**Headteacher Professional Learning**

**Think Piece**

**Education Scotland**

March 2023

**Summary**

This Think Piece, commissioned by Education Scotland, is intended to inform policymaking at a time of change within Scotland’s education agencies. Its aim is to provide headteachers with an opportunity to describe their experience of professional learning. The headteachers who engaged in this listening exercise describe the importance of their professional learning not only in enhancing their own leadership skills but also in benefitting their school communities. It is clear from what the headteachers say that there is currently some very impactful professional learning in Scotland and the best of this should certainly inform the new professional learning landscape. Headteachers wish for a ‘coherent learning pathway’ of professional learning which reflects the different stages their career. They want the time and space to learn with and from colleagues, to help them manage the challenges of leading their school communities in the post-pandemic landscape. Moreover, headteachers want to be included in this process of change, they want their voice to be heard.

**Eight Provocations arising from the Listening Exercise**

This set of provocations synthesise the repeating themes arising from the conversations.

1. Headteachers need the opportunity to influence the design, delivery, and timing of the professional learning available to them.
2. The most impactful headteacher professional learning connects with their professional values and moral purpose.
3. Headteachers need the time and space to reflect on and share their own experience and learn with others.
4. Professional learning needs to be underpinned with theory from credible sources.
5. Headteachers need the support and time together to make sense of and translate policy into practice.
6. Headteachers need the opportunity to learn from schools in different, contexts, local authorities, and systems both nationally and internationally.
7. All headteachers should have access to high quality Professional Review and Development.
8. All headteachers should have access to a professional coach or mentor depending on the stage in their career.

**Policy Context**

The context for this work was the initial recommendation from the OECD that Scotland should explore assigning leadership and development responsibilities for curriculum to a specialist stand-alone agency. OECD (2023) The response from the Scottish Government was to accept this recommendation and move the role of inspection out of Education Scotland as well as replacing the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) with a new, specialist agency responsible for both curriculum and assessment, Scottish Government (2021). Professor Ken Muir was appointed to lead the work on how this recommendation would be implemented. Regarding professional learning, he discovered that although there was some clarity about where professional learning could be accessed, there was also some confusion as professional learning provision was ‘patchy’ with some schools feeling 'bombarded' and finding it difficult to identify which providers/options would best meet their bespoke needs. Muir identified that, ‘PL [Professional Learning] should be coordinated and grouped by ES [Education Scotland] improvement staff and distilled to those busiest and at the front-line.’ The focus of the proposed national agency for Scottish education should be to provide responsive, bespoke support and professional learning at regional and local levels. Muir (2022).

**Methodology**

For the past 15 years I have been steeped in headteacher professional learning, first in my role as a headteacher then as a lead specialist for the Scottish College for Educational Leadership (SCEL), now the Professional Learning and Leadership (PLL) team within Education Scotland. My passion for professional learning made me determined to capture headteacher voices and represent their views in as much detail as possible in this think piece. Yen Cabag recognises the importance of having a passion for a subject when undertaking such a piece of work.

‘If you are writing a think piece, I’d encourage you to make sure it’s a subject that you yourself are passionate about, and which you have researched extensively. Your goal is not just to stir up controversy but contribute something beneficial and worthwhile to the larger aggregate of thoughts and ideas.’

Cabag (2019)

An appreciative inquiry (AI) approach was used to encourage interviewees to explore the best of what is already available and provide an opportunity to describe how they envisage the future. I was keen for the conversations to be about what is working well and impacting on their practice and how this could be built on.

‘By focusing on what’s going right, rather than what’s going wrong, people can deeply inquire into what’s right and why, and then find ways of pulling those successes into creating more of what they want to do now. AI does not ignore the negative; rather it shifts our basic orientation from problem-focused to possibility-focused*.’* The Center for Appreciative Inquiry (2023).

The listening exercise took the form of a series of conversations with headteachers around a set of core questions about their professional learning. Having been both a headteacher and lead specialist in professional learning I was able to call on my own networks and those of my colleagues to interview for this study.

