

School Leaders Survey Findings

Autumn 2023

**Browne
Jacobson**



Introduction

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

Research for the survey, where we invite the leaders of the nation's schools and academies to share their views, was carried out for four weeks during October 2023.

The survey was completed by 204 school leaders in England, of which 25% are CEOs and Deputy CEOs, 11% are COOs and CFOs, 15% are trustees and 29% are Headteachers, Deputy Headteachers and Assistant Heads. Responses for the remaining 20% included Business Managers/Partners, HR professionals, local governors and central team members.

74% respondents work or govern in a multi-academy trust, 14% in standalone academies and 12% in maintained schools.

All percentages quoted in this report have been rounded to whole numbers. Where the results total more than 100% this may be due to rounding.

We are grateful to all the school leaders who gave their time generously to participate in this survey.

November 2023

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Foreword

It is fascinating to take a moment out of the bustle of a busy term and reflect on the findings of our latest School Leaders Survey. What are the stories the findings are telling us?

The survey is open to the leaders of the nation's schools and academies and looks to gather views on a range of key policy issues as well as challenges and priorities of the day.

With a general election on the horizon there are clear indications of the policy areas where school leaders would welcome policy changes – SEND and its funding being the obvious one. It is also interesting to note leader's views on Ofsted inspections with a new chief inspector shortly to take up their post.

If you would like to discuss our findings, please get in touch.



Nick MacKenzie
Partner

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



Key Themes



Policy landscape

With widespread dissatisfaction across key policy areas, ensuring that policy makers hear loud and clear the sector's priorities will be really important over the coming year to ensure key messages are not crowded out.

Discrepancies in the results between policy dissatisfaction and organisations' operational strategies is also worth reflecting on. Leaders looking from within their organisation and networks to tackle key issues rather than wait for government and others are clearly building in resilience to address the broad spectrum of challenges faced by the sector.



Recruitment

Recruitment is clearly hard – talent management teams undoubtedly have their hands full. That said, is there a risk of a self-fulfilling prophecy developing? What is your talent management strategy and is it delivering what you thought it would?

Seeking to engage with staff, invest in data driven employee engagement products as well as continuing to evolve and learn will be critical in organisations looking to enhance their people offer.



Inspection

Ofsted is always a talking point but this term offered a unique juncture to gauge whether, having made some recent changes, there was still appetite for fundamental reform to the current inspection system.

The firm answer to that appears to be 'yes'. With an incoming new chief inspector and a general election on the horizon, the repeated support for policy changes posed by the Opposition suggests Ofsted will continue to feature in the political debate ahead.

Key Findings

56% of school leaders felt positive when asked about the educational prospects of their pupils, as a result of external factors compared to 12 months ago.

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

More than half (**52%**) of school leaders are dissatisfied with government policy regarding vocational education.

84% of school leaders are dissatisfied with government policy on capital funding and estates.

47% of school leaders felt positive about employee engagement compared to a year ago, while a quarter (**25%**) feel it's worse now.

45% of respondents surveyed cited pupil behaviour and attendance as a top three operational strategy in the year ahead.

82% of respondents felt there was insufficient expertise in Artificial Intelligence (AI) in their organisation.

70% of respondents agreed that single word overall inspection judgements equate to simplicity at the cost of fairness.

66% of school leaders felt that parents would gain a better understanding of a school's performance through a 'report card' system.

49% of respondents thought that a lack of necessary expertise within Ofsted was the main obstacle to MATs being inspected in their own right.

01 Policy Landscape

The operating environment

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

Educational prospects of your pupils



Employee engagement



Impact of government education policy



Financial prospects of your organisation



Very Negative Negative Neutral Positive Very Positive

It is interesting to note that compared to our last survey there is a notable improvement in reported employee engagement with 47% of respondents positive compared to 12 months ago (39% last term).

