

# 2026



## The Further Education Teacher Workforce in England

Annual Report 2026

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## Introduction

The further education (FE) sector plays a crucial role in ensuring young people and adults have education and training opportunities to gain skills. The Department for Education (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.

In the last two years, the Labour government has made FE, and therefore FE teachers, a key policy focus. FE teachers are included in the Government's headline target to recruit 6,500 more teachers in England by the end of the parliament (DfE, 2026a). One of the key objectives of the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper is to establish 'a specialist and prestigious further education system that delivers high-quality education and training for all (DfE, DWP, and DSIT, 2025). The White Paper outlined various policy changes aimed at recruiting and retaining FE teachers, including a new professional development pathway, teacher training, and industry-exchange programmes. New funding is explicitly aimed at supporting FE providers to recruit and retain more teachers.

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 FE teacher numbers, shortages, pay and working conditions, and points towards policy actions that are likely to have the greatest impact on addressing the challenges.

This report uses data collected in the Further Education Workforce Data Collection (FEWDC). DfE has collected this data annually since 2021/22 (DfE, 2025a). It is a key source for this work.

We have also utilised data from various surveys:

1. We look at how earnings for FE teachers have changed over time, using the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE).
2. We look at trends in working hours and working conditions using the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and the Annual Population Survey (APS). In these datasets, we can compare FE teachers to workers with similar age, gender, qualification level and region profiles.

Based on the data available, we define FE teachers in two main ways in this report:

1. In FEWDC statistics, we use the definition the DfE uses when collecting that data: individuals who work for relevant providers, including general FE colleges, sixth-form colleges, independent training providers, school-based providers, local authorities delivering FE with an education remit, and special post-16 institutions. Many of these providers will deliver both 16-18 education and adult education, but not all of them return data each year. Employer providers are not included. The role allocated to the individual is decided by the provider who returns the data. Individuals identified as being 'advanced practitioners', 'instructors', 'lecturers', 'practitioners', 'teachers', 'trainers' and 'tutors' are all counted as 'FE teachers' for the purpose of these statistics. Roles *not* considered to represent 'FE teachers' include leadership and managerial roles, and various support roles.
2. In the ASHE, LFS and APS data, we define FE teachers based on information about the respondent's occupation and industry. We include those who are 'Further Education Teaching Professionals' working in a range of different educational industries. We also include a wider range of teachers and trainers who work in either the technical and vocational secondary education industry (a different category to general secondary education) or the post-secondary, non-tertiary education industry.

Further details about the data sources used, sample definitions and measures are presented in a separate methodology appendix.



## Key findings and recommendations

**The number of teachers working in general FE colleges and sixth-form colleges has been relatively stable in the last three years, following a decade of falling teacher numbers.**

There were around 80,000 FE teachers working in England in 2023/24.<sup>1</sup> Over half of these worked in public providers like colleges, but many worked for independent training providers (ITPs). Whilst recent numbers have been relatively stable, historic data suggests the number of teachers in general FE fell by a quarter between 2010/11 and 2018/19.

**With numbers now stable, recruiting more FE teachers needs to be a key focus for the government if it is going to recruit 6,500 more teachers by the end of the parliament.**

The number of 16- to 18-year-olds in England is projected to increase by seven per cent between 2023 and 2027, and the number of students in FE colleges has increased sharply over the last two years. FE providers will almost certainly have to recruit significantly more teachers and to continue doing so for the next few years. A seven per cent increase in the teaching workforce equates to 2,700 more teachers between 2023/24 and 2027/28, close to half of the Government's overall target. But whether colleges will try to recruit that many more teachers, or whether they would be able to in critical subjects, remains to be seen.

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<sup>1</sup> This includes all teachers working in providers covered by FE workforce statistics, including general FE colleges, sixth-form colleges, independent training providers and other FE providers. For more information see the introduction to this report.

**Recruiting more teachers will be challenging because the FE sector is suffering from a significant shortage of teachers, albeit with some signs of improvement.**

In 2023/24, there were around 3,000 vacant FE teaching posts. 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. While the DfE cite concerns with comparisons across years, at face-value the vacancy data suggests there has been progress in reducing vacancy rates, across all regions of England. This may be because fewer FE teachers are leaving the sector each year, but we cannot know this for sure because DfE does not publish data on FE teachers' exit rates.

**FE teaching is a critical pipeline for providing the skills needed in the Government's priority sectors, but high vacancy rates in key subjects may be a barrier to their ambitions.**

Some of the highest FE teacher vacancy rates are in subjects that are crucial for the Government's economic growth plans, including construction and engineering. In some regions, one in 10 FE teaching roles in these subjects was vacant in 2023/24. The government is aiming to address shortfalls in these subjects by offering bursaries and retention payments for early career teachers who teach them. This approach has been used with some success in the school sector. Future data will show whether this has been enough to significantly reduce shortages.

**Relative to other groups, FE teachers' pay has declined markedly in recent years.**

On average, FE teachers earned around 20 per cent less than secondary school teachers in 2025. This gap has widened considerably over the last five years. In real terms, FE teacher pay has declined by almost 20 per cent since 2011, at the same time as average UK earnings have increased by four per cent. Although individual colleges make decisions about FE teacher pay, these decisions are inevitably based on what they are able to afford. Per student funding for 16-18 year olds – a key source of funding for FE – has declined markedly over the last 15 years (Farquharson *et al.*, 2026).

**FE teachers do not appear to work particularly long hours, but low pay and unpaid overtime may be contributing to dissatisfaction with workload.**

FE teachers reported working similar hours to similar workers. However, they were also more likely to report working overtime. As FE teachers are not usually paid for overtime (Flemons *et al.*, 2024), this suggests that FE teachers are paid for fewer working hours compared to similar workers, despite working an equivalent amount. These findings may in part explain the trend of FE teachers being more likely to want to work fewer hours, for the same pay, compared to similar workers in other sectors. It is not surprising that they should have a more negative view of their working hours than similar workers who work equivalent hours but are paid for all of them. This is further reflected in the fact that FE teachers are *not* more likely than similar workers to prefer shorter hours if it would mean less pay.

**FE teacher retention rates could potentially be improved by increasing their agency and opportunities for progression in the workplace.**

Our analysis of national survey data shows that FE teachers have consistently been less likely to report that they feel involved in workplace decision-making compared to similar workers in other sectors, and there are indications that perceived opportunities for progression are lower as well. Moreover, general happiness levels among FE teachers appear to be in decline. There is evidence that employee involvement and progression opportunities support staff retention (CooperGibson Research, 2018; Khalid and Nawab, 2018), while stress and poor mental health increases the risk of staff leaving (Arnold and Rahimi, 2025). There are therefore some indications that the working conditions of FE teachers may present a challenge for retention, particularly when combined with low pay and limited opportunities for progression, which could potentially increase their level of agency.

**Key recommendations**

1. The Government should provide funding that allows FE providers to pay teachers more. Recent announcements of new funding for the sector are welcome, but a sustained effort over several years is needed. This is also likely to be critical to helping the Government achieve the FE share of its 6,500 target.
2. The Government and FE providers should continue to target funding at key shortage subjects. Long-term evidence on bursaries and previous evaluations of retention payments show they can be effective. Targeting towards shortage subjects makes them more cost effective than general pay increases.
3. Leaders in FE should explore how teachers can be meaningfully involved and engaged in the way the college or other provider defines its organisational development priorities and makes decisions more widely.
4. 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.





