

# 2026



**The School Teacher  
Labour Market in  
England**

Annual Report 2026

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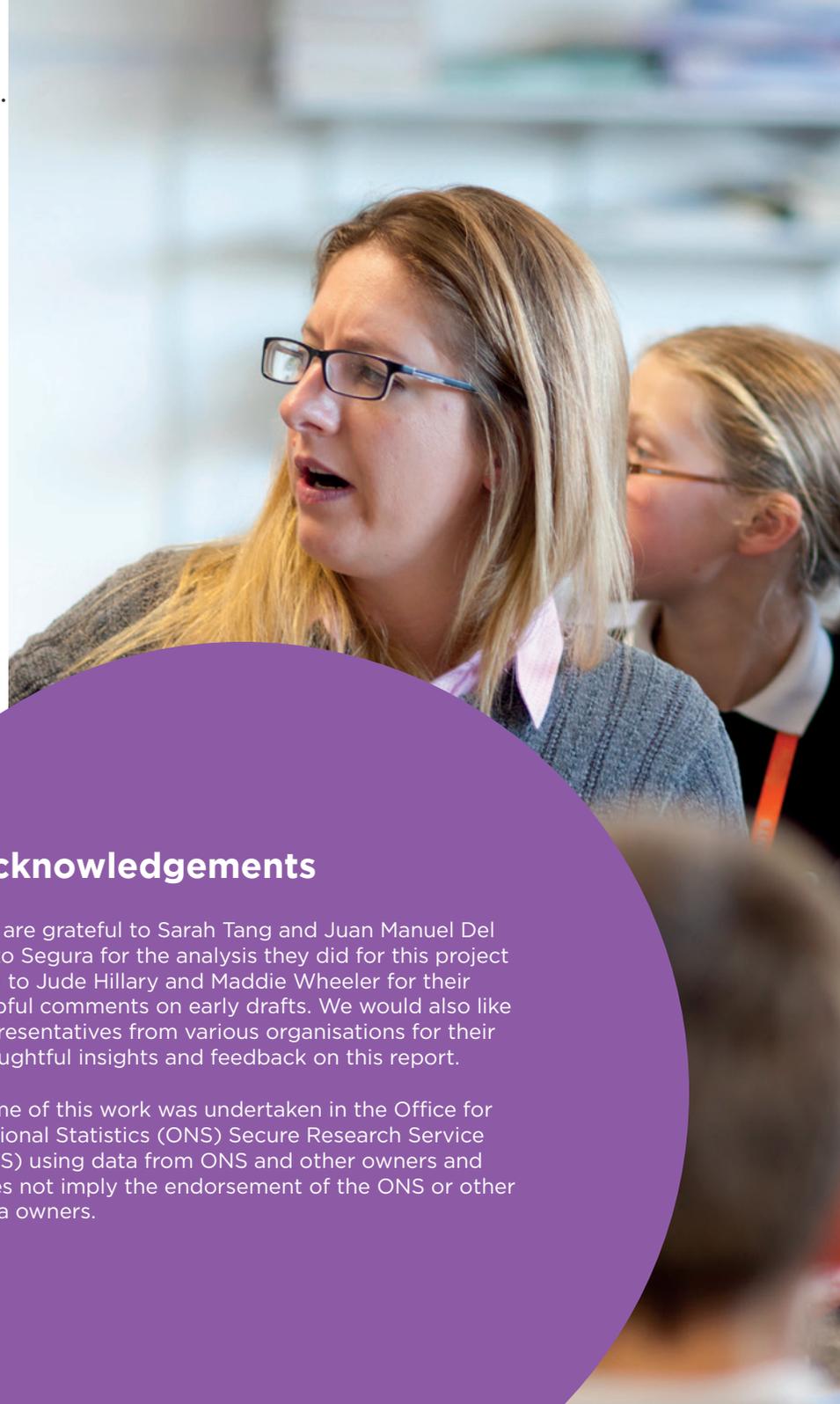
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## Introduction

The latest data on teacher recruitment and retention shows significant signs of improvement in key areas that are likely to ease some of the impacts of poor teacher supply over the last decade. These developments are welcome and may help to deliver the Government's pledge to recruit 6,500 teachers.

Recruitment to initial teacher training (ITT) in 2025/26 had improved on the year before and so far appears to be sustained for 2026/27, although secondary recruitment remains below target. Teacher retention has also improved modestly in recent years, which has contributed to reduced targets for ITT. Teachers' working hours have fallen slightly, although they still remain higher than other graduates during term time, and teachers are more positive about their workload than four years ago.

The overall impression is a happier one than NFER has given in recent teacher labour market reports, but this is not a time for complacency. The progress we show here is only partial and could easily be reversed in the coming years.

The aim of the National Foundation for Educational Research's (NFER) annual series of reports on the education workforce, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, is to monitor progress towards meeting workforce supply challenges. This report summarises the latest research and key trends in schoolteacher 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.

We use Department for Education (DfE) data on teacher training applications and enrolments to show how last year's ITT recruitment compared to target and what recruitment is likely to look like this year. We also explore trends in teacher numbers, retention and specialist teaching using data from the DfE's School Workforce Census (SWC).

Trends in recruitment and retention are driven by changes in the competitiveness of pay and working conditions in teaching compared to other jobs. We therefore also analyse trends in pay and working conditions, primarily using findings from the DfE's Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders (WLTL) survey, Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE), the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and Annual Population Survey (APS). The WLTL is a crucial source of sector-specific information on teachers' workload and perceptions of their working conditions while the APS and LFS enable us to compare teachers' pay and working conditions to graduates in other occupations with similar age, gender and region profiles. Further details about the data sources used and variable definitions are in a separate methodology appendix.



## Key findings and recommendations



### Teacher numbers have expanded in secondary and special schools, but primary teacher numbers are declining, driven by fewer pupils

The Government made some progress towards its 6,500 new teachers target in 2024/25 and positive trends in recruitment and retention flows suggest that this may continue. Secondary pupil numbers are set to start falling, meaning the demographic impetus to recruit more secondary teachers will be reduced. Nevertheless, more subject-specialist secondary teachers are needed to address long-standing shortages in some subjects, such as science, maths and computing.

In contrast, growth in the number of pupils in state special schools and alternative provision (AP) of 8.2 per cent by 2027/28 is likely to mean additional demand for teachers. An equivalent rise in the FTE number of teachers would equate to around 2,300 more teachers. However, the health of teacher supply into special schools and AP is not currently measured directly by DfE in the same way it is for primary and secondary teachers.

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### **Recruitment to initial teacher training (ITT) is forecast to be much improved in 2026/27 compared to previous years, despite some bursary cuts**

Recruitment to ITT increased in 2025/26, likely driven by deteriorating employment opportunities in the wider labour market. Improvements to retention and other factors also helped lower recruitment targets, meaning that primary, English, maths and science (biology, physics and chemistry combined) were all at or above target. However, overall secondary recruitment remained below target due to under recruitment in around half of subjects.

The early data for ITT applications for 2026/27 is also encouraging, with primary, English, maths and science all projected to be at or above target. This is despite some subjects like English and geography recruiting less than they might otherwise have due to cuts in their bursaries. Compared to the same point in the previous cycle, there has been a 36 per cent fall in the number of accepted applicants in subjects that have seen a bursary cut of £10,000 or more.

### **Teacher retention has improved over the last two years and exit rates for first year early career teachers were the lowest on record**

Retention rates have also been steadily improving. Nine per cent of teachers left the state school system between 2023/24 and 2024/25, a slightly better rate than in the previous two years and down from 10.6 per cent a decade before. The exit rate of first-year early career teachers (ECTs) who left within one year between 2023/24 and 2024/25 was 10.3 per cent, the lowest rate since the data began.

### **Unfilled vacancies and recruitment difficulties remain high, but have eased slightly since 2023**

Over the last few years, recruitment shortfalls and relatively high exit rates have led to an increase in teacher vacancies. Given that recruitment and retention have improved, it is likely that the overall vacancy rate will continue to fall too. The sense that teacher shortages are high but slowly easing is reinforced by new NFER survey data: 71 per cent of secondary school leaders and 49 per cent of primary leaders reported that recruiting teachers was difficult. Both these rates have come down from a similar survey in 2023. Recent improvements to recruitment and retention are also likely to result in improvements to the extent of specialist teaching and this, in turn, is likely to be positive for pupil outcomes.

### **Recent teacher pay growth has narrowed the gap with average earnings slightly, but competitiveness remains lower than in 2010/11**

Teachers have received pay awards of at least four per cent for four successive years, but inflation has been high during this time too. Teachers' salaries have increased faster than average earnings over the last three years. But these gains are relatively modest compared to the longer term trend. In 2025/26, experienced teachers' salaries remain around 8.5 per cent lower in real terms than they were in 2010/11, while starting salaries are now back to where they were in real terms then. By contrast, average UK earnings are set to be six per cent higher over the same period.

### **The Government's proposal to increase pay by 6.5 per cent over the next three years would probably mean teachers' earnings fail to keep pace with wider earnings growth**

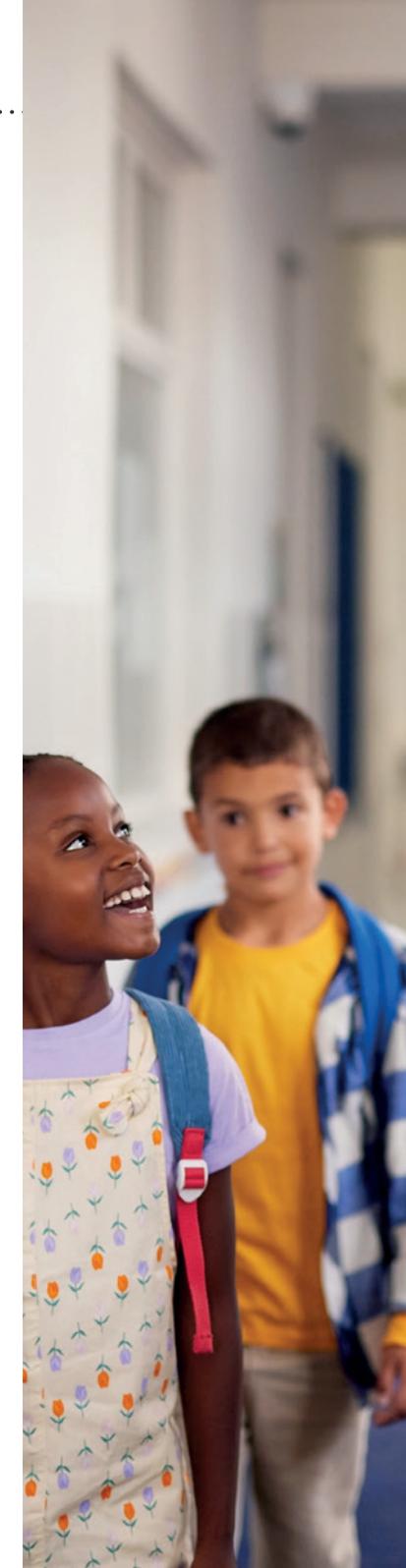
The OBR forecasts that average UK earnings will grow by seven per cent between 2025/26 and 2028/29. If that happens, increasing teachers' pay by 6.5 per cent, as the DfE proposed recently, would result in a mild loss of competitiveness. If the wider labour market recovers by then, as OBR broadly expects, then this could undermine the positive recruitment and retention picture. While three-year economic forecasts are very uncertain, it is clear that average earnings are likely to grow by more in the next year than DfE are suggesting teachers' earnings should or that schools can afford to fund given current funding levels. Such a small pay increase could be counterproductive given the progress made on teacher recruitment and retention in the last few years.

