

Navigating Ofsted: Creating Coherent Professional Learning Programmes



Why is coherence important?

Professional learning programmes are coherent when they:



Explicitly **address school priorities** for improving pupil outcomes ([Cordingley et al., 2015](#))



Consist of a '**regular rhythm** of opportunities', **sustained** over time ([DfE, 2016, p.10](#))



Support staff with **refining and embedding** teaching practices ([Whitworth and Chiu, 2015](#))



Respond to school, departmental, and individual **needs** ([DfE, 2016](#))

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'Developing coherence involves aligning the focus of improvement work across...the policies... the goals for the school... the planning done by departments... professional learning initiatives... and teachers' personal goals'.

([Timperley et al., 2020, p.13](#)).

The benefits of coherence have been associated with:



Improved pupil outcomes in a variety of settings ([Timperley et al., 2020](#)) because there is a collective effort across the school towards a shared goal(s)



Increased trust and collaboration amongst colleagues as the learning they engage with is perceived as meaningful and relevant for their daily practice ([Timperley et al., 2020](#))



Enhanced expertise, as colleagues implement changes to practice and embed new learning over time ([Whitworth and Chiu, 2015](#))

What problems are leaders trying to solve?

According to our work with schools and national research (2025)

Which of these scenarios do you recognise?

Leaders have noticed that there is initial enthusiasm from professional learning input, but this does not follow through to shifts in classroom practice.

▶ **'39% report that CPD has not clearly improved their ability to perform their job' (p.9)**

Teachers report feeling overwhelmed by the number of priorities being addressed through school-wide, departmental, and individual professional learning opportunities, not all of which align with the school's core priorities for pupils.

▶ **'48% feel that CPD aligns with school improvement plans' (p.9)**

Governors hear that over the last two terms, all staff have engaged in the same professional learning activities around one of the school's improvement priorities, but staff are reporting that their individual concerns and needs are not being met.

▶ **'12% feel that professional learning addresses the diverse needs of staff' (p.9)**

What practices are leaders working towards?

Based on the Ofsted Framework (2025)

These are the statements we've selected as having the strongest links with this area of professional learning.

▶ 'Leaders ensure that staff have access to high-quality, evidence-informed, **sustained and coherent** professional learning programmes that build expertise and are **aligned to balance the priorities** of whole-school improvement, subjects/teams/phases and individual needs' (p.75)

▶ 'Leaders take a **strategic approach** to improvement, in which they carefully **identify the right priorities** to ensure the best possible outcomes and experiences for pupils' (p.74)

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'Trying to work at the level of deep or powerful ideas and gain coherence around these, rather than at uniformity of practice, will have greater impact on student learning outcomes. Coherence does not mean that everyone does the same thing; it means that everything that people do is in service of the same big ideas.'

(Timperley et al., 2020, p.25)

Where might you start with creating greater coherence?

These reflection questions will support your assessment of how coherent professional learning programmes are in your setting at present. You might answer them alone or with colleagues.

On a scale of 1-10, where 1 is rarely and 10 is always, how often...



Is a single professional learning focus sustained over one term?



Are professional learning activities explicitly aligned with core school improvement priorities?



Do professional learning programmes respond to school-wide priorities, as well as departmental and individual needs?



Are individual professional learning activities thoughtfully sequenced to form a programme that builds expertise over time?

Whilst each setting has its own set of circumstances, conditions, and values that influence coherence, these two scenarios from school leaders we've worked with offer a range of insights into the creation of coherent professional learning programmes.

Explicitly address school priorities

Context: A Deputy Headteacher in a small primary school purchased 1-1 coaching from the Teacher Development Trust for support with their newly acquired responsibility for professional learning

Challenge: Fortnightly twilights on a range of 'Teach Like a Champion' (TLAC) strategies over the last two terms, with modelling and rehearsal, seemed initially promising for staff relationships and teaching quality. However, lesson observations and staff conversations highlighted infrequent and inconsistent implementation across the school, and revealed low confidence and overwhelm amongst teachers.

Coherence: The leader, with support from TDT, maintained the existing mechanisms of modelling and rehearsal in fortnightly twilights, but they selected specific TLAC approaches that would support the school to make progress towards a key priority of improving the efficacy of assessment for learning (AfL). Staff built their collective expertise over time with a single set of shared practices. Through the introduction of a peer coaching programme, they also worked collaboratively over time to make appropriate adjustments to AfL approaches to respond to their own needs and strengths, the demands of their subjects, and their pupils.

Respond to individual needs

Context: A large secondary school in the South-East purchased our Building Expert Schools Programme, so we conducted a Diagnostic Review. Evidence to inform strengths and areas for development was triangulated across a self-assessment completed by the Assistant Headteacher, a survey completed by 80% of staff, and interviews with a range of leadership, teaching, and support staff.

Challenge: The Diagnostic Review process revealed that coherent professional learning programmes in their setting meant that all staff had a clear and shared focus to work towards that aligned with school priorities. However, staff survey responses and interviews indicated that professional learning programmes were not adequately meeting colleagues' individual needs. Each week, every department met to rehearse behaviour management strategies in line with the school's teaching playbook. For some staff with strong practices already, there was no room in the schedule to explore adaptations for strategies to meet the needs of their pupils with SEND. Other staff suggested they needed more individualised, ongoing support beyond the shared focus of the weekly sessions.

Coherence: In the year following the review, school leaders maintained their shared focus for professional learning, though departments were offered more flexibility about how sessions were facilitated each week to meet their team's needs. The shared focus was also cascaded into monthly professional growth conversations so that middle leaders could ensure individual needs were being addressed within sessions and other ongoing support was put in place.

Where might you go next to learn more?



Instantly access our affordable, 90-minute online module, [Planning Continuous Professional Development](#), to support you towards more coherent professional learning in your setting.



Complete our CPD self-audit to explore the coherence of your current provision and identify what you might focus on next to improve, or go into more depth with our Diagnostic Review of CPD and develop a change plan through our [Building Expert Schools Programme](#). Either the CPD self-audit or Diagnostic Review will help you present credible evidence of current focus, provision and improvement plans to Ofsted.



Not sure where to start? Book a free 1-1 coaching call on our [CPD Leadership Hub](#).