I met with 46 headteachers online or face-to-face and the conversations usually took around 45 minutes. The questions used for the one-to-one conversations also formed the basis of the two group activities which involved participants discussing the questions and providing individual responses.

I captured core information on location, sector and size of school and used this to ensure the sample was as representative as possible of the wide variety of school contexts across Scotland. Information on prior professional learning was also collected. I met with headteachers with protected characteristics, but it did not feel appropriate in a one-to-one conversation to ask about these.

The core questions are included in Appendix A. The following figures show local authority, number of years as a headteacher and sector.

**Discussion Questions and Emerging Themes**

Taking the discussion questions in turn, the key messages and repeating themes are illustrated in this section with verbatim comments of headteachers in quotation marks. The discussion questions are included in Appendix B.

1. **Where do you currently access professional learning which supports you in your role as a headteacher?**

**1.1 Programmes to Achieve the Standard for Headship (2020)**

Many headteachers still draw on their learning from the programmes to achieve The Standard for Headship even though they may have completed the programme several years ago. These are the Scottish Qualification for Headship (SQH), Flexible Route to Headship (FRH) and the current Into Headship programme (IH). The books read, networks formed, and the strategies learned still inform practice years after completing the programme and the academic rigor and credibility of presenters and facilitators ensures a depth of learning that endures.

**1.2 Excellence in Headship (EiH), Columba 1400 and University Programmes**

Other programmes discussed were the Excellence in Headship programme and Columba 1400. It was noted that one of the main advantages of both programmes was that they provided ‘valued time away from school to meet new friends’ and ‘time to meet other like-minded professionals*.’* It was felt that face-to-face contact with other headteachers is important,’ and this ‘human connection’ could not be replicated online with ‘face-to-face discussions being more natural’ but conversations in ‘online chat rooms often feeling a bit awkward.’

Some headteachers engage in post-graduate study at masters (MEd) and doctorate (EdD) level. The range of masters programmes being undertaken includes; MEd Leadership and Learning, MEd Critical Enquiry and MEd Improving Our Classrooms (supported by the West Partnership and involving collaboration with teacher colleagues).

**1.3 Headteacher Networks**

Headteachers love to learn with and from their colleagues and identified the networks formed in programmes like EiH and Columba 1400 as invaluable to help navigate the challenges of their role. Many meet up face to face where possible and have formed WhatsApp groups to keep in touch. Some headteachers cited trios arranged by the local authority as a valuable opportunity for support and learning.

Membership of national organisations like the Scottish Catholic Education Service, (SCES), the Association of Heads and Deputes Scotland (AHDS), School Leaders Scotland (SLS) and the national Career Long Professional Learning (CLPL) group also provides networking opportunities and professional learning opportunities for some. However, one headteacher questioned the equity of access to some networks e.g., the Building our Curriculum Self Help Group (BOSCH) which is invitation only as groups like this are exclusive to certain headteachers or the ‘go to’ or ‘high profile headteachers who are not necessarily representative of all.’

**1.4 Professional Reading**

Most headteachers cited professional reading as one of the main sources of their learning. The most mentioned writers were Simon Breakspear and Bruce Robertson as it was felt that their ideas are current and practical. Some headteachers are members of professional reading groups with colleagues. In visits to two secondary schools, I was shown some well stocked school professional reading libraries specifically for this purpose.

A picture containing text, indoor, bookshelf

Description automatically generated   
 Professional Reading Library

Podcasts were also mentioned as a source of professional learning for example *Becoming Educated*. Many use social media, either Twitter, e.g., *EduTwitter* or Facebook headteacher groups. However, some questioned the value of learning through social media, talking about disappearing down internet ‘rabbit holes’ which can be frustrating and time-wasting.

