

# Recruitment and Retention of Newly Qualified Teachers in Oxfordshire Schools

Report of research undertaken by the University of  
Oxford and Oxford Brookes University for the  
Strategic Schools Partnership Board



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# Executive Summary

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## Rationale for the study

The study was commissioned by the Strategic Schools Partnership Board for Oxfordshire in November 2015 in response to increasing evidence from schools within Oxfordshire and concerns expressed by head teachers and governors about the challenges involved both in recruiting sufficient new teachers to Oxfordshire schools and in retaining those staff that were successfully recruited.

The local concerns that had prompted the commissioning of the research were confirmed by a report of the National Audit Office<sup>1</sup>, published in February 2016, which acknowledged that:

- The DFE had missed its targets for filling training places over the past 4 years, with the margin of failure increasing from 1% in 2012-13 to 9% in 2014/15. Secondary places had proved particularly difficult to fill.
- Only around 80% of trainees who commenced a (final) year of training in 2013/14 were known to have been recruited to teaching in England within 6 months of qualifying (of which an unknown proportion were working in independent schools).
- The recorded rate of vacancies and temporarily filled positions in state-funded schools had doubled between 2011 and 2014 from 0.5% of the teaching workforce to 1.2% (a figure which the DFE accepts is unlikely to reflect recruitment difficulties fully).
- Nationally, of teachers newly qualified over a 10-year period, approximately 12% left state-funded schools within one year of joining while 28% had left within five years.

## Research aims

The main aims of the study were to map patterns of recruitment and retention of newly qualified teachers across the county: to determine both the extent and nature of the difficulties faced by primary, secondary and special schools in attracting and retaining staff; and to identify the key factors that contribute to early career teachers' decisions to stay or leave employment within the county. Specifically the study sought to address the following questions:

1. What attracts NQTs (in different subjects/phases; and from different training routes/locations) to work in Oxfordshire schools?
2. What obstacles are there to the effective recruitment of NQTs in Oxfordshire?
3. Why do many early career teachers in Oxfordshire schools leave the schools to which they were recruited as NQTs?
4. Why do some teachers recruited as NQTs to Oxfordshire schools choose to continue working in the school and what might induce others to stay?

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<sup>1</sup> National Audit Office (2016) *Training New Teachers* [HC 798 SESSION 2015-16 10 FEBRUARY 2016] available online at: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Training-new-teachers-Summary.pdf>

## Research design

The study comprised three main elements:

1. a questionnaire survey sent to all state-funded primary and secondary and special schools asking about the appointment and subsequent employment trajectory of NQTs appointed within the last three years;
2. a series of interviews with teachers recruited as NQTs who have remained within the county for at least three years;
3. a series of interviews (conducted in small groups or with individuals) with teachers from each sector responsible within school for induction support.<sup>2</sup>

## Findings

### Underlying themes across all phases

Detailed findings from the project concerning primary, secondary and special schools respectively are presented separately in the main body of the report. However one of the most striking findings to emerge was the similarity in themes emerging from each of the strands of the study. This may be partly a facet of the methodology which did not, for example, yield sufficient responses for each subject area to allow us to interrogate the data for any particular idiosyncrasies that may have been more pertinent to the secondary phase. Nevertheless, the recurrence of the themes noted here across all strands was notable and provides some potential principles that may underpin more effective recruitment and retention of teachers.

### The importance of local connections

A major theme that applied to all types of school and was confirmed by all the different sources of data was the significance of teachers' existing connections to the locality and in some cases to individual schools as a key factor in attracting new teachers.

### The specific influences of economic factors

Economic reasons were less directly fore-grounded than the researchers had anticipated at the start of the project, but there is an important caveat here, in that the extent to which existing connections to Oxfordshire (and the region more widely) could be a partial proxy for economic issues. New teachers with existing links to the area are less likely to experience significant economic upheaval or challenge if they choose to remain somewhere they have already established connections through their training or if they remain within (or return to) a family base in Oxfordshire for their first appointment to a teaching role. There was some evidence, particularly from secondary respondents that economic reasons were more likely to surface a couple of years into an individual's career and for all phases the importance of securing promotion and effective career progression was seen as important for retention and this too may be partly allied to economic imperatives.

