four per cent of those age 51–55. A greater proportion of younger headteachers also change role, which is likely to be at least partly explained by young deputy headteachers temporarily filling-in while a permanent headteacher is found to fill the role in the long term. Fourteen per cent of headteachers age 35 or under are on fixed-term or temporary contracts, compared to just five per cent of all headteachers. Those on fixed-term or temporary contracts are significantly more likely to move schools.

**Figure 3.3 Younger secondary headteachers tend to move school and change role more**



Note: As age relates to age in the base year, normal age retirements include individuals age 59. The figures shown are for secondary school headteachers.

Source: School Workforce Census

**Unsurprisingly, early retirement tends to be concentrated among headteachers in their fifties**

Normal age retirement is confined (by definition) to those in their sixties. Headteachers over age 50, and particularly those over age 55, are significantly less likely to be retained than headteachers age 41–45. Headteachers aged over 50 represent a large proportion of headteachers: 43 per cent of primary headteachers and 52 per cent of secondary headteachers.

**There were no notable gender differences in retention rates**

Despite a higher retention rate among primary headteachers than secondary headteachers and a greater proportion of primary headteachers who are female than at secondary level, there were no notable gender differences in retention rates.

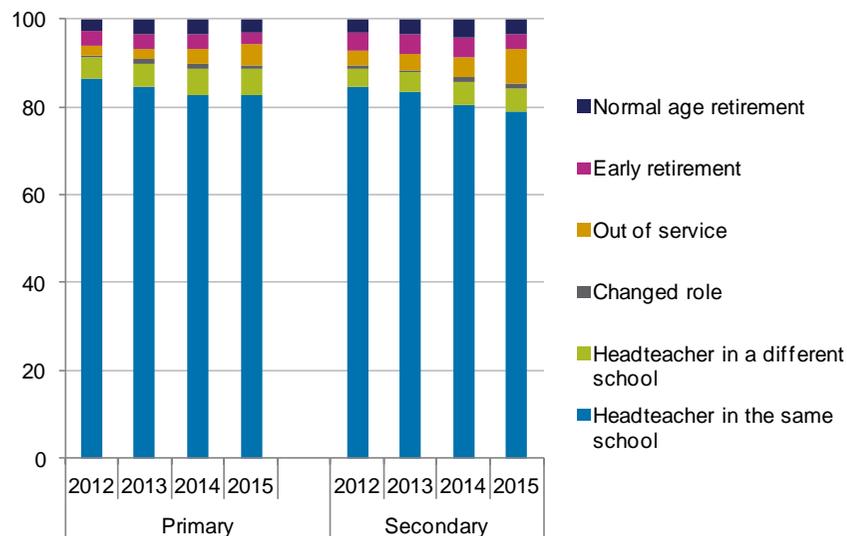
**3.2 Changes in headteacher retention over time**

**Retention rates have fallen between 2012 and 2015, particularly in secondary schools**

Retention rates for primary headteachers fell from 94 per cent in 2012 to 92 per cent in 2015. For secondary headteachers, retention fell from 91 per cent in 2012 to 87 per cent in 2015.

Figure 3.4 shows a breakdown of the underlying changes in headteacher retention and destinations between 2012 and 2015. While we still count them as retained in the system, the proportion of headteachers who remain as a headteacher but move schools has also increased slightly over time, from five per cent to six per cent at primary level and four per cent to five per cent at secondary level.

**Figure 3.4 Headteacher retention rates, particularly at secondary, have fallen steadily since 2012 driven by headteachers leaving service**



Note: N (primary) = 29,807 headteachers and 66,737 destinations.  
 N (secondary) = 6654 headteachers and 13,597 destinations.  
 The year (2012–2015) represents the destination year.

Source: School Workforce Census

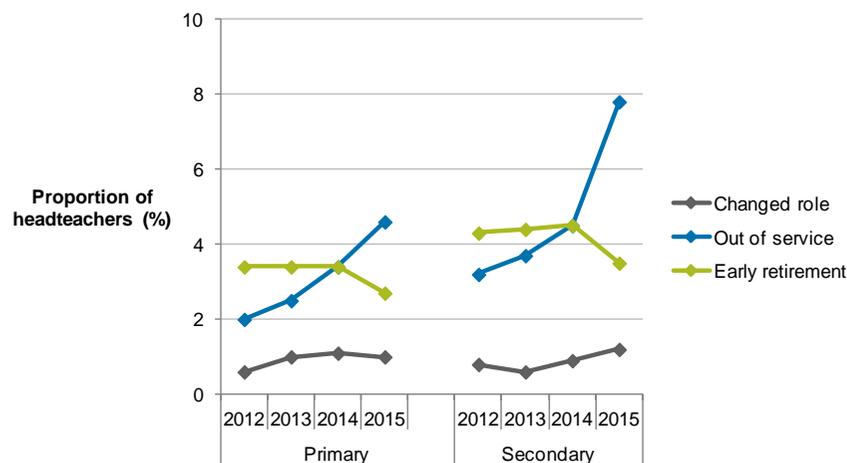
What factors might be driving the fall in headteacher retention rates over time? Our analysis shows that the changes in retention rates are largely attributable to an increase in the proportion of headteachers leaving service (i.e. leaving the state-funded education sector) before retirement, rising from two per cent (334 heads) in 2012 to five per cent (766 heads) in 2015 for primary headteachers and from three per cent (105 heads) in 2012 to eight per cent (274 heads) in 2015 for secondary headteachers. There have been few changes to headteacher retirement rates over time, whether early

or normal age. Figure 3.5 shows how the three components that define not being retained (changed role, out of service and early retirement) have changed over time.

Part of this trend could be explained by data quality issues with the SWC data. Leavers are identified as having a record in a particular year's census and not having a record in the following year's census. Gaps in records can be caused by schools submitting incomplete census returns (or no return at all). Some missing records are filled in by comparing gaps in the SWC to teacher pensions data (Database of Teacher Records). We have also imputed some missing records using the contract start date on a subsequent record, but very few headteacher records are recovered using this method. Because both methods are done with a time lag, records tend to be more complete for earlier years.

The increase in leavers could therefore be caused, at least in part, by missing data. However, because 99 per cent of schools submitted contracts data (which is used to measure retention), we think this explanation cannot fully explain the time trends in retention and that it is likely that the retention rate has fallen over time.

**Figure 3.5 Headteachers are more likely to be moving 'out of service' since 2012**



**The change in retention over time has not been influenced by changes in the profile of headteachers or schools**

We explored whether the downward trend in overall headteacher retention rates remains after controlling for changes in the characteristics of headteachers and their schools over time, using a logistic regression model (see Technical Appendix). For example, has the fall in retention rates over time been influenced by the changing age profile of headteachers? Are changes to interventions in underperforming schools behind the fall in retention rates (see Chapter 5 for more on the relationship between academy conversion and headteacher retention)?

However, our analysis showed that the change in retention rates over time was the same after controlling for the effect of other characteristics, suggesting that falling retention rates are *not*

explained by changes in the characteristics of headteachers and their schools over time. While factors such as school phase, Ofsted rating, academy sponsorship and low attainment are associated with headteachers leaving headship, changes in the prevalence of these factors over time (for example, an increasing rate of academy sponsorship) do not explain the fall in retention since 2012.

We use qualitative interviews with 22 headteachers to help explore possible explanations for falling retention rates over time that go beyond the variables within the dataset (see Chapter 7).

The following chapters explore in turn the factors we found in the quantitative analysis to be associated with retention: Ofsted grade; academy sponsorship; and school context (particularly low attainment).

## 4 Ofsted ratings and headteacher retention

### Key messages

More than three-quarters of headteachers in schools rated Inadequate by Ofsted are still in headship (in their own school or another school) from one year to the next, but retention rates are lowest in this category among both primary and secondary schools.

Retention rates are particularly low in the first year after a school is downgraded to Inadequate.

Following a downgrade to Inadequate, headteachers who are new to the post have much higher retention rates than those who have been in post for two or more years.

The Ofsted rating of a school can be indicative of a range of contextual factors: the performance of the school at a given time, the capacity of the school to improve and, as a result, the level of external scrutiny and intervention it receives. Headteacher retention is significantly lower in schools rated Inadequate as opposed to Good or Outstanding.

### Retention rates are lowest in Inadequate schools

<sup>6</sup> Figures are averages over the period 2012–15.

