

# Pressures on Middle Leaders in Schools

Understanding the professional stresses and strains that middle leaders face in their working lives.

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# Background



**Education Support commissioned Public First to explore the professional challenges affecting middle leaders in state-sector primary and secondary schools. This research project particularly sought to better understand how different factors relating to their leadership position can affect their mental and physical health.**

In order to hear from middle leaders in their own words, Public First carried out four focus groups across an eight-week period from late February to early April 2022. Two focus groups were with middle leaders in state-run primary schools and two with middle leaders in state-run secondary schools. Our focus group participants were recruited from the widest pool possible - normal teachers in normal schools. To be clear, this was qualitative research and not quantitative polling.

We wanted to give voice to those whose voices are often not heard, beyond the teacher trade unions and beyond educational social media. This is their testimony. For the purposes of this report, “middle leaders” are understood to be teachers with additional responsibilities including, but not limited to, Head of Subject, Head of Year or Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO). They are not members of the school’s senior leadership team (SLT).

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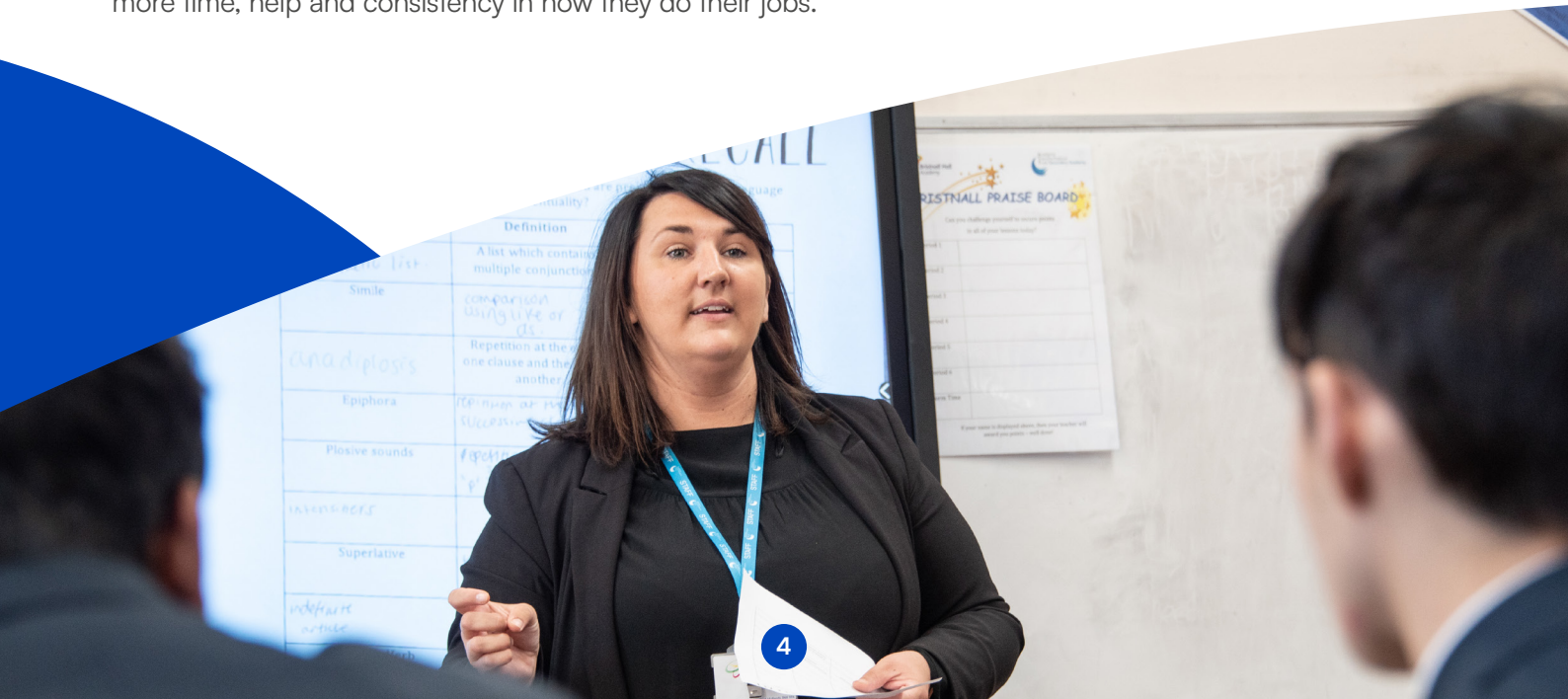
# Summary

**Middle leaders reported to us increasing levels of anxiety and a greater sense of being overwhelmed at work**, which is affecting their physical and mental well-being. We heard that being a middle leader carries particular challenges in terms of discharging additional responsibilities alongside teaching in classrooms.

