Department for Education

Evaluation of the School Leader Mental Health and Wellbeing Service

Research report

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Executive summary

This is the final report of the School Leader Mental Health and Wellbeing (MHWB) Service evaluation, undertaken between October 2022 and May 2023 by a team of researchers from York Consulting LLP.

About the service and evaluation

The School Leader MHWB Service was commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) as part of its COVID-19 recovery plan for the education sector. The charity Education Support was commissioned to deliver the Service. It included a pilot delivered between June 2020 and March 2021, a bridging service between April and August 2021, and the main Service from November 2021. It is this main Service that is the focus of this report.

The Service had the following objectives:

- To help prevent the onset of mental health difficulties, by taking action to support the wellbeing of school leaders in England.

- To support school leaders experiencing mental health difficulties.

- To increase the evidence base on professional supervision and wellbeing support for school leaders and learn lessons to inform future policy and interventions.

Two types of support were offered through the Service:

- **Peer support** provided school leaders with an opportunity to discuss the challenges they face with a group of other leaders in similar roles, while being supported by a trained facilitator.

- **Supervision** provided an opportunity for school leaders to have one-to-one, confidential conversations about the work they do and how the challenges they face impact them as professionals.

Supervision was provided both by Education Support freelance associates and by a subcontractor, Workplace Options (WPO). The Service was therefore delivered across three strands: peer support, Education Support supervision, and WPO supervision. Participants received 6 sessions of support, either online or over the telephone.

The evaluation aimed to assess the effectiveness of the programme's delivery and self-reported outcomes of the Service. Key aspects of the methodology involved a review of programme documents, analysis of programme data (including pre- and post- participant surveys), and qualitative interviews with delivery staff, sector stakeholders, and school leaders engaged with the Service.

School leader engagement

Up to the end of April 2023, 1,221 eligible applications were received to the Service, comprising 341 applications for peer support and 880 for supervision. Across all eligible applications, 26% (313) were actively engaged with the support, 26% (314) had received the full support offer (i.e., completed a sixth session) and 102 (8%) had received a partial service (i.e., stopped engaging before their sixth session). In addition, 22% (264) were awaiting contact about their first session or had been placed on a waiting list, and 19% (228) did not start the support after being offered (or contacted about scheduling) a first session.

Applicants were mostly representative of school leaders in England, with a slight overrepresentation of headteachers and female school leaders.

Most school leaders reported applying to the Service because they were struggling in their role, and/or feeling exhausted, stressed, overwhelmed, and/or isolated. They typically hoped that the support would provide protected time to discuss the challenges they were facing and give them tools and strategies to manage their workload and stress.

A key challenge identified by delivery staff and some participants was the limited time school leaders had in their busy schedules to take part in the Service, or even reply to emails about it. It is likely that this was a contributing factor to the high proportion of participants who did not go on to start the support after being offered a first session (19% or 228). In addition, 8% (102) participated in a first session then disengaged from the support before completing their sixth session. Feedback from a small number of school leaders where this was the case suggested that the reasons for this were varied and not exclusively related to the quality and effectiveness of the Service.

Demand and need for the Service

All stakeholders felt that there was a strong need for the Service, particularly the professional supervision offer, to help school leaders cope with the pressures of the role. However, it was felt that this may not translate into high demand or take-up for several reasons. These included the perceived stigma around school leaders seeking help, a lack of time to engage with the support offer, or a lack of understanding about its distinct benefits.

An increase in applications from October 2022 indicated strong demand for the Service. This increase may have been as a result of several factors, including changes in how the Service was promoted and/or coverage about school leader mental health and wellbeing in the mainstream media at the time.

Service effectiveness

The Service was promoted through a variety of channels. The most common way for participants to have heard about the Service was via an Education Support email, followed by a recommendation from a friend or colleague. Participant views on the application process were largely positive, with a few highlighting a lack of clarity about what the support involved. Participant views on session organisation were equally positive, again with a minority highlighting issues, typically regarding difficulties scheduling sessions.

During sessions, school leaders commonly discussed issues regarding workload and expectations. These included the pressures of the role, workload management, how to create a better work-life balance, and relationships with or management of colleagues. Participants were largely positive about the support, with four-fifths (81%) stating that they were very satisfied with the support and a further 16% fairly satisfied.

School leaders viewed their practitioners as highly skilled and valued the sessions as a safe, confidential, and professional space to reflect and share concerns. The sharing of ideas, strategies, and resources by other school leaders and/or their practitioner was viewed as particularly helpful.

Upon completion of the sessions, school leaders expressed a strong desire for continued support. Almost four-in-five (79%) respondents indicated that they would like access to regular one-to-one supervision in the future. In addition, the most commonly suggested improvement given in survey responses was to access 'more sessions'.

Service outcomes and impacts

Participant feedback highlighted positive, self-reported, outcomes of the support. Around a third of WPO and peer support participants strongly agreed that as a result of the support they felt less anxious (35%) and stressed (32%). Just over half somewhat agreed they felt less anxious (54%) and stressed (54%).

Qualitative feedback indicated that the support helped school leaders to feel better and think more clearly, improve management of their workload and wellbeing, and feel better connected to their sense of purpose as a school leader. While the average Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)[1] score for school leaders did increase between baseline and follow-up surveys, it was not possible to conclusively evidence an improvement in wellbeing using this measure.

Most school leaders interviewed spoke of wider, school level, impacts resulting from the support. These included recommending wellbeing support to other staff, improving their

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[1] The WEMWBS is a standardised measure of mental wellbeing. Responses to the 14 WEMWBS statements produce a score of between 14 – 70. A higher score indicates better wellbeing.

communication and relationships with colleagues, sharing ideas, tools, and strategies learnt through the sessions with other staff, and introducing wellbeing initiatives or support at their school.

Conclusion

Conclusions are structured around the 4 key questions the evaluation sought to answer.

What are the unique features of the support package's design and delivery?

- The peer support strand provided a unique offer not available elsewhere. It particularly added value during the COVID pandemic, addressing a need for school leaders to discuss concerns and share ideas in a confidential space.

- The delivery partner, Education Support, added distinct value through its delivery of the support package, due to its existing profile amongst schools and sector stakeholders and the other wellbeing services it offers.

What factors influence school leaders' engagement with the support package?

- There is a strong need and demand for the Service amongst school leaders, as evidenced by the higher-than-forecasted application numbers from 2022 and comments from sector stakeholders and participants. Despite this, participants faced barriers to engagement, for example high workload, that are outside of the control of delivery staff.

How are support sessions experienced?

- School leaders reported experiencing the support sessions positively, valuing the safe, confidential space to discuss issues as well as the practitioners' skills and sharing of ideas, strategies, and resources.

What are the self-reported outcomes and impacts of the support?

- Self-reported outcomes included reduced stress and anxiety, improved management of workload and wellbeing, and greater clarity of thinking.

Introduction

This is the final report of the School Leader Mental Health and Wellbeing (MHWB) Service evaluation, as commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE). The evaluation, undertaken between October 2022 and May 2023, was carried out by a team of researchers from York Consulting LLP.

The evaluators would like to thank all those who agreed to be interviewed for the evaluation, particularly the school leaders who offered their time to share feedback. Thanks are also owed to the programme manager at Education Support and the client team at the DfE for their support and assistance throughout the work.

Background and context

The mental health and wellbeing of education staff has long been a priority area for DfE, unions, and other stakeholders, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating concerns relating to high workload and poor wellbeing of teachers and school leaders. News reports into the tragic death of headteacher Ruth Perry by suicide in January 2023 have also brought discussions around school leader mental health to the fore.

The September 2022 School and College Panel report showed that levels of self-reported wellbeing among senior leaders, which fell during the pandemic, had yet to return to pre-pandemic levels (for example, self-reported life satisfaction fell from 7.9 to 6.2 out of 10 between December 2019 and September 2022[2]). The 2022 Teacher Wellbeing Index[3] found that over four-fifths (84%) of senior leaders, surveyed from across the UK, described themselves as stressed, with just under two-fifths (39%) reporting that they had experienced a mental health issue in the past academic year (2021/22). The Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders survey, from early 2022, found that on a standardised measure of wellbeing, the average score for teachers and leaders in England was below that of the UK general population. [4]

A 2023 Education Support report into the changing roles of education staff pointed towards causes of poor mental health and wellbeing among school leaders[5]. The report presented survey data indicating an expansion of responsibilities for education staff over the past 10 years. Most teachers reported increased non-academic needs of pupils, with these increased needs linked to teachers taking on additional responsibilities such as

[2] IFF Research (2023) School and College Panel: September 2022. Available here: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-and-college-panel-omnibus-surveys-for-2022-to-2023
[3] Education Support (2022). Teacher Wellbeing Index 2022. Available here: https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/resources/for-organisations/research/teacher-wellbeing-index/
[4] For example, teachers and leaders reported a mean life satisfaction score of 6.2 out of 10 in October 2021. This compares to 7.6 between July and September 2021 for the UK general population. IFF Research (2023). Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders. Available here: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-lives-of-teachers-and-leaders-wave-1
[5] Education Support (2023). Teaching: the new reality. Available here: https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/resources/for-organisations/research/teaching-the-new-reality/

offering emotional support to pupils and colleagues, increased safeguarding responsibilities, and providing support for disadvantaged pupils. Among school leaders, 81% reported that these additional responsibilities had a negative impact on their mental health, and 83% felt somewhat or very emotionally exhausted. The Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders survey showed that school leaders reported working an average of 57 hours per week[6], with 72% of surveyed teachers and leaders disagreeing that their workload is acceptable.

In December 2021, the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) raised concerns regarding the impact of poor wellbeing on the supply of school leadership, reporting that over 85% of assistant headteachers, deputy headteachers, and middle leaders were deterred from headship and leadership roles due to concerns about their personal wellbeing[7].

About the Service

The School Leader MHWB Service was commissioned by the DfE as part of its COVID-19 recovery plan for the education sector. The charity Education Support was awarded the contract for the Service, with delivery beginning in November 2021. This followed a pilot school leader wellbeing programme between June 2020 and March 2021 and a bridging service between April and August 2021, both also delivered by Education Support.

The Service had the following objectives:

- To help prevent the onset of mental health difficulties, by taking action to support the wellbeing of school leaders in England, affected by the pressures caused by COVID-19 in schools and in support of the DfE's COVID-19 response.

- To support school leaders experiencing mental health difficulties who do not have access to independent support by plugging the gap in provision.

- To increase the evidence base on the impact and value for money of professional supervision and wellbeing support for school leaders and learn lessons to inform future policy and interventions by government and within schools.

The DfE commissioned the School Leader MHWB Service as a pilot in June 2020, in response to the unprecedented challenges school leaders faced from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to school closures across the UK and significant disruption to the education system. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing concerns about the workload and wellbeing of education staff. School leaders were

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[6] IFF Research (2023). Working Lives of Teachers and Leaders. Available here: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-lives-of-teachers-and-leaders-wave-1
[7] NAHT (2021). Fixing the leadership crisis: time for change. Making school leadership a sustainable career choice. Available here: https://www.naht.org.uk/FixingTheLeadershipCrisis

required to adapt quickly to ever-changing circumstances and restrictions, while also facing the same challenges and health risks that COVID-19 brought for all of us.

Education Support were commissioned to deliver the pilot, offering 3 sessions of online peer support or 6 sessions of telephone supervision to deputy headteachers, headteachers, and executives of multi-academy trusts in England. A total of 225 school leaders were supported through the pilot (168 peer support and 57 telephone supervision).

