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# School Leaders Survey Findings

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Spring 2024

**Browne  
Jacobson**



# Introduction

## Welcome to this report on the findings from our Spring term's School Leaders Survey.

Research for this survey was carried out for 3 weeks during March 2024. Over 200 school leaders completed the survey. We estimate\* respondents represent leadership of over 1,800 schools, collectively responsible for nearly 1 million pupils from across all regions of England.

These results also reflect a balanced distribution of age groups with 53% of these schools comprising infant, junior, middle and primary; and 47% secondary and sixth form.

Of those school and trust leaders responding, 25% are CEOs and Deputy CEOs; 17% are COOs and CFOs; 25% are Headteachers, Deputy Headteachers and Assistant Heads; with 9% being trustees. Other respondents include Directors, Business Partners and Local Governors.

45% of respondents work as part of or govern a multi-academy trust, 20% for standalone academies, and 6% are in maintained schools.

We're grateful to all the school leaders who gave their time generously to participate.

*\* For leaders of multi-academy trusts (MATs), we've used the average number of schools and pupils per MAT to reach this figure, based only on MAT leader responses to this edition of the survey. Where multiple leaders from the same school/trust have responded we have only counted once, to avoid duplication.*

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# Foreword

## Reflections on the Spring 2024 survey findings

As things start to gear up for a General Election later this year, it's naturally interesting to explore attitudes to government policy as well as organisations' priorities looking ahead.

Whilst the high levels of discontent with government policy have been persistent for some time, what I find interesting is the interplay between areas of dissatisfaction and organisational priorities. It is perhaps worth asking, *“Is our trust taking enough of a proactive approach to those areas where we are dissatisfied with government policy?”*

In this survey, we also take a deeper dive into an issue that clients have frequently talked to us about over the last 12–18 months, parental complaints. The findings certainly paint a picture of how challenging this issue currently is for school leaders.

To find out more and discuss our findings, please get in touch.



**Nick MacKenzie**  
Partner

Nick is an experienced education lawyer, accredited executive coach and a member of Browne Jacobson's board. He leads Browne Jacobson's education practice.

# Key themes

## Trends emerging from the Spring edition

### Policy landscape

With widespread dissatisfaction across key policy areas, it's important to ensure that the sector's priorities are heard loud and clear by policymakers to ensure key messages are not crowded out.

The school system, with just under 11,000 academies in England, is "more complex" (in system terms) than it was in 2010. It is perhaps interesting to wonder whether, over the next Parliament, we will see the school system take a bigger lead on addressing the large and complex issues that are causes for concern for school leaders, rather than what has traditionally been the case of waiting for policymakers to pick up the "thorny issues".

### Priorities

Finance, again, comes out as a concern for many leaders. A key question for organisations will be how to future-proof themselves in terms of financial viability.

If schools continue to be funded in accordance with the current national funding formula, when taking into account the changing demographics, the outlook for many organisations is concerning. Innovative solutions to falling rolls will be required.

### Complaints

The majority of school leaders are dissatisfied with government policy on parental complaints.

The top three issues raised as subjects of complaint from parents/carers during this academic year are:

1. Support for SEN pupils (20%) .
2. Behaviour and pupil discipline (20%).
3. Equality, discrimination and transgender issues (12%).

Parental responsibility (10%) and safeguarding (7%) are also mentioned as common subjects of complaints.

# Key Findings

## Headline statistics from the Spring edition

68%

Over two-thirds expressed dissatisfaction with government policy on parental complaints, with only 10% reporting that they're satisfied

90%

90% of school leaders report that parental complaints are having a direct, negative impact on the wellbeing of staff.

80%

Over 80% of school leaders are dissatisfied with government support for SEND, with under 5% reporting that they are satisfied.

70%

Nearly 70% of school leaders are dissatisfied with school inspections and Ofsted, despite recent commitments to reform.

78%

78% felt they had insufficient expertise in their organisation in relation to Artificial Intelligence (AI) and 98% are finding recruitment in this area challenging.

50%

Half of school leaders felt positive when asked about the educational prospects of their pupils, while just under a quarter (24%) feel it's worse compared to 12 months ago.

62%

6 in 10 (62%) of leaders felt negative when asked about the impact of government education policy compared to 12 months ago.

50%

Half of school leaders are dissatisfied with government policy regarding vocational education assessment.

87%

The vast majority (87%) of school leaders are dissatisfied with government funding for schools and trusts.

58%

Financial sustainability remains the top focus for school leaders, cited by over half of all respondents.