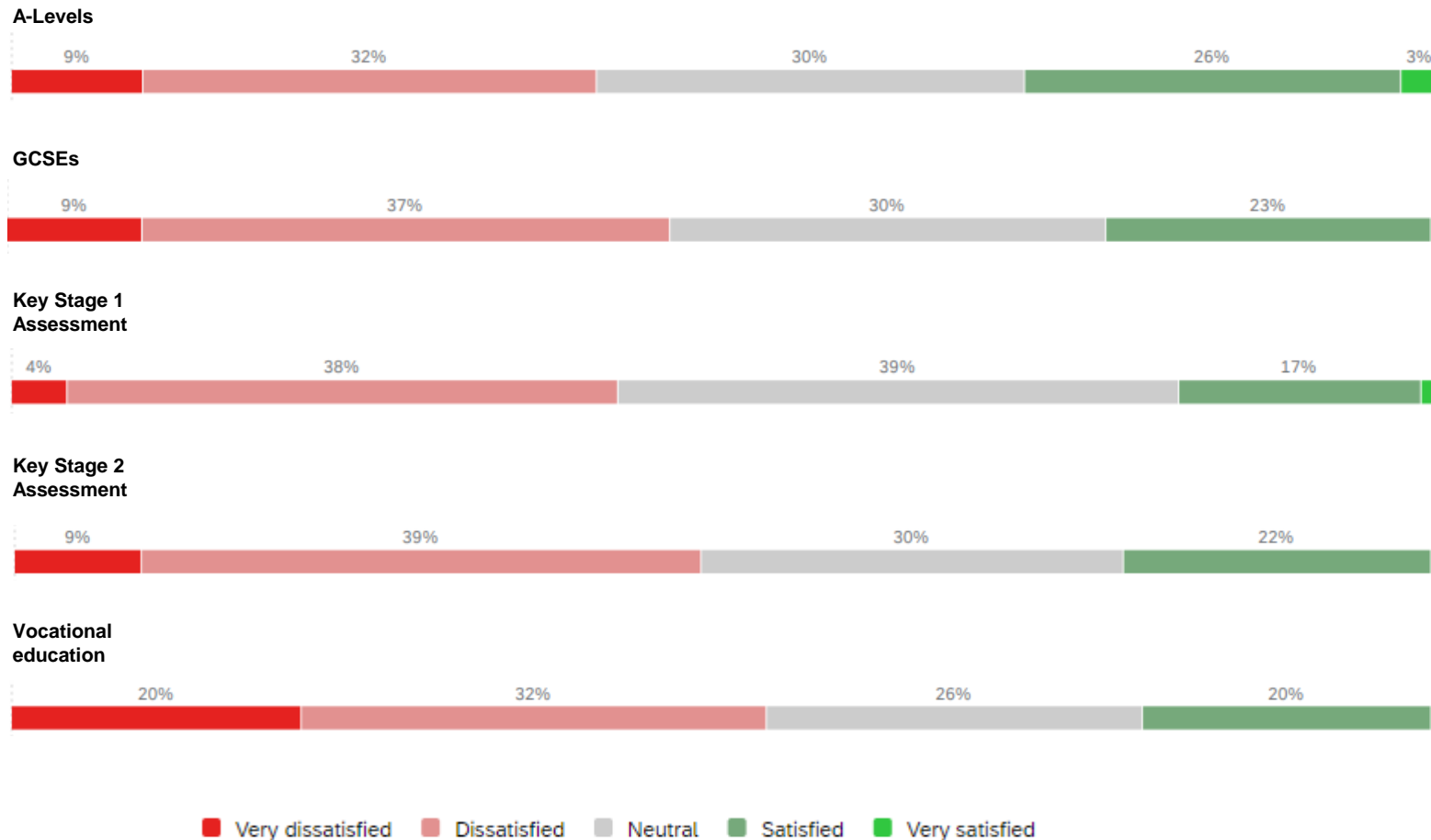
Perhaps unsurprisingly, the pressures created by the financial environment are still being keenly felt by trusts, with 63% of respondents feeling negative about their financial prospects compared to a year ago.

With a general election looming, persisting dissatisfaction with government education policy (62% of school leaders feeling negative) is both an opportunity and a threat to the parties.

Despite the challenging operating environment trusts are facing, on one hand it is encouraging to see over half of leaders (56%) positive about the educational prospects of their pupils. However, 15% of respondents felt that the educational prospects of their pupils were worse now than they were 12 months ago.

Assessment

How satisfied are you with current government policy regarding assessment?



Assessment in education will always divide opinion but school leaders clearly have concerns across all forms of assessment.

