



Workload Survey 2016-2026

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Executive summary & Recommendations

This report summarises the responses of AHDS members to an annual workload survey conducted in late February/early March each year between 2016 and 2025. The report focusses on the 2025 data and compares it to the data gathered in previous years. The survey was completed by between 1,000 and 1,470 members each year with 1,421 in responses in 2026.

Average typical **working hours** reported in 2026 was 52.5hrs (52.7hrs/week in 2025, 53.4hrs/wk in 2024, 52.6hrs/wk in 2023). While this is a reduction compared to the last two years, it is 17.5hrs above the contracted working week of 35hrs. This equates to 24,695 hours of unpaid overtime worked by survey respondents each week – this is the equivalent of 987,818 hours per year. Another way of looking at this is that it would take an additional 705 school leaders working full contracted hours to cover this. (Extrapolating this to the whole school leader cohort for primary and ASN schools, 2,324 additional staff would be required if all worked only their contracted hours.)

In short, these reported hours are very significantly above the contracted 35hr week which applied to school leaders and is reinforced in contracts and at various points in the SNCT handbook.

Further, 331 members reported working 60 hours or more a week or more – the equivalent of 12hr days 5 days a week. The highest average for HTs in any local authority was 58.3hrs/wk. The lowest was 45hrs/wk (still 10hrs/wk above contracted working hours).

Workload issues once again highlighted a mismatch between resources available and expectations. In common with previous years, the most commonly highlighted issue was the need for additional resources and support for pupils with additional needs. In 2024-2026, the need for ‘proper support for inclusion’ was highlighted by a much higher proportion of members than in previous years and vastly more than any other issue, indeed in 2026 80% of those who responded highlighted it as a key factor to make their role more manageable. When asked to pick one thing they could change about their job “Support for ASN/distressed pupils” was selected by more than three times as many respondents as the next most commonly raised issue.

In this year’s survey we asked a series of additional questions about members experience supporting pupils with additional needs. It is clearer than ever that the gap between expectations and resources is ever widening. Members report that more and more frequently, they are having applications for specialist pupil placements rejected and instead are expected to support pupils in mainstream with no additional resources. This is bad for pupils and schools.

Recommendation 1:

Significant and sustained investment is required to enable schools to effectively support pupils with additional needs.

While there was little movement over the years to 2020 in the proportion of HTs who would **recommend headship**, 2021 saw a step change in positivity on this issue with a notably larger proportion of HTs saying they would recommend headship to

others. However, this has worsened every year since with **only 22.7% of HTs in 2026 saying they recommend headship to others.**

Interest in headship amongst Deputes and Principal Teachers has also declined considerably over the survey period, particularly in recent years. When this survey started in 2016, 36% of Deputes and 39% of PTs who responded indicated that they were keen to become a HT. **In 2026 those saying they were keen to become a HT stood at only 14% of DHTs and 19% of PTs.**

Even those HTs recommending headship (and many DHTs and PTs keen to pursue headship) often added significant caveats to their positive stance. They noted that candidates needed to be aware not just of the positives but of the demands of the role and the significant impacts this may have on health and family life. Responses focussed on unreasonable expectations, as demands on school leaders increase while leadership capacity is reduced, and on the pressures associated with seeking to deliver effective support for pupils with ASN with insufficient resources.

Recommendation 2:

To address the excessive working hours of school leaders and the continual decline in desirability of headship, the Scottish Government and local authorities must increase and protect management capacity in schools. This must include action to ensure that any extension to class teacher non-contact time is not delivered at the expense of management time nor in ways which offer pupils lower quality learning time.

The **Into Headship** programme continues to be seen as valuable by a majority of those who have completed it. The workload associated with the programme alongside busy day jobs remains of considerable concern – with some candidates being put off headship as they see the programme as unmanageable while only 16% of those who are currently taking part in the programme identified the workload as manageable.

Recommendation 3:

Schools should be funded/backfilled to ensure that candidates undertaking Into Headship can be released from school 1 day per week for the duration of the programme.

Greg Dempster
May 2026

Note: 2020-2022 was a unique period in Scottish Education, dominated by working methods dictated by the Covid response (which started after our 2020 survey). This means that the output of the 2021 & 2022 workload surveys need to be seen in that context and interpreted carefully.

Background

AHDS is a union for school leaders from Scotland's primary, nursery and ASN schools. This paper draws together the views expressed by 1421 AHDS members in 2026 about: their working hours; workload challenges; key issues for change; desirability of headship; experience of the Into Headship programme and a range of ASN related themes. It compares responses to previous years and forms the foundation for reports prepared on returns from each local authority area. This survey has run each year since 2006.

The survey was conducted on SurveyMonkey at the end of February/start of March each year. Full responses can be broken down as follows (partially completed questionnaires are not included in this count):

Table 1: Responses by role

Role	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
HT¹	674	703	668	742	739	753	855	751	878	698	817
Multi school HT	-	-	56	64	61	51	63	68	78	66	57
DHT	228	244	242	313	331	329	354	345	429	441	431
PT	53	68	91	89	87	81	99	103	144	113	173
All	955	1015	1001	1144	1157	1163	1307	1262	1451	1252	1421

¹ Values in this row include those in multi school headships.

Most core questions have remained the same throughout all years of this survey but given the focus on a lack of 'proper support for inclusion' as a key theme in previous surveys, the 2025 edition included additional questions about ASN which were adapted and expanded in 2026 in an effort to get a fuller picture of the supports and pressures through the eyes of school leaders.

A key question we posed near the beginning of the questionnaire was "*What do you like most about your job?*" Responses highlight a strongly committed professional group who are deeply committed to:

- Children
- Learning
- Their staff teams
- School improvement
- Community

The response to this question presents an especially powerful contrast with other parts of the survey response, which show these valued aspects of the role being crowded out by workload, crisis management and gaps in support for pupils and for the schools seeking to support them.

Average working hours

We asked respondents “In a typical week, about how many hours do you work? (please only answer this question if you work full-time)”. Average reported hours have reduced a little for all roles since a peak in 2018. In 2026, there has been a slight drop in average working hours for all roles aside from HTs. **All roles reported working vastly longer than contracted hours, 17.5 additional hours on average. HTs, DHTs and PTs respectively reported working 18.8hrs, 16.3hrs and 13.1hrs more than the contracted working week of 35hrs.**

To put into perspective 24,695 hours of unpaid overtime are worked by survey respondents each week – this is the equivalent of 987,818 hours per year. Another way of looking at this is that it would take an additional 705 school leaders working full contracted hours to cover this.

If these figures are applied to the whole primary and school leader workforce, it would suggest the following additional hours are worked across Scotland:

Table 2: Unpaid overtime

	Census - 2025			Unpaid overtime		
	Primary	ASN	Total	Weekly	Weekly x Total	Annual
HT	1,596	83	1,679	18.8	31,565.2	1,262,608
DHT	1,388	130	1,518	16.3	24,743.4	989,736
PT	1,682	228	1,910	13.1	25,021	1,000,840
HT/DHT/PT	4,666	441	5,107		81,329.6	3,253,184

Despite the repeated inclusion of references to a 35-hour working week in the SNCT handbook (paragraph 2.10.2 for PTs, 2.13 for DHTs and HTs. 3.5 and 3.6 for all), this suggests that if the hours reported are reflective of the full school leadership cohort in primary and ASN schools, more than 3.25million hours of unpaid overtime are worked each year. It would take an additional 2,324 people working contracted hours to undertake that work.

In addition, while it is an arbitrary marker of excessive hours, in the 2026 survey 331 members reported working 60hrs or more in a typical working week. This is almost a quarter of respondents (23%) – a proportion which has remained similar in recent years.

Table 3: Average weekly hours

Role	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
HT	55.1	55.6	56.1	55.3	54.6	53.5	53.6	53.6	54.9	53.8	53.8
DHT	53	53	53.2	53	51.7	50.6	52	51.7	51.7	51.6	51.3
PT	51.2	51.6	52.0	51.2	50.6	49.7	48.8	49.7	49.3	48.8	48.1
All roles	54.5	54.6	54.9	54.4	53.4	52.5	52.9	52.6	53.4	52.7	52.5

In an effort to understand the effect of two specific, often referenced, calls on management time, and to understand how often school leaders are able to take breaks, we asked the following:

In the past week, how many:

- Hours have you spent on 1:1 support for pupils removed from class

Average working hours

- Hours have you spent providing unplanned class cover
- Days have you managed to take an uninterrupted break of at least 20 minutes

Table 4: Average time spent on specific activities

Role	Hours 1-to-1 with pupils out of class						
Year	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
HT	6.1hrs	3.5hrs	5.5hrs	6.0hrs	6.3hrs	6.1hrs	6.2hrs
HT multi	3.9hrs	2.8hrs	3.6hrs	4.7hrs	3.2hrs	4.7hrs	4.9hrs
All HT	5.9hrs	3.4hrs	5.3hrs	5.8hrs	6.0hrs	5.9hrs	6.1hrs
DHT	7.0hrs	4.2hrs	6.1hrs	7.0hrs	7.4hrs	7.3hrs	7.4hrs
PT	4.6hrs	3.3hrs	4.5hrs	4.2hrs	3.8hrs	3.8hrs	4.5hrs
	Hours unplanned cover						
Year	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
HT	3.4hrs	2hrs	4.8hrs	2.7hrs	3.4hrs	2.9hrs	3.3hrs
HT multi	3.8hrs	2.4hrs	5.3hrs	3.4hrs	2.8hrs	3.6hrs	4.7hrs
All HT	3.4hrs	2hrs	4.9hrs	2.8hrs	3.4hrs	3hrs	3.4hrs
DHT	4.5hrs	2.8hrs	6.6hrs	3.8hrs	4.3hrs	4.1hrs	4.3hrs
PT	3.7hrs	2.4hrs	5.6hrs	4.2hrs	3.0hrs	3.8hrs	5hrs
	Days with break of 20 minutes						
Year	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
HT	0.3	0.7	0.3	0.4	0.3	0.4	0.4
HT multi	0.3	0.5	0.3	0.2	0.6	0.6	0.5
All HT	0.3	0.6	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4
DHT	0.3	0.8	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.4	0.4
PT	1	1.8	1.3	0.9	0.9	1.1	1.1

NOTE: In 2021 only P1-3 were in school at the time of the survey. This means that the 2021 returns are not directly comparable to other years.