## Policy context

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

FE teacher supply has recently attracted increasing policy attention. FE teachers in colleges and related public providers are included within the Government's prominent objective to 'recruit 6,500 new expert teachers' (DfE, 2026b). This is in part due to rising student numbers, which necessitates more teachers, but it is also aimed at addressing underlying shortages. The introduction from September 2026 of a student loan for adult learners under the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE) (DfE, 2025b) may further increase the demand for FE provision.

The Government's Post-16 and Skills White Paper acknowledges that 'post-16 teachers and senior leaders lack a comprehensive, national, evidence-based and visible professional development offer, in contrast to their colleagues working in pre-16 education'

(DfE, DWP, and DSIT, 2025). It proposes to 'establish a coherent, career-long professional development pathway for teachers in further education'. Other measures aimed at supporting the FE teacher workforce include reforming FE initial teacher education (ITE) to raise quality, and embedding industry exchange into in-service professional development.

A range of financial incentives aimed at improving recruitment and/or retention have been extended to FE teachers, including ITE bursaries and targeted retention incentive (TRI) payments to teachers of shortage subjects in the first five years of their careers. The targeted subjects include building and construction, chemistry, computing and digital, early years, engineering and manufacturing, maths and physics. Almost 6,000 teachers received a TRI in 2024/24 (DfE, 2025e), and NFER is currently evaluating the impact of TRI payments in FE in a study commissioned by the DfE and in partnership with CFE Research.

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).

### The number of teachers in FE has remained steady in recent years following a decline in general FE colleges during the 2010s

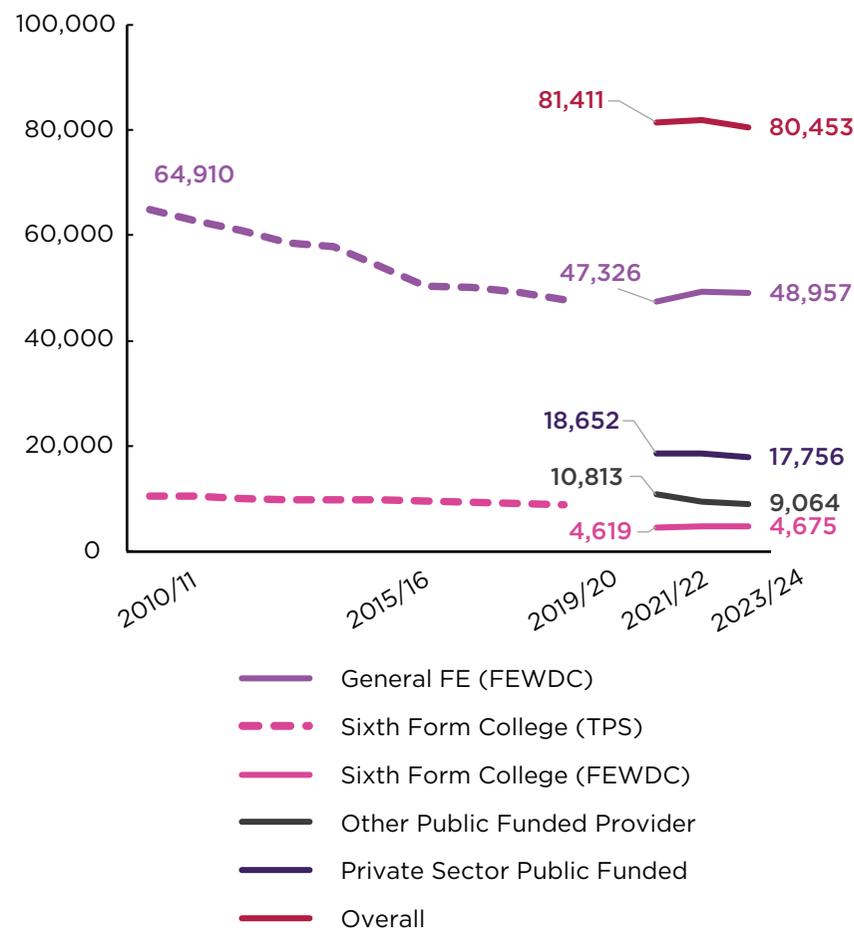
As of 2023/24, DfE data indicates that there were an estimated 80,453 FE teachers (headcount) in England. The majority (61 per cent) of these teachers were based in general FE Colleges, but this also includes teachers in ITPs, sixth-form Colleges, and other FE providers, catering to learners across a wide range of ages. The proportion of FE teachers working in general FE has increased slightly in recent years, up from 58 per cent in 2021/22. Sixth-form colleges account for just six per cent of the sector, and other public sector providers<sup>2</sup> make up a further 11 per cent. The private sector (i.e. ITPs) is a significant employer of FE teachers, employing 22 per cent of the workforce.

Between 2021/22 and 2023/24, the overall number of FE workforce staff decreased very slightly, by 958 individuals, or one per cent.<sup>3</sup> General FE staff numbers increased by three per cent and the number of teachers in sixth-form colleges also increased slightly. The overall decline is driven by the private sector and other public providers. This may suggest a shift from the private sector towards the public sector, although this is uncertain as the data collection was bedding in during this time<sup>4</sup>.

Looking back further using data from the Teacher Pension Scheme (TPS), the recent numbers represent a break from the significant decline in general FE teaching staff seen between 2010/11 and 2019/20 (DfE, 2021). This indicates that the number of FE teachers in general FE is no longer declining as it was during the 2010s. It also suggests the number of teachers in sixth-form colleges has been relatively flat over the last 15 years. However, we do need to be cautious here; the TPS data is not directly comparable with the FEWDC data. Although it is reasonable to

compare trends over time, the difference in the number of teachers in sixth-form colleges between the two datasets is likely to be due to the number of providers included in each dataset. The historic TPS data does not cover other provider types.

Headcount of FE teacher numbers



Source: TPS and FEWDC.

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2 This group can include school-based FE providers, local authorities with an education remit, and special post-16 providers.

3 Note that this is based on headcount, which includes zero hour and variable hour contracts.

4 Private sector providers have tended to have lower response rates to the FEWDC compared to other providers. DfE accounts for low response rates in their estimates of headcount, but there will be greater uncertainty in those estimates.