### **Teachers' working hours and workload perceptions have improved modestly in recent years, but remain less positive than for similar workers**

Both LFS and WLTL survey data suggest that full-time teacher working hours have fallen slightly in recent years. Around one in four teachers in the 2024/25 WLTL survey said they felt they had an acceptable workload, a significant increase from 17 per cent in 2021/22 (IFF Research and UCL Institute of Education, 2025). NFER analysis of LFS data also suggests that teachers' perceptions of their workload are improving. Recent NFER research has found that more positive workload perceptions are linked to an improved likelihood of retention (Worth, Kuhn and del Pozo Segura, 2026). However, the data also suggests there is further to go: teachers are 11 percentage points more likely to say they want to work fewer hours than they do, compared to similar graduates.

### **Key recommendations**

1. The School Teachers' Review Body (STRB) and Government should aim to maintain the competitiveness of teachers' pay by matching the growth in average earnings outside teaching and funding schools to deliver it.
2. Given the importance of special schools and AP for the 6,500 teacher target, DfE should conduct more deliberate workforce planning for these sectors, as it does for primary and secondary teachers.
3. 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.





## Policy context

A 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’. With recruitment to ITT and retention improving, it has made some progress to achieving that goal with 2,300 more teachers in secondary schools, special schools and alternative provision, but there is further to go.

In February 2026, the Government published its delivery plan for the target (DfE, 2026a). Given the progress so far and positive trends for the future, and in the context of major reforms to other areas of the education system such as Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), it is perhaps unsurprising that there were few major new policy actions attached to it. 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’.

More immediately, we are in the middle of an STRB process, which will determine teachers’ pay from the 2026/27 academic year. 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, 2025b). 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).

Teachers’ working lives may also be affected by other policy reforms in the school system. The revised national curriculum (UK Government, 2025) and accompanying changes to accountability measures (Ofsted, 2025) may affect demand for different subjects in the medium term and lead to additional work for teachers to adapt teaching materials around its introduction in 2028. The new Ofsted framework and proposed reforms to the SEND system (DfE, 2026b) may also have implications for teachers’ workload that will need to be carefully managed.

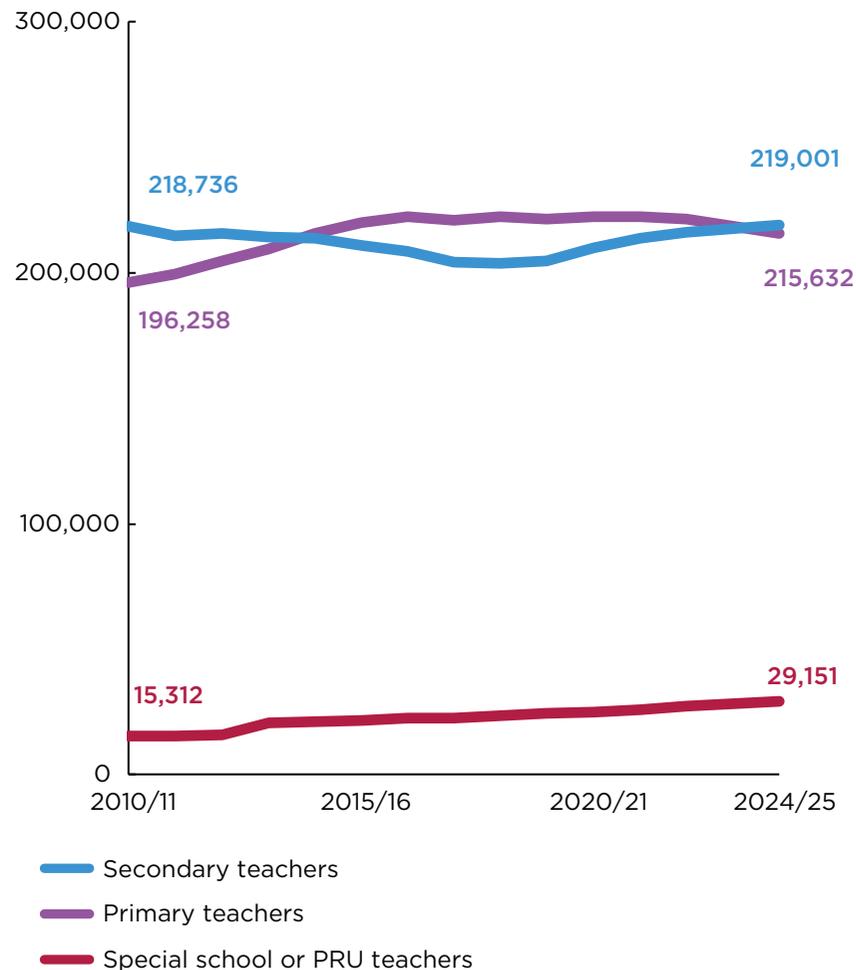
**While the teacher workforce continues to expand in secondary and special schools, the numbers in primary schools are declining, driven by falls in pupil numbers**

The size of the teaching workforce has grown over the last decade, with the total number of teachers in state-sector primary and secondary schools in England rising by about five per cent between 2010/11 and 2024/25. Most of this growth has been in primary, which increased roughly in line with the increase in primary-age pupils during the early 2010s. The number of primary teachers has consistently fallen each year since 2021/22, but this too is linked to the fall in pupil numbers. The average pupil-to-teacher ratio (PTR) in primary has stayed reasonably constant over that period, rising very slightly from 20.6 in 2021/22 to 20.8 in 2024/25.

The increase in secondary pupil numbers came later than it did in primary, as the larger primary cohorts reached secondary age. The number of secondary pupils started growing from 2015 and the number of secondary teachers has also increased. However, pupil numbers have risen by more than teacher numbers, resulting in rising PTRs. The average secondary PTR has risen from 14.9 in 2014/15 to 16.7 in 2024/25. Some rise in PTR as pupil numbers rise may be expected as the system accommodates more pupils into the existing capacity, but this rise in PTR has also been influenced by significant challenges affecting secondary teacher supply over the last decade. One result of supply challenges has been increased class sizes, with the proportion of pupils in classes larger than 30 rising from 10.3 per cent in 2015/16 to 16.3 per cent in 2024/25.

The number of teachers in special schools has grown substantially since 2010/11. This is against the backdrop of rising demand for special needs education and significant on-going challenges in teacher supply in the special needs sector (Scott, 2025a).

Size of the teaching workforce in England (FTE)



Source: SWC.

**The Government made some progress towards its 6,500 new teachers target, but pupil growth suggests further education and the specialist sector will be key**

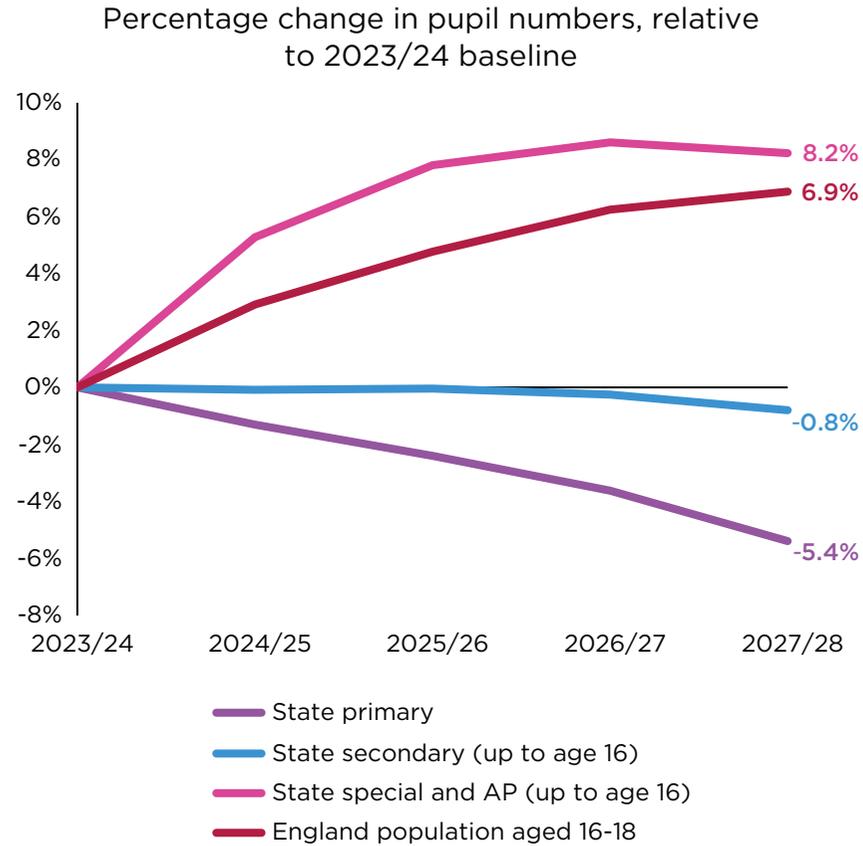
A key Government objective is its pledge to recruit ‘an additional 6,500 new expert teachers across secondary and special schools, and in our colleges, over the course of this Parliament’. Its delivery plan, published in February 2026, states that ‘we are deliberately seeking to recruit these additional teachers where the need is greatest’, framing those needs around ‘changing student demographics’ (DfE, 2026a). In other words, the focus has been on phases where pupil numbers are expected to rise as well as areas where there have been signs of staff shortages. The latest data shows that 2,346 secondary and special/ AP teachers were added in 2024/25, compared to the 2023/24 baseline.

The chart summarises pupil and population projection numbers compared to the baseline academic year of 2023/24 (DfE, 2025e; ONS, 2025). As we reported in our FE teacher workforce annual report, if the number of FE teachers increases in line with the number of 16-18 year olds in England between 2023/24 and 2027/28 (7 per cent), then that would equate to an increase of 2,700 teachers (Scott and Worth, 2026). As noted above, teacher numbers may not rise as fast as pupil numbers due to the system accommodating more pupils into the existing capacity, but it provides a guide to the role of demographics in supporting delivery of the 6,500 teacher goal.

A significant proportion of pupils age 16-18 are educated in secondary schools rather than FE settings (DfE, 2025f), so this will also support additional demand for secondary teachers. However, the number of secondary pupils up to age 16 are likely to begin slowly falling over the next few years.

