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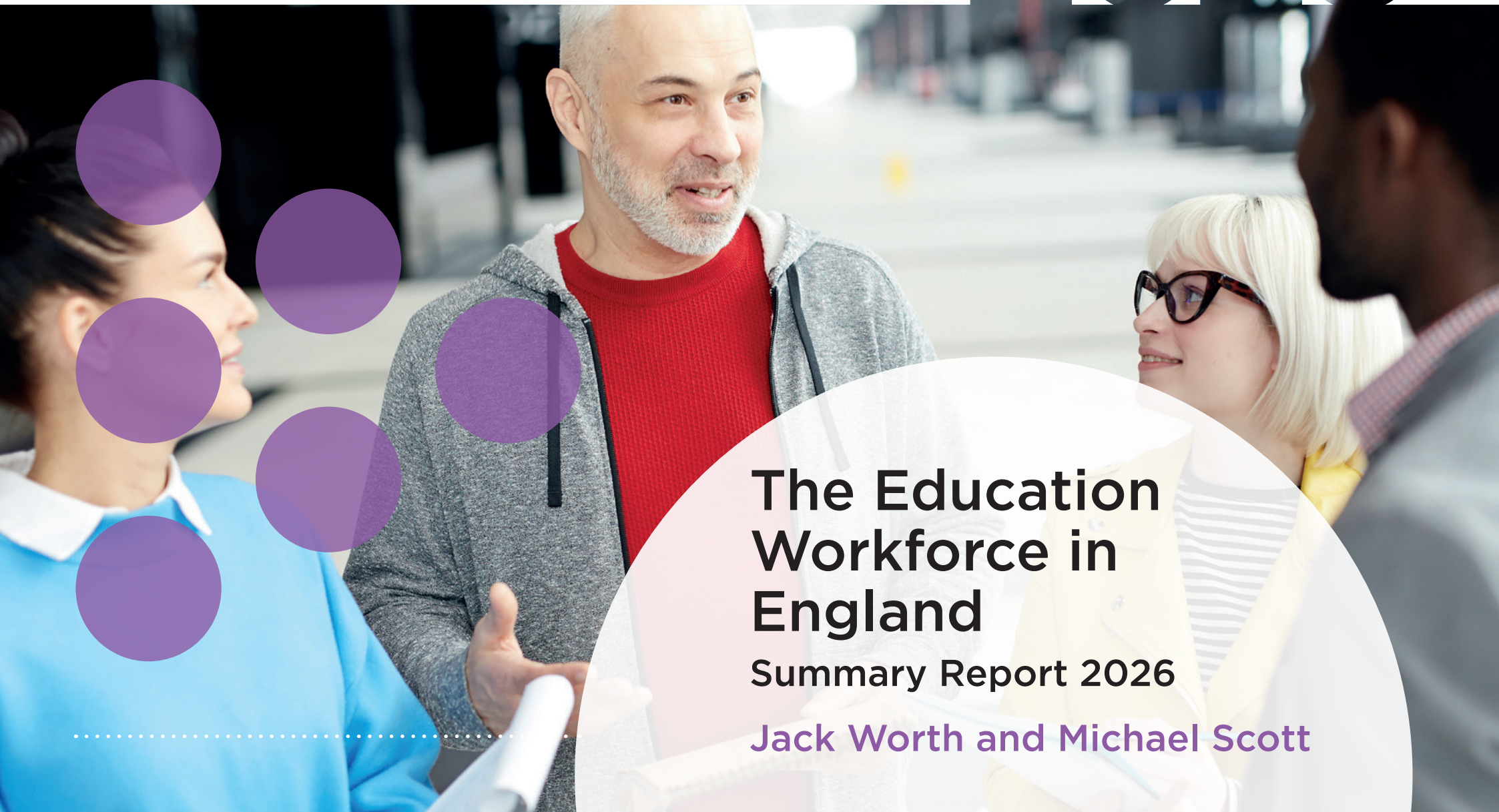
This report was updated in September 2026 following the discovery of a coding error which impacted our analysis of support staff attrition rates. Pages 11 and 18 have been revised.

2026



The Education Workforce in England

Summary Report 2026

Jack Worth and Michael Scott

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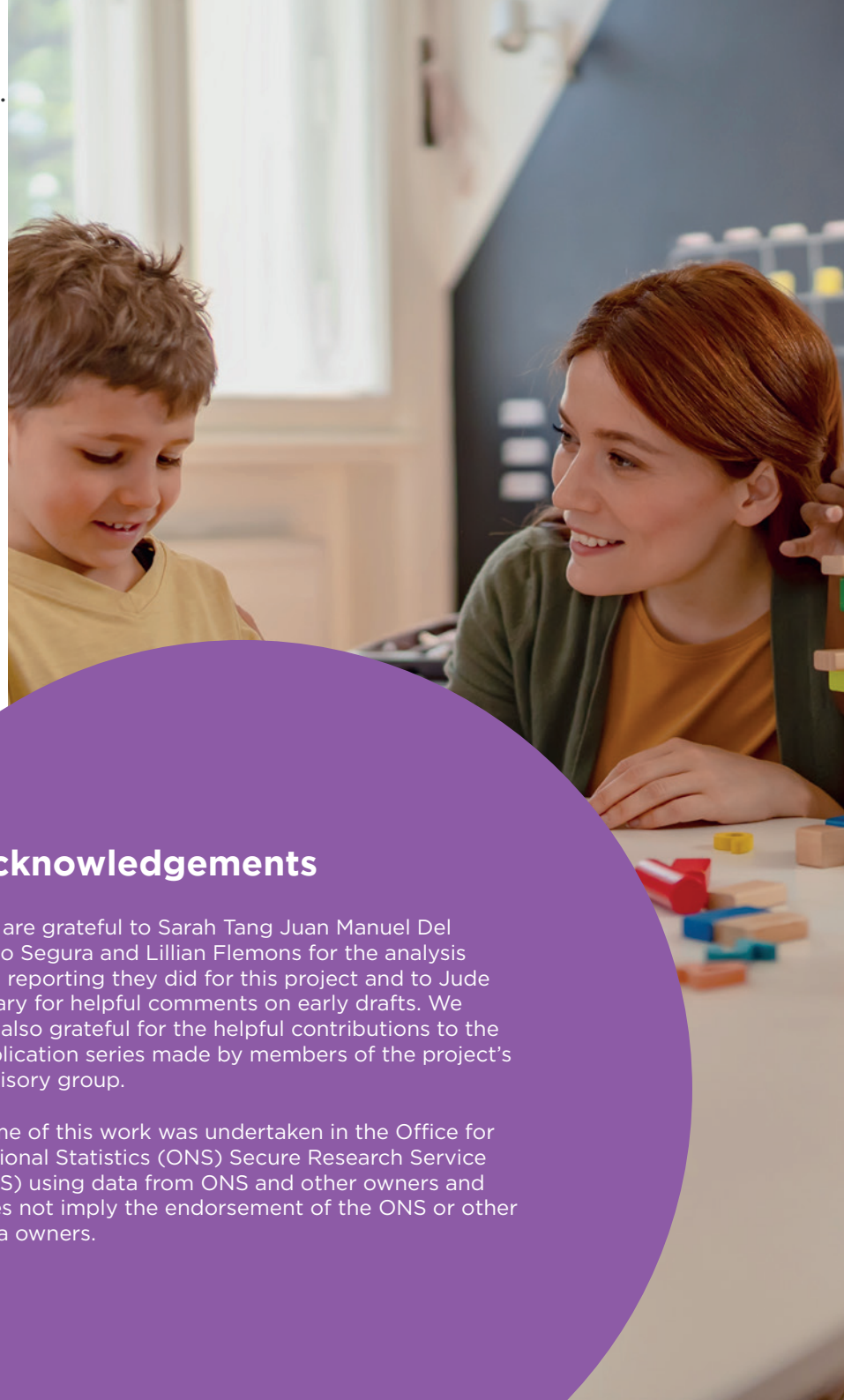

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Some of this work was undertaken in the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Secure Research Service (SRS) using data from ONS and other owners and does not imply the endorsement of the ONS or other data owners.