**1.5 Learning with Teachers**

Some headteachers discussed ‘learning alongside’teacher colleagues so they could understand what the teachers were learning to further support them*.* The need to learn new skills during the pandemic such as setting up and using Microsoft Teams or Google Classroom is a good example of this. Some professional learning programmes around literacy or numeracy in the primary sector also fall into this category with headteachers either delivering these programmes or supporting their senior leadership teams to do this. The increasing need for professional learning around the impact of trauma post-pandemic is a further example of headteachers needing to learn with their teachers. This type of learning, often delivered by partner agencies is vital for the whole school community to be able to support children and families in crisis, e.g., *Therapeutic Crisis Intervention* (TCI) training. One headteacher felt so strongly about the importance of time to learn with her staff she advocated an extra in-service day in the year specifically for that purpose.

**1.6 Coaching and Mentoring**

Those who signed up for one-to-one coaching as part of the workforce support package, spoke about the importance of having protected time to focus on their own role and work through current challenges. They valued the time and space to think out loud and identify their next steps in such a challenging time. One said, ‘coaching sessions through workforce support with Know You More were a very good opportunity for me to focus on what I need to do next.’Some had also undertaken the education Scotland *Coaching for Success* programme and used the learning from this to develop a coaching culture in their schools. Mentoring was also mentioned as being important, especially for new headteachers and some Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs) and Local Authorities (LA) also facilitate action learning sets or trios to support new colleagues.

**1.7 Informal ‘Learning on the Job’**

Some new headteachers talked about ‘learning on the job’ however, they felt that it was more of a case of being ‘left to get on with it’ and would have welcomed the support of a more experienced headteacher mentor. Colleagues like business managers could also be helpful in supporting learning about the operational side of school leadership.

**1.8 Regional Improvement Collaboratives and Local Authorities**

The provision of headteacher professional learning by Local Authorities and Regional Improvement Collaboratives was described as ‘patchy’by some headteachers. Some local authority development days were described as ‘varying in quality’. Some RICs were mentioned as professional learning providers more than others but this could be due to the geographical spread of the headteachers interviewed. One headteacher said that the professional learning she participated in with her teachers with the RIC was ‘beneficial as you do it as a school rather than in isolation’*.* Another said he benefitted from the learning as a part of the *Research Schools* initiative with his RIC.

1. **What is the most impactful professional learning you have had as a headteacher? For what reason? (e.g., impact on self, school)**

**2.1 The Standard for Headship**

The first theme that emerged was that headteachers still draw on their learning from the programmes to achieve the Standard for Headship even though this may have been some years ago. One headteacher, having completed the SQH in 2007, said that aspects of his learning from the programme still impact on his practice today especially those around professional values and moral purpose. Another said that the habit of professional reading that started with the SQH still permeates her practice and has helped her as the ‘leading learner’ to develop a culture of professional reading in her school. Another spoke about her learning from the SQH on the strategic role of a school leader and team dynamics which she still uses with her own staff saying that before this programme ‘I was naïve about these things.’

The Into Headship programme was valued for its ‘formal and structured’ learning by one headteacher and gave him the confidence to apply for posts as his ‘thinking changed over the course of the programme.’The underpinning theory and academic rigor of these programmes was considered important by many as ‘professional learning can’t just be all about the operational.’ Other benefits of the Into Headship programme included:

‘The impact on understanding of pupil voice and how to develop a child’s plan.’

‘The impact on behaviour as children now help in the running of the school.’

‘It made me more forward-thinking and thinking about sustainability.’

‘I learned about the importance of the whole staff team working together.’

**2.2 Excellence in Headship**

The headteachers who had taken part in the EiH programme said how much they valued the time away from school to focus on themselves and their leadership. They also appreciated the opportunity to learn about and discuss models of learning and their practical application e.g., Dilts’ model of the Neurological Levels of Change and its impact on leading change. EiH Learn sessions were also noted, especially Dr Simon Breakspear’s Agile School Leadership with one headteacher citing the ‘good sense’ of what Breakspear was saying with his ‘clear aims and challenge of practice’ having an impact on empowering the teachers in his school. The networks formed on the EiH programme also feature as a source of professional learning with colleague WhatApp groups and arrangements to meet up at EiH Learn sessions.

