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## **More than a “sticking plaster”: Understanding the demands and identifying the resources to create sustainable senior leadership in Welsh education**

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# Foreword

Addysg Cymru has articulated the aspiration to ensure all children are enabled to develop as healthy, confident individuals ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society. To fulfil this aspiration, headteachers must be supported to develop the compassionate leadership and cultures that our schools require.

In this inspiring and powerful report, Dr. Davies identifies the resources they need to help balance the huge demands they face. This will include national bodies and local communities taking shared responsibility for helping to sculpt compassionate cultures and support for headteachers, all school staff and children and young people.

Leaders play a significant role in any system. The last 100 years of research on organisational cultures has shown that the role of formal leaders throughout any community, system or organisation is central in shaping culture. What leaders pay attention to, talk about, monitor, reward and portray in their own behaviour, tells us what it is they value - what is important to them and therefore what should be important to us. Those who lead and support headteachers in Wales therefore play a crucial role in shaping the cultures of the system, of schools and thereby our wider communities. How can all of those with responsibility for education in Wales take a consistent and effective approach to shaping the culture of the system?

This report by Dr. Alice Davies provides deep and challenging insights into the experiences and challenges faced by headteachers and other senior leaders in education in Wales. Using insights from research and theory and conversations with headteachers, she has identified the difficulties they face including overwhelming work demands, excessive scrutiny of outcomes, sclerotic bureaucracy, competing agendas of multiple overseers, high levels of emotional demands and resource shortages. The report also therefore makes clear what the solutions are.

The challenge is to attract, develop, retain and value outstanding leaders in schools in order that they can create the conditions for the children of Wales to feel safe, loved, curious and connected with all around them. How can we achieve this?

Every interaction by every one of us every day in our workplaces, schools and communities is an opportunity to shape their cultures. How warm, irritable, cynical or compassionate we are influences the experiences and behaviour of others through the emotional contagion that ripples out from our interactions. Those who lead and support headteachers must themselves model the compassionate and wise leadership we want headteachers to practise - that is an essential underpinning to creating compassionate cultures throughout the educational system in Wales.

The aim must be to support headteachers in their mission to nurture compassionate and psychologically safe school cultures. Such cultures are inclusive, valuing the knowledge, skills and abilities of all, while wholeheartedly embracing the diversity that is the nature of human society. They promote learning, discovery, creativity, debate and healthy conflict management, in climates of mutual respect and compassion. Humility, compassion and altruism are core to the development of such compassionate and safe school cultures.

This report makes clear we must ensure compassionate approaches to supporting headteachers - listening to them, understanding the challenges they face, empathising with them, and then collectively helping them so they can succeed in ensuring all children in Wales are enabled to develop as healthy, confident individuals ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society

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# Executive Summary

## Why do we need to consider the well-being of headteachers and senior educators?

Successful recruitment and retention of headteachers has become increasingly difficult in Wales. The role being positioned as a ‘catalyst’ for school improvement is thought to be one factor for between 18-40% posts being unfilled by 2016 (Davies, Milton, Connolly and Barrance, 2018). School improvement has been a key driver in Welsh education following devolution in 1999 and the subsequent emergence of distinct policies which were then under increased scrutiny following comparatively low PISA scores in 2009. Issues surrounding high turnover of staff and recruitment to new posts are interconnected and link to the sustainability of such roles as well as a potential crisis in leadership in education. Such a complex issue will inevitably have more than one solution, however it seems clear that the well-being of headteachers is one key part to this phenomenon.

The role of headteacher is generally regarded to be highly challenging in terms of the scope of its remit, the level of responsibility for not just pupils but parents, carers and staff. There are additional layers of context surrounding the role which inform how it is enacted, for example regular changes to educational policy which are thought to somewhat ‘frame’ the role (Crow and MØller, 2017). Another element noted by Macbeath (cited in Davies, Milton, Connolly and Barrance, 2018) is the increasing distance between the role of teacher and senior leader meaning that the qualities and skills required and the associated expectation may change throughout one’s career. Rhodes and Brundrett (2009) suggest that low recruitment rates and challenges in headteacher retention in Wales represent a culmination of the level of ‘exposure’ of the role, the multiple accountabilities and the sense of unpredictability in the work. It is evident that it is not just the knowledge and skills (or ‘professional capital’) of a head which leads to success in a role, but what is described as ‘social capital’, such as the relationships and ability to access support in a collaborative way (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012). An example of this includes Orr’s suggestion for the need for ‘safe spaces’ for headteachers (cited in Davies, Milton, Connolly and Barrance, 2018). The third form of capital Hargreaves and Fullan highlight is ‘decisional capital’, referring to the headteachers ability to make decisions in the environment they are in. This way of conceptualising the role clearly articulates the way in which some factors may relate to ‘within people’, while others may highlight a need for intervention ‘within the school’ or within the wider context.

Following the devolution of Welsh Government there was an emphasis placed upon trust and collaboration between practitioners and government which is thought to have later reduced following a shift towards ‘high stakes accountability’ after PISA scores were viewed as indicating a need for increased scrutiny (Power, cited in Davies, Milton, Connolly and Barrance, 2018). This focus is thought to have changed again, for example with the abolishment of ranking schools allowing for increased collaboration. This comes at a time of developing awareness of the impact of well-being upon children with mental health initiatives such as the ‘Whole Schools Approach’ being widely employed. Meanwhile the recent introduction of the new National Curriculum for Wales (Addysg Cymru, 2020) sets out a holistic approach to learning which has its own section on ‘health and well-being’ and seeks to value the *whole* child in its aim for “*healthy, confident individuals ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society*”. These and other strands have set the context for a number of challenges for senior leaders in their role. The Covid 19 pandemic has then further complicated the work in schools and appears to have increased the sense of pressure that teachers and particularly senior leaders are under (National Academy for Educational Leadership, 2020). A research study conducted in England found that throughout lockdown there were a number of factors which generated stress for headteachers including “fear and anxiety across the school, high level of pressure (‘be strong for others whatever your own problems’), adverse conditions for promoting and sustaining young peoples’ learning (for example lack of internet or devices at home), inadequate support from government and unclear information and difficulties in creating a sense of belonging in a context that requires social distancing” (Riley and Mendoza, 2020, p.5). It is likely that many of these resonate in Wales and the landscape of senior leader well-being has never been more important.

## What do we understand well-being to mean in the context of work?

There are many definitions of well-being which can be considered a recipe of factors such as how fairly someone feels treated, their sense of purpose, their feeling of belonging, their sense of being valued and cared for and their capacity to have adequate control over what they do (Neal, 2021). It is not therefore about being ‘healthy’ as such, although these themes naturally do link to physical and psychological health. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) describes well-being as being about people reaching their potential, the ability to be productive and creative, to build positive relationships, to contribute to a wider community and to find a sense of purpose (NICE, 2015). The research surrounding well-being suggests that there are core conditions which determine whether an employee may thrive; these relate to factors such as having a sense of safety, participation, feeling valued, treated fairly and emotionally intelligent leadership (Highfield and Neal, 2021). The implication of this is that rather than purely ‘skilling people up’, there must also be a focus upon the working environment and culture of any organisation; this involves a response at every layer of the system. “*We recommend*

*a move away from viewing resilience as a fixed characteristic of individuals. Resilience is not a characteristic or a skill but is a dynamic interaction between the person and their environment. Staff susceptibility to these stressors could be reduced in future if NHS Trusts focus on the balance between personality traits, job demands and support systems to achieve employee well-being, as described by the Job– Demands–Resources Model. However, the Society’s view is that this is a systemic issue and that there is no one single cure” (BPS, 2020, p.1).*

## Considering leadership as a well-being resource

Leadership is well evidenced in health to play a key role in supporting the well-being of staff, maintaining a psychologically healthier culture and enhancing performance (The King’s Fund, 2013; NHS Leadership Academy, 2012). Landmark reports (Department of Health, 2012) including The Francis Report (Powell, 2012), commissioned after serious mistakes were identified in Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust and The Berwick Report an independent review into patient safety which followed. Moving from a ‘blame culture’ to one where staff feel safe and are empowered is vital but complex work. An excessive focus upon quantitative targets, a need for career-long continuing professional development, awareness of the need to trust in the ‘good intentions’ of employees and the need for a systemic shift were all highlighted as factors to improve patient safety (National Advisory Group on Safety of Patients in England, 2013). These are all themes which resonate with the experiences shared by senior leaders. Compassionate Leadership is an attempt to change employees experience of their work and to bring about a change in culture; this again relies upon high quality leadership (The King’s Fund, 2012).

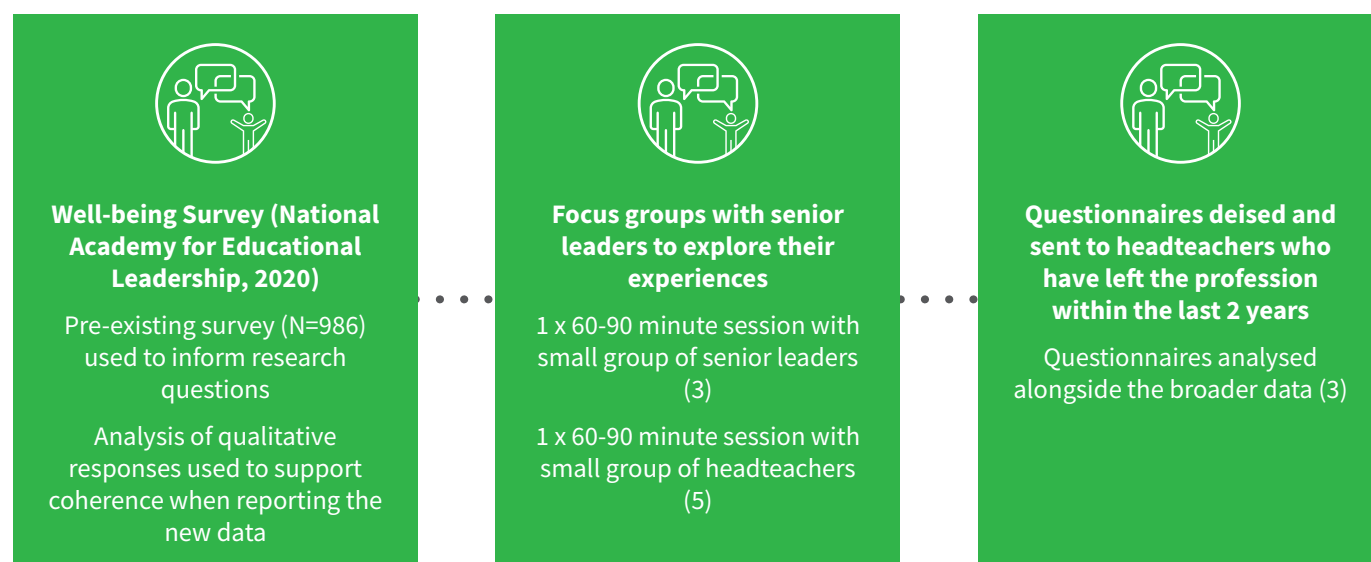
## Compassionate leadership (CL) and cultural change

A need for improved compassionate caring and a commitment to stronger health and care leadership (Powell, 2013) sparked a focus on compassionate leadership in healthcare across the United Kingdom. Effective leadership involves a focus upon the impact of self on other as well as a desire to understand the experience of others. It is based upon self-determination theory and the links between intrinsic motivation, engagement and well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2000; The King’s Fund, 2015). Those who receive compassionate leadership are more effective at their roles and help to inform a compassionate culture within the institution. It also allows every layer of an organisation to be responsible for informing and measuring the work, something which prevents ‘top down’ decision making that is thought to fail often due to a lack of understanding of the ‘on the ground context’ (West and Bailey, 2019).

## Towards understanding the challenge to well-being faced by headteachers in Wales

A wide perspective of contextual factors underpin well-being for this group. It is important to make sense of the broad and complex issues raised by the challenges to their well-being in order to identify steps to facilitate senior leaders remaining engaged, focussed and inspired in their work to educate with energy and care. With this in mind, this report now summarises research from headteachers and senior leaders in Wales which has been drawn from three sources (see figure 1).

**Figure 1: Sources of Data for Insight Paper**



Headteachers who have left the profession offer a unique perspective on which issues may be pertinent to the challenges in retention. A questionnaire was therefore developed to investigate their experience in the role on a day to day basis. The questions used a Likert to scale to assess how respondents felt across six staff experience domains which have been identified as being vital to employees well-being (Neal, 2021). There was additional space for respondents to expand on their answers. Participants were recruited by twitter posts broadcast by the National Academy for Educational Leadership and questionnaires were sent to anyone who responded that had left the profession within the last 2yrs. The National Academy for Educational Leadership also recruited for focus group participants who attended a one-off discussion, held via Microsoft Teams. These interviews were semi-formal in style and questions sought to better understand leaders' experiences as well as identify solutions, as well as potential barriers to their implementation.

This research was brief and small-scale in nature and sought to identify the main ideas important in thinking about how to implement useful changes to improve well-being. Each of the three sources of data were analysed in a procedural way based on a version of thematic analysis which is suitable for virtually any data type (Clarke and Braun, 2017) and enabled the three sets of data to be synthesised.

## What the data tells us about the experiences of senior leaders

The information obtained by those who had left the role of headteacher suggests that all respondents felt their work had purpose either most or all of the time and all experienced a sense of belonging at work. It was in relation to the questions which accessed how they felt they were *perceived by others*, that the answers suggested that they did not consistently feel valued or cared for. These questionnaire responses are outlined in figure 2. Qualitative comments were then analysed alongside the focus group data. The data generated a total of 170 sub-themes, consisting of 153 from the focus groups and 17 from the questionnaires. These sub-themes were synthesised and 11 broader categories were developed spanning 4 overarching themes which are presented in figure 3. When interpreting the synthesised data, reference will be made to the two factor structure of burnout as outlined in the Job-Demand-Resource Model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner and Schaufeli, 2001). Where the National Academy for Educational Leadership survey consistently articulated the demands that leaders' roles placed on them were too great, the focus groups offered stories to contribute ideas about why. The themes have been organised in a way which highlights what the identified demands are, their impact, and which resources may be required in order to equip leaders to remain effective and engaged in their role. Whilst the themes are presented here in summary form, a comprehensive discussion with illustrative quotes can be read in the full report.

