

School Leaders Survey findings

Summer 2026

Browne Jacobson

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Introduction

Welcome to this report on the findings from our Summer 2026 School Leaders Survey

Research for the survey, where we invited the leaders of the nation's schools and academies to share their views, was carried out during March 2026.

Leaders representing more than 1,000 schools completed the survey – responsible for over half a million pupils from across all regions of England.

These results reflect a balanced distribution of age groups with participants involved with institutions that cover a range of phases:

- 33% of participants representing infant, junior and primary.
- 26% secondary and sixth form.
- 42% all-through / mixed phases.

Of those school and trust leaders responding:

- 20% are CEOs and Deputy CEOs.
- 11% are Trustees or Governors.
- 30% are Executive Headteachers, Headteachers, Deputy Headteachers and Assistant Heads.

Responses for the remaining 39% included central exec team members, business managers/partners, CFOs and Directors of HR, IT and Operations.

Of respondents working in the sector, 57% are in a multi-academy trust, 19% in standalone academies and 24% in maintained schools.

As always, we're very grateful to all the school leaders who gave their time generously to participate.

Foreword
Navigating a changing sector

School leaders are well practised at navigating change. Whether it's changes in government policy, technology or society – our leaders are experienced in handling whatever is thrown at them.

Right now, however, it feels like we're moving into a period of transition where all the levers are being pulled at the same time, perhaps without a full appreciation of what the cumulative effect might be.

Our latest School Leaders Survey was carried out hot on the heels of the schools white paper, which sets out a broad set of changes to education policy. The Department for Education envisages a substantial shift in the way our country approaches SEND as well as wanting all schools to be in a high-performing trust.

Against this backdrop, schools are also impacted by changes to how we employ staff through the government's flagship Employment Rights Act, which will be drip-fed across the next two years.

This hits at a time when finances remain unstable, with an overwhelming majority of schools evaluating whether they can afford to retain all their staff.

External factors are also having profound impacts on schools. Demographic trends are leading to falling pupil numbers, which are now affecting school budgets and mean some face closure.

Meanwhile, the increasing prevalence of AI across society has encouraged use of platforms like ChatGPT to supercharge grievances, which for school leaders means a tsunami of parental complaints across schools.

In our survey, we capture leaders' views on this: on government policy, how they feel about the white paper, and the impact of the escalation of complex parental complaints.

In every survey, we ask about employee engagement. This time, we have seen a significant jump in leaders reporting that they judge employee engagement to be negative, compared to just nine months ago. Is it any wonder, in this context?

It's often said that good culture is hard won and easily lost. It will not be lost on leaders that it's not just the change to be navigated – it's the impact on their staff for which we can't lose sight.



Heather Mitchell
Partner

+44 (0)207 871 8511
heather.mitchell
@brownejacobson.com

Heather, employment partner, has dedicated her almost 20-year career to advising schools and academies.

Her areas of expertise include high profile employment matters, large scale restructures, managing industrial action and advising Trust Boards on senior exits.

Trends emerging from this edition

Key themes

Policy and finances

When asked how leaders feel about government policy, we're seeing a slight shift in the tide. There are **tentative signs of improvement in leaders' views of government policy** – satisfaction has risen to 20%, up from just 9% last summer. Yet financial instability remains the defining backdrop, with 80% of leaders dissatisfied with school funding and 86% dissatisfied with SEND funding.

Day-to-day finances have eased a little – those describing their situation as poor has fallen from 40% to 26% – but the longer view is still deeply troubling, with **only 27% expressing any confidence in financial security over the next three years**.

With staffing costs accounting for around 80% of total spend, **reviewing staffing requirements has become the most common response**, cited by 84% of leaders – a pattern that reflects the reality of schools having to make further cuts simply to balance their budgets.

The schools white paper

The white paper represents the government's big vision for education, which has not until now been clearly communicated to the sector. The largest element of this vision is **SEND reform** and our survey shows there is significant concern specifically on the level of funding the government has put forward to implement its proposals, with more than **two-thirds (68%) saying the funding announced would not be enough**.

There are still elements of SEND reform that are not yet clear and plenty of time for further funding to be announced but, given the importance of schools to these reforms, their buy-in is critical.

The vast majority of respondents (94%) believe the government will need to make some changes if the vision for a sector where **all schools are members of a trust is to be achieved**. Cost of the process was the third highest barrier raised, pointing to a need for government to consider grants if they are to encourage all schools, but especially smaller schools, to convert.

AI impact on complaints

The emergence of AI-generated and AI-enhanced complaints represents a sharp new dimension to an already serious crisis in schools, with survey data showing that **the majority (90%) of school leaders have observed an increase** in complaints that appear to be AI-generated or AI-enhanced.

Against this backdrop, **90% of school leaders report that parents are escalating complaints quicker** than two years ago, with many doing so immediately and without any attempt at informal resolution. 46% of leaders say complaint volumes are approaching or have already **reached breaking point**.

The white paper's explicit naming of vexatious complaints is a welcome step, and one the sector has long called for. Encouragingly, **clearer guidance on handling vexatious complaints** is the white paper measure attracting the strongest support from leaders, with over two-thirds agreeing it is needed.

Key findings

54%

More than half have some, or serious, concerns about the proposed SEND reforms.

90%

Say parents are escalating complaints more quickly than two years ago — many immediately, with no attempt at informal resolution whatsoever.

46%

Almost half of school leaders are dissatisfied with the impact of government education policy on their organisation.

71%

Judge the financial prospects of their organisation negatively.

75%

Three-quarters feel there would be a significant increase in workload as a result of the SEND reforms.

46%

Say complaint volumes are approaching or have already reached breaking point.

55%

Over half expressed dissatisfaction with government policy regarding place planning.

76%

Believe the government's vision for every school to be part of a trust is achievable, but the majority believe it will require significant changes.

62%

Six in ten feel that being part of a trust will help with better SEND provision.

90%

Have observed an increase in complaints that appear to be AI-generated or AI-enhanced.

68%

Believe that the additional funding announced for SEND reforms is insufficient.

35%

Over a third report negative employee engagement, up from 20% last year.

1. Policy and finances



1. Policy and finances

1.1 The current policy landscape

There are modest signs of improvement in how leaders view the impact of government education policy overall. Satisfaction on this measure has risen to 20%, up from just 9% in Summer 2025, and the proportion rating the overall impact negatively has fallen to 43% – down from 59% recorded under the previous government.