**Growing the FE teacher workforce will play an important part in the government’s 6,500 target due to increases in the number of 16- to 18-year-olds**

Along with teachers in state-funded secondary and special schools, the number of FE teachers in general FE Colleges, sixth-form colleges and school-based providers is included in the Government’s target to employ 6,500 additional teachers over the course of this parliament. In 2023/24, there were 38,800 FE teachers in these settings. This count forms the baseline for the FE component of the 6,500 target. The increase between 2022/23 and 2023/24, whilst encouraging, will not count towards the target.<sup>5</sup>

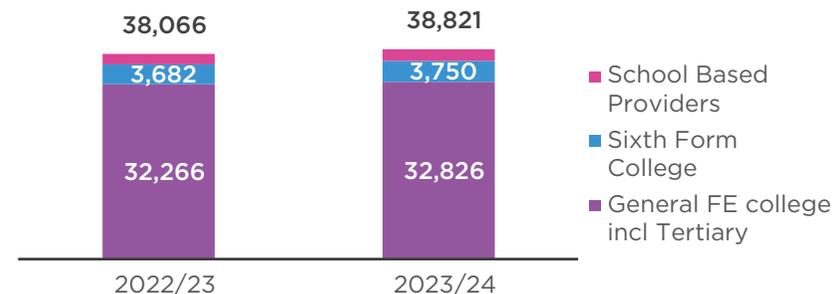
Whilst recruitment in secondary schools and special schools will also help achieve the target, FE teacher recruitment is likely to be important. The number of students in FE is likely to increase sharply in the next few years. Population projections from the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2025) suggests the number of 16-18 year olds – a key learner segment of most FE provision – will increase by almost seven per cent between 2023 and 2027 (which is approximately the timeframe of the 6,500 policy). This is likely to manifest in greater demand for provision and FE teachers. Indeed, DfE statistics suggest that the number of 16-18 year olds in general FE College has increased sharply in the last two years (DfE, 2025c).

If the number of FE teachers in these targeted providers increases in line with the number of 16-18-year-olds in England between 2023/24 and 2027/28 (i.e., by seven per cent), then that would equate to an increase of 2,700 teachers - nearly half of the 6,500 target.

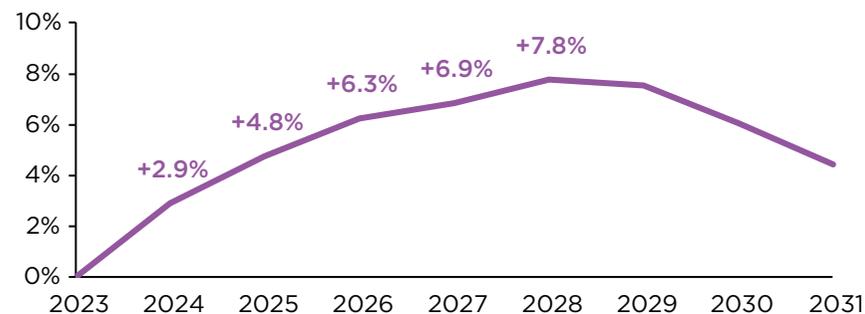
However, other factors are at play here. Most obviously, providers may struggle to recruit those teachers (or make gains through better retention), even if the demand is there. In addition, the increase in the number of 16-18-year-olds may not translate perfectly into an equivalent increase in the number of FE teachers. Even if it does, it is

not necessarily the case that colleges will increase teacher numbers in proportion to an increase in student numbers. Some may have spare capacity within their existing provision. FE also caters to a wider learner demographic than just 16-18-year-olds. Changes in the number of adult learners could also affect demand for teachers, in either direction. Finally, there were 2,000 FE teacher vacancies (a headcount measure) in these providers in 2023/24 (see later in report). Filling many of these would also make a material difference to the target.

FTE of FE teachers in areas relevant to the +6,500 teachers target



Projected growth in the number of 16-18 year olds in England, compared to 2023



<sup>5</sup> Data for the 2024/25 academic year will be published in May 2026. Data for the 2025/26 academic year will be published in late Autumn 2026 because the DfE have decided to bring data collection forward (DfE, 2026d). DfE have also introduced a new, snapshot data collection focused on the number of teaching staff in January each year. They have said this will be used to monitor trends in numbers but they did not say they will release this data publicly (DfE, 2026c).

### Five of the top 15 in-demand subjects are key sectors for Government’s economic growth ambitions

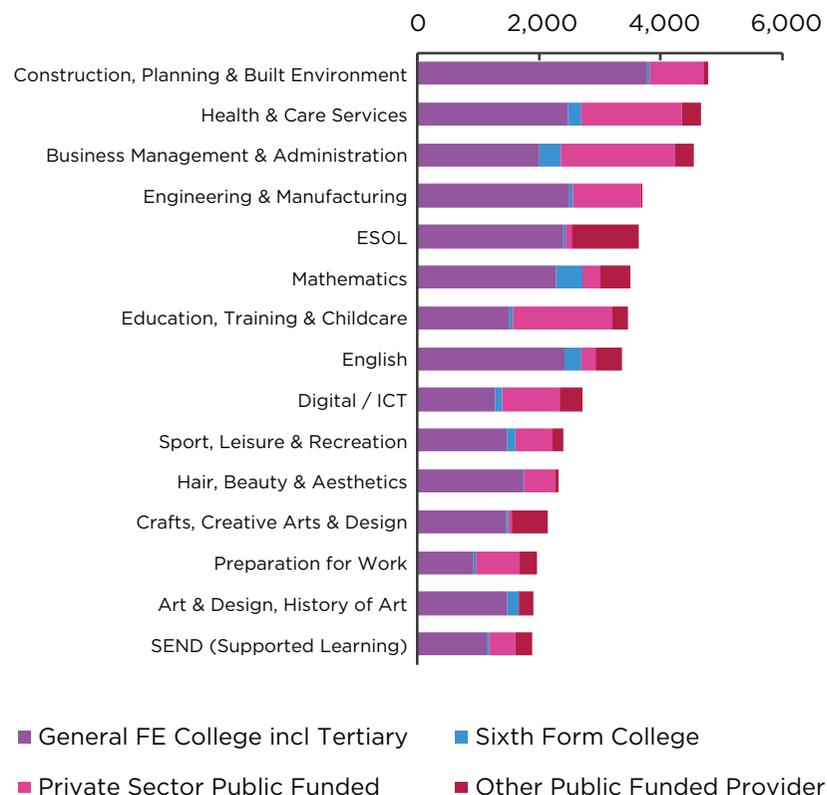
Of the 15 subjects with the largest number of FE teachers, five are centred on priority sectors for driving economic growth, as identified by the Government in their Industrial Strategy (DBT, 2025). These are: construction, planning and the built environment; engineering and manufacturing; digital/ICT; crafts, creative arts and design; and art and design and history of art. This demonstrates that there is high demand for training in these areas, and consequently high demand for relevant teachers. Most of the teachers in these subjects are based in the public sector.

The core subjects of mathematics, English and ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Language) also constitute a large part of the workforce, with limited coverage within the private sector. Some sectors have a larger part of their FE workforce in private providers, particularly health and care services, business management and administration, and education, training and childcare. If the trend of declining workforce numbers in private providers continues, this could have a particular impact on provision of teaching in these subjects.

The DfE has various policies aimed at expanding the FE teacher workforce in high priority subjects. Bursaries for FE teachers are currently on offer for the 2026/27 year. They are aimed at computing, engineering and manufacturing, maths, and science, and there are also smaller amounts for trainees in supported learning for Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND) and English. There is a robust evidence base (looking at schoolteacher recruitment) that bursaries do improve recruitment into teaching and tend to offer a cost-effective way of boosting teacher supply.

In 2024, the DfE also introduced TRI payments for some early-career FE teachers in construction, engineering and manufacturing, English, maths, computing, physics and early years (DfE, 2025f). The evidence base on similar payments in secondary schools suggests they do work, although this evidence base needs further development (Worth and McLean, 2025). NFER is evaluating the FE TRI payments for DfE.

FE teacher headcount for top 15 subjects, 2023/24



Source: FEWDC.