“Hours providing 1-to-1 support” has remained at a similarly high point for HTs & DHTs when compared with last year (with slight increases across the board) and have increased notably for PTs. Reported hours spent on this task have increased each in most years since 2021 and are now in excess of 2020 totals for HTs and DHTs (and are similar for PTs). Hours spent providing **“Unplanned cover”** have increased for all when compared to 2025, especially those in multi-school headships and for PTs.

The average amount of time spent on these two duties by HTs in 2025 was 8.9hrs in the survey week. This increased to 9.5hrs in 2026. This accounts for almost two full pupil days on average in that week. The time spent on these tasks has always been lower for those in multi-school headships until 2026 when it exceeds single school HTs for the first time. It is also notable that time spent on these duties for PTs is the same as HTs (almost two pupil days in the week of the survey) and even greater for DHTs at 11.7hours in the week of the survey. This is a substantial draw on school leaders time and links to the key issues raised in response to questions about the key challenges faced by members and about desirability of headship.

These averages mask a wide variation from local authority to local authority with the average hours providing 1:1 support (for all roles) varying by local authority from 1.7hrs/wk to 8hrs/wk. For unplanned class cover, the range is 0.9hrs/wk to 7hrs/wk.

Average working hours

Combining the two, the average time spent on these tasks (all roles) by local authority ranges from 3.8hrs/wk to 13.1hrs/wk.

School to school comparisons relating to providing 1:1 support and unplanned class cover also show wide variance. Some members in each role reporting providing no such cover while, for others, it accounted for the whole pupil day including breaks and lunches.

In relation to “Days [in the last week] you have managed to take an uninterrupted break of at least 20 minutes”, the averages remain at a fraction of a day for all roles. This means that, on average, members reported being able to take an uninterrupted break of 20 minutes or more remains at 0.4 days out of 5 – **this equates to school leaders, on average, having such a break during working hours once every 2½ weeks**. This is unchanged since 2023.

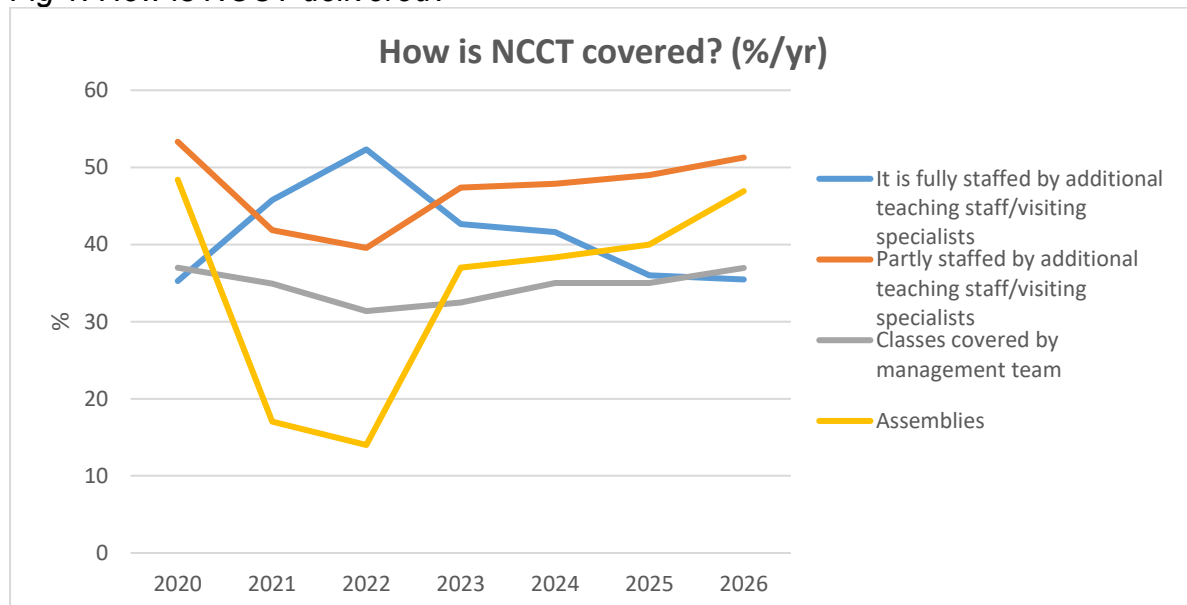
By local authority

It is clear that there is a huge variation in the number of hours worked by members who are undertaking the same roles. Further, it is clear that even those areas with the shortest average working hours are vastly beyond contracted working hours. The lowest average working hours (all roles) was 46hrs/wk in 2026 (49.5hrs/wk in 2025, 49.1hrs/wk in 2024 and 47.1hrs/wk in 2023) while the longest average reported was 56hrs/wk (56.1hrs/wk in 2025, 56.3hrs/wk in 2024 and 55.4hrs/wk in 2023).

Non-contact time

For the past seven years, we asked how members were delivering teachers' non-contact time in their schools.

Fig 1: How is NCCT delivered?



(Note: Respondees could select more than one response so percentages in Fig 1 do not add up to 100%)

It is clear from Fig 1 that the proportion of members indicating that NCCT was delivered via assemblies declined hugely during covid restrictions and that it was, instead, delivered by being fully staffed with additional teaching staff or visiting specialists.

Average working hours

However, the reliance on mechanisms for delivery which absorb the time of school leaders has increased year on year since restrictions were lifted. This is a considerable absorption of school leadership time in a period where the amount of management time available in schools has been reduced in many areas.

All of these changes put more pressure on SMT time and will often result in sub-optimal provision to pupils during these periods as school leaders rarely have sufficient time to prepare for covering a class or are undertaking assemblies with many classes together – which does not offer learning of the same level as would be expected in class.

Further, members have expressed considerable concern about plans to further reduce teacher contact time. This does not relate to any resistance to address class teacher workload concerns. Rather, it is as a result of the fear that NCCT will not be properly resourced resulting in further pressure on school leader time and working hours.

Challenges in school leadership

Introduction

We asked two questions to try to get under the skin of what existing post holders would see as being crucial to making their role more appealing to them and to others. These questions were:

“What would make your role more manageable?”

“If you could change one thing about your job, what would it be?”

These were free-text responses until 2023. In subsequent years members were offered a randomly ordered list of the top ten issues identified in 2023 and were invited to select up to three in response to the first question and to select one in response to the second question. Members were also able to leave free text comments in addition to their answers but most offered comment expanding on an item selected rather than introducing a new theme or commented that:

“It is difficult to select 3 given the year-on-year degradation of staffing across all roles. Teachers, clerical, support staff, management time.”

“My week has been consumed by phone calls to parents, social work, police etc along with supporting deregulated children. More allocated management time, particularly for primary sector, is required.”

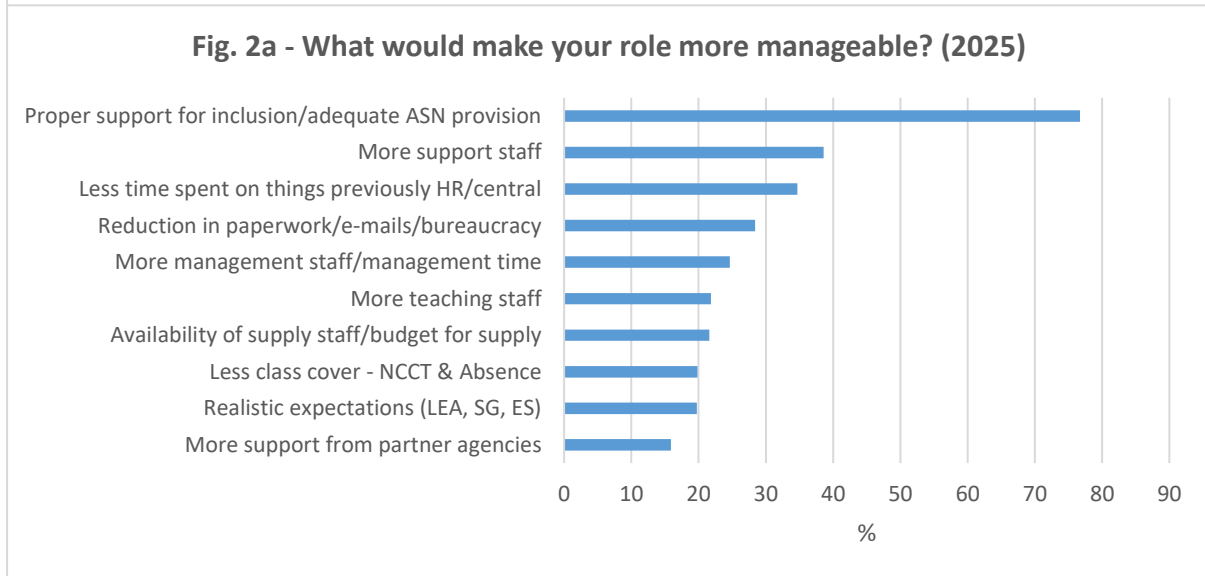
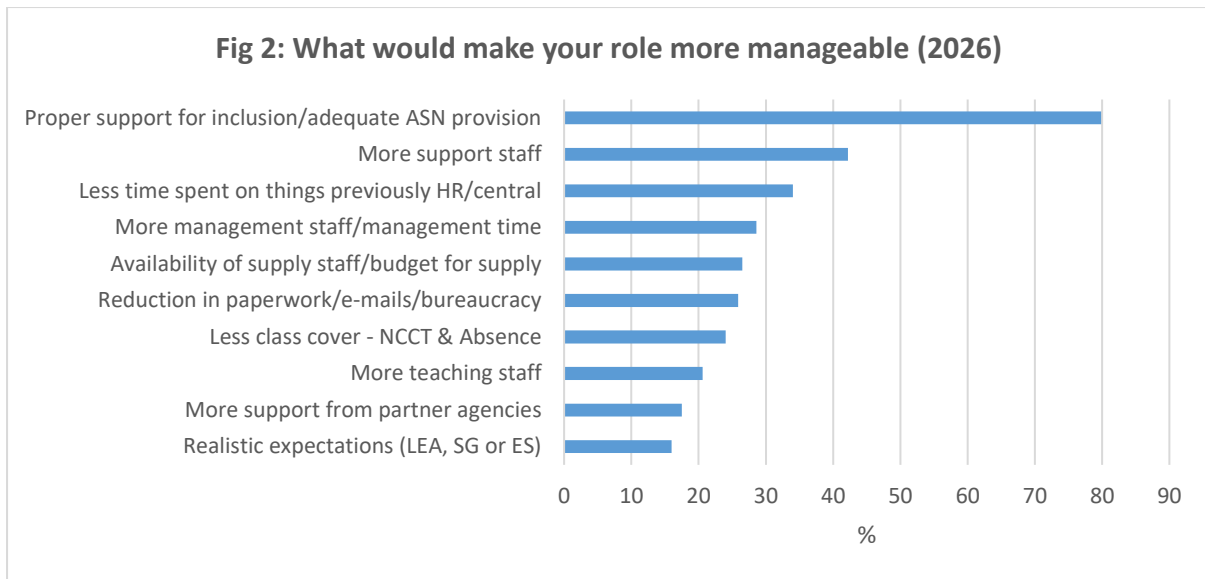
“I have been covering the clerical role (18hrs per week) since September 2025 due to long term absence on top of teaching 1 and a half days per week and leading the school.”