The direction of travel is encouraging, but the baseline remains low: nearly half of all school leaders still view the impact of government policy on their organisation negatively.

However, the picture on finances is harder to read positively. While the proportion describing current finances as poor has eased from 85% to 71% since last summer, most respondents still judge the financial prospects of their organisation negatively.

Looking ahead, only 27% report having any confidence in financial security over the next three years, with maintained school leaders recording notably lower levels of confidence with 56% judging their financial prospects to be 'poor'.

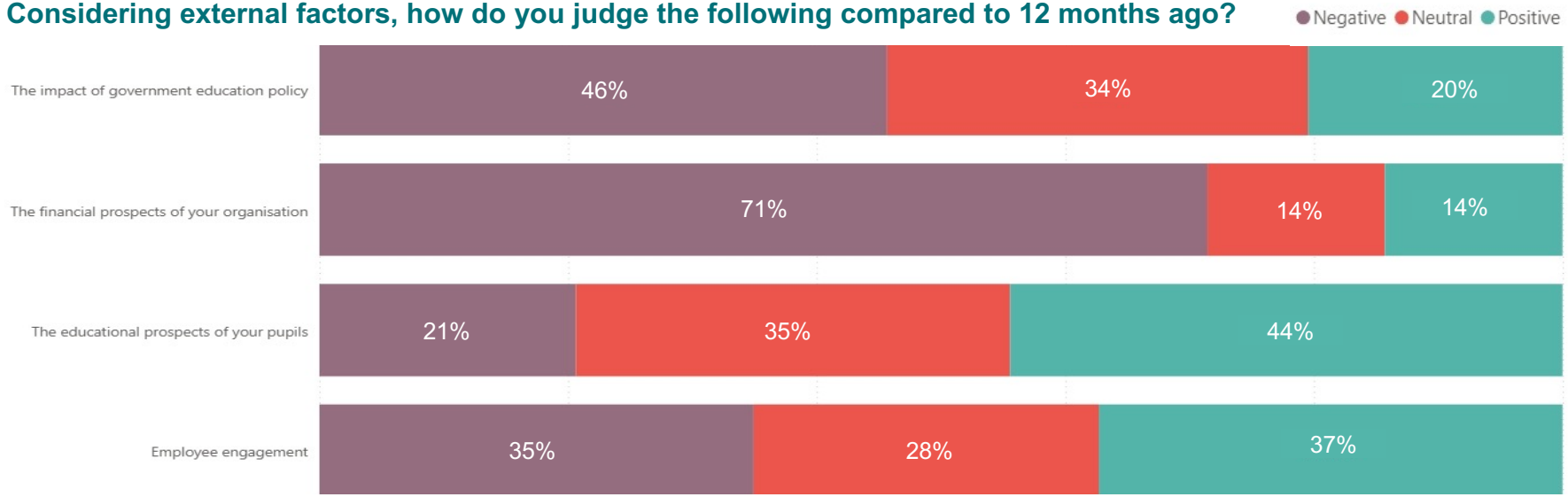
This is in stark contrast to their academy counterparts, of whom 70% felt their financial prospects to be 'manageable' or 'good'.

Set against this backdrop, a significant shift this year is the sharp decline in reported employee engagement, with 35% of leaders now judging it negatively — up from 20% last year. 56% maintained school leaders reported low employee engagement, and none felt it was high, while 19% academy leaders feel their staff are highly engaged with 44%.

How would you describe your organisation's current financial situation?



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



1. Policy and finances
1.2 Satisfaction with government policy

The theme of financial instability continues across the board, where 80% of school leaders are dissatisfied with school funding, rising to 86% for SEND funding.

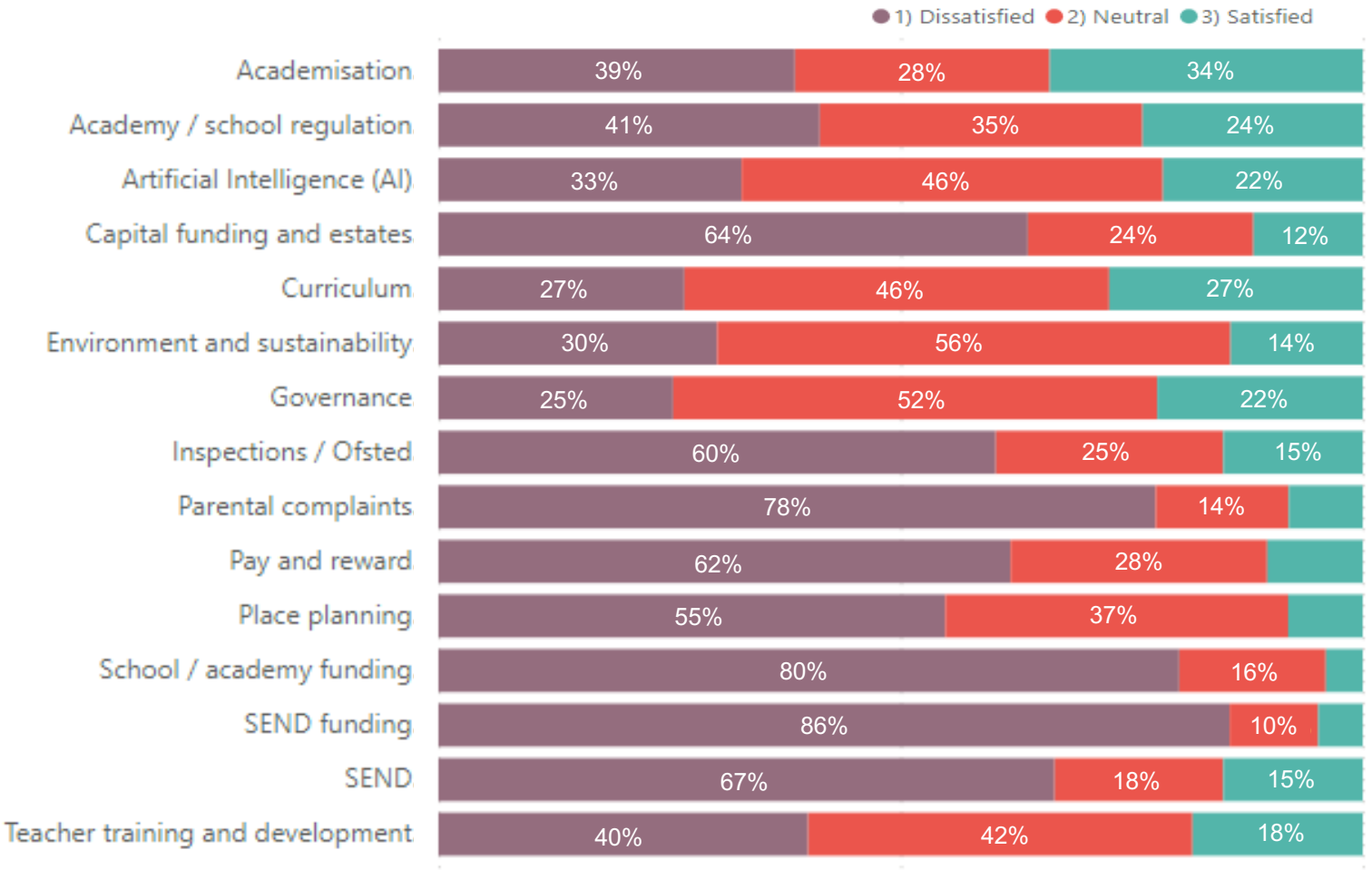
The proposal for all schools to be part of a MAT has started to move the dial for leaders' sense of satisfaction with government policy for academisation, with only 39% dissatisfied, compared to almost half before the white paper was published.