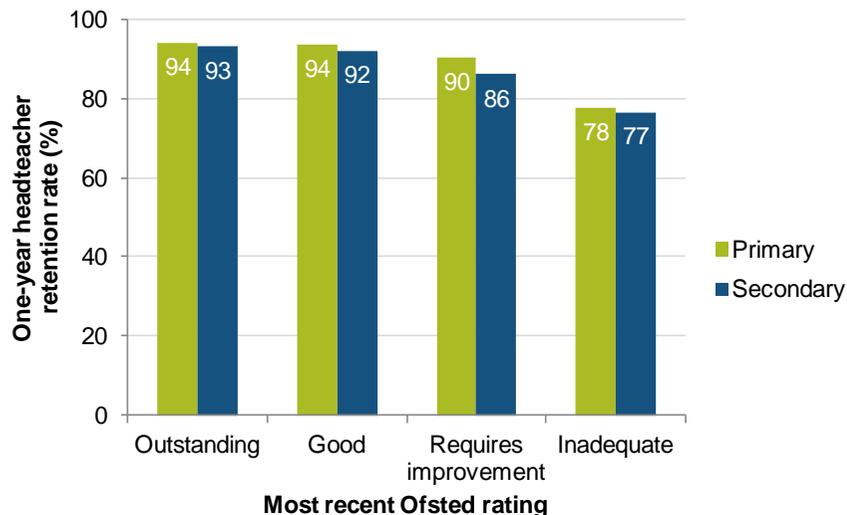
<sup>7</sup> On average, schools with low levels of attainment also tend to be schools with high levels of disadvantage and poor Ofsted ratings. In our statistical analysis, we tested whether there was sufficient variation in the distribution

Figure 4.1 shows that more than three-quarters of headteachers in schools rated Inadequate are still a headteacher from one year to the next, whether in the same or a different school.<sup>6</sup> However, retention rates were lowest in this category. One-year retention rates are also slightly lower in schools that are rated Requires Improvement by Ofsted compared with schools rated Good or Outstanding, particularly among secondary schools.

Headteacher retention rates in primary and secondary schools rated Inadequate are significantly lower than schools rated Good or Outstanding even after accounting for the higher levels of deprivation and lower levels of attainment that Inadequate schools tend to have, which are also associated with lower retention rates.<sup>7</sup>

of these factors between schools to pick out the independent association of each with headteacher retention (known as a test of multicollinearity – see Technical Appendix) and found that there was.

**Figure 4.1 Headteachers of Inadequate schools are least likely to be retained in headship**



Source: School Workforce Census, Ofsted monthly management information

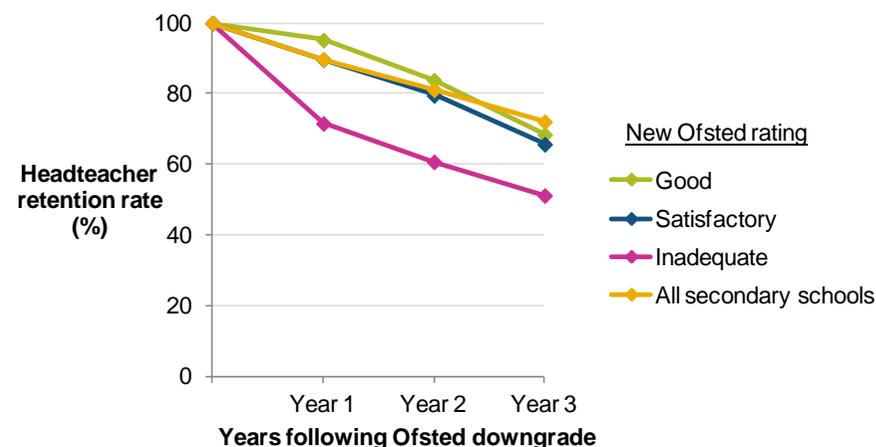
**Particularly low retention is seen after downgrading to Inadequate, especially in the first year**

Figure 4.2 shows headteacher retention rates in secondary schools that were downgraded by Ofsted between November 2010 and November 2012, split by the rating to which they were downgraded. The retention rates relate to the headteacher who was in post before the downgrade occurred. The figure clearly shows lower retention in headship (at the same school or another school) for

<sup>8</sup> In September 2012, the Satisfactory rating became Requires Improvement.

headteachers of secondary schools downgraded to Inadequate, particularly in the first year after the school was downgraded. The trends are similar in primary schools. The retention rates of headteachers in schools downgraded to Good or Satisfactory<sup>8</sup> are broadly similar to overall average retention rates, although the rates fall slightly more quickly over time than the average.

**Figure 4.2 Headteacher retention rates drop when secondary schools are downgraded to Inadequate**



Source: School Workforce Census, Ofsted management information

Headteachers of schools rated Inadequate are significantly less likely to be retained in headship (in their own school or another school) compared to headteachers of schools rated Good. Retention in the system is even lower in the first year after their

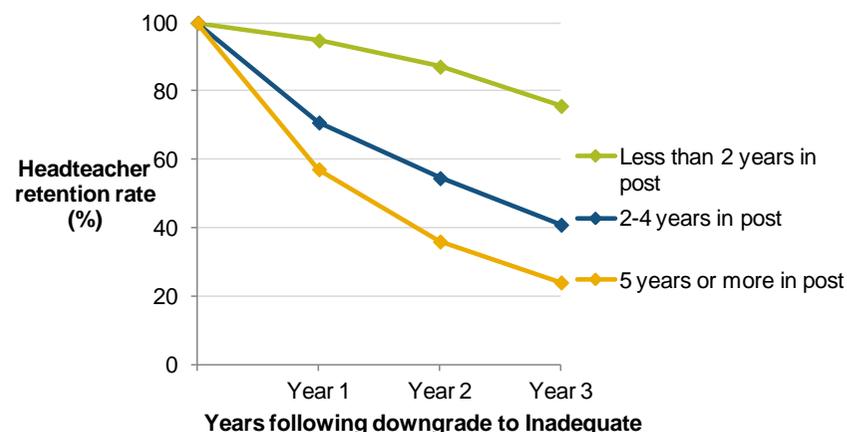
school is downgraded than in other years. Both differences – the lower retention rate in Inadequate schools and the particularly low rate after being downgraded – remain statistically significant after taking account of other differences in the characteristics of headteachers and schools.

This finding mirrors the pattern seen in Sam Sims’ work on teacher turnover: schools downgraded from Requires Improvement to Inadequate were also found to have higher classroom teacher turnover (Sims, 2016).

**...this also relates to how long headteachers have been in post**

This relationship varies further depending on how long the headteacher has been in post at a school when it is downgraded. Figure 4.3 shows headteacher retention rates in secondary schools downgraded to Inadequate, split by the number of years the headteacher had been in post before the downgrade. Headteachers who are new to the post are significantly more likely to be retained in headship than those who have been in post for two or more years. Fewer than a quarter of headteachers who have been in post for five years or more at the time the school was downgraded are still in headship (whether at the school or in another school) three years later.

**Figure 4.3 Headteachers in post for a number of years were unlikely to be retained in headship after their school was downgraded to Inadequate**



Note: Sample sizes: 39 (less than 2 years), 24 (2–4 years), 28 (5 years or more). Numbers were sufficient to be able to detect significant differences between categories.

Source: *School Workforce Census, Ofsted monthly management information*

The situation will be different depending on the particular school, but this evidence suggests that once a headteacher has been in charge of a school for at least two years they are much more likely to be held directly responsible for a school’s Ofsted judgement, rather than it being attributed to actions of a previous headteacher.

## Headteachers recognise the risks of an Ofsted downgrade

The majority of the 22 headteachers we interviewed emphasised that they feel ultimately accountable for the success of their school (including those in layered systems such as multi-academy trusts). As a result, they describe the outcome of inspection as 'high stakes' for them personally and recognise it can have a long-lasting impact on their career. Some headteachers we interviewed report a 'panic' associated with a downgrade following inspection, and the 'vulnerability' of their post that coincides with it.

One headteacher who was satisfied in their role implied the risk of working in lower-performing schools has grown: 'It used to be a clear professional route where people would go into challenging schools and be able to move on from them with their career intact.'

### 20; happy head of a secondary academy

It may not be a negative consequence for the education sector if some headteachers leave following an Inadequate inspection result, but interviewees questioned whether headteachers are given the chance to improve their performance.' The level of accountability and pressure on heads means heads don't get the opportunity to learn from their mistakes.'

### 9; head who had left a secondary maintained school

## Time to make an impact

Some headteachers feel they are held to account before they have the opportunity to make an impact. Case A illustrates the experience of a headteacher in a school which was graded Inadequate and placed in Special Measures. Mr A felt he had to resign despite not wanting to leave his role.

## Case A

Mr A, aged 39, took up his first headship in an academy which was placed in Special Measures two months after he had joined the school. He was aware of the challenges facing the school and saw it as a career opportunity.

He was given two years to meet improvement targets and felt that was not sufficient due to the context of the school. 'To take a school with a legacy of inadequacy out of measures [in two years] is completely undoable and unrealistic.' He noted recruitment challenges and felt 'you are only as good as the staff you put in front of your students'. He felt the academy trust did not have the capacity to provide enough support with teaching and learning, recruitment, and school improvement in general. 'The last Ofsted report was positive and referred to leaders as doing everything they could.'

Results had improved, but did not meet the floor standard. As a result he felt pressured to resign. 'There is a throw-away approach to professionals. There are heads who do not want to leave ... but it's wrecking the aspirations of people. They won't want to take on challenging schools if they find themselves in this position. It will go against the government's wish to improve social mobility because people won't want to teach in those kinds of schools because of the risks to their personal security.' The experience had made him question his position. 'You have to be a strong character to bounce back from it.' Mr A was still working within the academy trust whilst he looked for another job, but was 'not doing much ... it's just a way of trying to maintain a career'.