Member responses and comments tend to approach the same issues from different directions (i.e. Some call for less bureaucracy while others called for more management or admin time. Some call for being enabled to spend more time on learning and teaching while others seek more management time or for formerly central roles to be returned to HQ). Most responses highlight a mismatch between resources available and expectations.

“What would make your role more manageable?”

The 2026 response highlights continued high levels of concern about the support available for pupils with additional needs. The degree to which it stands out as a common theme from members is slightly more pronounced than in previous years. As can be seen by comparing Fig 2 with Fig 2a, some of the other themes have swapped positions but the proportion of members choosing each has not changed significantly and all are selected by far fewer members than “Proper support for inclusion/adequate ASN provision”.

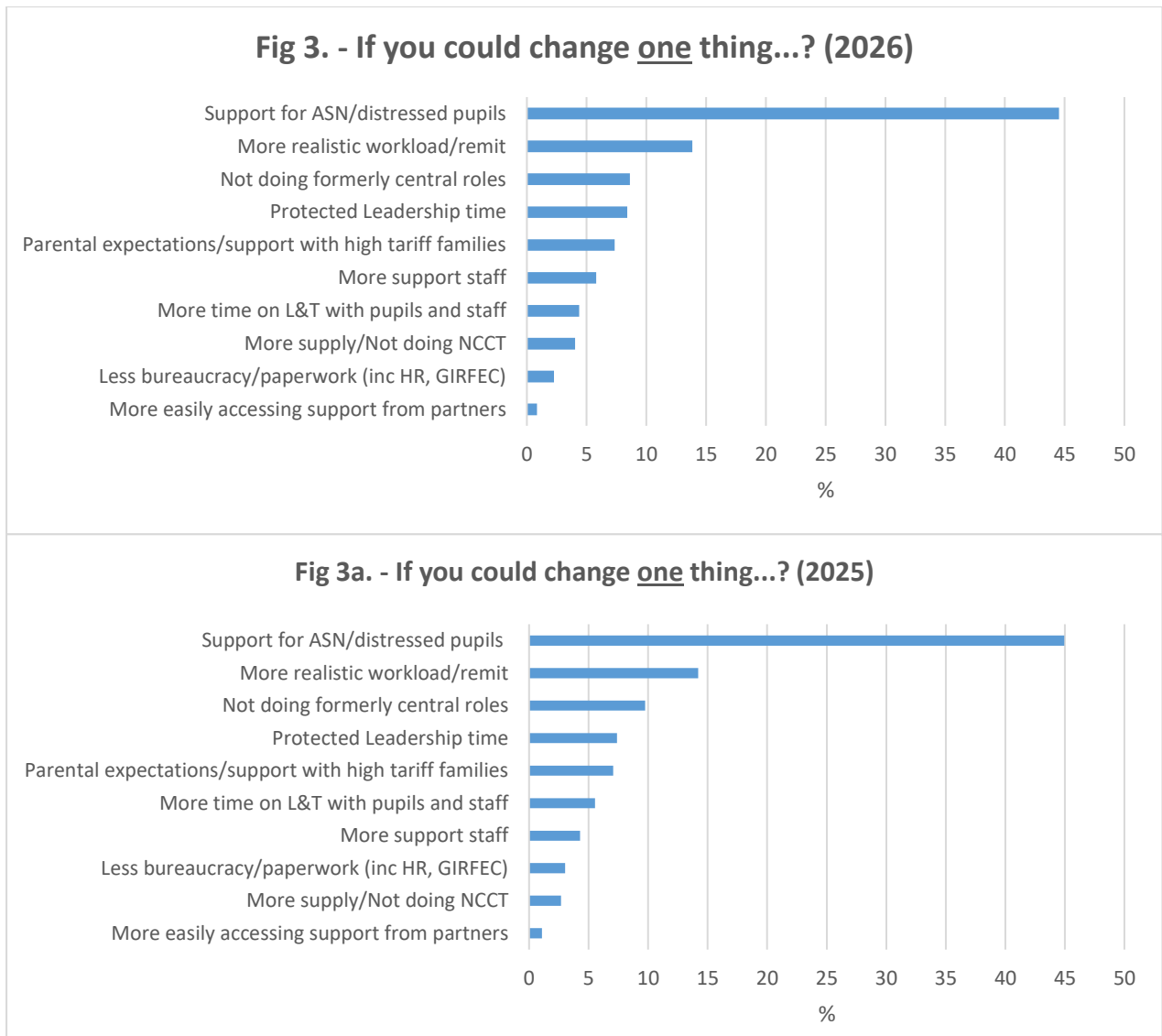
Challenges in school leadership



“If you could change one thing about your job, what would it be?”

Again, this question changed in 2024 so that rather than seeking a free text response, members were asked to select one issue from a randomly presented list of the ten most common responses from 2023 (they could also offer additional free-text comments). The 2026 response was as follows:

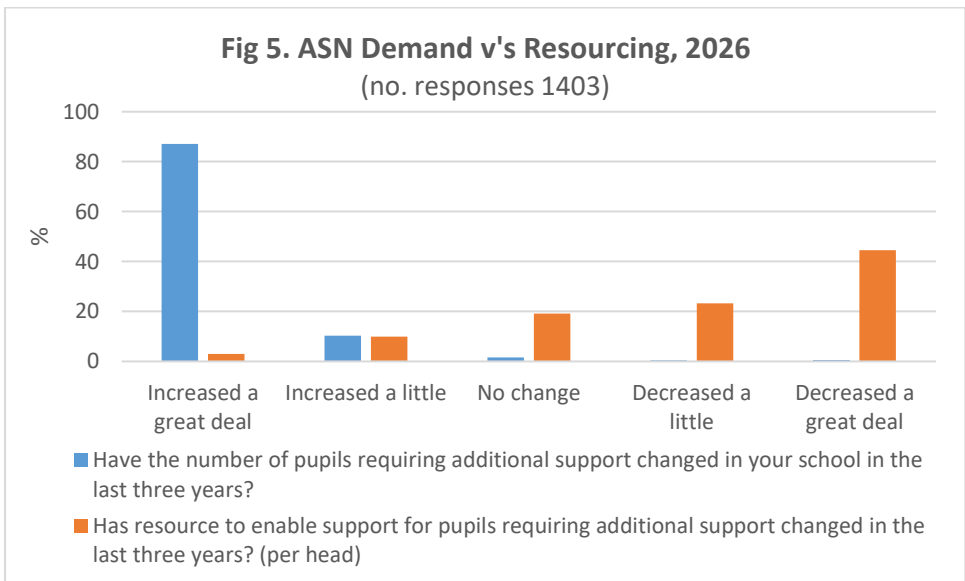
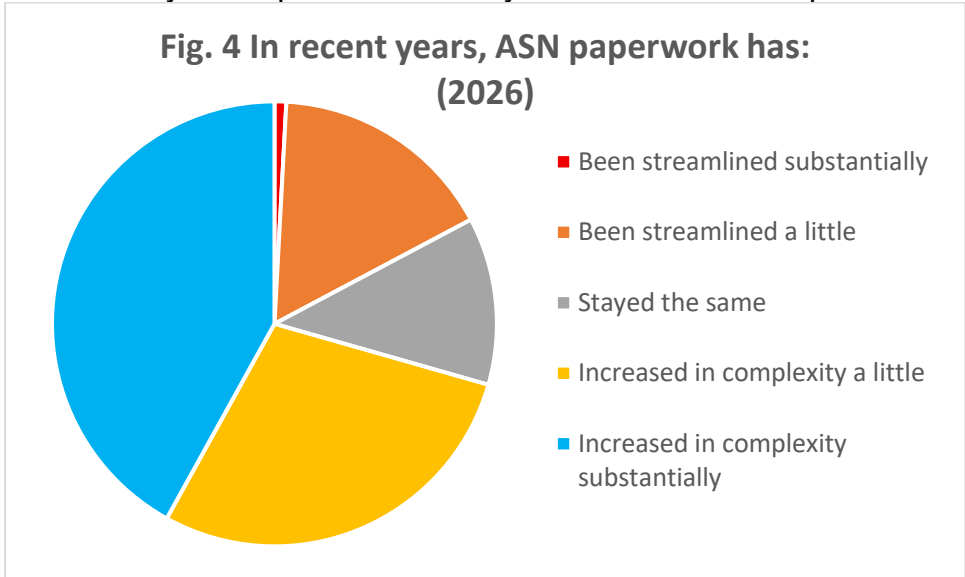
Challenges in school leadership



Support for ASN pupils was the 5th most common response in 2022, 3rd most common in 2023 and then, by far the most common response from 2024 onwards – in 2026 it was selected by more than three times as many members as the next most common response. AHDS members have a very clear view that support for ASN and distressed pupils is insufficient and is having an increasing impact on management teams and schools' abilities to deliver effectively for all of their pupils.