### FE teacher vacancy rates are high, but improved between 2021/22 and 2023/24

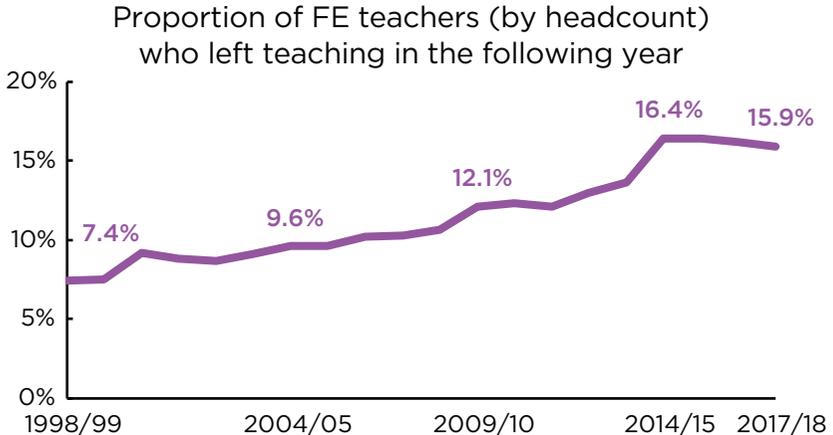
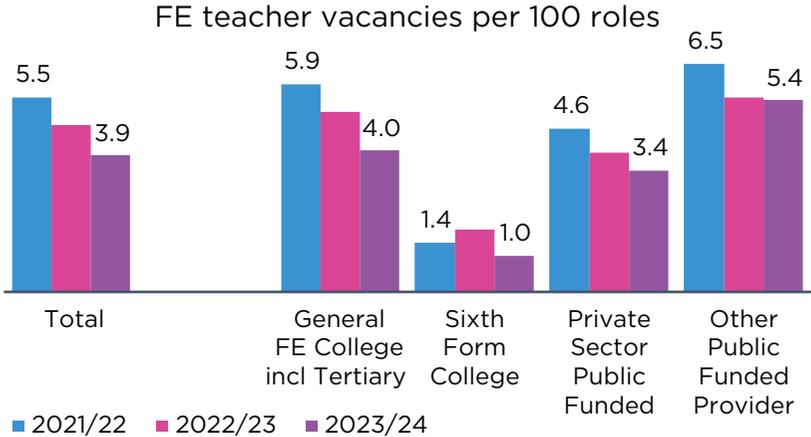
As of 2023/24, around four in every 100 FE teacher roles were vacant, adding up to 3,000 vacant roles in total. Two-thirds of these vacancies were in general FE Colleges. These numbers constitute a significant portion of the Government’s ambitions to recruit an additional 6,500 teachers. Vacancy rates are higher in the public than in the private sector, with the exception of sixth-form colleges, where the vacancy rate is just one in 100.

The DfE advises that the vacancy rates in their data are not compared across years because they do not get responses from all providers each year. At face value, however, the four per cent vacancy rate does appear to represent an improvement in recent years, down from 5.5 per 100 roles in 2021/22. We can also see that trends in vacancy rates between parts of the FE sector have remained broadly consistent, although other public-funded providers (a relatively small group) have not seen vacancies fall as much as in other areas.

It is not straightforward to compare vacancies across the FE sector and schools in England, because of the way the data is collected. As such, comparisons need to be treated with caution. In the 2023/24 School Workforce Census (DfE, 2025d), less than one in 100 secondary school classroom teacher roles were recorded as vacant. A basic comparison suggests the teacher vacancy rate is four times higher in FE than it is in secondary schools, so it seems reasonable to tentatively conclude that national vacancy rates are higher for FE teachers than they are for secondary school teachers, but this is not certain.<sup>6</sup>

One reason FE may have a high rate of vacancies is that the sector suffers from poor retention. The latest FE retention data (DfE, 2021), from 2017/18, shows a leaving rate of 16 per cent – which means around one in six FE teachers were leaving the sector every year. The dual professionalism of FE teachers may create additional challenges for retention, as the option to return to industry likely provides an easier transition out of the teaching sector than would be the experience of schoolteachers, for example. These rates saw a steady increase from the start of the data being collected in 1998/99 (seven per cent) up until

2014/15 (16 per cent), where there were then signs of it levelling out, and even potentially beginning to decline. However, given the serious and systemic issues with retention that this data demonstrates, it is essential that the DfE resumes publication of this data so we can have a better understanding of the role retention is playing in the staffing shortages observed.



Source: FEWDC above and TPS below.

<sup>6</sup> The School Workforce Census measures the number of vacancies at the time the data is collected in November. It is not clear how many vacancies occurred across the entire year that remain unfilled at the end of the year, which is how the FE data is measured.

### Vacancy rates are worse in some high priority FE subjects, as well as in Yorkshire and the Humber and London

Some of the subjects with the largest number of staff also have the highest vacancy rates, suggesting that demand for teaching in these areas still outstrips supply. Subjects of this kind include construction, planning and the built environment; engineering and manufacturing, and digital/ICT. Most of these are also among the Government’s priority sectors (DBT, 2025), indicating significant challenges for achieving their economic growth ambitions. These priority sectors are indicated in the chart in blue. Ten of the top 15 shortage subjects are in STEM.<sup>7</sup> While not among the largest subjects, electronics, computer science, and accounting and finance also feed into the Government’s priority sectors and have some of the highest vacancy rates across the sector.

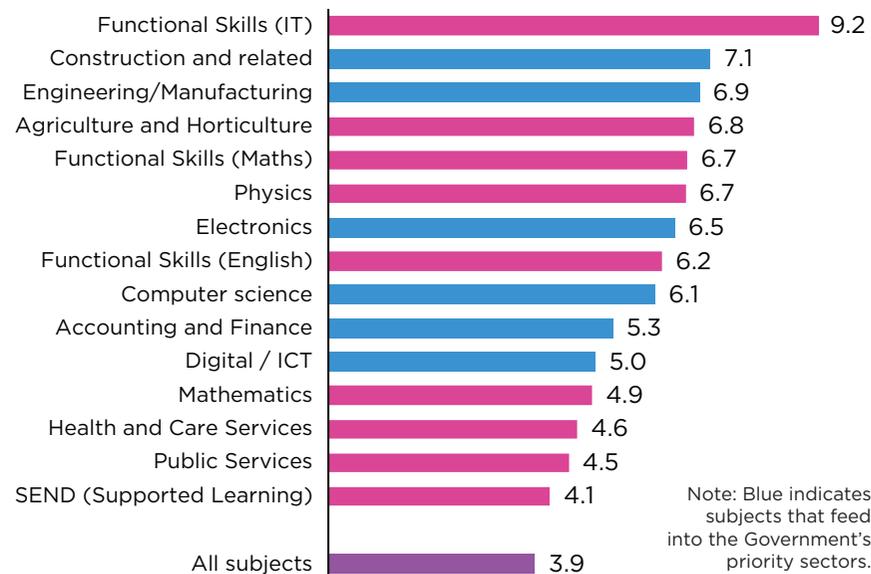
We also find significant variation in vacancy rates by region, with some regions having nearly twice as many vacancies per 100 roles as others. In 2023/24, the highest vacancy rates were seen in Yorkshire and The Humber and London, while the lowest were in the East Midlands, North East and South East. The DfE advises that vacancy rates are not compared across years due to differences in the provider sample. However, at face value, vacancy rates fell across all regions between 2021 and 2024, with the largest reductions seen across the North and in the East of England.