However, the picture is starkly different for leaders working in maintained schools, where three quarters are dissatisfied with the government's policy on academisation.

Concerns around falling pupil numbers are continuing to increase with now over half (55%) expressing dissatisfaction on this issue.

We'll continue to watch how this issue evolves.

How satisfied are you with government policy?



1. Policy and finances
1.3 Schools' financial sustainability

Schools spend a significant proportion of their budget on staffing costs (commonly around 80% or more).

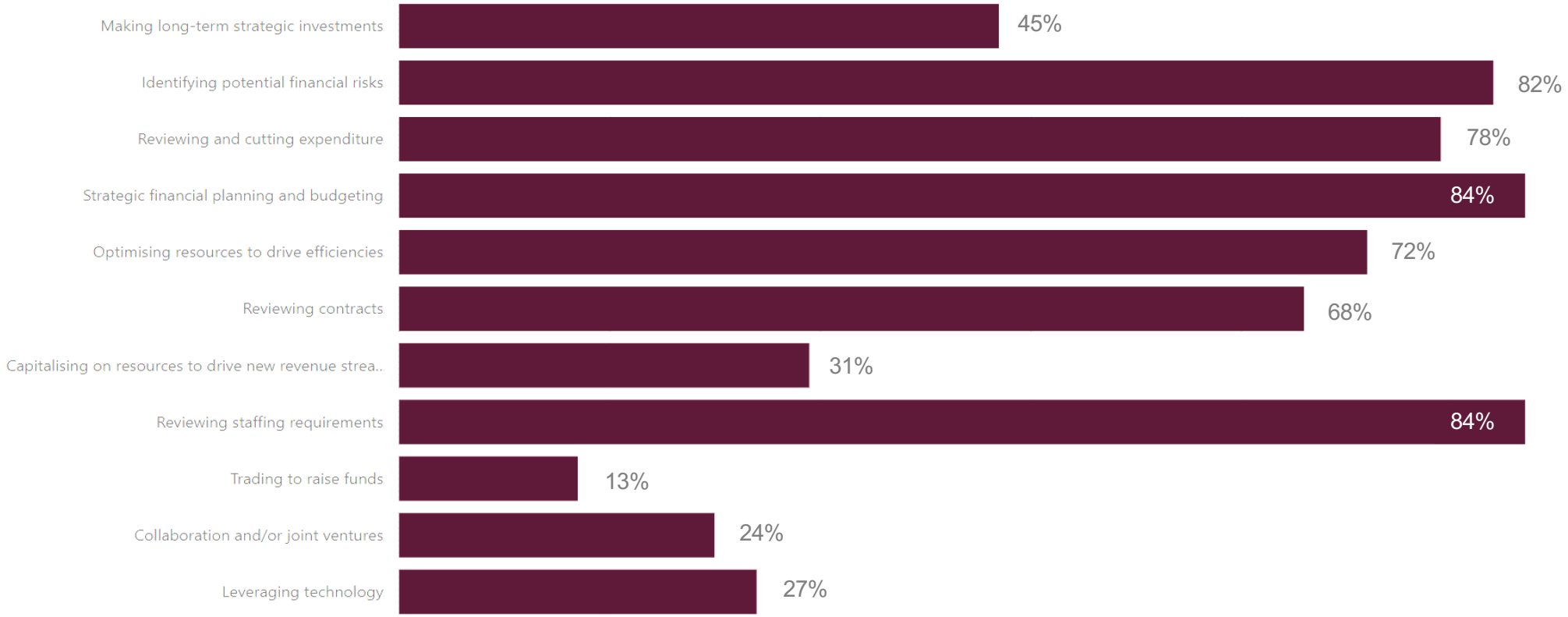
Unsurprisingly, therefore, the most common response (84%) was that schools are looking at reviewing staffing requirements to mitigate financial concerns.

We saw the same picture last year and this maps closely to our own experience of schools who are having to make further cuts to try to balance their budget.

On other measures, only 13% are trading to improve financial sustainability and a quarter are leveraging technology.

We have not seen a significant increase in these figures in recent years over several of these surveys, despite the significant sustained financial pressures reported across the sector.

What measures are you taking to improve your organisation's financial sustainability?



“Staffing restructures have emerged as the leading cost-saving measure identified by survey respondents, reflecting the considerable budgetary pressures facing schools across the sector.

“For those considering this approach, the industrial relations and legal implications of undertaking a restructure are well understood and should not be underestimated.

“We’re seeing unions emboldened under this labour government, in part due to their increased powers under the Employment Rights Act. In this context it’s more important than ever that early thought goes into the detailed planning of restructures and clear engagement with staff is at the forefront of the strategy.”