Introduction

The aim of the National Foundation for Educational Research's (NFER) annual series of reports on the education workforce in England, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, is to monitor progress towards meeting workforce supply challenges.

In 2026, we have published four reports on early years (EY) workers, school support staff, further education (FE) teachers and school teachers. Each report summarises the latest research and key trends in staff numbers, recruitment, retention, shortages, pay and working conditions and points towards policy actions that are likely to have the greatest impact on addressing the challenges.

The Education Workforce in England 2026 Summary Report brings together the findings from all four reports to give an overview of the education workforce we have analysed. It seeks to deepen our understanding of the education workforce in England by identifying shared challenges, pointing to common causes where they exist, and discussing possible solutions. It does this by comparing the evidence we have collected across the four reports. While acknowledging that each workforce group is different and operates within its own unique context, this evidence can help us to understand where progress has been made and why and identify how similar progress might be made for other groups.

Throughout this report, we use a wide variety of data sources, including Department for Education (DfE) data on each of the key workforce groups. For school teachers, DfE collects data through the School Workforce Census (SWC) and the Initial Teacher Training (ITT) Census. The SWC also covers school support staff. In addition, DfE maintains the Further Education Workforce Data Collection (FEWDC), which covers FE teachers and goes back to 2021/22. Finally, DfE's Survey of Childcare and Early Years Providers (SCEYP) collects data about the EY workforce.

Trends in recruitment and retention are driven by changes in the competitiveness of pay and working conditions in education compared to other jobs. We therefore also analyse trends in pay and working conditions, primarily using findings from the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE), the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and Annual Population Survey (APS). The APS and LFS enable us to compare each workforce group's pay and working conditions to similar workers in other occupations with similar qualification level, age, gender and region profiles. For school teachers we go a step further and limit this to similar graduates. Further details about the data sources used and variable definitions are in separate methodology appendices that can be found with each of our four reports.

NFER will publish education workforce annual reports again in 2027 and 2028.

Policy context

An early action by Secretary of State Bridget Phillipson after the Labour Government took office in July 2024 was to write a letter to the education workforce, including 'all working in early years, children's services, schools, further and higher education' (DfE and Secretary of State for Education, 2024). The letter said, 'I can't wait to start working together with you as we begin to transform our system so that young people get the skills, care and opportunities they deserve'.

The Government has since continued and initiated a range of policy reforms affecting education, skills and childcare. The letter acknowledges the important role that all parts of the education workforce play in underpinning any successful system reform.

Opportunity Mission and early years

Overarching the Government's policy reforms is the Opportunity Mission, part of its Plan for Change. Central to this mission is the ambition that 75 per cent of 5-year-olds in England have a good level of development (as measured by the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile) by 2028 (HM Government, 2024). A key policy continuation in early years is the Government's commitment to rolling out the expanded childcare entitlement from September 2025 to enable working parents to access up to 30 hours of free childcare per week (for 38 weeks per year) for children from 9 months old. The DfE has estimated that the early years workforce would have to increase by 35,000 staff between December 2023 and September 2025 to meet the needs of the expanded entitlement (DfE, 2024a).

In July 2025, the Government published its early years strategy (DfE, 2025c). The strategy identifies key issues in the early years workforce, including the feeling among early years staff that they are 'overworked, overlooked and undervalued'. The strategy outlines policy measures that will be implemented to improve the early years workforce, including rolling out a degree apprenticeship route to become early years teachers, creating a clear pathway and training routes for early years educators to progress their careers and achieve higher level qualifications, offering financial incentives to attract and keep early years educators and teachers in nurseries serving the most disadvantaged communities and introducing a professional register for early years educators co-designed with the sector.

Recruiting 6,500 more teachers

Another key Government objective relates to the quantity of education workforce staff. The Labour party manifesto pledged to 'recruit 6,500 new expert teachers in key subjects' (Labour Party, 2024). The Government's delivery plan clarifies that the ambition is framed around the overall number of teachers in secondary schools, colleges, special schools and alternative provision (AP) (DfE, 2026a). These areas are the main focus because of both pupil number pressures meaning more teachers are needed in any case, as well as being areas of key shortages in the past. The definition ensures that retention is key to its achievement as well as recruiting new teachers.

The delivery plan focusses mainly on rearticulating and embedding existing policies. However, it contains new plans for extending full maternity pay from four to eight weeks to help retain female teachers and 'targeted action to ensure the teaching workforce reflects the diversity of our communities', including 'promot[ing] teaching to people who may not previously have considered it', 'piloting anonymised applications' and 'provid[ing] new resources to support school leaders in creating inclusive environments' (DfE, 2026a).

Post-16 education and skills

The FE sector plays a crucial role in ensuring young people and adults have education and training opportunities to gain skills. The DfE recognises that a high-quality FE teaching workforce is a critical underpinning for the quality of FE (DfE, DWP, and DSIT, 2025). However, over the last decade, the FE sector has struggled to attract and retain the numbers of highly skilled teachers it needs.

The Post-16 and Skills White Paper sets out an £800m increase in funding for 16 to 19 education in 2026/27 that will 'support colleges and other providers to recruit and retain the high-quality teachers they need' (DfE, DWP, and DSIT, 2025). The IFS has calculated that this translates into a 2.5 per cent real-terms increase in spending per student aged 16-19 (Farquharson et al., 2026).

Pay-setting and negotiation processes

The Employment Rights Act makes specific provision for the establishment of a School Support Staff Negotiating Body (SSSNB) in England. This will take up the process for negotiating and setting support staff's pay and working conditions, away from the National Joint Council for Local Government Services (NJC). It is expected that the SSSNB will make its first decisions for the 2027/28 financial year. DfE has said the SSSNB will mean that support staff employed by local authorities and academy trusts and working both in maintained schools and academies in England, will be entitled to the statutory minimums for pay and working conditions agreed by the body (DfE, 2026c). This could include entitlements to things like training and career progression for support staff. DfE also recently announced that maternity pay for support staff would be improved through the SSSNB's negotiation process in its first year (DfE, 2026a). The NJC will continue to make decisions this year.