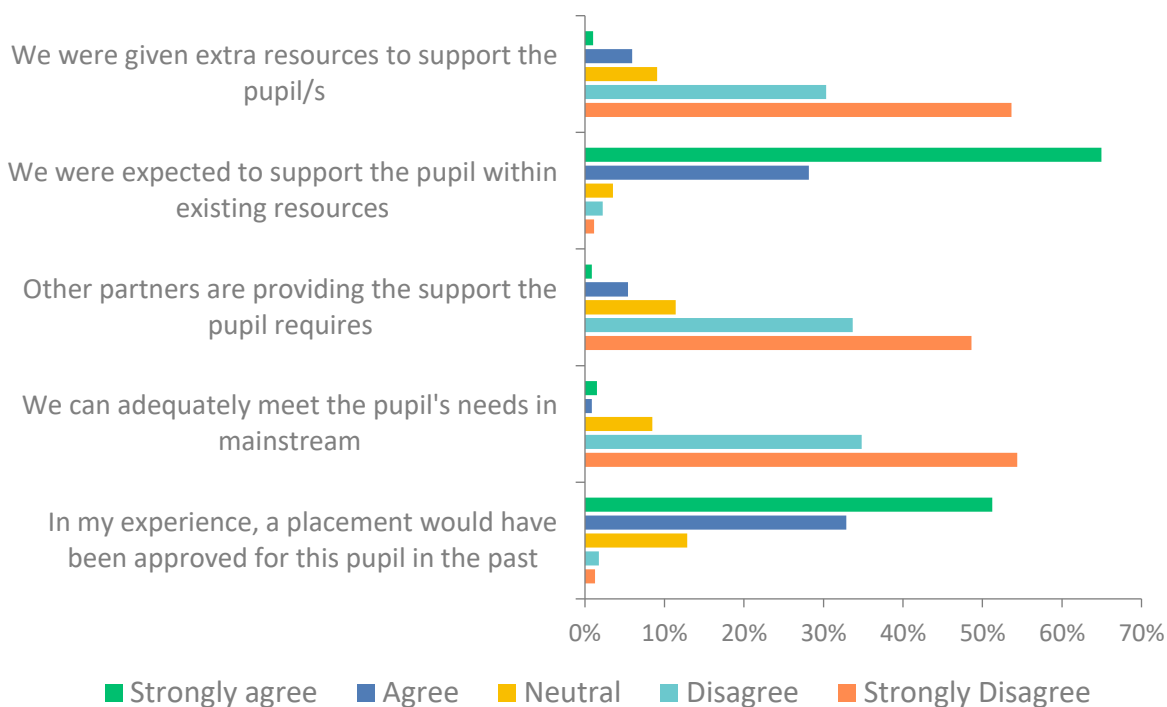
Inclusion/ASN

As inclusion has been a recurring theme in response to successive workload surveys, additional questions on this topic have formed part of the survey in the last two years. The 2026 responses to the first three questions, presented in two charts, paint a very clear picture of increased demand, reduced resource and increased bureaucracy. This picture is broadly the same as the response in 2025:



We went on to ask members about their experience of seeking specialised provision for pupils. 80% of those responding to the survey had sought specialist provision for at least one pupil. 45% of those who had done so had a placement approved. We asked follow-up questions of the 55% who had the placement request **rejected**:

Fig 6. Application not approved, please respond to the following statements.
(807 responses in 2026)



While not directly correlating ASN with distressed behaviours and violent incidents, there are links in some cases. There are clear links between the impact of these behaviours/incidents – whatever the cause – and the member experience that the resource available is insufficient to properly support inclusion and Getting it Right for Every Child.

Fig 6 highlights a new challenge faced by schools and the pupils they are seeking to support – increased difficulty accessing external placements for pupils school judge they are not equipped to support. When professionals are working through the inevitable bureaucracy associated with seeking an external placement for a pupil, they are doing so because their setting is not appropriate to meet the pupil’s needs. This is bad for the pupil in question and demoralising for their family and school staff. The final group of bars in Fig 6 set out very clearly that members are seeing a change in practice where they judge that these pupils would have been allocated a placement in appropriate provision in the past. The preceding groups of bars make clear that the pupils who have not been approved for such placements are left in mainstream often without any additional resources, staffing or external expertise. Only a very small number of members conclude that they could adequately meet those pupil’s needs in the mainstream.

Pupils who are kept in mainstream without the support they require can result in additional pressures for those pupils, for staff teams and result in impacts for other children in those classes and schools. The picture of member experience is once again very easily painted in the following seven charts (fig 7a-7g):

Fig 7a. Have you seen an increase in distressed pupil behaviours in the last three years?

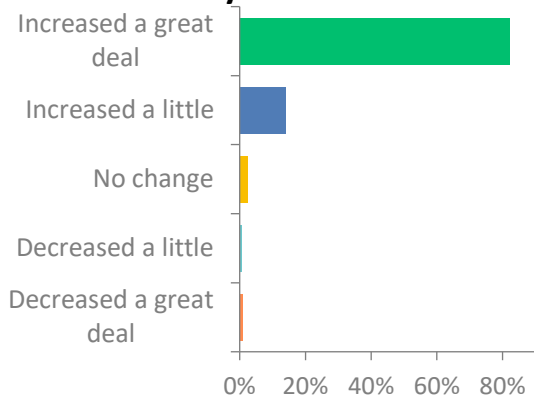


Fig 7b. Have you seen an increase in pupil/pupil violent incidents in school in the past 3 years

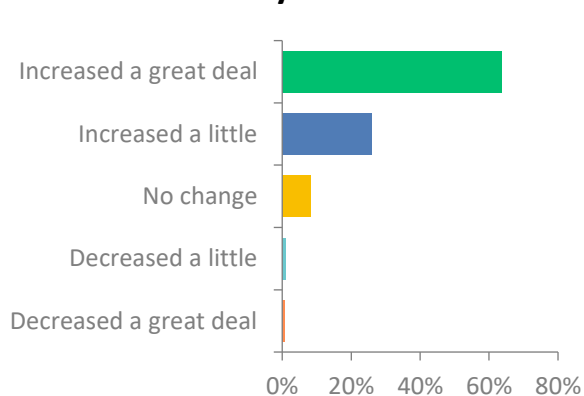


Fig 7c. Have you seen an increase in pupil/adult violent incidents in the last three years?

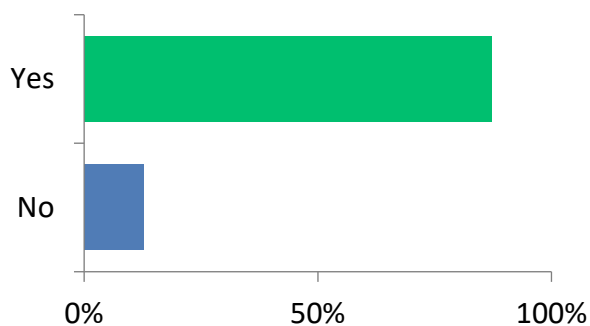


Fig 7d. For incidents where staff of pupils have been injured, to what degree do you believe that was due to a lack of resources?

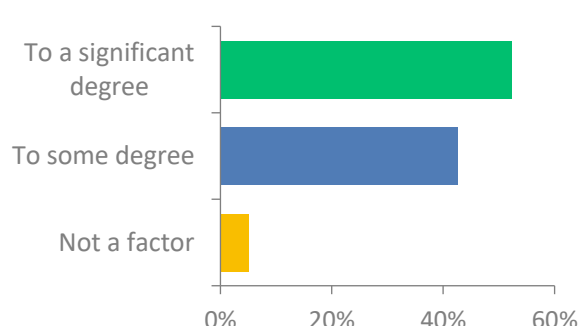


Fig 7e. Violent incidents and you
(1376 responses, 2026)

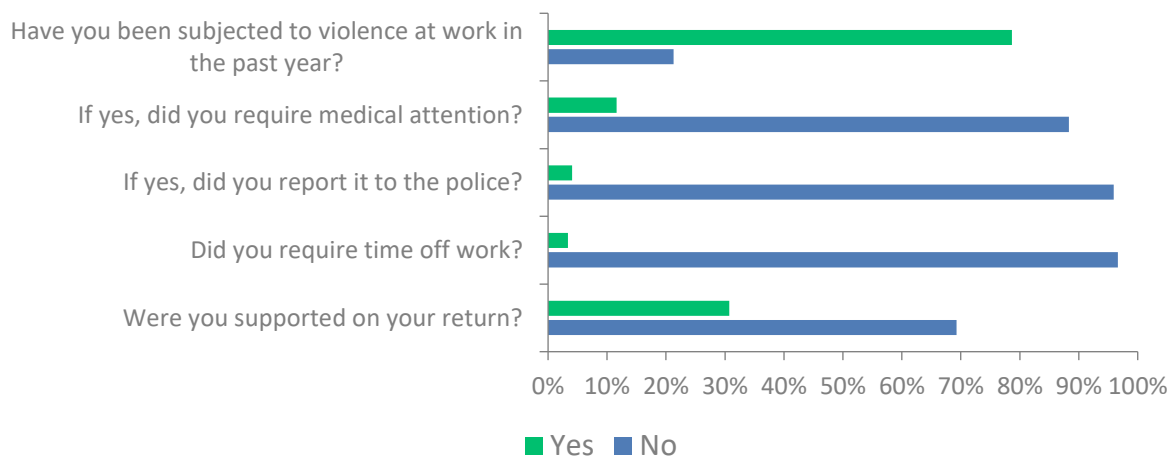


Fig 7f. If there is a violent incident in your school...
(1372 responses, 2026)