Figure 2: Experiences of Headteachers who have left the profession within the last 2 years

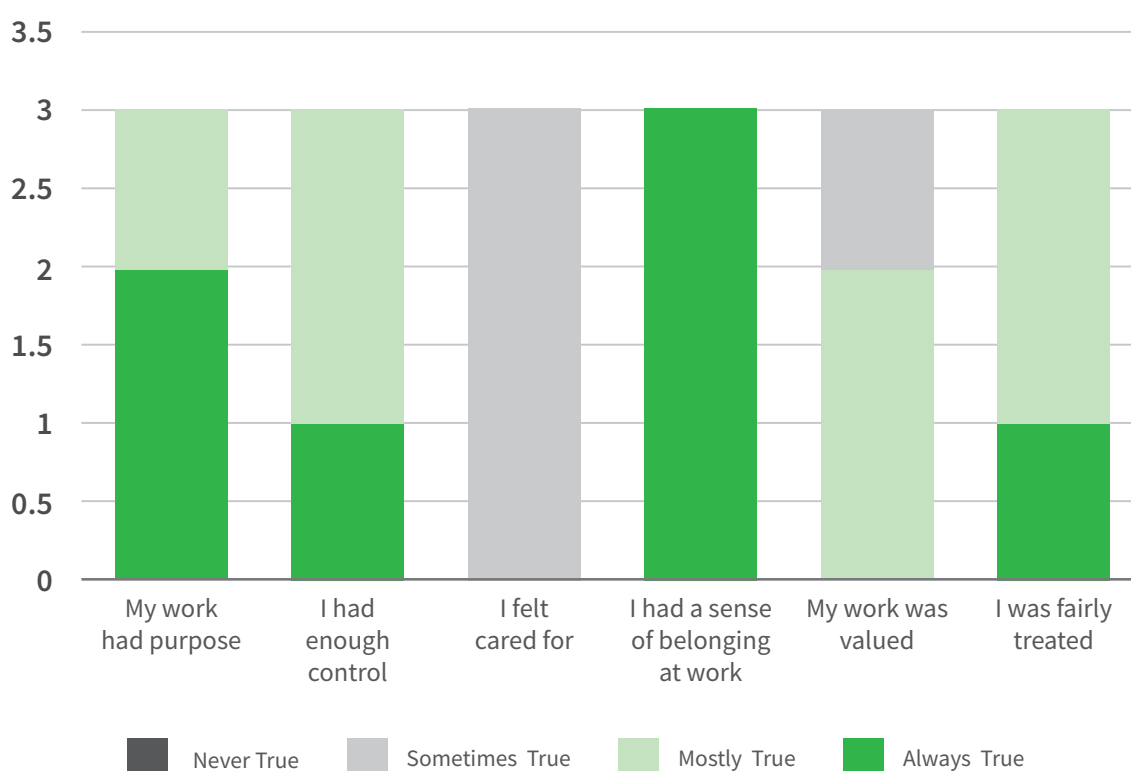


Figure 3: Over-arching themes from the synthesised data outlining the experience of senior leaders.

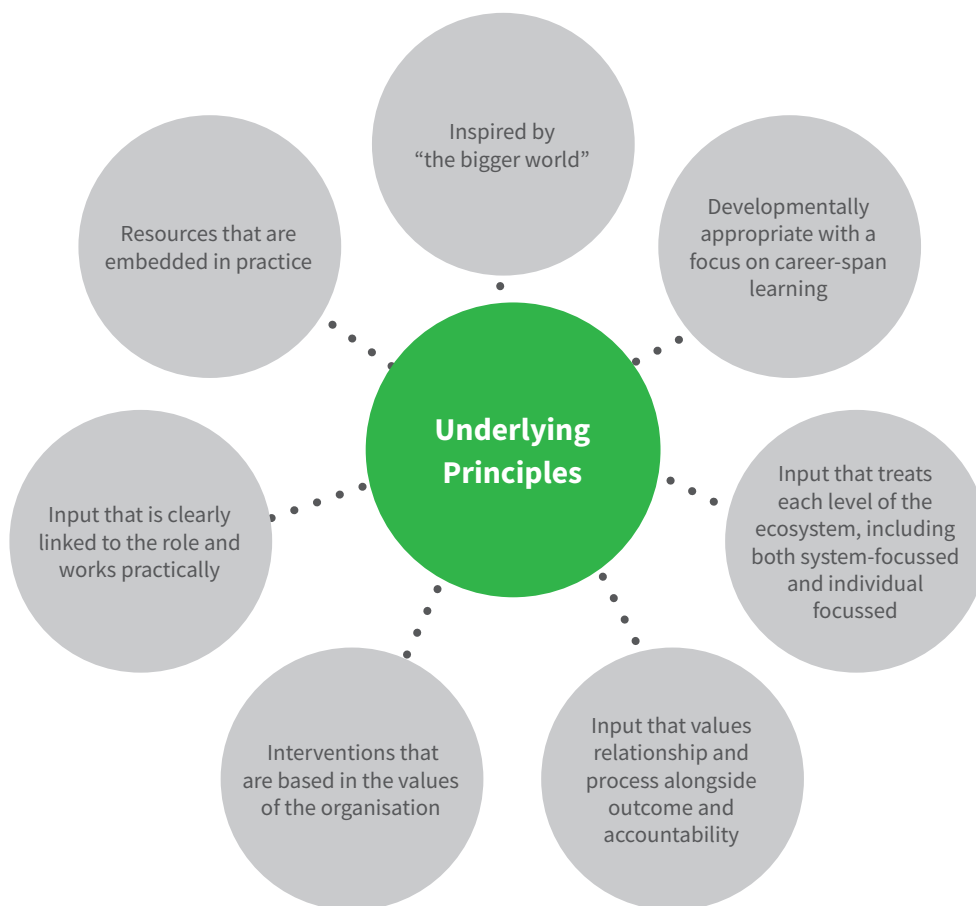
Performance Based Demands	Organisational Demands	Psychological Demands	Social Demands
<p>Impact of overwhelming workload</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Perception of excessive scrutiny on outcomes</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Sense of purpose diminished by bureaucracy</p>	<p>Desire for cultural shift</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Headteachers having 'many masters'</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Feeling that learning and development stifled</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Lack of awareness of the role of headteachers</p>	<p>Senior leaders as figureheads</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Emotional load</p>	<p>Unrealistic expectations of society</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Limited resources</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Embracing opportunity and celebrating good practice</p>

### Mitigating the impact of identified demands: recommendations for a way forward

By exploring in greater detail the experiences of those in such roles we are better able to understand 'what' the issues are. We can see that many of the demands identified by headteachers are complex, long standing and multi-layered, as well as mostly being beyond their control. As such solutions and resources need to be considered creatively and also at a local level. However there are resources that are universally relevant and utilised in other professional areas such as health. This section will explore a range of possible resources. Ideas about 'how' to respond are now presented (see figure 4).

### Operational principles

Figure 4: The underlying principles of resources



As with many system-focused interventions, the manner in which it is implemented is at least as important as 'what' is actually presented. With that in mind the following features are presented as underlying principles for consideration when creating any direct provision in order to maximise the impact of the resource. The principles are informed by psychological principles and ideas shared by senior leaders in the focus groups.

Interventions are considered to be input that is intentionally implemented to generate change within a person or a system. It is vital that such contributions are based upon the values of the institution and ensure that people at every level or state of well-being are genuinely valued. This includes an understanding that learning and development does not stop once someone gains experience in a role, but continues throughout the lifespan of a career and is particularly necessary as the focus of challenge in any role shifts; senior leaders may become 'unconsciously competent' in many areas while also developing what Broadwell called 'conscious incompetence' in others (cited in Curtiss and Warren, 1973).

- It is important that any response respects the person's breadth of experience and needs.

**“Supporting well-being cannot be a tick box exercise, simply because the words 'well-being' have been put on an official agenda. Providing genuine support led by specialists in alternative therapies and putting into action a plan where there are opportunities for staff to engage in sessions that will allow them to improve their own well-being will be critical in enabling us to move forward with a return to school. Curriculum recovery can only follow staff recovery in my opinion.” (Survey)**

- Input that works practically – ‘meeting people where they are’ seems important when offering initiatives directly to headteachers and senior leaders. Initiatives related to well-being (be they opportunities for professional learning, leadership development or peer supervision) that are offered as part of the core working day convey a message that this aspect of the work is not only ‘permitted’ but viewed as fundamental to the role. It also means that work/life balance is encouraged in a more meaningful way.

**“As much as I’ve enjoyed some of the leadership courses we’ve had, it’s too much for me at the end of the day and I think it’s because it makes you question yourself as a leader and at the moment I don’t need that.” (Focus Groups)**

- Clearly related to the role – The content of any input is likely to be most effective when leaders can recognise aspects of themselves and their own work and aspirations in the wider culture of the institution in order to connect with what is being presented.

**“I remember sitting in XX, must have been about 10yrs ago now, talking about systems leadership with the great and the good - they had David Hopkins and you know, keynote speakers from around the world. He was telling us about his trip up Everest, lovely, but what has it actually meant in real terms. In 10 years since I sat in that room with all those headteachers, I would say ‘very little’”. (Focus Group)**

- Embedded in practice – Crucially, following any ‘intervention’ leaders then need to return to a working environment within which they have the resources required to pursue the ideas and create sustainable change in their practice. This may include space to develop the ideas in reflective practice groups or peer supervision, or ‘practice’ based sessions following leadership skills courses. It requires an ongoing commitment to create space in a leader’s role to establish healthy working practices and maintain a focus on professional development and well-being.

**“Networks have trainings days that you talk about being innovative in school and changing things and being strategic and all of a sudden you go back to school and the hustle and bustle of the daily life... as you know flat out all day long being there for the children, which is ultimately our job and... and then there’s no time to do these things, no thinking space and focus.” (Focus Group)**

- *“Inspired by the bigger world”* There seems to be both a desire for those who scrutinise practice to have experience in the role that they are evaluating, and also a hope for external input to facilitate ‘different ways’ of working with issues in education. There was a suggestion here that external expertise could play a valuable role in enhancing the experience and work of those already skilled in their profession.
- Interventions for different stages – Provision for headteachers and senior leaders will need to take into account the nature of their specific need and the urgency within which a response is required. It is likely that a suite of provision is required involving both ‘sustaining’ measures embedded in core practice which prevent difficulties in well-being as well as a (likely smaller) resource which attends to those who have developed burnout and are suffering with stress.

**“Well-being support needs to be structured and pre-emptive... With the multitude of stressful situations - accountability, budgets, supporting families and vulnerable children, child protection, complaints, managing under performance etc headteachers should be required to attend regular supervision in order to support well-being from the beginning, not as a sticking plaster when things go wrong.” (Questionnaire)**

- Interventions which treat each level of the ecosystem – headteachers and senior leaders work within a context which sits amongst the wider education system, the middle tier and government. It is important to acknowledge that changes may be required at each level in order to fully maximise change within schools.
- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, what has become clear is the importance of relationship in mediating the challenges that senior leaders face. It is important that relationship remains at the heart of any response, be that at a systemic or an individual level.

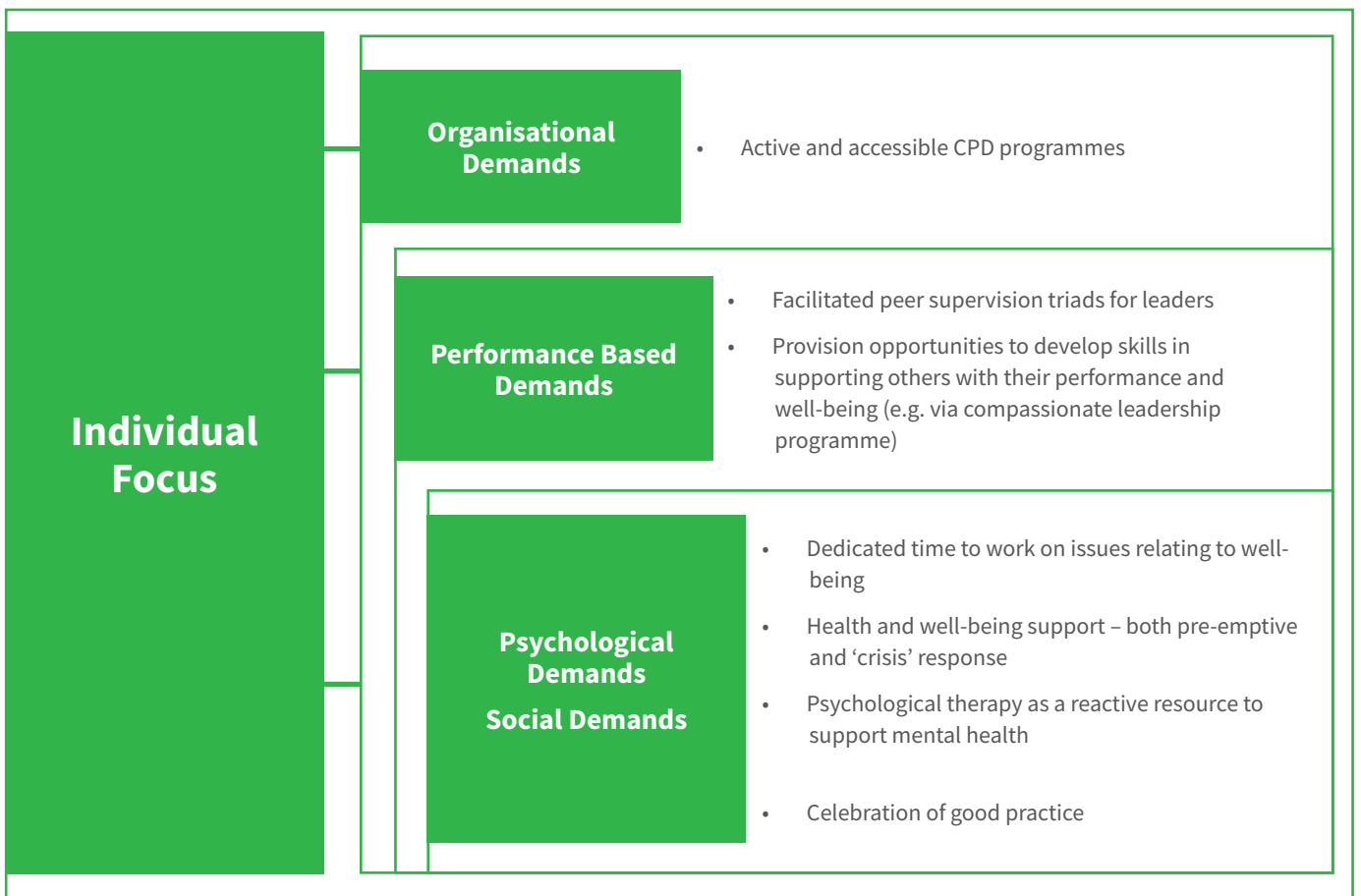
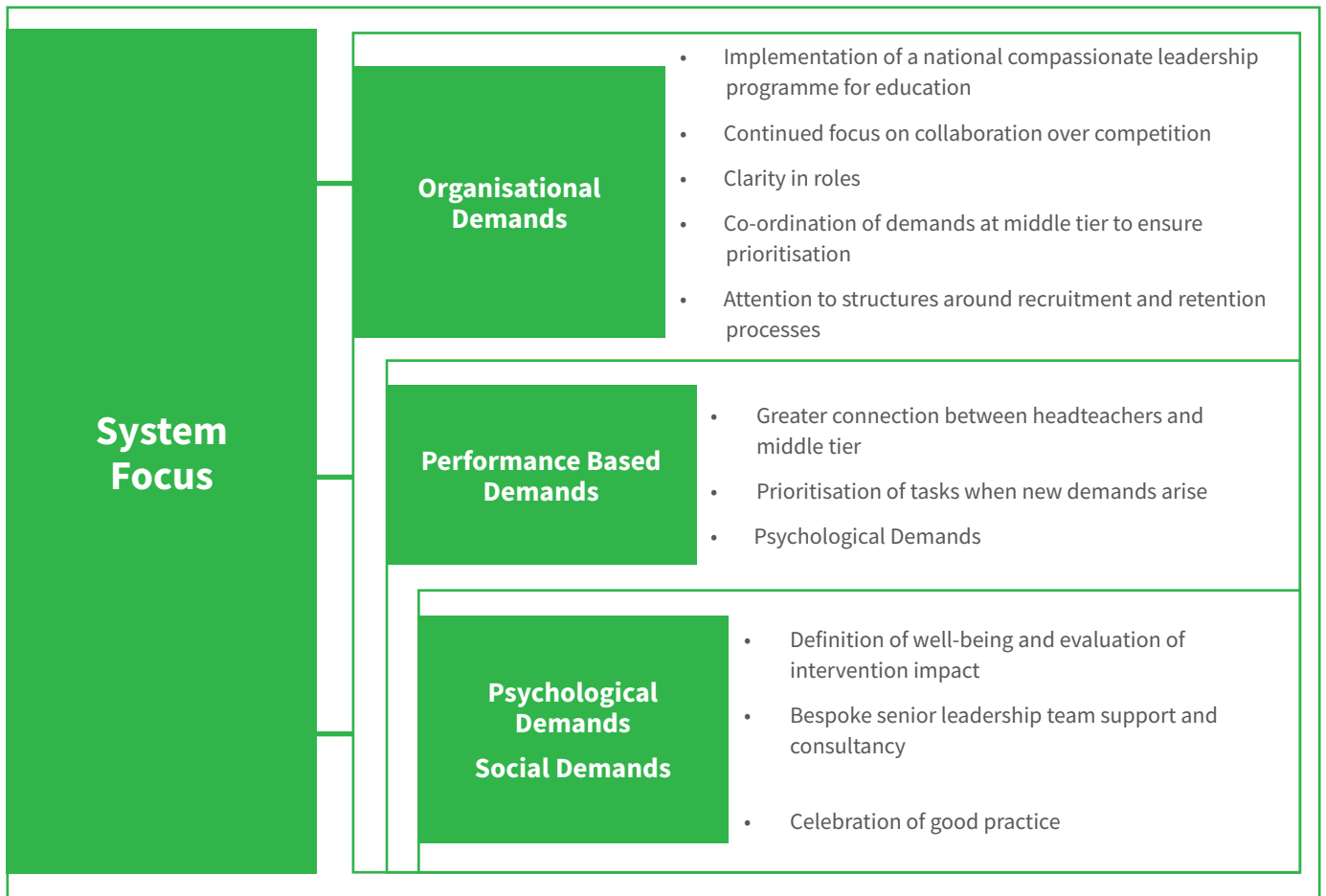
## The process of innovation and practice-based suggestions