We are also in the middle of a School Teachers' Review Body (STRB) pay review process, which will determine teachers' pay from the 2026/27 academic year. The STRB has submitted its report with its recommendations, which the Government is considering. DfE has asked STRB to make recommendations on pay for two years and an indicative recommendation for 2028/29. The Department has proposed an increase of 6.5 per cent over those three years, with more growth at the end than the start, although they did not give a specific figure for the intervening years (DfE, 2025a). More recently, DfE said that, given existing funding levels and cost pressures, schools cannot afford more than a 2.7 per cent increase over the next two years (DfE, 2026d).

SEND and curriculum reforms

Two major policy developments in the past year could have implications for the school workforce. First is the introduction of the new National Curriculum, which could lead to increased workload if not implemented carefully. Although changes may be more limited than the 2014 curriculum change and will not be introduced until 2028, updates to schools' teaching approaches and schemes of work may be required when it is published in September 2027 (UK Government, 2025).

Second, the Government's reforms to the system for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), could also increase the workload burden many teachers face. Schools will be expected to create Individual Support Plans (ISPs) for pupils with SEND, in partnership with parents, and review them regularly. Despite the support for schools and teachers DfE are planning to put in place through additional funding and training, there is clearly a risk to teacher workload if the reforms are not carefully implemented.

The work of support staff, and particularly TAs, is often shaped by the needs of SEND students. Reforms could therefore change the nature of demand for support staff in the long-term. Given that the Government has said that children will not lose existing support and has placed a large focus on mainstream schools being able to support a wider range of needs, the medium-term effects are more likely to be an expansion, rather than a reduction, in demand for support staff. We will look at the likely implications of the reforms for school support staff in future iterations of this report.

There has been some progress in growing the workforce in key areas, but further to go to reach the Government's targets

More staff in key areas of the education workforce is the subject of two major Government policy objectives. Whether to deliver a key policy reform, keep up with growing demand or address underlying shortages, the size of the education workforce is a crucial factor for successful implementation and delivery.

First, the rollout of the expanded childcare entitlement from September 2025 requires more early years places and the staff to deliver it. The DfE has estimated that the early years workforce would have to increase by 35,000 staff between December 2023 and September 2025 to meet the needs of the expanded entitlement (DfE, 2024a).

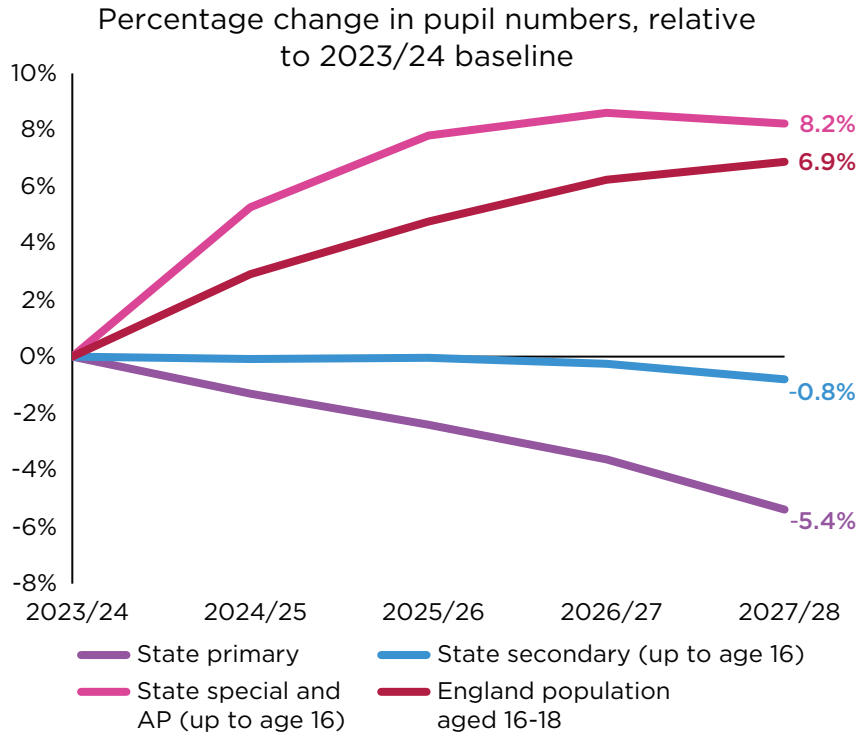
Our analysis indicates potential challenges with that, given that early years staff numbers may have plateaued after years of strong growth (Flemons and Worth, 2026). While DfE reported that the early years workforce had grown by 39,559 between summer 2021 and summer 2024 (an increase of 12 per cent), the number of staff in the sector increased by just 628 (0.2 per cent) between summer 2024 and summer 2025. However, it is important to note that the data is based on a survey rather than a census, so has a margin of error. It is also possible that further recruitment over the summer, a period not captured by the survey data, may have closed this gap. Next year's data may give a clearer picture of whether staff numbers have increased, where staffing challenges have emerged and parents have been able to access all the free childcare they would like.

Another key Government objective is its pledge to recruit 'an additional 6,500 new expert teachers across secondary and special schools, and in our colleges, over the course of this Parliament'. The latest data shows that 2,346 secondary, special or AP teachers were added in 2024/25, compared to the 2023/24 baseline, with the first data on FE teachers expected in May 2026. Recent improvements in the recruitment and retention trends for secondary teachers suggests future data may show further increases.

The Government's delivery plan, published in February 2026, states that 'we are deliberately seeking to recruit these additional teachers where the need is greatest', framing those needs around 'changing student demographics' (DfE, 2026a). In other words, the focus has been on areas of the teacher workforce where pupil numbers are expected to rise, as well as areas where there have been signs of staff shortages.

As shown in the chart, this demographic impetus to recruit teachers is strong in special schools and AP and for 16-18 education, increasing demand for teachers in FE and schools. However, secondary pupil numbers are expected to start falling in the next few years, at least amongst those aged between 11-16 in the projections. Primary pupil numbers are already falling and are expected to continue to do so, implying fewer teachers will be needed, especially as there has been little evidence of shortages.

However, addressing underlying shortages is also a key impetus for targeting an increase in teacher numbers, so ensuring shortages in key subjects and most-affected schools (e.g. those with the most pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds) are reduced will be key to avoiding hitting the target but missing the point. There are positive signs that recruitment in key secondary subjects has improved.