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<sup>2</sup> In a number of cases written responses to the same questions were provided as an alternative to interviews

## **Anticipating and acknowledging the (ongoing) demands in providing appropriate support**

The importance of career progression and personal professional development was another key theme to emerge across all phase and strands. In seeking to retain teachers, it is important to ensure that new teachers are consistently supported in the early stages – *before* and *after* as well as *during* their NQT year. In particular, the study identified the need both to enhance teachers' awareness within their training year, of the range of demands that they would face and to provide support mechanisms during the NQT year – including realistic expectations of what they could achieve – that would strengthen their professional resilience and scaffold the development of coping strategies. It was widely acknowledged that no training programme could fully prepare new teachers for all aspects of the job – many of the teachers who stressed the demands that they had faced as NQTs, also insisted that they had been well prepared to take those challenges on. The message essentially seems to be about acknowledging how much more NQTs have to learn and how many different things they are learning to handle simultaneously, even as they acquire the specific contextual knowledge that they need of new policies and systems. In response, it is important to create as much space as possible for individual development as well as providing new teachers with appropriate support, targeted where possible to their particular needs.

## **Accentuating the positive aspects of teachers' professional identity and commitment**

More positively there was clear evidence from the teachers involved in the study that the motivation to persist was rooted in a powerful sense of professional, or indeed, vocational commitment that could be effectively nurtured by paying attention to three fundamental issues: teachers' sense of worth – assuring them that they are valued for what they do; the profound enjoyment to be found in teaching – a facet of professional practice that needs to be reinforced and celebrated; and the importance of professional agency – giving teachers' scope to make pedagogical and curricular choices and involving them in collective rather than unilateral decision-making.

## **Specific findings**

### **The need to understand how local connections operate**

- Local connections were highly significant across all phases and types of school. The majority of teachers recruited to Oxfordshire schools as NQTS had either trained locally or had moved into the county to be near existing family members.
- A number of recruits had developed a specific commitment to a particular school through undertaking part of their training in the school.
- The definition of local is permeable, however, with new and early career teachers often identifying the locations where they might teach in terms of their accessibility and the possibility of commuting, rather than because of loyalty to any particular county.
- With few exceptions, new teachers do *not* tend to mention specific characteristics of the county that might make it an attractive place to work.

## Challenging contexts

- Particular schools sizes and locations and high proportions of FSM do not *necessarily* create problems of recruitment and retention. There are many examples of schools that buck expectations in this respect.
- While some teachers may find some characteristics off-putting, different teachers are inspired by different aspirations and even schools in challenging circumstances can create a positive narrative by emphasising the scope for professional learning

## The demands of teaching as they are experienced by NQTs

- Initial training providers may need to acknowledge the demands of the profession more explicitly and be more active perhaps in counselling some trainees who are struggling out of the profession.
- Initial training providers may also need to consider how they can make trainees aware of the *range* of demands that they will face in the first year of teaching; while they cannot equip them to tackle them all effectively from the very beginning, they may be to promote more realistic expectations that promote greater resilience and prevent new teachers from feeling overwhelmed.
- Teachers in special schools face perhaps the most extreme demands in the sense of teachers being unprepared for what they will encounter; but (perhaps because they are fully aware of the range of challenges they know that beginners will face) some of them seem particularly successful at reassuring new teachers, enabling them to take pride in what they are doing and to strive for improvement without feeling oppressed by all they have yet to learn.
- There is *some* evidence of new teachers' need for more guidance or support in relation to behaviour management, but this only seems to relate to specific students or particularly challenging classes, rather than being a more general concern.
- Another aspect of practice highlighted as a focus for more guidance and support was related to the needs of students with special educational needs and to the processes of differentiation. (This was associated with the assumption of greater responsibility for student progress.)
- Assessment was the other most frequent concern (in both primary and secondary sections) with teachers struggling with the full range of processes from marking and feedback to recording and reporting students' achievement in appropriate ways

## The value of ongoing support

- New teachers required and benefitted from *ongoing* mentoring, provided not just in their NQT year, but also in relation to new professional responsibilities which tend to be assumed quite quickly.
- There is considerable variation between schools in relation to the extent to which (and ways in which) they sustain provision of tailored support into the second year of teaching. Where support ceases abruptly teachers can feel that they have been '*dumped*'.

- Clear developmental pathways associated with career progression are important to retention.
- Informal collaboration and collegiality plays a vital role alongside formal NQT provision and in supporting the retention of teachers – within specific schools as well as within the profession
- Many teachers tend to have a positive, vocational commitment to their profession .Many have very strong feelings of loyalty that can be nurtured, especially if they feel they are valued.
- Teachers also want scope to enjoy what they are doing and opportunities to exercise their professional agency as individuals and through shared processes of decision-making.