It is clear from our research that many middle leaders do find significant satisfaction in their roles — and there are many heads and senior leaders who manage their teams with support and encouragement.

However many of the teachers we spoke to are also reporting a high degree of physical and mental fatigue. This is linked to high workload, bureaucracy and sometimes an underlying feeling that they are inadequately supported by their senior management teams. Our focus group participants were often sympathetic to the pressures experienced by their headteachers, but for many, day-to-day life as a middle leader requires personal compromise, with a diminishing work/life balance and a worrying reluctance to take sick-days when needed.

They increasingly compare themselves to friends and family who have different, more flexible careers. Covid-19 has further exacerbated the issues that these middle leaders face, whilst also undermining confidence in policymakers in government. It is therefore clear that middle leaders in schools urgently need more time, help and consistency in how they do their jobs.





# Key findings



1

**There are many positive elements of middle leadership**, and those we spoke to were generally enthusiastic about their roles and their pupils. These teachers have a passion for their subject areas and for working with children or young adults.

2

**There were also several recurring challenges felt by the teachers** that were specific to middle leadership. Although every teacher is different, the clearest recurring themes included time pressures, burdensome bureaucracies and a lack of autonomy or reward despite extra responsibility.

3

**While some things have returned to normal post-pandemic, the effects of Covid-19 are still lingering.** This is particularly the case with regards to managing learning loss and the increased expectations for middle leaders to always be available online.

4

**These combined factors led to universal agreement that many middle leaders struggle with their mental health.** They have all experienced or witnessed “burn-out”, prompting them to consider leaving the profession altogether.

5

**The middle leaders’ physical wellbeing is similarly under strain**, as they demonstrate a worrying reluctance to take sick days when needed. The teachers felt various pressures to go into school if they are unwell.

6

**Many middle leaders have lost faith in those responsible for their wellbeing and were sceptical about commitments to improve working conditions.** This scepticism applied both to their respective senior leadership team and to policymakers within government.

7

**Nevertheless, there was consensus about what good leadership looks like** and numerous endorsements of headteachers getting it right. There were very positive examples of senior leaders implementing sensible initiatives to support their team.

8

**There was also universal agreement on the need for more training and shared best practice to promote improvements.** Middle leaders were optimistic about the ways in which meaningful culture changes could be brought about, if given the time and resources to do so.

# Policy recommendations

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There are some clear takeaways from this research as to how school leaders and policymakers can improve working conditions for middle leaders.

## For School Leaders

- **Middle leaders should be allocated more specific time for their additional management responsibilities.** It is critical that middle leaders are able to fulfil their additional duties without unfairly compromising their teaching or work-life balance.
- **The impact of changing technology use on middle leaders should be assessed.** Technology can be a force for good and offer new efficiencies that save time; but schools must be confident that technology is not perpetuating an “always-on” culture that negatively impacts staff wellbeing and effectiveness in the long-term.
- **Expanded peer-to-peer support should be offered to teachers.** Schools should consider schemes such as action learning sets with a focus on improving mental health and stress levels.
- **Sickness policies should be reviewed and adjusted to avoid unhealthy pressures on teachers.** Teachers should not have to compromise their physical wellbeing if they are genuinely unwell.
- **Senior leaders should be offered more management training.** Senior leaders will be able to better support their middle leader colleagues if they feel more comfortable and competent as managers.
- **Middle leaders should be empowered in their roles and trusted to leverage their expertise.** Senior leaders should resist the temptation to micromanage their staff, or to force unwanted additional responsibility on teachers without capacity.