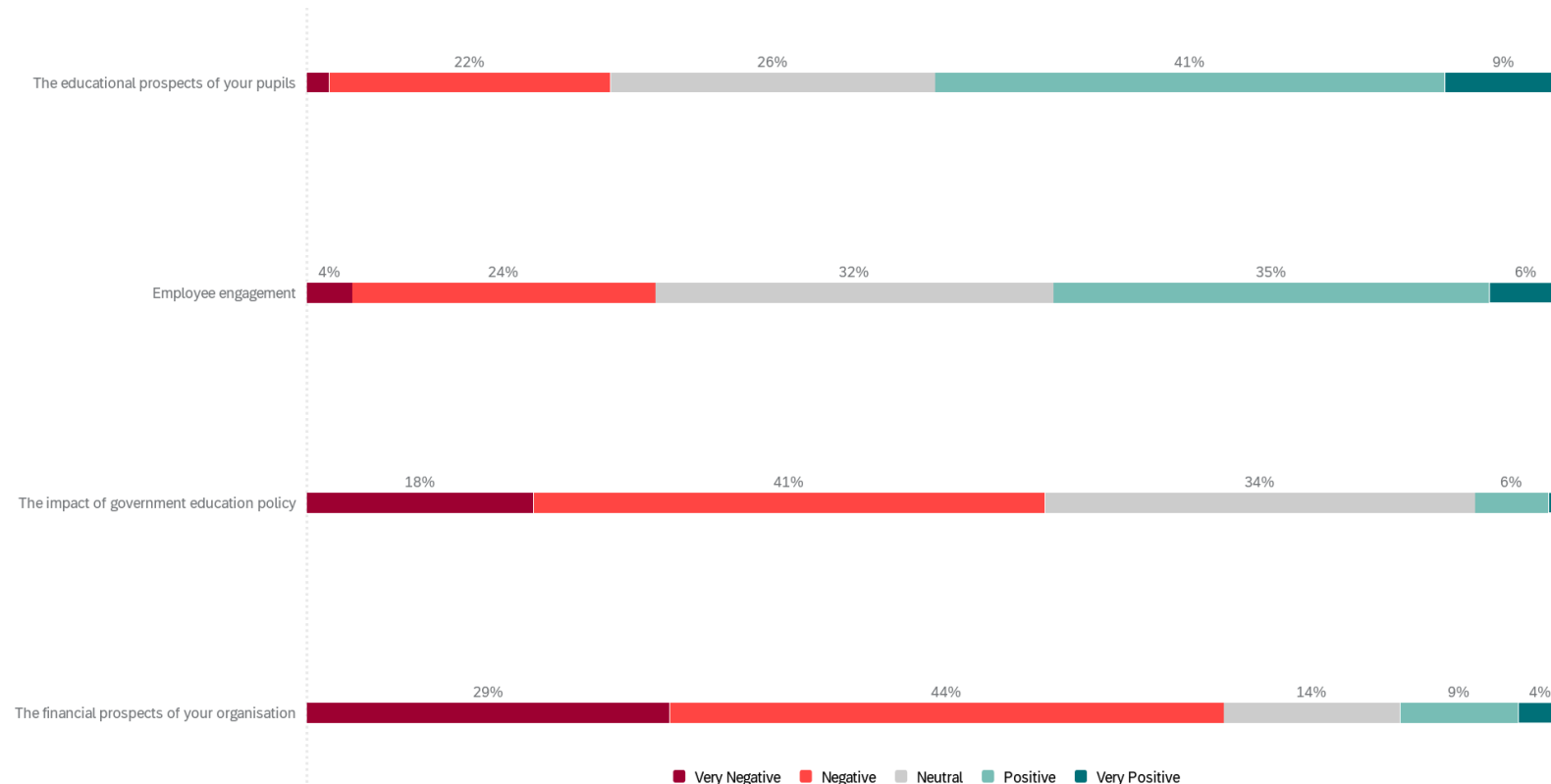
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# 01 Policy landscape

# 01. Policy landscape

## The operating environment

Considering external factors, how do you judge the following compared to 12 months ago?



Over the last year, the direction of travel in the operational environment has remained broadly consistent. With reported improvement, again, in educational prospects of pupils and employee engagement compared to 12 months ago, and continued concern about the impact of government policy and financial prospects compared to 12 months ago.

Thinking of people, 50% of respondents were positive about the educational prospects of their pupils compared to 12 months ago. On the staff front, 6 in 10 were positive about employee engagement compared to 12 months ago.

With a General Election on the horizon, the impact of government policy is interesting to note. Nearly 1 in 5 were very negative about the impact of government policy on their organisation. In total nearly 6 in 10 were negative about the impact of Government policy on their organisation.

Finances continue to be a cause for concern for many leaders. 29% were very negative about the financial prospects of their organisation compared to 12 months ago. In total, 73% were negative about the financial prospects of their organisation.

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# 01. Policy landscape

## Pupil behaviour and attendance

*“Three years after schools returned to education full-time post-Covid, the latest data shows that behaviour and attendance remain top priorities for school leaders.*

*These challenges are significant on their own, but when combined they create even greater difficulties for schools. School exclusions are at an all-time high and, to make matters worse, schools are reporting funding issues, not just within their own organisations but also in other areas of the public sector, such as CAMHS and local authority teams.*

*As in so many areas of public policymaking, there is no easy fix for these issues, and the bigger picture of organisational responsibilities and support needs urgently considering by government if significant progress is to be made in the near term.”*