Source: NFER analysis of DfE Pupil Projections and ONS Population Projections

Staff shortages undermine workforce sufficiency and impact on the quality of education provision

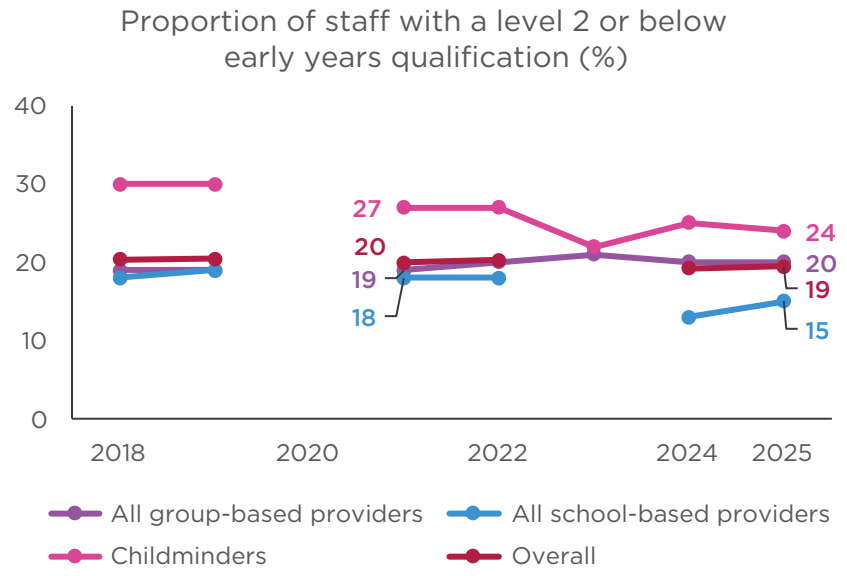
The quality of education provision depends not only on a sufficient number of staff but also on having a high-quality workforce that is trained and motivated to deliver in their roles. Goals framed around the quantity of staff may complement quality goals: for example, increasing the number of specialist secondary teachers available in shortage subjects is likely to increase the number of teachers and education quality when deployed to replace non-specialists.

However, quality and quantity goals can also be in tension with one another. For example, the Government's early years strategy sets a clear ambition about the quality of provision, centred around more high-qualified staff in settings, particularly in disadvantaged areas. However, delivery of the expanded childcare entitlement requires a sizeable and rapid increase in staff numbers within a system that does not have high regulatory bars for staff qualification levels. The proportion of early years staff with a level 4 or above (higher education) early years or teaching related qualification remains relatively low, at a quarter of the overall workforce. Furthermore, a significant minority of staff are only qualified to level 2 (GCSE equivalent) or below: 15 per cent in school-based settings, a fifth (20 per cent) of staff in group-based providers and a quarter (24 per cent) of childminders.

Moreover, the early years sector may not be attractive in the long term for staff with higher qualifications. Higher qualified early years staff are significantly less likely to report that they have career progression opportunities compared to similar workers. In addition,pay compression – linked toincreases in the statutory National Living Wage (NLW) - is likely to be reducing the pay premium associated with higher qualifications. These factors could reduce the incentive for lower qualified staff to train and qualify to higher levels.

While teaching has higher regulatory bars in terms of training and employment, deployment of non-specialist teachers in shortage subjects is likely to mean lower quality teaching. Some secondary subjects have clear gaps in the proportion of subject specialists. For example, around 72 per cent of physics and religious education teaching in 2024/25 was delivered by specialists (DfE, 2025d). For business studies the rate was 79 per cent, computer science 82 per cent and mathematics 87 per cent. These tend to be subjects where ITT performance has been less strong, relative to target and in contrast to subjects that have tended to recruit well, such as PE and history (95 and 93 per cent, respectively).

Unlike school teachers, high quality FE teachers need to not only be highly skilled teachers, but also experts in their industry. This dual professionalism adds another layer of complexity to recruitment and retention challenges. Nevertheless, in FE there are also signs of shortages that are likely to be impacting on the quality of provision. In 2023/24, there were around 3,000 vacant FE teaching posts (DfE, 2025b). In general FE colleges, four per cent of roles were vacant. These rates vary by region, reaching as high as 6.5 per cent in Yorkshire and The Humber, compared to only two per cent in the East Midlands.



Source: NFER analysis of SCEYP, 2025.

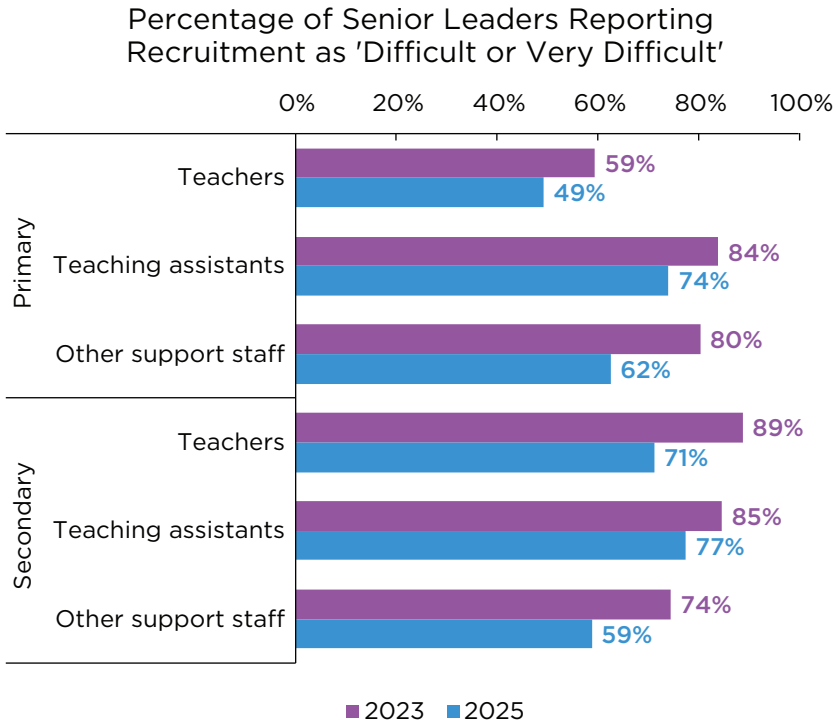
Weakness in the wider labour market is likely to be driving improvements in workforce recruitment

Recent trends in the teacher recruitment pipeline show some signs for optimism that the conditions for recruiting new teachers are more benign than they were a few years ago. In 2023/24, recruitment to secondary ITT courses only represented 48 per cent of the target, which is estimated by the Government based on expected future staffing needs, influenced by projected changes in pupil numbers as well as teacher retention rates, returners and other entrants (DfE, 2026b). The number of secondary recruits has increased by 33 per cent since 2023/24, while the targets have also fallen due to improvements in retention and other factors. Last year, secondary recruitment reached 89 per cent of target. Our forecast for 2026/27 – based on data about the number of applications that have been made and accepted in the year to date, up to February 2026, and compared to last year's target as this year's is not yet published – is 86 per cent.

This encouraging ITT performance is likely due to challenges in the wider labour market. UK unemployment rates have increase from 4.2 per cent in summer 2024 to 5.2 per cent in autumn 2025 (ONS, 2026a). Economy-wide vacancies have also been declining in recent years (ONS, 2026b), from 1.3m in spring 2022 to 700,000 in late 2025, below the pre-pandemic level of 800,000. A recent survey of large graduate employers suggests that the number of graduate vacancies declined for three years in a row between 2022 and 2025 (High Fliers Research, 2026). Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that ITT recruitment is relatively healthy.

The improvement in ITT recruitment has also translated into somewhat improved perceptions among senior leaders about difficulty recruiting teachers. New NFER research for this year's education workforce reports highlights that while 71 per cent of secondary leaders reported in autumn 2025 that it is 'difficult' or 'very difficult' to recruit teachers, this is lower than the 89 per cent reporting the same in 2023. Fewer senior leaders in primary report recruitment difficulties than in secondary, and the rate amongst primary leaders has also fallen since 2023. Nonetheless, the levels of recruitment difficulty reported by secondary leaders remain high, perhaps since overall ITT recruitment remains below target.

