

# Navigating Ofsted: Strategic Leadership of Professional Learning



## Why is Strategic Leadership Important?

Schools and leaders make significant investments in staff professional learning, whether through direct budget spend or the cost of staff time. With resources so limited, it's more important than ever to be confident that the time and money being spent on professional learning is actually having the intended impact. Making time now to consider your strategy is a good investment in developing sustainable and effective professional learning.



## Effective strategic leadership of professional learning involves:

- **Clear leadership of professional development**, aligning school improvement priorities with professional learning activities and fostering a school environment that enables professional learning to be most effective ([Cordingley et al, 2015](#)).
- **A long-term view of career development that considers** the professional development colleagues might need to respond to changing pupil and staff needs, building capacity in the longer term and ensuring effective succession planning is in place.
- **Effective allocation of resources** that follows the school's strategic priorities ensures that professional development has the greatest return on investment. This also includes protecting high-quality time for staff to learn, practise and reflect, as well as a transparent professional development budget that accounts for both financial investment and staff time.
- **High-quality professional development** informed by the rich and developing evidence base around what constitutes effective professional development to give leaders confidence that the time and money invested genuinely improves teaching and learning ([EEF, 2021](#); [DfE, 2016](#)).
- **Evaluation-informed professional development** is not only a way to understand whether professional development is making the difference leaders intend and adapt implementation plans accordingly, but can also enable leaders to identify staff development needs based on pupil outcomes and design professional development more effectively ([Guskey, 2002](#)).

“*The single biggest in-school factor in terms of pupil outcomes is the quality of teaching. If schools are finding it increasingly difficult to prioritise development for teachers, it will begin to have an impact on teaching quality over time.*’ Teacher Development Trust, 2024.

## What problems are leaders trying to solve?

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

**Which of these scenarios feel familiar?**

School staff are not aware which person, or group of people, is responsible for leading professional learning in their setting.

- ▶ **'62% say CPD responsibility lies with a member of SLT, with 9% reporting no clear leader or person(s) with responsibility for CPD in their setting' p.11**

Leaders have noticed that the time allocated in meetings for professional learning is not always being used for this and is repurposed for other activities

- ▶ **'Only 16% of teachers feel adequate time is given to CPD within working hours' p.42**

Teachers are not seeking out or requesting funded professional development opportunities, as they don't think there is a budget available.

- ▶ **'50% of all primary respondents believe funding for CPD is not available – and cannot be made available' p.10**

Despite significant investment from leaders, staff buy-in to professional development activities is low

- ▶ **'26% feel that their CPD is directly applicable to their role' p.9**

## What practice 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 allocate appropriate time and other resources to a coherent programme of evidence-informed professional learning for all staff' p.75**

- ▶ **'Leaders ensure that professional learning opportunities draw on the best available evidence, including high-quality research and expert provision from beyond and within the school, including nationally recognised career and professional frameworks and programmes, to build capacity and support succession planning' p.75**

# Where might you start in developing the strategic leadership of professional learning?

These reflection questions will support your assessment of the current practices around strategic leadership of professional learning in your setting. You might answer them alone or with colleagues.

- To what extent do professional learning activities reflect whole school improvement priorities?
- What opportunities are there for staff to revisit and refine learning over time, and how does this enable longer-term changes in practice?
- How would colleagues describe the leadership of professional learning in your setting?
- How much time is protected for professional learning, and how often is it used just for this purpose?
- To what extent is there adequate funding and resources, within the available budget, set aside for professional learning?
- What evidence-informed principles are used currently to design and deliver your professional development programmes?

Every school or setting will be at their own specific starting point based on their individual circumstances, vision and culture. Here are some examples of different areas that schools have focused on when developing the strategic leadership of professional development.

## Leadership of CPD

Through our CPD Excellence Hubs, we worked closely with schools to develop their CPD leadership capacity. Many of the schools did not have a dedicated CPD leader, so these roles were established, and we worked with the leaders through our Building Expert Schools Programmes to develop coherent, evidence-informed CPD programmes in their settings. This significantly improved the perception and experiences of CPD for staff in these settings.

## Effective use of time

We worked with a headteacher who was new in post and the school had a large deficit budget. All staff had an hour protected each week for individual professional development, there was a positive culture around professional learning and staff valued their time for professional development. Despite this significant investment in time for professional development, the impact on whole school priorities was not evaluated, so the leader was unclear on the return on investment. Through our Building Expert Schools Programme, we supported the headteacher and distributed CPD leadership team to change the structures and establish evaluation practices to ensure staff retained high-quality protected time, but activities were aligned with whole school priorities and staff were able to see the impact on their pupils.

## Identifying staff needs

Through our Associate Qualification in CPD Leadership, we worked with an established CPD leader who was leading an evidence-informed CPD programme that staff really valued, however, they were finding it difficult to identify individual staff development needs in line with the whole school priorities. The leader made small but impactful changes to their evaluation processes, which now enables them to remain informed of individual staff development needs through the implementation of their whole school programme, and respond to these as they arise.

## Where might you go next to learn more?



Instantly access our affordable, 90-minute online module, [Planning Strategically for Professional Development](#), to develop strategic leadership of 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](#).