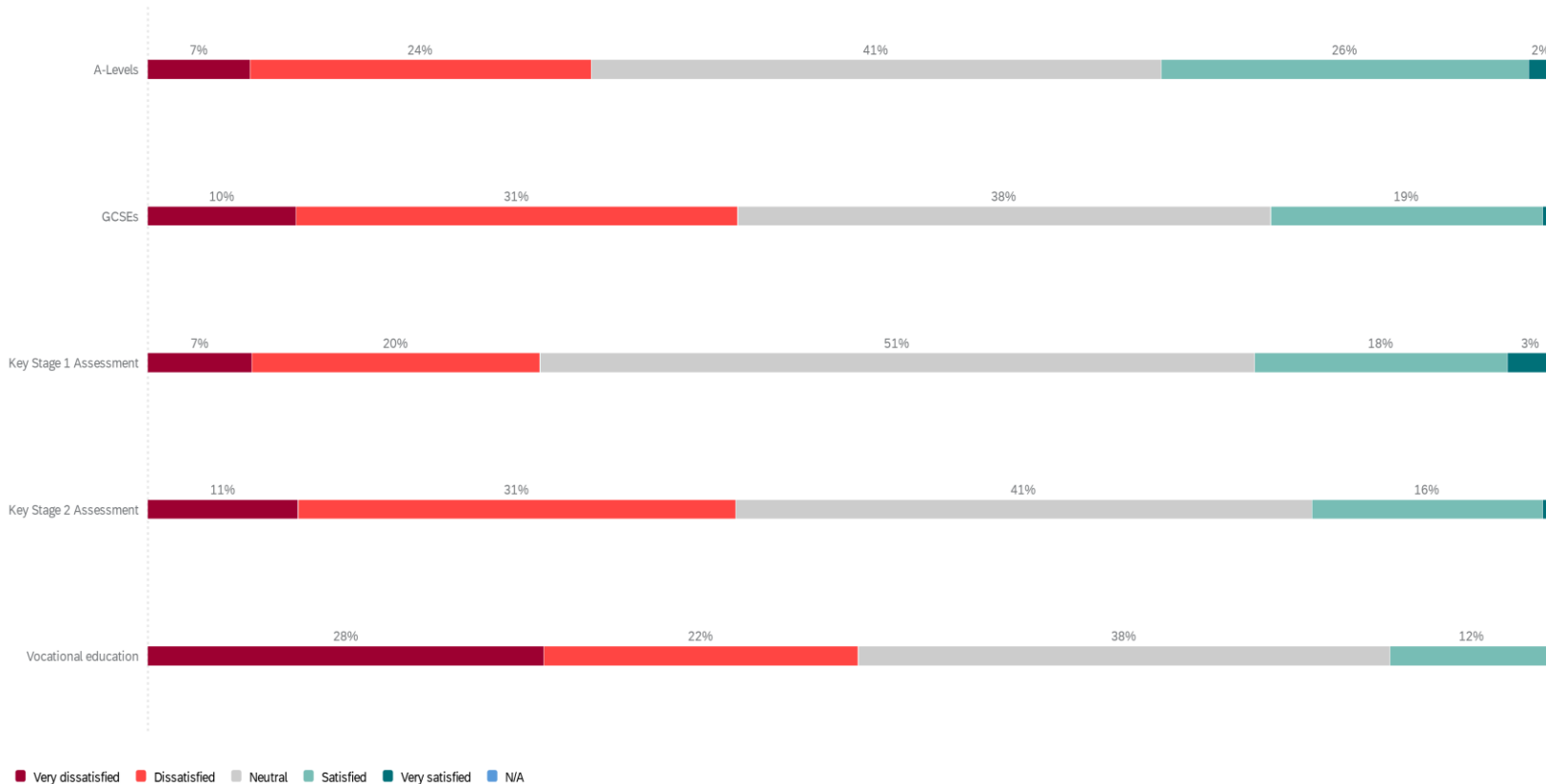
**Philip Wood, Senior Associate**



# 01. Policy landscape

## Assessment

### How satisfied are you with current government policy regarding assessment?



Assessment is likely to be an area that always divides opinion in the sector.

When looking at satisfaction with government policy regarding assessment, SATs and vocational education remain the prime causes for concern (albeit with GCSEs close behind).