The increase in the number of pupils in state special schools and AP is also likely to mean additional demand for teachers. Pupil numbers are expected to rise by 8.2 per cent by 2027/28. An equivalent rise in the FTE number of teachers would equate to around 2,300 more teachers, which is a significant proportion of the 6,500 teacher target. Similar caveats apply in terms of how many more teachers this may actually equate to. Increased demand does not necessarily guarantee more teachers, as that also depends on sufficient teacher supply being available. However, the health of ITT recruitment into special schools and AP is not directly measured by DfE in the same way it is for primary

and secondary teachers. There is no specific ITT route, so there is also no target to report against. Given the importance of these sectors for its 6,500 teacher target and vacancy rates are high in many special schools (Scott, 2025b), DfE should incorporate the demand for special schools’ teachers into its workforce planning.



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

### Despite an improvement for 2025/26, the postgraduate secondary ITT recruitment target has been missed for five years in a row

Healthy teacher recruitment through ITT is a vital component of ensuring there are enough teachers each year. DfE measures recruitment by comparing the number of postgraduate trainees recruited against a target, which it estimates based on expected future staffing needs, influenced by expected changes in pupil numbers as well as teacher retention rates, returners and other entrants (DfE, 2026c).

ITT recruitment of secondary teachers has lagged behind the target now for some time. It has missed the target in every year since 2015/16, except in 2020/21<sup>1</sup>. There have been signs of progress over the last two years, with recruitment reaching 89 per cent of target for the 2025/26 training year, which equates to around 17,00 recruits against a target of a little over 19,000. This is an improvement on the previous year, where secondary ITT recruitment was at 61 per cent of target. In that year, there were around n15,000 recruits against a target of nearly 24,000.

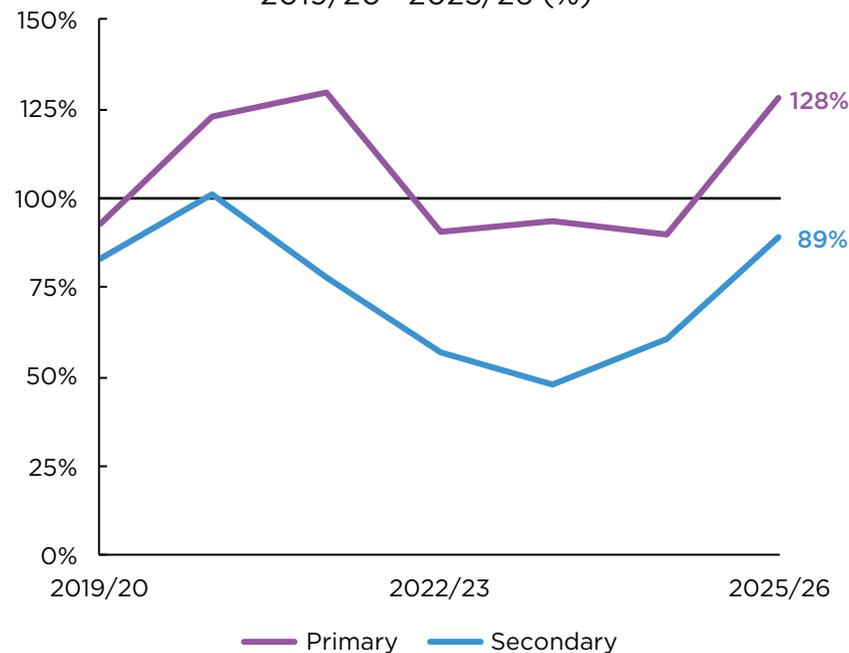
A large share of the performance improvement in 2025/26 in secondary schools was therefore driven by a lower target. DfE reduced its assessment of how many recruits were needed because of a previous 'boost' in ITT recruitment as well as improvements to retention and more returners (DfE, 2026c). Given ITT recruitment has improved again, it is possible that some targets could fall further in future.

Recruitment of trainees on primary ITT courses was strong in 2025/26. There were around 9,800 recruits against DfE's target of 7,700. This is the first year in the past four where primary recruitment has reached its target, although in the previous three years it was at or above 90 per cent of target. DfE has been bringing down its target for primary recruitment for some time now – in 2019/20 it was at 13,000. This is primarily due to falling forecasts of pupil numbers in primary schools.

While secondary recruitment missed its target, overall ITT performance for 2025/26 was the best its been in four years. An increase in bursaries may have helped some subjects (McLean and Worth, 2025), but this appears to be largely down to a slowdown in the wider labour market,

particularly for entry-level or graduate jobs, meaning more young people decide to apply for teaching courses. People applying for the 2025/26 round will have done so during the 2024/25 academic year. Unemployment rates rose throughout this period, from 4.2 per cent in summer 2024 to 4.9 per cent in summer 2025 (ONS, 2026a). Economy-wide vacancies have been declining since early 2022 (ONS, 2026b) and 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.

Postgraduate ITT recruitment vs target  
2019/20 - 2025/26 (%)



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<sup>1</sup> The target was calculated using a different methodology before 2019/20.

Source: DfE ITT Census.

## Postgraduate ITT recruitment for 2025/26 was below target for around half of all secondary subjects

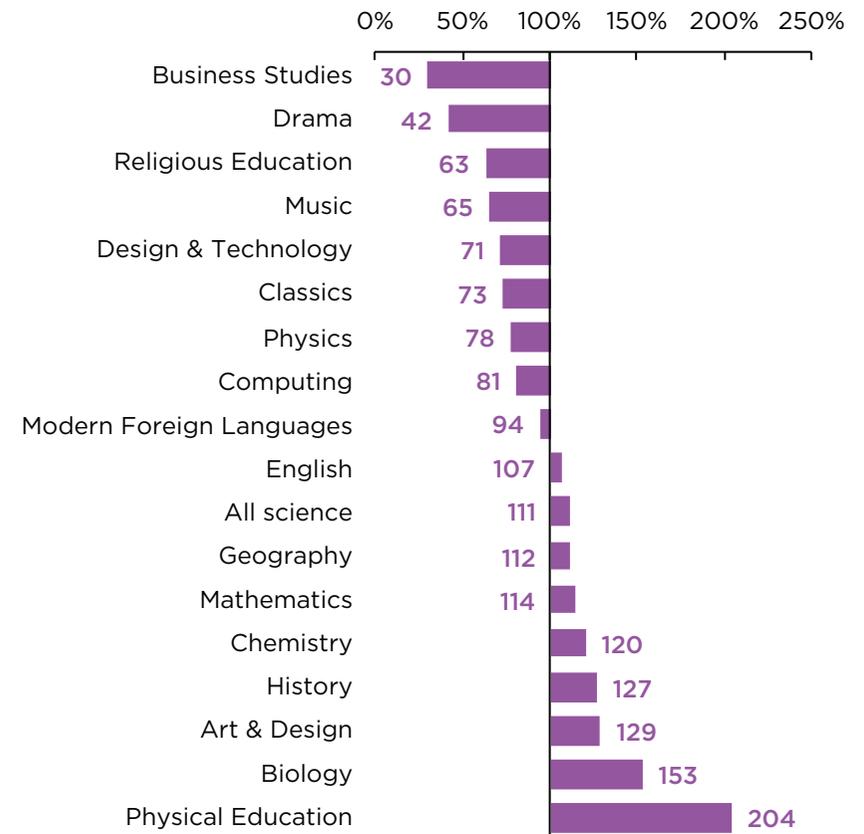
With ITT recruitment of secondary teachers generally improving in 2025/26, it is not surprising that most subjects also saw an increase in recruitment relative to target. Indeed, only four subjects did not: classics, religious education (RE), drama and physical education (which still remained well above target).

Unsurprisingly, maths and English are the two subjects with the largest targets. This tends to be true in most years and reflects the demand for teachers in these subjects across all year groups. DfE set a target of 2,300 trainees for maths in 2025/26. This was achieved, with over 2,600 recruits. This is the first time since 2011/12 maths recruitment has met its target. English recruitment was also above target, with almost 2,100 recruits against a target of 1,950.

However, many subjects still missed their targets. Business studies (including economics) was the worst performing subject for the 2025/26 recruitment round, at 70 per cent below target: 270 recruits against a target of almost 900. This subject has not hit its target in every year since at least 2019/20. It is a good example of a subject where repeated under-recruitment has been incorporated into an increased target in future years. In 2019/20, the target for business studies was around 350 trainees, meaning it has almost tripled since then. RE, music and design and technology are all similar examples that have failed to hit their targets consistently over the past several years.

STEM subjects are a key focus for the Government. Recruitment of physics teachers has consistently been below target for many years. However, physics recruitment in 2025/26 of 78 per cent of target is the best it has been since 2016/17. This was driven by an increase in international recruits, incentivised to apply by the extension of bursaries to non-UK nationals since 2022. Chemistry recruitment was above target for the first time since 2014/15 and biology significantly overachieved its target. Overall, science recruitment was above the combined target for the first time since 2012/13. However, computing recruitment remained 19 per cent below its target.

2025/26 postgraduate ITT recruitment vs target, by subject



Source: DfE ITT Census.

### The early data for ITT applications for 2026/27 is encouraging for most subjects, driven by a downturn in the labour market for young people and graduates

NFER forecasts ITT recruitment compared to target for the current cycle. This forecast is based on data about the number of applications that have been made and accepted in the year to date, up to February 2026, and how this compares to the same point in previous cycles (GOV. UK, 2026). We compare to last year’s targets as the targets for this cycle have not yet been published by DfE.

For secondary recruitment, NFER forecasts a similar overall level of recruitment in 2026/27 to the previous year (86 per cent, compared to 88 per cent). However, the confidence interval shows that there remains uncertainty as to whether it might end up above or below the target. Primary recruitment is forecast to be strong again this year.

Eight out of 17 secondary subjects (not including ‘others’) are predicted to be below target, including subjects that have regularly under-recruited in the past, including business studies, drama, RE and design and technology. We forecast that two subjects will outperform their targets. Physical education consistently does so. More notably, chemistry has started the year remarkably well, with a surge of 64 per cent more accepted applicants compared to the same point during the last cycle, having also met its target last year. Physics has also seen an increase in accepted applicants (up 21 per cent) and is forecast to be near its target. However, biology has fallen substantially, with accepted applicants down by 54 per cent. This is likely due to the bursary for this subject being reduced (see next page). All sciences are only up four per cent when combined, suggesting that some applicants who would have applied for biology have instead applied for a difference science course.

