

NQT Quality improvement study

4.5 Retention

4.5.1 Retention of NQTs: a problem?

It appears that retention is perceived as an issue for very few of the schools we spoke with in the Case Studies. In fact, over half stated categorically that there was no problem at all, and only one (11-18 secondary, above average performing) school explicitly noted that there was a serious issue, although – as we go on to explore – schools did mention particular problems in some areas.

Well over half of the schools in all sectors noted that NQTs leaving for promotion was the main reason for their moving on. Around a quarter of schools in all sectors noted that it was normal and welcomed for staff to move on for promotion in the medium term (after 3 to 5 years was a typical response), and in fact several noted that they felt it was more problematic to stay for too long.

For many schools in our sample, then, appropriate retention of NQTs might typically mean keeping them long enough to feel that time and effort spent on development is to some extent 'paid back' but this didn't mean staying in the school for longer than around 2 years. Of course, for a small number of schools - perhaps 2 or 3 this led to some degree of resentment, having spent effort on providing support and development. Others however had a more philosophical view, since of course every school benefits from the training and support provided by others: *"There is some turnover but this is seen as something healthy, a form of renewal. There is a 'danger' that good induction and CPD will lead to training the new staff 'up and out' of the school, but that is not something to be scared of."* (Secondary SLT member).

4.5.2 Retention strategies

Unsurprisingly, the single most often mentioned retention strategy was to provide appropriate development opportunities, mentioned in one form or another by the majority of schools across all sectors. This meant providing high quality induction (3 schools: see also section 4.4), being given opportunities to take on responsibility or engage in longer term CPD and providing specific opportunities, such as described here:

"A high proportion of NQTs stay in the school. They are very well supported and the CPD process continues to support them in their early years of teaching. There are training days designed to discuss relevant issues and NQTs are involved in both being coached and later coaching others. They have access to software for evaluating teaching and make good use of this which helps them to see their progression. The school makes creative use of their Recruitment and Retention allowance to enable staff to be involved in innovative projects and this encourages them to take the initiative" (secondary SLT member).

One primary school made the point that whilst high quality induction was essential, this sometimes dropped off in the post-induction year, and this could lead to some early career



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teachers moving on. The school that said there were some retention problems, linking it to induction issues:

"Over the last four years, NQTs have left in rather greater numbers than [the deputy head] would have expected or wished... This had led to a questioning of whether the induction programme is right. The general feeling is that it is, overall. For someone who is failing an NQT year, the induction process is very rigorous. It throws up questions not only about the ability of the trainee but also about the quality and appropriateness of the induction programme."

These opportunities did not necessarily mean providing paid promotion in the short term, although one secondary school specifically mentioned providing progression linked to training, and in fact at least 12 schools – interestingly all but one of which were secondaries – did mention explicitly providing promotion opportunities as being important. One of these noted that this was becoming easier due to the ageing workforce increasing natural turnover.

Related to development was providing appropriate support, mentioned by seven schools. Two schools picked up the important point that providing development opportunities and support made staff feel valued, and this was the crux of retaining them, and two others noted that not getting on with the SLT was an issue for some staff who decided to leave.

The other major dimension, alongside support and development, was the school's character. Around a quarter of schools noted that NQTs stay because the school provided a positive, friendly, happy environment. In a slightly different vein, two secondary and one independent school SLT members noted that teachers understood their schools were professional and well run, and stayed for that reason, and one special school and one independent school noted that individuals stayed due to personal rewards for teachers working in those particular sectors.

Two primary schools specifically mentioned work life balance, one SLT member noting that *"Within school all members of the SLT try to ensure that all members of staff and NQTs have the right work / life balance by limiting the number of meetings, avoid out of hours working and make sure NQTs have evenings free"* (Primary SLT member). The other primary school related his more to additional staff benefits such as *"people in to wash staff cars, a staff yoga group and someone who comes in to do Indian head massage"* (Primary SLT member). In a similar vein, one independent school outlined the additional benefits they could provide compared with state schools including health insurance, subsidised accommodation and subsidised education for teachers' own children.

Other aspects of the wider context of the work of the school were mentioned by some. For example, five schools noted that relationships with pupils were important, and one mentioned relationships with parents. Whilst these issues are to some extent related to factors outside the schools' control, it is certainly not the case that they cannot put in place strategies to address them, as this example powerfully demonstrates: *"Retention of staff is part of the School Improvement Plan ... the reasons that people have left predominately relate to pressures from outside – aggressive parents. To tackle this ... NQTs (and other staff) are not expected to meet with parents alone, conflict management is part of the*

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school's CPD and the SLT will take on any issues that staff have" (primary mentor). Linked to this, one primary school NQT mentor noted that having a positive Ofsted report reduced pressure on new staff (we return to pressure on NQTs in the next subsection).

Finally, one school made the point that if the recruitment process (see section 4.2) works well, then retention is easier since there is a good match between the school and the teacher.