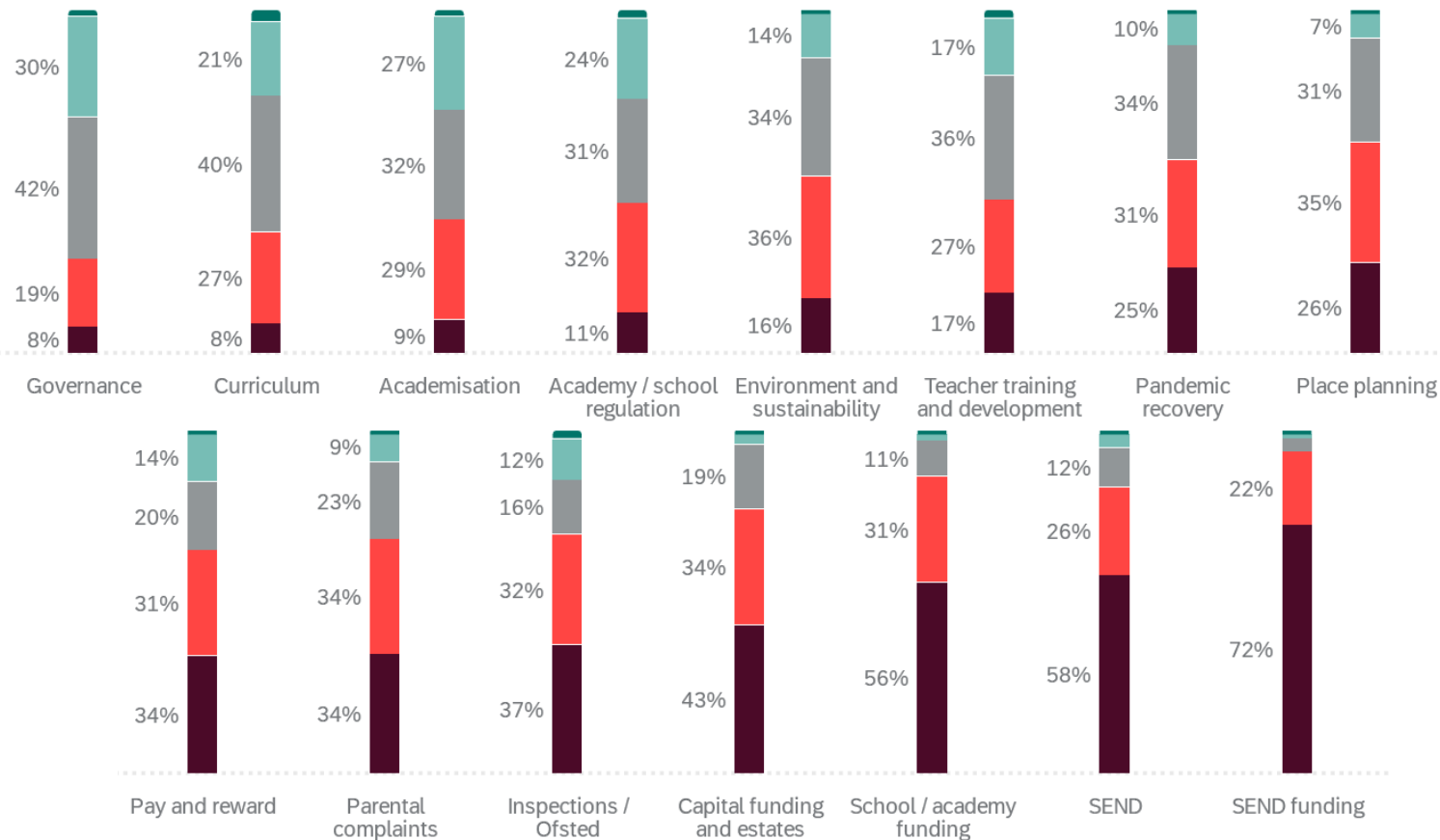
Overall, 55% of school leaders expressed dissatisfaction with vocational education assessment, with 28% very dissatisfied.

It is also interesting to note the large numbers that are neutral in terms of satisfaction levels with government policy regarding assessment.

# 01. Policy landscape

## Satisfaction

How satisfied are you with current government policy on each of the following?



Whilst levels of satisfaction with government policy on pay and reward show an improvement on a year ago, it is still an area with high levels of dissatisfaction (65%), with 34% very dissatisfied.

Government policy on SEND and SEND funding jumps out as a key issue where the political parties should really take note and consider policies that would meet leaders' concerns in both the short and long term. A very significant 94% of leaders are dissatisfied with SEND funding, with nearly three-quarters (74%) very dissatisfied.

Overall funding for schools and academies is also still a cause of dissatisfaction for leaders, with 87% dissatisfied (over half (56%) are very dissatisfied).

Whilst there has been a change at the top of Ofsted and a number of actions taken over the last 9 months, it is notable that there is still a way to go for the sector in terms of satisfaction with inspections and Ofsted; overall, 69% of leaders are dissatisfied.

Whilst things may have quietened a little on RAAC, government policy on capital funding and estates is another area where leaders are dissatisfied (77%), with over 6 in 10 (43%) very dissatisfied.

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# 01. Policy landscape

## Support for special educational needs and disabilities

*“We are being asked by schools for advice on SEND funding on a daily basis. There continues to be a huge disparity between the level of funding that schools require to meet the needs of pupils with SEND and the level of funding that they are actually given.*

*We know that the government has committed £2.5 billion towards improving SEND provision but this isn't a quick fix and, with a general election looming, may change.*

*In the meantime, schools need to continue to be creative, remain mindful of their duties under the Equality Act (an issue that arises in many parental complaints), and press for support from local authorities where it is needed and rightfully owed.”*