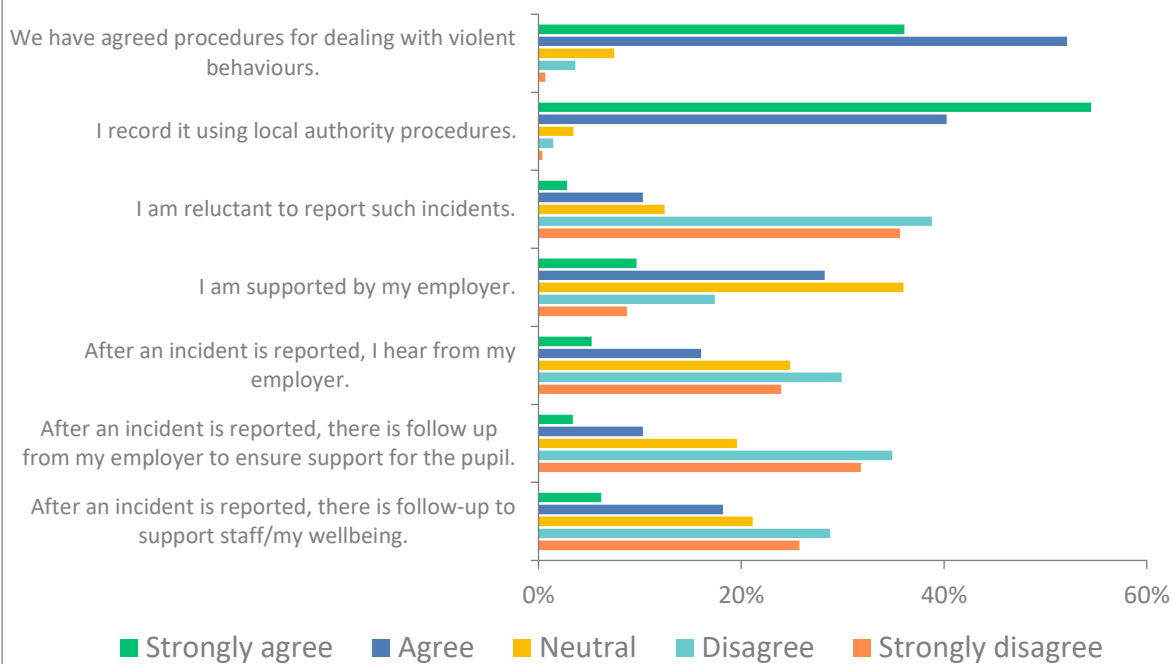
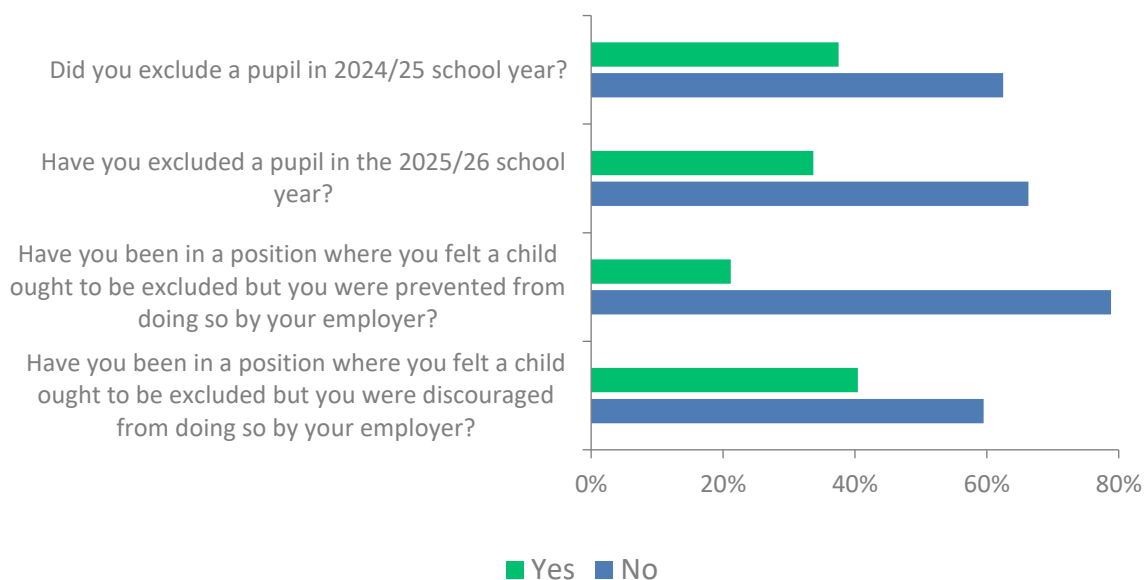
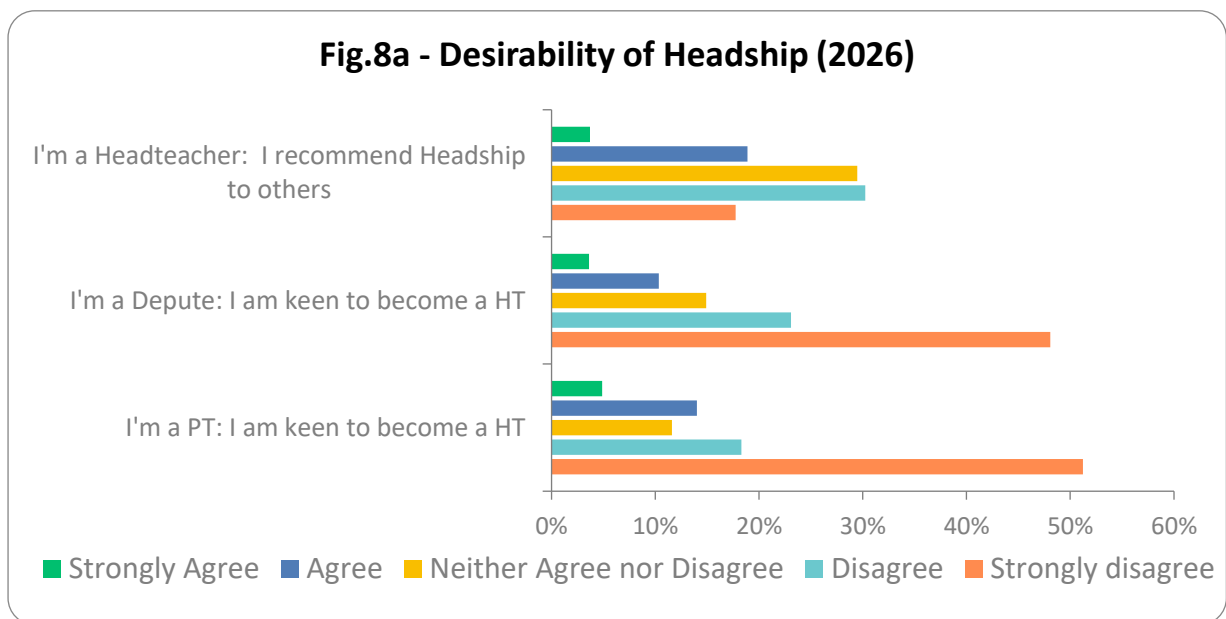


Fig 7g. Exclusions (related to violent incidents only)
(1369 responses, 2026)



Recommending or seeking headship

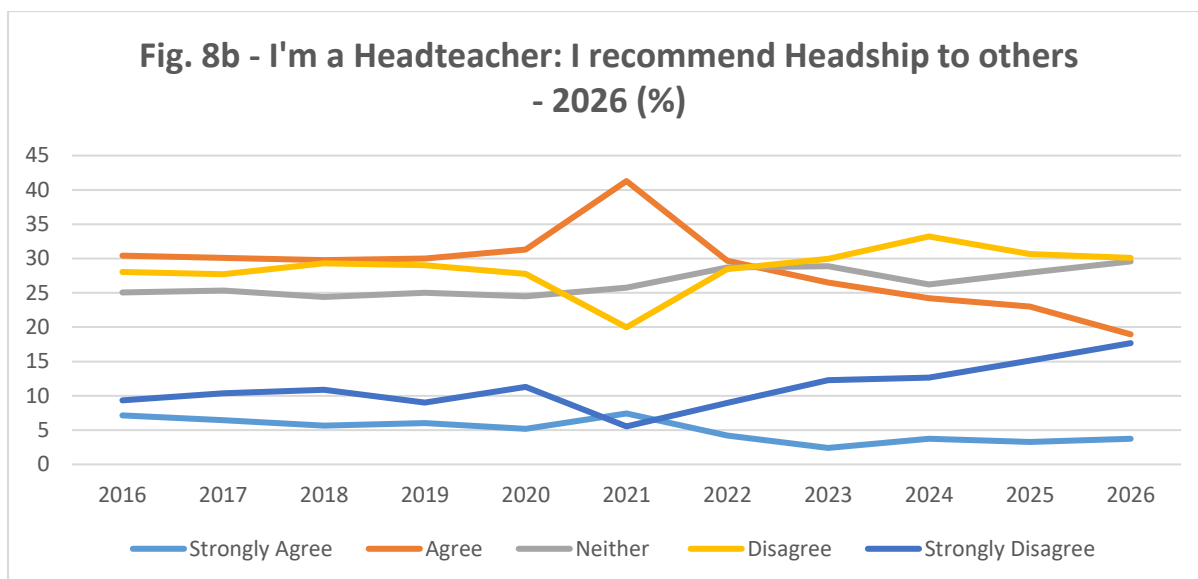
We asked about the desirability of headship and the Into Headship' qualification. Those completing the survey were asked to respond to the statement that was relevant to their role. The 2026 response, shown in Fig.7a makes clear the very low proportion of DHTs and PTs (15.3%) who respond positively when asked if they are keen to become a HT. It also shows that considerably more HTs disagree or strongly disagree (47.8%) with "I recommend Headship to others" than offer a positive response (22.7%). This is the least positive response from HTs in any year of our survey.



The HT response

The degree to which HTs recommend Headship to others was virtually unchanged for the first five years of this survey while the DHT and PT responses saw a steadily more negative response (see below). After a jump in positivity from HTs in 2021, during Covid, the response has become progressively less positive and is now notably worse than the previously stable picture and is markedly less positive than the 2025 response (26.7% gave a positive response in 2025, this reduced to 22.7% in 2026). There is a very clear negative trend since the high of 2021 with 2022 less positive than the previous years and each successive year less positive than the last. Similarly, it is clear that the proportion offering the most negative response has seen a steady increase over the same period – rising more than 300% in since 2021.

Fig. 7b shows the HT response over the eleven years of this survey.