Following this successful pilot, Education Support were commissioned to deliver a bridging service between April and August 2021, offering 4 sessions of either peer support or telephone supervision to school leaders. The bridging service supported a total of 125 school leaders (101 peer support and 24 telephone supervision).

The main School Leader MHWB Service began in November 2021, with Education Support contracted as the delivery partner following a competitive tender. It is this main service that is the focus of this evaluation report.

Service design

The Service had an initial delivery timeframe of November 2021 to March 2023 and a target of 2000 school leaders accessing support during this period. As per the pilot and bridging service, two types of support were offered: peer support and supervision.

Peer support provided school leaders with an opportunity to discuss the challenges they face within a group of other leaders in similar roles, while being supported by a trained facilitator.

Supervision was offered to school leaders in need of or preferring one-to-one support. Supervision provided an opportunity for school leaders to have confidential conversations about the work they do and how the challenges they face impact them as professionals.

To meet the required capacity, supervision support was provided both by Education Support freelance associates and by a subcontractor, Workplace Options (WPO)[8]. This meant that the two types of support were delivered across three strands:

- Peer support.
- Education Support supervision.
- WPO supervision.

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[8] Workplace Options is an independent provider of wellbeing solutions. More information here: https://www.workplaceoptions.com/

Counselling was also available to school leaders if it was felt that this type of support would be more appropriate. This was the case for a small number of school leaders (under 10), who were referred to counselling provided by WPO.

Target audience and eligibility

All deputy headteachers and headteachers at state funded primary, secondary, special, and alternative provision schools were eligible to apply for online peer support or individual supervision, as well as executive headteachers and academy trust leaders. School leaders self-referred to the Service, applying via an online form on the Education Support website.

From September 2022, the programme eligibility was expanded to include assistant headteachers. A decision was then taken in early 2023 to extend programme delivery until March 2024, with the aim of increasing participant numbers to achieve the initial target of 2000 school leaders. From April 2023, college leaders were also eligible to apply to the Service. In addition, eligibility expanded to include schools with an EAP to apply. [9]These decisions were taken due to lower than anticipated numbers of school leaders applying within the first year of the Service, an issue which is discussed further in the chapter: School Leader Engagement.

Session organisation

Once school leaders applied, they were contacted to schedule a short, introductory phone call. This call was either made by the practitioner who would facilitate their peer support group or, for the supervision strands, either the lead supervisor or Education Support programme officer. The aim of this phone call was to provide the school leader with further information about the Service and to find out more about them and what they hoped to get out of the support. After this phone call, school leaders were allocated a supervisor who contacted them to schedule their first session.

Peer support participants were allocated groups based on their role, e.g., separate groups for deputy headteachers and headteachers. Care was taken to ensure that group members were geographically dispersed to minimise the risk of school leaders in the group knowing of each other.

Session delivery

Across all strands, school leaders were offered 6 sessions of support. However, session delivery differed slightly depending on the type of support:

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[9] Employee assistance programmes (EAP) are an employee benefit that provides staff with support and advice on issues that might be impacting their wellbeing and performance. More information here: https://www.bupa.co.uk/business/small-business-healthcare/products-and-services/employee-assistance-programme

- **Peer support**: delivered online with a maximum of 6 school leaders, plus a facilitator to guide the discussion. Sessions lasted one and a half hours and were scheduled to take place monthly.

- **Education Support supervision**: delivered online and designed to last an hour. Typically scheduled monthly, although this was flexible depending on need.

- **WPO supervision**: delivered over the phone and designed to last an hour. Typically scheduled monthly, although this was flexible depending on need.

Evaluation methodology

The evaluation aimed to assess the effectiveness of the programme's delivery and the self-reported outcomes of the School Leader MHWB Service through answering the following research questions[10]:

- What are the unique features of the support package's design and delivery?

- What factors influence school leaders' engagement with the support package?

- How are the support sessions experienced?

- What are the self-reported outcomes and impacts of the support?

The evaluation was undertaken between October 2022 and May 2023 and involved a review of programme documents, analysis of programme data, and qualitative interviews.

Document review

To gain an understanding of the service delivery model, context, and progress to date, various documents were reviewed. These included previous internal and external evaluation reports for the pilot, bridging, and main service, promotional materials, and relevant research reports linked to school leader and teacher mental health and wellbeing.

Analysis of programme data

Management information

Data on service applications and participant status, shared by Education Support, was analysed to understand delivery volumes and the characteristics of school leaders engaging with the service.

Pre- and post- surveys

Introduced at the pilot stage, pre- and post- surveys (designed by Education Support with input from the DfE) sought to gather participant feedback on the service and measure

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[10] A more detailed breakdown of the evaluation's research questions can be found in Appendix A.

changes in participants' wellbeing after engaging with the support. Survey questions (open and closed) were slightly different across the three support strands, although the broad themes covered were largely the same. Areas covered included:

- Why the school leader signed up to the service and how they hoped to benefit (pre- survey only).

- Views on the effectiveness of the organisation and delivery of the sessions (post-survey only).

- Outcome measures, including questions on:

    o How strongly connected participants felt to their sense of purpose as a school leader.

    o The Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) – a standardised measure of wellbeing comprising of 14 statements. Responses give an overall score of between 14 – 70, with lower scores indicating lower levels of wellbeing.

    o How the support influenced levels of stress and anxiety (post- survey only).

    o How the school leader benefited from the support (post- survey only).

- The need/desire for further support (post- survey only).

- Demographic information such as gender, ethnicity, school type, and role.

Participants completed the pre- survey after their first session, meaning it was not a true baseline measure of school leader wellbeing as responses may have included some change resulting from engagement with the first session. Pre-surveys were issued in this way to ensure that responses came only from school leaders who were actively engaged with the Service.

It is also worth noting that participants were sent the follow-up survey after completion of their sixth session. As such, there may be a skew in the findings towards those with positive experiences of the support, as these participants may have been more likely to complete all 6 sessions. To somewhat mitigate this, a small number of school leaders who did not complete all 6 sessions ('partial service') were interviewed to gain their views on the Service.

Another issue to note is that pre-survey and post- survey responses were not paired. This decision was taken to maintain the anonymity of respondents, which was a crucial feature of the methodology, given the sensitive nature of the subject matter. As the survey responses were not paired, comparison of individual level scores and responses to pre- and post- outcome questions (e.g., WEMWBS scores) was not possible. Instead, mean group scores were used to provide an indication of any change in wellbeing resulting from the support.

Table 1 shows the number of survey responses received up to the end of April 2023, by support strand. Overall response rates for the baseline and follow-up surveys were 42% and 45% respectively, with similar response rates across the three support strands.

Table 1: Survey responses up to end April 2023

	Peer support	WPO supervision	Education Support supervision	Total (Response rate)
Baseline survey	150	96	60	306 (42%)
Follow-up survey	78	34	28	140 (45%)

Source: Education Support survey data September 2021 – April 2023. Note: Base for the baseline response rate = combined active, partial service and full-service participants (729). Base for follow-up response rate = full-service participants (314).

Qualitative fieldwork

Qualitative fieldwork sought to provide an in-depth understanding of how the Service was delivered and gather views on delivery effectiveness, challenges, and outcomes. Most interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams, although some school leader interviews took place over the phone where this was preferred by the participant. A breakdown of interviews completed by stakeholder group is detailed in Table 2.

Delivery staff

Interviews were undertaken with DfE and Education Support project management and delivery teams to develop an understanding of the key features of the delivery model and to support access to programme data and information.

Focus groups were also completed with Education Support associate supervisors and facilitators to further develop understanding of how the support was delivered and gather views on delivery effectiveness, challenges, and outcomes for school leaders. WPO practitioners provided feedback to the evaluation via an online survey comprising of 4 open text questions.

Sector stakeholders

To gain insight into the level of demand and need for the Service, key education sector stakeholders were consulted, comprising of representatives from unions and faith bodies involved in the programme's development.

Participants

School leaders who had engaged with the Service were interviewed, to understand their reasons for engagement, experience of the Service, self-reported outcomes and impacts,

and any areas for improvement. Interviews were undertaken with school leaders who had received the full service (i.e., 6 sessions), and consented to take part in an interview in their follow-up survey response.

To understand why some school leaders stopped engaging with the Service before their sixth session, the evaluators also interviewed a small number of participants who had received a partial service.

Table 2: Interviewees by stakeholder group

Respondent group	Number
Delivery staff	23*
Sector stakeholders	6
Participants – full service	37
Participants – partial service	5
Total	71

Source: YCL fieldwork data, 2022-23. * Includes written responses received from 6 WPO practitioners.

Analysis

Quantitative analysis of programme data and pre- and post-survey responses was completed in Excel. Qualitative data from interviews and survey responses was coded using NVivo qualitative analysis software, using an agreed coding framework.

School leader engagement

This section details applicant numbers and characteristics, factors influencing school leader engagement, and stakeholder views on the level of demand and need for the Service.

Applicant numbers

As shown in Table 2, 1,221 eligible applications[11] were received to the service up to the end of April 2023, comprising 341 applications for peer support and 880 for supervision. Of these applicants, 314 had received the full support offer (i.e., completed a sixth session), while 102 participants had received a partial service (i.e., they stopped engaging with the support before their sixth session). Up to the end of April 2023, there were 313 'active' participants who had received their first session, but not yet completed their sixth.

Table 3: Applicant numbers by status and support strand up to end of April 2023

Status	Peer support	Supervision	Total
Waiting list	-	156 (18%)*	156 (13%)
Awaiting first session	-	108 (12%)	108 (9%)
Active	44 (13%)	269 (31%)	313 (26%)
Partial service	29 (9%)	73 (8%)	102 (8%)
Full service	171 (50%)**	143 (16%)	314 (26%)
Did not start	97 (28%)	131 (15%)	228 (19%)
Total eligible applications	**341 (100%)**	**880 (100%)**	**1221 (100%)**

Source: Education Support programme data October 2021 – April 2023. Bases = total eligible applications. Notes: *Includes 3 participants who requested to delay their first session. ** Includes 3 participants who were allowed to take part in the peer support programme twice by mistake.

Participants awaiting their first session (108), comprised of those who applied but had not yet completed a first session. This included those who were yet to be offered a first session, those who had been offered but were yet to book a first session, and those who had a first session booked but not completed. A total of 228 school leaders applied for

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[11] A total of 55 ineligible applications were received, comprising 47 school leaders who had already received the service they were applying for and 7 who were ineligible for other reasons. The total figure of 1,221 eligible applications includes 19 school leaders who took part in both peer support and supervision. School leaders were allowed to take part in the Service twice, provided that their second application was for a different type of support to that they received initially.

the Service but did not start the support after being offered (or contacted to schedule) a first session[12].

Following an increase in applications in February 2023 that surpassed delivery capacity, new applicants were asked to complete an expression of interest form rather than an application form and placed on waiting list. Up to the end of April 2023, there were 156 school leaders on the waiting list for professional supervision. A decision was taken in early 2023 to conclude peer support as an available support strand. As such, no school leaders were on a waiting list or awaiting a first session for peer support. Reasons for this are discussed in the section: Promotion and Recruitment.

Applicant characteristics

Applicants were somewhat representative of the national picture in terms of demographic characteristics:

- **Role:** Headteachers were slightly over-represented in applicants when compared to the balance of headteachers and deputies nationally[13]. If representative, the balance between the two roles would be 55% headteachers and 45% deputies[14]. In applications to the service, the balance was 67% headteachers and 33% deputy headteachers[15].