When any institution is faced with a set of complex challenges, innovation may offer meaningful solutions. In healthcare there is a well-established relationship between the process of problem solving and compassionate leadership. A report by the King’s Fund outlines the way in which compassionate leadership can support the navigation of each of the stages of problem solving by attending, understanding, empathising and then helping (West, Eckert, Collins and Chowla, 2017). This insight paper could be seen as representing the first phases of this process, as by listening to senior leaders and better understanding the system within which they work, it is possible to then meaningfully address generating change.

The following ideas are practice based suggestions to inform direct provision for individual senior leaders as well as the wider systems within which these roles sit (see figure 5). The whole of these working together will be greater than any one factor, so all will be required to enhance the impact of any one intervention. It is acknowledged that some of these are likely to be considered ‘priority’ while others may be more appropriate for implementation in the medium and longer term. It is important that these recommendations are viewed alongside what else is currently provided and that the overall provision is then clearly integrated in a coherent way to maximise efficacy. Provision will then need to be developed and trialled with active senior leaders at the heart of the process in order to really address the needs presented.



Figure 5: Practice based suggestions for provision of resources



## System focused resources

Implementation of a Wales wide compassionate leadership programme in Education to enable a framework for professional development and skills in a consistent way. This would contribute to the culture change highlighted by senior leaders through enabling leaders to feel supported to lead with confidence and competence. It would also incorporate specific skills training, such as processes to facilitate 'difficult conversations' with staff, mechanisms to identify difficulties in a system, and provide measures for developing clarity within a workforce around expectations and task responsibility. Beyond the initiation of a programme to develop these ideas, adopting the principles of compassionate leadership in the Education system could benefit stakeholders at every level. The key elements of compassionate leadership are:

- Inspiring vision and strategy
- Positive inclusion and participation
- Enthusiastic team and cross-boundary working
- Support and autonomy (West, Eckert, Collins and Chowla, 2017, p.11).

The specific resources listed below represent examples which speak directly to meeting the demands identified in this paper and represent specific changes which could be made. They also fit alongside a compassionate leadership approach, meaning that they could be considered examples of how such an approach may be enacted. Further work may be required to identify how such an approach could be most effectively embedded into the Education system.

- Continued focus upon collaboration over competition within and between schools in order to create a culture of openness which allows pooling resources for efficiency, learning from good practice and generation of an open dialogue to reduce the sense of isolation and stress associated with the role.
- Development of a definition of well-being in order to evaluate the impact of any interventions, for example via the implementation of an annual staff well-being survey to measure change across key areas.
- Participation of headteachers in middle tier strategy development in order to capitalise upon the pre-existing resources of skilled leaders and ensure greater connection between senior leaders in schools and the middle tier in a mutually beneficial way.
- Creation of opportunities to celebrate good practice so that professional bodies are aware and can communicate their feedback to facilitate positive relationships and ensure the promotion of such practice for the benefit of professionals and students.
- Consideration of use of routine leadership mechanisms such as the Responsibility and Accountability matrix (RACI) to assess the needs of the system and identify a shared sense of responsibility and accountability for tasks in order to ensure maximum impact of effort.
- Focus upon the structures around supporting the recruitment and retention of teachers at each stage of their career, including input to newly qualified teachers and established leaders as well as exit interviews as staff leave.
- Focus upon engagement with headteachers when communicating tasks in order to share the underlying meaning of such demands and ensure shared sense of vision and purpose.
- Improved co-ordination of demands at the middle tier level whereby priorities are established at that level and then disseminated according to a joined up vision to prevent leaders being overwhelmed by various demands and to attempt to ensure tasks are enacted without unintended cost.
- Provision of a bespoke senior leadership team support and consultancy service in order to help with team cohesion, development, and pre-crisis conflict management.

## Individual focused resources

- 'Triads' or facilitated peer supervision sessions for leaders – 'safe' spaces to share ideas and process difficult issues (e.g. through linking in with senior leaders in different geographical areas). These sessions would critically be unrelated to the management of performance outcomes and would make use of pre-existing skills amongst senior leaders.
- Active and accessible CPD programmes which meet people's need for safety in order to allow a window of opportunity to develop pre-existing skills.
- Dedicated and protected time to regularly work on issues relating to well-being - this may be in school or offsite and may consist of formal or informal activities.
- Health and well-being support both pre-emptive and 'crisis' responses to well-being needs– workshops, meditation, yoga/fitness sessions, psychoeducation groups and psychological consultation as a protective resource.

- Psychological therapy as a reactive resource for those in need of input due to psychological distress.
- Development of skills when working to support others in their role and for own well-being (for example through a compassionate leadership programme).
- Mentorship and coaching programme specifically for senior leaders.

However these ideas are taken forward, it seems important to note that these measures are ultimately to serve the well-being of senior leaders. This is because it is appropriate to treat every level of a workforce well by ensuring they are valued and sufficiently equipped to enact their role to the best of their ability and also because to not to do so will have a detrimental impact upon their colleagues in schools and the young people they serve. This is a powerful motivator for all involved in the education of children and creates an urgent but potentially exciting call for change.

**“Things could stay exactly as they are and we could continue in our roles, you know here as senior leaders, carers, teachers or support staff and the learning would keep on trembling along, and you know... we keep on learning and you know they’d progress through the school system but what we’re really asking ourselves here is, could we do this differently? And could we affect cultural change which would benefit the entire school community? And what we’re saying collectively in this meeting is yes, we could do it differently and that would be beneficial, but there will have to be willingness on all parties, including them, those who support and finance the education system to see this through in a meaningful way. Otherwise it’ll just be another initiative that’s a little wayside”. (Focus Group)**

# Part 1

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Why do we need to consider the well-being of headteachers and senior educators?

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### 1.2 Context

The role of headteacher is generally regarded to be highly challenging in terms of the scope of its remit, the level of responsibility for not just pupils but parents, carers and staff. There are additional layers of context surrounding the role which inform how it is enacted, for example regular changes to educational policy which are thought to somewhat ‘frame’ the role (Crow and MØller, 2017). Another element noted by Macbeath (cited in Davies, Milton, Connolly and Barrance, 2018) is the increasing distance between the role of teacher and senior leader meaning that the qualities and skills required and the associated expectation may change throughout one’s career. Rhodes and Brundrett (2009) suggest that low recruitment rates and challenges in headteacher retention in Wales represent a culmination of the level of ‘exposure’ of the role, the multiple accountabilities and the sense of unpredictability in the work.

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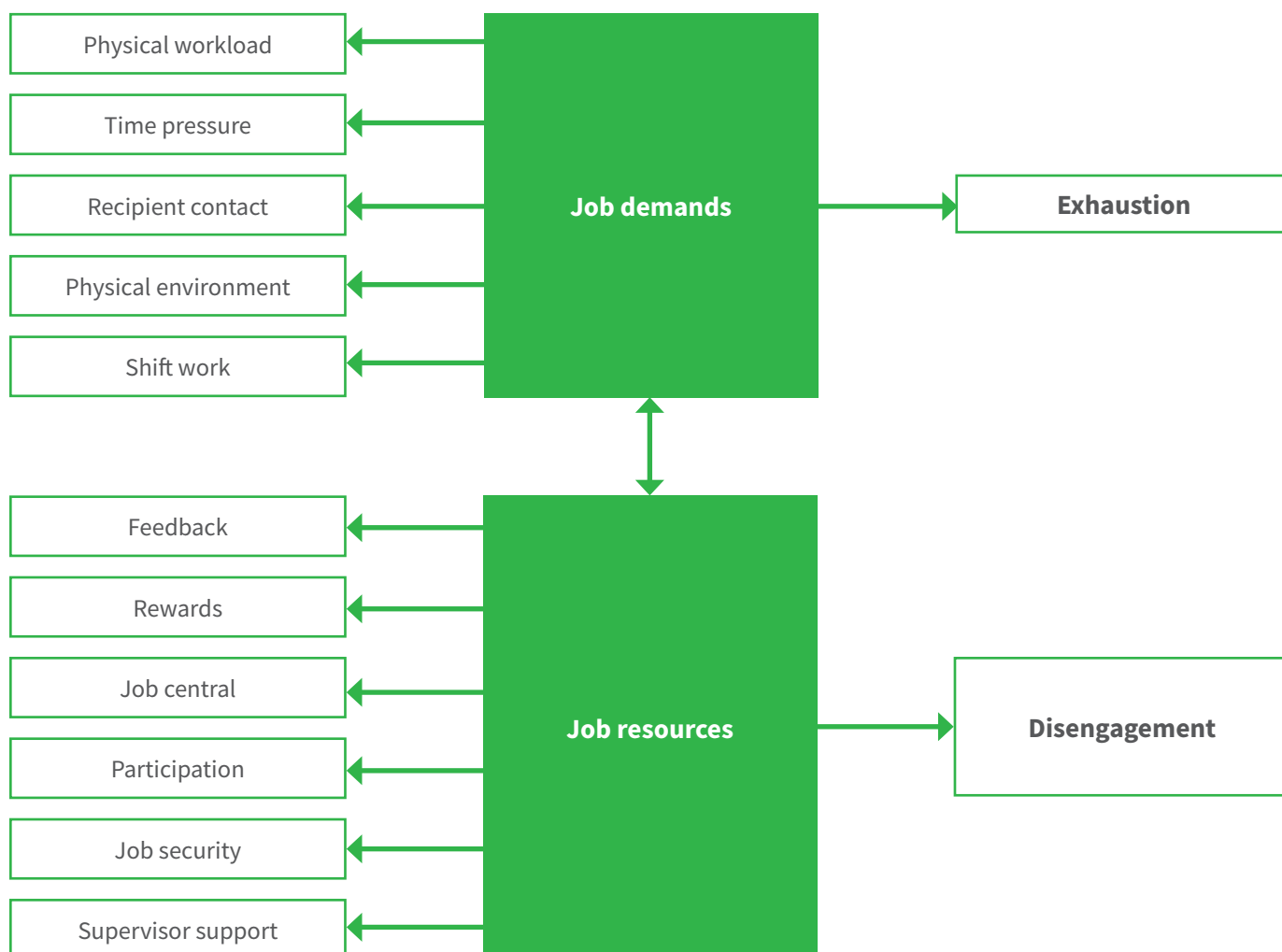
Pink (2009) highlights the importance of people connecting with the meaning of any task in order to feel motivated to undertake it. He suggests that it is a sense of autonomy, combined with mastery and purpose that enables motivation in the workplace and that it is the presence of these factors which mediate stress caused by any task. This sits alongside other studies which reflect that it is often not the task itself which impacts upon well-being, but the context around it. Fullerton (2017) develops these ideas in the education context and views empowerment of others as key in educational leadership, suggesting this is linked to being trusted and being able to develop, all of which are key to an innovative and motivated workforce which is clearly based in peoples’ values.