**2.3 Columba 1400**

Many of the headteachers who had taken part in the Columba 1400 programme cited this as being the most impactful on them personally as it offered them protected time and space away from school and helped them focus on their values and what really mattered to them as a headteacher. One said that ‘Columba was the most beneficial professional learning I have ever engaged in.’

Other comments included:

‘Columba 1400’s values-based leadership felt like a ‘lightbulb’ moment as I explored why I want to do this role. I realised my values are a part of this.’

‘Columba 1400’s values-based work gives time to focus on your own values, time, and space to focus on you, your skills base and your values base and yourself as a leader.’

‘Columba 1400 was very powerful and outstanding. The attention to valuing people, the core values and the depth of learning had a great impact on self.’

‘Columba was a ‘life-changing’ experience.’

‘Columba 1400 went back to core values and purpose as a headteacher, the concept of being away from everything, it was emotional and cathartic.’

‘Columba had the greatest impact. Staff said I looked different when I got back, I made a network of non-judgemental folk.’

‘I had permission to have time to reflect and we left phones in the bedroom.’

‘Columba renewed my passion for my job, I got rid of HMI baggage I had been carrying around with me.’

‘Columba made me reflect on myself as a leader and my values, I was re-invigorated as a leader, this had a positive impact on school.’

‘The coaching sessions in Columba let you bare your soul in a secure environment.’

‘Columba helped me start a new leadership journey in a new school.’

‘It is a big undertaking being away from school but what you reap outweighs this.’

Similar reasons for impact on self were given by a headteacher who had participated in the Evolving Systems Thinking programme (EST).

‘EST was about values, finding your ‘why’ and your underpinning values of education.’

**2.4 Learning from other Schools**

Headteachers who had been given the opportunity to work with the Inspectorate as Associate Assessors (AA) cited this as their most impactful professional learning. Through the AA training they were kept up to date regarding any changes to the educational landscape. However, the most important part of this process was cited as the opportunity to ‘learn from other schools, contexts, and local authorities.’ It afforded one headteacher ‘the time to think how this relates to my own practice and leadership.’

**2.5 Health and Wellbeing Programmes**

As mentioned above, many headteachers spoke about the effect of the pandemic on the health and wellbeing of children and young people as well as on staff. Some named specific programmes such as *Training in Therapeutic Crisis Intervention* (TCI)as giving them a better understanding of trauma, staff wellbeing and risk of burnout.

The impact of headteacher professional learning can be explained by John West-Burnham in his model of professional learning (2005). The learning from programmes like EiH, EST and Columba falls into the ‘profound’ category and that from the more operational programmes falls more into the ‘shallow’ category. Headteachers cite these programmes as having the most impact as they are designed to encompass ‘meaning, moral purpose, challenge, and values.’ The great value of the interdependence of networks and collaboration also leads to this profound, impactful learning. See Appendix C.

1. **What have been the past barriers to effective professional learning for**

**you?**

This next question departed slightly from the appreciative inquiry stance of the other questions, but it was important to identify the barriers to then be able to discuss the opportunities that could arise with these barriers removed or reduced.

**3.1 Local Authority Pressures**

The main barrier to professional learning for headteachers was the lack of time with much discussion about this and increasing pressures on them post-pandemic. The lack of time fell into two main categories, the first one being the escalating demands from local authorities with comments mentioning:

‘Pressures from local authorities.’

‘Local pressures and inconsistencies in local authority approaches.’

‘The number of meetings we are having to attend.’

‘Demands for data with tight deadlines.’

‘The local authority agenda can be a barrier to school agenda with blame falling on headteachers.’

‘Structural barriers mean that not all local authorities have the same commitment to professional learning. This needs to be prioritised as a system with investment in staff.’

‘We need to ditch some of the ‘stuff’.’

**3.2 Post-Pandemic Pressures in School**

The second time pressure was the feeling from many that ‘it is almost impossible to spend time away from school’ because of the increase in the needs of pupils and families due to the mental health crisis. This is compounded by the challenge of supporting the wellbeing of staff and managing ongoing staff absences.