- **School type**: Primary school leaders were over-represented, and secondary school leaders under-represented, amongst applicants. Across school leaders in England, 58% work in nursery or primary schools (compared to 71% of applicants) and 35% work in secondary schools (compared to 17% of applicants)[16]. In addition, special school or pupil referral unit leaders make up 7% of school leaders in England compared to 12% of applicants.

- **Gender**: Female school leaders were slightly over-represented in applications, making up 69% of school leaders nationally but 80% of applicants[17].

- **Ethnicity**: Data on ethnicity was not collected at the point school leaders applied to the Service. However, this data was collected via baseline surveys completed by participants after their first session. Of the 306 school leaders who completed a baseline survey, 6% (20) were from Black, African, Caribbean or Asian

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[12] For supervision participants, 'offered a first session', means that Education Support contacted them to schedule an initial phone call to discuss the Service. For peer support, this means participants were either allocated a group or (in later stages of the Service) contacted with a few different date and time options to choose from.

[13] It is not possible to assess the representativeness of assistant headteachers, as this group only became eligible for the Service part way through delivery.

[14] DfE (2023). School workforce in England. Available here: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-workforce-in-england

[16] DfE (2023). School workforce in England.

[17] DfE (2023). School workforce in England.

backgrounds[18]. This is representative of the 5% of school leaders in England from these backgrounds, although it is unknown whether those completing the baseline survey are representative of all applicants in this regard.

- **Region**: Applicants were broadly representative against the proportion of school leaders by region (Figure 1). School leaders from the East of England were slightly over-represented in the applicant group (17% of applicants compared to 11% of school leaders nationally). For all other regions, the proportion of applicants was within 2 percentage points of the overall proportion of school leaders by region.

Figure 1: Applicants by region against total school leaders by region
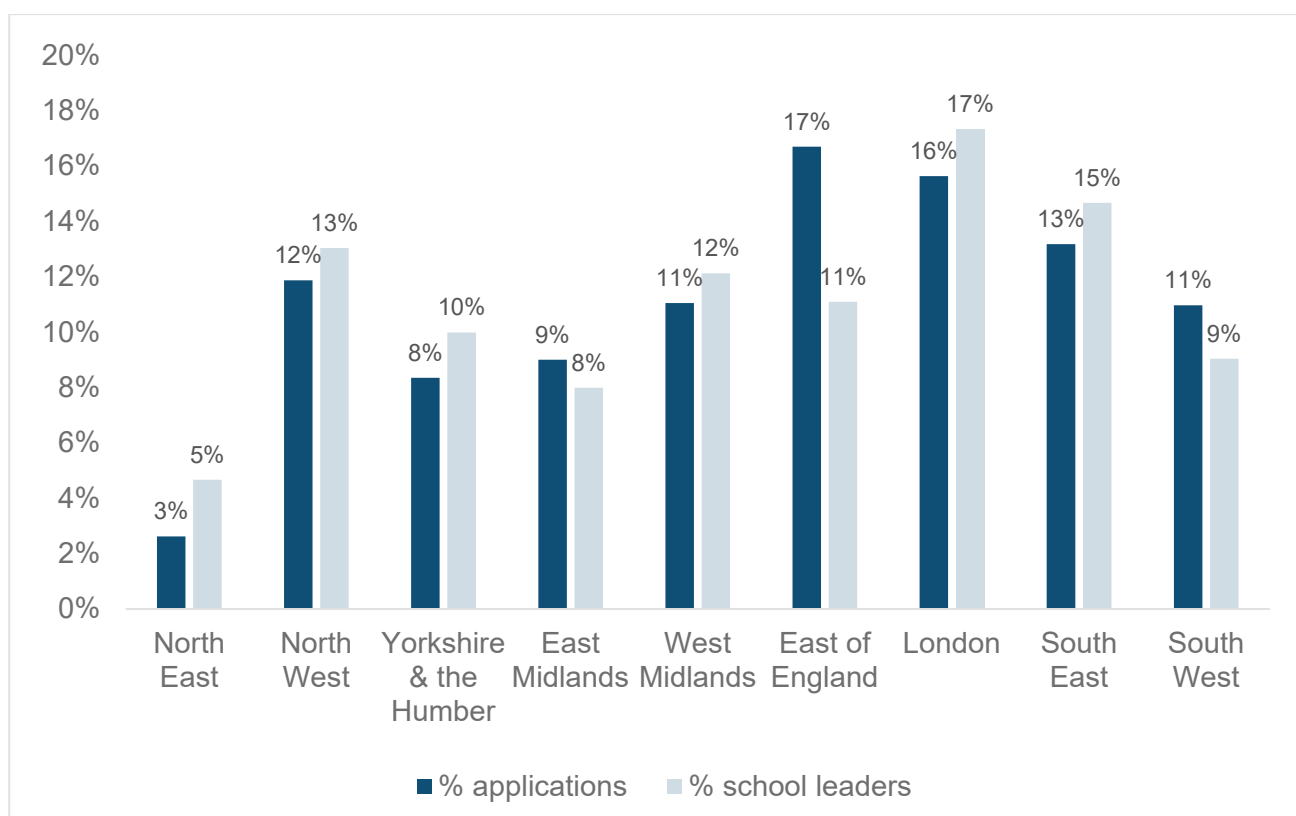
Source: Education Support programme data September 2021 – April 2023 and School Workforce in England data (DfE 2023). School leaders = heads, deputy heads and assistant heads in state-funded schools.

Demand and need for the Service

All stakeholders felt that there was a strong need for the Service, particularly the professional supervision offer, to help school leaders cope with the pressures of the role. School leaders often spoke of how isolating the role can be, commenting on the need for

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[18] DfE (2023). School workforce in England. Available here: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-workforce-in-England

confidential conversations about their concerns and challenges with another professional who is separate to their school, trust, or local authority.

A significant minority of interviewed school leaders (around a third) expressed the view that mental health and wellbeing support, particularly supervision, should be a standard part of headteacher continuing professional development (CPD). This view was echoed by delivery staff and some sector stakeholders. When asked in the follow-up survey what further support, they would like access to, eight-in-ten (79%) school leaders (including some who had only accessed peer support) said they would like regular, one-to-one supervision.

> "There's still so much of an idea that senior leaders should just be able to cope on their own. But in no other role would you be expected to deal with such complexity and not require supervision." (Delivery staff)

Barriers to engagement

Discussions with sector stakeholders and participants highlighted the importance of distinguishing between need and demand for the Service. It was felt that there is huge need for the Service, but that this may not translate into high demand or take-up for several reasons, including:

- Feelings of guilt around taking time for support and prioritising their own needs.

- Stigma around seeking help, linked to ideas about school leaders needing to be 'resilient and tough'. Some stakeholders suggested this stigma may be more acute for certain school leaders, such as those from Black and/or religious backgrounds and those working in secondary schools.

  > "It may be pride that prevents some from engaging. Often as a headteacher there's a perception that you have to be bulletproof. But to get the most out of the support you need to be vulnerable - it's that opportunity for vulnerability, in an appropriate context with a professional." (Headteacher, secondary, Education Support supervision)

- A lack of headspace for school leaders to take on information about the service, even if they receive communication about it, and a lack of time to engage with the support offer.

  > "The stress people are under, they probably see it [the support] and think 'oh yeah, I'll get round to it', but then never do, or they think they don't have time for it." (Deputy headteacher, primary, Education Support supervision)

- A culture in some schools of not encouraging staff to seek help for wellbeing, especially if this is not actively supported by governors or trustees.

- A lack of understanding about the distinct benefits of the offer, particularly regarding supervision.

Delivery staff also identified key constraints that acted as barriers to school leaders' engagement with the support once they had signed up to the Service. Common challenges reported by delivery staff and some participants were:

- School leaders struggling to find an hour/hour and a half within the working week to participate. Even when a session was booked in, the school leaders would sometimes need to reschedule if a more pressing issue arose, such as a safeguarding meeting.

- Significant challenges scheduling first sessions with school leaders and re-scheduling sessions that were missed. ("It's a real dance." – Delivery staff)

- Finding an appropriate space to engage with the session, especially when sessions took place in work hours and leaders therefore had to find space within the school building where they would not be interrupted or overheard.

A few delivery staff also described less proactive engagement during sessions from school leaders who were recommended the support by colleagues rather than signing up independently of any encouragement from their peers.

Across sector stakeholders and some participants, it was suggested that a culture change, regarding attitudes towards school leaders accessing support, was needed to improve take up and engagement. Those in more senior positions, such as headteachers, governors, trustees, and DfE, were viewed as key to encouraging and enabling school leaders to engage with the Service and wellbeing support, more generally. In some cases, having headteachers or governors who were supportive of the school leader accessing the Service was identified as a key facilitator to their engagement.

> "There's still stigma around asking for help, especially in leadership. My school is very supportive though, they've bought into a helpline for staff and the head is very supportive too - said it was 'brilliant' that I was taking part." (Deputy headteacher, primary, peer support)

> "In agreement with the headteacher, we made it protected time and I did a mix of at home and in school sessions. The headteacher was very supportive… they gave me the time, which was really useful." (Deputy headteacher, primary, peer support)

Why school leaders applied

When asked in the baseline survey why they had applied for the service, by far the most common reason given by school leaders was because they were struggling in their role. Almost two-thirds described feeling exhausted, stressed, overwhelmed, and/or isolated, with many commenting that COVID-19 had exacerbated these feelings.

> "Simply because I was at my wit's end, completely overwhelmed with work and demands of the role. It was either this or see my GP and probably be told to sign off with stress!" (Peer support, primary)

> "My workload is very challenging and makes me question whether I want to continue as a school leader. The covid years have taken their toll and it has been very difficult to return to normal alongside an impending Ofsted [inspection]." (WPO supervision, primary)

> "I think the multi-faceted nature of the job means that it can be very hectic and stressful, often moving from problem to problem without time for reflection." (WPO supervision, primary)

Others commented that there was limited support available to them as leaders through their school or trust. Some of these school leaders were reluctant to discuss the challenges they were facing with colleagues and therefore welcomed the external, confidential support offered by the Service. Similarly, peer support participants saw the Service as an opportunity to meet and receive support from others in similar roles, with many highlighting that they did not have a support network or individuals they could be open and honest with about their challenges.

When asked how they hoped to benefit from the support, school leaders gave varied answers. For peer support participants, two-fifths hoped the service would provide a network through which to share challenges, good practice, and ideas. Other hoped for benefits (across both strands) included:

- Confidence building and improved mental health and wellbeing, through developing new strategies to manage workload, stress, and the challenges of the role.

- Protected time to talk and reflect with another professional.

- Renewed focus and enthusiasm for their work and role.

> "Having previously worked for social care I have always been used to having monthly supervision. In my current busy role, I sometimes need time to focus on the breadth of work I need to do and how to prioritise." (WPO supervision, special school)

"An opportunity to speak freely about my experiences and feelings at work with a third party and to use this as an opportunity to reflect on how I might be able to adjust my approach to work to achieve a better balance. I struggle to see how I can continue to fulfil my current role effectively, while at the same time finding some opportunities to switch off from work and rest. (WPO supervision, secondary school)

Reasons for disengagement

Once they had applied to the Service, there were two ways in which school leaders could subsequently disengage:

- Not starting the support after being offered (or contacted to schedule) a first session ('did not start').

- Disengaging with the support after their first session but before their sixth session ('partial service').

Removing applicants who are on the waiting list or awaiting their first session from the data, we can assess the extent to which school leaders have disengaged with the Service after applying (Table 4).