This survey also revealed the same pattern of some improvement but also continued difficulties in recruiting school support staff. In 2025, around three in four leaders from both primary and secondary schools said they found recruiting TAs 'difficult' or 'very difficult'. Around 60 per cent of leaders said they found recruiting other support staff difficult. Indeed, the data indicates that more leaders said they found it difficult to recruit TAs than teachers. Policymakers should be concerned that the majority of school leaders still say support staff recruitment is difficult, with TAs being particularly difficult to recruit. It suggests more action is needed to ensure schools have the staff they need in their classrooms to deliver for their students. To start with, DfE should develop a better understanding of the extent and nature of support staff shortages.



Source: NFER surveys of school leaders (2023 and 2025). In 2025, at least 212 primary leaders and 126 secondary leaders answered each question. Sample sizes in 2023 were larger than this.

This page was updated in September 2026 because a coding error was found in the original analysis of support staff attrition rates. Both the text and chart have been revised.

Following an increase after the pandemic, school workforce exit rates are falling

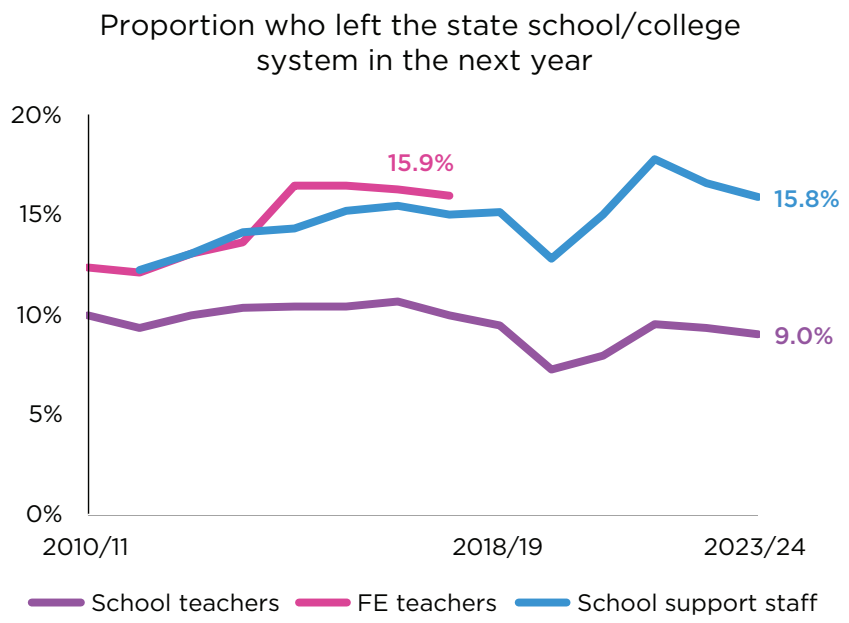
Retaining staff is important for reaching quantity goals such as the target to recruit Retaining staff is important for reaching quantity goals such as the target to recruit 6,500 more teachers in England. Retaining more staff also contributes to workforce stability and increasing experience levels, which are linked to higher quality education provision (National Institute of Teaching, 2026). Retention is one of the key pillars to the 6,500 additional teachers delivery plan (DfE, 2026a).

School teacher retention has improved slightly in recent years, with the leaving rate falling from 10.6 per cent in 2016/17 to 9.5 per cent in 2021/22 and nine per cent in the most recent data. This has contributed to lower ITT recruitment targets and increased teacher numbers overall. The exit rate of first-year early career teachers who left within one year between 2023/24 and 2024/25 was 10.3 per cent, the lowest rate since the data began.

Experimental NFER analysis suggests around 16 per cent of support staff left the school system between 2023/24 and 2024/25. This rate increased sharply after the Covid-19 pandemic. It has trended downward since, like teachers, but remains above pre-pandemic levels.

Historic data on FE teacher leaving rates also suggests that retention is poorer among FE teachers. However, the latest available data on FE teacher retention is from DfE analysis of Teacher Pension Scheme (TPS) data that only gives information up to 2017/18. To enable better monitoring, the DfE should start publishing regular data on retention rates of FE teachers as soon as it can, either via the FEWDC or failing that, using pension scheme data, as it has done before.

There is no data available on the retention in the sector of early years staff, although SCEYP covers turnover rates (i.e. rates of early years staff leaving workat their setting). This data suggests that turnover rates are considerably higher in group-based providers (14 per cent in 2025) than in school-based providers (seven per cent). The data also suggests that turnover has been falling since 2023, with turnover among staff in group-based providers falling from 19 per cent in 2023 to 14 per cent in 2025 and among staff in school-based providers from eight per cent to seven per cent.



Source: Teachers is from DfE analysis of SWC. FE teachers is from DfE analysis of Teacher Pensions Scheme data. School support staff is from NFER analysis of SWC.

Note: some caution should be exercised in directly comparing the series because the school teachers series is based on a full-time equivalent leaving rate, while the FE teacher and school support staff are headcount measures.

The competitiveness of FE teacher pay has fallen rapidly in recent years

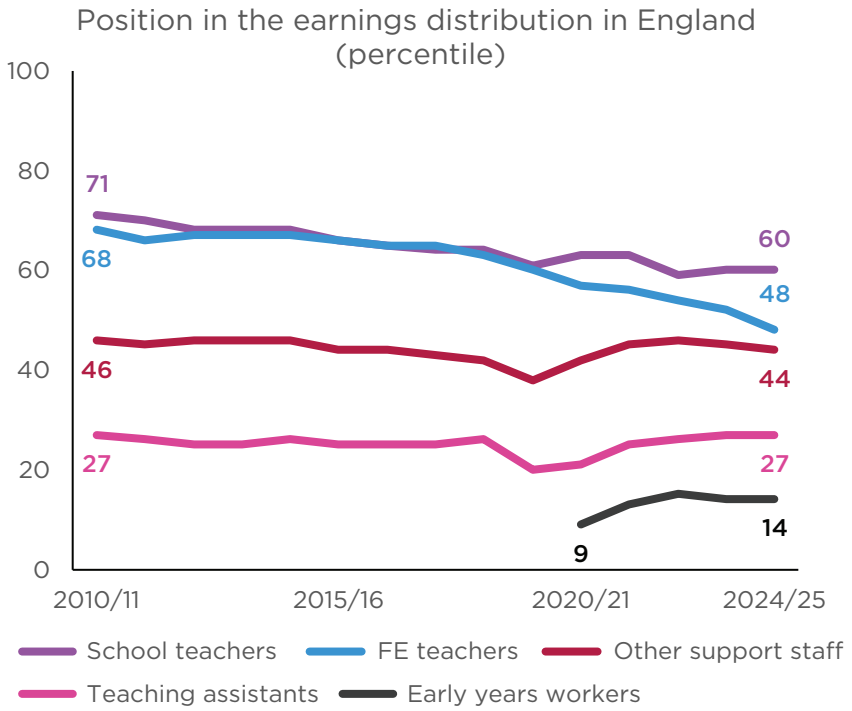
Pay competitiveness is a factor for recruitment and retention in the education workforce. Pay increasing more slowly than pay in the rest of the labour market is likely to make jobs less attractive and therefore more challenging to recruit and retain the staff required. In contrast, accelerated pay growth that is funded is likely to support attracting more staff to join and to stay.