- **Administrative processes should be reviewed and bureaucracies minimised.** Middle leaders should not be compelled to spend time on tick-box exercises that don't materially improve education outcomes in their classrooms.

## For policymakers

- **Ministers and officials should ensure there is more direct engagement with middle leaders.** This will help policymakers to better understand their challenges and help to rebuild trust.
- **Funding should be made available for middle leadership training.** The government should create and fund better training that supports teachers as they take on new responsibilities.
- **Government should work with the sector to ensure there are consistent standards across middle leadership responsibilities.** Best practice should be researched, articulated and promoted to schools to minimise disparities between institutions.
- **A dedicated mental health resource should be created for middle leaders.** This should offer meaningful advice and guidance that is sensitive to their unique stresses and strains.
- **The impact of Covid-19 on teaching habits should be thoroughly assessed.** Consider how Covid has changed teaching and whether this needs to be factored into teacher training and wider policy.





# Detailed findings



# Positive elements of middle leadership

There are many positive elements of middle leadership, and those we spoke to were generally enthusiastic about their roles and their pupils.

There was a consistent sense that these teachers valued the continued opportunity to share knowledge in the classroom, whilst also taking on extended responsibilities. Participants took pride in pursuing a specific passion — be it as a subject lead or by taking on a dedicated pastoral role — and were quick to say they enjoyed the variety of their respective positions.

Many also felt that middle leadership gave them a chance to support their teaching colleagues, finding satisfaction in a broadened sphere of influence in their school community.

**“I’ve got a great love and passion for my subject area — and I love sharing that with youngsters. I love the fact that the job is different every day. I like that it keeps you on your toes.”**

*Head of Subject at a Secondary School*

“It’s having that broad overview of what’s going on in that student’s life, and really getting to know them as a person, getting to know what makes them tick, and really trying to find ways to help them, you know, in more ways than just their academics.”

*SENCO at a Secondary School*

**“It helps that I’m a teacher as well. The deputy or the head will often ask me, ‘Could you speak to that member of staff about XYZ’, because I’m on the ground with them.”**

*SENCO at a Primary School*

“I’ve worked at the school for almost 11 years. So during that time, people within my department have started as NQTs and I’ve helped to shape and mould teachers of history.” *Head of Subject at a Secondary School*

**“As a classroom teacher, you’ve got an influence on the students in front of you. But then as a head of department, that sphere grows.”**

*Head of Subject at a Secondary School*





# Challenges of **middle** leadership

There were also several recurring challenges felt by the teachers that were specific to middle leadership.

The middle leaders were frank about the struggles of balancing classroom and leadership responsibilities. Across all four sessions, the participants spoke of “spinning plates” and “juggling” their responsibilities — indicating the precarious nature of their day-to-day work.

There was a strong agreement that there is **not enough time in the working week** to get everything done, with many participants only getting one or two extra free periods a week to focus on their extra tasks.

“You are still primarily a teacher. I only get one extra free to fulfil this role. So they very much still see me as a teacher that has lessons to deliver.”  
*Head of Subject at a Secondary School*

“If you want to move up the pay-scales you have to take on more and more, and then obviously what comes with that is additional time and effort. And not everybody gets that additional time outside of the classroom.” *SENCO at a Primary School*

“Once you get to middle leadership it sometimes feels like you’re just keeping things ticking over, because you’ve got so many different things that you need to give your time to. And that can be quite exhausting.” *Head of Humanities at a Secondary School*

“**I cannot see myself doing the SENCO role if I have children. Unless I’m given more time out of class, I don’t think it’s possible.**”  
*SENCO at a Primary School*

As a result, **almost all teachers admitted to working very extended hours** — with some still planning and marking late into the evening and across the weekend. Most of them stated that they were exhausted and unsure how long they could maintain this level of working.

“There’s just no way that there are enough hours in the day to do a middle leadership job just confined to a nine to five, Monday to Friday.” *Head of Humanities in a Secondary School*

“I gave my life to school. I stayed behind, I came in early, I worked on the weekend, I would be constantly buying things for the children.”  
*Inclusion Lead at a Primary School*

This time pressure also led to a number of participants stating that they would **struggle to balance family life** with their leadership responsibilities — and some admitted that they had had to change their approach once they had their own children.