### 8; head who left a secondary academy

Within the time period covered in this analysis, Ofsted advised that leaders were viewed as taking 'effective action' if inspectors thought a school would be removed from Special Measures within 18 to 24 months. The 2016 White Paper Educational Excellence Everywhere (GB. Parliament, HoC, 2016) announced the introduction of 'improvement periods', during which schools judged to Require Improvement where a new headteacher has taken post will not face re-inspection until around 30 months. Similarly, when a poorly performing maintained school is replaced by a sponsored academy, a new school opens or a new sponsor is needed to drive further improvement in an academy, the school will not normally face inspection until its third year of operation. The White Paper indicates that this 'breathing space' aims to provide headteachers with the time to embed change and encourage leaders to take on the challenge of working in the schools where they are most needed.

For Mr A, it was not Ofsted inspectors who had pressured him into leaving headship, but the reaction of the multi-academy trust<sup>9</sup> and governors at a more local level.

### **Support with accountability**

Some of the headteachers interviewed perceive that not enough support is given to leaders who are striving for school improvement, including those who are willingly leading Inadequate-graded schools. This is evident for headteachers working with some MATs, as Case A illustrates above, but also for some headteachers

working in maintained schools: 'The LA was just telling me there was a problem, rather than helping me sort it out.'

### **3; head who had left a maintained infant school**

However, one 'happy head' of a school in Special Measures praises the support he receives and feels that it is the responsibility of leaders to seek support if needed, as illustrated in Case B.

#### **Case B**

Mr B described how he had an 'advantage' of being part of numerous networks through development programmes and other colleagues. 'That acts as a very healthy sounding board. It gives opportunities to share experiences and seek reassurances, to help with the role. Nobody stops a head from reaching out and seeking more help and advice. It's your responsibility as a leader ... networking is an essential part of leading. It is about seeking advice, seeking objective perspectives, seeking additional support, to enable you to achieve your ultimate aim.'

He commented that it is important to work across different schools to learn about innovative practices. 'The person who is responsible for my own support is me. I should be able to identify my needs and have the autonomy to seek that support elsewhere.' This 'happy head' notes 'the complexity of the [headteacher] role' and feels that the skills required by headteachers vary greatly depending on the school context. In his view, the skills required to lead a large inner-

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<sup>9</sup> The influence of trusts and academy sponsors on headteacher retention is discussed more in Chapter 5.

city school in Special Measures are very different from a small Outstanding rural school.

## 22; happy head of a secondary academy in Special Measures

### Accountability pressures are present at all Ofsted grades

Some headteachers of schools rated Good feel that higher Ofsted ratings can alleviate the pressure from accountability, as they have more time available for improvements. One leader had moved from a 'challenging' sponsored academy to a 'good' school and commented: 'We are genuinely focusing on the kids rather than the next phase of external scrutiny coming through the door.'

#### 20; happy head of a secondary academy

However, other headteachers in Good or Outstanding schools feel ongoing pressure to maintain that grade. 'We have a heads meeting once a term where an Ofsted rep. gives a talk and I come back with a massive list of things to check. I have to respond for fear of getting a bad Ofsted.'

#### 1; head who had left a primary maintained school graded as 'Good'

This reactivity can contribute to workload. One headteacher described starting at a school where 'the team were not preparing for the new term, they were preparing paperwork for the next people coming in to hold them to account.'

#### 20; happy head of a secondary academy

Ofsted has made efforts to counter this sense of pressure by, for example, releasing a 'myth-busting' document (Ofsted, 2016). However, some headteachers still feel ongoing changes to the

inspection framework and to performance measures create pressure by 'moving goalposts' Our quantitative analysis indicates that headteachers are no more likely than average to leave the system following a downgrade to Good or Requires Improvement, suggesting that this sense of pressure amongst some headteachers may come from a perceived rather than actual risk to their careers.

## 5 Academisation and headteacher retention

### Key messages

Headteacher retention rates are higher in converter academies and lower in sponsored academies than in other schools, although this is more likely to reflect the particular characteristics of these schools rather than the direct influence of the school structure itself.

Retention rates are particularly low in schools that became sponsored academies, particularly in the first years after academisation.

Headteachers who are new to the post when a school becomes a sponsored academy have much higher retention rates than those who have been in post for two or more years.

Comparing size of organisational structures, retention rates are higher in single academy trusts, and lower in the largest MATs.

**Retention rates are higher in converter academies<sup>10</sup> than in other schools, but they are lower than average in sponsored academies<sup>11</sup>...**

Our SWC analysis reveals that one-year retention rates are lower for headteachers of sponsored academies compared with other schools. On average, 85 per cent of headteachers in primary

<sup>10</sup> A converter academy is a high-performing school that chooses to become an academy.

sponsored academies are retained in headship and 83 per cent of headteachers in secondary sponsored academies, compared to 93 per cent and 90 per cent respectively in all primary and secondary schools. However, this is more likely to reflect the particular characteristics of these schools rather than the direct influence of the school structure itself.

### ... particularly in the first year after conversion

As with the relationship between Ofsted ratings and headteacher retention, our analysis shows that the relationship between academy status and headteacher retention depends on timing. Figure 5.1 illustrates headteacher retention rates in secondary schools that became academies between November 2010 and November 2012, split by sponsored and converter academies. The retention rates relate to the headteacher who was in post before the school became an academy.

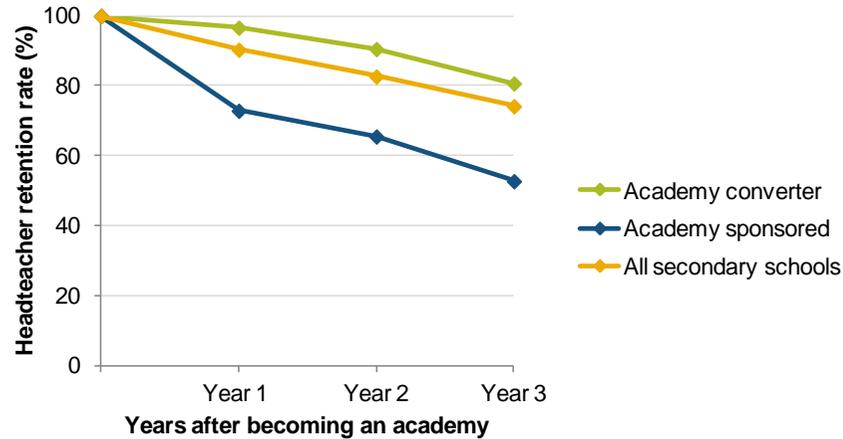
The figure clearly shows that retention in headship (in the same school or another school) is lowest amongst the headteachers of secondary schools that became sponsored academies, particularly in the first year after their school becomes sponsored. The trends are similar in primary schools. Conversely, the retention rate of headteachers leading schools that became converter academies was higher than the average for all schools.

The retention rate of headteachers of schools who were in post just before they became a sponsored academy is considerably lower than average, and is statistically significant even after accounting

<sup>11</sup> A sponsored academy is an underperforming school that is required or strongly encouraged to become an academy following poor exam performance and/or an Inadequate rating by Ofsted.

for other differences in the characteristics of headteachers and schools, such as lower attainment and poor Ofsted ratings.

**Figure 5.1 Headteacher retention rates drop when secondary schools become sponsored academies**



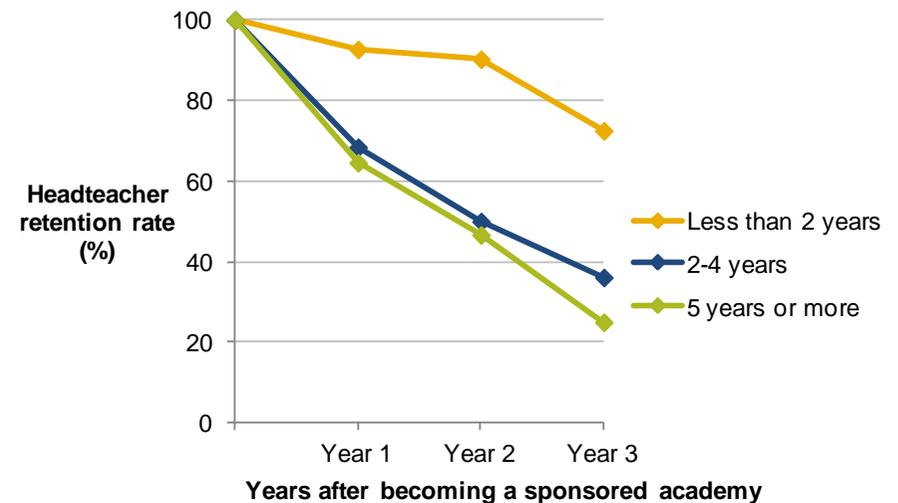
Source: School Workforce Census, Edubase

**... particularly if they have been in post for two or more years**

This relationship varies further depending on how long the headteacher had been in post at the school when it became an academy. Figure 5.2 shows headteacher retention rates in secondary schools that became sponsored academies, split by the number of years the headteacher had been in post before the point of sponsorship. Headteachers who were new to the post were significantly more likely to be retained in headship (whether in the same school or elsewhere) than those who had been in post for two or more years. Only a quarter of headteachers that had been in post for five years or more when the school became a sponsored

academy were still a headteacher three years later. This is likely to relate to the fact that schools become sponsored academies if they are underperforming and that these leaders would therefore have led an underperforming school for a number of years.