The deterioration of the position of school teacher pay over the last decade, as shown in the chart, is likely to have contributed to the recruitment and retention challenges. Median FE teacher pay has fallen even more rapidly, particularly since 2019, resulting in a much lower level of competitiveness compared to the wider labour market than in previous years. This is likely to have compounded recruitment and retention challenges affecting FE teachers, although limited retention data is available. Our analysis of ASHE data suggests FE teacher pay was 20 per cent lower than the pay of school teachers in 2025.

School support staff (especially TAs) and early years staff have lower levels of pay than teachers, but this also reflects prevailing qualification levels. Pay of school support staff and early years staff have tended to keep pace better with pay within the earnings distribution of England, which is likely to be due to rapid increases in the minimum wage in recent years.

Indeed, the relative position of early years workers within the overall earnings distribution has risen since 2020/21, albeit from a very low base. This increase may reflect providers responding to the need to recruit more staff with pay increases. In July 2024, 46 per cent of surveyed providers said they had 'increased the pay of existing staff to improve retention rates' to meet staffing requirements (DfE, 2024b). While early years providers are responsible for setting pay levels for their staff, levels of Government funding – including funding rates for free entitlement hours – have a strong influence over what is feasible for a provider to pay.

Given the tight fiscal environment facing the Government, affordability is likely to continue to be a key constraint on pay growth being a lever for improving recruitment and retention across the education workforce. Nevertheless, the important role pay competitiveness plays in supporting recruitment and retention means that at least maintaining competitiveness is vital. The pay disparity between teachers in FE and schools and the expected extra demand for FE teachers in the coming years means that increasing FE teacher pay competitiveness should be a key priority. The Government should also ensure that early years funding rates support providers to offer competitive wages to recruit and retain staff with a pay structure that rewards higher qualification levels. As it begins its work, the SSSNB should also strongly consider whether low pay levels are driving the recruitment and retention challenges among school support staff.



Source: NFER analysis of ASHE. Percentiles for school and FE teachers are compared to the distribution by annual earnings for full-time employees. TAs, other support staff and early years staff are compared to the distribution by hourly earnings for all employees regardless of working pattern. This reflects the relatively large proportion of the latter group that work part time. This data has been aligned to academic years.

Financial incentives targeted at recruitment and retention in key subjects and geographical areas can provide welcome and cost effective additional improvements

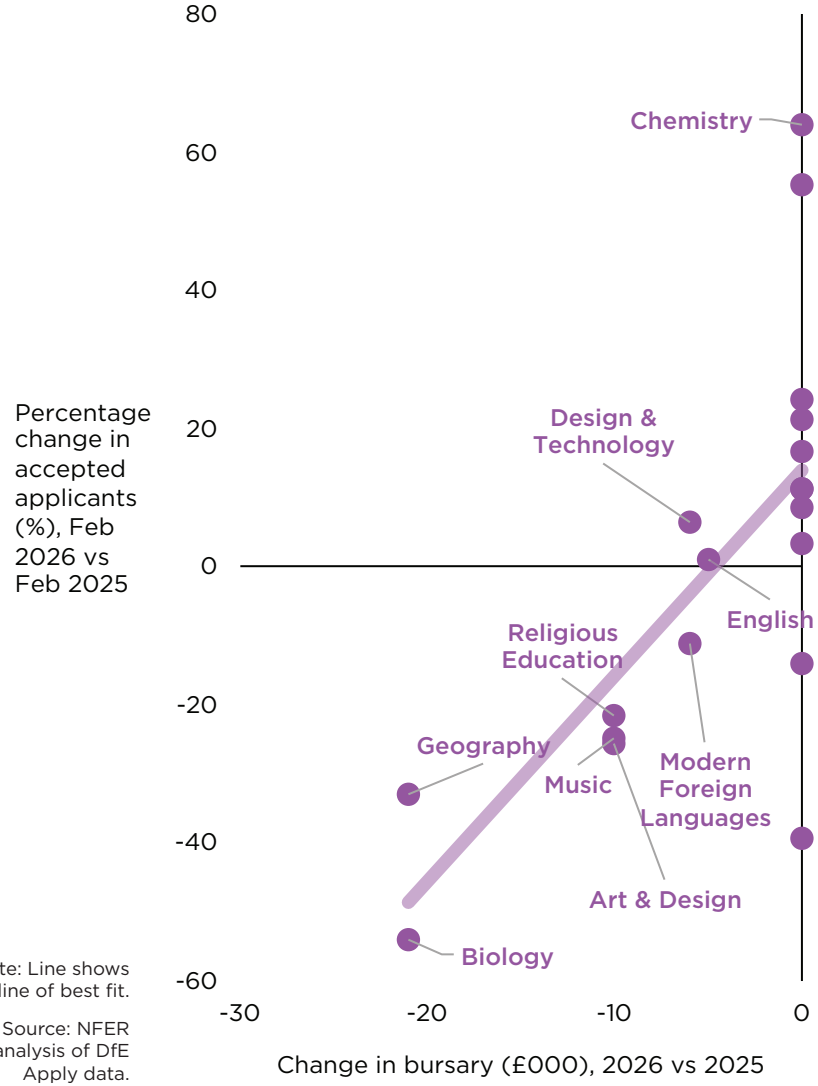
The Government has introduced, changed and reformed a number of targeted financial incentives aimed at improving recruitment and/or retention in the education workforce. Incentives can be particularly cost effective because they target key areas that need particular support, such as shortage subjects.

Training bursaries for teachers have been longstanding, but the payment levels and eligible subjects often change. For 2026/27, the Government reduced several bursaries by as much as £21,000, including eliminating some entirely. Bursaries for maths, physics, chemistry and computing were retained at £29,000. As shown in the chart, this has led to lower levels of ITT recruitment in affected subjects than might have otherwise been the case. This impact is also backed up by NFER's evaluation of bursaries using data over many years of bursary changes (McLean, Tang and Worth, 2023).

NFER's evaluation also found that bursaries lead to sustained changes in supply and are more cost effective than alternative policy measures such as pay increases and retention payments. DfE should therefore consider increasing bursaries again in subjects that have low bursaries and fail to meet their targets. The Government should particularly consider bursary increases for languages and arts subjects that are below their ITT targets, to support the implementation of the revised national curriculum and its changes to accountability measures.

Early career teachers in some shortage subjects in eligible schools and FE providers also receive retention payments of up to £6,000. The evidence on the effectiveness of these payments is somewhat mixed, but tends to suggest they are associated with improved retention among school teachers (Sims and Benhenda, 2022; Worth and McLean, 2025). NFER is currently evaluating the impact of TRI payments in FE in a study commissioned by the DfE and in partnership with CFE Research.

Financial incentives have also been introduced to early years to encourage recruitment, with £1,000 available to new recruits in eligible areas. However, an evaluation of the scheme concluded that the pilot did not result in a measurable increase in the number of applicants per vacancy. However, the pilot's effectiveness may have faced barriers including a lack of provider engagement and buy-in, and a lack of awareness among potential applicants (IFF Research and London Economics, 2025).