Jenny Beaumont, Principal Associate



2. The schools white paper



2. The schools white paper
2.1 SEND reform

When asked about the impact of the proposed SEND reforms to workload, important given a general theme is a larger role for schools and trusts, more than three-quarters (76%) believed this would result in a significant increase for schools.

While this might be tempered with sufficient additional funding to hire further staff for handling that workload, 68% said they did not believe the announced funding was enough to bring it to life for their school/trust.

This is not surprising given the per school amounts for the mainstream inclusion fund are not significant, equating to less than half a TA for some primary schools.

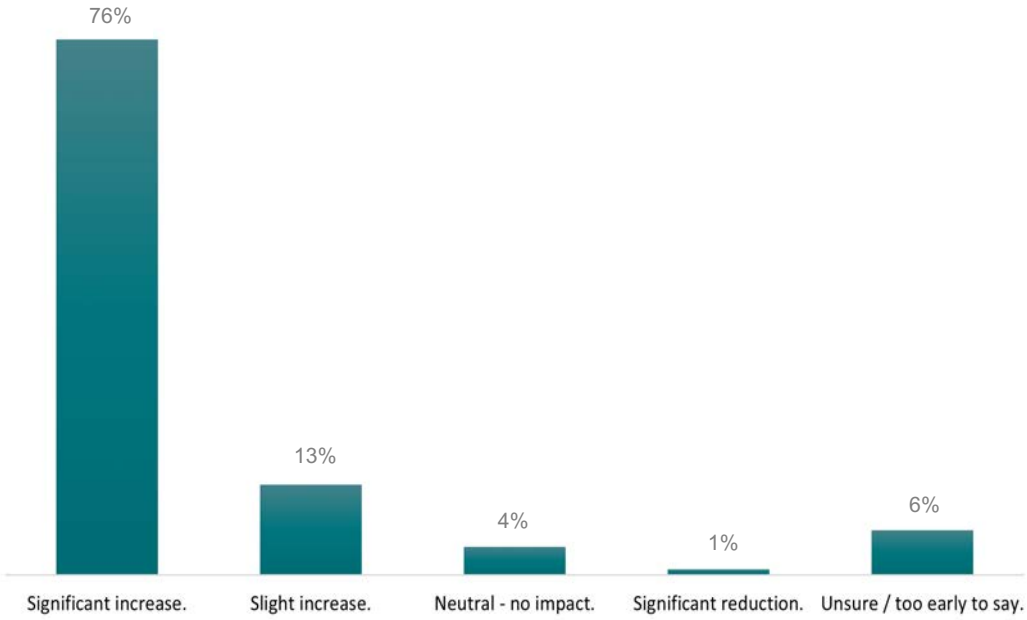
Taken together, there was a mixed picture on the support of those responding to the reforms.

More than half (54%) had at least some concerns with the proposals while 25% were supportive, with a reasonable number of respondents (18%) unsure, likely because the white paper sets out a vision in broad terms, but without the full detail yet for schools to understand how all details will work in practice.

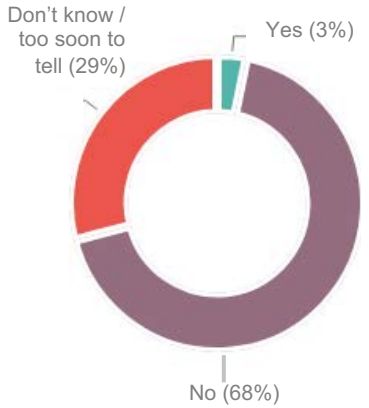
Overall, how do you feel about the proposed reforms to SEND?



What impact do you think the proposed SEND reforms will have on schools in relation to workload?



Will the new SEND funding for be enough to bring the vision of a more inclusive system to reality for your school/trust?



"It is imperative that SEND reforms are supported by significant changes to the curriculum, particularly at KS4.

"It is also very unhelpful that Ofsted has created a definition of inclusion before the sector. Inclusion cannot be weighed by outcomes/data.

"An unfit curriculum and unachievable accountability definitions are driving the opposite agenda. Schools that are truly inclusive are now being penalised.

"Without these fundamental changes, we cannot make the difference we are all desperate to make for the most vulnerable children we serve."

Chief Executive Officer, Yorkshire and Humber



2. The schools white paper
2.2 Trust SEND provision

Leaders overwhelmingly agreed that being part of a trust would help schools offer better SEND provision, with 62% saying it would significantly or somewhat help, only 10% not agreeing and the rest neutral.

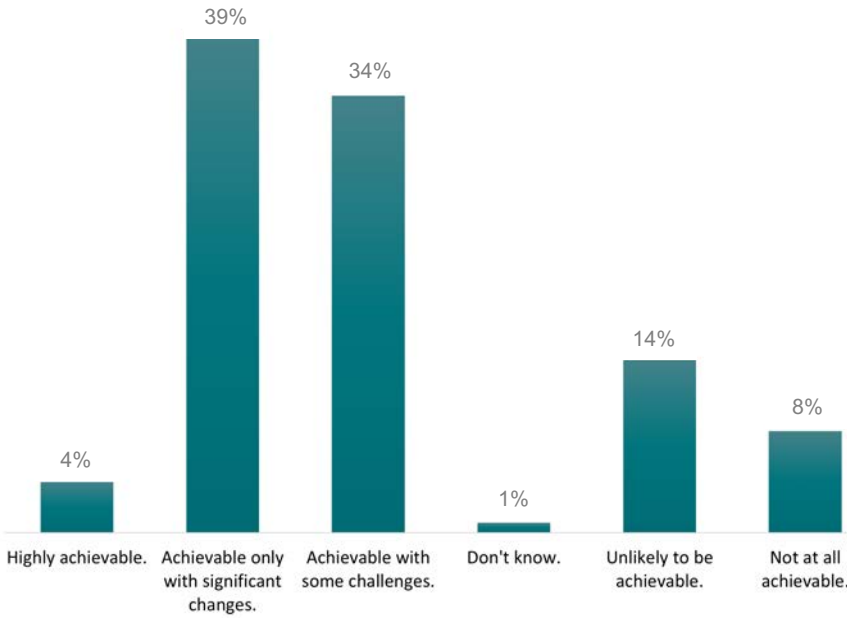
Although, perhaps unsurprisingly, there is less confidence outside of academy leaders with only 25% of maintained participants agreeing that being part of a trust will help offer better SEND provision.