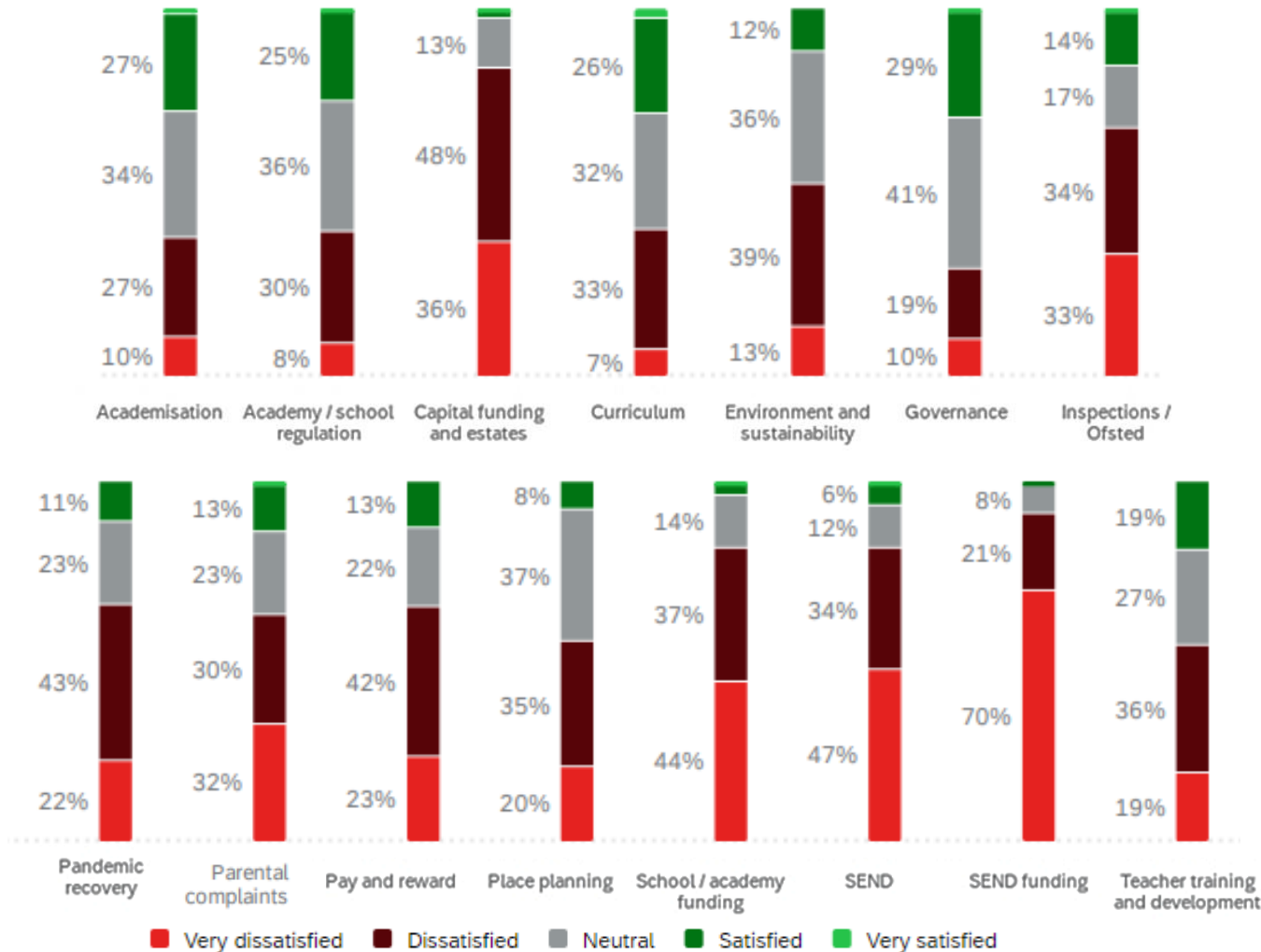
That said, it is clear that when it comes to assessment, SATs and vocational education are causes for real concern.

Almost half (48%) the leaders surveyed are dissatisfied with Key Stage 2 Assessment, with nearly one in ten (9%) very dissatisfied.

The picture is similar when it comes to vocational education, with over half of respondents (52%) dissatisfied and one in five (20%) very dissatisfied.

Policy satisfaction

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



The expression ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’ seems apt here. There is widespread dissatisfaction with government policy across the board.

With a general election on the horizon this chart gives a good indication of the sector’s concerns and priorities. Dissatisfaction remains highest with SEND funding with 91% of respondents dissatisfied with government policy in this area (70% very dissatisfied).

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the recent furore surrounding [RAAC](#), there is significant dissatisfaction (84%) with government policy on capital funding and the school estate.

The other area where dissatisfaction is very high (over 80%) is school and academy funding with 81% dissatisfied (more than half being very dissatisfied).

Capital funding and estates

“These results reflect widespread concerns regarding the deteriorating condition of school buildings. It’s clear that RAAC is not an isolated issue, but rather just part of a bigger picture of underinvestment in school estates.

This issue is not going away any time soon. Significant spending is needed to avoid putting pupils, their learning and school staff at risk.

Until that investment comes, leaders should take a proactive approach to monitoring the condition of their sites.”