Note: Line shows the line of best fit.

Source: NFER analysis of DfE Apply data.

Teacher workloads are slowly coming down but face significant headwinds, while workloads for other groups compare well to those of similar workers

Finding ways to ease workload pressures is another important part of efforts to improve retention in the education workforce. This is borne out in recent NFER research on teacher retention, which found that school teachers who feel they spend too much time on activities like lesson planning are subsequently more likely to leave teaching (Worth, Kuhn and del Pozo Segura, 2026).

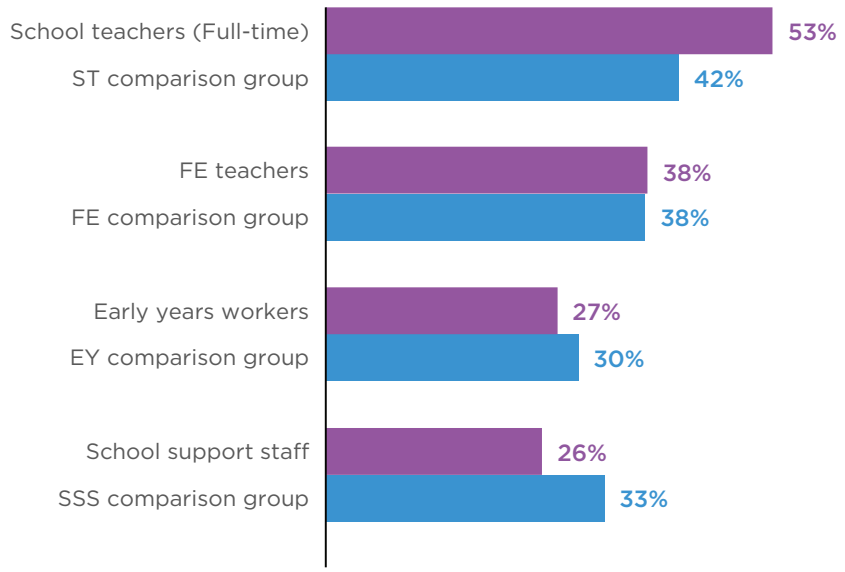
School teachers' workloads have eased over the last four years. This trend is seen in different datasets that measure the average number of hours a full-time teacher works in a working week and appears to be part of a longer-term trend going back to the mid-2010s. However, school teachers still work longer weeks than similar graduates[1] during term time and over half would like to work fewer hours, suggesting there is still some way to go. Indeed, the progress in recent years could go into reverse. Recent policy developments pose a potential risk to school teachers' workloads unless they are carefully implemented. The new National Curriculum will mean updates to schools' teaching approaches and schemes of work may be required from September 2027 (UK Government, 2025). In addition, the Government's reforms to the system for children with SEND, could also increase the workload burden many teachers face.

Unlike school teachers, the data does not suggest that average full-time FE teachers work a longer working week than similar workers. They are however more likely to work overtime, which they are usually not paid for. FE teachers have tended to be slightly more likely than similar workers to express a desire to work shorter hours, although this was not the case in 2024/25. Overall, our research suggests FE teacher concerns around workload are likely to be related to the nature of the work and whether they are receiving proportionate pay, rather than the number of hours worked in themselves.

Early years staff face a similar number of hours in a working week compared to similar workers and are not more likely to express a preference to work a shorter week. However, we did find some evidence of a deterioration in the working conditions of higher qualified staff. Compared to similar workers, early years workers with at least a Level 4 qualification were much more likely to say they would prefer to work less hours even if it meant less pay.

School support staff tend to work less hours than similar workers. For many this will reflect what attracted them to the job – the ability to only work during school hours. However, 15 per cent of support staff in 2024/25 said they would like more work than they currently get at the current level of pay, which is more than similar workers. This suggests underemployment is a challenge for part of the support staff workforce.

Proportion who would prefer to work fewer hours, 2024/25



Source: NFER analysis of LFS. For school teachers, we compare with similar graduates. For other groups, we compare with similar workers. See individual reports and methodologies for more detail.

1 See the introduction of this report or our previous 2026 reports for how similar graduates or similar workers are defined.

A lack of career progression opportunities is a key challenge for FE teachers, support staff and higher qualified EY workers

Alongside ways of making the job manageable today, employers can improve workforce recruitment and retention by offering clear pathways to career progression for current and prospective employees. APS data suggests this is a challenge across the education workforce, with the exception of school teachers.

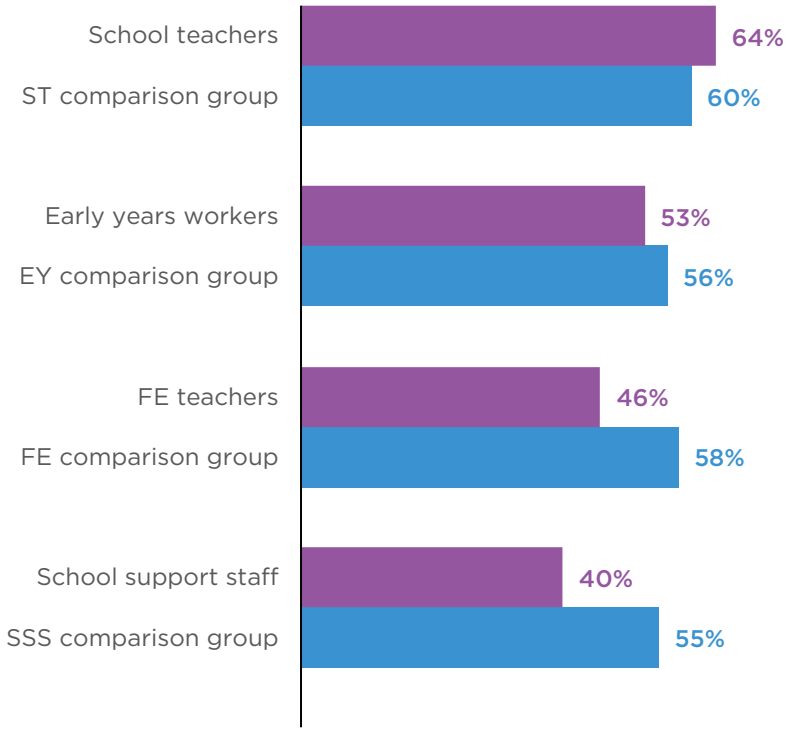
In 2024, 40 per cent of school support staff in the APS agreed that they have good opportunities for career progression in their current job. They are considerably less likely to report this than similar workers, suggesting there is lack of career progression routes for support staff. Given a lack of career progression is also a relatively commonly cited reason amongst support staff who are considering leaving their jobs, it suggests defining and signposting clear paths to progression would help improve support staff retention. This should be a key focus for the new SSSNB – career progression is part of the body's remit.

FE teachers are also less likely to agree that their job offers good opportunities for career progression than similar workers in 2024 (46 compared to 58 per cent, respectively). NFER's previous research on the FE workforce found that limited opportunities for pay progression were a major challenge for retention (Flemons *et al.*, 2024).