Table 4: Participant status up to end April 2023[19]

	Peer support	Supervision	Total
Active	44 (13%)	269 (44%)	313 (33%)
Partial service	29 (9%)	73 (12%)	102 (11%)
Full service	171 (50%)	143 (23%)	314 (33%)
Did not start	97 (28%)	131 (21%)	228 (24%)
Total participants	**341 (100%)**	**616 (100%)**	**957 (100%)**

Source: Education Support programme data October 2021 – April 2023.

Did not start support

As shown in Table 4, just under a quarter (24% or 228) of those offered (or contacted to schedule) a first session did not go on to receive any support. While the evaluation did not seek to gather feedback from this group (doing so would be difficult given the level of disengagement with the Service), feedback from delivery staff sheds some light on the reasons behind this figure.

As previously mentioned, delivery staff commented that scheduling sessions with school leaders was by far the most challenging aspect of service delivery. For the peer support strand, delivery staff faced significant difficulties finding a suitable time for up to 6 school leaders to take part in the hour and a half long session. Scheduling challenges sometimes meant that groups ran with only 2 or 3 participants. This issue, combined with declining application numbers, was why delivery of the peer support strand was concluded in early 2023.

Communicating with school leaders about scheduling sessions was also a key barrier, particularly:

- A lack of response to emails, with multiple emails often sent before receiving a reply.

- Where a school phone number rather than a personal phone number was given, it was hard to get past the 'protective techniques' of the school receptionist to speak with the school leader directly. This was made even more challenging if a school

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[19] Participant figures by support strand are provided for illustrative purposes only. Given that the peer support strand was discontinued, comparison of participant status between the two would only be meaningful once delivery of the supervision strand is also complete. In addition, the proportions of school leaders within each of the status groups (active, partial service, full service and did not start) were broadly similar when looked at by gender, role, region, and school type, indicating little variation in engagement of school leaders in relation to these characteristics.

leader had indicated they did not wish for messages to be left about their participation in the Service.

> [On challenges] "The amount of administration required to make the sessions happen. Headteachers' diaries changing at the last minute and disconnects in diaries over moving schedules." (Delivery staff)

If no response was received after several attempts at contact, the application would be closed, and no further contact made[20]. Given that over two-thirds of school leaders highlighted stress and feeling overwhelmed as the reason that they applied to the Service, and that many hoped the support would give them skills to manage their workload and priorities, it is perhaps not surprising that some failed to respond to multiple contacts about the Service. While this does not give a complete picture as to why almost 1 in 4 school leaders did not start the support after applying, it does suggest that barriers were wider than the Service itself.

Partial service

Table 4 also shows that 11% (102) of all those offered a first session disengaged with the support after completing a first session but before completing their sixth session. Attempts were made by Education Support to gather data on this issue by asking participants why they concluded the support early, although responses to this were low. Of those who responded, a few cited health reasons, others stated that they had felt fully supported after fewer than 6 sessions, and a small number were recorded as having been referred to counselling. These reasons were reflected in anecdotal reports from delivery staff, which highlighted that some school leaders felt sufficiently supported after fewer than 6 sessions and some stopped engaging with the support after they were signed off sick from work[21].

As part of the evaluation, interviews were conducted with 5 school leaders who had started the support but not completed all 6 sessions. The reasons given were varied, with no singular issue common to all 5:

- Sessions were less directive than anticipated, with the practitioner listening and reflecting rather than offering tools and strategies.

- They felt the practitioner did not have a deep enough understanding of the pressures faced by school leaders or the necessary skills to dynamically facilitate the group discussion.

- Following the first 3-4 sessions, they did not have any further issues to discuss with the supervisor.

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[20] If school leaders replied after their application was closed, the case would be reopened, and support arranged.
[21] These school leaders were given the option to continue the support while off work, if they wished to.

- They were so busy they missed the emails from the supervisor trying to schedule the second session. While this school leader was keen to reengage with the service, they were unsure how to do this.

- After the first session, the supervisor recommended that counselling would be more appropriate.

Due to the small number of participants asked about this issue, firm conclusions cannot be drawn about why other school leaders chose to disengage from the Service. However, the findings detailed above indicate that reasons were likely to be varied and not exclusively linked to Service quality and effectiveness.

Service effectiveness

This section reviews service effectiveness in a range of areas, including promotion and recruitment, session organisation and session delivery, and participants' suggested improvements to the service.

Promotion & recruitment

A range of channels were used to promote the service on an ongoing basis, with promotional packs shared with stakeholders to support dissemination. Channels included:

- **Direct marketing:** Information shared with Education Support's 43,000 school leader contacts and 28,000 senior multi-academy trust (MAT) contacts, in addition to targeted regional promotion via local authority contacts.

- **Newsletters**: Information included within the Education Support newsletter shared with 35,000 education staff, as well as the DfE newsletter, Twinkl, and Place2Be's network of mental health leads.

- **Social media**: Organic and paid for promotion on Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn.

- **Partners and stakeholders**: Promoted via newsletters and social media, including DfE, NAHT, Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), Governors for Schools, and the Local Government Association.

- **Paid for advertising**: In Education Guardian, Schools Week, and The Headteacher.

- **Webinars and in-person promotion**: For example, the Healthy Mind-Ed Conference and Birmingham Consortium of Headteachers.

- **Contacting previous participants**: To encourage them to recommend the Service to other suitable school leaders.

As shown in Figure 2, the most common way for school leaders to hear about the Service was via an Education Support email (36%), indicating that many were already aware of the organisation prior to engaging with the Service. Almost 1 in 4 (24%) participants reported hearing about the service through a friend or colleague. For some, this was a recommendation from a leader that had previously accessed the Service or from their senior leadership team. This suggests that wellbeing and support is being discussed among some school leaders and education staff, despite the previously highlighted issues around stigma.

Local authorities appeared to be a key stakeholder, with 10% of participants hearing about the service this way. Of those selecting 'another organisation' or 'other', around

half stated they had heard about the service through their union, while others mentioned their academy trust or faith body.

Figure 2: How did you hear about the School Leader Support?
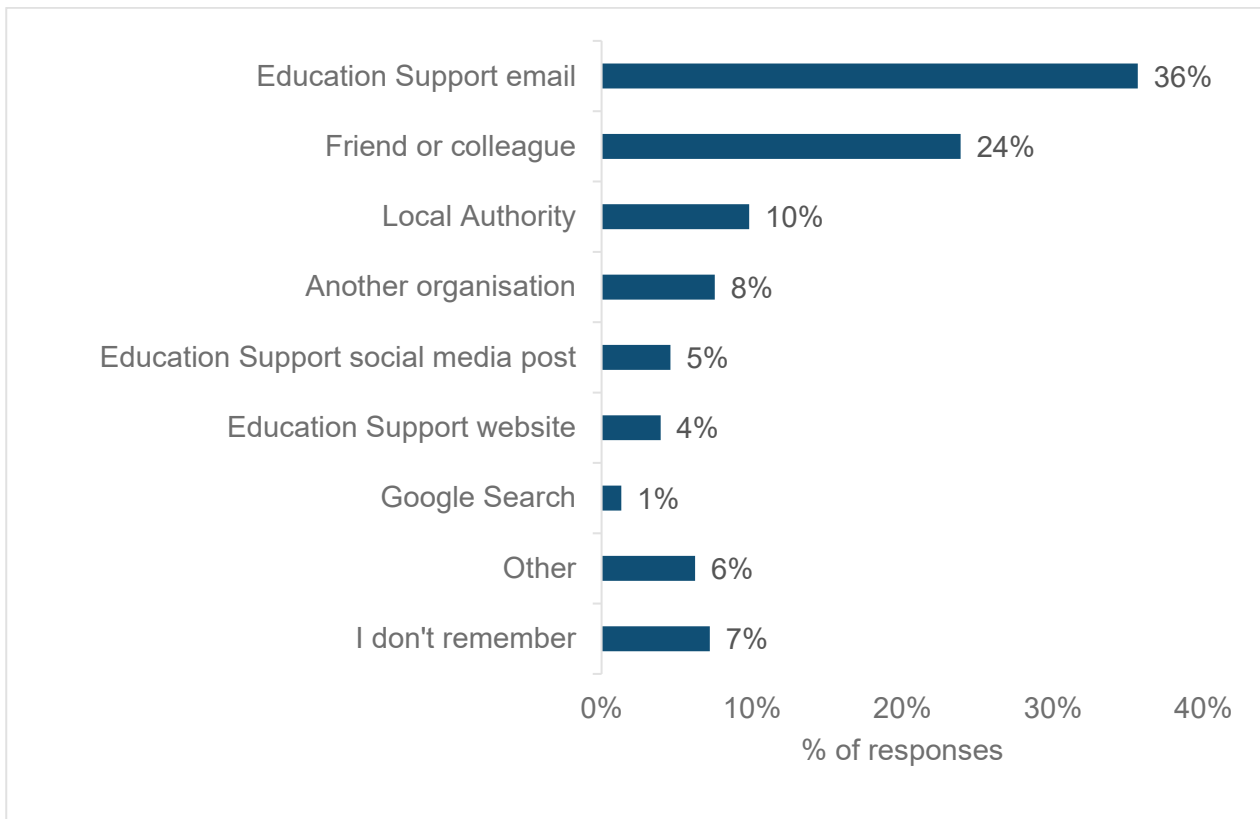
Source: Education Support baseline survey data April 2023. Base: 306.

Figure 3 shows the volume of recruitment over time. A high number of applications at the launch of the service was followed by below forecast monthly recruitment throughout 2022. Delivery staff held the view that this trend was a result of school leaders moving from being in 'crisis mode' during the pandemic – where the need to discuss challenges and concerns with other school leaders and professionals was acute and wellbeing was a top priority – to 'managing with COVID' mode, where COVID is just one of many challenges school leaders face and where there is no longer the same sense of urgency to discuss issues with others. Delivery staff felt that this was particularly a factor in the declining peer support applications.