**Laura Thompson, Senior Associate**

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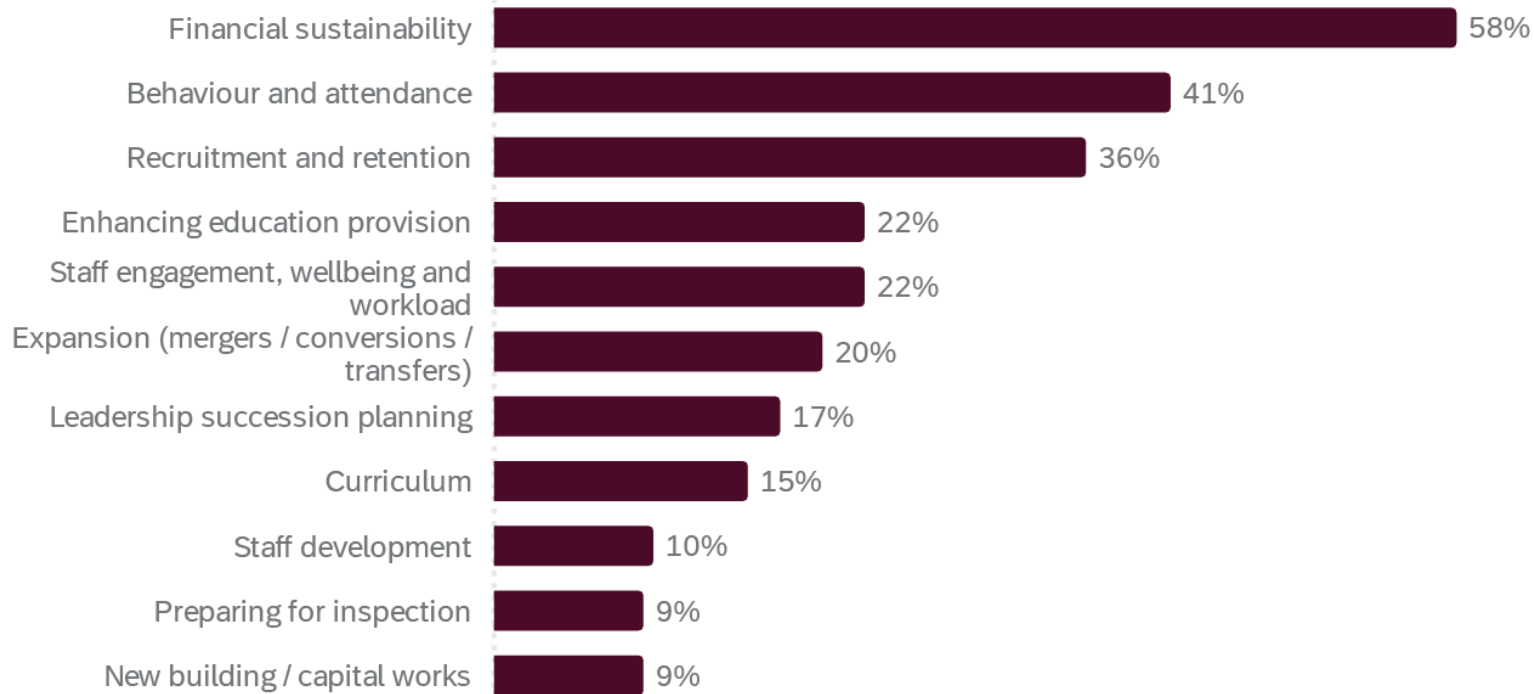
**02**

# **Priorities and organisational resilience**

# 02. Priorities and organisational resilience

## Operational strategies

### The top operational strategies for the next 12 months



This table shows the most selected priorities from the range of priorities made available to school leaders.

You get a clear sense of where leaders feel they need to be focusing, with three clear top operational strategies — financial sustainability; behaviour and attendance; together with recruitment and retention.

Unsurprisingly, financial sustainability is the top priority for over half of the organisations surveyed. Many are already experiencing a financial squeeze as the number of pupils falls due to declining birth rates and changes in migration patterns. As well as school mergers and closures, other innovative solutions will undoubtedly be required. Policymakers will need to carefully consider the national funding formula and whether it remains fit for purpose.

Behaviour and attendance are key concerns. New legislation and guidance on school attendance are scheduled to come into force on 19 August 2024, with the aim of “cracking down” on pupil absence. Time will tell what impact the new measures will have. In terms of pupil behaviour, cuts to specialist behaviour and mental health services for children have left schools having to address behavioural challenges without much-needed external support.

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## 02. Priorities and organisational resilience

### Recruitment and retention

*“Recruitment and retention continues to be a top operational priority for leaders, and is inextricably linked to a number of the other priorities, notably, financial stability and staff engagement.*

*A clear people strategy reflecting the needs and expectations employees have (e.g. flexible working, creative T&Cs etc.) can go a long way to address these issues.*

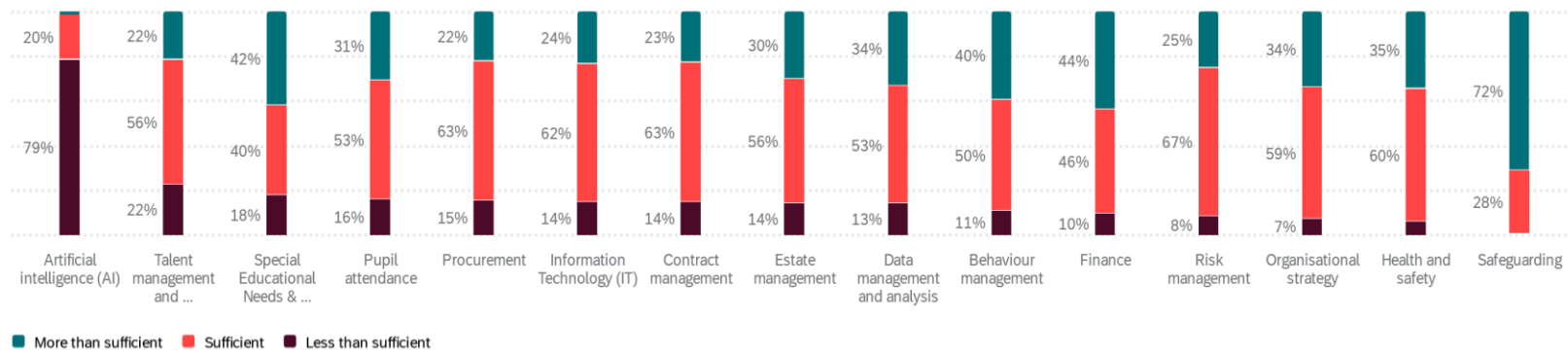
*Trusts and schools who have clear strategies in place are already beginning to reap the rewards.”*