The proportion of early year workers (53 per cent) who agree they have good opportunities for career progression is nearly the same as the proportion of similar workers (56 per cent; the gap is not statistically significant). However, there is some variation within the group: those with Level 4 qualifications or higher report lower levels of agreement than similar workers. This suggests progression opportunities for those with higher qualifications are perceived to be more limited. With pay differentials for higher qualified workers also falling due to pay compression, this suggests the sector may struggle to retain these staff in future. The Government's early years strategy sets out plans to create 'a clear pathway and training routes for early years educators to progress their careers and achieve higher level qualifications' (DfE, 2025c).

Finally, as noted earlier, our analysis suggests teachers are more likely than similar graduates to agree there are good opportunities for career progression in their job, although this gap is small. A higher proportion of teachers report agreement here than any other workforce group too. Generally speaking, teaching has clear routes to career progression, particularly through school leadership, so this is perhaps unsurprising. As well as highlighting the importance of defining clearer routes for other groups, this result suggests that these routes should be protected and strengthened in future.

Proportion who agree that they have opportunities for career progression, 2024



Source: NFER analysis of APS

DfE has developed an excellent evidence base for teachers and should now do the same for other workforce groups

This is the first year NFER has published education workforce reports looking at four different groups, having previously published its report on school teachers every year since 2019. Throughout the reports, we have highlighted evidence gaps and research needs for each group. The table on the next page summarises the evidence landscape across seven topics for each of the four groups. The ratings are intended to give an overall sense of the evidence but are subjective, based on the opinions of the report's authors.

DfE has developed the evidence base on teachers for a long time. The SWC has been in place for over fifteen years, providing high-quality information about all teachers. In recent years, the Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders (WLTL) survey has filled an important gap by directly collecting teachers' perceptions of workload, working conditions and reasons for considering leaving. The largest gap in the current teacher evidence base is the impact of workforce policies. There have been good recent evaluations of policies, including bursaries and retention payments, but more could be done to measure the effects of other policies (including those tackling teacher workload) and compare the cost-effectiveness of policies and interventions at both the system and school level.

The evidence base for FE teachers has been transformed by the FEWDC, which collects information about numbers, shortages and pay. DfE has also commissioned NFER to conduct a large-scale representative survey of the FE teacher workforce. Given historic evidence points to FE teacher retention challenges, DfE should prioritise further development of the FEWDC to produce statistics about retention. DfE's commitment to collecting data on FE ITE provision and use it to inform FE workforce planning is also a welcome step (DfE, 2026a).

The SCEYP data collection provides basic information about the early years workforce, drawing on provider survey responses from a representative sample. However, the workforce information is limited and its estimates carry uncertainty since it is not a census. The Government should upgrade the sources of early years workforce information available, including commissioning a representative individual-level workforce survey and designing the new early years professional register so that it provides individual-level workforce data.

DfE collects data on school support staff through the SWC, although it has gaps. DfE should add a measure of support staff shortages to the collection. The existing SWC data has not been as well used by DfE or other researchers as it has for school teachers, in part due to issues with the quality of the data. For example, DfE does not publish statistics about support staff entrants, retention or pay, although it has the data to do so. The arrival of a new regular support staff survey (Thomas *et al.*, 2026), which was published after our 2026 support staff report was finalised, is welcome. It will give good information about workload and other aspects of working conditions. Nonetheless, more can be done on this evidence base, which is vital to inform SSSNB decision-making.

The authors' view of the evidence base across four workforce groups and seven key topics, based on an assessment of the evidence published by DfE

	School teachers	FE teachers	EY workers	School support staff
Numbers and characteristics FTE/headcount across England, including across characteristics and how it relates to demand.	Good	Good	Some	Good
Recruitment Numbers and pathways of joiners, as well as training routes.	Good	Little	Some	Little
Retention Numbers and characteristics of leavers, as well as reasons for leaving.	Good	Little	Little	Little
Shortages Vacancies and/or measures of how much provision is delivered by a specialist.	Good	Good	Little	Little
Pay The distribution of pay, along with the drivers of variation.	Good	Good	Some	Little
Workload Average workload and drivers of excessive workload.	Good	Little	Little	Some
Recruitment and retention policies The effect of these policies on workforce outcomes and their relative cost effectiveness.	Some	Little	Little	Little

- Good, publicly available evidence and it is regularly updated.
- Some publicly available evidence but it has gaps in coverage.
- Little, or no, publicly available evidence.

Source: NFER

Conclusions and recommendations

The Government has a range of policy initiatives to implement and objectives it wants to achieve that either directly or indirectly rely on the education workforce to deliver. These span the education workforce, ranging from requiring more early years workers to deliver the expanded childcare entitlement, desiring a higher qualified early years workforce to improve child development outcomes at age five, recruiting more teachers across schools and colleges, ensuring the skills system supports young people, employers and workers to equip the workforce, and delivering a reformed system of SEND provision that requires trained teachers and support staff. Staff sufficiency in the education workforce is also the bedrock of day-to-day delivery of education provision, without which the quality of provision for children, young people and adult learners suffers.

However, the nature of supply challenges vary across the workforce. While there are clear objectives related to ensuring there are more early years workers and teachers in FE and secondary schools, primary schools are likely to need fewer teachers over the coming years as pupil numbers fall. School teacher retention and early years turnover have been steadily improving.

Our research also highlights that the key job-related issues affecting the recruitment and retention of different groups also differ substantially across the workforce. While workload is a longstanding retention issue for school teachers, it appears to be less of an immediate concern for other groups, particularly school support staff. In contrast, despite annual policy attention on school teachers' pay, the competitiveness of FE teacher pay has fallen much more rapidly in the last decade. A lack of career progression is a key issue for many FE teachers, school support staff and higher qualified staff in early years, while it appears much less of an issue for school teachers. This means that the policy solutions employed need to be nuanced and tailored to the specific workforce contexts. Further, while learning from policy initiatives applied in other workforce groups can be beneficial for developing policy solutions, rigorous and context-specific evaluation is crucial for testing whether and how evidence-based solutions can be applied more widely.

Key recommendations from our workforce reports:

On pay, the Government should:

- provide funding that allows FE providers to pay teachers more
- ensure that funding rates support early years providers to offer competitive wages to recruit and retain staff, with a pay structure that rewards higher qualification levels
- strongly consider, with SSSNB, whether low pay levels are driving school support staff recruitment and retention challenges
- aim to maintain the competitiveness of school teachers' pay by matching the growth in average earnings outside teaching and funding schools to deliver it.

On career progression and training, the Government should:

- explore, with SSSNB, what can be done to improve career progression opportunities for school support staff
- implement its policy proposals on the early years professional development offer and career pathway
- carefully explore the role of regulation in providing clear opportunities for early years staff career progression and a pay structure that incentivises gaining further qualifications
- focus on ensuring training is available to both prospective and current TAs, given SEND skills shortages are commonly cited by schools as a key recruitment challenge.

On staff wellbeing, the Government should:

- emphasise, with providers, the high sense of worthwhileness, fulfilment and positive working environments that can be found in early years as part of recruitment

For school teachers, the Government should:

- consider bursary increases for languages and arts subjects that are below their ITT targets, to support the implementation of the revised national curriculum and its changes to accountability measures
- conduct more deliberate workforce planning for special schools and alternative provision teachers, as it does for primary and secondary teachers.

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