Figure 3: Applications to the service November 2021 – March 2023
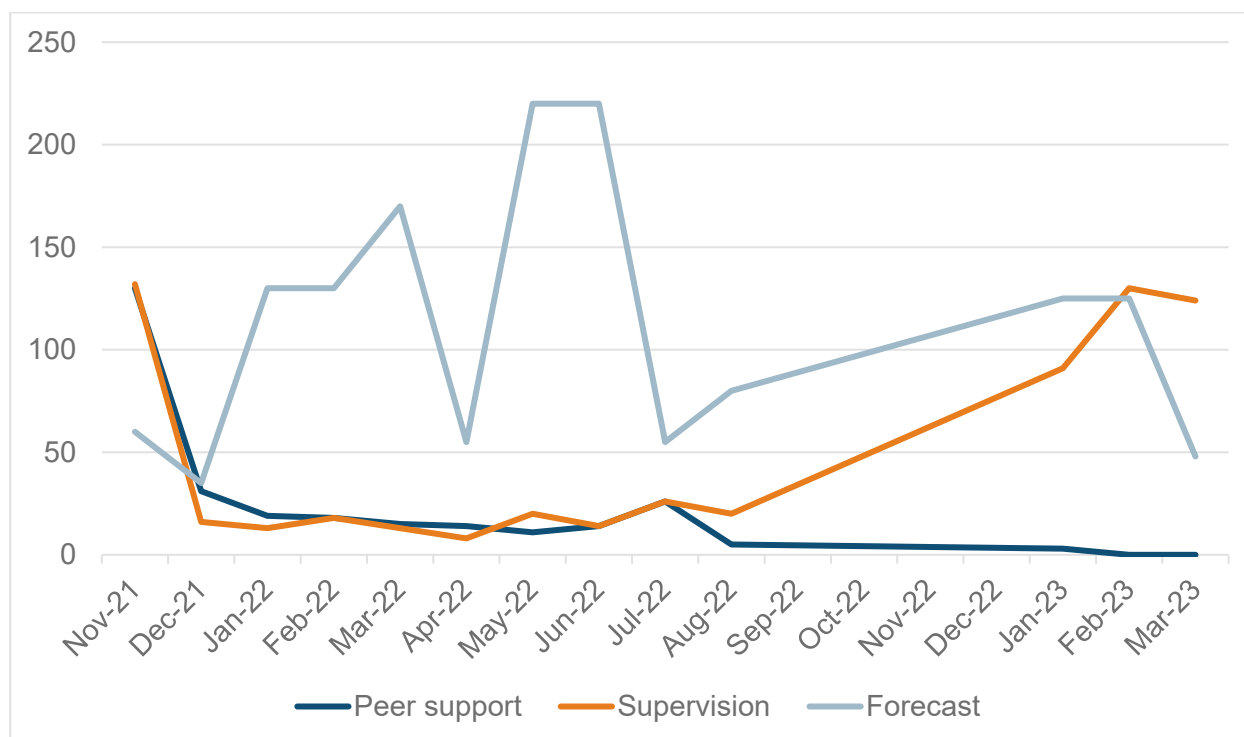
Source: Education Support programme data up to end March 2023.
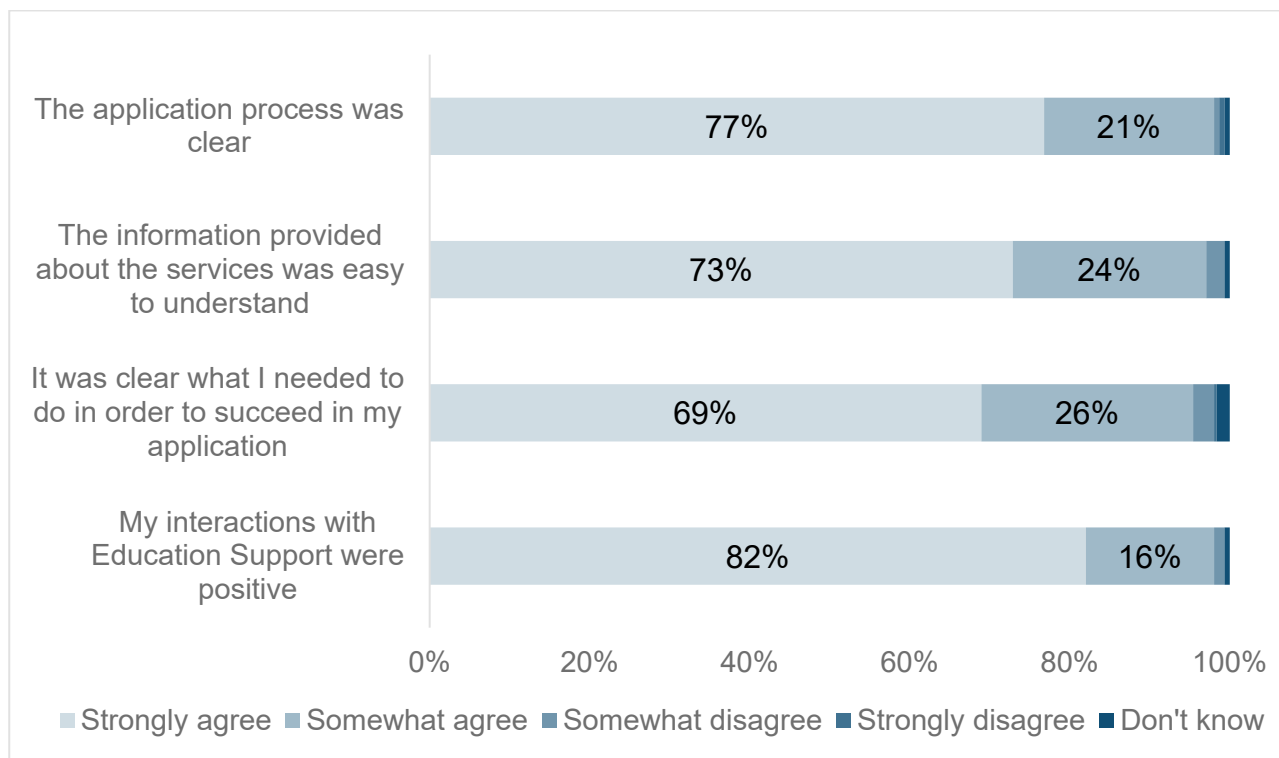
After a promotional 'relaunch' in September 2022, applications steadily increased. This increase can only be partly attributed to assistant headteachers becoming eligible for the Service at this time, as these school leaders accounted for just 24% of applications between September 2022 and March 2023. Applications to the Service increased again in early 2023 such that between mid-February and the end of April 2023, 156 school leaders were added to the waiting list for support.

This increase may have been related to changes in how the Service was promoted at the time. Promotional information was changed to make it clearer that the individual support provided was professional supervision, framing it as an opportunity for school leaders to reflect and reconnect with their sense of purpose rather than something to access if they were struggling. While we do not have sufficient data to conclusively say what caused the increase in applications, it is possible that this change in language was a factor. However, there may be other contributary factors, such as increased media coverage about school leader MHWB at the time.

Application process

As shown in Figure 4, participant views on the application process were largely positive, with most stating that they strongly agreed with the statements given. Where this was not the case, only a small number provided further comment as to why. The issue raised most frequently by these participants (and by a few participants interviewed for the evaluation) was a lack of clarity or information about the nature of the support prior to starting.

Figure 4: Participant views on the application process

The application process was clear — Strongly agree 77%, Somewhat agree 21%

The information provided about the services was easy to understand — Strongly agree 73%, Somewhat agree 24%

It was clear what I needed to do in order to succeed in my application — Strongly agree 69%, Somewhat agree 26%

My interactions with Education Support were positive — Strongly agree 82%, Somewhat agree 16%

Legend: ■ Strongly agree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Don't know

Source: Education Support baseline survey data April 2023. Base: 306 participants. Question: "The next question is about your experience of the application process for Online facilitated peer support / individual telephone support / 1:1 professional supervision. Please look at the statements below, and say how much you agree or disagree with each."

Session organisation

As with the application process, participant views on the organisation of sessions were very positive. Over four-fifths (81%) strongly agreed that communication with the Education Support team was good, while 84% strongly agreed that the organisation of the sessions was good.

Figure 5: Participant views on session organisation

Communication with the Education Support team was good: Strongly agree 81%, Somewhat agree 15%

The organisation of the sessions was good: Strongly agree 84%, Somewhat agree 14%

Legend: Strongly agree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Don't know

The minority disagreeing with the statements shown in Figure 5 did not offer further reasoning for their views. However, interviews with participants highlighted the issues with scheduling sessions that were discussed in more detail in the section: School leader engagement.

Despite these issues, most school leaders interviewed for the evaluation spoke positively about how the sessions were organised, with many noting that they were surprised by how quickly contact was made and a first session arranged after they signed up. In addition, many interviewees found the initial phone call prior to their first session helpful in putting them at ease and understanding more about the support and what it would involve.

> "All the staff that I've dealt with through Education Support have been amazing." (Deputy headteacher, primary, WPO supervision)

> "I was initially nervous about that first call, as I didn't know what to expect. It was really helpful though. She [Education Support delivery lead] provided info about the service and what areas it would be able to support with. It felt very personalised." (Deputy headteacher, primary, Education Support supervision)

Session delivery

Peer support and supervision sessions did not have set formats, with practitioners adapting their approach to suit the individual or group. Despite this, practitioners did describe certain key features and commonly used practices.

For peer support, the first session was usually used as an opportunity for participants to get to know each other and to set expectations and parameters, establishing the group as a safe space. For subsequent sessions, facilitators described introducing prompts in the form of ice breakers, questions, materials, or tools, to support discussion of the issues that school leaders were bringing to the group.

Similarly, supervisors spoke of the importance of establishing professional supervision sessions as a safe space early on, using the first session to emphasise confidentiality and taking a non-judgemental approach throughout. Supervisors aimed to create a space for school leaders to discuss and reflect on the issues they faced in their role, supporting them to gain greater clarity, acceptance, or resolution. Their practice was often informed by different models of supervision, such as the Hawkins and Shohet seven-eyed model[22], but this varied depending on the individual supervisor.

There does appear to have been some lack of clarity regarding the purpose and focus of the sessions for some participants, with individual support not consistently understood as supervision. For example, a few interviewees were unsure how to refer to their supervisor when talking about the support or referred to them as a counsellor.

Issues covered

When asked to describe the general issues that school leaders discussed during sessions, the most common areas highlighted were:

- **Workload and expectations**, including workload management and how to create a better work-life balance. The pressures of the role were also discussed, with school leaders describing the need to wear 'multiple hats' and the unique challenges that come with certain roles or school types.

- **Relationships with colleagues**, including new school leaders navigating changing dynamics with colleagues, management of other staff and delegation, issues with parents or governors, or specific issues that school leaders were having with staff at the time.

Other issues discussed, often in conjunction with the above, were the pressures of Ofsted and the ongoing impact of COVID-19. In some cases, personal issues affecting the school leader's work were also discussed.

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[22] Hawkins, P., & Schwenk, G. (2011). The seven-eyed model of coaching supervision. Coaching and mentoring supervision: Theory and practice, 28-40.

"Workload was a big one. We talked about how work was taking over my life. Holidays, weekends, constantly working... [Supervisor] encouraged me to think of ways I could put some boundaries in place for my own wellbeing. I came up with some ideas, implemented them, and then came back and discussed how it had gone." (Deputy headteacher, primary, Education Support Supervision)

"We talked about the need to change operational style, about the need to delegate and trust colleagues." (Headteacher, secondary, Education Support supervision)

"We talked about managing a school and managing other people and all that entails, particularly during a pandemic. Nobody trains you for that." (Headteacher, secondary, Education Support supervision)

Views on effectiveness

Over four-fifths (81%) of school leaders participating in the peer support and WPO supervision strands stated that they were very satisfied with the support, while around one-sixth (16%) were fairly satisfied[23]. Participants of the Education Support supervision strand were asked in the follow up survey how helpful they found the support, with all answering 'very helpful'[24].

What worked well

A key aspect of what worked well about the support appears to have been the skills and experience of the practitioner's delivering the support. Feedback from school leaders also suggested that they found certain aspects of the Service design particularly useful.

Practitioner skills

Across interviews and survey responses, participants held overwhelmingly positive views regarding practitioner skills. As shown in Figure 6, nine-in-ten (90%) viewed their practitioner as effective and almost all (98%) strongly agreed that their practitioner created a safe space and was empathetic and understanding.

"I felt totally supported and listened to and able to share what I was feeling without worry that what I was saying was wrong. I was able to have a 'voice' again. Thank you." (Primary, WPO supervision)

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[23] Source: Education Support follow-up survey data up to April 2023. Base: 112 participants (peer support and WPO supervision)
[24] Source: Education Support supervision follow-up survey. Base: 28 participants.