Following the devolution of Welsh Government there was an emphasis placed upon trust and collaboration between practitioners and government which is thought to have later reduced following a shift towards ‘high stakes accountability’ after PISA scores were viewed as indicating a need for increased scrutiny (Power, cited in Davies, Milton, Connolly and Barrance, 2009). This focus is thought to have changed again, for example with the abolishment of ranking schools allowing for increased collaboration. This comes at a time of developing awareness of the impact of well-being upon children with mental health initiatives such as the ‘Whole Schools Approach’ being widely employed. Meanwhile the recent introduction of the new National Curriculum for Wales (Addysg Cymru, 2020) sets out a holistic approach to learning which has its own section on ‘health and well-being’ and seeks to value the *whole* child in its aim for “*healthy, confident individuals ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society*”. These and other strands have set the context for a number of challenges for senior leaders in their role. The Covid 19 pandemic has then further complicated the work in schools and appears to have increased the sense of pressure that teachers and particularly senior leaders are under (National Academy for Educational Leadership, 2020). A research study conducted in England found that throughout lockdown there were a number of factors which generated stress for headteachers including “fear and anxiety across the school, high level of pressure (‘be strong for others whatever your own problems’), adverse conditions for promoting and sustaining young peoples’ learning (for example lack of internet or devices at home), inadequate support from government and unclear information and difficulties in creating a sense of belonging in a context that requires social distancing” (Riley and Mendoza, 2020, p.5). It is likely that many of these resonate in Wales and the landscape of senior leader well-being has never been more important.

### 1.3 What do we understand well-being to mean in the context of work?

There are many definitions of well-being which can be considered a recipe of factors such as how fairly someone feels treated, their sense of purpose, their feeling of belonging, their sense of being valued and cared for and their capacity to have adequate control over what they do (Neal, 2021). It is not therefore about being 'healthy' as such, although these themes naturally do link to physical and psychological health. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) describes well-being as being about people reaching their potential, the ability to be productive and creative, to build positive relationships, to contribute to a wider community and to find a sense of purpose (NICE, 2015). There is a view arising from the research surrounding well-being that there are core conditions which determine whether an employee may thrive; these relate to factors such as having a sense of safety, participation, feeling valued, treated fairly and emotionally intelligent leadership (Highfield and Neal, 2021). The implication of this is that rather than purely 'skilling people up', there must also be a focus upon the working environment and culture of any organisation. *"We recommend a move away from viewing resilience as a fixed characteristic of individuals. Resilience is not a characteristic or a skill but is a dynamic interaction between the person and their environment. Staff susceptibility to these stressors could be reduced in future if NHS Trusts focus on the balance between personality traits, job demands and support systems to achieve employee well-being, as described by the Job-Demands-Resources Model. However, the Society's view is that this is a systemic issue and that there is no one single cure"* (BPS, 2020, p.1). At the same time, there may be certain traits that are held by those working in public service - for example the desire to help or make a difference to others - which may make some more vulnerable to overlooking their own needs. Research suggests in fact that those who are most attuned to the emotions of others (a trait which may be highly valued in the 'helping professions') are more likely to experience burnout (Bakker and Schaufeli, 2000). The Job-Demands-Resource Model is outlined below and offers a clear framework outlining the necessary equation to prevent burnout (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The Job-Demands-Resource Model of Burnout (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner and Schaufeli, 2001)**



### 1.4 What has been the impact of support offered to date?

Formal structures for input to leaders in Wales appear to be lacking or under-utilised. The National Academy for Educational Leadership Wales (Leadership Academy) well-being survey (National Academy for Educational Leadership, 2020) identified that between 69 and 75% of senior leaders reported they received most support from colleagues and family members; this represented more than double the number of those who listed ‘manager or leader’ in their workplace and approximately five times more than those citing middle tier organisations, or services provided such as coaching or counselling. Despite this, the impact of such support is highly valued, suggesting that it is desired, but some work may be required in making this available in the workplace setting (see figure 2).

### Impact of Support Strategy on Well-being (National Academy for Educational Leadership Survey)

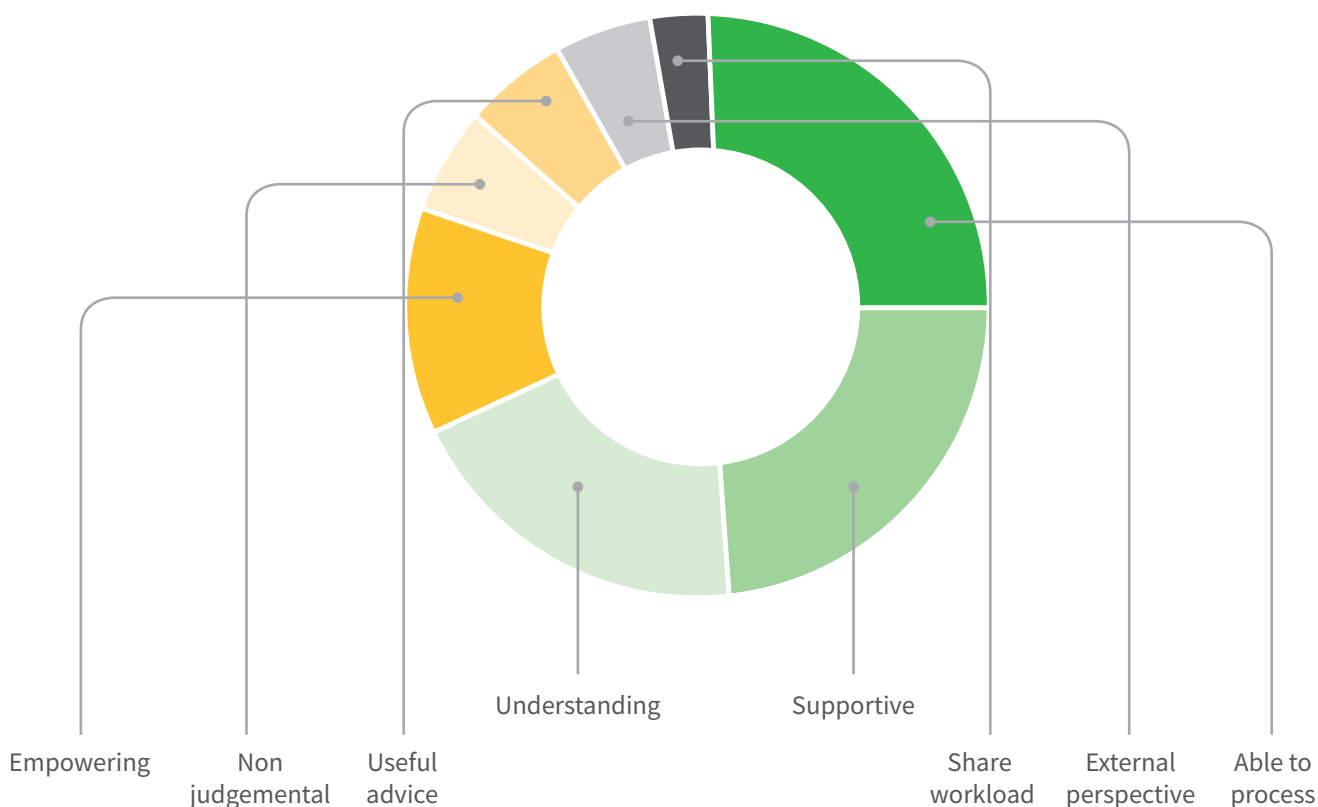


Figure 2: Impact of Support Strategy on Well-being (National Academy for Educational Leadership Survey, 2020)

### 1.5 Considering leadership as a well-being resource

Leadership is well evidenced in health to play a key role in supporting the well-being of staff, maintaining a psychologically healthier culture and enhancing performance (The King’s Fund, 2013; NHS Leadership Academy, 2012). Landmark reports (Department of Health, 2012) including The Francis Report (Powell, 2012), commissioned after serious mistakes were identified in Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust and The Berwick Report an independent review into patient safety which followed. Moving from a ‘blame culture’ to one where staff feel safe and are empowered is vital but complex work. An excessive focus upon quantitative targets, a need for career-long continuing professional development, awareness of the need to trust in the ‘good intentions’ of employees and the need for a systemic shift were all highlighted as factors to improve patient safety (National Advisory Group on Safety of Patients in England, 2013). Compassionate Leadership is an attempt to change employees experience of their work and to bring about a change in culture; this again relies upon high quality leadership (The King’s Fund, 2012).

## 1.6. Compassionate leadership (CL) and cultural change

A need for improved compassionate caring and a commitment to stronger health and care leadership (Powell, 2013) sparked a focus on compassionate leadership in healthcare across the United Kingdom. Effective leadership involves a focus upon the impact of self on others as well as a desire to understand the experience of others. It is based upon self-determination theory and the links between intrinsic motivation, engagement and well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2000; The King's Fund, 2015). Those who receive compassionate leadership are more effective at their roles and help to inform a compassionate culture within the institution. It also allows every layer of an organisation to be responsible for informing and measuring the work, something which prevents 'top down' decision making that is thought to fail often due to a lack of understanding of the 'on the ground context' (West and Bailey, 2019).

West and Bailey promote the importance of demonstrating 'courage' to listen to difficult messages from those they lead in a culture that prioritises the needs of *people* (be they staff, patients or community) over individual agendas. Compassionate leadership involves behaviours which demonstrate 'attending, understanding, empathising and helping' (Atkins and Parker 2012). It importantly focuses on interpersonal relationships and understanding what motivates people as well as responding with wisdom, or "*doing hard things in a human way*" (Hougaard, Carter and Hobson, 2020, p.3). NHS England conceptualised a list of 9 behaviours associated with effective leadership (NHS Leadership Academy, 2013) but highlighted that "*the way that we manage ourselves is a central part of being an effective leader*" (NHS Leadership Academy, 2013, p.3). A common misconception may be that to be effective, a focus upon the task must be privileged but studies into leadership point to the importance of attending to the *people* in the work over the *process* of the work (West, Eckhart, Collins and Chowla, 2017). Heffernan, for example (2012) speaks about the way that, in a culture of innovation conflict can bring value to a working process but when people become defensive the benefit of different ideas are lost and this process is clouded. One researcher who has explored the impact of 'shame' in the workplace suggests "*Leaders must either invest a reasonable amount of time attending to fear and feelings or squander an unreasonable amount of time trying to manage ineffective and unproductive behaviour*" (Brown, 2018). Responding compassionately, by both seeking to understand and set clear boundaries in a kind way is not just a 'nice' way to be, or 'the right' way to be, it increases efficacy and productivity and leads to innovation (The King's Fund, 2012; West, Eckhart, Collins and Chowla, 2017). It also leads to healthy teams whereby a culture of compassion and effectiveness is either 'taught' or 'caught' by those new to the institution.

The idea of using compassionate approaches is increasingly present in the education sector and in a context where the demands are high, the resources are finite, and the quality of the work is dependent on the performance of people the need is arguably as great as it is in healthcare. Woods suggests that "*the teaching profession has always been peopled by some of the most compassionate people in our society. You could not survive in the contemporary education world unless you have an overriding concern for the well-being of your children in all its aspects*" (Woods, 2017, p.1). Like in health, those who choose to work in education may be particularly skilled on focussing upon the needs of others and it is appropriate that such skills are enacted within a culture that can sustain their own well-being too. To develop an environment whereby people are able to lead at every level with empathy and self-awareness at every level will impact across the ecosystem "*the fact that we are compassionate means that we will undoubtedly get the best out of them. People respond better in their learning and work when they feel valued and when their unique situations are understood. We must aim to influence others, but not to dragoon people into obedience*" (Griffin, 2019). It is important to note that the extent to which one is able to respond compassionately to others, is informed by their own ability to receive a compassionate response. This is an important, measurable, psychological concept which translates into skills around remaining relationally connected when under 'threat' or the extent to which someone may feel driven to complete a task (Gilbert, McKewan, Matos and Ravis, 2010).

## 1.7 Towards understanding the challenge to well-being faced by headteachers in Wales

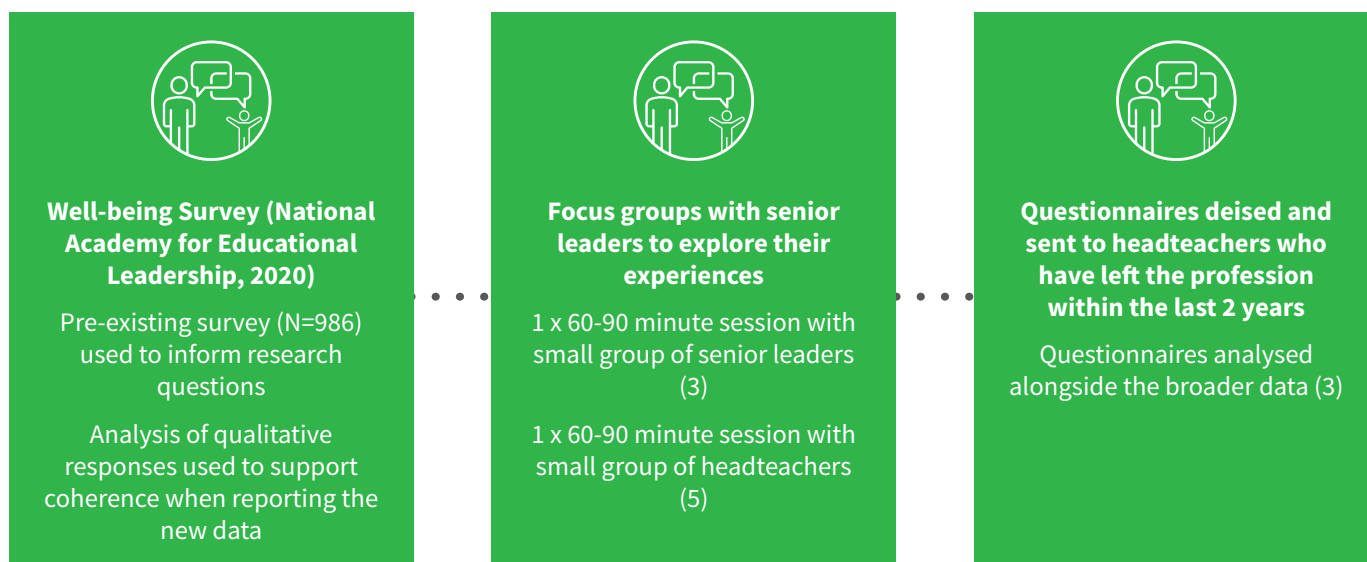
A wide perspective of contextual factors have been offered that underpin well-being for this group. It is now important to better understand the experience of headteachers and senior leaders in order to further consider which steps may be useful in creating change to facilitate senior leaders in education remaining engaged, focussed and inspired in their work to educate with energy and care. This article will therefore present findings on small scale 'action research' involving focus groups and a questionnaire aimed at exploring headteachers' experiences and analyse them alongside pre-existing data generated from the National Academy for Educational Leadership's 2020 well-being survey. Recommendations will then be shared in order to incorporate what is known into areas for development.