“I think people are leaving because it’s becoming a hard job to have with a family.”  
*Subject Lead at a Primary School*

“I’ve found it harder since having my own children, so I ended up dropping down to part time.” *EYFS Lead at a Primary School*

The middle leaders expressed repeated **frustration with the various bureaucracies** that divert their energy and attention away from their students. There was an implicit belief that time was wasted on administrative tasks that were spiralling out of control.

“I think there’s a lot of bureaucracy and a lot of form filling and ticking boxes... which can add that little bit of extra pressure, extra stress.”

*Head of Subject at a Secondary School*

“

**The planning, the assessment — it’s so, so over complicated and so all-encompassing, everything you’ve got to do. You’re spinning 1,000 plates, and you’ve never got all the funding to reach all the SEN kids. You never feel like you’ve done it properly.**

*EYFS Lead at a Primary School*

“I considered for a time being quite happy as a classroom teacher, and not taking on the responsibility because you think, well, you’re going to lose time on your subject by filling it with other things, a lot of admin and bureaucracy.”

*Head of Subject at a Secondary School*

In particular, subject-leads were quick to reference the **threat of Ofsted deep-dives** as a major source of anxiety. The participants felt there is a discrepancy in Ofsted’s stated aim to reduce teacher workloads versus heightened expectations during inspections.

“I think the drive from Ofsted now in terms of the expectation of people to know a subject inside out, is new and putting pressure on teachers.”

*Subject Lead at a Primary School*

“There seems to be a big mismatch in some of the big things Ofsted want. They really want teachers’ workloads to be reduced, but at the same time... the expectations around subject leadership are much more intense than they were three, four years ago.” *EYFS Lead at a Primary School*

A small number of participants also raised the **lack of real incentives or choice** when it came to taking on middle leadership roles. This proved to be a point of inconsistency across the different middle leaders, with some (but not all) suggesting they had been compelled to take on the additional workload without additional pay.

“We don’t get paid for it. It’s that expectation that we do it and ultimately it is the pupils that are missing out, you know, if we don’t give up our time.” *Head of Year at a Secondary School*

“We don’t get extra pay. Everyone is expected to do a coordinator’s role and be middle management... You’re just told you’re doing Geography or History.” *Subject Lead at a Primary School*



“

**I never signed up to be a manager, I signed up to be a teacher and to teach children... I don’t think teachers should be coordinators or have extra roles unless they have gone for it and it is paid. I don’t think we should be made to do that.**

*Subject Lead at a Primary School*

# Effects of Covid-19



While some things have returned to normal post-pandemic, the effects of Covid-19 are still lingering.

After a tumultuous few years, the middle leaders we spoke to confirmed that Covid-19 continues to have a long-lasting impact on their working life.

First and foremost, the teachers reiterated unsurprising **concerns about the learning-loss** experienced by their pupils. This adds further pressure to leaders who are responsible for catering to the divergent needs across their school. Not only are their students falling behind academically, but many lack the maturity or discipline that would be expected of their age-group.

“

**I would say that it's really evident... the one to two years of education that a lot of pupils have missed out on. I can especially see it in our younger pupils... our current year seven cohorts, their last full year of school was Year Four and it really, really does show in terms of their academic achievements and their behaviour in school.**

*Head of Subject at a Secondary School*

“In terms of our year sevens, we're getting to a stage now where some of them couldn't even manage the toilet schedule.” *Head of Year at a Secondary School*

The participants also raised the **lingering effects of technology on their working practices**. There were some clear positives — with virtual parents' evenings repeatedly cited as a positive outcome of the pandemic — but teachers were equally faced with new expectations to be permanently available. This furthered the creep of teaching and leadership responsibilities into their personal time.

“We would never normally have been sending those emails, at that frequency or at those times. And I think that's something that's continued on, you know, whether we're getting a weekend email or reporting back on homework platforms.”

*Head of Subject at Secondary School*

“Now there does seem a slight more of an element of you might check your emails, you know, after you've had your evening meal. And just to make sure everything has been wrapped up. So that's quite unhealthy really.” *Head of Subject at a Secondary School*

Some even suggested that the efficiency savings of digital communication are counteracted by the increase in work that is generated and shared across digital platforms. The immediacy of some applications allow colleagues to more rapidly create and delegate work.