**Tom Wallace, Deputy Head of HR Services**

# 02. Priorities and organisational resilience

## Staff expertise and recruitment

### In which areas do you feel there is sufficient expertise within your organisation?

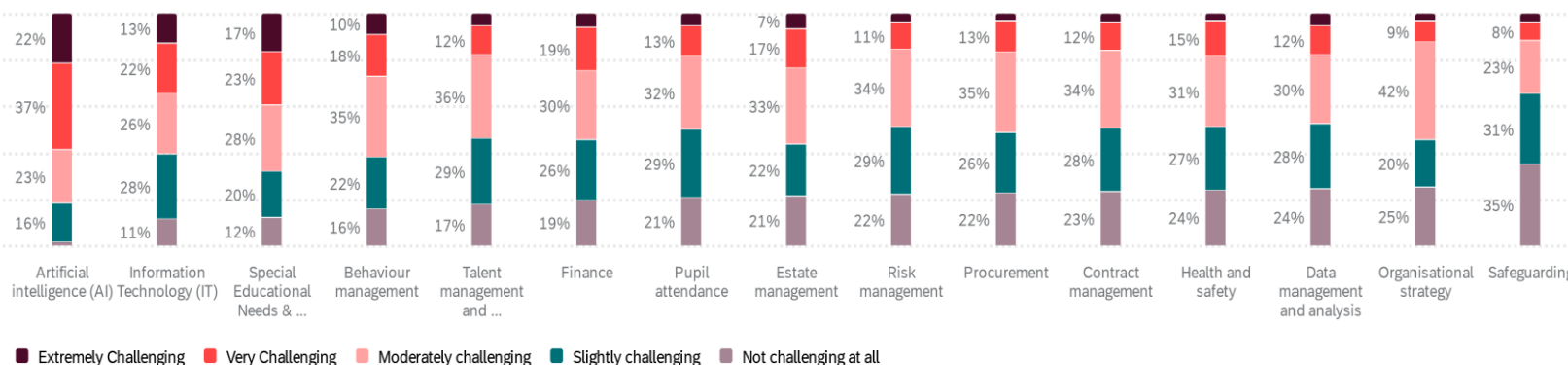


There is clear concern amongst leaders about the levels of expertise within their organisation in respect of Artificial Intelligence (AI). More than three-quarters (78%) feel that they have insufficient AI expertise within their organisation, and 98% find recruiting challenging.

22% of leaders reported that talent management was an area where they did not have sufficient expertise.

Otherwise, the survey paints a picture where organisations largely have sufficient expertise in key areas. On the key issue of safeguarding, all respondents (100%) feel that the safeguarding expertise within their organisation is sufficient or more than sufficient.

### How hard is it to recruit individuals with sufficient expertise?



Challenges in respect of recruitment are well documented in the sector. Drilling down and taking into account the broader concerns regarding government policy on SEND and its funding, it is unsurprising that this area experiences significant recruitment difficulties. 68% of leaders report facing some level of challenge in recruiting for SEND roles, with 40% finding it extremely or very challenging.

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## 02. Priorities and organisational resilience

### Talent management and staff investment

*“Talent management has historically taken a back seat in the education sector but, with the ever-increasing recruitment and retention issues, school leaders are beginning to see the true value in investing in their staff.*

*‘Growing your own’ is a great motto to have and can go a long way in resolving multiple issues that can stem from a lack of training and clear career pathways and succession planning.*

*It really is worth the time investment!”*

**Tom Wallace, Deputy Head of HR Services**



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## 02. Priorities and organisational resilience

### Artificial Intelligence (AI) comes to the fore

*“As anticipated, school leaders’ anxieties have increased due to the emerging and evolving nature of AI and its use in schools, along with the need to employ and retain staff that are sufficiently versed in deploying AI in schools.*

*A link between a lack of funding and recruiting into specialist areas, such as SEND, suggests that the emergence of new specialist areas such as AI is likely to pose ongoing challenges that leaders will need to navigate in the near future.”*