## Part 2

### 2. Developing a method to investigate the issues surrounding the well-being of senior leaders

Understanding the lived experiences of headteachers is critical in order to make sense of the broad and complex issues raised by the challenges to their well-being. With this in mind information from headteachers and senior education leaders in Wales has been drawn from three sources (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Sources of Data for Insight Paper



The methodology will now be described before presenting a summary of the themes that arose.

#### 2.1 Analysis of qualitative answers to the National Academy for Educational Leadership Well-being Survey (2020)

The National Academy for Educational Leadership survey was sent to senior leaders and headteachers in Wales and data was gathered May-June 2020. Completed forms were received from 986 different people 54% of whom were headteachers and 46% were senior leaders in other roles in schools. Three quarters of respondents worked in Primary Schools, while the rest came from Secondary or specialist provisions such as Pupil Referral Units (PRU). The survey was answered by staff aged between 25 and 65+yrs, with the most frequent age being 45-49yrs; experience levels in the role ranged from less than 2yrs to more than 10yrs. Responses were gathered and key themes then analysed and reported separately prior to this article (National Academy for Educational Leadership, 2020) with access to raw data then offering further richness to this Insight Paper.

Figure 4: Key findings from the National Academy for Educational Leadership Survey

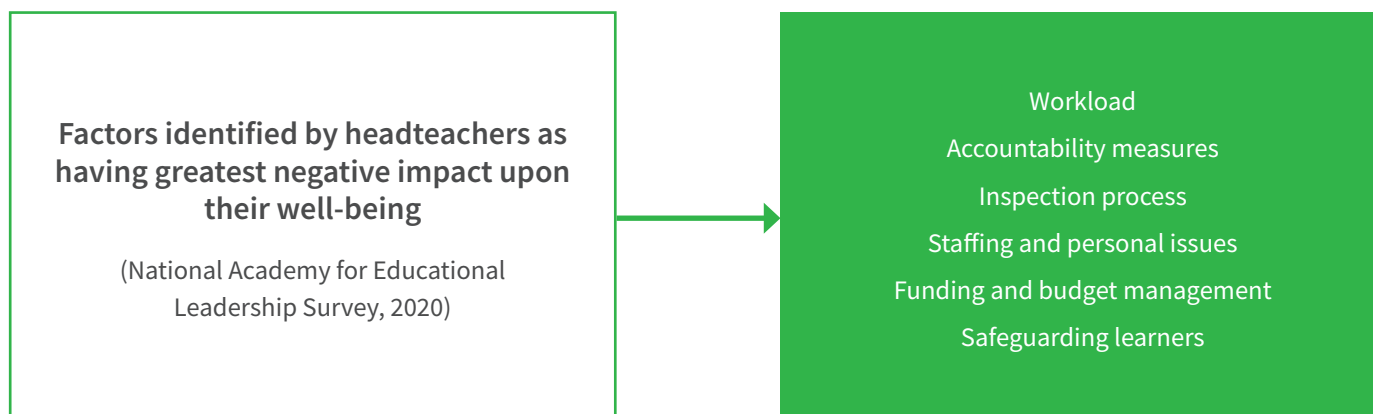




Figure 4 outlines the main factors experienced by respondents as having the greatest negative impact upon well-being. Themes from the survey data informed questions to further explore the issues raised and written comments made in response to the open ended questions “*why does [whichever factors were chosen] impact upon your well-being?*” and “*how would you like the Leadership Academy to support you?*” have also been incorporated to highlight ideas raised across all three data sources.

## 2.2 Questionnaire for headteachers

Headteachers who have left the profession offer a unique perspective on which issues may be pertinent to the challenges in retention. A questionnaire was therefore developed to investigate their experience in the role on a day-to-day basis. The questions used a Likert to scale to assess how respondents felt across six staff experience domains which have been identified as being vital to employees well-being (Neal, 2021); there was additional space for respondents to expand on their answers to add breadth to the data. Participants were recruited by twitter posts broadcast by the National Academy for Educational Leadership and questionnaires were sent to anyone who responded that had left the profession within the last 2yrs. Approximately a third of those who showed interest in the research returned their questionnaire, meaning a small sample size of three. This included one headteacher that had retired, one headteacher who had chosen to change career and another who had left for ‘other’ (unidentified) reasons.

## 2.3 Focus groups

Two semi-structured focus groups were conducted, the first with senior leaders and the second with headteachers. Participants were recruited via invitations sent by the National Academy for Educational Leadership, sourced through their network of contacts. Discussion points were based upon responses to the National Academy for Educational Leadership survey and conversations were used to both generate and ‘road test’ ideas from pre-existing research and link them to established practices in healthcare in order to identify how best to tailor interventions to effectively meet the needs that were raised. The groups had a fluid style of conversation that took on their own momentum meaning that the discussion points were different in each; despite that, analysis identified themes which overlapped significantly. The discussions were 60-90 minutes long and were held online via Microsoft Teams. The conversation was recorded either visually and/or via transcriptions which were later analysed.

## 2.4 Analysing the data

This research was brief and small-scale in nature and sought to identify the main ideas important in thinking about how to implement useful changes to improve well-being. As a result, the analysis of the themes, whilst based loosely on content analysis used for qualitative research, involved a naturalistic process aimed at capturing ideas in a way that was most useful to move the process along and enable the meaningful development of credible recommendations. Each of the three sources of data were analysed in a procedural way based on a version of thematic analysis (Nowell, Norris, White and Moules, 2017). ‘Themes’ in qualitative data are interpreted as “patterned responses or meaning” within a dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.82). This method of analysis is suitable for virtually any data type (Clarke and Braun, 2017) and enabled the three sets of data to be synthesised. The data generated a total of 170 sub-themes, consisting of 153 from the focus groups and 17 from the questionnaires. These sub-themes were synthesised and 11 broader categories were developed spanning 4 over-arching themes which are presented in section 2. Participants’ quotations, as well as relevant comments from the National Academy for Educational Leadership survey are used to support the exploration of the themes.

## Part 3

The information obtained by those who have left the role of headteacher suggests that, although some of the comments highlighted very mixed experiences, all felt that their work had purpose either most or all of the time and all felt they had a sense of belonging at work. It was in relation to the questions which accessed how they felt they were perceived by others, that the answers suggested that they did not consistently feel valued or cared for. Results are outlined below in figure 5.

**Figure 5: Experiences of Headteachers who have left the profession within the last 2 years**

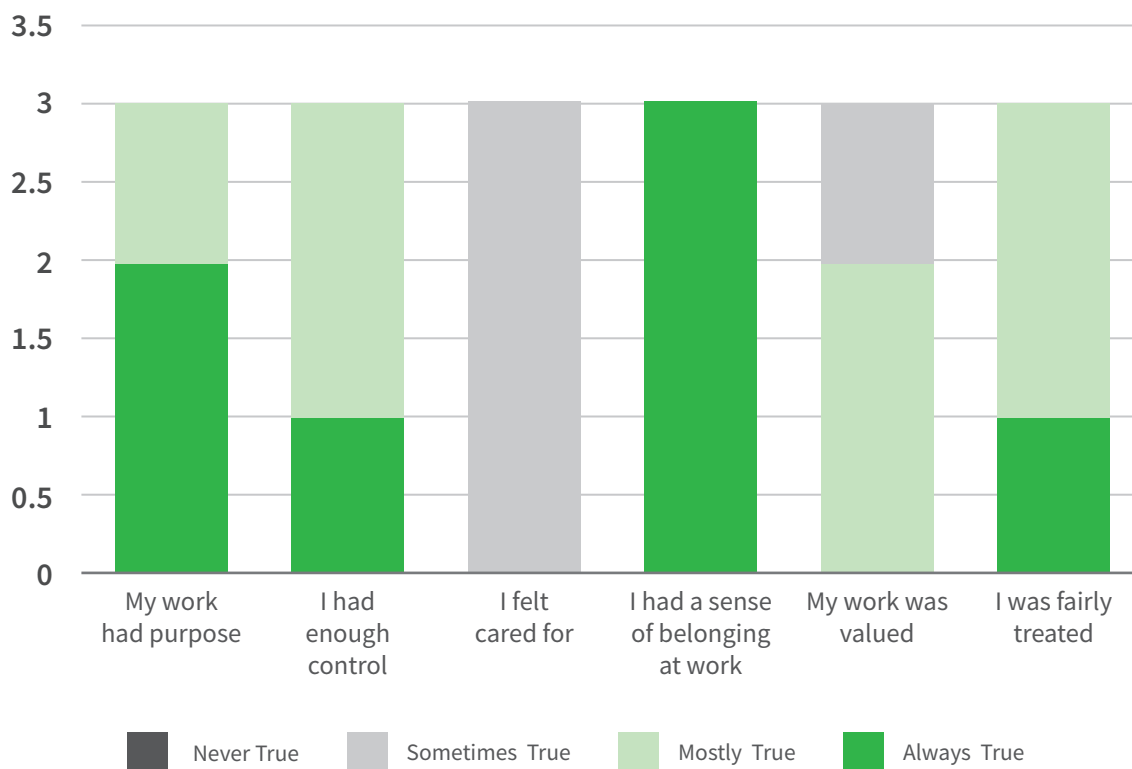


Figure 5 outlines the answers to questions relating to their experience, qualitative comments were then synthesised with the focus group data which will now be explored.



**Figure 6: Over-arching themes from the synthesised data outlining the experience of senior leaders.**

When interpreting the synthesised data reference will be made to the two-factor structure of burnout as outlined in the Job-Demand-Resource Model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner and Schaufeli, 2001). The National Academy for Educational Leadership survey consistently articulated the demands that leaders' roles placed on them were too great, the focus groups offered stories to bring the ideas to life. The themes that emerged (figure 6) are explored below. They are organised through the lens of the Job-Demands-Resource Model, looking at what the identified demands, their impact, and which resources may be required in order to equip leaders to remain effective and engaged in their role.

## Performance-based demands

- Impact of overwhelming workload

Three quarters of the National Academy for Educational Leadership survey respondents outlined 'workload' as a major stressor in their role, suggesting this is currently a significant issue for leaders. When asked about *why* it impacts their well-being, comments outlined areas such as a sense of 'pressure' it created, 'the time it takes from family' and an experience of things being uncomfortably 'beyond their control'. For the majority of leaders, it seems that the overall workload is perceived as unrealistic and often overwhelming.

**“We’re just running from one thing to the next and nothing seems to be done slowly, everything is... the next thing’s coming along, the next thing’s coming along... it’s really stressful...” (Focus Group)**

High demands appear to also deliver a sense that it is impossible to 'get it right', an experience which seemed potentially unsettling for those keen to do the best job they can and demonstrate a clear impact upon those they lead.

**“...and the days where you get everything right are practically non-existent, to keep everyone happy and I’ve just got 130 pupils, ...when you think of the children, the staff, the parents, they’re almost non-existent.” (Focus Group)**

The breadth and number of tasks described across all data sources develop a consistent picture that many feel they are impacted negatively by a lack of time to just 'think' in the role.

**“Having time would mean we could ‘press that pause button’ I compare my job to you know that chap in the fair who’s spinning the plates? I’m constantly spinning plates and I just hope I have enough energy to round all those plates and keep all those sticks going.” (Focus Group)**

**“we support staff on a daily basis... I’ve got staff knocking on my door constantly” (Focus Group)**

The need for physical distance and additional mental capacity seems to have been amplified by an increase in expectations post-lockdown, following major disruptions associated with the Covid 19 pandemic:

**“staff are really tired and we’re putting on them now, all these courses, and curriculum for Wales and everything else and we’re jumping hoops and trying to get everything and strategies and timetables and you feel ‘oh my gosh I don’t think there’s enough left”. (Focus Group)**

That said, leaders were clear to say that these are issues that pre-date the pandemic. Another indirect consequence of having insufficient time for the required demands was that the focus of the leader's attention became inevitably reactive, leading to a change in *nature* of the core work itself:

**“1% of my time has been strategic and 99% has been operational, no matter how much you don’t want that to happen, with everything that’s been going on... you occasionally have a bit of time away from school and you come back to so many decisions in the current climate because we’re over scrutinised.” (Focus Group)**

The unintended impact of being less able to work strategically inevitably means that there is less capacity to focus on driving the development of particular projects, or attending to the 'culture' of the school. It also means that tasks are executed with a sense of reduced reflective capacity which poses a potential risk to the quality of output or comes at a cost to the person themselves. The unsustainability of the pace links to all of the other themes and is explored throughout.

- Perception of excessive scrutiny on outcomes

An experience of being 'overly scrutinised' resonates throughout the dataset and involves not only results-based evaluation but a sense of personal judgement which is perceived as exposing. Throughout the data lies a strong narrative that senior leaders are called to spend their time in areas that create dissonance between where they are required to spend their time and where they would like to focus.

**“we’ve come into this role... At the heart of what we do is the children and what’s right for them and we’re pulled to focus on priorities that don’t sit well with us.” (Focus Group)**

Leaders spoke too of a lack of sensitivity in how assessment processes are constructed and applied, with a focus being on set aims that fail to recognise other achievements or the limitations of the context. This appears to have a demotivating impact upon staff engagement and creates a sense of disconnect between leaders 'on the ground' and those setting the standards. One powerful example outlined the experiences of a leader who was working in a school recovering from the traumatic death of two young people.

**“bearing in mind all this has happened and I think the school have dealt with these bereavements [two child deaths] really well, the last big discussion was ‘and by the way, did I feel there was an improvement in my boys’ outcomes?’ Bearing in mind they’ve only be back since April! And I just thought ‘there’s no understanding of where we are at all’... schools are going to take a while to get back to normal... even Estyn’s saying that!” (Focus Group)**

Leaders also shared frustration and resentment around the perceived excessive need for 'proof' of certain practice or outcomes.

**“Reduce the need for so much 'evidence' of everything, treat us as professionals that are doing our job.” (National Academy for Educational Leadership Survey)**

**“Accountability measures, particularly for secondary schools, seem to be the be all and end all at certain points in the year”. (National Academy for Educational Leadership Survey)**

**“[measures of accountability are] harmful and unrealistic” (National Academy for Educational Leadership Survey)**

In addition to the increase in workload that outcome monitoring creates, 'scrutiny' appears to have led to a feeling of having one's professional capability deeply mistrusted and undermined. It also adds to a context where leaders experience a need to prove themselves in numerous ways, compounding that sense of pressure.