When asked about how achievable the vision for every school to be in a trust was though, only 4% felt that it was highly achievable with most saying it was achievable with some challenges (34%) or achievable only with significant changes (39%).

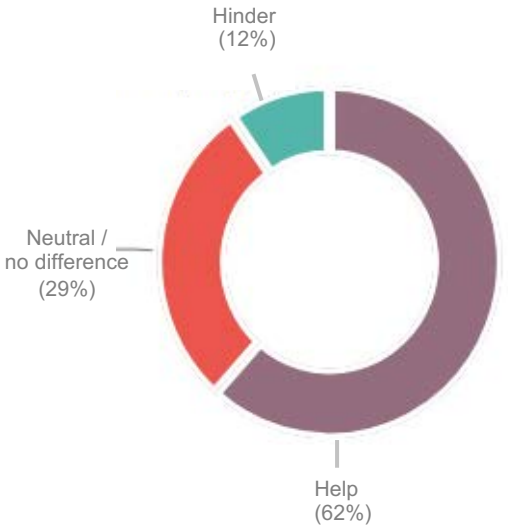
"...biggest issue with SEND is funding is insufficient for EHCP requirements, if maintained schools were truly given the kind of funding a special school placement gets, we would be able to deliver and our budgetary / TA staffing headaches would go away"

School Governor, Yorkshire

How achievable do you think the government's vision is for every school to be part of a trust?



Will being part of a trust help schools to offer better SEND provision?



“SEND is an area that has needed reform for some time, with many reports showing the difficulties for all stakeholders in the system.

“There is real concern among school leaders over workload increases and the lack of sufficient funding to bring the reforms to reality, given schools will play a more prominent role.

“A key aspect of the proposed reform is more pupils educated in mainstream schools and a more inclusive school system. This will require work that school leaders are prepared to do but they need the support from government – principally, sufficient funding – to achieve it.”

Philip Wood, Partner



2. The schools white paper
2.3 Every school to be in a trust

When asked what the main barriers were, the largest was persuading governing boards of maintained schools to relinquish autonomy (62%), with the second being loss of identity in a trust (53%), perhaps reflecting the two sides of the debate from academy and maintained school respondents.

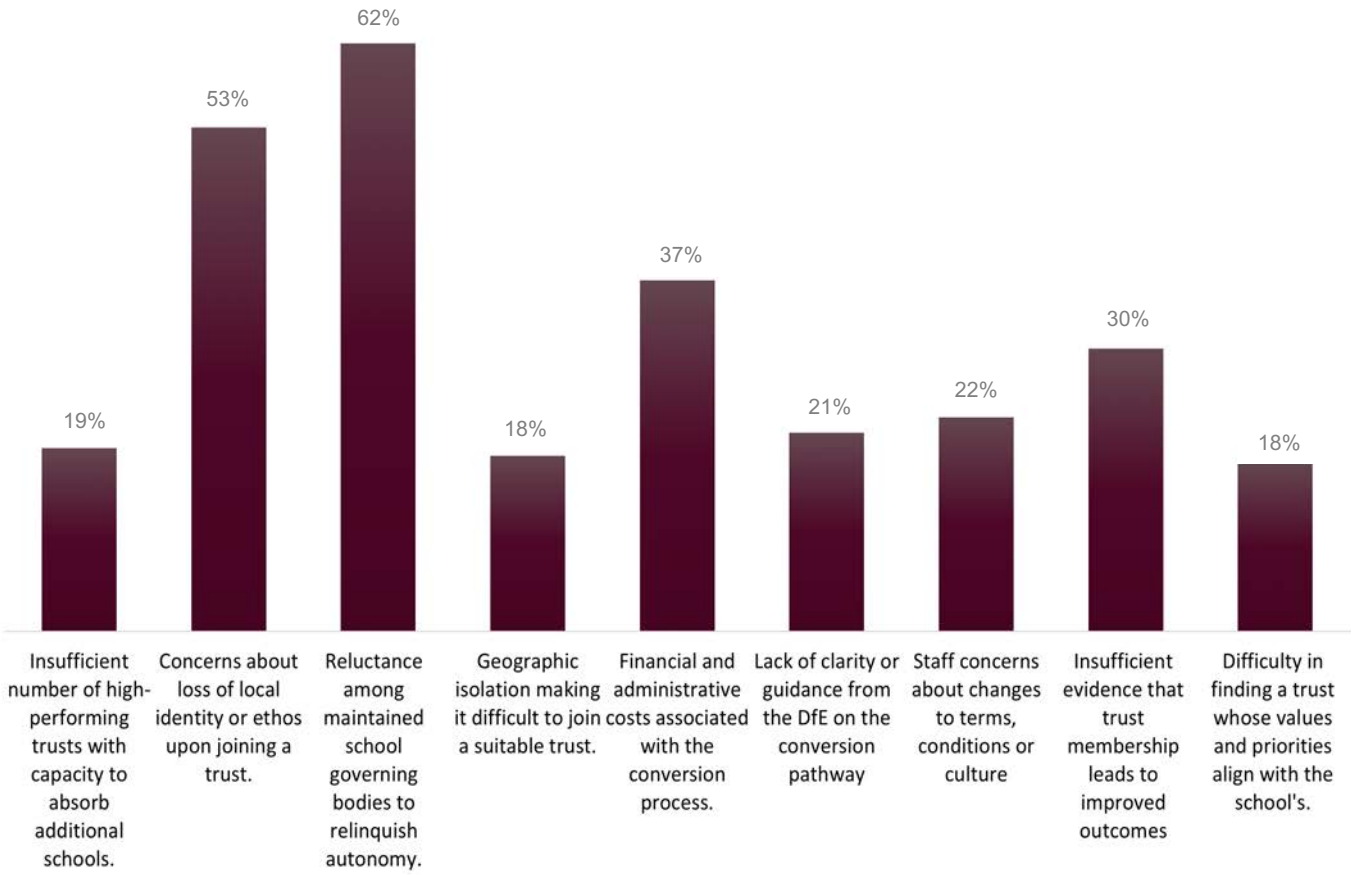
Financial pressures were cited by more than a third (37%) as being a significant barrier.