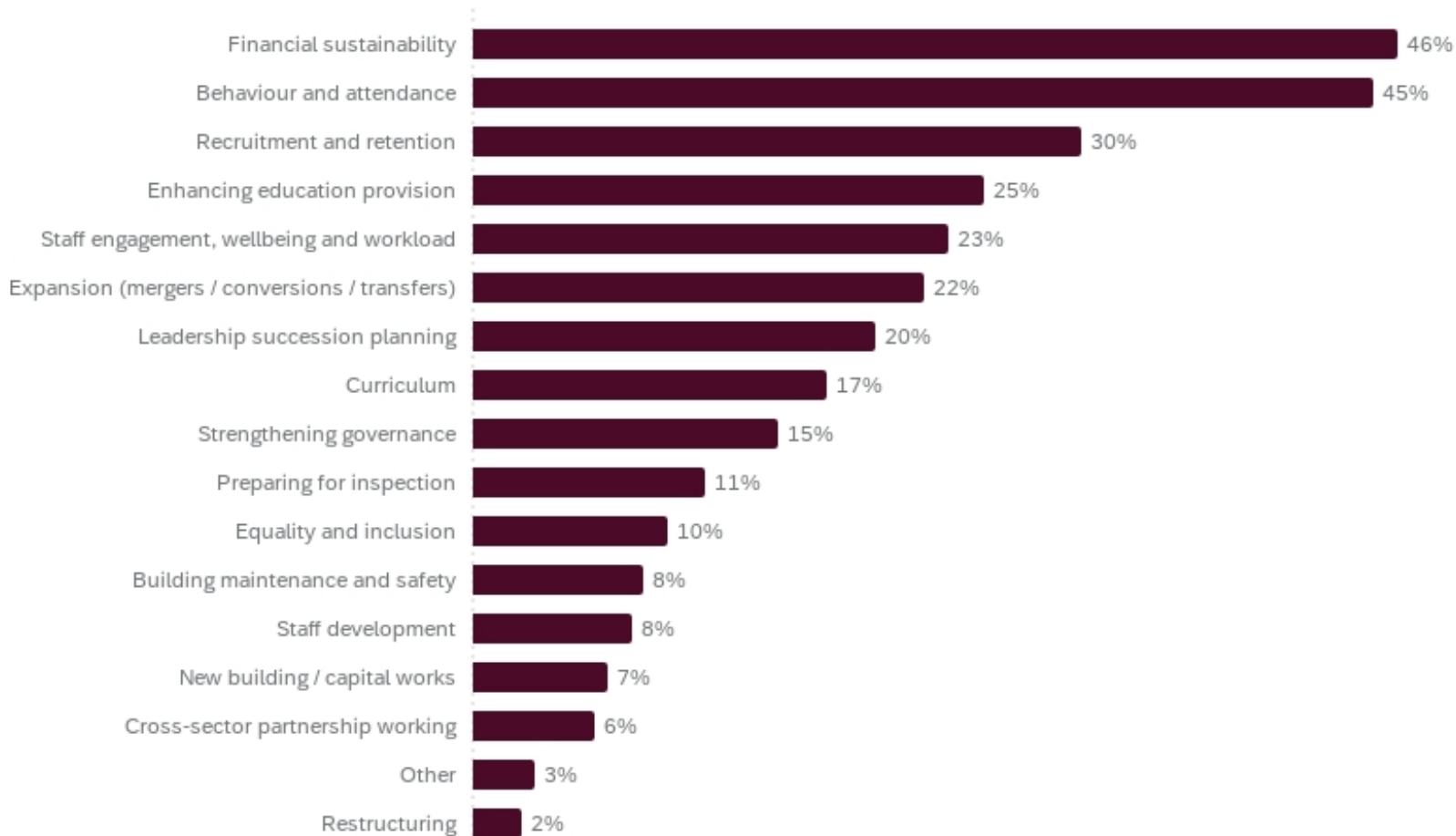
Peter Jackson, Senior Associate.

02

A question of priority ...

Top operational strategies

The top operational strategies organisations will focus on in the next 12 months



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

You get a clear sense of where leaders feel they need to be focusing with two clear top operational strategies - financial sustainability and behaviour.

Three of the top ten strategies are focused directly on pupils with four on people (recruitment and retention, staff wellbeing, succession planning, and strengthening governance).

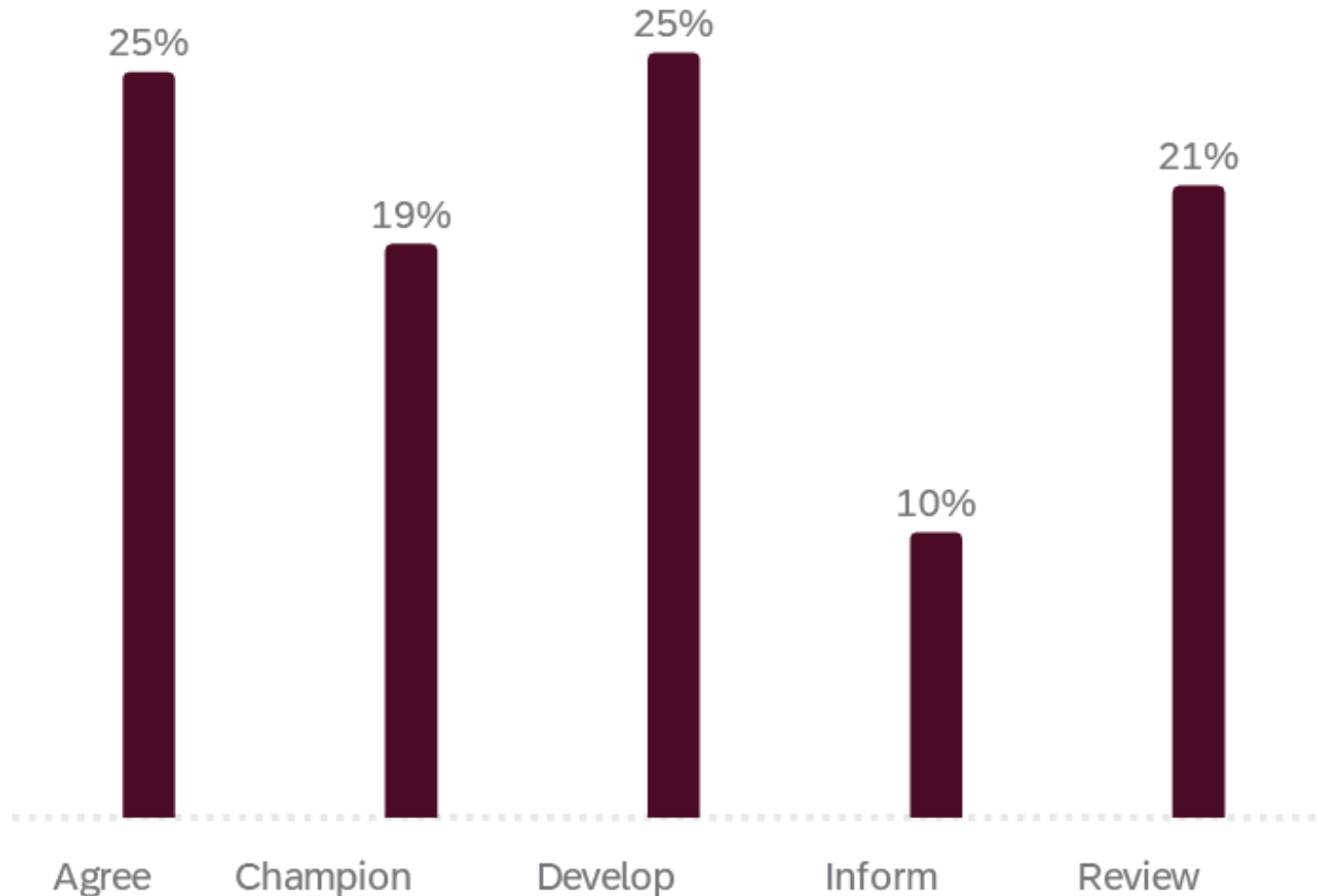
It is interesting to note in light of the high levels of dissatisfaction with capital funding that new building/capital works is a top operational strategy for just 7% of leaders.