4.5.3 Reasons for leaving the schools

The factors mentioned in the sub-section above can reduce the likelihood of NQTs leaving in the near term; so for example, if teachers are well supported, provided with development and perhaps promotion opportunities and feel they work in a happy environment then they are likely to stay for an appropriate time (which as we note above is perhaps three to five years). After this period, as we note above, promotion is a driving influence for many staff, and if it not available in the school then the vast majority of schools recognised that NQTs will eventually move on for this reason. The interviews with NQTs themselves concurred with this view, with the majority saying they would like to be promoted, and at least 15 stating that they would move for promotion, in some cases only if they were not offered promotion at their current schools.

In addition to leaving promotion, seven schools, five primary and secondary, noted that a reason for leaving that was often inevitable was where an NQT was on a temporary contract. One secondary SLT member explained: *"All NQTs are recruited on a one-year contract. The majority of them complete the NQT year, but very few are retained ... Some NQTs are lucky and are made permanent but this depends on the subject and there tend to be more permanent appointments made for core subjects"* (Secondary SLT member).

But there are other factors, some of which are less clearly within the schools' remit. The most common of these was leaving due to relocation (mentioned by 14 schools), often linked to a partner's job. The next most common personal reason was to travel (four schools).

Factors related to the location were mentioned: if NQTs were happy and settled in the locale of the school, they were more likely to stay (three schools). However, if they were not settled or – a problem mentioned by four schools – the cost of housing was prohibitively high, then this tended to push some into leaving.

Seven schools mentioned that NQTs moved on if they felt stressed or pressured, finding the work too difficult, the workload too high, even if provided with adequate support. SLT members stated that for some of these teachers, and others, it may well be the case that leaving the school is sometimes in everyone's interests: it is just not the job for them (either teaching more generally or in the particular school). When we examined the characteristics of schools where leaving due to pressure was mentioned, however, all but one were in challenging circumstances (five had some combination of high deprivation and/or high unemployment; and two had recently left special measures).

Finally, three schools gave examples of individuals leaving to change career or return to their previous career.

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4.5.4 Plans for the future: NQT views

The vast majority of the NQTs with whom we spoke intended to stay in teaching for at least the next three to five years. For a significant minority – 18 of the 50 NQTs we spoke to in all sectors – teaching was seen as a long term career, and six used the term “career for life”. For the rest, teaching was something they planned to stay in for the foreseeable future (at least ten more) or at least for the time being (most of the rest).

Only two (both primary teachers) felt they were likely to leave teaching. One of these was feeling the pressure of working in a school in with significant levels of deprivation, the other felt underpaid compared with comparable professions (this issue was not mentioned by other NQTs).

There were seven others who felt they may leave, to travel (two NQTs), to change career (three) to teach abroad (one), or to escape the pressure (one, working in an independent school).

In the medium to longer term, most – perhaps 80 per cent – had goals, or more or less developed plans to advance via some sort of promotion. As we noted in the previous subsection, most of the NQTs were prepared to move on for promotion opportunities, although three were unsure they wanted to move out of the classroom for promotion. Related to this, there was a group of perhaps six to ten who were clear that whether promoted or not, they did not want to get too far from the classroom, so perhaps a Head of Department or Head of Year role, or a Key Stage coordinator role in primary schools - or in three cases an AST role - would be possible, but certainly not a senior management role.

About half of the secondary NQTs harboured a medium term goal to become a Head of Department or Head of Year. Five NQTs (four primary, one secondary) expressed a desire to move to a very senior position in a school, either Deputy Head or Headteacher (although two schools were clear they did not want this). Three female NQTs stated they would be likely to want to work part time in the future as they planned on having a family.

Of the remaining few NQTs, medium and longer term goals were simply expressed as “staying for a while” in the school or teaching, then moving on or deciding later on. This group consisted of around 7-10 NQTs across all phases.

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4.5.5 Summary

- It is difficult to make the case, based on the case study data analysed and presented above, that there is a serious, widespread problem with retention. Most schools felt that there was either no problem or that problems were related to a limited number of issues, and most saw that providing good quality support and development opportunities in a friendly environment was the key to retaining staff for the first few years of their careers. Beyond that, it is likely that most NQTs will look to move on (internally or externally) for promotion or other challenges. Also, many schools recognised that keeping staff in the longer term was not necessarily in the schools or the individual NQT / teacher's interests.
- NQTs supported these views, in the main. Most intended to stay in teaching, and looked forward to promotion internally or externally at some point, in some cases to very senior positions. A very small number were considering leaving the profession, with two (out of 25 interviewed) fairly sure they would do so. Schools did not necessarily see this as a problem in itself: schools no more wanted to retain staff unsuited to the school or the job than the NQTs wished to remain.
- In a minority of schools, there was a more or less serious problem with retention of NQTs, and these schools were some of those facing the most challenging circumstances. One of the two NQTs that were clear they wanted to move on were also working within a challenging environment. This supports other research which indicates that it is more difficult to retain staff for such schools, yet it is also true as we see from our study – that these schools often work very hard to develop innovative and thoughtful strategies to retain their most valuable resource. In the next stages of the study, we intend to investigate such strategies in more depth.