With there being no prospect of additional funding from the DfE for schools joining a trust, coupled with the concerns for loss of autonomy, it appears the government has some way to go in achieving its goal of all schools being part of a trust.

"Union objections and campaigning remain the primary barrier to achieving universal academy trust membership for schools"

Chief Operating Officer, Yorkshire

What do you consider to be the most significant barriers to achieving this vision?



"School leaders identified significant barriers to conversion to academy status. Chief among these were concerns that joining a school trust could lead to an erosion of a school's ethos, identity and cultural values. Alongside this, there was notable reluctance among maintained school governing bodies to relinquish autonomy.

"These concerns reflect a tension between the potential benefits of trust membership and a desire to preserve local accountability, institutional independence and a clearly defined sense of school identity.

"With the government now sharing a clear direction of travel for all schools to be part of a school trust, there's work for school trusts in overcoming these challenges if they want to grow their organisations."

Lydia Michaelson-Yeates, Partner



3. Complaints and the impact of AI



3. Complaints and the impact of AI
3.1 Trends in parental complaints

Survey data continues to paint a troubling picture: 90% of school leaders say parents are now escalating complaints to formal stages more quickly than two years ago, with less patience for informal resolution.

Just under half are at or approaching breaking point with 7% already saying complaints are unmanageable, 14% are within just a term of that point, and 24% expect to reach their limit within the academic year.

47% currently consider volumes to be manageable but even they fear the trajectory ahead, with only 6% comfortably managing.

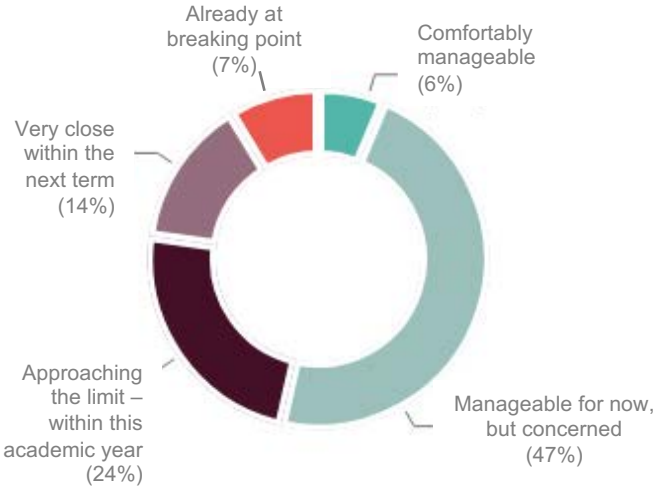
As one leader put it bluntly:

"Complaints are preventing leaders from leading."

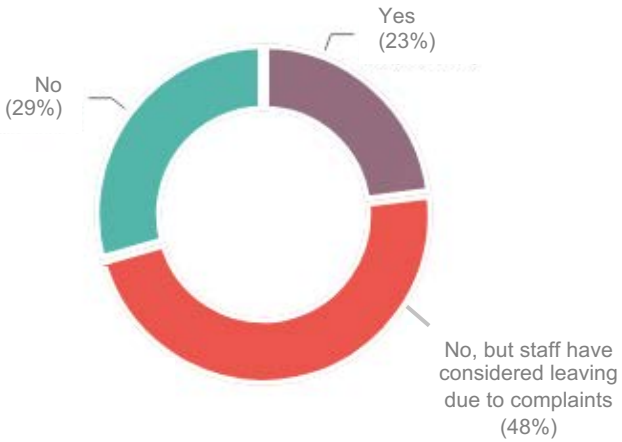
The personal cost is stark. 23% of respondents confirm that staff have left their school or trust in the last 12 months where parental complaints were a contributing factor — and a further 48% report that staff have considered leaving. Of these staff departures, senior leaders and teaching staff were the most affected.

With AI-generated complaints adding new layers of complexity and volume to an already overstretched system, the risk is that this latent intention to leave becomes a wave of departures the sector cannot afford.

How close is your school/trust to the point where the volume or nature of parent complaints becomes unmanageable, with current resources?



In the past 12 months, have any staff left where parental complaints were a contributing factor?



"More education professionals are considering leaving the profession, and the frequency and tone of parental complaints, along with the conduct shown towards staff, is becoming a contributing factor."

Chief Operations Officer, West Midlands.

“The tone of complaints has significantly changed with more aggression, more personal comments and unacceptable comments such as ‘I hope the headteacher is sacked or even better falls off a cliff’.

“And people refusing to engage with the process, e.g. refusing to meet to discuss their complaint, refusing to meet with the school before they escalate their complaint to the trust, complaining to several organisations at the same time (school/trust, Ofsted, DfE, LA, MP, local councillor, SEND tribunal), emailing several times a week. It is very time consuming and mentally draining.”

Trust Governance Professional, South West



3. Complaints and the impact of AI
3.2 The impact of AI on complaints

90% of school leaders have observed an increase in complaints from parents that appear to be AI-generated or AI-enhanced – a sharp new dimension to an already serious crisis.