In 2026 there were 91 additional comments added by HTs who recommend headship (agree or strongly agree). Few offered a positive comment without qualification. The key themes emerging in these comments were:

- **Headship is challenging but rewarding** – many describe the role as *hard*, but also *highly rewarding* and meaningful.
- **Making a difference is a major motivator** – recurring emphasis on impact for pupils, staff, and communities.
- **Support matters a lot** – people often note that **local authority / employer support** is a key factor in feeling positive about recommending headship.
- **Workload & ASN pressures still weigh heavily** – even among those who would recommend headship, some describe exhaustion and frustration, especially around fighting for support for pupils and the burden of external agency expectations.

Three quotes which capture the feeling of this group would be:

“...the authority have been very supportive to me and that is key I think to those more reluctant at taking on the position. This then ensures a greater chance of success.”

“I love my job really, and I am good at it. But I am tired of fighting for children to get them support they need. It feels that all other agencies dump on us to make referrals, provide support etc”

“I think it is a hard but very rewarding job and would recommend it... Finding the right school and right authority is key.”

There were 257 comments left by HTs who do not recommend headship (disagree or strongly disagree). The key themes from this group were:

- **Workload & intensity of the role** (often described as unsustainable or overwhelming)
- **Insufficient support** — especially from partner agencies, and difficulties accessing timely help for pupils
- **Staffing cuts / lack of capacity** leading to increased pressure on remaining staff

- **High emotional strain** and feeling of “fighting a losing battle”
- **Challenging relationships/expectations** including **parental behaviour** and reduced respect for schools

The following quotes give a strong representation of the essence of many of the comments which frequently reflected on changes in the role over time which added pressure and expectation without the resources or support to deliver the service required, often with negative health impacts for school leaders:

“Relentless pressure and unrealistic expectations from all stakeholders. Expecting high pupil attainment and achievement but not providing staff to do this. Absence rates are high, SLT have to cover this regularly due to no supply teachers being available. Teacher absence is regularly cited as stress. ASN high and increasing year on year. Expectations of support from parents do not match council provided resources.”

“I recently became a Headteacher. I would not recommend to others - it is a very challenging role. I am also completing Into Headship this year. This alongside the expectation that I undertake HT induction means I have a significant workload which is additional to running the school”

“There are so many pressures in the role. It can feel you are fighting a losing battle at times, partner agencies not able to provide the support at the right time for pupils and by the time the support is available it’s too late. So many needs to meet within the school, can feel like you are failing the children as there aren’t enough options available to support them. Parents have an increasing lack of respect for schools and everything gets blamed on the school and lack of responsibility comes from the parent, particularly with pupils displaying dysregulated behaviours.”

“It’s an amazing job in so many ways but the level of stress it brings should make anyone stop and think before taking it on.”

“5/6 years ago I would have recommended headship. I have been an HT for over 20 years and used to love it. Things have changed so much that it is a poisoned chalice.”

“Doing Into Headship was unbelievably hard for what ultimately leads to you being qualified to apply for a job that is unmanageable, stressful and takes over your entire life. I would not recommend the job as I believe the best parts that were once a big part of the job have been taken over with nonsense demands, expectations and conditions.”

“There is no way I’d do this job in another school. I know my context and have established myself over time. It is increasingly getting more and more difficult and I see many less experienced HTs cracking and not coping. Standards I observe are slipping across schools and that is not due to the effort of school staff but due to the lack of funding, staffing and resources. Initial teacher training is also weaker as students and probationers are weaker in general. There needs to be an acceptance that there are real issues and a complete system overhaul is needed.”

“My job is at times unsafe and I can no longer meet staff to debrief on violent incidents and amend a support plan in the hope that this will change the significant distressed and violent behaviours. I also feel my mainstream children suffer due to the level of distressed behaviours in communal areas of the building. All my support assistants are deployed covering absence in ASN classes which means that there is no support for distressed children in mainstream. I feel that it is not acceptable to try to reassure staff and parents that the learner will get the best education in the wrong setting with no support.”

“The job is impossible and there is no work life balance. You have to be all things to all people. The new ‘Curriculum Improvement Cycle’ and increased RCCT will make things even harder.”

“I don't think I can recommend this role to anybody as I don't think the role is 'do able' anymore and it has impacted my mental health. Would not want this to be the case for anybody else.”

HT recommendation and working hours

Those who were most positive about recommending headship to others worked the fewest hours while those least positive worked the longest.

Strongly agree = average 50.5hrs/week (52.5hrs/wk in 2025)

Agree = average 51.6hrs/week (52.7hrs/wk in 2025)

Disagree = average 54.6hrs/week (53.5hrs/wk in 2025)

Strongly disagree = average 55.1hrs/wk (55 hrs/week in 2025)

In addition, in 2026, those who strongly disagreed about recommending headship spent considerably longer, on average, providing 1:1 cover for pupils or providing unplanned class cover. The average time spent on these tasks for this group was 11.7hrs/wk while those who recommended headship (agree/s.agree) averaged 8.9hrs/wk on these tasks.

DHT and PT responses

Deputes and PTs continue to be extremely negative in their responses to the statement “I am keen to become a HT”.

While there was a slight increase in positivity amongst DHTs (and decrease in the most negative response) in 2025, which went against the overall trend, this has been more than wiped out in the 2026. **In 2025, 18.1% DHTs who responded offered a positive response, in 2026 it was 13.6%, while 71% responded negatively (with over 48% strongly disagreeing and over 23% disagreeing).**

The extremely negative response from PTs in 2025 (only 11.5% who responded offered a positive response) has not been sustained. However, with 18.9% offering a positive response and 69.5% offering a negative response, it is far from anything to celebrate at this stage. If that trajectory remains in subsequent years, it presents the question, why are PTs more inclined to respond positively than DHTs who would naturally be next in line to become HTs?

Desirability of Headship

Figs 7c and 7d and tables 6 & 7 below show the progression of DHT and PT responses over time.

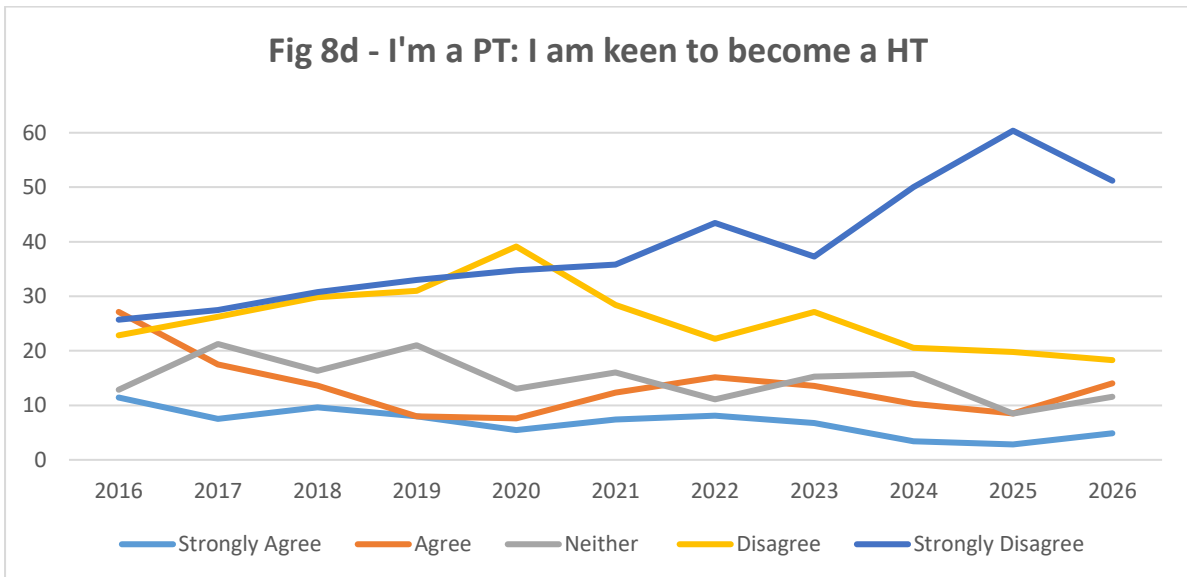
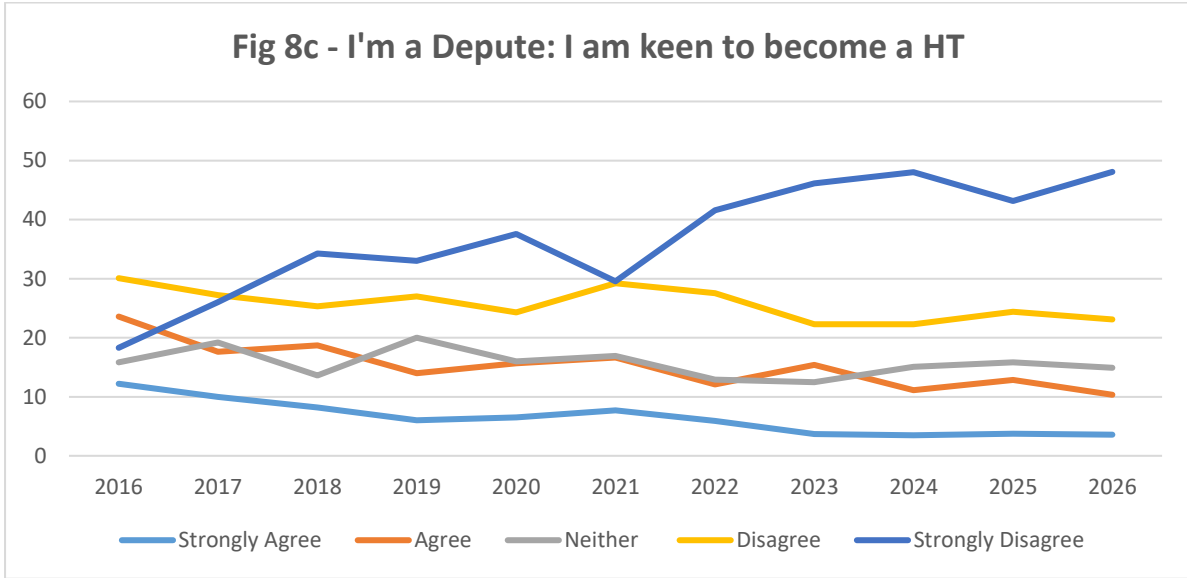