This encouraging ITT performance is likely due to challenges in the wider labour market, as discussed previously in the context of 2025/26 performance. In Autumn 2025, all-age UK unemployment reached 5.2 per cent, and 14 per cent of 18-24 year olds were unemployed (ONS, 2026a).<sup>2</sup> Outside of the pandemic period, neither of these rates have been this high in a decade and the OBR forecasts that unemployment will not start falling until 2027 (OBR, 2026). While overall vacancy

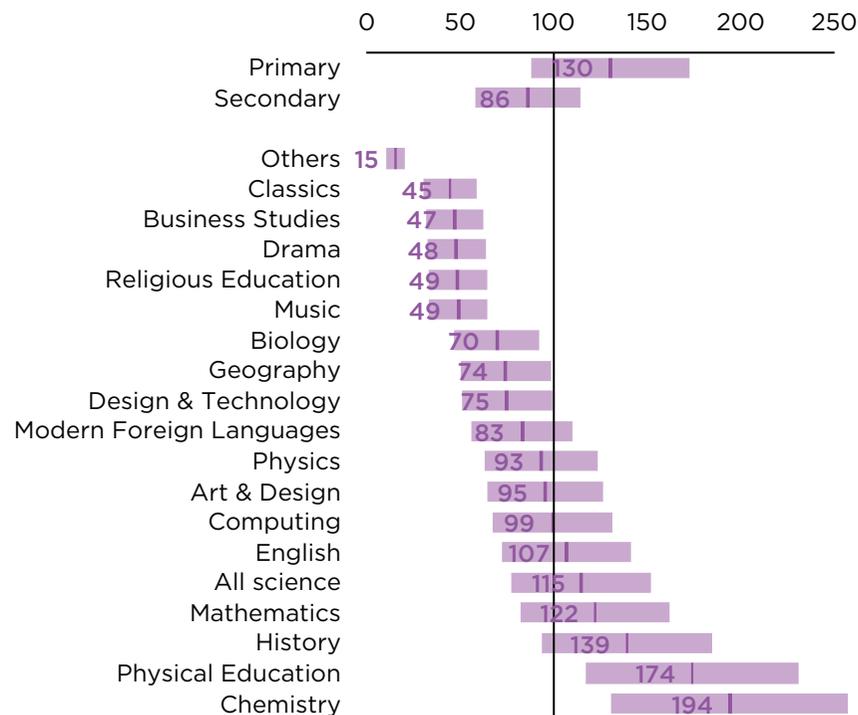
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<sup>2</sup> Unemployment rates for specific age groups have been volatile in the LFS in recent years but the trend of increasing unemployment among 18-24 year olds is clear.

numbers have stabilised since mid-2025 (ONS, 2026b), research focused on graduate employers suggest graduate vacancies were low in 2025 and are anticipated to fall again in 2026 (High Fliers Research, 2026). These figures suggest that ITT performance for 2026/27, and perhaps for 2027/28 too, will benefit from significant tailwinds.

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Forecast of 2026/27 ITT Census recruitment vs target, based on applications up to Feb 2026 (%)



Note: Forecasts represent the central estimate, with the shaded bands showing the predictions’ 95 per cent confidence intervals. Based on targets for 2025/26, as 2026/27 targets have not yet been published.

Source: NFER analysis of DfE ITT Census and Apply data.

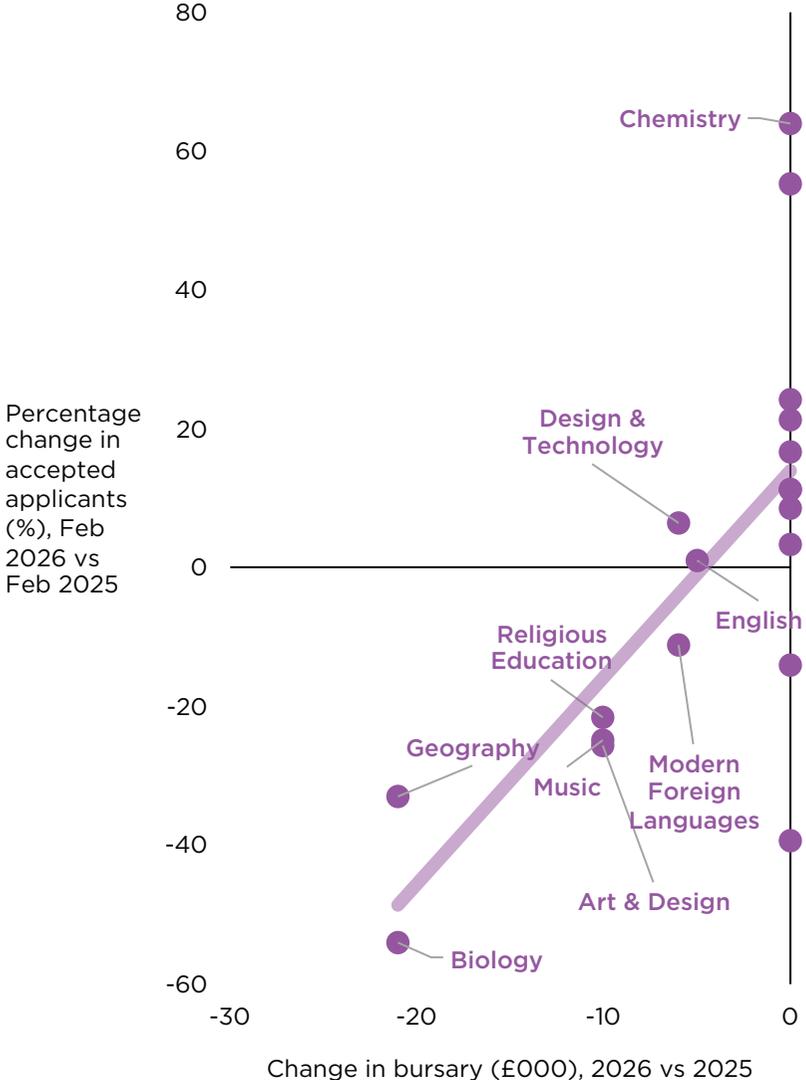
### DfE reduced bursaries in some subjects for 2026/27, with negative effects on ITT recruitment for those subjects

In October 2025, the Government announced changes to bursaries for the 2026/27 ITT year (DfE, 2025c). Bursaries for perennial or high-priority shortage subjects such as chemistry, computing, physics and maths were maintained at £29,000, the highest level. Bursaries were not increased in any subject and they were either stopped completely or reduced substantially for some subjects. Subjects like English and art and design had bursaries cut, from £5,000 or £10,000 respectively. In cash terms, the biggest cuts were made to biology and geography, where the bursaries fell from £26,000 to £5,000, a fall of £21,000.

NFER's research has previously found that bursaries are effective at increasing recruitment (McLean, Tang and Worth, 2023). It is therefore predictable that reducing bursaries for some subjects leads to a fall in recruitment onto those courses. As shown in the chart, the early data for 2026/27 suggest this has happened following the cuts outlined above. There has been a 36 per cent fall in the number of accepted applicants in subjects that have seen a bursary cut of £10,000 or more. Among those subjects that have seen bursary cuts of less than £10,000, there has been a three per cent fall in accepted applicants.

The data suggests that overall ITT recruitment is two per cent behind where it was this time last year, but may well have been ahead had the bursary cuts not been made. This is because subjects that have not seen bursary cuts are seven per cent higher, on average. While secondary ITT recruitment was higher in 2025/26 compared to 2024/25, it was still below target, so a reduction in bursaries (on average) across subjects is counterproductive, particularly given the Government's target to recruit 6,500 more teachers. Indeed, four of the subjects that had bursaries reduced recruited below their respective targets in 2025/26.

The NFER research cited above 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.



Note: Line shows the line of best fit.  
Source: NFER analysis of DfE Apply data.

### The policy changes that came out of the Curriculum and Assessment Review may require more teachers in some subjects

The Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR) was published in November 2025 (DfE, 2025a). A key ambition in the review is to offer the option of GCSE triple science to all pupils. Currently, many pupils study double award (DfE, 2025d), so extending provision would require an increase in science teachers. Since a majority of science teaching is currently by teachers with a biology background, an effective extension would also require more physics and chemistry specialists (Worth, 2025a).

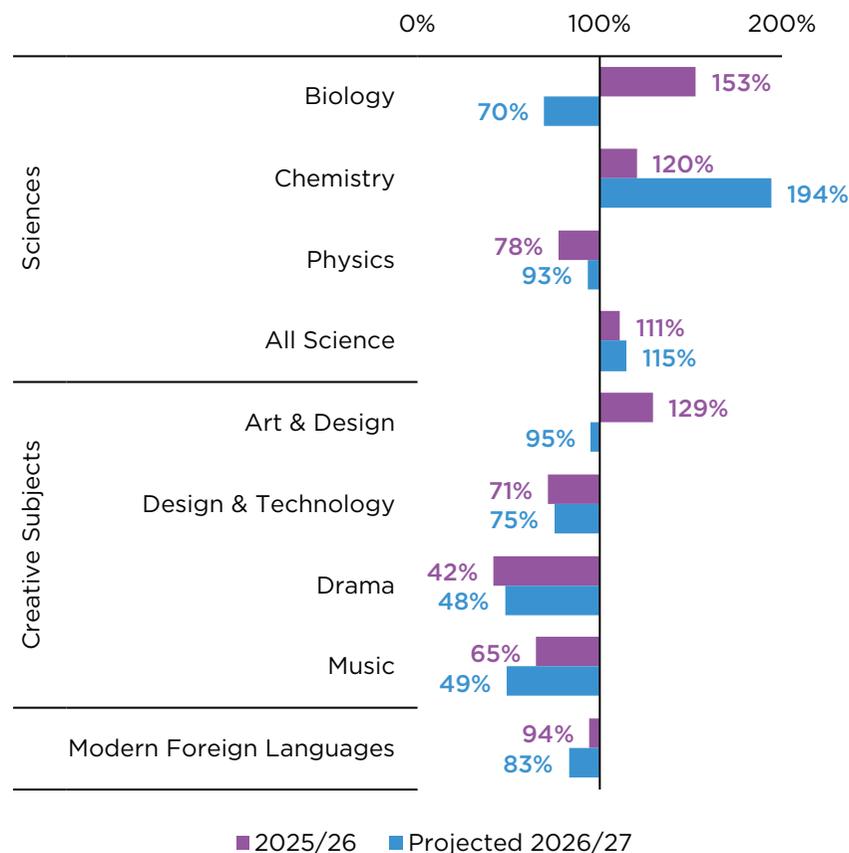
As shown in the chart, supply trends in these subjects have been improving recently. However, the ITT target only captures maintaining the teacher supply status quo and does not include any additions due to curriculum changes. As such, this level of recruitment is unlikely to be enough to fully support this ambition in the short term. If sustained, current trends could support it over the longer term but whether these levels of recruitment are sustainable may depend on whether the wider labour market recovers. As noted above, the OBR is anticipating the wider labour market to begin recovering in 2027 (OBR, 2026).

In its CAR response, the Government set out proposals to change how the Attainment 8 (A8) accountability metric is measured (UK Government, 2025). When it was introduced, the inclusion of EBacc 'buckets' in A8 influenced school's incentives to offer certain subjects and therefore teacher supply in those subjects. The incentive to fill EBacc buckets with humanities or languages led to a huge expansion in history and geography teachers, supported by relatively plentiful supply (Worth *et al.*, 2018). Arts subjects declined, due to a lessened incentive to enter pupils for GCSE.