**Figure 5.2 Headteachers in post for a number of years were unlikely to be retained after their school became a sponsored academy**



Note: Sample sizes: 41 (less than 2 years), 39 (2–4 years), 48 (5 years or more). Numbers were sufficient to be able to detect significant differences between categories.

Source: School Workforce Census, Edubase

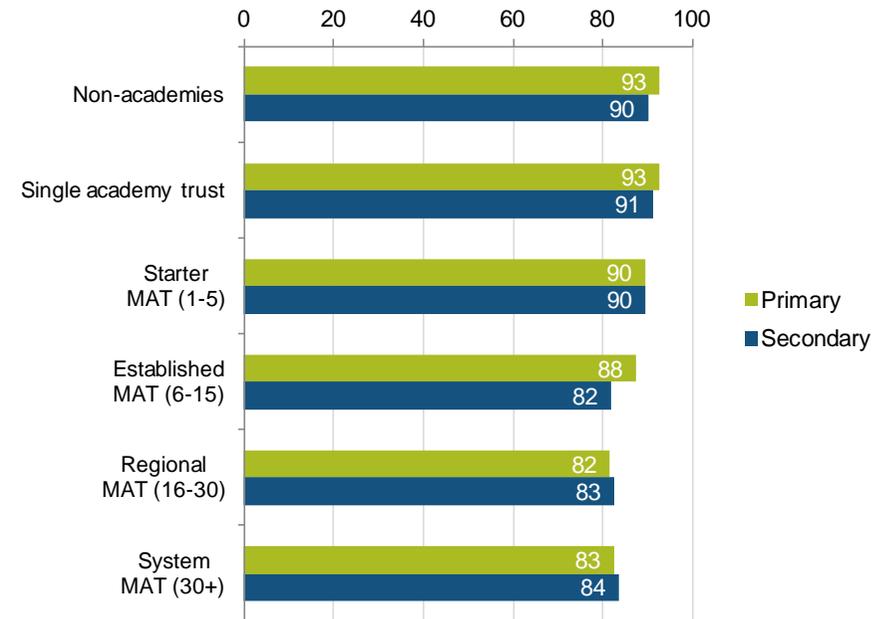
Each school's experience of academisation will have differed depending on the particular circumstances of the sponsorship process, but this evidence suggests that if a headteacher had been in charge of a school for two or more years they were much less likely to be retained by the trustees of the school's new sponsor and

would find it much harder to move on to another headship role elsewhere. This mirrors to some extent with the findings from Eyles and Machin (2015) who identified significantly lower headteacher retention in the year that schools became sponsored academies, but we find an effect over a longer time period.

### Headteacher retention rates are lower in larger multi-academy trusts

Retention rates are highest in non-academies and single academy trusts, as illustrated in Figure 5.3. Rates are lowest in the largest MATs. The figure shows headteacher retention rates split by the four-tier system developed by National Schools Commissioner, Sir David Carter, as well as single academy trusts (SATs) and all non-academy schools for comparison.

**Figure 5.3 Headteacher retention rates are lower in larger multi-academy trusts**



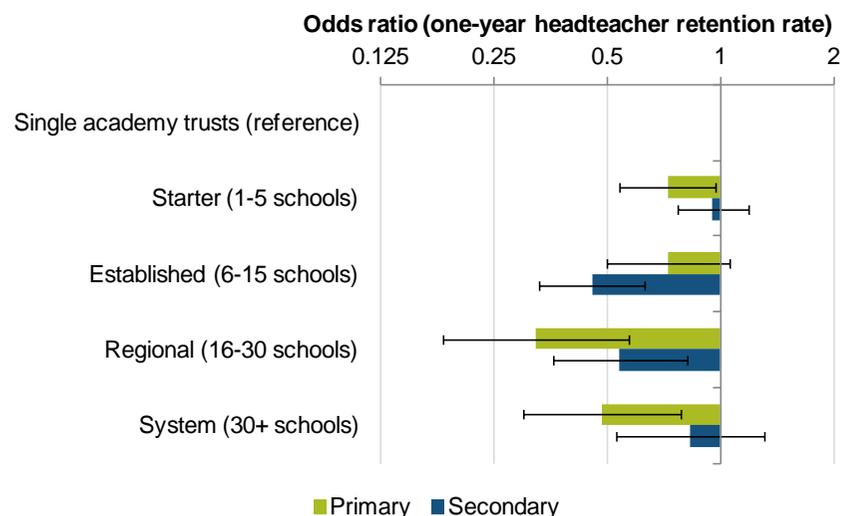
Note: Sample sizes (primary): 59,759 (non-academies), 1755 (single academy trust), 1819 (Starter), 706 (Established), 213 (Regional), 320 (System). Sample sizes (secondary): 6530 (non-academies), 3244 (single academy trust), 2355 (Starter), 432 (Established), 304 (Regional), 239 (System)

Source: School Workforce Census, Edubase

Lower retention in larger MATs could be driven by a number of factors. For example, the largest MATs tend to have high proportions of sponsored academies, which our analysis finds have lower retention rates on average, but we find this does not explain all of the differences. We explored the influence of both of these

factors simultaneously (and other factors, such as Ofsted ratings) in a regression model. This showed that retention rates are lower in sponsored academies in all different sizes of MAT. However, as shown in Figure 5.4, we also found that headteacher retention rates are significantly lower in secondary schools in Established and Regional MATs (between 6 and 30 schools) compared to single academy trusts, even after accounting for the higher proportions of sponsored academies. In primary schools we found that headteacher retention rates are significantly lower in Regional and System MATs (more than 15 schools) compared to single academy trusts, after accounting for school type and other factors.

**Figure 5.4 Larger MATs have lower headteacher retention rates**



Note: black lines show the 95 per cent confidence interval.

Source: School Workforce Census, Edubase

One possible explanation for lower retention rates in larger MATs could be if more headteachers move from a school-based role to a central role within the MAT. The School Workforce Census does not include central roles, so such a move would be counted as not retained in headship in our measure. We have been informed by one MAT, for example, that its chief executive and director of secondary schools are both ex-headteachers from inside the trust. The MAT has also appointed headteachers from outside of the trust into its central team – these moves would not be counted as retained in headship in the SWC analysis. However, models will differ across MATs – we have been informed by another that its directors fulfil their central responsibilities on a part-time basis, whilst maintaining responsibility for their own schools (they would therefore be retained as a headteacher in the SWC analysis).

Another hypothesis is that larger MATs are those with stronger central teams and models of school improvement, who act more quickly to remove headteachers that they identify as under-performing.

### What headteachers told us about the capacity of MATs to support ...

Headteachers are still ultimately accountable for their school's performance and yet their capacity to improve a school can depend partly on the support available from their MAT. Despite the data revealing that smaller MATs have higher retention rates, some headteachers who were interviewed in smaller MATs felt they

lacked capacity to offer support. 'Being an academy wasn't an issue, but it was a small MAT and they didn't have the resources to support [us].'

## 2; head who had left a primary academy

Note though that other headteachers made similar comments about the capacity of their local authority.

A number of headteachers highlighted the potential of larger MATs to aid school improvement by, for example, seconding teachers or fostering collaboration between schools. More research is needed to understand the effect that working with a MAT that lacks supportive capacity has on headteachers' short-term performance and long-term career prospects.

### Views on the role of the sponsor ...

Our findings from interviews with a small sample of headteachers give an insight into the role of academy sponsors and the influence they can have on retention. Headteachers who had led sponsored academies report varied experiences. In the best cases, they have a positive relationship with their sponsor, balancing challenge and accountability. A new headteacher at a school in the process of becoming an academy was looking forward to joining a MAT that had higher-performing schools in the area because she could 'work with them and collaborate with them rather than be isolated'.

## 19; happy head of a challenging school

One headteacher already working within a MAT describes how he feels confident challenging his MAT and 'managing upwards' if he disagrees with their decision but also acknowledges that 'if things

are not working well in a school then the trust has a duty to step in and put in measures'.

## 22; happy head of an academy in Special Measures

Conversely, a number of the headteachers interviewed could be termed 'reluctant leavers' who have left headship after actions were taken by a sponsor (for example, see Case A in Chapter 4). Case C below illustrates the impact of a change in sponsor.

### Case C

Mrs C took up her first headship in a secondary sponsored academy one month after its conversion. Initially sponsored by a small MAT, when the central team changed she felt they could no longer offer support. '[The MAT] had nothing to give in terms of secondary provision, none were secondary educators and [I] was given no support in terms of HR, finance, improving learning and teaching or outcomes.' Mrs C felt that the lack of capacity in the trust was affecting her ability to improve the school but felt 'as head I had no opportunity to report concerns'. Eventually the school was re-brokered, and the new trust wanted a new headteacher who was not associated with the previous sponsor. It offered her a choice of capability proceedings or an immediate settlement package, although she felt they did not have sufficient evidence of poor performance to suggest a capability route. 'My first and only Ofsted inspection got a 2 for Leadership and Management.' Mrs C felt the experience was damaging to her career: 'they could have found me a new role [in the trust] but it wasn't an option'. She had left headship and was seeking a new job outside of the education sector.