If we look at subject specific shortages by region, we can see there are geographical cold spots where FE teacher shortages are very significant. Amongst engineering and manufacturing teacher roles, 13.2 and 10.8 per cent of roles are vacant in London and Yorkshire and the Humber, respectively. The same is true for 9.2 per 100 roles in construction, planning and the built environment in the West Midlands.

As outlined earlier, DfE is targeting FE teacher recruitment in high priority subjects through bursaries and TRI payments. The subjects it has chosen are largely aligned with those with the highest rates and highest numbers of vacancies.

<sup>7</sup> We look at subjects with at least 100 FE teachers (headcount) in 2023/24, because a small number of subjects have a very high rate of vacancies across a small number of posts.

FE teacher vacancies per 100 roles Top shortage subjects (with at least 100 headcount), All FE



All FE teacher vacancies per 100 roles, by provider type



Sources for both: FEWDC.

**On average, FE teachers' earnings have lost ground compared to earnings of other workers, including secondary school teachers**

One factor that is likely to be a driver of FE teacher shortages is poor levels of pay across the sector, which have worsened over the last fifteen years. FE teachers' pay is set by individual colleges. Colleges' ability to pay teachers is determined by a set of factors, including the rates of funding they receive to deliver provision to students. The Association of Colleges (AoC) makes annual recommendations about FE teacher pay based on their perception of what most colleges can afford. Some colleges follow these recommendations each year, while others make their own decisions based on their circumstances (House of Commons Education Committee, 2025).

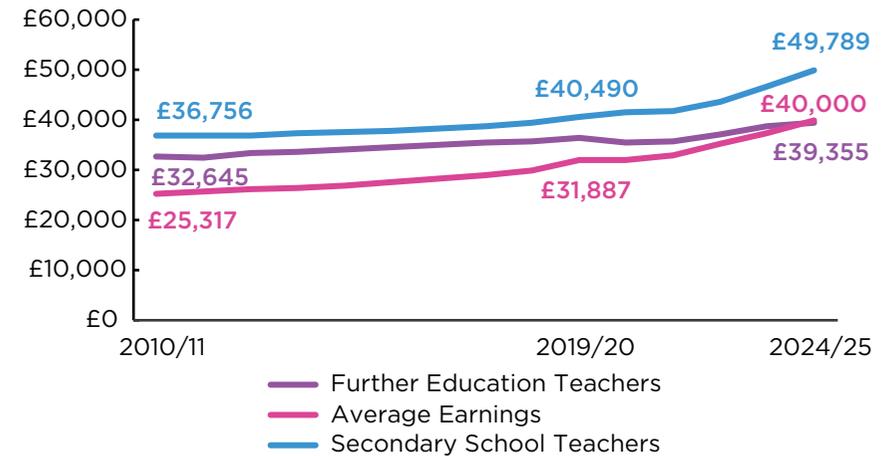
In this report, we look at median earnings over the last fifteen years in a national survey called ASHE. We have also made comparisons with other data which shows a similar picture (see accompanying methodology for full details). The data suggests FE teacher pay increased in nominal terms over the last fifteen years. However, it has fallen relative to other workers, including secondary school teachers.

Throughout this period, median FE teacher earnings have been lower than secondary school teachers. In 2024/25, the median full-time FE teacher received around £39,400, compared to £49,800 for the average full-time secondary teacher, a gap of 20 per cent. This gap has widened markedly in recent years. Between 2010/11 and 2019/20, the median full-time FE teacher earned around ten per cent less than the median full-time secondary school teacher. Previous NFER research has also shown a substantial gap between FE teachers' earnings in priority subjects, including construction and engineering, and what they could earn working in those industries (Flemons *et al.*, 2024).

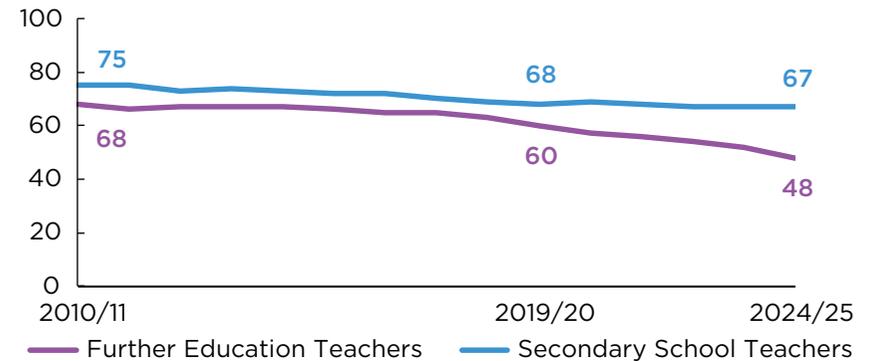
The decline in FE full-time teacher pay over recent years is even more startling when held up against average full-time earnings in England. In 2010/11, the median full-time FE teacher earned around 30 per cent more than the median employee in England. In 2024/25, median earnings for full-time FE teachers fell below the national median for the first time in our data. We can also look at how average FE teacher pay has fallen down the pay distribution. In 2010/11, the median FE teacher earned as much as 68 per cent of the full-time population in England. By 2024/25, they earned as much as just 48 per cent. Schoolteachers'

pay has also dropped in relative terms, but the drop for FE teachers has been far larger. This data reinforces the impression that FE teacher pay is now far less competitive than it was in the recent past.

Median full-time earnings in England (nominal)



Position in the full-time income distribution in England (percentile)



Source: NFER analysis of ASHE data.

**FE teacher pay has fallen by almost 20 per cent in real terms since 2010, while average UK earnings have increased by four per cent**

The relative lack of growth in FE teacher pay means that it has fallen substantially once we account for inflation. Between 2010/11 and 2024/25, median FE teacher pay has fallen by about 18 per cent in real terms. This means prices have increased by substantially more than FE teacher salaries over this time. The fall in the value of their salaries has been relatively persistent: in real terms, pay has fallen in nine out of the last 14 years. However, the fall was particularly pronounced during the period between 2018/19 and 2022/23. Since then, we have seen larger nominal increases, which have just about kept up with inflation.