Similar effects may happen when the A8 changes take effect. FFT Datalab argue that the changes provide additional incentives to enter pupils for arts subjects and MFL (Thomson, 2025). MFL was somewhat incentivised to expand under the previous A8, but one of the reasons why it did not may have been teacher supply pressures. Current trends suggest that teacher supply in arts subjects may also not support rapid expansion, despite the incentive from the accountability system to do so. It may therefore be the case that most subjects that the accountability change gives an incentive to expand are unable to due

to supply constraints. Given the effectiveness of bursaries for teacher recruitment (see previous page) and the shortages in these subjects, DfE should increase bursaries in these subjects to improve supply in future.

ITT recruitment as a proportion of the target



Source: NFER analysis of DfE ITT Census and Apply data

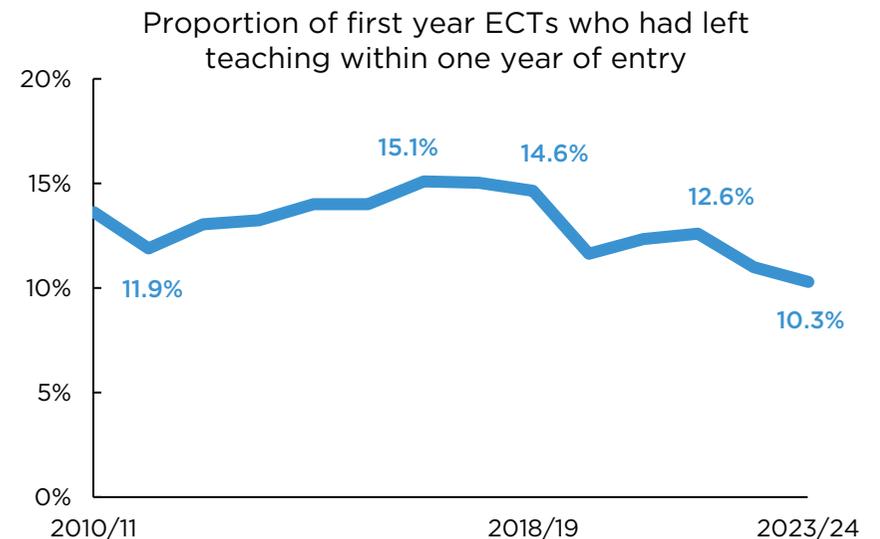
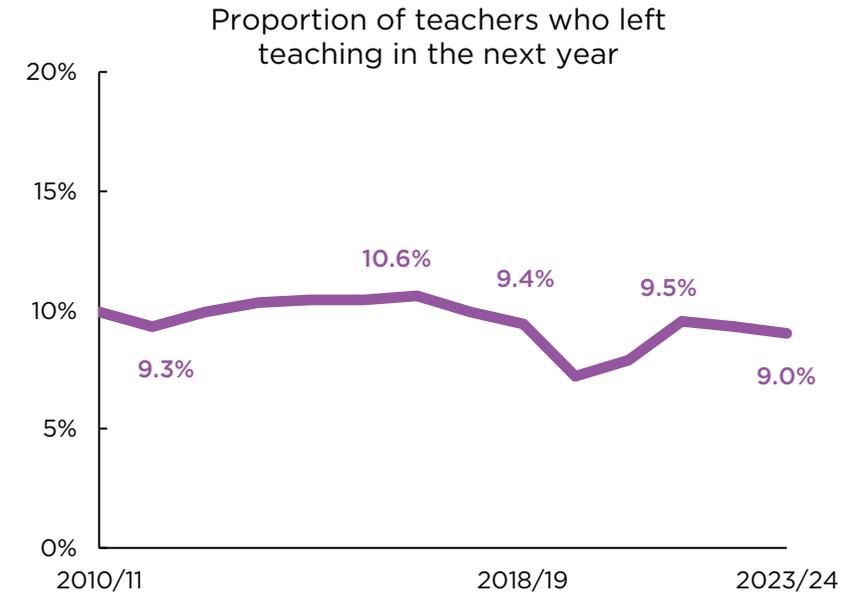
### Teacher retention has improved since the post-pandemic spike and exit rates for first year early career teachers were the lowest on record

As well as improving teacher recruitment, retaining more teachers can help the Government reach its target to recruit 6,500 more teachers in England. Somewhere between nine and 11 per cent of teachers have left the state-funded system each year since 2010 (except during Covid-19). With the current number of teachers, an exit rate of nine per cent rather than 11 per cent equates to retaining more than 8,000 more teachers from one year to the next.

Nine per cent of teachers (by FTE) left the state school system between 2023/24 and 2024/25. This is a slightly better rate than in the previous two years. Teacher attrition rates were lower during the pandemic, but increased back to pre-pandemic levels afterwards. However, they have not been above ten per cent in almost a decade.

Recent NFER research looked in detail at many of the factors that are associated with teacher retention using data from the WLTL survey (Worth, Kuhn and del Pozo Segura, 2026). It found that job satisfaction, leadership support, pupil behaviour, pay satisfaction and workload are all significant factors. Many have shown some improvements over the first four WLTL waves, including workload perceptions (see below), which could represent reasons for the improvement. Fewer job opportunities in the wider labour market (as discussed earlier in the context of ITT) may also be an economic factor contributing to the improvements.

We can also see that the exit rate of first-year early career teachers (ECTs) who left within one year of teaching was 10.3 per cent between 2023/24 and 2024/25. This represents the lowest on record since the data began and is good news for the system. As highlighted in previous versions of this report (McLean and Worth, 2025), it suggests that the new Early Career Framework may have reduced exits in the first year of teaching. However, it still remains to be seen whether these cohorts have permanently lower exit rates, or whether eventual exits are simply deferred.



### Unfilled vacancies and recruitment difficulties remain high, but have eased slightly since 2023

Over the last few years, recruitment shortfalls and relatively high exit rates have led to an increase in teacher vacancies, a key measure of teacher shortages. In 2019/20, there were two vacancies for every one thousand teachers in service. The vacancy rate then increased for three years in a row, reaching six vacancies per one thousand teachers in 2023/24.

As we have shown, teacher retention improved slightly in 2024/25. ITT recruitment has also been on a steady improvement since 2022/23 too. These factors will partially explain why vacancies fell between 2023/24 and 2024/25, down to five vacancies for every thousand roles. Given that recruitment has continued to improve, it is likely that the overall vacancy rate will continue to fall too.

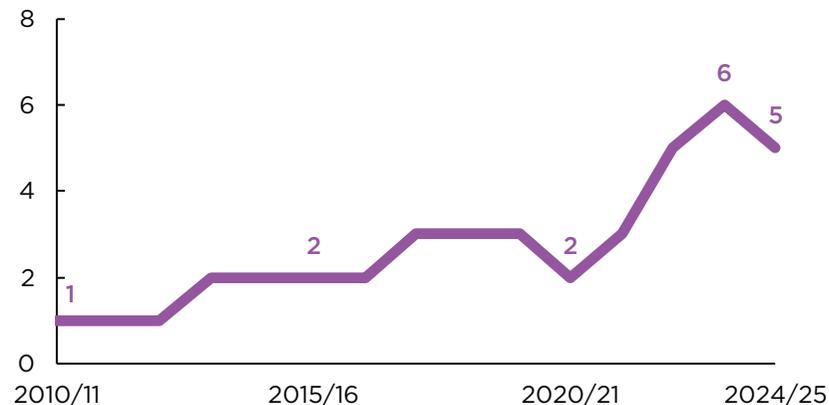
While the fall in vacancy rates is good news, it should be noted that they are still at high rates relative to previous years. The fall in the vacancy rate last year was seen across all primary and secondary, but not special schools and pupil referral units (PRUs), where there continued to be nine vacancies per thousand teachers, higher than it is in any other school type. Our study of the special schools workforce showed that this is due to very high rates of vacancies in PRUs and other forms of alternative provision (Scott, 2025a).

The sense that teacher shortages are easing but are still high is reinforced by new NFER research for this year’s education workforce reports. In an Autumn 2025 survey, 71 per cent of secondary school leaders reported that recruiting teachers was difficult. Among surveyed primary leaders, the equivalent rate was 49 per cent<sup>3</sup>. As shown in the chart, these rates have come down from a similar survey in 2023 (Lucas *et al.*, 2023), a period which coincided with under-recruitment to ITT. Nonetheless, that seven in ten secondary leaders find it difficult to recruit teachers clearly shows that there is still work to be done to ease the impact of teacher shortages on schools.

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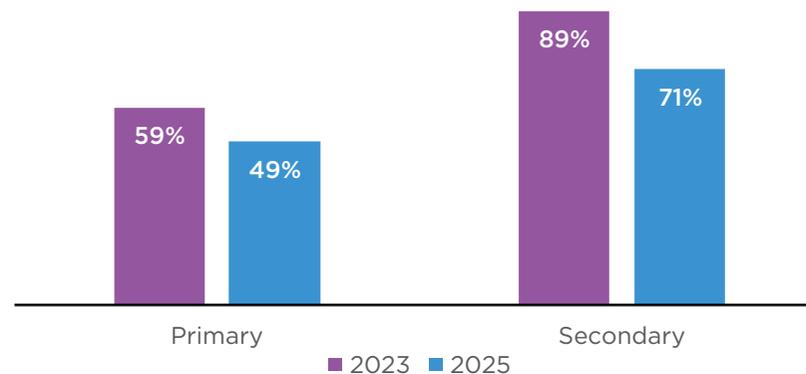
<sup>3</sup> We were unable to survey special schools in 2025. 77 per cent of leaders in special schools reported finding it difficult to recruit teachers in our 2023 survey.

Vacancy rate (per 1,000 teachers in service)



Source: School Workforce in England.

Percentage of senior leaders reporting recruitment of teachers as 'difficult' or 'very difficult'



Source: NFER surveys of school leaders (2023 and 2025). In 2025, there were 223 primary leaders and 135 secondary leaders that answered this question.

## Relative supply is also a key influence over the extent of specialist teaching

As well as vacancy rates, DfE also collects data about the proportion of teaching in secondary schools that is delivered by a subject specialist. This is another good proxy indicator of shortages, particularly if we compare across subjects. We have compared this data to ITT recruitment for these subjects over the last few years, to explore the relationship between the supply of subject teachers and extent of specialist teaching<sup>4</sup>.

Some subjects have high proportions of subject specialists teaching them, for example PE and history. These tend to be subjects that have recruited well into ITT. The chart shows these subjects in the top right: more than 90 per cent of teaching in these subjects was by specialists in 2024/25 and ITT recruitment in 2021/22 to 2023/24 was, on average, well above target.