- Sense of purpose diminished by bureaucracy

Linked closely to the ideas on scrutiny are the administrative tasks that certain demands bring for headteachers. The impact of such requirements appears to feel particularly difficult because of an indirect consequence that less time could be spent on other priorities. Having a sense of purpose at work is key to engagement (The King's Fund, 2015) and was clearly important to those who participated in the research. The 'purpose' was consistently located as having a direct impact upon the development of the young people they served. One headteacher articulated the sense of responsibility they felt in their role:

**“We’re responsible for such precious things which is peoples’ children and we’re responsible for their education”. (Focus Group)**

Others spoke of their values around the impact of education:

**“We all embrace the purposes [referring to the new Curriculum] – I’m quite passionate about it, I want these young people that can lead, I want these young people that can change their worlds... in deprived areas [where] you need to work doubly, triply hard at those things and take the community with you. That lovely word ‘cynefin’, is about home and belonging, that’s what I want for us... that sense of us as a community and village but also a global connection.” (Focus Group)**

This sense of purpose and energy appears to be diminished by demands that are deemed as “*constantly jumping through hoops*” (as one participant described it) on tasks such as last-minute requests for information, evidencing how money has been spent after previously articulating the need to receive that funding and suchlike. It appears to have created a sense that outside of schools, those in Education are focussed on outcomes in a way that risks missing the young people the aims serve.

**You don’t mind putting in workload you know, for all those gains, but when you’re putting in workload with no particular reasons or gains for children or the school, which is just more stress for staff it’s really not purposeful”. (Focus Group)**

**“I occasionally feel like I'm a failure at both due to the expectations - much of which is paperwork - some duplicated and totally unnecessary. This needs to be looked at before more headteachers feel forced to leave the profession for the sake of their mental health.” (National Academy for Educational Leadership Survey)**

This perhaps suggests a need to spend more time engaging with headteachers around the purpose of such directives, as well as further lack of consideration of what any demand set may cost. In contrast, one senior leader shared the value in having someone support them through the administrative tasks in a way that minimised their workload, suggesting the power of such input in mitigating the stress such tasks create.

**“I’ve got a challenge advisor that’s absolutely brilliant, they’ll say I’ve got to ask you this but it’s absolute rubbish, but don’t worry I’ll do something for you... or he’ll say I’ve got to fill in this questionnaire but rather than send it to me I’ll just get a brief overview and are you happy for me to do it?” (Focus group)**

Another feature that seems to enhance a sense of purpose in work is to be working alongside those with a similar vision; this shared vision seems particularly important given the ways purpose can also be diminished.

## **Organisational demands**

- Desire for cultural shift

Throughout the dataset, a theme arose which spoke to the environment in which peoples’ responses to well-being sit. Well-being seems to be perceived as an area long overlooked, but more than that, there appear to be active pressures in the way the system is constructed which continue to prevent improvement.

**“I think for me one of the barriers is, it’s a cultural barrier and I think schools had operated in a certain way for so long that it is difficult for leaders or teachers or parents or governors or, you know, other agencies to visualize what a different way of working might look like, and it’s quite difficult.” (Focus Group)**

One person spoke of the need for ‘external collaboration’ as a way of exploring these issues and creating cultural change through bringing experience from other sectors to prevent stagnancy.

**“Maybe a bit more sort of radical in what I say personally, I think it would be really helpful to be working with people who are not in education and actually aren’t connected to education because it’s surprising when you speak to people who aren’t in the educational sector and they’re sometimes really surprised about the way schools operate.” (Focus Group)**

This idea fits closely with a sense that leaders in education do not feel they need to learn how to be better at ‘doing education’, rather that the systems surrounding them require change and that they would benefit from better support to navigate the challenges that do arise. It is important to recognise that changing the shape of headteacher well-being is likely to come from changing the context within which headteachers work.

**“So genuinely supporting well-being across the local school community where we move away from these high stakes accountability systems and beginning to sort of re-imagine what our purpose is as well. Not just school leaders, I would talk about the whole school community really because I think you know schools know what they’re about in terms of teaching and learning. As things currently stand we can’t hope to meaningfully deliver on those [new National Curriculum] purposes unless we have this cultural shift that we’ve been discussing.” (Focus Group)**

There was a strong idea that those in certain positions may purport to invest in headteacher well-being whilst at the same time fail to use their power to generate change, or even act in ways that undermined that intention.

**“Empower discussion at the highest levels on this feedback to make change, not offer token counselling/coaching [and] mentoring.” (National Academy for Educational Leadership Survey)**

A sense of ‘failure’ was alluded to if leaders were not thriving, in a way that seems to unhelpfully link ‘being well’ with ‘doing well’. This focus on mastery links to the important themes of workload and scrutiny and suggests that the prioritisation of outcome is both part of the problem and also an obstacle to any solution. The ‘cultural shift’ seems to be required at every level of the ecosystem and in a way which impacts every stakeholder in a coherent way. Investing in supporting the development of wise and steady leadership was viewed as one way to address this.

**“The reality is Headteachers are not able to talk openly about their well-being with colleagues, governors or challenge advisors as there is an aspect of judgement with each of these roles.” (Questionnaire)**

**“Across the country, there has to, there has to be kind of a systemic vision for leadership change rather than a kind of piecemeal school by school or authority by authority approach” (Focus Group)**

- Headteachers having ‘many masters’

Linked closely to the themes above is a demand which emerged around the indirect pressure placed upon headteachers stemming from their accountability to many professional bodies. Leaders spoke of a sense of having various – and sometimes conflicting – demands placed upon them, often with a lack of joined up thinking between them in the middle tier. As a result, leaders described the need to digest significant amounts of information quickly and decide how to respond, often needing to prioritise levels of urgency at a pace which impacted upon other aspects of their role and prevented strategic thinking or innovation. Alongside this experience came a sense of being ‘controlled’, which appears to undermine professional competence and confidence. It also appears that the demands of the middle tier were felt to be communicated in a ‘downward’ trajectory. The resultant lack of bio-directional influence, means the systems co-ordinating education risk missing out on senior leaders’ expertise and experience.

**“I think for me it’s the levels of accountability, you know the education workforce is so over scrutinised, more than any other profession. You know we have our governing bodies, we have our local authority, we’ve got EWR we’ve got Welsh Government, we’ve got ESTYN, and they all want something that could be different, might be similar... and it’s so much over accountability, that I would say is absolutely the main stress of education or me and my staff.”**

**“I believe the Leadership Academy has a vital role in articulating the systemic change needed to streamline the education system in Wales facilitating clarity of role for the 'middle tier', eliminating duplication and the perverse protection of vested organisational self-interest.” (National Academy for Educational Leadership Survey)**

**[A request to The Leadership Academy] “Be there as an advocate for leaders. To argue our case within the middle tier. To hold Welsh Government, Estyn and the Consortia accountable on our behalf, because currently nobody is doing so.” (National Academy for Educational Leadership Survey)**

Finally, the sense of ‘relentlessness’ about the many and varied demands made by professional bodies in the middle tier appear to leave them viewed as an authoritative body which is focused more on specific parts of the task of education at certain times rather than the overall state and well-being of young people and the workforce, leaving senior leaders feeling isolated in their role.

**“You are negatively affected by outside influences not least a local authority that claims little ownership but makes significant demands”. (Questionnaire)**

- Feeling that learning and development is stifled

The data demonstrated that senior leaders in education often feel stifled in terms of their personal and professional development. As explored in previous themes, senior leaders seemed to feel a disconnect between the ‘on the ground’ running of schools and the strategizing that happens at the middle tier level. As a result it seems it is difficult to fully engage senior leaders in the aims of the middle tier, partly because of a perception that priorities often do not meaningfully relate to the core business and partly because the requests are not viewed as being informed by the expertise of those working in schools.

**“that strategic vision needs to be we who see the effects of what’s going on for children in their daily lives... we need to be a part of that... there’s a separation at the moment between strategy and what actually happens to a child in their school life”. (Focus Group)**

One factor that influences this seems to be the need to leave a senior leadership role in order to develop in other areas:

**“...you’re either in school or you’re out of school’. You know, if you go to work for the consortia you leave the classroom, now again in health, if you want to go and do research you do research whilst you’re still practising.” (Focus Group)**

As a result there appears to be a loss of professional capital in schools whereby, as one headteacher phrased it “*none of that [strategic expertise and experience] comes back into the classroom*”, meaning that highly experienced leaders leave the classroom to develop in specific ways but the growth is not ploughed back into the classroom leading to a loss of expertise. This links to the idea that professional learning is a key need for senior leaders (as it would be any role) in order to keep the role sustainable and the suggestion that focussing on the development of leadership richly benefits both them and the institutions they serve.

- Lack of awareness of the role of headteachers

Building on themes already developed is the sense from senior leaders that those in positions of power are detached from the running of a school and as a result find it hard to understand what their role involves. Throughout the data this idea seemed to generate anger, perhaps exacerbated by the added sense of disconnect brought about by changes in during the pandemic. There was at times a feeling of cynicism and discouragement that one may associate with burnout, an occupational phenomena brought about by the environment within one works (Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter, 2001).

**“Most of the people that give us the rules and regulations are sitting in their conservatories and they’ve been there for a year and a half.” (Focus Group)**

**“The thing that pushes me over the edge is a lack of realism or any empathy about what it is actually like to be in a school many of us had an email... the tone of the email, it just really really upset me personally because I’ve been a senior leader for 4 schools and I’ve seen in every single school, you know the staff, perhaps ourselves have stayed 7-8pm at night to work with parents, social workers, when children are at risk, I’ve seen staff burnout. We’ve had two really horrible bereavements since January... Staff at sixth form level are still working, still supporting at the weekends and to be told then in the first paragraph from the minister of education, ‘this was unacceptable’... the tone of it is like he doesn’t know what goes on in our schools.” (Focus Group)**

**“We’re in a really dangerous situation where people have no understanding of what school life is like and I can’t see our well-being improving until there is a more general sense.” (National Academy for Educational Leadership Survey)**

Senior leaders appeared to strongly value experience in a role and hold this as a marker for competence, perhaps because in education experience seems to be a common currency for learning.

**“I really appreciate the support of a challenge advisor (I know it’s an improvement champion now) that’s someone who has walked the walk.” (Focus Group)**

This is an interesting point to reflect on and suggests that ‘external expertise’ would be valued around areas to support broader leadership and application of strategies to support well-being. However, where professional practice is evaluated, senior leaders feel strongly that this should be delivered by those who have worked in the role they are themselves navigating.

**“I’ve got a new improvement partner in September who’s never been a senior leader in a school... and with the greatest of respect, I’m sure she’s very, you know, capable of doing her job but actually to sit in the chair and do it I think is very different... I wouldn’t go and be a managing director at a farm, it’s just absolutely ridiculous.” (Focus Group)**

Related to this is the observation that ‘learning on the job’ seems to be core for educationists professional learning and therefore any recommendations around well-being must be informed by that process.

## Psychological demands

- Senior leaders as figureheads

Senior leaders reported feeling the importance of their ‘presence’ at school and the associated sense of containment that this brought those who rely on them (staff, parents and students). Presence occurs both physically through remaining on site as much as possible and demonstrating accessibility (for example having a door open) and psychologically, through thinking of others and withholding their own needs. As one leader described:

**“The headteacher sets an ethos to live by. If successful it becomes the life blood and part of your [school] identity.” (Questionnaire)**



The emotional state of such a figurehead therefore appears to have a significant impact on this process.

**“How I am sets the tone for everyone in the school. If I come in and slam the door then down goes the mood of everybody in the school... you’ve still got to maintain that ‘everything’s fine, I’m calm’ because the minute you’re not calm the roof’s going to blow off... Our well-being is paramount to everyone in the school.” (Focus Group)**

The need for presence is inextricably linked to the level of responsibility felt by senior leaders and the breadth and depth of ‘duty’ experienced in the role, including an all year round responsibility not only to the people with whom they work but to the building itself, as outlined by one headteacher planning to visit school daily to oversee building work, thus impacting upon leisure time.

The ‘containment of others’ and ‘responsibility for well-being’ ideas seem to feature across all senior leader roles, with each working to support the effectiveness of the other:

**“I don’t know if buffer’s the right word but you’re the person between the head and the rest... a general point of reference for anybody and everybody who has a question that they think you may be able to answer.” (Focus Group)**

At the same time, senior leaders commitment to the well-being of others appears to at times come at a cost to their own care seeking.

**“I feel terribly guilty working from home so I don’t but at school I never get anything done because people constantly need things I almost need permission to do that, a directive, I feel too guilty.” (Focus Group)**

**“I wouldn’t share my problems with colleagues as it wouldn’t have been appropriate. Therefore colleagues were unaware of the stresses and strains of my life...” (Questionnaire)**

**“I don’t call on other heads, it never really crosses my mind – they’ve probably got enough.” (Focus Group)**

This pattern is perhaps unintentionally reinforced by the expectations of the wider ecosystem and reinforced by initiatives which appear to them to overlook them:

**“12 months ago unfortunately a document came out from Welsh Government about well-being in schools and every stakeholder was mentioned apart from the headteacher.” (Focus Group)**

**“The well-being of the headteacher is often the last consideration by everyone.” (National Academy for Educational Leadership Survey)**

- Emotional load

One particular demand which appears to be a symptom of many of the others is the sense of strong emotion that arises from headteachers’ experiences in their role.

**“The weight of accountability weighs heavily on me, whether that be with regards to safeguarding issues or judgements that will be made about our school... A harmonious team is essential for success, when staff are unhappy that affects my own well-being greatly.” (National Academy for Educational Leadership Survey)**

The combination of at times overwhelming responsibility for others, the pressure for outcomes despite many challenges and a sense of being undervalued amidst working hard appears to come at personal cost.

**“Safeguarding - sometimes we have to deal with really traumatic safeguarding issues. Something needs to be in place to 'debrief' staff using professionals following experiences like this. After spending a whole day or more uncovering atrocities maybe working into the night with social services and the police it is not reasonable to expect school to get up the next morning and carry on as if nothing has happened. The police tell us that they have a debriefing and chance to talk with professional and have been amazed that there is nothing for school staff along these lines.” (National Academy for Educational Leadership Survey)**

In addition to concern for others, senior leaders spoke about feeling untrusted, and the resultant diminishing impact upon a sense of mastery. At the same time a sense of mistrust towards middle tier professional bodies and government was apparent, following examples where they felt ‘autonomy’ was awarded for disingenuous reasons.