**Faisal Sameja, Senior Associate**

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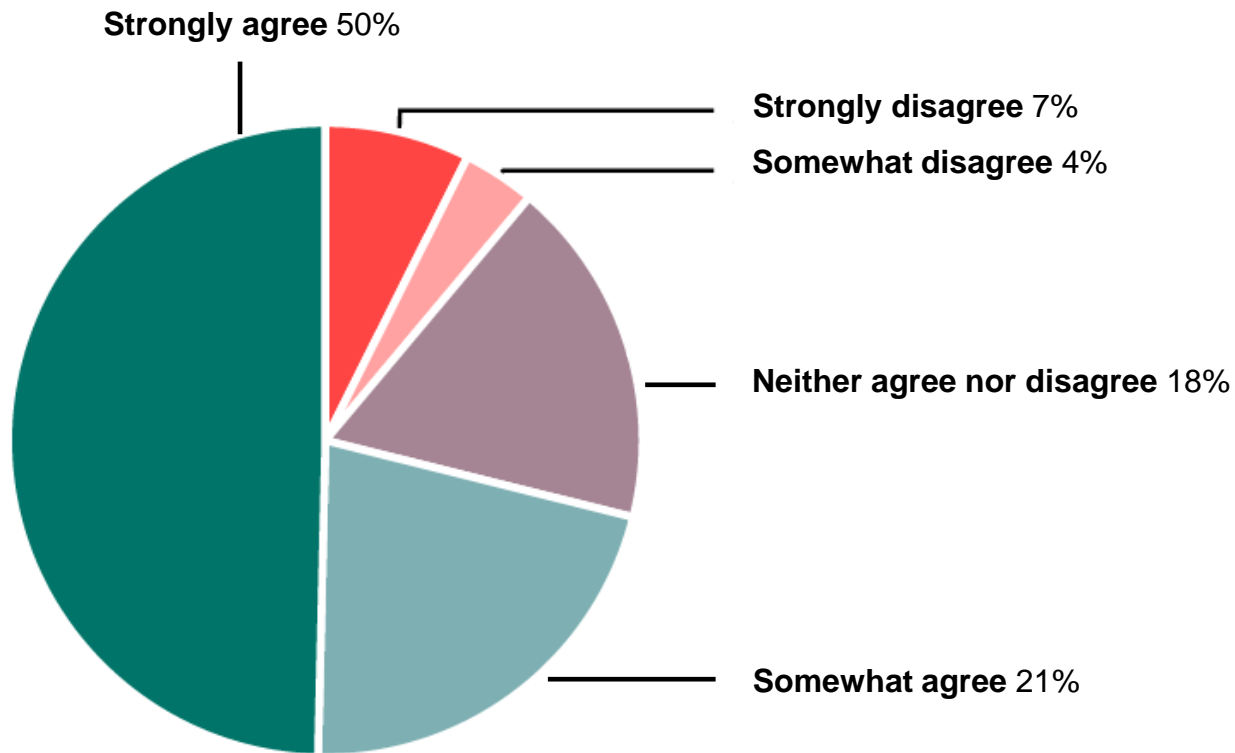
**03**

# Parental complaints

# 03. Parental complaints

## Volume, subject and escalation

### Parents and carers are quicker to escalate complaints to the formal stage of the process



There is clear evidence that the number of complaints from parents/carers to schools and academy trusts continues to rise, with 65% of respondents reporting an increase in complaints during this academic year and 47% of those respondents stating that the number has substantially increased.

Only around 4% stated that the number of complaints has reduced, with just under a third reporting that the number of complaints received has remained about the same.

The top three issues raised as subjects of complaint from parents/carers during this academic year are:

- Support for pupils with special educational needs (20%).
- Behaviour/discipline (20%).
- Equality/discrimination and transgender issues (12%).

Parental responsibility (10%) and safeguarding (7%) are also mentioned as common subjects of complaints.

Just under half of respondents strongly agree that parents/carers are now quicker to escalate complaints to the formal stage of the process, with a further 21% of respondents somewhat agreeing with this statement.

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## 03. Parental complaints

### Equality, discrimination and transgender issues

*“School leaders are tired of being dragged into toxic debates on equality issues. Too often, parents use schools as the forum to air frustrations with current government policy. The result is the diversion of time, energy and resource away from the school’s primary function of advancing education, to the detriment of all.*

*The key question for organisations is how to navigate these issues and protect themselves from being embroiled in such debates. Schools need clear evidence-based guidance from policymakers to ensure they can comply with their legal obligations and feel confident in their decision making.*

*Reinforcing clear and compliant policies, providing regular training for staff, and establishing effective messaging to the school community also provide reassurance and clarity to parents on the organisation’s role.”*

**Hayley O’Sullivan, Senior Associate**

# 03. Parental complaints

## Impact

### Complaints impacting the quality of education and wellbeing of staff

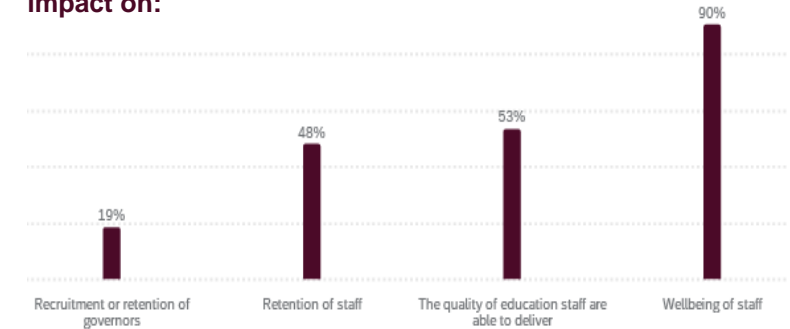
There is no doubt that managing complaints from parents/carers is having a direct negative impact on school staff, with 90% reporting a detrimental impact on staff wellbeing and 48% reporting a negative impact on staff retention.

One respondent felt that their school “*doesn’t really care about staff in this regard*”. Over half of respondents, also, report that managing complaints is having a direct negative impact on the quality of education that staff are able to deliver within schools.