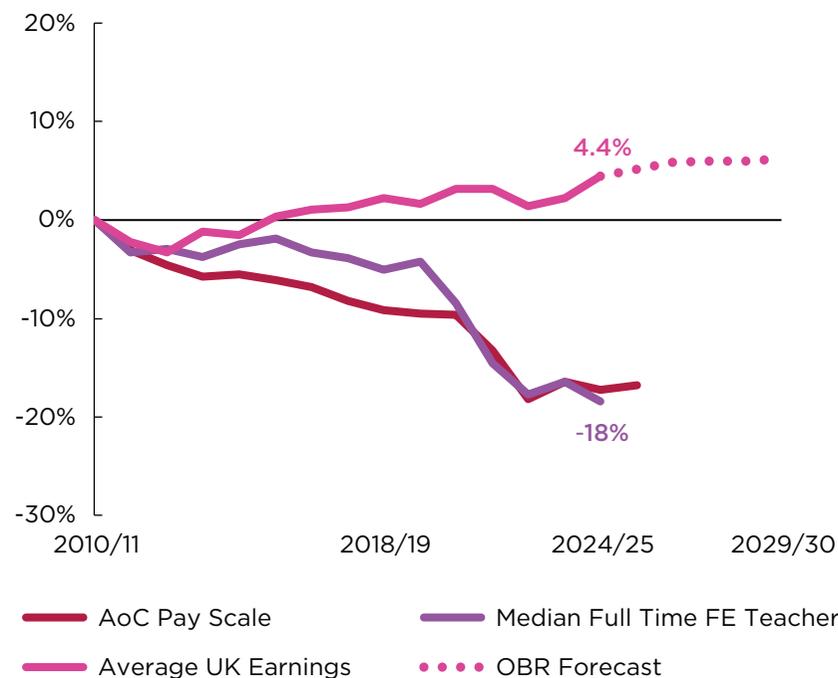
The chart also shows that a similar fall can largely be seen in the AoC’s pay scale recommendations to colleges, which have been compared to changes in inflation. This suggests that the fall in FE teacher pay is largely driven by colleges and other providers’ inability to afford higher pay. Data from the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) somewhat reinforces this impression: per-student FE funding for 16-18 students fell by eight per cent in real terms between 2010/11 and 2025/26. In the same report, the IFS shows that total spending on adult education has fallen by more than 20 per cent in that time (Farquharson *et al.*, 2026).

As highlighted on the previous page, it is also important to review how these changes have coincided with developments in the wider economy. Average UK earnings increased by 4.4 per cent between the 2010/11 and 2024/25 FE academic years, and the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) projects further slight real earnings growth over the medium term (OBR, 2026). This means there is a 22 percentage point gap between where median FE teacher earnings were in 2024/25 and where they would have been had they kept pace with average earnings in the economy.

The decline in FE teacher pay is attracting widespread attention. The Education Select Committee called for the establishment of a statutory pay review body for college teachers, similar to the process for schoolteachers. They also told the DfE to close the pay gap between college teachers and school teachers (House of Commons

Education Committee, 2025). Our analysis shows a clear divergence in FE teacher and school teacher pay over the last fifteen years, despite the widespread recruitment and retention challenges in the FE sector. The Government needs to urgently consider what more can be done to address this lack of parity.

Real earnings growth since 2010/2011



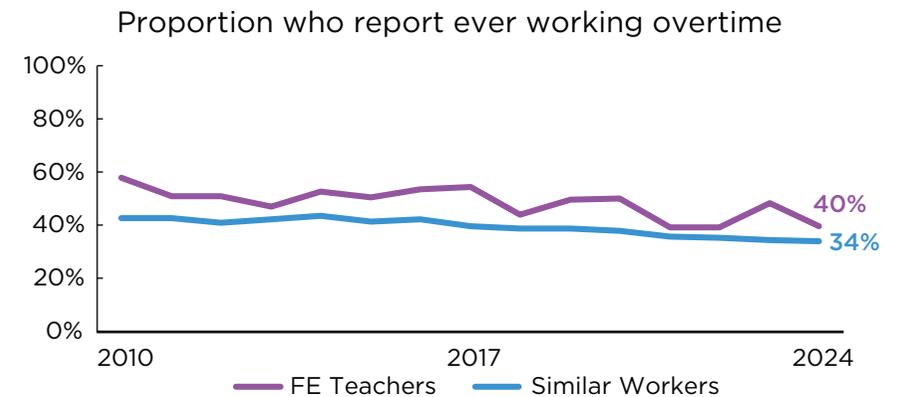
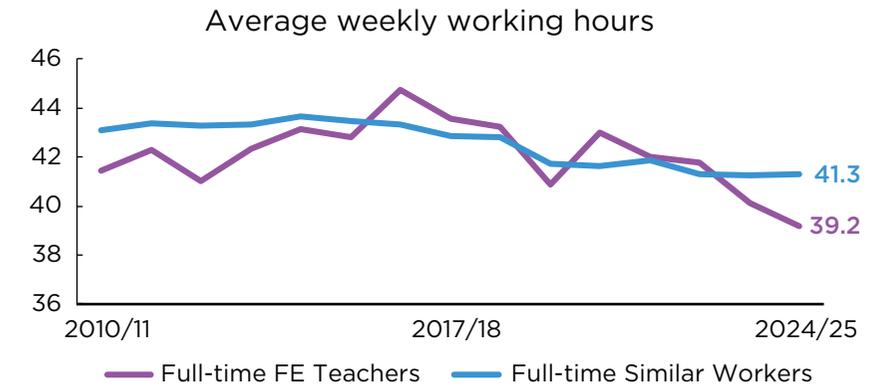
Source: NFER analysis of AoC, ASHE and OBR data.

### FE teachers have tended to work similar hours to similar workers, but it is more common for this to include overtime – usually unpaid

Previous qualitative research by NFER found that FE teachers considered workload to be a key factor driving poor retention rates in the sector (Flemons *et al.*, 2024). To explore this further, we used data from the LFS to compare the average working hours of FE staff to those of similar workers. We constructed the latter group statistically by creating a group with a similar set of underlying characteristics to FE teachers, including qualification level, gender, age and region. This means differences between FE teachers and similar workers are not simply due to composition effects driven by these factors (although there could be others that we did not control for). Sample sizes are low for this analysis, so these trends should be interpreted with caution.

Comparing working hours is challenging when a large proportion of staff work part time, as they do in FE. We therefore look specifically at full-time workers who reported working at least five days in the previous week. In 2024/25, full-time FE teachers worked an average of 39 hours per week, compared to 41 hours among similar workers. However, as the top figure shows, there is no consistent trend in relation to the working hours of FE teachers compared to those of similar workers over time, probably due in part to the small sample size in the data. The differences observed for each year are rarely statistically significant.

On the other hand, we find that FE teachers are consistently more likely to report working overtime compared to similar workers in other sectors, and this gap is statistically significant in most years. In 2024, 40 per cent of FE teachers reported working overtime, compared to 34 per cent of similar workers. Given that FE teachers are usually not paid for overtime (Flemons *et al.*, 2024), these findings suggest that FE teachers work similar hours to similar workers, but that they are potentially more likely than similar workers to not receive payment for all of that time. This is likely to increase levels of dissatisfaction with workload, if they do not feel they are being proportionately compensated for it.



Source: Above, NFER analysis of LFS data. Below, NFER analysis of APS data.

### FE teachers want to work fewer hours, but not if that means less pay

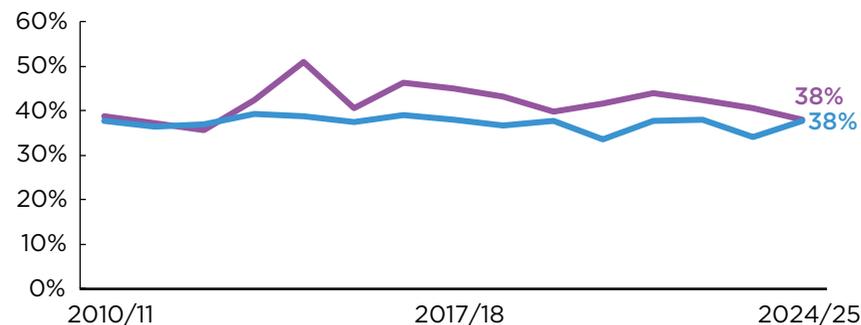
While 38 per cent of both FE teachers and similar workers reported that they would prefer to work shorter hours in 2024/25, this marks a break in an 11-year trend of FE teachers being more likely to report wanting to work shorter hours compared to similar workers. In four of these years, this gap was statistically significant.