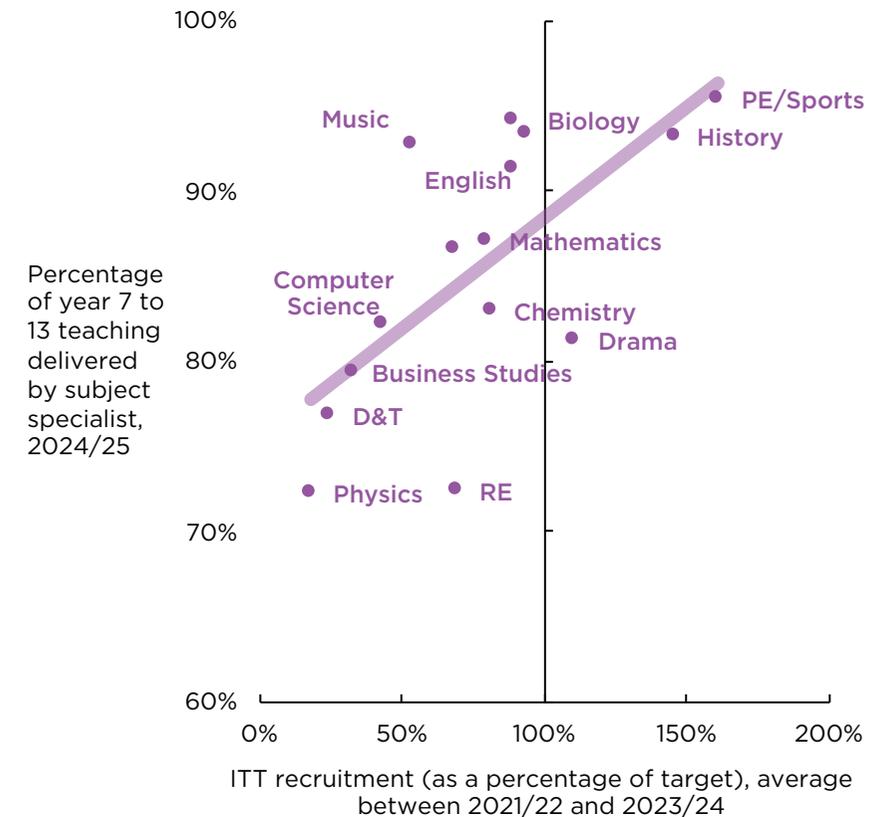
In contrast, other subjects have lower proportions of subject specialists, for example physics and RE around 72 per cent, business studies 79 per cent, computer science 82 per cent and mathematics 87 per cent. These tend to be subjects where ITT performance has been less strong, relative to target.

The flow of new teachers is one influence. However, there are also outliers, such as drama and RE that are particularly likely to be covered by non-specialists. This may be linked to being smaller subjects within larger departments and therefore covered by other teachers across the department (e.g. RE by history or geography teachers; drama by English teachers). It may also be because teachers in these subjects are asked to teach a wider range of subjects and are timetabled less to teach their own subjects.

.....  
 4 Other factors will affect this relationship too. For example, if some subjects have higher attrition rates, there will be fewer specialist teachers. We use average ITT recruitment across the last three years to get a sense of how recruitment has fared in the recent past. This will be correlated with shortages over the long-term and these will also affect the extent to which schools can offer specialist teaching in a given subject.

Overall, the analysis suggests that recent improvements to recruitment and retention – which will not have fully shown up in the subject specialisation data here yet – are likely to result in improvements to the extent of specialist teaching. This, in turn, is likely to be positive for pupil outcomes in future.

Relationship between ITT recruitment and specialist teaching



Note: Line shows the line of best fit, giving all subjects equal weighting.

Source: NFER analysis of ITT Census and SWC data.

### Recent teacher pay growth has narrowed the gap with average earnings slightly, but competitiveness remains lower than in 2010/11

Setting teacher’s pay is a key level for influencing the supply of teachers in England. The Government decides on an annual teacher pay award, after considering the recommendations of the School Teachers’ Review Body (STRB). For teachers in maintained schools, these decisions have been legally binding for a long time. Until recently, academies have had more freedom about whether to implement these decisions. In practice, most academies chose to follow the same arrangements and, under the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Act, academies will be legally obliged to ensure all teachers are paid at least the minimum of the pay ranges set out in the School Teachers Pay and Conditions Document (STPCD). Academies will also be required to ‘have regard’ to the rest of the pay and conditions framework set out in the STPCD (DfE, 2025g).

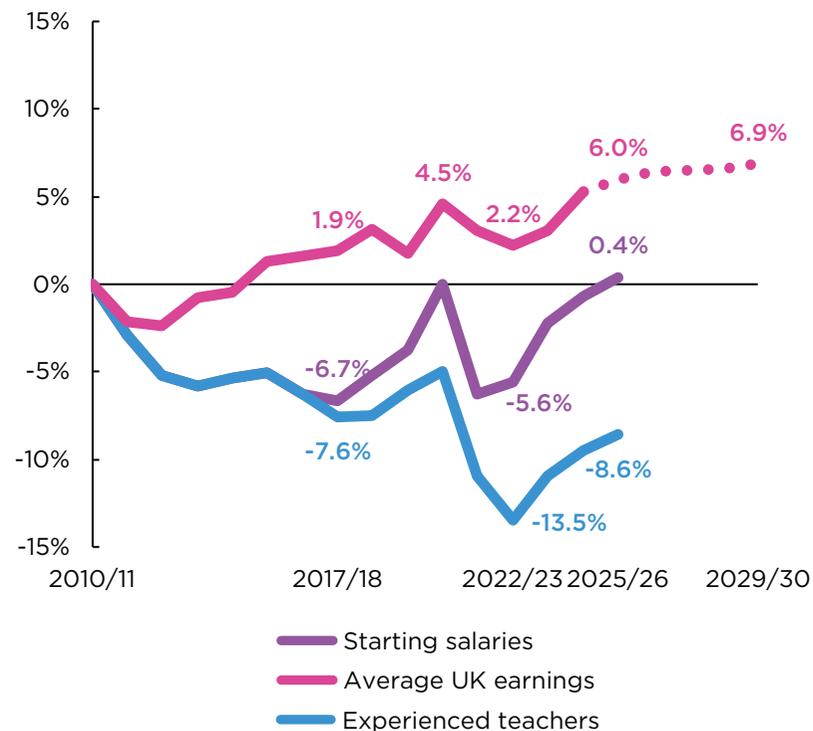
STRB’s recommendation for a four per cent pay increase in 2025/26 was accepted by the Government. This follows previous pay awards of 5.5 per cent for 2024/25, 6.5 per cent for 2023/24, and five per cent for 2022/23. (In the earlier two years, starting salaries were increased by more than this.) These increases mark a clear change with previous patterns. Before 2022/23, the pay award for experienced teachers (teachers at the top of the upper pay scale) had not exceeded 3.5 per cent in any year going back to at least 2011/12. During this period, prices tended to increase faster than teacher salaries each year. This means salaries have lost value in real terms. Even after the 2022/23 award, starting salaries were 5.6 per cent lower than they were in 2010/11 in real terms, and experienced teacher salaries were 13.5 per cent lower.

The increases in teacher pay from the 2022/23 academic year onwards have been above inflation. Starting salaries are now the same in real terms compared to where they were in 2010/11 (and briefly in 2020/21). However, experienced teachers’ salaries have only partially recovered the real-terms decline that occurred up until 2022/23, and as of 2025/26 they are still around nine percent lower than they were in 2010/11.

Average UK earnings growth has been slow over the last fifteen years, but nonetheless it has tended to outpace teachers’ earnings. By 2022/23, real average UK earnings were around 2 per cent more than they were in 2010/11. Between 2010/11 and 2022/23, growth in teachers’ starting salaries lagged behind the growth in average earnings by

almost eight percentage points, and experienced teacher salaries by nearly 16 points. By 2025/26, these gaps have narrowed a little to 5.5 percentage points for starting salaries and 14.5 percentage points for experienced teachers. While a small narrowing, this may partially explain why retention and ITT recruitment has improved over that period. But the longer term data shows that growth in teachers’ salaries has lagged far behind UK earnings growth and recent increases have only recovered some of that ground.

Real earnings growth since 2010/11



Note: ‘Experienced teachers’ refers to teachers at the top of the upper pay scale. The dotted line represents the forecast of real earnings growth based on OBR projections from March 2026.

Sources: School Teachers’ Pay and Conditions Document; Office for Budget Responsibility.

**The Government’s proposal to increase pay by 6.5 per cent over the next three years would probably mean teachers’ earnings fail to keep pace with wider earnings growth**

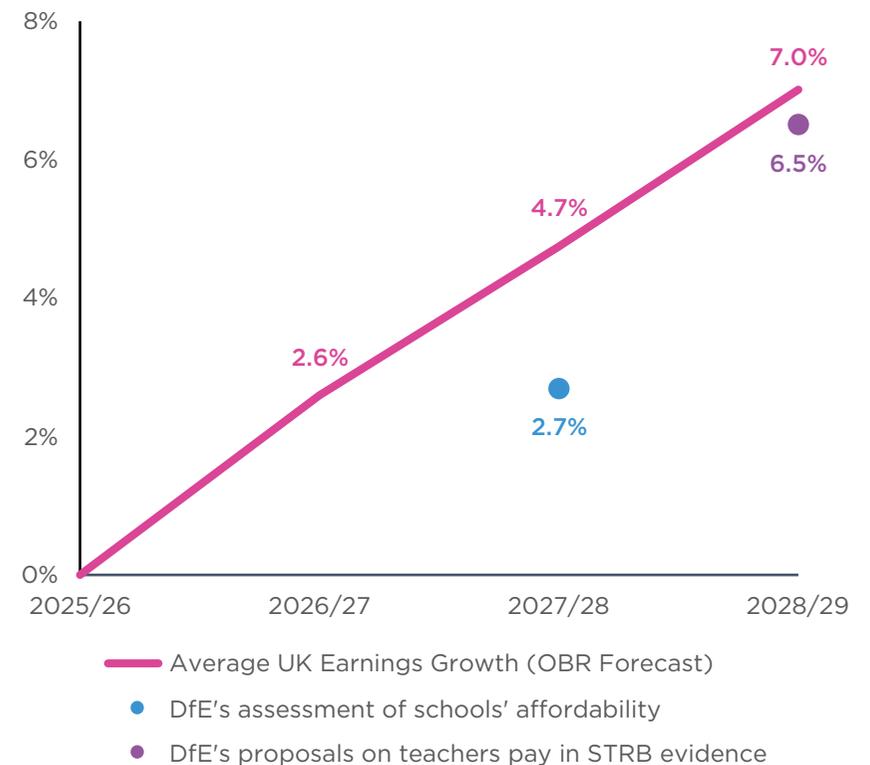
At the time of this report’s release, STRB has made its recommendations to the Government for teacher pay from 2026/27, which the Government is considering. DfE has asked STRB to make recommendations on pay for two years and an indicative recommendation for 2028/29. It has suggested a pay increase of 6.5 per cent over three years and that larger increases should come later in this period (DfE, 2025b).