Figure 6: Participant views on practitioner skills
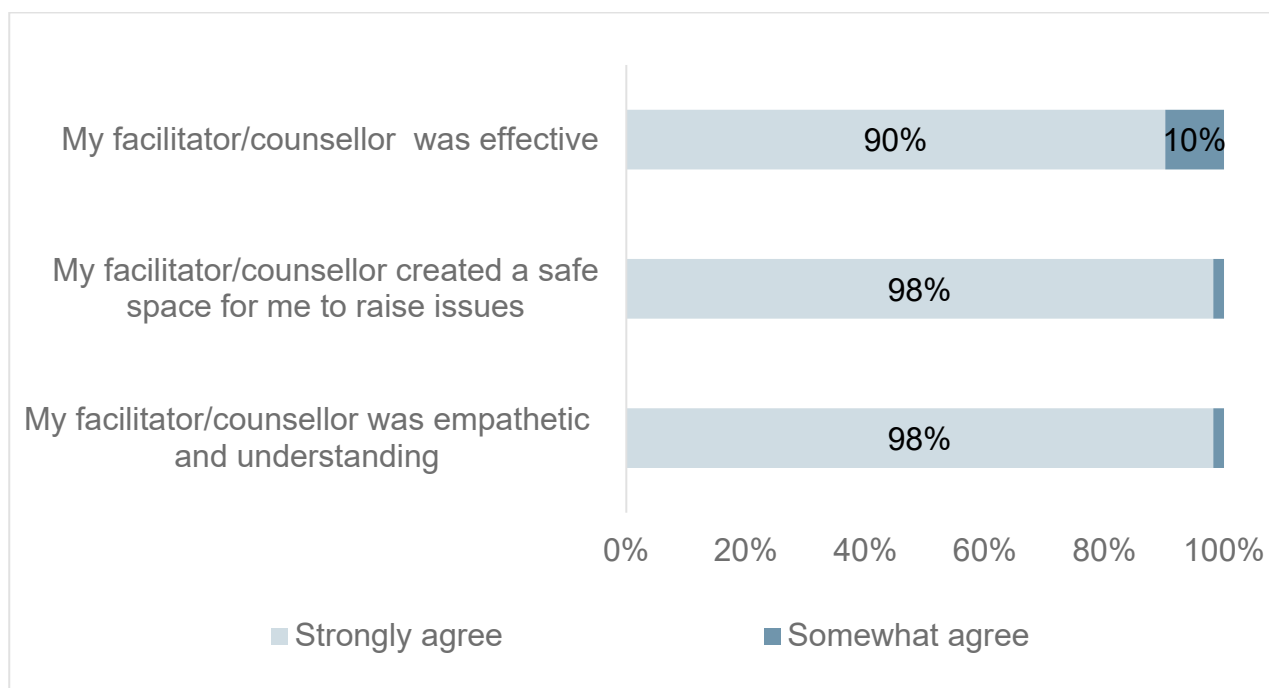
Horizontal bar chart showing:
- My facilitator/counsellor was effective: 90% Strongly agree, 10% Somewhat agree
- My facilitator/counsellor created a safe space for me to raise issues: 98% Strongly agree
- My facilitator/counsellor was empathetic and understanding: 98% Strongly agree

Legend: Strongly agree, Somewhat agree. X-axis: 0%, 20%, 40%, 60%, 80%, 100%

Source: Education Support follow-up survey data April 2023. Base: 112 participants. Question: "The next question is about your experience of your facilitator / counsellor who led your sessions. Please look at the statements below and say how much you agree or disagree with each." Note: Education Support supervision participants not included as question not asked in the follow-up survey.

During interviews, school leaders highlighted ways in which they felt their practitioner was particularly effective. These commonly included:

- For peer support, effectively building rapport within the group, ensuring everybody had a chance to speak and guiding the discussion in a way that kept things focussed.

- The dynamic way that practitioners facilitated the sessions, adapting their approach to whatever issues were raised. School leaders valued that their practitioner would refer to things said in previous sessions and provide 'input' in the form of sharing ideas, strategies, and resources, with relevant links and materials shared via email after the session.

Some school leaders highlighted other elements of effective practice that they valued. These included supervisors keeping the conversation within boundaries (by ensuring the focus was on the school leader's professional role), providing a supportive level of challenge, and having a good understanding of the education system and the pressures school leaders face.

> "The facilitator seemed very experienced and professional. Even though there were 6 people on the call [they] let people have time to talk whilst also facilitating and moving the conversation on where appropriate. [They] would recall information that group members had

shared in previous sessions, even months before." (Assistant head, primary, peer support)

"The supervisor had expert skills. [They] provided a really great sense of challenge and made me reflect on things. There was a good balance of talking and listening, and we covered quite a broad range of things, exploring stuff from the psychological side but also strategies and tools for work… it didn't feel overly rigid, which was a good thing." (Headteacher, secondary, Education Support supervision)

"[They] had this magical way of helping me come up with my own ideas or thoughts on how I'm going to manage something." (Deputy headteacher, primary, Education Support supervision)

Service design

School leaders also highlighted aspects of the Service design that they found useful. These included:

- The sessions giving them a safe, professional space to reflect, share concerns, and gain greater self-awareness about how they approach their role as a school leader.

- For peer support, meeting others in similar situations to share concerns and worries as well as sharing practice with school leaders from across the country.

- The confidential and anonymous nature of the support, and that it was external and separate from the leader's school. Peer support participants commented that they felt reassured regarding confidentiality by the wide geographical spread of group members.

- The sessions taking place monthly, meaning the support was delivered over a roughly 6-month period, facilitating reflection over time.

- Sessions taking place virtually or over the phone rather than face-to-face, making it easier to fit into busy schedules.

    "It didn't just feel like you were having moan, you were given tools and strategies to help you reflect and manage stress." Headteacher, primary, WPO supervision)

    "I was able to engage with it completely anonymously. I didn't need to let anyone else at the school know that I was taking part if I didn't want to." (Deputy headteacher, secondary, WPO supervision)

"Generally, you hold back with your own network of people… this group had an extra layer of confidentiality as you don't know the peers." (Headteacher, special school, peer support)

Challenges

The main challenges highlighted during the evaluation were the difficulties that delivery staff faced in scheduling sessions and school leaders finding the necessary time and space to engage with the Service. These were covered in detail in the section: School leader engagement.

School leader suggested improvements

School leaders were asked in interviews and follow-up surveys for suggested improvements to the Service. By far the most common response was school leaders wanting more support sessions. Some specified that these should be funded, whilst others commented that they would welcome additional sessions even as a paid-for service. A summary of school leaders' suggested improvements is detailed in Table 5.

Table 5: School leader suggested improvements

Responses	Both strands	Peer support	Supervision
Common	• More sessions over a longer period.		
Less common	• Greater options for scheduling sessions, including outside of working hours. • Clearer explanation of what the support involves in promotional materials.	• Group together professionals from similar settings and/or backgrounds.	• Virtual meetings rather than phone calls, for a more personal discussion.

Source: Education Support follow-up surveys (peer support and WPO supervision) and YCL evaluation interviews up to April 2023. Question: "What, if anything, are the improvements you would like to see to the individual telephone. /online facilitated peer support?"
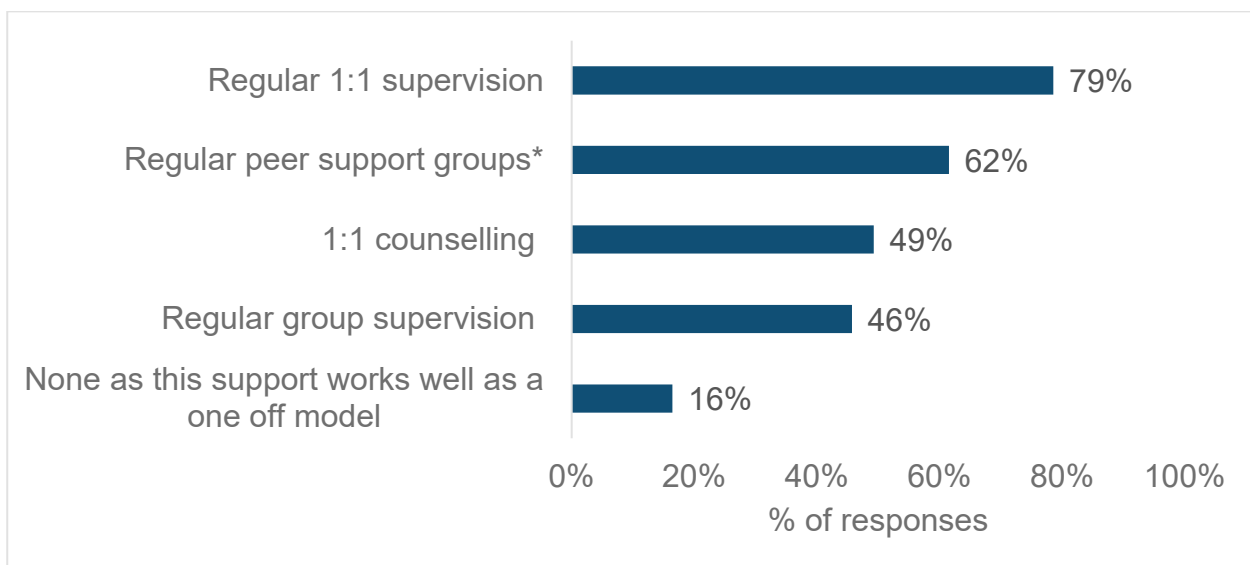
"It would be good to have sessions once a half term after the main bulk of the sessions, to keep you in the loop and reminded. Continuous support is needed, but not necessarily at the frequency of the sessions we had." (Deputy headteacher, primary, peer support)

> "More sessions - even if it's just the option of having two sessions a year. Once the support stopped, it felt like there was no one there to help." (Headteacher, primary, WPO supervision)

Further support

School leaders' desire for further support was also reflected in other follow-up survey questions, with 79% of school leaders stating that they would like to have further access to regular one-to-one supervision (Figure 7).

Figure 7: What, if any, further support would you like to have access to?

Regular 1:1 supervision — 79%
Regular peer support groups* — 62%
1:1 counselling — 49%
Regular group supervision — 46%
None as this support works well as a one off model — 16%

% of responses

Source: Education Support follow-up survey data up to April 2023. Base: 140. *Base 130 due to 10 respondents not answering

During interviews, most school leaders said they would like to engage in similar support in the future, with some already doing so. This latter group were largely self-funding the support, although for a small number it was being funded by their school.

Funding was identified as a key barrier for school leaders wanting to receive similar support in the future and many stated that they would only be able to engage with a free service. This was not only due to school budgets being stretched but also school leaders anticipating feelings of guilt around using school funds to pay for the support. Where school leaders had secured school funding to continue some form of support, it tended to be framed as a part of the school leader's CPD or, in the case of Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) supervision, as a key part of their role.

> "I'm now having supervision as part of DSL role. It had been recommended a year ago, but my experience of the school leader service made me push harder to get that support in place. It helped us recognise the benefits and understand the usefulness of it." (Deputy headteacher, secondary, WPO supervision)

Outcomes and impacts

Evidence of self-reported outcomes, from pre- and post- survey data and participant interviews, highlighted a range of positive outcomes resulting from the support. An increase in school leaders' average WEMWBS score as reported in surveys suggests improved wellbeing among participating school leaders, although there are certain caveats to note. Standalone post-programme outcome measures show self-reported reductions in levels of stress and anxiety, as well as an increased sense of purpose in their role as school leaders. In addition, survey responses and interviews provided qualitative feedback on a range of positive outcomes for school leaders along with wider, school level impacts of the support.

Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale

The WEMWBS is a standardised measure of mental wellbeing. It comprises of 14 statements, covering both feeling and function aspects of wellbeing, alongside 5 response categories (ranging from 'never' to 'all of the time')[25]. Responses to the 14 WEMWBS statements produce a score of between 14 - 70. A score of 41 - 44 is indicative of possible/mild depression, while a score of below 41 is indicative of probable clinical depression[26].