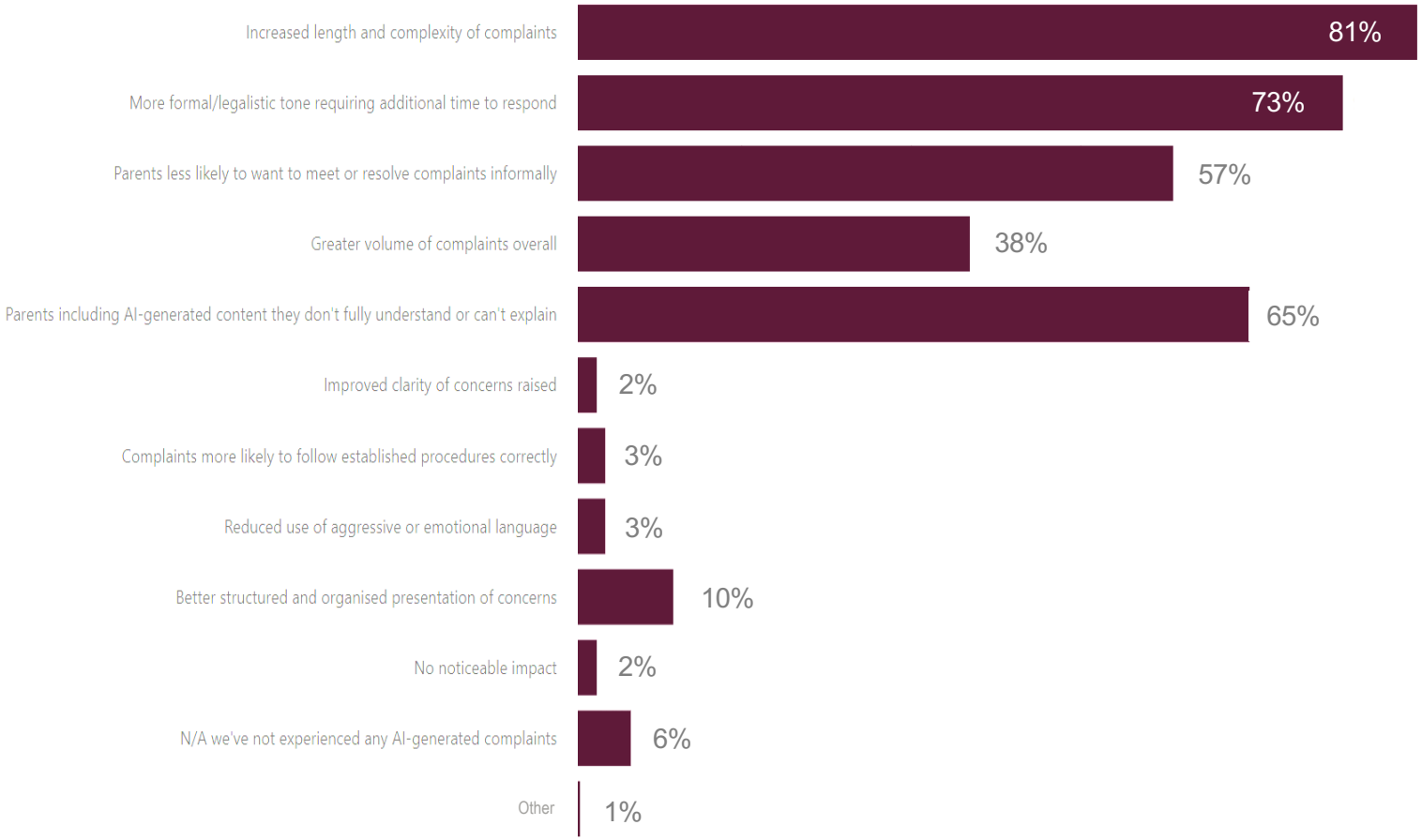
The data makes clear the adverse impact this is having in practice: nearly nine in ten (89%) of those who have experienced AI-generated complaints report increased length and complexity, over four in five (81%) report a more formal or legalistic tone requiring greater professional resource to address, and almost two thirds (63%) report that parents are less likely to want to engage in dialogue once AI has been used to draft their complaint. A further 71% note that parents are including AI-generated legal references or precedents.

The qualitative data brings this to life starkly. One leader described handling “complex unreasonable AI generated complaints" as "the worst part of my job".

Others highlighted the disproportionate burden these complaints place on senior leaders, governors and administrative staff, diverting resource from the education and support of pupils, and raising serious concerns about staff wellbeing and retention.

The training gap compounds the problem. Over half of respondents report that fewer than 10% of their staff have received role-appropriate training in the past 12 months on handling difficult conversations or complaints from parents.

What impact have AI-generated or AI-enhanced complaints had?

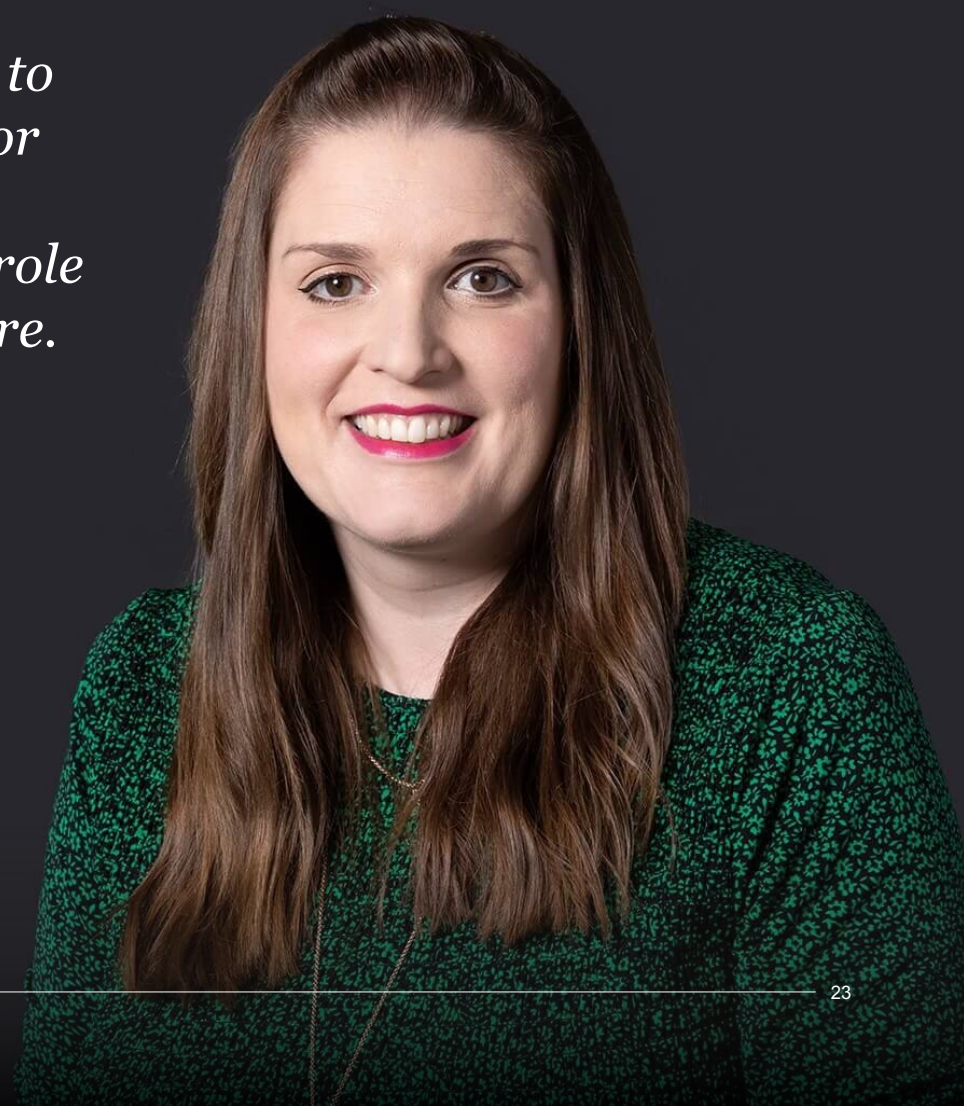


“The fact that 23% of schools have lost staff due to parental complaints is not simply a recruitment and retention issue. It signals a need for schools and trusts to think practically about how they safeguard staff and build a culture where people feel protected, valued and supported when challenged.