### 10; left a secondary academy which 'Requires Improvement'

We do not have evidence of the effectiveness of these headteachers, but for Mrs C these circumstances meant she could not secure a new job.

*I've always wanted to be a headteacher since I first started teaching. I always wanted to make the biggest difference to children's lives ... I'm sat here highly qualified, extremely eager and enthusiastic but without a job.*

**10; head who left a secondary academy which 'Requires Improvement'**

Not all MATs take the approach described in Case C; some actively work to retain headteachers in the profession. One headteacher describes how the chair of his MAT tried to persuade him to stay and offered an alternative headship, but other factors meant he still wanted to leave.

### **Some academy heads feel they have lost autonomy ...**

Among the small sample of headteachers we interviewed, some are concerned about a wider loss of professional autonomy associated with working in a MAT and a resultant change in leadership structure. A number of headteachers remarked on the expectation that they would move from being a headteacher to a head of school, with an associated change in their autonomy and salary. Comments included: 'It changed the leadership structure and I no longer feel valued in my knowledge or experience. I want to be treated as a professional.'

**11; head of a primary academy who is considering leaving the profession**

A feeling of lost autonomy was not universal. One 'happy head' of a school in Special Measures described his sense of autonomy, saying, 'I have really been able to control all aspects of how I want to influence provision in the academy.'

**22; happy head of a secondary academy in Special Measures**

### **The role of MATs in supporting retention ...**

Even within a small set of interviewees, there were diverse perspectives on academisation and MATs, which might best be summarised by one interviewee's observation that 'the impact of moving to an academy would depend on the academy'. Given that our interviews were designed to explore reasons why people stay in or leave headship, the headteachers we spoke to were more likely to highlight situations where academisation or MATs affected retention – whether positively or negatively – than where it had no impact at all. It is therefore possible that the commentary reflects a minority of experiences.

However, as the number and size of MATs grows, so will their capacity to affect headteacher retention and larger MATs currently have lower retention rates. MATs should monitor their impact on headteacher retention over time and should consider the system-wide impact of any actions they take which affect headteacher retention rates. They should also evaluate whether they are developing a sufficient pipeline of new headteachers to counteract the lower retention of those currently in headship.

## 6 School context and headteacher retention

### Key findings

The difference in headteacher retention rates between ‘challenging’ and non-challenging schools is not statistically significant after accounting for other differences in headteacher and school characteristics.

Headteacher retention is lower in schools with higher levels of disadvantage and lower levels of attainment. Our analysis shows that it is levels of attainment that drive this relationship.

After controlling for attainment, headteachers at schools with higher levels of disadvantage have slightly *higher* retention rates than those at other schools.

Our interviews give us insight into these complex interactions. Some headteachers are initially attracted to working in challenging circumstances, as they see it as an opportunity to have a positive impact. However, if their school is low performing, which is more common if they have more disadvantaged pupils, then the resultant pressure to raise standards in response to accountability and inspection can contribute to some headteachers leaving headship.

### Retention in ‘challenging’ schools

Schools with high proportions of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, low attainment, or a mixture of both are often

<sup>12</sup> This definition is used by [Ambition School Leadership](#) (see Appendix A2) and [Teach First](#).

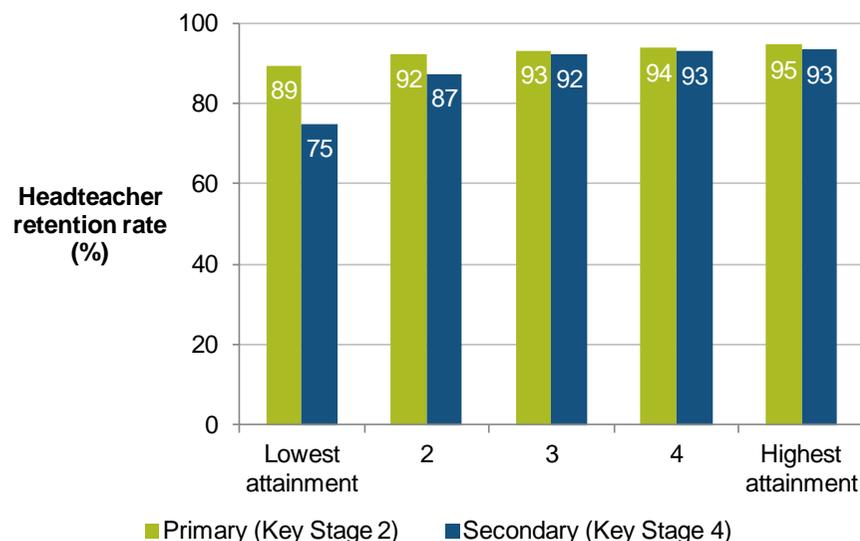
described as ‘challenging’ schools.<sup>12</sup> We used this definition for our analysis. It might be expected that given the challenging context in which headteachers are working, retention rates might be lower in these schools. In challenging primary schools, 91 per cent of headteachers are retained year to year, compared to 93 per cent in non-challenging primary schools. Among secondary schools, 87 per cent of headteachers are retained in challenging schools compared to 92 per cent in non-challenging schools. However, these differences between challenging and non-challenging schools are not statistically significant for primary or secondary schools once other differences in headteacher and school characteristics, including Ofsted rating and school type, are taken into account.<sup>13</sup>

We then investigated the relationship between retention in headship and levels of school ‘disadvantage’ (determined by the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals) and attainment (measured at Key Stage 2 and 4) separately.

**Headteacher retention rates are lower in schools with low levels of attainment.** For example, one-year headteacher retention rates are 75 per cent in secondary schools in the quintile with the lowest proportion of pupils achieving 5 A\*-C grades at GCSE including English and maths, compared to 93 per cent in schools in the quintile with highest attainment (see Figure 6.1).

### Figure 6.1 Retention is lower in lower-attaining schools

<sup>13</sup> It was not necessary to account for FSM or attainment in this analysis as these measures are the basis of the ‘challenging’ definition.



**Retention rates are also lower in schools with high proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals**, but differences are less marked than those relating to attainment. Retention rates are 87 per cent in secondary schools in the quintile with the highest proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals, compared to 92 per cent in schools in the quintile with the lowest levels of disadvantage, the same gap as seen for challenging schools.

When we included both disadvantage and attainment in a logistic regression model along with other headteacher and school characteristics, we saw a complex interaction between them.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> As noted in Chapter 4, we carried out a test of multicollinearity (see Technical Appendix) and are satisfied that there was sufficient variation between the distribution of factors between schools to pick out the independent association of each with headteacher retention.

It confirms that attainment is the more influential factor of the two on headteacher retention: schools with lower attainment still have significantly lower retention rates. After controlling for a school's level of attainment, schools with higher proportions of pupils eligible for free school meals have very slightly *higher* retention rates. **It is pupil attainment rather than disadvantage that drives the relationship with lower retention rates.**

However, it is not clear that this relationship is causal: i.e. whether headteachers are leaving *because* of low attainment, or whether schools with low attainment have a wider range of characteristics that make them the type of school that headteachers tend to leave. It is also important to note that attainment measures partly reflect the intake of the school rather than the quality of the education pupils receive. Further research is needed to understand this relationship more fully, and should consider the relationship with measures of pupil progress as well as attainment.

Our qualitative analysis later in this chapter offers potential explanations for this complex relationship between economic disadvantage, attainment and retention.

### **Retention rates are lower in the lowest-performing local areas**

Another measure of challenge comes from the Department for Education's categorisation of local authority districts into six categories, based on school quality and the capacity within the area to improve (DFE, 2016). Twelve 'opportunity areas'<sup>15</sup> were also

<sup>15</sup> The areas are West Somerset, Norwich, Blackpool, Scarborough, Derby, Oldham, Bradford, Doncaster, Fenland & East Cambridgeshire, Hastings, Ipswich and Stoke-on-Trent.

identified by the Department from among the lowest quality/capacity areas as being the most in need of support to improve.

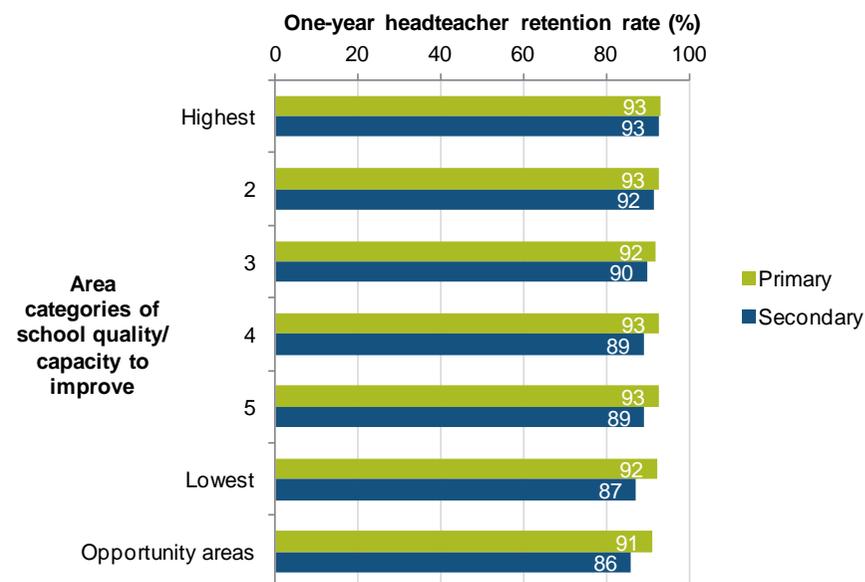
As shown in Figure 6.2, the secondary headteacher retention rate in the highest quality/capacity areas was 93 per cent compared to 87 per cent in the lowest and 86 per cent in opportunity areas. The primary headteacher retention rate was less varied between high and low quality/capacity areas, varying from 93 per cent in the highest quality/capacity areas to 91 per cent in opportunity areas.