Given that FE teachers work similar hours to similar workers, it is possible that the challenges FE teachers associate with workload are about the intensity of the work rather than the number of hours. This is supported by NFER’s previous qualitative research, where FE teachers indicated that excessive administrative responsibilities and the challenges of behavioural management and pastoral support without sufficient training were key contributors to high levels of dissatisfaction with the role (Flemons *et al.*, 2024).

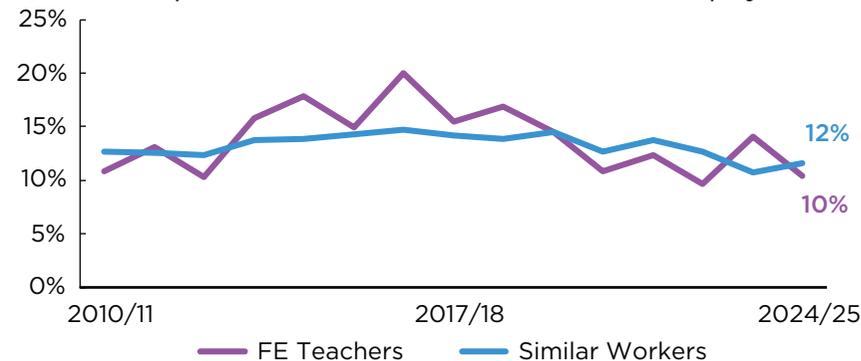
However, when asked if they would prefer shorter hours if this meant less pay, no consistent difference between FE teachers and similar workers were seen. The proportion of FE teachers who would select this option also drops to 10 per cent – just over a quarter of those who would prefer to work fewer hours if they were to receive the same pay. These findings likely reflect the lower levels of pay among FE teachers compared to similar workers.

Overall, these findings suggest that 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. NFER’s previous qualitative FE workforce research found that it was the mismatch between pay and workload that was the primary issue for retention, rather than specifically one factor or the other (Flemons *et al.*, 2024).

Proportion of FE teachers and similar workers who prefer to work shorter hours



Proportion of FE teachers and similar workers who prefer to work shorter hours for less pay



Source for both: NFER analysis of LFS data,

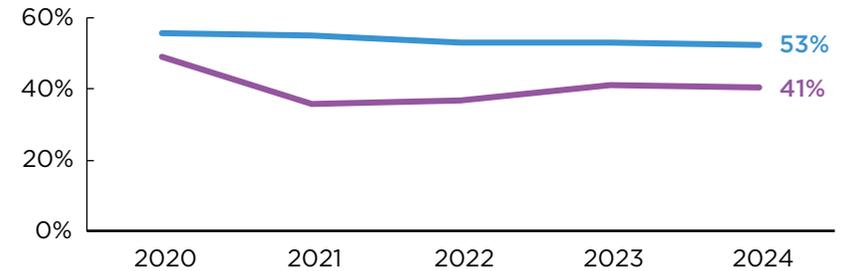
**FE teachers are less likely than similar workers to report lower workplace agency and opportunities for progression at work**

APS data from 2024 shows that FE teachers were significantly less likely than similar workers to agree that their workplace involves employees in decision making (41 per cent compared to 53 per cent). This continued a trend since 2020 of FE teachers reporting lower levels of workplace agency compared to similar workers. This gap is persistent over time and statistically significant – even with a relatively small sample size – in 2020, 2021 and 2024.

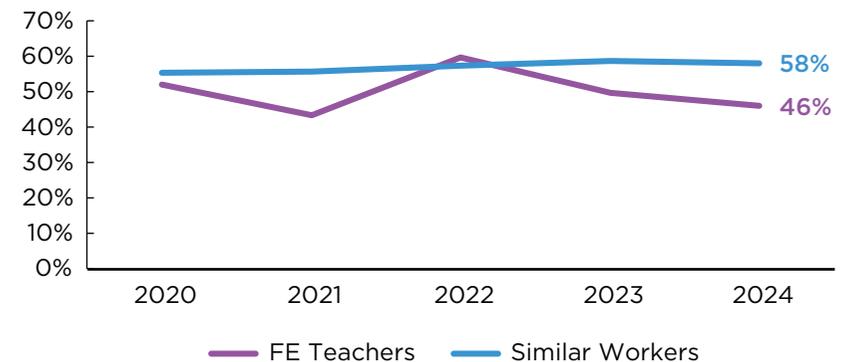
In 2024, FE teachers were also significantly less likely than similar workers to agree that their work offered good opportunities for career progression (46 per cent compared to 58 per cent). A similar picture has been seen most years since 2020, although this difference was only statistically significant in 2021 and 2024. NFER’s previous research on the FE workforce found that limited opportunities for pay progression were a major challenge for retention, particularly in subjects such as construction and digital that have very high upper pay levels within the industry (Flemons *et al.*, 2024). Perceptions of career progression may consequently also be bound up in pay scale constraints.

It is possible that poorer working conditions, including in relation to opportunities for progression and a sense of employee participation in workplace decision-making, may contribute to dissatisfaction levels within the workforce in relation to workload, even when the hours worked are similar to those of similar workers. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that both employee participation and wider progression opportunities may help to support retention of first-line and middle-level employees and teachers, respectively (CooperGibson Research, 2018; Khalid and Nawab, 2018). As potential mechanisms for helping to address staffing challenges, these factors merit additional attention and research.

Proportion who agree that employees are involved in decision making in their workplace



Proportion who agree there are good opportunities for career progression



Source for both: NFER analysis of APS data.

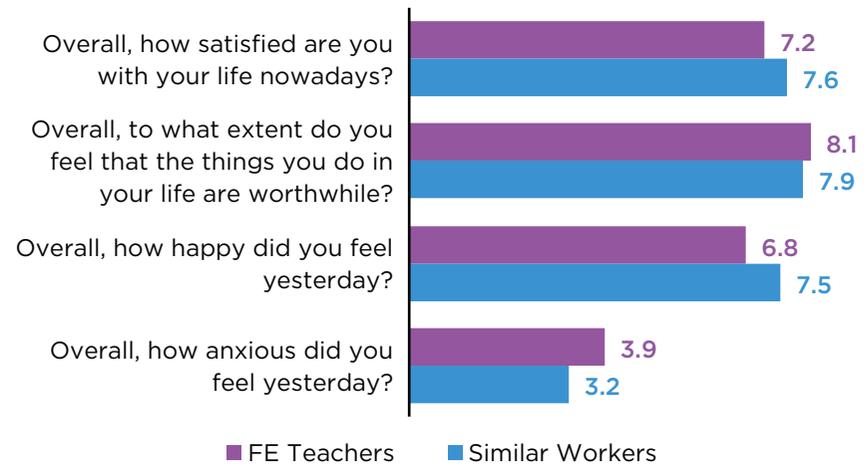
**FE teachers' subjective wellbeing levels are comparable to similar workers, but there is emerging evidence they are less happy**

APS data also allows us to look at the general subjective wellbeing of FE teachers and compare their scores to those of similar workers. In 2024, FE workers reported, on average, high levels of satisfaction with their life (7.2 out of 10), and feeling that the things they do in life are worthwhile (8.1 out of 10). These scores are broadly similar to those among similar workers. This has largely been the case since 2016 for these questions. FE teachers also report low levels of anxiety (3.9 out of 10). While this rate is higher than for similar workers, the gap is not statistically significant, meaning there is a reasonable likelihood it is driven by chance.