“What stands out is that this isn’t just happening to newer or more junior staff. With 40% being senior leaders and 43% teaching staff, it’s clear that the issue runs deep. Nobody in school, regardless of role or experience, is truly protected from this pressure.

“The decline in employee engagement, with 35% of staff now rating it negatively (up from 20% last year) is unlikely to be a coincidence. Schools should take a proactive approach to staff wellbeing, including meaningful investment in training and support."

Esme Dickinson, HR Consultant



3. Complaints and the impact of AI
3.3 White paper proposals

The white paper's explicit acknowledgement of vexatious complaints is now needed more than ever. Clearer guidance on handling vexatious complaints is the measure attracting the strongest backing from leaders, with 68% agreeing it is needed.

New mutual expectations with clear resolution timeframes attract agreement from 45% of leaders, though 24% remain neutral – a sign that the detail of implementation will matter as much as the principle.

Updated guidance to help parents understand the process is supported by 47%, though 29% don't believe this will be effective in practice.

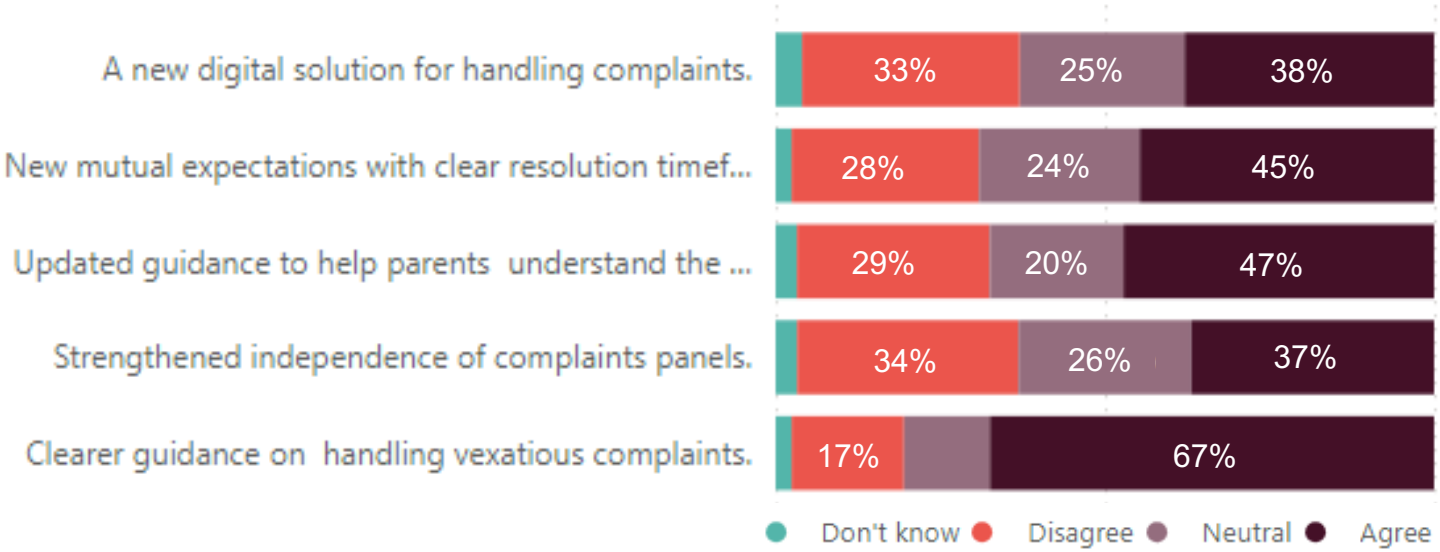
Beyond what is proposed, 72% of leaders call for a statutory definition of vexatious complaints – the single most demanded additional reform. A mandatory sequencing requirement, preventing parents from bypassing informal stages, is called for by 58%. Statutory home-school agreements are supported by 43%.

As one respondent put it:

"Without reform, the current system risks allowing a small number of individuals to consume disproportionate time, energy, and public resources, ultimately reducing the capacity of schools to focus on what matters most: educating children."

Warm words must now be matched by mechanisms with genuine force.

To what extent do you agree that the reforms proposed in the white paper reforms will effectively address the challenges your school/trust faces?



"The guidance released so far will do nothing to resolve the crisis of complaints. It assumes all parties want an amicable outcome. For a sizable minority of parents, they have no interest in a resolution".

Director, East Midlands

“The volume and complexity of parental complaints has reached a point where it is genuinely impeding school leadership. What we see in practice is that vexatious or misused AI-enhanced complaints do not just consume time – they erode confidence, affect staff wellbeing, and draw governors and senior leaders away from the work that matters most.

“The white paper creates an opportunity, but opportunity alone is not enough. Schools need clear, enforceable mechanisms that allow them to draw a line under complaints that have run their course, and to protect staff from conduct that would not be tolerated in any other professional context.”

Victora Hatton, 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.



Dan Robinson
PR and Communications Manager

+44 (0)330 045 1072
dan.robinson@brownejacobson.com

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Top tier law firm

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Leading employer in the Social Mobility Index 2026 and top ranked law firm for five consecutive years.

Next steps

Let us know if there are any topics you'd like us to explore in the next edition and please do take the opportunity to share your views for future editions of the School Leaders Survey. Register here to be among the first to hear about future surveys.

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+44 (0)330 045 2338
heather.mitchell@brownejacobson.com

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