Change in WEMWBS scores

A comparison of pre- and post- mean group scores was used to provide an indication of change in wellbeing as a result of the support.

Overall, the average WEMWBS score across participants who completed pre- and post-surveys has changed from within the possible/mild depression range at baseline (43.0) to above this indicative range at the point of follow-up (49.5), an increase of 6.5 points (Table 6)[27]. The average score at baseline (43.0) is slightly below the average for school leaders in England (43.4). An increase of 6.5 points to 49.5 takes the average wellbeing score for Service participants much closer to, but still below, the national population wellbeing score for England of 52.4[28].

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[25] Warwick Medical School (n.d.). The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scales – WEMWBS. Available here: https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/med/research/platform/wemwbs/
[26] Warwick Medical School (n.d.). Collect, score, analyse and interpret WEMWBS. Available here: https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/med/research/platform/wemwbs/using/howto/
[27] Whilst t-test results report this as a statistically significant result, this test is not valid given that the survey respondents were self-selected rather than randomly selected. For this reason, we cannot assume that this improvement in wellbeing is representative of participants who did not complete baseline and follow-up surveys.
[28] Education Support (2022) Teacher Wellbeing Index 2022. Available here: https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/resources/for-organisations/research/teacher-wellbeing-index/

Table 6: Participant average WEMWBS scores – main service

	Baseline	**Follow-up**	**Change**
Peer support	43.3 (149)	48.5 (77)	+5.2
Supervision	42.8 (154)	50.1 (61)	+8.0
All strands	**43.0 (303)**	**49.5 (138)**	**+6.5**

Source: Education Support follow-up survey data April 2023. Bases: reported in brackets. Question: detailed in Appendix B. Note: 3 baseline surveys and 2 follow-up surveys were not included due to incomplete responses to this question.

It is worth noting that not all participants completed a baseline and follow-up survey, with the response rates to the surveys being 42% and 45%, respectively[29]. In taking the increase in average WEMWBS score as an indication of improved wellbeing, we are assuming that most participants who completed a follow-up survey also completed a baseline survey. In addition, we cannot know whether those who completed a follow-up survey had higher than average wellbeing scores at baseline. If this were the case, the actual change in average wellbeing score would be lower than indicated in Table 6.

When looking at combined survey data from the pilot, bridging and main service (Table 7), the discrepancy between numbers of baseline and follow-up surveys and the change in average WEMWBS score is smaller than when only looking at the main service data.

Table 7: Participant average WEMWBS scores – pilot, bridging and main service

	Baseline	**Follow-up**	**Change**
Total	**42.8 (414)**	**48.0 (279)**	**+5.2**

Source: Education Support follow-up survey data up to April 2023, Pilot and Bridging WEMWBS data April 2023. Bases: reported in brackets.

Despite these caveats, the increase in average WEMWBS score between baseline and follow-up surveys does provide an indication that wellbeing has improved for school leaders engaging with the Service. Being observational rather than experimental data, we cannot say conclusively that the Service caused this increase in average wellbeing scores. However, qualitative feedback from school leaders (discussed further under the section 'Qualitative outcomes for school leaders') suggests that it is highly likely that the Service was a key factor.

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[29] Base for the baseline response rate = combined active, partial service and full-service participants (729). Base for follow-up response rate = full service participants (314).

Alongside their WEMWBS scores, a few school leaders provided further clarification about the answers they had given, including highlighting ongoing stressors related to their role that had impacted their responses and, in some cases, commenting that the support had helped to mitigate these.

> "Despite having a good understanding of how I am feeling and having developed resilience and strategies to deal with the pressures of my role - the workload, stress, external pressures and challenges of the political education system alongside broken health, local authority and social care systems make the role of headteacher incredibly challenging and all consuming." (Headteacher, primary, peer support)
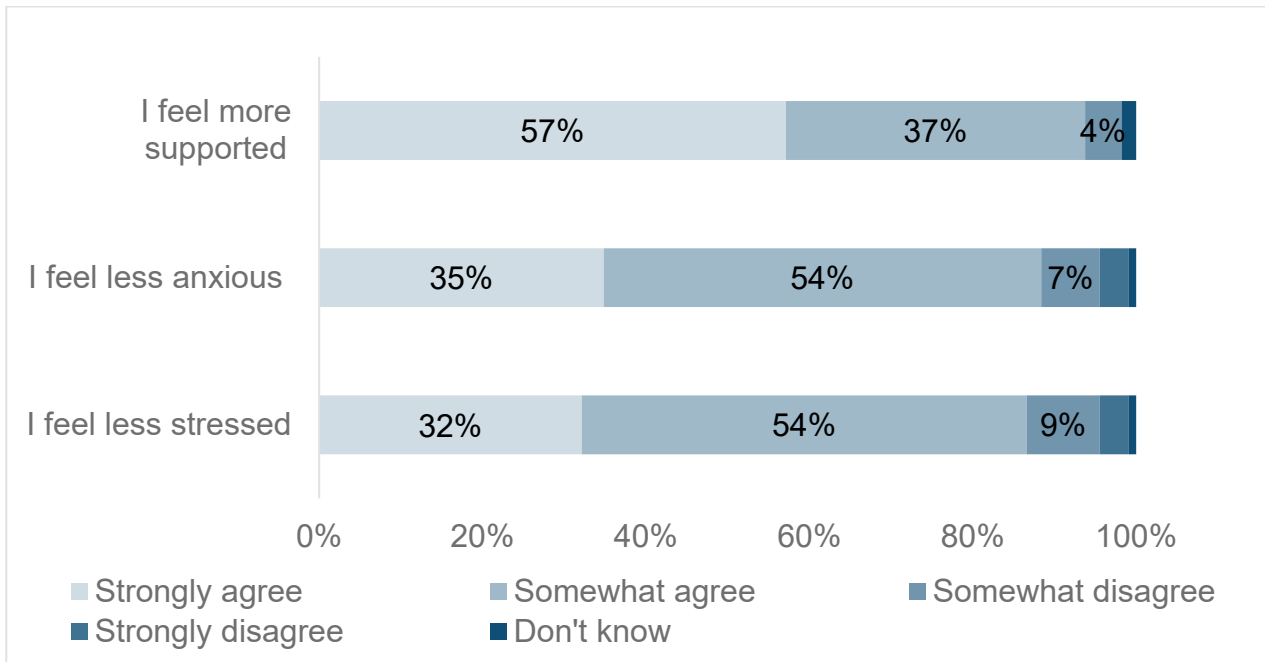
> "I am generally finding it very hard to find any joy in the role of a school leader. Despite having taken some time out over the summer holidays, I already feel exhausted and stressed and we are already only 3 weeks in. Again though, this is not a reflection of the supervision sessions - these have been an absolute lifeline during the ongoing demands of the job." (Primary, WPO Supervision)

Other wellbeing measures

Participants were asked in the follow-up survey whether, as a result of the support, they felt more supported, less anxious, and less stressed. As Figure 8 shows, almost all school leaders who completed the follow-up survey either strongly agreed (57%) or somewhat agreed (37%) that they felt more supported. In addition, almost all agreed at least to some extent that, as a result of the support, they felt less anxious or less stressed[30].

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[30] Comprising peer support and WPO participants only, as Education Support supervision participants were asked this question in a slightly different way. E.g., question statements read 'I have been better able to manage times of anxiousness' instead of 'I feel less anxious'. Responses to the statements were nonetheless broadly aligned with those shown in Figure 8 for the other two strands.

Figure 8: Participant views on outcomes as a result of the support

Statement	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree
I feel more supported	57%	37%	4%
I feel less anxious	35%	54%	7%
I feel less stressed	32%	54%	9%

Legend: Strongly agree · Somewhat agree · Somewhat disagree · Strongly disagree · Don't know

Source: Education Support follow-up survey data April 2023. Base: 112 participants. Question: "The next question is about the impact of the [Online facilitated peer support / individual telephone support] on you. Please look at the statements below, and say how much you agree or disagree with each." Note: question was not asked in Education Support supervision survey

Of the small number who disagreed or strongly disagreed that they felt less anxious or stressed as a result of the support, a few shared reasons for their answers. Comments included:

- A greater focus on practical solutions may have led to more positive outcomes.

- Positive outcomes would not be sustained once the support finished.

- A longer period of support would have resulted in more positive outcomes.

- The survey questions/options did not reflect the type of benefits they had gained through the support.

- Their answers reflected ongoing, external stressors and were therefore unrelated to the quality of the support.

Other quantitative outcomes highlighted through follow-up survey data included:

- For peer support participants, 55% somewhat agreed and 32% strongly agreed that they had more ideas about how to manage their school as they navigate post-pandemic school life.

- For Education Support supervision participants, 68% strongly agreed and 32% somewhat agreed that they had been challenged to think differently by their supervisor.

- For Education Support supervision participants, 54% strongly agreed and 36% somewhat agreed that they were able to manage professional challenges in between sessions, but knew the Service was available to ask for additional support where needed.

Qualitative feedback on outcomes

Qualitative feedback gathered through interviews with school leaders and follow-up surveys provided further evidence of positive outcomes resulting from the Service. These outcomes fall broadly into two key categories:

- Feeling better and thinking more clearly.

- Improved workload and wellbeing management.

Feeling better and thinking more clearly

School leaders spoke of the sessions helping them to become more reflective and self-aware, as well as providing important validation, reassurance, and perspective. This helped them to feel more confident and provided increased clarity around how they view their role. School leaders gave examples of how the support had helped them in these ways, such as:

- Having negative thinking patterns challenged, helping them to recognise where they were doing a 'good enough' job, and separating their sense of self and self-worth from their role as a school leader.

- Having feelings of stress and being overwhelmed validated.

- Gaining clarity or developing solutions to specific issues they were facing, by talking them through with other school leaders or their supervisor.

- Reducing their sense of isolation through having someone to talk to; feeling 'heard'.

- Generally having a sense of feeling more positive and like themselves.

- Gaining greater perspective on challenges they were facing through hearing about other school leaders' experiences in the peer support groups.

    "To feel professionally held in a space which recognises the challenges of the role and know that the unhelpful thoughts have validity. The realisation of the constant demands and pressures that I have not [been] able to process, due to the speed and urgency that I have been working at. In the sessions I have been able to process those thoughts and understand the emotional impact they have been having on me." (Special school, Education Support supervision)

"It definitely made me feel more energised… But mostly it connected me back to who I am outside of being a school leader. I'd lost sight of myself a bit, and the support enabled me to regain that insight."
(Deputy headteacher, primary, peer support)

"It brought a realistic perspective and helped identify unrealistic expectations… it felt like you had someone in your corner."
(Headteacher, primary, Education Support supervision)

Sense of purpose

Participants on the Education Support supervision strand were asked in the follow-up survey about how, if at all, the support had better connected them to their sense of purpose as a school leader. Most of these participants felt that the Service had helped them in this way, variously commenting that the support had:

- Improved their confidence and understanding of what their values were and why they chose to become a school leader.

- Allowed them space to step back from day-to-day tasks to consider what their role as a school leader is and what the most important things to focus on are.

- Helped them to acknowledge their achievements as a school leader, the impact they have, and what they enjoy about the role.

For a small number, the support had not affected their sense of purpose as a school leader. This was either because it was not something they were seeking to gain from the support or because they did not feel they had the capacity to connect to their sense of purpose due to the pressures of the role.

Clarity around career decision-making

Some school leaders highlighted that the support had given them greater clarity around whether to stay or leave their current role. For some, the support had helped them to stay in a role that they were considering leaving when they first signed up to the Service. The support had helped them to feel more positive about the role and given them tools to manage their workload and wellbeing.