After controlling for headteacher and school characteristics we do not find any significant differences in retention between categories of area or opportunity areas. This suggests that lower headteacher retention rates in opportunity areas are explained by the low attainment and Ofsted ratings of schools in these areas.

### Headteachers have a broader definition of ‘challenging’

Although challenge is often defined using attainment or free school meals, interviewees offer broader definitions of ‘challenge’ and refer to other pressures that occur ‘alongside normal stuff’, including ‘personal trauma’ (staff or pupil illness/death), poor pupil behaviour, low parental and pupil aspirations, budget cuts, and buildings in need of refurbishment. If a headteacher feels they lack the resources or authority to address these challenges, it can contribute to them questioning their power to improve their school and hence their career as a headteacher.

**Figure 6.2 Headteacher retention rates are lower in Category 6 areas (lowest school quality and capacity to improve) and lowest in opportunity areas**



### Headteachers told us they are attracted to the challenge ...

The interviewees working in schools with high proportions of disadvantage and low attainment reject the idea that it is these characteristics *per se* which lead them to consider leaving. Although survey evidence suggests they are in a minority (Social Mobility Commission, 2016), headteachers can be attracted to and motivated by the challenge of raising results and some seek that type of environment for the positive impact they feel they can make.

'I like a challenge, I look at it [the school] and think it should be good, it's got the potential to be good, and I like the challenge.'

#### 17; happy head of a challenging school

Those working with high levels of disadvantage describe how they want to 'make a difference' and to offer better opportunities to children in 'a community that historically has struggled'.

#### **... but the resultant pressure to raise standards in challenging contexts can contribute to some headteachers wanting to leave**

Frustration was voiced around the increased level of scrutiny experienced by some headteachers in a challenging context and therefore the day-to-day pressure of the role:

*Ofsted all over you every 18 months to two years. [It's an] unfair system for disadvantaged schools. The system is so unfairly stacked against those [disadvantaged] children and that [challenging] situation.*

#### 7; head who left a secondary academy which Required Improvement

Amanda Spielman, Ofsted's new chief inspector, recently commented that overall judgements on schools are not a 'fair way' of assessing headteachers' performance because some schools (including those in disadvantaged areas) are 'harder to run' (Hazell, 2016). Headteachers do not want to set lower expectations for their pupils, but want the additional challenges they face in meeting

standards to be acknowledged when their performance is judged. 'All contextual value added has gone and for schools like us serving deprived communities it makes it much harder. It's frustrating because context matters.'

#### 17; happy head of a challenging school

For one 'happy head' scrutiny is a motivator for improvement, but *constructive* and *supportive* scrutiny from inspectors is said to be key. Headteachers want to see a balance of support alongside the challenge and accountability they experience.

#### **... and this can deter headteachers from new roles in similar contexts**

While headteachers are often initially motivated by challenge (in terms of turning around low-performing schools or working with less advantaged communities), the experience and associated risk of working in that context have caused some to question their future career in similar settings. One said they would be 'unwilling and very very cautious' about 'taking on' another challenging school.

Even some of the 'happy heads' said they do not envisage working in a challenging context for the full span of their career: 'I believe the energy – physical and emotional – you need to do this job in challenging circumstances you couldn't do ad infinitum'.

#### 17; happy head of a challenging school

## 7 Other influences on headteacher retention

### Key findings

Interviews with 22 headteachers provide insights into additional factors that influence headteacher retention that are not evident from the quantitative data.

The dominant themes are policy change (how headteachers respond to the pace or nature of change in the system) and how supported they feel in their role.

These factors may have contributed to the fall in the retention rate over time.

Although our quantitative analysis identifies a range of characteristics associated with headteacher retention, it does not explain why headteacher retention is falling over time. The findings from interviews with 22 headteachers provide insights into additional factors that influence headteacher retention that are not evident from the quantitative data, which may have contributed to a fall in retention over time. As our sample is small and self-selecting, their views cannot be taken as representative of all headteachers. Instead, they offer indicative themes worth further investigation.

### Response to a changing education system

A dominant theme emerging from the interviews related to how headteachers respond to changes to the education system. Some headteachers told us that keeping on top of the **pace of policy change** caused *problems and pressures* for them and their staff, as

they were having to respond to change. 'I'm a hamster in a wheel going round and round ... it's unhealthy.'

**13; head of an 'Outstanding' academy who is thinking of leaving**

Headteachers also want more time for the impact of a policy to be seen, before more change is made. 'We need evidence-based policy and proper time for it to bed in and for it to be evaluated.'

**6; head who left a 'Good' maintained secondary school**

Some commented on the actual **nature of changes** and highlighted specific policies to which they were opposed (for instance, curriculum change, assessment changes, academisation, and/or a perceived focus on meeting performance table criteria at the expense of individual students' needs), particularly if it is not felt to benefit pupils. 'I don't mind embracing change if it will change things for the better for children. But I'm not convinced it's for the better.'

**5; head who left a 'Good' maintained primary school**

### Some headteachers are more confident about managing change ....

Some 'happy heads' seem less reactive and more strategic in how they implement change. They appear more adept at change management.

*One thing that demoralises staff is to see lots of initiatives that are knee jerk reactions ... I try to think carefully about anything we're going to do and work out what impact it's going to have on several areas of the school and take it to the level I want it to go to.*

**18; head who is satisfied in her role**

### **Some headteachers want to be consulted more about change ...**

A number of headteachers felt that policy makers should consult the professionals on the ground about changes to the education system, which would make them feel more valued as a profession. 'No one seems to be listening'.

### **Support for headteachers**

Headteachers' experience of support varied greatly. A number of heads, including all those who were happy in their roles, had received invaluable emotional and practical support from **networking and collaborating with other leaders:**

*I have the advantage of being part of numerous networks .... That acts as a very healthy sounding board. Opportunities to share experiences and seek reassurances, to help with the role .... Networking is an essential part of leading.*

**22; satisfied in the role of head of a secondary academy in Special Measures**

The value of **peer-to-peer coaching, mentoring and shadowing** was also emphasised. For example, one happy head felt it had supported her to deliver improvement in a challenging context:

*We developed peer-to-peer support with heads going into each other's schools to give support ... but it needs to be trained coaching with a model for the conversation.*

**18; satisfied in her role as head of a secondary school**

Being trained as a coach helped her to develop coping mechanisms and to increase her personal resilience.

*I've done coaching training ... it's fantastic and I use that coaching on myself by asking questions and working out what issue and solution would be. I give myself a talking to.*

**18; satisfied in her role as head of a secondary school**

Another headteacher satisfied in her role had sought **counselling** to cope with the anxiety and depression she had previously developed as head of department. Now as a headteacher she is trained in counselling herself and uses this to support her staff, as detailed in Case D below.

### **Some headteachers want more support ...**

Multiple headteachers – some who are happy in the role and others who are considering leaving or have left – felt that there should be **more support and induction for new headteachers**, including opportunities for mentoring and coaching.

*There needs to be a much clearer system of mentoring and coaching and induction for any headteacher who is new to post or new to any school in a different authority or context.*

**18; satisfied in her role as head of a secondary school**

Others would like more access to practical support. One felt that 'only lip service was being paid to **wellbeing**'.

A number of headteachers feel that the local bodies in their area, including the LA, governing body and unions, do not have the **capacity** to offer the **practical support** they need.

Those working in schools requiring substantial improvement want **guidance on effective strategies** for their context.

Some headteachers want **governors to have a better understanding of current educational policy and processes**, to enable them to support heads more effectively. Heads were spending their own time keeping governors up to date. They wanted governors to *challenge* and *support* them (both roles were considered important).

#### Case D

Mrs D thinks the key factors which lead some headteachers to leave headship are stress, work–life balance and frustration with the external system. When asked how she deals with these factors, she explained that she 'learned the hard way'. She said, 'I became ill as head of department – mild depression and anxiety. I had to do something about it.' Mrs D explained that she did not leave at this time because she 'had counselling and external support'. One of the strategies this taught her to use during her commute was 'to open the window and tip the rubbish of the day out of the window'. Mrs D has employed the same support that helped her remain in middle leadership to support her staff as a headteacher, she has completed a counselling course to 'look from the other side to support staff better as well'. [17]

*It's a massive, massive amount of work. Governors don't do their homework in their own time. [It causes] so much work making sure governors understand ... keeping them on board.*

**1; head who left a 'Good' maintained primary school**

#### Headteachers have different attitudes towards seeking support ...

Headteachers who are happy in their role seem more proactive at seeking support. They acknowledge that the role of headteacher can be 'lonely ... but only as lonely as you make it'. 'It is about seeking advice, seeking objective perspectives, seeking additional support, to enable you to achieve your ultimate aim.'