**“There’s a lack of trust but then there’s this false perception publicly to try and create more trust and make out that we’re given this responsibility, for example the announcement yesterday that every school basically is going to make up their own covid guidelines in September is the type of thing that’s completely out of our remit of accountability and is just passing the buck. No national strategy for determining grades, they don’t want the accountability and the backlash to be on them. I’ve got 7 other comps in the LA and they’ve all done it completely differently. It’s a false implication that they’re giving us more trust by allowing us to do those things because we know our communities but actually it’s because it’s easier to take the pressure away from them...” (Focus Group)**

Leaders spoke of feeling angry about ‘empathy’ being firmly on the education agenda (“*named 39 times in the well-being curriculum*”) in a way that contradicted their own experience of being led without an understanding of their needs. There was an energy about how leaders expressed their experiences that suggested they were very much engaged in the process, but that strong feelings emerging from the work, the context and the culture were present. These responses link to the sense of disconnect described earlier and to the high level of scrutiny perceived by heads, but the emotional response to these experiences seem in themselves to add another demand on resources.

Finally, a part of this theme related to a thread representing senior leaders’ desire for more support. A culture was reflected whereby the higher up one travels in the hierarchy, the less focus there is upon professional learning and supporting emotional well-being. This perhaps ties in with the idea that in education, it is experience over other methods of learning which may be most privileged; this perhaps risks adding pressure to those who could feel that they ‘should’ be able to manage a certain task or incident because of their job title. In reality, an increase of expectations and workload is only sustainable if it is met with the necessary resources to meet such demands.

**“Just because you’ve had X numbers of experience it doesn’t mean the workload’s any lighter.” (Focus Group)**

**“As you’re going through the school you always have someone above you who you can go to and talk to, but the higher up you go in the school the only people who are there are people who come in to inspect it... the buck stops basically the way I gather it.” (Focus Group)**

**“the further up you go you get to a lonely place” (Focus Group)**

## Social demands

- Unrealistic expectations of society

An important idea that arose in the data centred upon the ever expanding remit of what schools are required to cover. It links to a perceived mentality of a 'blame culture', whereby incidents that happen involving young people unquestioningly become the responsibility of schools.

**“I think it’s this blame culture... If anything happens with anyone in school, it’s the school’s fault, because we’re, like here we had a suicide, not far away and suddenly it was looking at everything we’re doing to see if we were to blame even though it happened outside school and it’s really difficult and the news doesn’t help, daily on the news it’s up to educationalists – they’re supposed to do, oh it’s all right ‘sexual harassment, schools will sort it! Homophobic and yep, schools will sort it!” (Focus group)**

**“Schools remain places of education for our children, but have become front line social provision and are used to the hilt as one of the few vehicles that policy makers have to use to make a difference in society. Teenage pregnancy, children can't hold a knife and fork properly, knife crime, parenting skills, radicalisation, FGM, not providing skills industry requires - schools are expected to fix the lot.” And then we’re pilloried on outcomes, often from narrow theoretical perspectives. (National Academy for Educational Leadership Survey)**

It seems increasingly more difficult to be clear on what the 'business of education' is and this narrative around education being the response to many social issues creates increased pressure on headteachers. The sense of growing expectations seems to have been compounded by an increase in social need and further perpetuated by a reduction in mental health and social care resources, meaning an inadvertent increase in what is 'held' at a tier 1 level.

The level of concern around young people therefore stretches well beyond academic performance, but lies at its heart, a focus on well-being and safety. This inevitably perpetuates a huge sense of responsibility for those in leadership positions.

**“The safety of my students always worries me and this is even more so now” (National Academy for Educational Leadership Survey)**

- Limited Resources

Leaders have noted that political priorities inform the wider education system and that inevitably then shapes the service schools deliver in terms of both process (how it is delivered) and content (what is delivered). It is certainly clear that there is concern around the level of need compared with the capacity available to meet that need.

**“I lose sleep about the budget worrying how we are going to cope with the increasing challenges within school with less and less resources, including staff.” (National Academy for Educational Leadership Survey)**

Distributing resources in a way that meets the needs of each layer of the education system presents a challenging task and one that is informed by political decision making.

**“Ultimately these are going to be political decisions and I just wonder right now, whether political rhetoric will actually, you know, match up with the reality at school level because they, they will talk a good game but we all know there are not endless amounts of money to support the education sector.” (Focus Group)**

- Embracing opportunity and celebrating good practice

Throughout the data there was a thread of optimism and mastery, suggesting that despite the challenges outlined senior leaders remain very much engaged in their role.

**“There’s been some incredible practice through covid ... you hear about some wonderful things that the current situation has sparked in people and although there are areas of the school, areas of development plan that just haven’t happened... but if it was on our terms and we invited, we could invite ESTYN or somebody that would actually see ‘oh we can trust these people, look what they’ve done, look at the positives that have come up with’. And I think for me, that would be more reassuring than even time because they would take back with them that belief in schools that they don’t have to, that belief in schools. And I think that’s something that would really help me.” (Focus Group)**

There was a call by various senior leaders for ‘good practice’ to be acknowledged and celebrated by those who evaluate performance rather than a focus solely on feedback around improvement. This fits with the idea that feeling valued at work is core to staff well-being and a key factor in quality of performance. Feedback which fosters a ‘growth mindset’ (Dweck, 2006) by reinforcing strengths and inspiring autonomy is also more likely to generate high levels of motivation and confidence. By offering leaders an experience of this they will also be better able to foster this in those they lead and educate.

**“[I’d like] someone to tell me, talk to me about what I’m doing well. Celebrate the good and not focus on next steps, areas to develop, targets etc.” (National Academy for Educational Leadership Survey)**

Headteachers spoke too of the power of connecting with peers when possible in order to remain ‘steady’ in the role and also to develop their practice. These experiences appear to provide an antidote to the complexity and pace of the role.

**“...often just relating to what’s going on, someone on the end of the phone that says ‘don’t worry, that happened to us we just did this... that just helps me feel better and I feel like I can do something about it.’ (Focus Group)**

**“It’s the support of other headteachers that’s been the only thing that’s helped me through this last 18 months. But it does take time and I don’t know how we’re going to do it when we’re being piled on with issue after issue.” (Focus Group)**

Connecting with peers seems to provide a sense of unity that reduces the isolation in the role, as well as a place to generate ideas and develop practice and to process difficulties experienced in the role. The result seems to be that the roles feel more possible; this a useful reminder that it is not just the level of demands which impact upon a role but the presence of support mechanisms.

Finally, there was a sense of excitement following the pandemic and a sense of hope that the significant changes in education that were brought about by lockdown restrictions could actually have inadvertently uncovered improvements. Leaders spoke of opportunities created by some tasks happening online for example (meaning reduced travel time) and opportunities being created by changes to the way parents’ evenings are delivered.

**“Let’s get rid of the stuff, and strip it back to what’s important... This could be an exciting time if we give ourselves time to do that, really do that... In every secondary school I’ve worked in they [parent evenings] become a kind of market place where people are queuing and... I don’t actually think they have the impact that we want them to have. Reports are another one... well there’s a ticktock generation out there, they’re doing things in 15 seconds, we’ve got to change.” (Focus Group)**

Whilst there may well be no real restrictions on leaders developing innovative ways of meeting the demands of the work in typical times, leaders are reporting that the quantity of demands and the associated lack of time to reflect or focus on strategic issues does diminish their capacity to look beyond ‘reacting day to day’. The stark changes necessitated by lockdown have then facilitated rise to innovation, something which, with the adequate resources, could be capitalised on going forward. It is striking to observe the resilience with which leaders recognise opportunities amidst a period of intense challenge and a reminder it is not the stress itself that creates hardship, but the presence of excessive demands combined with insufficient resources.

## Part 4

Many of the demands identified by headteachers are complex, long standing and multi-layered, as well as mostly being beyond their control. As such solutions and resources need to be considered creatively and also at a local level. However there are resources that are universally relevant and utilised in other professional areas such as health. This section will explore a range of possible resources.

The difficulties noted in recruitment and retention suggest that there are issues to address regarding the sustainability of senior leaderships roles in Welsh schools; this creates a rationale for this being an important focus. By exploring in greater detail the experiences of those in such roles we are better able to understand ‘what’ the issues are. Ideas about ‘how’ to respond are now presented (see figure 7).

### 4.1 Operational principles

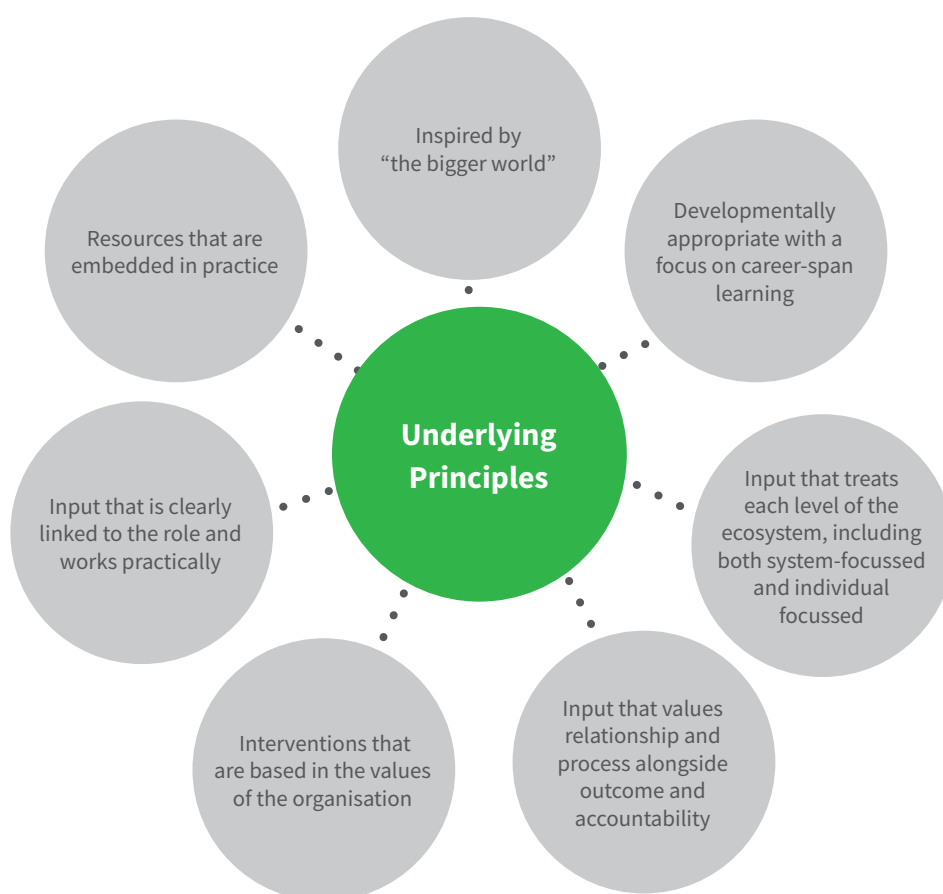


Figure 7: The underlying principles of resources

As with many system-focused interventions, the manner in which it is implemented is at least as important as ‘what’ is actually presented. With that in mind the following features are presented as underlying principles for consideration when creating any direct provision in order to maximise the impact of the resource. The principles are informed by psychological principles and ideas shared by senior leaders in the focus groups.

Interventions are considered to be input that is intentionally implemented to generate change within a person or a system. It is vital that such contributions are based upon the values of the institution and ensure that people at every level or state of well-being are genuinely valued. This includes an understanding that learning and development does not stop once someone gains experience in a role, but continues throughout the lifespan of a career and is particularly necessary as the focus of challenge in any role shifts; senior leaders may become ‘unconsciously competent’ in many areas while also developing ‘conscious incompetence’ in others (Broadwell, cited by Curtiss and Warren, 1973).

- It is important that any response respects the person's breadth of experience and needs.

**“Supporting well-being cannot be a tick box exercise, simply because the words 'well-being' have been put on an official agenda. Providing genuine support led by specialists in alternative therapies and putting into action a plan where there are opportunities for staff to engage in sessions that will allow them to improve their own well-being will be critical in enabling us to move forward with a return to school. Curriculum recovery can only follow staff recovery in my opinion.” (Survey)**

- Input that works practically – ‘meeting people where they are’ seems important when offering initiatives directly to headteachers and senior leaders. Initiatives related to well-being (be they opportunities for professional learning, leadership development or peer supervision) that are offered as part of the core working day convey a message that this aspect of the work is not only ‘permitted’ but viewed as fundamental to the role. It also means that work/life balance is encouraged in a more meaningful way.

**“As much as I’ve enjoyed some of the leadership courses we’ve had, it’s too much for me at the end of the day and I think it’s because it makes you question yourself as a leader and at the moment I don’t need that.” (Focus Groups)**

- Clearly related to the role – The content of any input is likely to be most effective when leaders can recognise aspects of themselves and their own work and aspirations in the wider culture of the institution in order to connect with what is being presented.

**“I remember sitting in XX, must have been about 10yrs ago now, talking about systems leadership with the great and the good - they had David Hopkins and you know, keynote speakers from around the world. He was telling us about his trip up Everest, lovely, but what has it actually meant in real terms. In 10 years since I sat in that room with all those headteachers, I would say ‘very little’. (Focus Group)**

Embedded in practice – Crucially, following any ‘intervention’ leaders then need to return to a working environment within which they have the resources required to pursue the ideas and create sustainable change in their practice. This may include space to develop the ideas in reflective practice groups or peer supervision, or ‘practice’ based sessions following leadership skills courses. It requires an ongoing commitment to create space in a leader’s role to establish healthy working practices and maintain a focus on professional development and well-being.

**“Networks have trainings days that you talk about being innovative in school and changing things and being strategic and all of a sudden you go back to school and the hustle and bustle of the daily life... as you know flat out all day long being there for the children, which is ultimately our job and... and then there’s no time to do these things, no thinking space and focus.” (Focus Group)**

- *“Inspired by the bigger world”* – There seems to be both a desire for those who scrutinise practice to have experience in the role that they are evaluating, and also a hope for external input to facilitate ‘different ways’ of working with issues in education. There was a suggestion here that external expertise could play a valuable role in enhancing the experience and work of those already skilled in their profession.
- Interventions for different stages – Provision for headteachers and senior leaders will need to take into account the nature of their specific need and the urgency within which a response is required. It is likely that a suite of provision is required involving both ‘sustaining’ measures embedded in core practice which prevent difficulties in well-being as well as a (likely smaller) resource which attends to those who have developed burnout and are suffering with stress.

**“Well-being support needs to be structured and pre-emptive... With the multitude of stressful situations - accountability, budgets, supporting families and vulnerable children, child protection, complaints, managing under performance etc headteachers should be required to attend regular supervision in order to support well-being from the beginning, not as a sticking plaster when things go wrong.” (Questionnaire)**

- Interventions which treat each level of the ecosystem – headteachers and senior leaders work within a context which sits amongst the wider education system, the middle tier and government. It is important to acknowledge that changes may be required at each level in order to fully maximise change within schools.
- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, what has become clear is the importance of relationship in mediating the challenges that senior leaders face. It is important that relationship remains at the heart of any response, be that at a systemic or an individual level.