For others, the support gave them greater clarity on the challenges they were facing and their own priorities, which helped them make the decision to leave or step down from their leadership role.

"I tell anybody who'll listen about it… I've gone from really thinking I need to find a way out of education, I can't do another 20 years of this, I just can't withstand it emotionally, physically or mentally, to being really, really positive about continuing to have a good impact

on these children and families." (Deputy headteacher, primary, Education Support supervision)

"The conversations gave me the confidence to put my family and wellbeing first and drop down from being a senior leader to a class teacher again. This has had a really positive effect on my mental health and stress levels." (Primary, WPO supervision)

Delivery staff stressed the importance of viewing both these outcomes as positive, stating that the aim of the support should not be to keep school leaders in their role. It was felt this was an important principle not only for the sake of the individual's wellbeing but also for the education system, given that it is ultimately not in the interests of pupils to have school leaders who are burnt out or unwell.

Improved workload and wellbeing management

Another outcome commonly mentioned by school leaders was improved management of their workload and wellbeing. This was achieved partly through the improved confidence and clarity gained through the support but also through the ideas, tools, and strategies shared in the support sessions.

School leaders spoke of being better able to recognise the need to put in place boundaries, both within work and in relation to work-life balance, and having the confidence and strategies to do so as a result of the support. This had enabled them to better prioritise and manage the work they do and create space for their wellbeing. Some school leaders highlighted practical tools shared during the sessions, aimed at improving time management and prioritising tasks, which they had found useful.

"I actually think that the whole process was transformational. It doesn't mean I don't have bad days or don't manage sometimes, but it has given me a distance from myself, to almost see myself clearly again. I feel almost put back on my feet, on steady ground, with a bag of tools, to help me when things become challenging. I am very grateful for the opportunity and my supervisor. (Secondary, Education Support supervision)

"I don't know [if] I will ever be without anxiety but I know how to live with it. Stress is part of the job but the sessions have helped to manage those feelings." (WPO supervision)

Wider school-level impacts

Almost all school leaders interviewed for the evaluation spoke of wider, school level impacts resulting from the support. These included:

- **Recommending support to other staff**: Participants spoke of recommending the Service to other school leaders and promoting other wellbeing services offered through Education Support to wider staff. Linked to this finding, 90% of those who completed a follow-up survey said they were very likely to recommend the Service to a colleague or friend, and 9% said they were fairly likely to do so.

- **New approaches to communication and relationships**: Taking a kinder, more empathetic and open approach to communicating with and managing staff.

- **Sharing ideas, tools, and strategies:** Some school leaders described sharing the things they had learnt during the sessions, from general concepts and techniques to online tools and materials, with other staff and in some cases pupils.

- **Introducing wellbeing policies, strategies, or support:** Such as wellbeing checks-ins for staff, integrating a mental health and wellbeing focus into appraisals, or delivering mental health first aid training. Some school leaders had put in place additional support for staff as a result of engaging with the Service, such as buying into the Education Support Employee Assistance Programme or providing external supervision for other school leaders, particularly DSLs.

Some participants mentioned being more mindful of mental health and wellbeing in their work, and that the Service had supported them to be more effective in their role as a leader. Both were seen to then positively impact on the school. A small number felt the Service had only led to change at an individual level and therefore not resulted in any school level impacts.

> "It's made me kinder when managing staff. I've applied the 'good enough' idea to other staff, and generally I'm more understanding if they make mistakes. It's human to make mistakes and they need to know that it's recoverable. Also making sure to say thank you to staff." (Headteacher, Education Support supervision)

> "I've used the facilitation skills that were modelled during the sessions when facilitating meetings with the school senior leadership team." (Deputy headteacher, primary, peer support)

> "There are all sorts of things [the DSL] is facing on a daily basis and I think she needs regular supervision. I think that's really important, but I'm only really pushing for that because I found it [the Service] so transformational and can see the importance of it. With that really high level of need - socially, emotionally economically for those families - it does put pressure on people dealing with it day in, day out." (Deputy headteacher, primary, Education Support supervision)

Conclusion and areas for consideration

Conclusions are structured around the 4 key questions the evaluation sought to answer, as set out in the introduction. Key areas for consideration for future delivery of similar support programmes are also outlined.

What are the unique features of the support package's design and delivery?

The peer support strand provided a unique offer not available elsewhere. It addressed a need for school leaders to discuss concerns and share ideas in a confidential space, particularly at a time when they were experiencing common challenges arising from COVID-19. School leaders highlighted that they do not often feel comfortable disclosing challenges to other leaders in their local network. The geographically dispersed nature of the groups therefore enabled them to be open about their concerns in a way that was helpful and reduced their sense of isolation. This strand of the Service was discontinued because of decreased demand and delivery challenges. Nonetheless it is worth recognising the value it provided, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The delivery partner, Education Support, added distinct value through its provision of the support package. Education Support's profile among schools and its existing communication networks meant that almost half of participants heard about the service via an Education Support email, social media post, or webpage. The organisation is well regarded by sector stakeholders, which further supported promotion of the Service. In addition, some school leaders reported recommending or buying into other Education Support services as a result of their positive experience of the Service.

What factors influence school leaders' engagement with the support package?

A range of evidence, along with comments from sector stakeholders and participants, has highlighted a clear need for the Service among school leaders. While take up of the support offer was lower than forecasted for the first 18 months of the service, the higher rate of applications during 2023 suggests strong demand, particularly for professional supervision.

Despite this, a high proportion of school leaders who applied and were offered a first session did not go on to engage with the support (almost 1 in 4). Feedback suggested that the high workload and pressures of the role, along with school leaders finding it difficult to prioritise their own needs, were contributory factors to this disengagement. There are a few things that could be done to somewhat mitigate these challenges when delivering similar programmes in the future, such as being persistent with contact, anticipating increased administration time per school leader, and clearly communicating

the expected benefits of the support from the start. However, evaluation evidence has suggested that to fully address these challenges, a culture change is needed around school leaders accessing mental health and wellbeing support.

How are the support sessions experienced?

Feedback from participants indicated that school leaders experienced the support sessions positively. Sessions were viewed as safe spaces to share concerns and issues, and school leaders rated practitioner skills highly. School leaders valued both the peer support and supervision sessions as being more than simply spaces to reflect, with the sharing of ideas, strategies, and resources by other school leaders and/or practitioners viewed as particularly helpful.

Reasons for school leaders disengaging with the support after their first session appeared varied and not exclusively linked to Service quality. However, feedback from some of those who disengaged, and the high value put on practitioner skills by those who completed the support offer, suggests that highly skilled practitioners are important for maximising school leader engagement with this type of support.

What are the self-reported outcomes and impacts of the support?

Evaluation evidence has indicated that the support has had a positive impact on participant wellbeing. Positive outcomes reported included reduced stress and anxiety, improved management of workload and wellbeing, and greater clarity of thinking.

It was not possible to conclusively evidence an improvement in wellbeing using a standardised measure. While the average WEMWBS score reported at baseline and follow-up did increase, the low response rates and non-paired nature of the surveys mean we cannot be sure that this reflects an actual increase in wellbeing as measured by the WEMWBS.

School leaders interviewed for the evaluation reported some school-level impacts arising from the support they received. This included making recommendations for wellbeing support to other staff and improved relationships with colleagues. That participants reported recommending wellbeing support to other school leaders also suggests that the Service itself is helping to address some of the barriers previously noted in this report.

Areas for consideration

Reflecting on the evidence and conclusions presented in this report, the evaluators advise consideration of the following issues:

- **Culture change and messaging**: The evaluation has highlighted several barriers that school leaders face both in taking the step to initially sign up to the Service and in engaging fully with the support offer once they have applied. Typically, these barriers are related to school leader workload and expectations around school leaders accessing support. These are, to a large extent, outside of the control of Service delivery staff. Consideration should therefore be given by DfE and others (local authorities, governors, and trustees) to how the culture around expectations for school leaders accessing support could be changed. This might include, for example, more explicit promotion of the Service and/or setting clear expectations (and associated time/funding) for school leaders to access supervision or support for mental health and wellbeing.

- **Additional or longer-term support**: Many school leaders highlighted a desire for additional support sessions beyond the 6 provided by the Service. A common suggestion made was for a few additional 'top up' sessions spread further apart than the initial 6 sessions. This could help to maximise and sustain outcomes over a longer period, although would come with additional resource requirements that may affect the potential scalability of the Service. Nonetheless, it is something worth considering for future delivery.

- **Clarity of individual support offer**: There appeared to have been some lack of clarity around the one-to-one support offer, with this sometimes being referred to as counselling (particularly in the earlier stages of delivery) instead of supervision. Some participants also felt there was initially a lack of clarity around what the support would involve. While changes to how the Service was promoted during 2023 appeared to be addressing this issue, providing greater clarity from the outset would be beneficial for the delivery of similar programmes in the future.

- **Evaluation planning**: It is positive that a pre- and post- evaluation design utilising standardised measures of wellbeing was implemented by the project team throughout delivery of the Service. Despite this, the evidence base for the evaluation was not as robust as it could have been due to the constraints around non-paired pre- and post- surveys. Delivery of similar programmes in the future should consider planning for evaluation at an earlier stage, to ensure that evaluation design is as robust as possible.

Appendix A

Evaluation questions

What are the unique features of the support package's design?
How are the support package and its support elements designed?
What works well about this design? What could be improved?
How does the design differ from other support packages currently available?
How does the programme supplier (Education Support) add value to the design?
What are the unique features of the support package's delivery?
How are the support package and its support elements delivered?
What works well about this delivery? What could be improved?
Has the delivery approach undergone changes as a result of pilot feedback?
How does the delivery approach differ from other support packages currently available?
To what extent does the scaling up of the support package affect its design, delivery, experiences, outcomes, and impacts?
What factors influence school leaders' engagement with the support package?
To what extent is there demand/need for the support package?
What are the barriers and/or facilitators to accessing the support package? Do these differ between support streams?
Is there anything that could be done to increase school leader engagement with the support package?
How are the support sessions experienced?
What works well about the support sessions? What could be improved?
Are the support sessions experienced differently by different people?
Are there any pre-requisites to a beneficial experience (i.e., tech proficiency) and how can these be mitigated against?

Have changes, implemented as a result of feedback, been successful in improving experiences?
What are the self-reported outcomes and impacts of this support?
Do the self-reported outcomes align with the project's aims?
Have there been increases in participants' wellbeing measures (WEMWBS and ONS-4)?
Are there any differences in outcomes between the support streams?
Are there any difference in outcomes dependent on other factors (i.e., individual and school-level characteristics)?
Have changes, implemented as a result of feedback, been successful in improving outcomes?
What are the self-reported impacts of the support? (longer term impacts may include those on teaching quality, pupil outcomes, staff retention, time available for CPD activities).

Appendix B

Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale – survey question

Below are some statements about feelings and thoughts. Please choose the answer that best describes your experiences of each over the last two weeks.

[Response options: None of the time, rarely, some of the time, often, all of the time, prefer not to say].

- I've been feeling optimistic about the future.
- I've been feeling useful.
- I've been feeling relaxed.
- I've been feeling interested in other people.
- I've had energy to spare.
- I've been dealing with problems well.
- I've been thinking clearly.
- I've been feeling good about myself.
- I've been feeling close to other people.
- I've been feeling confident.
- I've been able to make up my own mind about things.
- I've been feeling loved.
- I've been interested in new things.
- I've been feeling cheerful.

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