The Government will first need to decide how to increase teachers’ earnings going into the 2026/27 academic year. DfE did not propose a specific figure in its evidence to STRB. The latest OBR forecast suggests nominal UK earnings will grow by 2.6 per cent into the next academic year, ahead of inflation at 2.1 per cent (OBR, 2026). The DfE’s recent analysis of school cost pressures suggests schools can only afford a 2.7 per cent pay increase over two years, with significant pressures in 2026/27 (DfE, 2026d). However, doing so would lead to a fall in competitiveness of teacher pay in the short term. In turn, this risks reversing some of the progress we have so far shown in this report, particularly if the wider labour market were to start recovering in this time. Increasing teacher pay in line with wider earnings growth mitigates this risk and the Government needs to look at options to give schools more funding so they can afford a sufficient increase in 2026/27.

Over the longer three-year period, the latest OBR forecasts<sup>5</sup> suggest that a 6.5 per cent pay increase would not be quite enough to keep track with wider UK earnings growth. This is forecast to increase by seven per cent over the same period. Of course, a three year economic forecast is highly uncertain (Worth, 2025b), which makes it challenging for STRB to make longer term recommendations with a high degree of certainty. The OBR project that the labour market will start recovering after 2026, which risks putting pressure on teacher recruitment and retention. As such, DfE should indicate that teachers’ pay will at

least be as competitive in 2029 as it is today. This means it should be anticipating an increase of at least seven per cent by 2028/29, up from the 6.5 per cent it suggested to STRB. This assessment will probably change over the next two and a half years as new data emerges – managing these changes is the challenge with the Government’s decision to try to set the course of teacher pay over a longer time horizon.

Forecast nominal earnings growth (from 2025/26)



<sup>5</sup> OBR forecast earnings and inflation before the most recent conflict in the Middle East in late February and March 2026. This could push inflation up, through higher energy prices.

### Teachers' average working hours have fallen modestly in recent years, but remain higher than similar workers

Along with pay, another important way that policy makers and schools can help retain teachers is by ensuring they have a sustainable workload. This is borne out in recent NFER research on teacher retention, which found that 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).

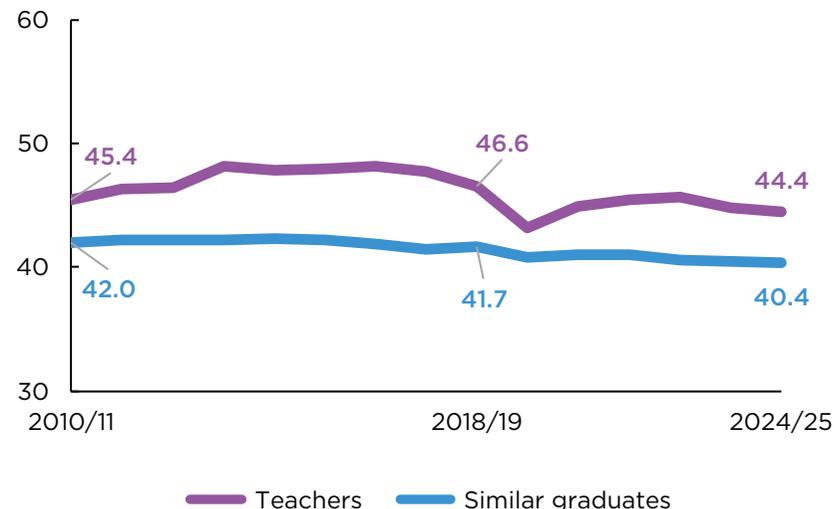
Data from the LFS has consistently shown that, during term time, the average full-time teacher works longer hours than similar graduates in other jobs. These are graduates with similar demographic characteristics (age, gender and region) as teachers, but who work outside teaching – see methodology for more details. In 2024/25, full-time teachers reported working 44.4 hours per week. This is four more hours than similar graduates and this gap is statistically significant, as it has been every year since 2010/11.

Both LFS data and data collected in DfE teacher surveys suggest that full-time teacher working hours have fallen slightly in recent years. DfE surveys have always resulted in higher estimates than the LFS, but both data sources agree on recent trends in the last four years. In the 2024/25 WLTL survey, full time teachers reported working 50.1 hours on average, down from 51.2 hours the year before (IFF Research and UCL Institute of Education, 2025).

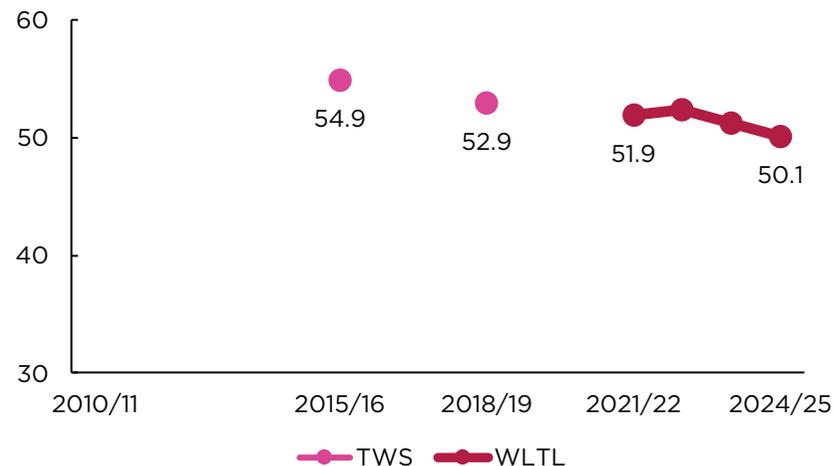
Two major policy developments in the past year may lead to increased workload if not implemented carefully. First is the new National Curriculum. Although changes may be more limited than the 2014 curriculum change and will not be introduced until 2028, updates to schools' teaching approaches and schemes 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 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.

Average hours worked in a full working week (full time only, LFS)



Average hours worked by full time teachers (TWS & WLTL)



Sources: NFER analysis of LFS, TWS and WLTL data.

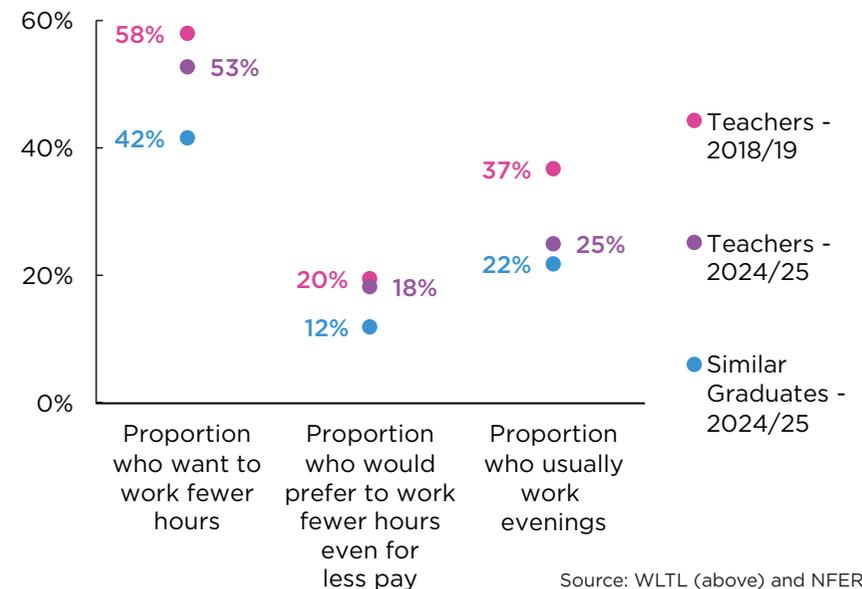
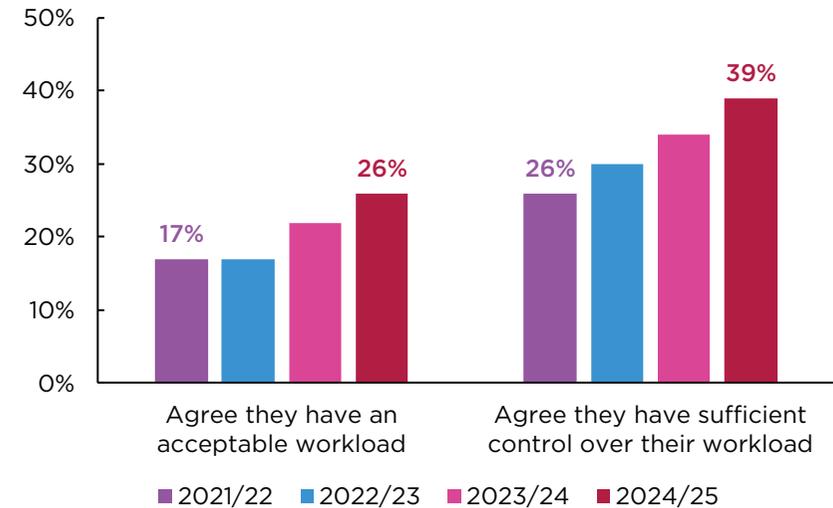
### Teachers' perceptions of their workload, which are linked to retention, have also improved

A good understanding of teacher workload goes beyond looking at working hours. The WLTL survey asks teachers whether they have an acceptable workload and whether that have sufficient control over their workload. In 2024/25 the proportion of responding teachers who agreed with these statements was higher than it has been since the WLTL began in 2021/22 (IFF Research and UCL Institute of Education, 2025). Around one in four teachers said they felt they had an acceptable workload, a significant increase from 17 per cent in 2021/22. Recent NFER research has found that more positive workload perceptions are linked to an improved likelihood of retention (Worth, Kuhn and del Pozo Segura, 2026).

The impression that teachers' perceptions of their workload are improving on average is somewhat supported by NFER analysis of LFS data too. In 2024/25, 53 per cent of teachers reported wanting to work fewer hours than they currently work and 18 per cent said they would want to work fewer hours even if it meant less pay. Both of these are lower levels than six years before (pre-pandemic), although neither of these falls are statistically significant due to uncertainty in the survey data. The analysis does suggest teachers are less likely to usually work in the evening than they were six years before, a difference that is statistically significant.

However, while some progress has been made, the analysis also demonstrates there is further to go. On each of these measures, the average response given by teachers fare poorly against those from similar graduates. Teachers are 11 percentage points more likely to say they want to work fewer hours than they do compared to similar graduates. This gap has been persistent and statistically significant over time.

The proportion of teachers who:



Source: WLTL (above) and NFER analysis of LFS data (below).