## 4.2. The process of innovation and practice-based suggestions

When any institution is faced with a set of complex challenges, innovation may offer meaningful solutions. In healthcare there is a well-established relationship between the process of problem solving and compassionate leadership. A report by the King's Fund (West, Eckert, Collins, Chowla, 2017, p.3) outlines the way in which compassionate leadership can support the navigation of each of the stages of problem solving:

**Attending** - it is necessary to identify the issue causing difficulty through actively listening in a non-judgemental way to those it affects.

**Understanding** – this step of the process involves engaging staff to help make sense of the challenges faced in order to harness their expertise and work collaboratively.

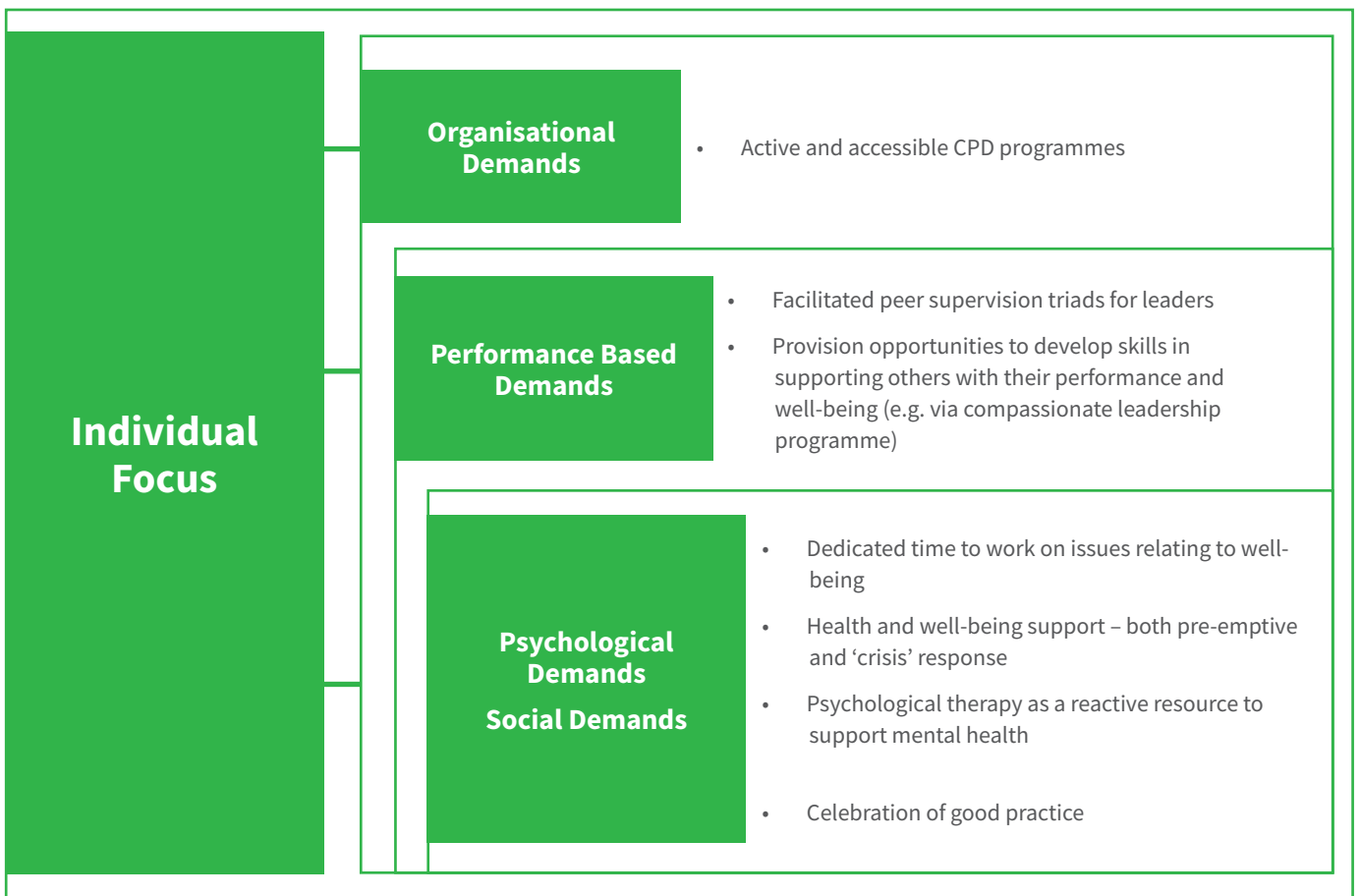
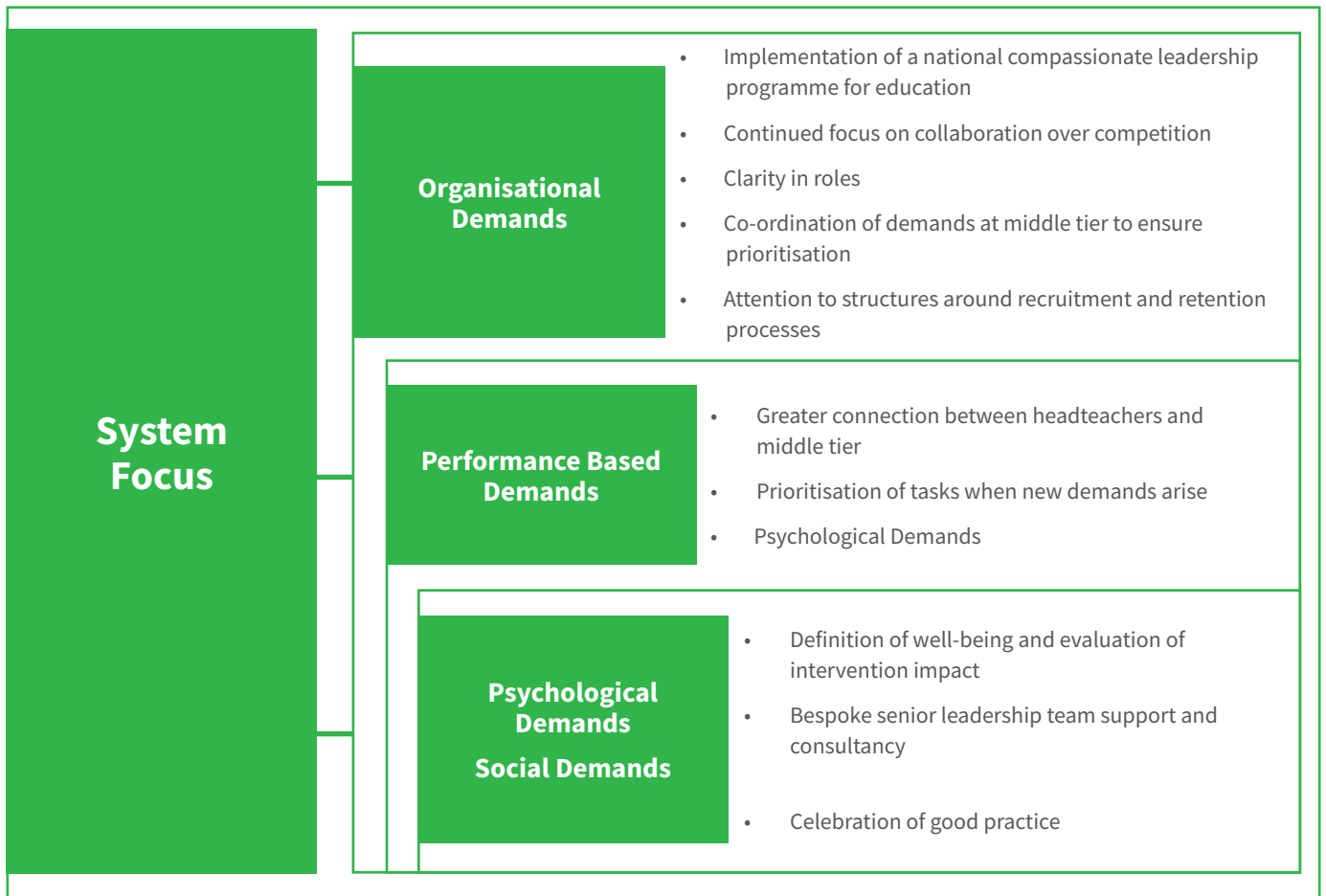
**Empathising** – seeking to understand the experience of others has a motivating effect which generates innovative practice. It also creates a shift in affect, from negative to more positive emotions which in turn enhances creativity and resilience. Ensuring leaders feel valued at work is key to this and includes responding to failure compassionately, in a way that allows leaders to feel confident in trying new things.

**Helping** - the final stage involves taking thoughtful and intelligent action to help. This is beyond telling people what to do in a hierarchical way, but supports implementing and evaluating ideas in a way that meets the needs of the work. It is important to note that both time and resources are needed for innovation, as well as the removal of obstacles to new ways of working.

This insight paper could be seen as representing the first phases of this process, as by listening to senior leaders and better understanding the system within which they work, it is possible to then meaningfully address generating change.

The following ideas are practice based suggestions to inform direct provision for individual senior leaders as well as the wider systems within which these roles sit (see figure 8). The whole of these working together will be greater than any one factor, so all will be required to enhance the impact of any one intervention. It is acknowledged that some of these are likely to be considered 'priority' while others may be more appropriate for implementation in the medium and longer term. It is important that these recommendations are viewed alongside what else is currently provided and that the overall provision is then clearly integrated in a coherent way to maximise efficacy. Provision will then need to be developed and trialled with active senior leaders at the heart of the process in order to really address the needs presented.

Figure 8: Practice based suggestions for provision of resources





### 4.2.1 System focused resources

Implementation of a Wales wide compassionate leadership programme in Education to enable a framework for professional development and skills in a consistent way. This would contribute to the culture change highlighted by senior leaders through enabling leaders to feel supported to lead with confidence and competence. It would also incorporate specific skills training, such as processes to facilitate 'difficult conversations' with staff, mechanisms to identify difficulties in a system, and provide measures for developing clarity within a workforce around expectations and task responsibility. Beyond the initiation of a programme to develop these ideas, adopting the principles of compassionate leadership in the Education system could benefit stakeholders at every level. The key elements of compassionate leadership are:

- Inspiring vision and strategy
- Positive inclusion and participation
- Enthusiastic team and cross-boundary working
- Support and autonomy (West, Eckert, Collins and Chowla, 2017, p.11).

The specific resources listed below represent examples which speak directly to meeting the demands identified in this paper and represent specific changes which could be made. They also fit alongside a compassionate leadership approach, meaning that they could be considered examples of how such an approach may be enacted. Further work may be required to identify how such an approach could be most effectively embedded into the Education system.

- Continued focus upon collaboration over competition within and between schools in order to create a culture of openness which allows pooling resources for efficiency, learning from good practice and generation of an open dialogue to reduce the sense of isolation and stress associated with the role.
- Development of a definition of well-being in order to evaluate the impact of any interventions, for example via the implementation of an annual staff well-being survey to measure change across key areas.
- Participation of headteachers in middle tier strategy development in order to capitalise upon the pre-existing resources of skilled leaders and ensure greater connection between senior leaders in schools and the middle tier in a mutually beneficial way.
- Creation of opportunities to celebrate good practice so that professional bodies are aware and can communicate their feedback to facilitate positive relationships and ensure the promotion of such practice for the benefit of professionals and students.
- Consideration of use of routine leadership mechanisms such as the Responsibility and Accountability matrix (RACI) to assess the needs of the system and identify a shared sense of responsibility and accountability for tasks in order to ensure maximum impact of effort.
- Focus upon the structures around supporting the recruitment and retention of teachers at each stage of their career, including input to newly qualified teachers and established leaders as well as exit interviews as staff leave.
- Focus upon engagement with headteachers when communicating tasks in order to share the underlying meaning of such demands and ensure shared sense of vision and purpose.
- Improved co-ordination of demands at the middle tier level whereby priorities are established at that level and then disseminated according to a joined up vision to prevent leaders being overwhelmed by various demands and to attempt to ensure tasks are enacted without unintended cost.
- Provision of a bespoke senior leadership team support and consultancy service in order to help with team cohesion, development, and pre-crisis conflict management.
- 

### 4.2.2 Individual focused resources

- 'Triads' or facilitated peer supervision sessions for leaders – 'safe' spaces to share ideas and process difficult issues (e.g. through linking in with senior leaders in different geographical areas). These sessions would critically be unrelated to the management of performance outcomes and would make use of pre-existing skills amongst senior leaders.
- Active and accessible CPD programmes which meet people's need for safety in order to allow a window of opportunity to develop pre-existing skills (Vygtosky, 1978).
- Dedicated and protected time to regularly work on issues relating to well-being - this may be in school or offsite and may consist of formal or informal activities.

- Health and well-being support both pre-emptive and ‘crisis’ responses to well-being needs – workshops, meditation, yoga/ fitness sessions, psychoeducation groups and psychological consultation as a protective resource.
- Psychological therapy as a reactive resource for those in need of input due to psychological distress.
- Development of skills when working to support others in their role and for own well-being (for example through a compassionate leadership programme).
- Mentorship and coaching programme specifically for senior leaders.

However these ideas are taken forward, it seems important to note that these measures are ultimately to serve the well-being of senior leaders. This is because it is appropriate to treat every level of a workforce well by ensuring they are valued and sufficiently equipped to enact their role to the best of their ability and also because to not to do so will have a detrimental impact upon their colleagues in schools and the young people they serve. This is a powerful motivator for all involved in the education of children and creates an urgent but potentially exciting call for change.

**“Things could stay exactly as they are and we could continue in our roles, you know here as senior leaders, carers, teachers or support staff and the learning would keep on trembling along, and you know... we keep on learning and you know they’d progress through the school system but what we’re really asking ourselves here is, could we do this differently? And could we affect cultural change which would benefit the entire school community? And what we’re saying collectively in this meeting is yes, we could do it differently and that would be beneficial, but there will have to be willingness on all parties, including them, those who support and finance the education system to see this through in a meaningful way. Otherwise it’ll just be another initiative that’s a little wayside”. (Focus Group)**

Written by Dr Alice Davies, Consultant Clinical Psychologist (Employee Well-being). With many thanks for the input made to this project by Dr Adrian Neal and Dr Benna Waites and also gratefully acknowledging the time and thoughts offered by all the senior leaders who helped shape this piece with their experiences and views.

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