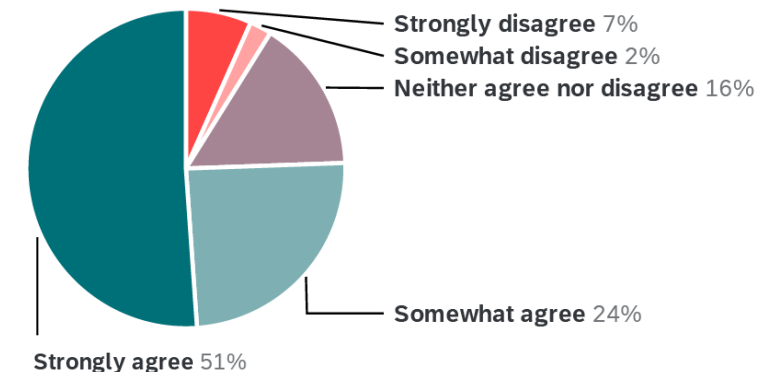
Over half of respondents strongly agree that there is a real burden being caused by parents/carers submitting complaints to multiple agencies, such as local authorities, local MPs, Ofsted and the DfE whilst the internal school complaints procedure is ongoing.

A further quarter of respondents somewhat agree with this statement. One respondent told us that they felt that there was a “*terrifying*” lack of support on this issue from the DfE and that Ofsted “*have no grasp of this situation*”. Another stated that “[*t*]he DfE process for looking at school complaints is completely broken”.

### Managing complaints is having a direct, negative impact on:



### Submitting complaints to multiple agencies whilst the complaints procedure is ongoing creates a real burden



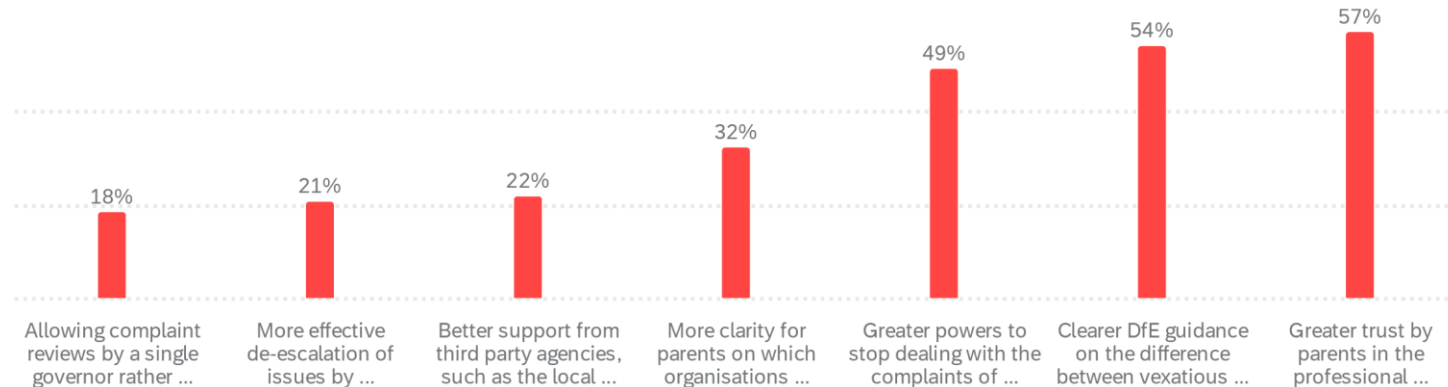
# 03. Parental complaints

## Solutions

### Steps schools have taken in the last year to manage complaints



### Key factors that would reduce the impact of complaints



54% of respondents want clearer DfE guidance on the difference between vexatious complaints and unreasonable parent behaviour, and how to handle them, and believe this would help to reduce the negative impact of complaints.

Despite clear evidence of an increase in the number of complaints and the negative impact that managing complaints from parents/carers is having on school staff, there is surprisingly little evidence that school/academy trust leaders are taking proactive steps to address this issue.

Only half of respondents report that training has been provided for senior leaders within the last year, and just a quarter of respondents state that classroom staff have received training in managing complaints during the same period. Only 39% of respondents state their school/academy trust has put in place a new complaints procedure.

Capacity to manage the number of complaints has been addressed in some cases, with a quarter of respondents reporting that their school/academy trust has reallocated staff time to manage complaints investigations.

Interestingly, 43% of respondents report that their school or academy trust has instructed legal advisers to support in the management of complaints and 18% state that a “complaints coordinator” has been appointed to manage complaints.

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## 03. Parental complaints

### Parental complaints impacting staff wellbeing

*“The message is clear: the rise in the number of parent/carer complaints and the handling of vexatious complaints and unreasonable parent behaviour is having a direct negative impact on staff wellbeing, staff retention, and the quality of education staff are able to deliver.*”

*Whilst clearer guidance from the DfE on complaints would no doubt assist, school leaders have got to do more to understand the root causes of these issues within their schools/academy trust communities and be proactive in initiating change from within.”*

**Victoria Hatton, Senior Associate**

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# About Browne Jacobson

Browne Jacobson is the law firm working to make a difference across business and society.

We champion fairness, make the complex simple, and forge connections between clients to find creative solutions.

This is how our lawyers improve outcomes for every person, community, education institution and business we serve.

## Leading education lawyers

Browne Jacobson's education practice is very well-established and is highly regarded. As one of the country's leading law firms operating in the sector, our multidisciplinary practice delivers a comprehensive portfolio of legal and HR services, from our office network to education sector organisations nationally.

The team are ambitious and forward-thinking. We seek to combine our legal expertise and deep sector understanding to provide advice that enables our clients to navigate the evolving education landscape.

The team are ranked Tier 1 in both Legal 500 and Chambers and Partners UK.

## Media enquiries

If you'd like to feature any of the findings from this report or explore any of these themes in more detail, please get in touch.



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