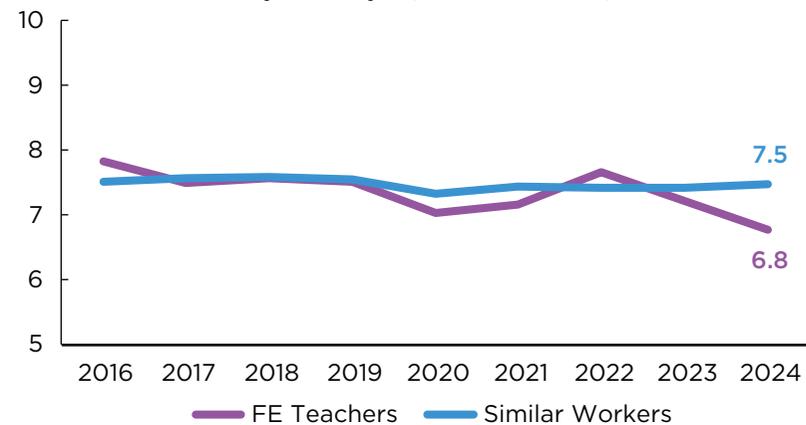
FE teachers reported lower happiness levels (6.8 out of 10) in 2024 than similar workers and this gap was statistically significant. When we look at the data since 2016, we see a downward trend in the happiness of FE teachers over the last couple of years. This result is notable but further data is needed to assess whether it is a sustained gap, given the relatively small sample size in the APS data and the lack of similar differences in previous years.

Given that these measures are about general wellbeing, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which factors specific to being an FE teacher are meaningful drivers of these trends. However, more research into the wellbeing and working conditions of FE teachers would provide greater clarity around the observed trend around happiness levels and potentially help to identify ways of addressing it. As the other findings in this report suggest a somewhat high intensity of work and low pay competitiveness among FE teachers, it is not unlikely that the challenging economic conditions could be particularly impactful on their happiness levels. There are also slight indications of an emerging upward trend in anxiety levels among FE workers in particular, further supporting the need for more research.

General wellbeing (scores out of 10), 2024



Average response to 'Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?' (scores out of 10)



Source for both: NFER analysis of APS.



## Conclusions and policy recommendations

High quality FE teaching is the most important lever available to DfE and FE providers to improve outcomes for FE students (DfE, DWP, and DSIT, 2025). Despite this, significant challenges in the FE teacher workforce have been allowed to remain for a long time. The recent statistics show welcome signs of growth in FE teacher numbers, but at a time where demand for FE is seeing a sharp increase, the sector will need to achieve strong and consistent growth. Indeed, many of the 6,500 new teachers the government is aiming to recruit will be needed in the FE sector over the coming years.

There is a significant shortage of FE teachers across England, with four per cent of all roles vacant as of 2023/24. Vacancy rates are higher in high priority FE subject areas such as construction, engineering and manufacturing. This is a key problem given that these areas are central to the Government's wider economic growth agenda. FE teacher bursaries and retention payments target these subjects, along with English and maths. There is good evidence that bursaries and retention payments can work. Yet it remains to be seen whether this set of policies – which is focused on trainees or early career teachers – will be enough to significantly reduce shortages in these key areas.

A driver of teacher shortages in the FE sector is its struggle to retain teachers. However, there is no publicly available data on how FE teacher retention has evolved since 2017/18. At that time, around one in six FE teachers left the system within twelve months. Relatively low pay, and very low levels of pay growth over the last fifteen years, are a key factor here. Our analysis reveals that the longstanding gap between FE teacher pay and secondary school teacher pay has widened sharply over the last few years. Median FE teacher pay is down by almost 20 per cent in real terms since 2011. While the increases in the last three years are welcome, they have barely kept pace with inflation. The Government needs to act over the long term to improve the competitiveness and value of FE teacher pay.

Beyond pay, there will be other things the sector can do to improve FE teacher retention. NFER's previous research has highlighted that many FE teachers consider leaving the profession due to a high workload. We found mixed evidence here. While FE teachers do not appear to work longer hours than similar workers, they do work more overtime, much of which is unpaid. We also found that teachers have less involvement in workplace decisions than similar workers, and there is good evidence they lack opportunities for career progression too, which may also be related to limited pay growth.

### Policy recommendations

- The Government should provide funding that allows FE providers to pay teachers more. Recent announcements of new funding for the sector are welcome, but a sustained effort over many years is needed. It looks set to be critical to helping the Government achieve its 6,500 target too.
- The Government and FE providers should continue to target funding at key shortage subjects. Long-term evidence on bursaries show they work and previous evaluations of retention payments for schoolteachers show they can work too. Targeting makes them more cost effective than general pay increases.
- Leaders in FE should explore how teachers can be meaningfully involved and engaged in the way the college or other provider defines its organisational development priorities and makes decisions more widely.



## Research and data recommendations

For a long time, the data on the FE workforce in England has been significantly worse than data on the school workforce. The arrival of the FEWDC in 2021/22 is a welcome development and goes a long way to addressing this difference. However, there are some key gaps within the data collection that need addressing.

Most significantly, the DfE should be publishing statistics about FE teacher attrition, particularly given previous, experimental statistics suggest that exit rates in FE are higher than for schoolteachers. It is not currently possible to say whether rates are getting better, or which subjects or geographical areas are worst. This information would help the DfE, colleges and providers, and researchers identify where exit rates are a key challenge and target solutions more effectively than they can at present.

Another gap in the FEWDC and FE data landscape concerns recruitment of FE teachers. There is no measure of new teachers in the FEWDC, nor is there any public information about the flows within the FE ITE system, as there is for school teacher initial teacher training (ITT). Releasing more data on ITE would enable ITE providers and researchers to better understand the ITE landscape. It is promising to see that the 6,500 teacher delivery plan sets out plans to register providers of FE ITE and ask them to submit data to DfE (DfE, 2026a).

One of the key gaps in the evidence base on FE teachers at the moment is the lack of a widescale survey on FE teachers. NFER is currently administering an FE workforce survey, commissioned by DfE. This study will give large-scale survey evidence on the working lives of FE teachers and inform future iterations of this report.

Finally, our analysis found that FE teachers regularly report having less involvement in workplace decision making than similar workers, and were less likely to agree they had good opportunities for career progression in most years in the data. As potential mechanisms for helping to address staffing challenges, there factors merit additional attention and research, perhaps in similar vein to a recent NFER paper on school teachers (Worth, Kuhn and del Pozo Segura, 2026).

### Research and data recommendations

- DfE should start publishing retention rates of FE teachers regularly as soon as it can, either via the FEWDC or failing that, using pension scheme data, as it has done before.
- DfE should publish more data about the FE ITE process, in line with existing data on school teacher ITT.
- More research should look at which factors influence FE teacher recruitment and retention, including involvement in workplace decision making and opportunities for career progression.



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