**22; head satisfied in the role**

But other headteachers find it hard to ask for support and fear it will show vulnerability. 'I would never ask for help again ... as soon as you admit that weakness, you get picked off.'

**3; head who left a maintained infant school**

Another former headteacher acknowledged that she could have requested more support but felt that she did not have the 'space' to step back and realise she needed it. '[...] you're so busy getting on with the job ... Sometimes you just need someone to barge in.'

**1; head who left a 'Good' maintained primary school**

Some headteachers emphasise that more support would not have prevented them from leaving, as they had done so because of system-wide changes to education policy.

## 8 Concluding comments

More than 90 per cent of headteachers below retirement age are retained in headship each year. But retention rates are falling. Our analysis does not identify any changes in individual or school characteristics that explain this trend over time. We did not include a measure of headteacher effectiveness in our analysis and we acknowledge that some attrition could be beneficial for the system. Our analysis does provide evidence of the characteristics which are associated with headteachers being more likely to stay in the profession or leave headship early, which is informative for those who have a role in addressing this issue in the sector.

*Higher* retention is seen amongst leaders who work in primary schools, in schools with Good or Outstanding Ofsted ratings, in converter academies and in schools with higher attainment at the end of Key Stage 2 (primary) or Key Stage 4 (secondary).

In contrast, *lower* retention is seen amongst headteachers in schools graded as Inadequate by Ofsted, particularly in the first year following downgrade and if the head has been in post for two years or more at the time of downgrade. We also see lower retention in schools which become sponsored academies, again particularly at the point of sponsorship if the head has been in post two years or more. Retention is also lower in schools in larger MATs, and in schools with low level of attainment at the end of Key Stage 2 (primary) or Key Stage 4 (secondary). More needs to be understood about *why* different school contexts are more or less likely to retain leaders in headship.

The interviews with 22 headteachers suggest that, beyond the factors we could measure in our quantitative analysis, system instability (the pace and nature of policy changes) and mixed experiences of support may be contributing to some headteachers leaving the profession, but the reasons need to be investigated in greater depth.

With this in mind, our analysis has identified some **additional research questions** which, if investigated on a larger scale, could help to inform policy decisions.

- **Why do retention rates fluctuate over time?** We know that falling retention is *not* related to changes in the profile of headteachers or schools, so what is influencing this change? Do rates fluctuate at times of particular reforms? Why do rates vary between primary and secondary schools?
- **What more can be understood about headteacher turnover?** Why do headteachers leave the profession and what is the impact on the sector?
- **What is the relationship between headteacher effectiveness and retention?** Are the least effective heads the ones who are leaving the profession? Or, is the sector losing effective heads it would prefer to retain?
- **Why is lower retention associated with lower-performing schools?** We did not have a measure of headteacher effectiveness in our analysis, and acknowledge that it may be beneficial for the system if some headteachers of lower-performing schools are no longer leaders. However, the research raises the question ‘to what extent is it a greater career risk to lead a school with low attainment, academy sponsorship

and/or lower Ofsted grades compared to a higher-performing school'? What impact does the lower retention in these types of schools have on the aspirations of future leaders to work in these contexts?

- **What more can we learn about the relationship** between pupil *progress*, *attainment* and headteacher *retention*?
- **What is a realistic timescale and trajectory for improvement in the lowest-performing schools?** Our interviews suggest that expectations are not always consistent between school leaders, governors, MATs or LAs and Ofsted. Are there accepted *indicators* of sustainable school improvement, which may be evident before results improve? What *has* worked within a timescale deemed appropriate to those who hold schools to account?
- **Why is there lower retention in MATs?** Why is headteacher retention lower in MATs compared to non-academies or single academy trusts and why is it lowest in the largest MATs?
- **How are the models of headship evolving, given the changing landscape of school contexts and structures?** What skills and competencies do heads require in a changing system? What can we learn about the complexities of the role, to help develop the leaders of the future?
- **What factors contribute to the higher resilience exhibited by some school leaders?** How do the *mindsets* of heads differ across contexts?
- **What are the career expectations of heads?** Do their expectations match the needs of the system? For example, do

heads prefer to spend only short intensive periods in challenging contexts? Is headship a career until retirement, or do school leaders have aspirations for other pathways?

- **How effective are existing interventions for headteachers?** For example, what influence do leadership development programmes, working with a National Leader of Education, or working in a teaching school structure have on retention?

### Recommendations

Based on our current evidence, we make a number of recommendations to those with a role in preventing effective headteachers from leaving the profession and in developing the future pipeline of leaders. These recommendations need to be considered within a changing education landscape, where there is no 'one size fits all' job description of 'headteacher' given the varying contexts, sizes and complexities of schools and school groups now included within the sector.

#### Clarify the career pathways of headteachers

Headteachers need to understand the variety of career pathways available to them. These pathways should allow effective heads to lead a challenging school without a higher risk to their career and should encourage more experienced heads into challenging schools. There should be **strategies to enable headteachers to move into different roles** which are beneficial to the sector, including school inspection, advisory roles, and opportunities to train future leaders, before returning to headship.

**A career strategy needs to be set within a broader progression pathway for all levels of leader.** There should be clear

opportunities for the **future pipeline** of headteachers to develop leadership capabilities. There should also be a clear way for heads to develop the skills they may need if moving into system leadership roles.

### **Provide more guidance to headteachers and those who hold them to account**

More clarity is needed on **how sustainable change has been delivered** in different contexts. Headteachers need clarity about what is expected in timescales deemed appropriate to those who hold them to account, and those holding them to account need to understand the trajectory of sustainable improvement. For example, are there potential **indicators of improvement** that would be considered as evidence before headline results improve? This would help to address the disparity evident between some headteachers who feel they are doing everything they can to try to improve a school, and those who hold them to account who may consider that change is not happening fast enough.

### **Support headteachers**

All headteachers who are new to their role or context should have **access to formal induction** and MATs and local authorities should share effective examples where this is already in place.

Governors, MATs and local authorities should establish an **open culture** where headteachers can seek and are offered support with the confidence that this will not threaten their position.

Headteachers need a transparent performance management system, with clear objectives for school improvement alongside opportunities for *support* and *development*, within a culture that does not make them feel 'weak' and vulnerable.

Governors, MATs and local authorities should always evaluate whether a headteacher who is not performing can be **supported to improve** before they are removed from post. They should also consider whether leaders who are not effective in one context could be supported to be effective elsewhere, or **re-deployed** to alternative roles.

Governors, MATs and local authorities should review the range of support available to headteachers. This should include **practical support** to acquire the new skills required in the changing education landscape (e.g. business-related skills), **emotional support** for well-being and **peer support**, such as coaching, mentoring and shadowing.

Support should be selected based on evidence of effective practice for the specific context. Those commissioning support should **evaluate which of the interventions they offer are effective** and assess the practicalities around extending effective interventions to a wider proportion of the population (including future headteachers).

Existing gaps in support should be closed. For example, central government and Ofsted should ensure that schools which have received academy orders are given support in the period between receipt of the order and becoming formally sponsored. MATs should build capacity to support headteachers in anticipation of any planned growth. They need to consider their capacity for support and the impact that has on headteachers' short-term performance and long-term career prospects.

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# Technical Appendix

## A1 Quantitative analysis of School Workforce Census data

### Data

The School Workforce Census (SWC) is a statutory data collection for all maintained schools and academies in England, made by the Department for Education. The SWC collects information about individual teachers, teaching assistants and other school staff. The individual information collected includes characteristics of staff (gender, age, ethnicity), types of contract and how they are deployed on full or part time, roles and responsibilities, salary details, sickness absence details, qualifications held and the curriculum taught for a sample of secondary schools.

The School Workforce Census is collected annually in November and was first collected in 2010. Individual teacher records are linked across years, so teachers' employment movements from year to year can be analysed, including changes in teachers' role, the school they are employed in and whether or not they are still a teacher in the state-funded system.

Our analysis used longitudinal data from five waves of the SWC, from 2011 to 2015. We restricted our sample to individuals who were a headteacher and/or executive headteacher at some point

between 2011 and 2015. We used data from the Database of Teacher Records to identify teachers who had left teaching in the state-funded sector to retire. We also matched information about the school the headteacher was employed at from other sources:

- phase and type of school, and multi-academy trust membership (from Edubase)
- proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (from the school census)
- measures of primary (Key Stage 2) and secondary (Key Stage 4) school attainment (from school performance table)
- current and previous Ofsted inspection rating (from Ofsted monthly management information<sup>16</sup>)
- the school quality/capacity to improve in an area (from Defining 'achieving excellence areas': methodology<sup>17</sup>)
- eligibility for Ambition School Leadership's programmes as a 'challenging' school (from Ambition records).

### Definitions

Our analysis of the School Workforce Census has explored the annual movements of 29,807 primary headteachers and 6652 secondary headteachers in England between 2011 and 2015. For every headteacher recorded in a November census, we have analysed what that headteacher is doing in the following census (i.e. from year to year): whether they are still a headteacher (in the

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/monthly-management-information-ofsted-school-inspections-outcomes>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/defining-achieving-excellence-areas-methodology>

same school or a different one), if they have changed role (to an assistant headteacher, for example), retired (either early or at normal age<sup>18</sup>) or if they are out of service.<sup>19</sup> We also look at what headteachers are doing according to the census collected two and three years later.