“We used to communicate verbally, but now we're expected to do so much more because you can just send a message saying 'Can you do this?', 'Can you do this?', 'Can you do this?'. I've found that, since having that form of communication, the messages are even going on at the weekend and at 10 o'clock at night.” *Subject Lead at a Primary School*

# Struggle with mental health

These combined factors led to universal agreement that many middle leaders struggle with their mental health.

In one session, **every single teacher had witnessed a colleague cry at work due to stress.** There was universal agreement that many colleagues have struggled with their mental health, and that this was prompting people to leave teaching altogether. For middle leaders in particular, this deterioration was tied to the added pressures of their extra responsibilities.

“It gets to the point that you just don’t have the energy left — you’re getting older, you don’t have the energy that you did when you first started... and you’ve got more demands, more pressure on you. You’re not as enthusiastic as you were, and then, boom, this extra work gets put on top. It’s just too much.” *AP teacher at a Primary School*

“I’ve seen a lot of teachers and TAs crying at school over the pressures, and I’ve seen lots of people being sent on long term stress.” *EYFS Lead at a Primary School*

“I’ve seen people’s mental health deteriorate, and them becoming not as good at their job as they were when they first started.” *Head of Year at a Secondary School*

“**I think there’s a lot of teachers who do two or three years, then burn out. They see what their other friends who graduated are now earning. And it is a tough job.**

*Head of Subject at Secondary School*

It was shocking to hear how readily each participant accepted poor mental health as near inevitable after a few years as a middle leader. Multiple participants indicated that they could only cope with the pressure for a few years, and then will likely be forced to change their role or change jobs altogether.

“It’s certainly not something I would carry on doing after five years, because you just get burnt out — and I’ve seen staff do it for seven, eight years, and then start hating it because it’s just that constant kind of drag.” *Head of Year at a Secondary School*

It was clear that burn-out was prompting teachers to leave the profession for other careers, and comparison with other professions was rife. Indeed, one participant had already handed in his notice, with a plan to change careers at the end of the school term.

“I’m going back into the legal profession. I was a solicitor for seven years before I went into teaching and got an offer a few months ago.” *Head of Subject at a Secondary School*

“In our place there are at least three teachers that are very obviously telling people that they are going for interviews, because they do not want to be with us come September.” *SENCO at a Primary School*



# Reluctance to take sick days

Middle leaders' physical wellbeing is similarly under strain, as they demonstrate a worrying reluctance to take sick days when needed.

Shockingly, conversations revealed that almost all the participants felt unable to take time off work if they were unwell. Most believed that it was “normal” for teachers to be in classrooms when they were ill and could cite multiple personal examples where this had been the case for them.

Middle leaders across all four groups agreed that the demands of setting cover-work, alongside feelings of guilt for burdening those covering for them, often disincentivised taking sick-leave when genuinely sick.

“It’s your colleagues that have to pick up the pieces - to help set the work, or help print off sheets. So you feel guilty for them as well.”

*SENCO at a Secondary School*

“

**It’s just not worth having the day off ill as a teacher, because it’s way more hassle than it’s worth.**

*Head of Subject at a Secondary School*

Moreover, there was a consistent belief that pupils do not effectively learn when cover work is set and a different teacher leads the lesson — leading to classes falling behind and additional workload down the line.

“You know when you come back, the cover is probably not going to have been done. And you’re going to have to reteach it to the kids because they won’t have listened or understood it.” *SENCO at a Secondary School*

“

**You feel bad for the kids, because you know full well they’re not going to do anything. And then you know, the next week, it’s just going to be another battle to catch up from the previous week. It’s just easier being in.**

*Head of Year at a Secondary School*



Indeed, there was a strong culture of presenteeism, where teachers felt they would be judged by colleagues for being unwell - or that they would set a bad example to their students. In a particularly troubling example, one teacher was criticised for missing school following a car accident.

“We actively tell the students attendance is everything... And you have to lead by example there, as a member of staff — even if you were ravaged with illness, you try to drag yourself in.”