03

Decision-making and expertise

Strategic vision

What is your Governing Board's primary role in setting the organisation's strategic vision?



We were keen to explore decision-making in the governance arena.

The findings on the governing body's primary role in setting the strategic vision is fascinating and shows, depending in your viewpoint, confusion or healthy debate as to their role.

Overall leaders reported high levels of satisfaction with the information they receive from within the organisation to perform their role effectively with **46%** extremely satisfied.

On the whole, leaders felt there was an appropriate level of challenge in governance/executive meetings with **50%** of respondents reporting that the level of challenge was always appropriate. Whilst on the face of it this is encouraging is this too high for those Boards that are looking to find that "sweet spot" of getting into the 'zone of uncomfortable' debate on the most important issues to be decided?

Setting the strategy

“Reflecting on the varied responses to the primary role of the Board in setting the strategic vision, it does beg an important question. How are we holding the CEO to account on the organisation’s progress towards achieving its strategic vision and goals, if as a board we are not side-by-side (or co-creating them) with the executive?”

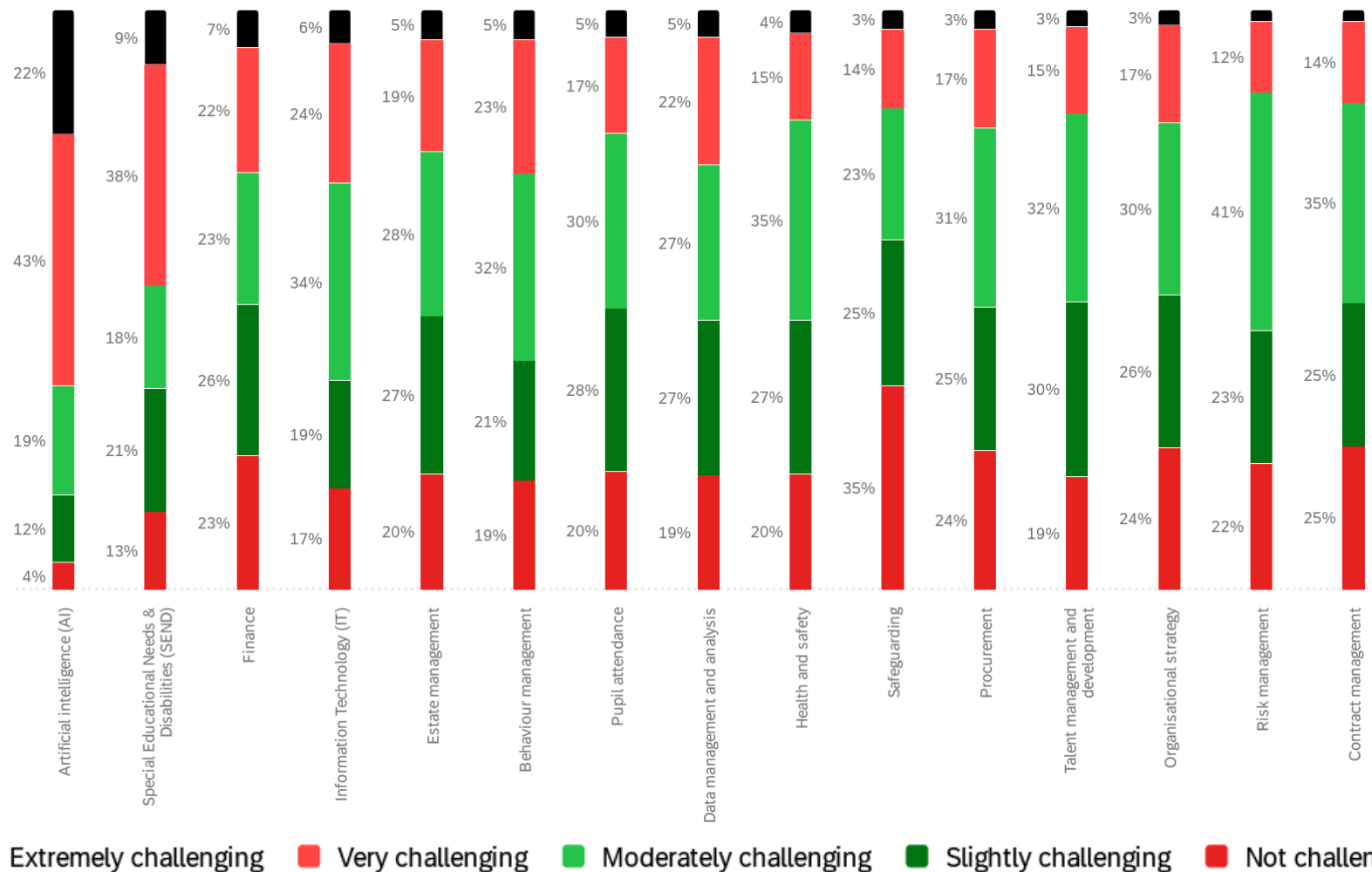
Truly utilising governance in strategy is to welcome the ‘outside-in’ viewpoint that trustees and governors bring in order to prevent what could be an ‘inside-out’ and narrower approach to strategic planning and vision setting.