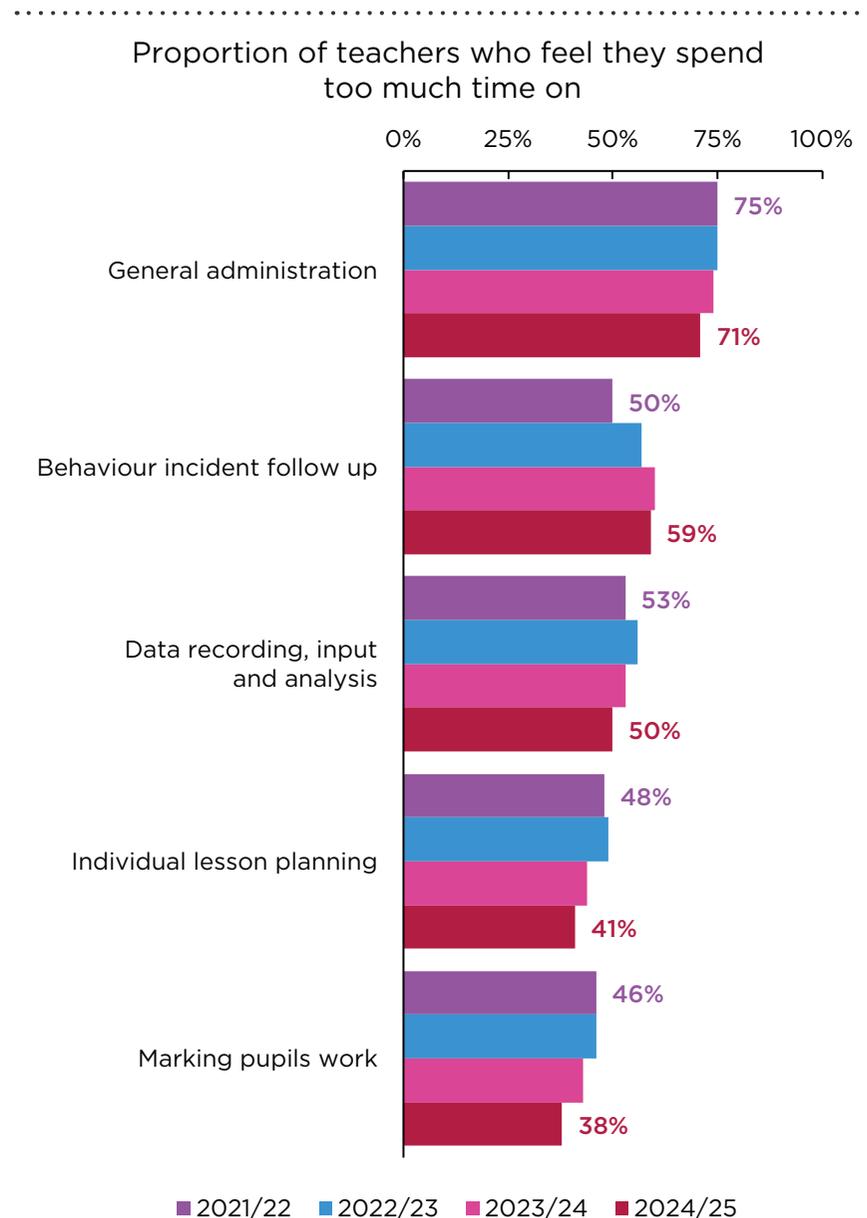
### Poor pupil behaviour is linked to retention, teachers report that it has increased and more say they spend too much time dealing with it

Workload can also be measured not by the total but also its component parts: additional time spent on different tasks and activities is not equally valued by teachers. Recent NFER research found that teachers reporting that they feel they spend too much time on lesson planning and behaviour incident follow up was linked to a higher likelihood of leaving (Worth, Kuhn and del Pozo Segura, 2026). However, teachers reporting that they feel they spend too much time on general administration and marking were not strongly linked to retention and time spent on data analysis was more weakly linked than the factors outlined above.

The trends in these perceptions have gone in various directions since the WLTl survey began in 2021/22. The proportion of teachers saying they spend too much time on general administration, data analysis, lesson planning and marking have all fallen between 2021/22 and 2024/25. However, the proportion of teachers saying they spend too much time on behaviour incident follow-up has risen from 50 per cent in 2021/22 to 59 per cent in 2024/25 (IFF Research and UCL Institute of Education, 2025).

There is further evidence that pupil behaviour is a rising concern in the WLTl survey. The proportion of teachers rating pupil behaviour in their school as 'good' has fallen from 58 per cent in 2021/22 to 46 per cent in 2024/25. Similarly, the proportion of school leaders saying the same has fallen from 85 per cent in 2021/22 to 77 per cent in 2024/25 (IFF Research and UCL Institute of Education, 2025).

The Government's 6,500 teacher delivery plan sets out that it will 'raise standards of student behaviour' to tackle this with up to 90 new 'Attendance and Behaviour Hubs'. A recent evaluation of the predecessor Behaviour Hubs programme found that staff in participating schools reported improvements in pupil behaviour compared to the period before its implementation, suggesting it could be beneficial at the system level if implemented at larger scale (Befani *et al.*, 2026).



**Teachers reported better levels of subjective wellbeing than similar graduates in 2024/25, a continuation of a long-term trend**

Despite the various pressures placed on teachers, as detailed in this report, they have higher levels of subjective wellbeing than similar graduates and this has been relatively consistent over time.

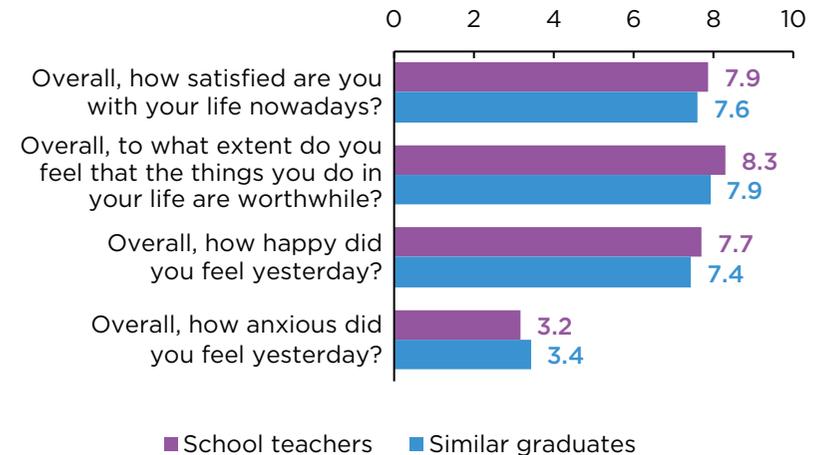
On all four of the ONS subjective wellbeing questions in 2024, teachers report better scores than similar graduates. This includes questions about life satisfaction, the extent to which people feel the things they do in life are worthwhile, how happy they felt yesterday and how anxious they felt. The average scores for teachers in these surveys are higher on the first three questions and lower on the latter, meaning they reported a lower level of anxiety. In 2024, this gap between teachers and similar graduates was statistically significant on all four questions.

For the questions about life satisfaction and the extent to which people feel the things they do are worthwhile, the gap has been roughly the same size and statistically significant in almost all years. For the question about happiness, teachers have always reported a higher level of happiness than similar graduates, but this gap has not always been statistically significant.

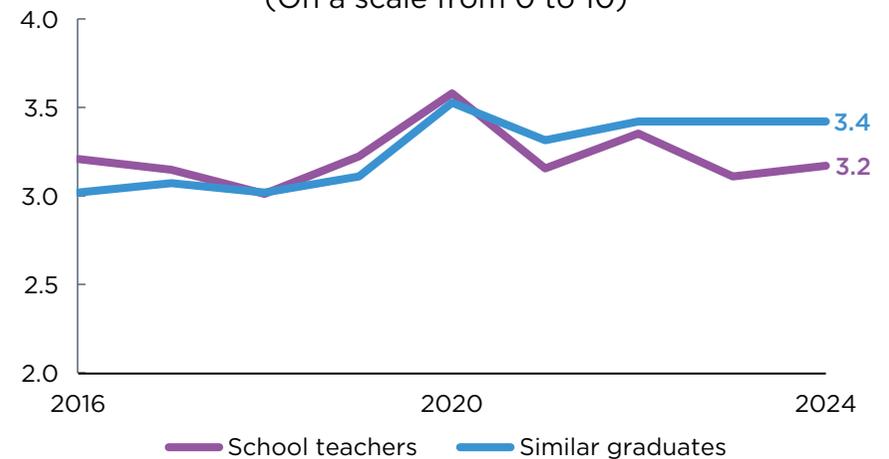
The question about anxiety shows a slightly different pattern over time. In 2016, self-reported anxiety levels were higher in teachers than they were in similar graduates (this was statistically significant) but levels were quite similar between 2017 and 2019. Subjective anxiety levels for both groups increased during the pandemic. They have since come back down for teachers but have not done so significantly for similar graduates, meaning teachers now report lower anxiety levels, on average, than similar graduates. It is notable that this happened at approximately the same time as average working hours have come down for full-time teachers, while they have remained relatively steady for similar graduates.

These are only averages – teachers and similar graduates will have a range of different experiences. Nonetheless, this is good news for teachers and those seeking to recruit and retain them. It suggests that, despite the challenges, teaching can be a rewarding career.

Average scores on ONS subjective wellbeing questions (0-10 scale), 2024



Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday? (On a scale from 0 to 10)



Source for both: NFER analysis of APS data.



## Conclusions and recommendations

In contrast to previous NFER reports on the teacher workforce, the flows of teachers into and out of the labour market look reasonably healthy for the future of teacher supply. Recruitment is improving, even in some subjects which have seen persistent shortages. Teachers were less likely to leave the workforce last year compared to any year since 2010/11, outside of the pandemic. The early career teacher retention rate is the best on record. Teachers' working hours are steadily coming down on average and the proportion of teachers who report having an acceptable workload has improved somewhat.

Some progress has also been made in the competitiveness of teachers' pay. Most teachers' have received a pay increase of at least four per cent for each of the last four years, which has been higher than inflation over the period and even closed the gap – albeit only partially – that had opened up between teacher pay growth and average earnings growth since 2010/11. The increase in job insecurity and slowdown of job opportunities in the wider labour market is also likely to be a key factor driving recent trends.

However, this is not a time for Government or the sector to rest on its laurels. Secondary recruitment overall remains below target, with our forecast indicating it may be at 86 per cent of target this year. The positive trends may ease some of the impacts of poor teacher supply over the last decade but need to be sustained to substantially reverse the greatest impacts in the most affected subjects. The state of the wider economy being a key driver means that trends could reverse if the labour market improves and this could be exacerbated if pay competitiveness is eroded in the meantime. Likewise, there are potential risks that could increase teacher workload if not carefully implemented, such as the impact of the revised national curriculum and the Government's SEND reforms.

As such, the Government needs to maintain a focus on teacher recruitment and retention, particularly if it wants to ensure it will hit its target to recruit 6,500 teachers. This will require continuing to make increases to teachers' pay that match or exceed wider earnings growth, continuing to ensure bursaries are targeted at the right subjects and making further progress on reducing teachers' workloads. This will ensure the progress achieved in the last few years is sustained and that students across the country have access to high-quality teaching.

### Recommendations

1. The STRB and Government should aim to maintain the competitiveness of teachers' pay by matching the growth in average earnings outside teaching and funding schools to deliver it.
2. Given the importance of special schools and AP for the 6,500 teacher target, DfE should conduct more deliberate workforce planning for these sectors, as it does for primary and secondary teachers.
3. 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.



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