Table 5a: %positive about Headship

	DHT	PT
2016	35.7%	38.6%
2017	27.6%	25.0%
2018	26.9%	23.1%
2019	20.0%	16.0%
2020	22.2%	13.0%
2021	24.3%	19.8%
2022	18.0%	23.3%
2023	19.0%	20.3%
2024	14.6%	13.7%
2025	16.6%	11.3%
2026	13.9%	18.9%

Table 5b: %negative about Headship

	DHT	PT
2016	49.1%	48.6%
2017	53.2%	53.8%
2018	59.5%	60.6%
2019	60.0%	64.0%
2020	61.9%	73.9%
2021	58.8%	64.2%
2022	69.1%	65.6%
2023	68.4%	64.4%
2024	70.3%	70.5%
2025	67.6%	80.2%
2026	71.2%	69.5%

Fig 8e:

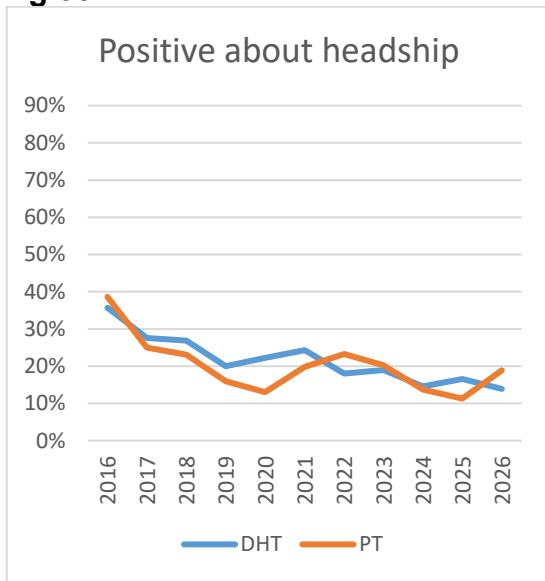
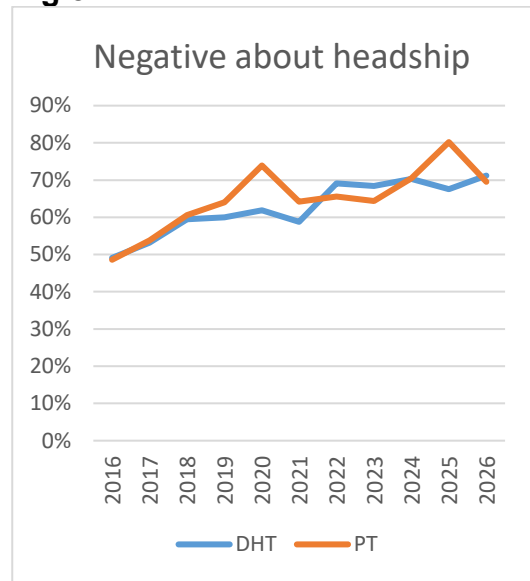


Fig 8f:



Reasons given for response

Deputes and Principal Teachers are normally the only people who become HTs (it would now be exceptional for a class teacher to step directly into headship). As a consequence, understanding why there is such a decline in the interest in headship from these two groups is crucial if we are to ensure the next generation of school leaders.

The 286 comments added by DHTs and PTs who were not keen to become HTs (those responding “Strongly disagree” or “Disagree”) fell into the following themes:

130 DHTs and 51 PTs highlighted the excessive workload faced by HTs as a strong disincentive.

“In the last 5 years, my ambition to become a HT has all but gone. Increased workload, reduced funding, no supply cover, possible increase in CCC time (SLT will more than likely have to cover this), lack of support in dealing with discipline/ASN, not enough support staff, increase in paperwork, increase in completing HR/Personnel/Finance tasks/admin.”

“The job appears to becoming unmanageable due to the constant cuts in budgets while expectations and demand only ever increase.”

“I have watched HTs around me become shadows of their former selves due to the relentless pressures and stresses of the job.”

“I have a young family and already struggle with work life balance. I don’t think it’s possible to have a young family and be a headteacher in the current climate. You will always either be letting down school or your family which is a feeling I feel regularly however I know this would increase significantly as a head teacher. It is often impossible for me to leave school to pick up my son from childcare due to on-going incidents within school.”

Many related their own excessive workload to the disincentive as they could not envisage working any more hours, which they perceived as necessary if in a HT role.

21 members specifically mentioned the impossibility of the additional workload (and time) associated with undertaking Into Headship:

“Into Headship is a barrier. It would impossible to complete along side a very demanding full time DHT job and family/personal life. Not possible to do all at once, it would have a detrimental effect on mental health.”

“The requirement to complete the ‘Into Headship’ qualification which I feel completely unable to do because of my current workload mean my opinion has changed and I no longer have the desire to become a head teacher.”

“I am an acting HT just now. The acting role has discouraged me from becoming a HT or doing Into Headship as it is not possible to do at the same time as the job.”

“I have no idea how I would have capacity to undertake into headship. I see the strain my headteacher is under and do not want this, I have enough stress and pressure at the moment in the role I am in.”

Another frequently mentioned issue was a lack of support for HTs. Thirty-one DHTs/PTs left comments highlighting either experiences of little support when in acting or substantive headship roles or seeing the lack of support available to their own HT:

“Have been acting HT with little support from Council. Long hours working evenings and weekends to complete paperwork/forms/respond to emails which I couldn’t get to during day as I was with dysregulated children/covering classes. My position wasn’t backfilled, no extra staff provided and staff absent. Stressful experience which knocked my confidence completely.”

“I have been acting head a few times in my career and felt very unsupported by my employer and it has given me no faith in progressing in my career given this and the other mitigating factors in education.”

“If I was a surgeon performing a medical procedure, I would need the training, the staff, the tools and the time required to perform this task. None of these are offered to a head teacher. Not enough training, not enough resource, not enough staff and thus, not enough time.”

Finally, amongst other reasons, 17 members shared the view that the pay differential for taking on headship (and the associated increase in workload and responsibility) was insufficient:

“I am a DHT on salary point 4. I look at the hoops I need to jump through to become a head teacher for (most of the time) very little financial gain. This makes the idea of headship less attractive to me.”

“Pay difference from DHT to HT is nothing but much bigger role”

“The pay does not offset the personal sacrifice you have to make to just survive in the role.”

Even amongst DHTs who were positive about seeking headship, there was considerable negativity – with only 9 DHTs who offered comments being entirely

positive. Some of the concerns noted by DHTs who are keen to become HTs were not dissimilar to those expressed by those who responded negatively:

“I am keen to one day become a head teacher. However, the current climate, declining budgets, violence and aggression, demands and aggression of parents and unrealistic goal posts contribute to the role becoming less attractive. If RCCT time increases for teachers, this could add additional workload onto senior leaders.”

“I am currently completing the into headship qualification and would like to be a head teacher but not sure if this is for me in the current environment.”

“I know I have the skills and knowledge to be an effective HT but having to complete the into headship course is something that puts me off. As a full time working mum trying to fit studying into my 45-hour week as a DHT fills me with dread.”

“I would like to aspire to be a HT, however my current role is putting me off more and more”

“Would love to be a HT however as a working mum I would be unable to have time with them due to the demands of a HT”

‘Into Headship’ experience

From 2019, response statements on ‘Into Headship’ were added in an effort to understand the experience of those who had undertaken or were undertaking the course. Members were asked to respond to the following statements and to offer any other comments. Responses have been grouped into three categories – on Into Headship, Completed into Headship, Dropped out of Into Headship.

Response statements:

- “I feel it was a good preparation for headship”
- “The content was relevant and useful”
- “The workload was manageable”
- “I still want to be a Head Teacher“
- “I am now more confident about applying for headships”