It also means when difficult decisions are required, the board are more likely to be in-tune with the strategy and even under pressure make consistent decisions that align with the plan jointly set.”

Emma Hughes, Partner

Recruitment

How hard is it to recruit individuals with sufficient expertise to the following areas?



Recruitment across all roles within the sector is clearly hard.

Delving deeper, in response to a question on the level of expertise in the organisation, 85% of respondents have sufficient expertise in talent management. Although encouraging, this does not, on the face of it, align with the data presented here. A key measure of success within any talent management team is success in recruiting hard to fill posts and this raises the question on how we measure the success and skills of key functions.

The sector shows a clear awareness that Artificial Intelligence (AI) has not quite found its place in our sector yet, with 82% of respondents reporting they have less than sufficient expertise internally. With an open market of AI tools online, all generations of internet users are learning as we go; leaders should be encouraged to partner with industry and other sectors to embed AI into its practices sooner rather than later.

Recruitment challenges

“As the sector continues to face recruitment and retention challenges, are leaders at risk of creating their own fixed mindset or narrative? Recruitment is hard, therefore all roles are hard to fill.

Let it not become a self-fulfilling prophecy and instead seek to engage with your staff, invest in data driven employee engagement products and continue to evolve and learn.”

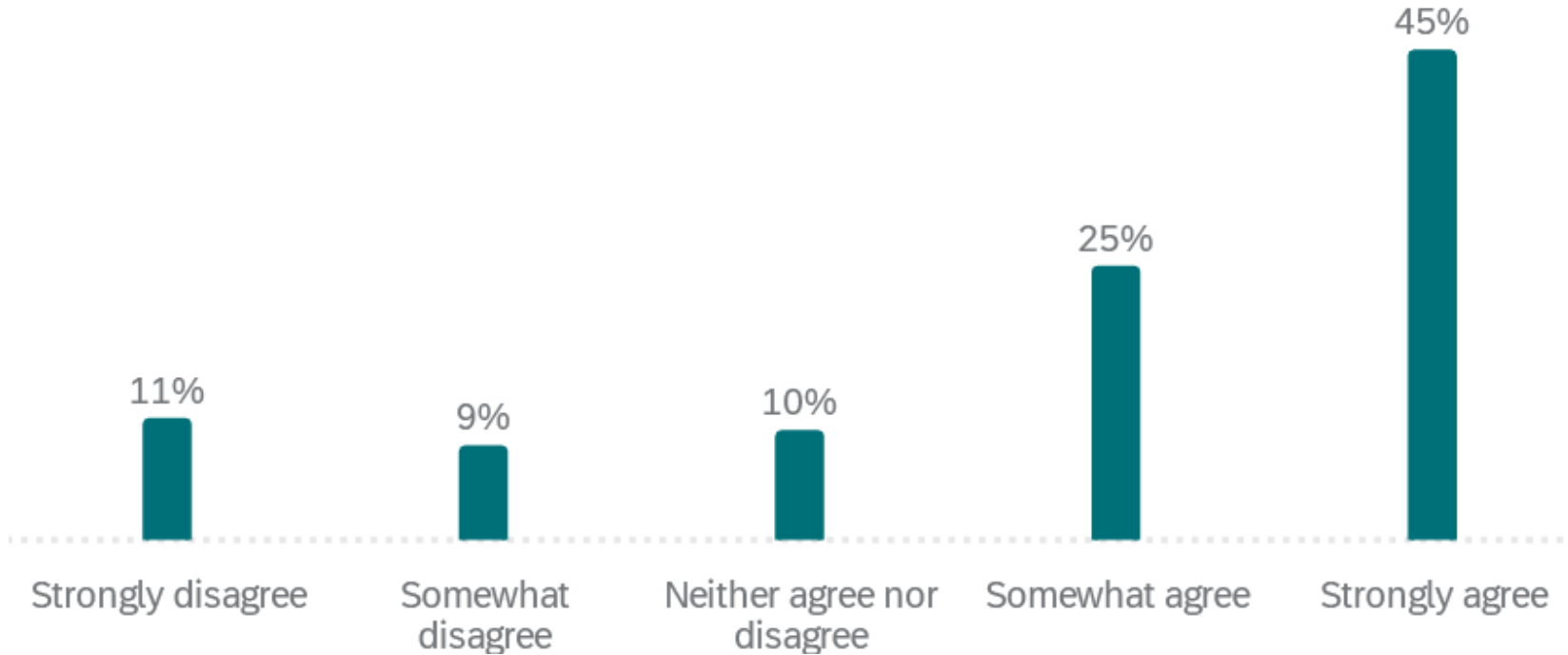
Hannah Bingham, Senior HR Consultant

04

Ofsted and school inspections

Inspection

Do single word overall judgements equate to simplicity at the cost of fairness?

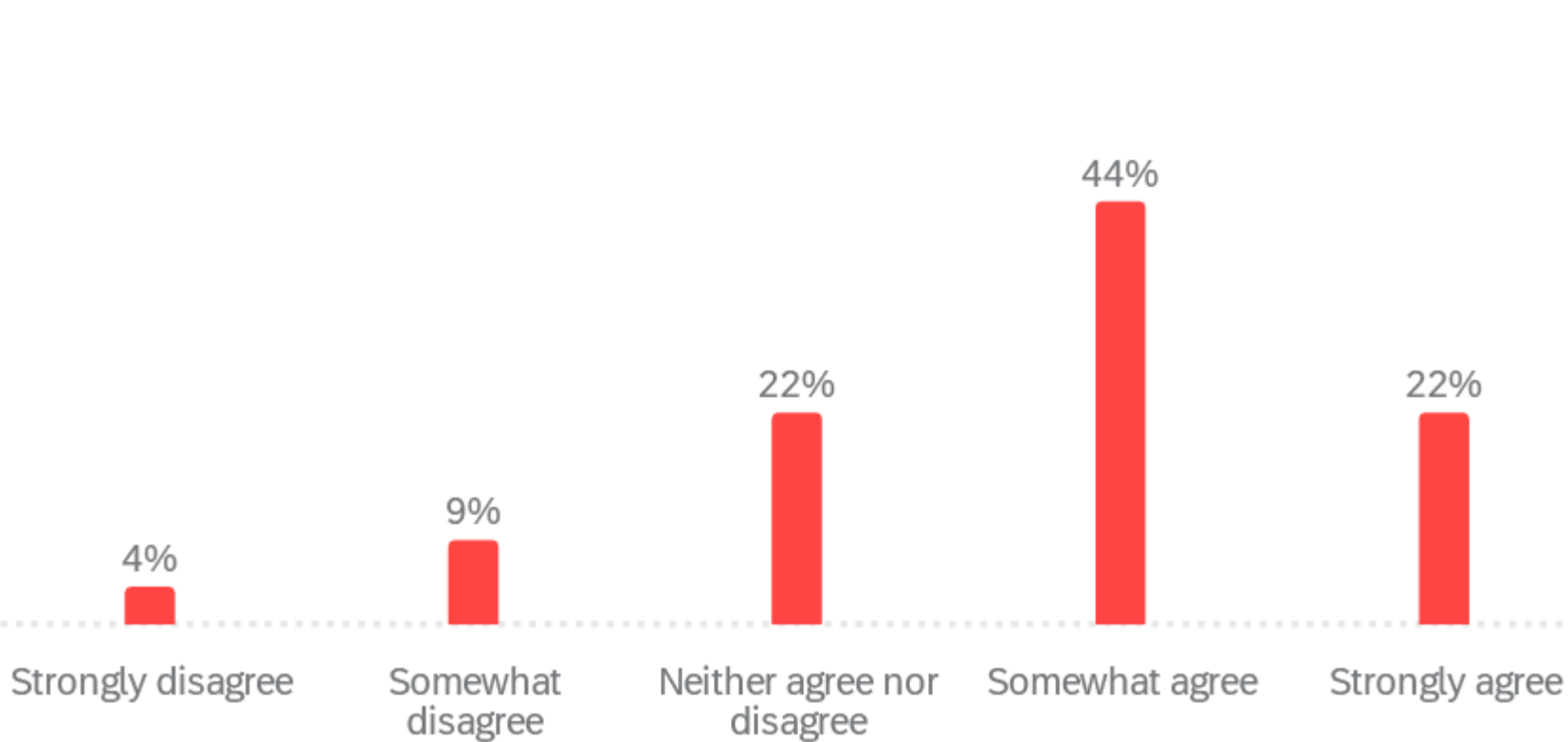


There is a clear strength of feeling that a single overall inspection grade does schools a disservice. The impact of individual judgements being, as one leader responded "unduly weighted", is particularly contentious and perhaps supports the fact that 62% of respondents also considered that safeguarding (a limiting judgement) should be inspected separately and more frequently.

The results also highlight the stress invoked by this "label culture" with 38% of respondents considering that the removal of single word overall judgements would have the most impact in making inspection less stressful. An interesting side-thought perhaps to the findings around recruitment is also drawn from this survey.