*Head of Subject at a Secondary School*

“I went in once with the flu and was delirious and had to be driven home. But I felt like I had to go in.” *Head of Subject at a Secondary School*

It was interesting that the mandatory isolation periods prompted by Covid-19 over the last two years had not substantially changed attitudes towards sick-leave. Teachers still perceived a stigma around taking time off to recover from illness. However, one middle-leader did state that there was now a new expectation to deliver virtual lessons if a teacher truly is too unwell to come into school.

“I know colleagues who have been asked, ‘Oh I know you’re at home and you’re not feeling too well, but is there any chance you can do a live lesson’... So it’s almost as if you’re not allowed to be ill anymore, in some ways.”

*Head of Year at a Secondary School*

“

**The only time I took a day off was when I had a car crash on the way into school, and was blue lighted to [hospital] and the next day was criticised for not having set any cover work when I was in a neck brace in A&E.**

*Head of Subject at a Secondary School*



# Criticisms of senior leadership

Many middle leaders have lost faith in those responsible for their wellbeing and were sceptical about commitments to improve working conditions.

## The participants were at times sceptical of their SLT's efforts to improve conditions.

There were multiple reports of senior leaders reducing workload in one area, only to add on more in another. Across two different sessions, participants described the efforts as predominantly “lip-service”, rather than meaningful initiatives to boost morale.

“

**I think sometimes they pay lip service. So you know, say, right, “we’re reducing this aspect”, for example. But then a week later we’ll have another meeting about something they’re introducing, another thing to add on.**

*Head of Subject at a Secondary School*

“They [the SLT] do talk about mental health, they do talk about wellbeing, they do talk about offering support — but you still have eight plates that you’re spinning at any one time. And it’s still your job to keep all of the plates in the air at the same time. And if one of them were to fall, it would be your fault as to why it fell.” *Head of Subject at a Secondary School*

Frustrations were further fuelled by examples of micromanagement. Middle leaders reported an inflexibility to working practices that were, in their minds, arbitrary. Many of the examples seemed symptomatic of a lack of trust between senior and middle leadership and, again, indicative of a culture of presenteeism beyond the official school day.

One participant explained that he liked to cycle home at the end of the school day and then return to any outstanding work in the evening — but his leadership wouldn’t allow for this working pattern. Another said they had to invent a dentist’s appointment in order to spend some quality time with their young child.

“It’s having that trust in the staff to maybe work at the times that they need to, when they need to, it’s really important.” *Subject Lead at a Primary School*

“I jumped from my former school because we had to ask permission before leaving before half past four or five.” *Head of Year at a Primary School*

In the worst (albeit rare) examples, the SLT actually exacerbated stress and upset — criticising or even verbally abusing struggling middle Leaders, reducing them to tears.

“

**I’ve just come from a school which I left because of the toxic management culture, where the middle managers thought it was completely normal to cry at least once a week, because they were being screamed and shouted at by the head teacher.**

*Inclusion Lead at a Primary School*



When it came to policymakers, **middle leaders similarly expressed a high degree of scepticism towards the government.** This was fuelled by the pandemic, where the middle leaders experienced a significant loss of trust in the Department for Education after two years of what they deemed to be mixed-messaging and inconsistent guidance.

“A lot of teachers perhaps lost their faith in the government during Covid. Being honest, whatever kind of announcement they make, I kind of tend to take it with a bit of a pinch of salt. Because during Covid they were so back and forth with some guidance.” *SENCO at a Primary School*



Participants were not convinced that Ministers had a strong grasp of the daily realities in schools, and were too quick to implement endless new initiatives without much consideration for the impact it would have on teacher workloads.

“I think the biggest problem we have with the Education Secretary, whoever they may be, is to be too quick to change things and then not actually let things run its course, to see if things are a success or not” *Head of Subject at Secondary School*



**[Ministers] just make rules based on whatever they wake up thinking that day, when they don't spend any time in schools and actually see what's going on at our level.**

*Head of Subject at a Secondary School*





# What good senior leadership looks like

Nevertheless, there was consensus about what good leadership looks like and numerous endorsements of headteachers getting it right.