## Recommendations

### In relation to recruitment

1. Schools and local providers should be **proactive in forging prospective links** from an earlier point in the training year. Such collaboration should focus not only on recruitment but on helping trainees in developing their understanding of the requirements of the job and of specific contexts.
2. Schools should **think regionally as well as locally** about recruitment. This means ensuring that advertisements about distinctive features of the county’s provision, as well as details about specific vacancies, are effectively communicated through providers in neighbouring counties as well as through recruitment drives within OTSA, OBU and OUDE.
3. Schools and local providers both need to ‘sell’ the **advantages of Oxford/Oxfordshire as an area steeped in education with a deep commitment to teachers’ continued professional learning and career development**. This principle applies equally to retention. It is important to promote the specific attractions of the school and of the locality to the teachers that *have* been recruited. They may have other reasons for taking the job and may remain unaware of what the area (the universities, OTSA) has to offer.
4. Advertising should thus include a strong **focus on the scope for continued professional development** and the variety of opportunities offered within a developmental framework. Many schools already present their CPD programmes in this way and OTSA has a similarly well-framed developmental package supporting teachers at different stages of their career. There may be more scope to make this visible at the recruitment stage, offering teachers the prospect of career development rather than simply a job.
5. Where there is a negative narrative about a particular local context, it may be helpful to counter this by **stressing opportunities for learning rather than support in facing the challenges**.

6. The provision of **additional financial support** would obviously be welcomed by teachers, but it may be more useful to focus what funds are available on the retention of teachers at the point they become more concerned about the costs of living. Funds might, however, be made available to support teachers' travel costs (if they are commuting) as part of a recruitment package.
7. Include more **opportunities within initial training programmes for teachers who may be interested in working in special schools** to gain experience of working with students with special needs alongside the necessary theoretical understandings of the particular barriers to learning that they face.

## In relation to retention

1. All staff in school and initial teacher training providers should **recognise the scale of the demands** that NQTs are facing. However well prepared teachers have been, it may help them – and those supporting them – to acknowledge the inevitable impact of an increased timetable and greater responsibility for students' progress. Given the scale of attrition in the first two years of teaching it is worth investing, where possible, in additional time for new teachers to absorb these demands. More attention could also be paid within initial teacher education to establishing realistic expectations and building resilience.
2. Senior leaders and those responsible for induction in mainstream schools could usefully **explore the scope to learn from successful practice in special schools**, many of which seem to prove very effective in nurturing new teachers, despite the range of additional demands that teachers face in such contexts. Key factors may prove to be linked to a widespread commitment (across the whole staff) to supporting new teachers as well as clear messages that everyone is continuing to learn how to provide effectively for their students.
3. School leaders (at middle and senior levels) and induction tutors should **recognise the importance of both the formal provision that is made for NQTs and the informal factors associated with collaboration** within and across subject departments or year/phase teams. While genuine collegiality cannot be mandated, it is possible to ensure that planning, for example, is a collaborative endeavour, with existing schemes of work and lesson materials effectively stored on staff networks so they can be readily accessed and new teachers are engaged in *joint* planning for new schemes/lessons. Given teachers' views of the variability of some of the formal sessions provided for them it is important to evaluate these carefully and to exploit the value of other kinds of activity – such as the opportunity to observe other teachers.
4. Induction tutors (and those responsible for CPD provision) should also appreciate the value of providing both **internal and external forms of support**. Not only do the latter widen the range of teachers' knowledge, they also provide welcome opportunities for social and professional networking.



5. School leaders responsible for induction and CPD should seek to provide **a programme of tailored support through the early career stages** that develops out of the NQT provision offered in the first year. It is important that second year teachers do not feel abandoned at that point. Continued mentoring in relation to their new role may be the priority for those teachers who have assumed new responsibilities, but other forms of provision should allow teachers to develop subject or phase specific professional expertise that reinforces a sense of pride in their professional identity.
6. For small schools in particular it may also be appropriate to make **arrangements for external mentoring** as well as offering internal support and guidance. It is important that new teachers know how to seek help (beyond their own context if necessary) if they feel that they are not being offered adequate mentoring.
7. School leaders are already very aware of the importance of securing early promotion to teachers who would like to be able to remain within the county. While it may not always be possible to offer them paid positions of additional responsibility, try to **provide scope for professional development that will also enhance their career prospects**. Where scope is limited within a particular school, multi academy trusts or local partnerships may be able to offer some kind of exchange programme that could widen teachers' knowledge and expertise.
8. Senior leaders within schools should **acknowledge and nurture the sense of vocation and commitment** that sustains many teachers and the sense of loyalty that many feel to their students and to the school. It is important that teachers continue to enjoy their work, which they will not do if they feel under constant pressure, and that they feel their professional knowledge and expertise are valued and respected. This means that they need to be involved in decision-making and feel that there are certain spheres of practice within which they can exercise their own agency.