Inspection

Would a "report card" system provide parents with a better understanding of school performance?



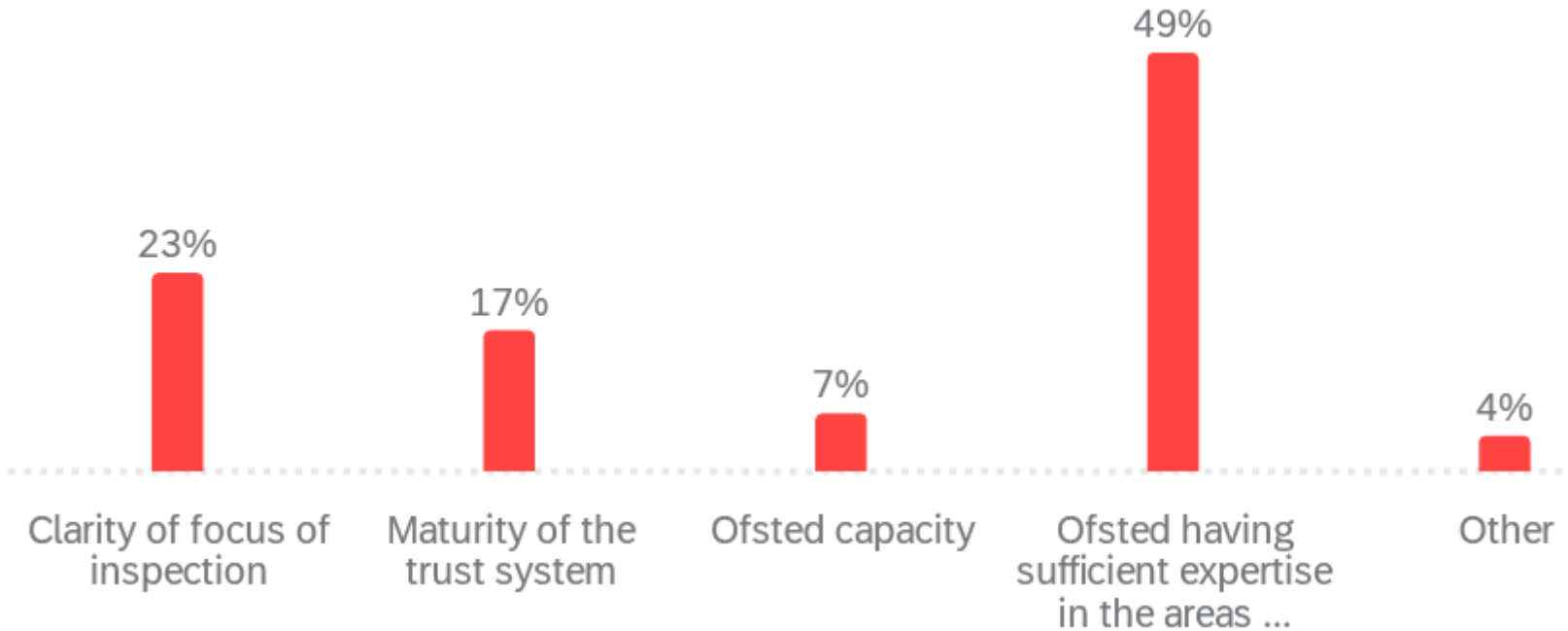
At present we don't know a huge amount about Labour's education policy but their proposal to introduce a report card to replace the current grading system has caught the sector's attention. A clear majority of leaders think this approach would better serve parents, presumably by allowing them to see beyond the distraction of the glaring overall effectiveness grade.

A report card system would also operate as a more effective school improvement tool compared to the current grading system, according to 59% of respondents, while only 17% disagreed.

The present regime, according to one leader, "is not conducive to school improvement". This potentially prompts a further question: should Ofsted have a school improvement function?

Inspection

What is the main obstacle that would need to be resolved to facilitate multi-academy trusts (MATs) being inspected in their own right?



The concept of MAT inspection continues to be discussed, with many commentators within the sector believing that its introduction is a case of "when not if". For our respondents, there was a definite frontrunner in terms of barriers to its inception, although the insufficient expertise 49% selected is linked, at least in part, to some of the other possible answers.

Real clarity about the purpose of inspections for MATs will also be important to address if MAT inspections are to become a reality as 23% cited clarity here as the main obstacle.

Grumbles around Ofsted's understanding of MATs are not new. The inspectorate appears to be working to iron out issues which have featured at school-level inspection in recent years, for example inconsistency in trust involvement. Ofsted's experiences, albeit quite limited, of MAT summary evaluations hopefully would embed a deeper appreciation, particularly of the differences between MATs.

Ofsted and school inspection

“The last 12 months of headlines around inspection have cut deep. There have been recent adjustments to the inspection system but most leaders still appear to support more meaningful change.

Debate around the specifics of the current grading system has been cracked open by the turmoil, but it too has prompted bigger questions, for example, about what Ofsted’s role should be, the purpose of the written inspection report and the relationship between Ofsted grades and formal intervention.

With a new chief inspector and a general election, the next calendar year should bring opportunities for some answers.”

Katie Michelin, Partner.

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Media enquiries

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



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