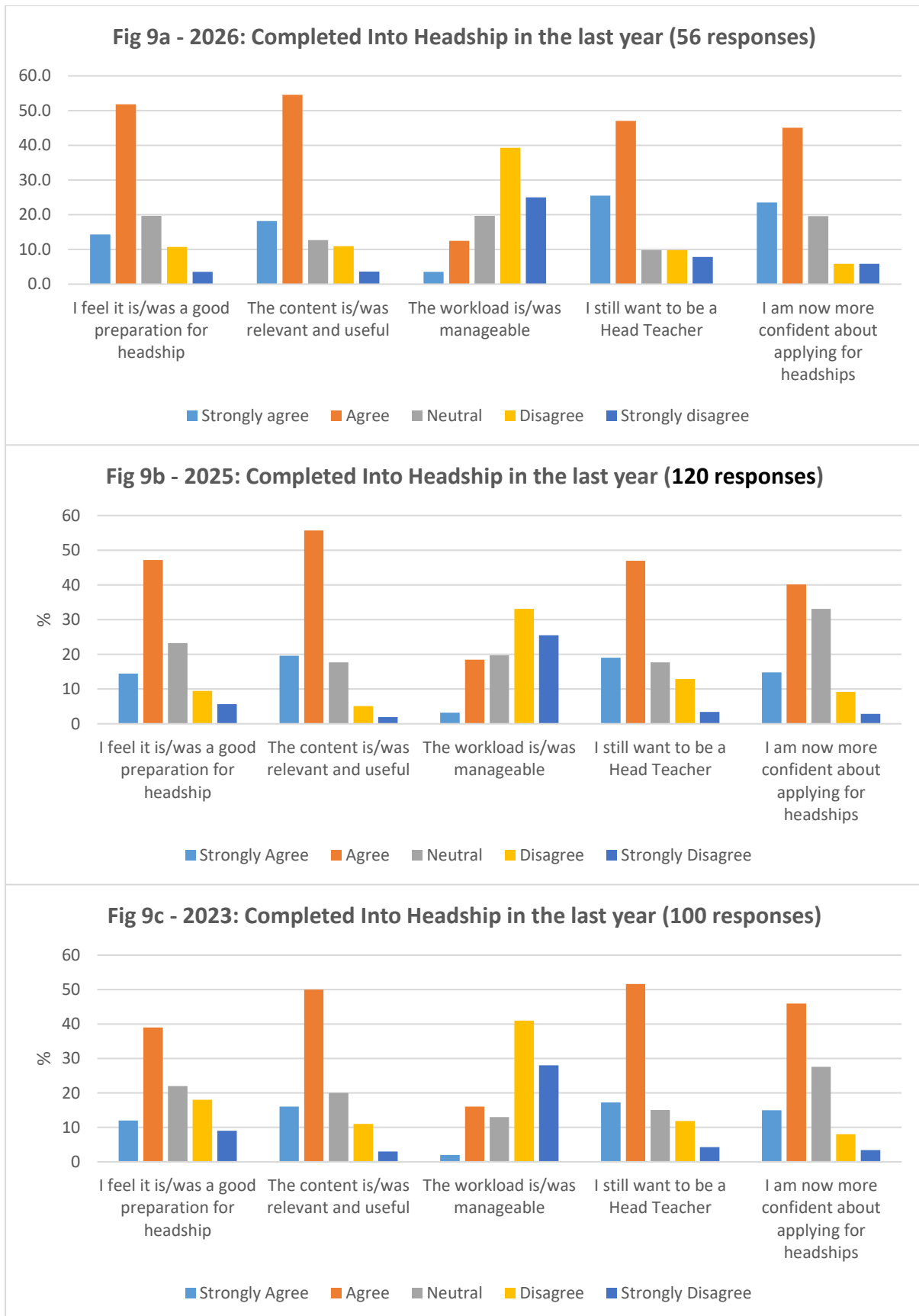
Completed Into Headship

In 2026, 56 members indicated they had completed into headship in the last year and responded to all statements. Whilst a smaller sample than in previous years, it presents similar levels of positivity about the programme and the continued desirability of headship. However, the response in relation to the manageability of the workload involved in Into Headship worsened notably in the latest return. It must be borne in mind that this is the experience of those who have decided to undertake the programme, remembering that the associated workload will now be understood by candidates ahead of enrolment and appears to be a disincentive for those considering undertaking headship.

The responses from the three most recent years are shown below in Figs 8a-c (2024 is not shown as an error in the questionnaire meant that all members, rather than just those who completed it in the past year, responded).

These graphs make clear that positivity about the value of the programme remains strong. However, the proportion who consider the workload to be manageable has dropped markedly, with only 16% responding positively. There are two possible solutions to the workload challenge – the first is to reduce the content, the second is to ensure more time is available for study. Given the positivity about the programme being a good preparation for headship, changing the content would not seem like a wise choice. Instead, this reinforces AHDS calls for candidates to be enabled to be released for study for one day a week for the duration of the programme.

Into Headship experience



Undertaking Into Headship

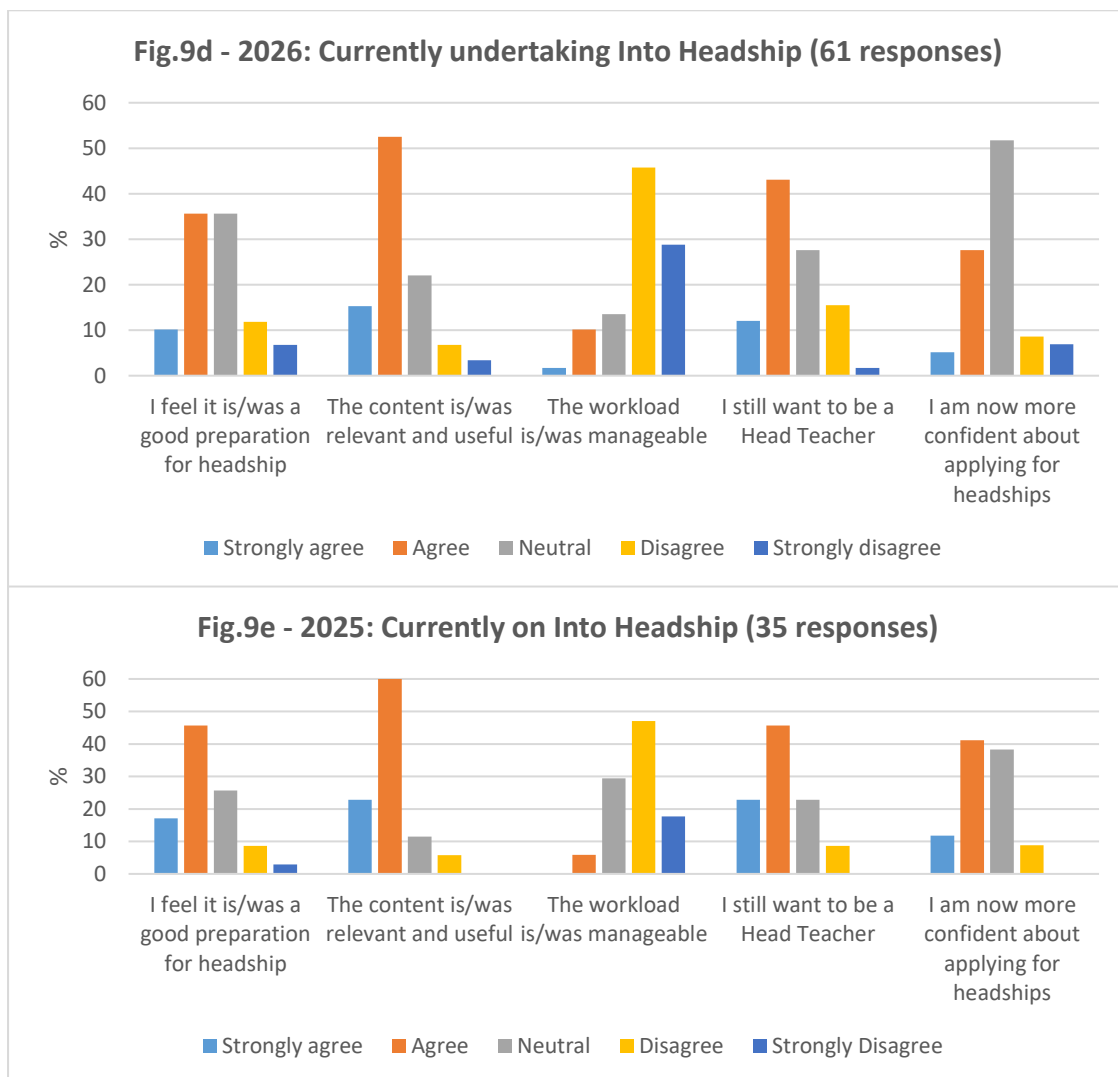
Those currently undertaking their studies were even less likely to be positive about workload (fig 8d-f) when compared with those who have completed it. While the

2026 response was more positive than 2025, there were fewer neutral responses and 10% more negative responses in 2026. Almost all in this group who offered a comment referenced excessive workload and expectations associated with the programme. Two such comments which captures the wider view are:

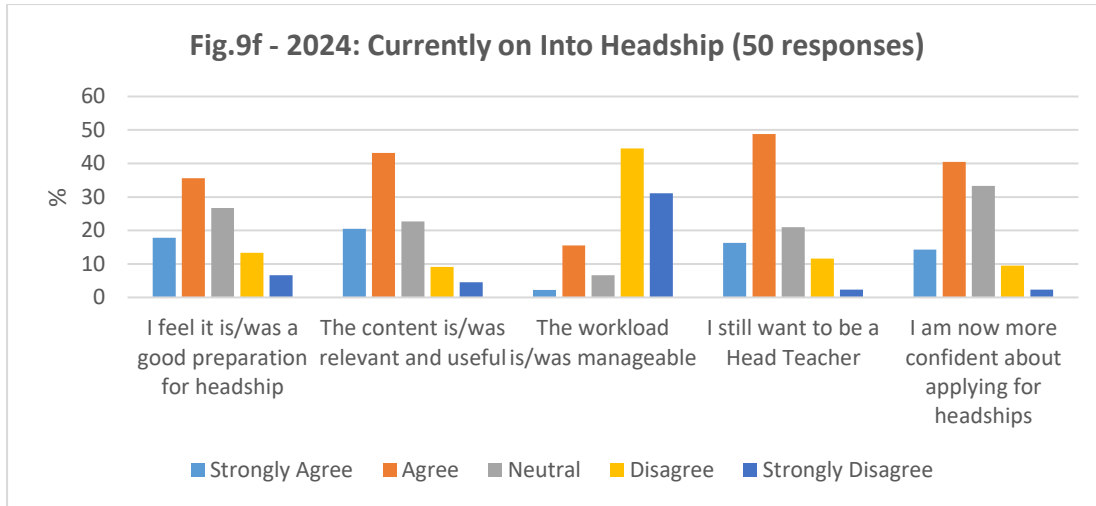
“It is ridiculous that a masters level mandatory course has to be completed on the job with very little support/time out.”

“The course workload on top of the day to day of an extremely busy job is horrendous and I have nearly dropped out on a number of occasions. The workload of the two things combined has really impacted my mental health, family life and more.”

It is worth noting that within this group of 61 members, 25 reported being in acting HT roles when they started Into Headship and 7 had moved into acting roles during their studies. This is more than 50% of the group (which is an increase on 46% in 2025 and 47% in 2024). The added pressure of seeking to undertake a new headship while absorbing the workload of Into Headship pushes even greater pressure onto these candidates.



Into Headship experience



Conclusions

This report again highlights the reducing desirability of HT roles. HTs themselves are less likely than ever to recommend headship to their colleagues. Deputies – those next in line for headship – are less likely than ever to aspire to headship. This is not new news, it is a story that has been unfolding over a number of years in which the concern expressed by members about workload and about the capacity of their schools to properly support children with additional support needs has continued to grow. These concerns have not been addressed, instead school leaders feel under even more pressure with reducing budgets/support services and increased service demand.

The lack of desirability of headship is a direct consequence of the failure to properly support inclusion. This has resulted in Head Teachers undertaking unsustainable working hours in an effort to compensate for resource gaps. Their strain is visible to others in schools such that other SMT members recognise that to fully discharge the expectations placed upon a Head Teacher, they would have to compromise their health or family life. This is not acceptable and must be urgently addressed. In addition, due to the pressures faced by those in DHT and PT roles, the additional time commitment required to undertake Into Headship is a growing disincentive to pursue headship.

To address the issues highlighted in this survey report, three key actions are required:

- Substantial and sustained investment in ASN – additional trained support assistants, specialist placements and support for associated services that schools rely on.
- Ensure adequate management time in schools.
- Deliver one day a week release for those undertaking Into Headship.