We constructed a simple measure of headteacher retention from the detailed destination variable. Our measure captures the retention of headteachers in the school system, so those who move school are counted as retained by the system. Headteachers who step down from headship are counted as not retained; while they do not necessarily represent a loss to an individual school or the school system, they nonetheless are a loss to headship in the system. Our focus is on understanding the patterns of retention that could be preventable, so we have excluded headteachers that retired at a normal age from this measure.

## Analysis

We conducted logistic regression analysis of whether a headteacher was retained in headship from year to year, with a set of headteacher and school characteristics as explanatory variables. We estimated separate models for primary and secondary school headteachers. Logistic regression is a statistical technique used to determine the relationship between one or more factors and the probability of an event occurring. It is a form of regression analysis in which the outcome of interest is binary, i.e. just takes two values

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<sup>18</sup> We defined normal age retirement as being age 60 or over when retiring and early retirement as being under age 60 when retiring.

<sup>19</sup> 'Out of service' includes any headteacher no longer in the SWC data and therefore not in the state-funded education sector. This could include

– for example: remaining as a headteacher; passing an exam or not; applying to a university or not, etc. A set of background variables can be used to predict the probabilities of the binary outcome, as in conventional regression analysis, but the coefficients relate to increasing or decreasing the probability that an outcome occurs.

The headteacher and school characteristics we included as covariates were:

- Headteacher age (under 35 to over 60, in five-year bands)
- Headteacher gender
- Headteacher contract type (permanent, fixed term, temporary, service agreement)
- School Workforce Census year
- School type (e.g. community school, voluntary aided/controlled, sponsored/converter academy, free school, etc.)
- Attainment quintile (proportion of pupils achieving Level 4 in maths, reading and writing for primary schools and proportion achieving five A\*-C GCSE grades including English and maths for secondary schools)
- Disadvantage quintile – proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals

taking up a role in an independent school or FE college, which are not covered by the SWC, and may include moving to central (in contrast to school-based) roles within a multi-academy trust.

- whether the school had been downgraded by Ofsted in the last year, split by new rating
- whether the school had become an academy in the last year, split by sponsored or converter academy status
- size of multi-academy trust (compared to single academy trusts)
- geographical region
- school quality/capacity to improve within a local authority district.

Many of these characteristics tend to be jointly prevalent, on average, in the same schools. For example, many (but not all) schools with low attainment also tend to have lower Ofsted ratings and higher proportions of disadvantaged pupils. In order to confidently identify the association between a single characteristic and headteacher retention, while holding the association between the other factors and headteacher retention constant, the characteristics need to differ sufficiently between schools to identify the independent associations of each. In other words, there need to be sufficient numbers of low-attaining schools with relatively low levels of disadvantage and high-attaining schools with relatively high levels of disadvantage, all with a variety of Ofsted ratings. We performed a test of multicollinearity<sup>20</sup> to test whether there was sufficient variation to independently identify the association between each characteristic and headteacher retention. Comparing the variance inflation factor (VIF) for each model coefficient and the

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<sup>20</sup> Using a linear probability model rather than a logistic model, where the model coefficients are very similar.

overall mean to a common rule-of-thumb indicates that multicollinearity is not a problem.<sup>21</sup>

## Limitations

The SWC provides almost complete coverage of headteachers employed in state-funded schools in England. However, as it does not cover employment in further education, higher education, independent schools or overseas schools, it is not possible to say that headteachers who are not retained as headteachers are not headteachers elsewhere in the wider education system. Another limitation with our analysis of retention is that headteachers who move to a central, rather than school-based, role (for example, in a multi-academy trust or local authority) are counted as not retained even though they may be contributing to system leadership.

The statistical models we estimated to investigate the factors associated with headteacher retention are unable to explain a large proportion of the variation in headteacher retention. Pseudo-R<sup>2</sup>, a measure of how much variance in headteacher retention is explained by the factors we have explored, is around 9 per cent for primary schools and 11 per cent for secondary schools. Therefore, other factors not measured in the administrative data are also important in explaining headteacher retention.

<sup>21</sup> Rule-of-thumb is that the largest VIF is greater than 10 and mean VIF is considerably greater than 1. Primary: max(VIF)=2.9, mean(VIF)=1.7; Secondary: max(VIF)=5.2, mean(VIF)=1.9.

## A2 Ambition School Leadership definition of challenging

	Primary	Secondary
Criteria 1	More than 50 per cent of pupils that have been eligible for free school meals in the last 6 years.	
Criteria 2	25–50 per cent of pupils that have been eligible for free school meals in the last six years; and Fewer than 80 per cent of disadvantaged pupils achieving Level 4 or above in Key Stage 2 reading, writing and maths.	25–50 per cent of pupils that have been eligible for free school meals in the last six years; and Fewer than 57 per cent of disadvantaged pupils achieving 5+ A*-C GCSEs (including English and maths).
Criteria 3	20–25 per cent of pupils that have been eligible for free school meals in the last six years; and Fewer than 70 per cent of disadvantaged pupils achieving Level 4 or above in Key Stage 2 reading, writing and maths.	20–25 per cent of pupils that have been eligible for free school meals in the last six years; and Fewer than 37 per cent of disadvantaged pupils achieving 5+ A*-C GCSEs (including English and maths).
Criteria 4	Fewer than 60 per cent of disadvantaged pupils achieving Level 4 or above in Key Stage 2 reading, writing and maths.	Fewer than 40 per cent of disadvantaged pupils achieving 5+ A*-C GCSEs (including English and maths).

### A3 Qualitative analysis of in-depth headteacher interviews

Headteachers expressed an interest in the research via social media. We then selected headteachers who met different criteria. The profile of the 22 interviewees is shown in the table below. Interviews took place between October and November 2016 and lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. Interviews were semi-structured and question themes included: the reasons why some headteachers are leaving or may leave the profession; the support received by headteachers; and the actions that schools, policy makers and others could take to help retain headteachers.

ID	Status in profession	Phase	Type	FSM	Challenge (results) <sup>22</sup>	Challenge (disadvantage) <sup>23</sup>	Ofsted <sup>24</sup>	Time as a headteacher	Gender
1	Left	Primary	Maintained	<25%	Above	Above	2	<5 years	Female
2	Left	Primary	Academy	<25%	Below	Below	0	5–10 years	Female
3	Left	Infant	Maintained	<25%	NA	NA	3	5–10 years	Female
4	Left	Primary	Maintained	<25%	Above	Above	2	<5 years	Female
5	Left	Primary	Maintained	25–50%	Below	Above	2	<5 years	Female
6	Left	Secondary	Maintained	<25%	Above	Above	2	>10 years	Female
7	Left	Secondary	Academy	25–50%	Below	Above	3	5–10 years	Male
8	Left	Secondary	Academy	25–50%	Below	Below	1	<5 years	Male
9	Left	Secondary	Maintained	<25%	Below	Below	3	>10 years	Male
10	Left	Secondary	Academy	25–50%	Below	Below	3	<5 years	Female
11	Thinking of Leaving	Primary	Academy	<25%	Above	Above	1	5–10 years	Female

<sup>22</sup> Results at Key Stage 2 or 4 are above or below the national average for *all* pupils

<sup>23</sup> Results at Key Stage 2 or 4 are above or below the national average for *disadvantaged* pupils

<sup>24</sup> Ofsted categories: 0 'no information provided'; 1 'Outstanding'; 2 'Good'; 3 'Requires Improvement'; and 4 'Inadequate'.

ID	Status in profession	Phase	Type	FSM	Challenge (results) <sup>22</sup>	Challenge (disadvantage) <sup>23</sup>	Ofsted <sup>24</sup>	Time as a headteacher	Gender
12	Thinking of Leaving	Primary	Academy	Over 50%	Below	Above	2	>10 years	Female
13	Thinking of Leaving	Secondary	Academy	<25%	Above	Above	1	5–10 years	Female
14	Thinking of Leaving	Secondary	Maintained	25–50%	Below	Above	3	5–10 years	Male
15	Thinking of Leaving	Special	Maintained	NA	NA	NA	2	<5 years	Male
16	Satisfied in role	Primary	Academy	25–50%	Above	Above	4	<5 years	Female
17	Satisfied in role	Secondary	Foundation	Over 50%	Below	Below	3	<5 years	Female
18	Satisfied in role	Secondary	Foundation	25–50%	Above	Above	2	>10 years	Female
19	Satisfied in role	Secondary	Maintained	<25%	Below	Below	2	<5 years	Female
20	Satisfied in role	Secondary	Academy	Over 50%	Below	Above	4	5–10 years	Male
21	Satisfied in role	Secondary	Academy	Over 50%	Above	Above	1	5–10 years	Female
22	Satisfied in role	Secondary	Academy	Over 50%	Below	Below	4	<5 years	Male

# NFER provides evidence for excellence through its independence and insights, the breadth of its work, its connections, and a focus on outcomes.

- independent
- insights
- breadth
- connections
- outcomes

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