Just as some middle leaders expressed frustration with their SLTs, a high number of participants **commended their line-managers for being supportive and realistic** in the face of swelling workloads.

Middle leaders were quick to praise SLTs who were flexible in their expectations and who scrapped unnecessary working practices. The participants could cite very specific initiatives which made their lives easier - and always tended to emphasise practical changes that brought tangible benefits.

“Our head is quite kind of practical. [...] Fairly frequently, probably once a term, there will be a Google Docs where he actually asks for suggestions of what to drop [...] He’s quite conscious of reinventing the wheel.” *Head of History at a Secondary School*

“I’ve moved to a really good school now where the middle leadership team, the heads, the leadership teams are just absolutely fantastic. They think about things rather than just rushing it through.” *Subject Lead at a Primary School*

“**We’ve got a very good Head who has been reducing workload for years. And he very much does things because it’s good for the children. [...] For example, we’ve had a live marking policy, which has meant that I’ve not sat marking books every evening. And when that was introduced, it saved hours of my time.**

*Subject Lead at a Primary School*

Above all, the middle leaders wanted to feel valued. The teachers were happiest when they felt they were being listened to, and when their efforts were being appreciated by their seniors.

“I think appreciation is a massive one. If your team don’t feel appreciated, then you’ve lost them.” *Subject Lead at a Primary School*

““

**We’ve got a new head and he does listen. It’s really obvious that he’s really engaged. For example, every month we do a breakfast now, which is really nice on Friday morning where all staff are invited and just actually talk.**

*Head of Year at a Secondary School*

“If I needed something, her door was always open. And that made such a difference, having somebody popping in and saying, ‘Are you okay, today? Do you need anything?’” *SENCO at a Secondary School*

# The role of training and consistent best practice



There was also universal agreement on the need for more training and shared best practice to promote improvements.

Over the course of the discussions, it was clear that training and knowledge exchange has an essential role to play in improving working conditions for middle leaders in schools.

The middle leaders that had been offered training to support their extra duties were very positive about their experiences. The most confident middle leaders also explained that they had been given adequate time to reflect on what they had learnt and share it with other colleagues in their school community.

“We had to attend middle leader training. And that went on for quite a few weeks. And we had to pass the course. And we had to do a big presentation at the end. It was definitely useful.”

*Subject Lead at a Primary School*

“Our school will send you on training, they will give you time to reflect on that training, and then implement it, if needed.” *SENCO at a Primary School*

However, it was also clear that there is a very inconsistent approach to training across the system, with many middle leaders expected to learn on-the-job.

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**I think most people will come out at the end of their NQT year and they'll just be expected to lead a subject area without knowing how to lead or how to implement change. That was certainly my experience as well. Every time you move up to a different leadership position, you've just got to learn to do it yourself.**

*Subject Lead at a Primary School*

Indeed, middle leaders identified a real absence of consistency across school policy more generally — with every school taking a different approach to time allocations, training and pay. Teachers were therefore keen to see greater parity at a national level.

“There's such variations between schools as well about the roles within the school. [...] And how is that fair that people doing the same job, but in different schools have different benefits to be able to do that job.” *Head of Humanities at a Secondary School*

“Certain local authorities have different training. I don't think it's standardised across the board. If you're lucky enough to be in a good local area that does offer some [training], it's then up to your school as to whether you're allowed to access the training.” *SENCO at a Primary School*

A few contributors also pointed out that many SLT members have little management training themselves, and are therefore unable to cope with the demands of their own responsibilities.

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**That person who's doing that screaming, shouting, has never been taught or developed to have those leadership skills and just to manage those strategic challenges. So actually, partly, my sympathy goes out to that person.**

*Inclusion Lead at a Primary School*

“I think too many people at the top don't know what they're doing. That trickles down obviously to us and then the teachers don't know what they're doing. That's why it is so important to have that strong senior management team.”

*Subject Lead at a Primary School*

Hence, there was significant appetite across the board for more training and support at all management levels. With the right interventions, middle leaders were optimistic that meaningful culture shifts could be brought about; but only if a real effort is made to truly understand middle leadership and to cater to middle leaders' specific needs.



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ISBN: 978-1-7399860-3-2

Registered Charity No. 1161436  
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