Some of the comments mentioned:

*‘*The escalating needs of children, families, and staff.’

‘The mental health decline following Covid.’

‘The mental health crisis and where is the support? We are not in a healthy place to let the majority of learners learn.’

‘Since the pandemic the level of need in schools has got to such a level that many headteachers feel that they just cannot leave the building.’

‘A lot of children with a high level of need means leaving school is difficult.’

‘With the inclusion agenda more children are needing support with limited resources so any long-term commitment to professional learning is difficult, and this is worse since the pandemic.’

‘There are difficulties in getting away from school families need you and there’s always payback when you’ve been away.’

‘Staff absence.’

**3.3 Policy**

Once headteacher felt that this situation is exacerbated by policy that is not ‘fit for purpose’ and spoke about this at length, specifically the *Included, Engaged and Involved* policy as thiswas written pre-covid and does not reflect the reality in schools post-Covid. She stated that,‘We need time to discuss and understand current policies with other headteachers and we need to engage with policy with colleagues to bring it to life. Policy needs to be updated with headteachers involved to discuss the barriers and difficulties.’

**3.4 Budget**

A further barrier was decreasing budgets and the expense of some programmes, one example being the annual conference of the Catholic Headteachers Association of Primary Schools (CHAPS) at a cost of £150. Other more general comments included:

‘Budgets, some courses are expensive.’

‘Financial cost.’

‘Funding is hard to access.’

‘Funding, and a reduction in allocation.’

The budget barrier was felt most acutely by the rural schools who find it difficult to access professional learning away from school with the‘Central Belt’ still seen by many as the main location for national face-to-face professional learning.

**3.5 Professional Review and Development**

Equity of access to high quality Professional Review and Development (PRD) was seen to be a barrier for some.

‘We need a good system of PRD with space and time and with who?’

‘We need a team of PRD coaches.’

One new headteacher commented that ‘when you become a headteacher you stop thinking about yourself and start thinking about everyone else.’ This can also be said for PRD with some headteachers ensuring this process is in place for staff but often not receiving any high-quality PRD themselves.

**3.6 Online Learning**

One recurring discussion was around the pros and cons of online learning versus face to face. Most headteachers thought that online learning could be beneficial as it was less costly and did not involve travel although connectivity was still a real problem in some rural areas. To illustrate this point, two online conversations planned had to be changed to phone-calls at the last minute due to poor connectivity. Some also reported that the number of platforms used for online learning could be a barrier with confusion about what to use or with some local authorities blocking certain platforms. Comments included:

‘There are too many platforms and problems with Glow.’

‘We can’t access Zoom in school.’

The general feeling was although online professional learning has its place and can save time and expense, there is no contest between that and face to face learning. One headteacher commented that ‘any difficult PL is hard to do online as you need that time in person to discuss things and get that real depth of learning.’ Another acknowledged that ‘online opportunities are available, but I miss people physically there in the room. It’s easier to build a relationship in person.*’* Headteachers from rural areas commented on the accessibility of online professional learning but also said that ‘opportunities for face to face are key and councils need to fund the travel for rural areas if professional learning is the priority.’Most felt that post-pandemic a blended model of professional learning was the best way forward.

**3.7 Workload and Work-Life Balance**

The pressure of trying to balance a heavy workload with family life was also mentioned by some headteachers with ‘the need to be emotionally ready to support family, school, and the wider school network.’ Comments included:

‘Demands on time and energy don’t leave enough headspace for professional learning.’

‘It’s hard making sure you’re ready for professional learning with family, school etc.’

‘We need energy and protected time.’

‘There needs to be acknowledgement that headteachers have families and other lives.’

‘We need to go a step back first. If we want high quality professional learning for headteachers we first need to look at workload! The workload is preventing us from creating time to allow quality professional learning. Once Education Scotland looks at how to reduce workload only then can we look at quality professional learning.’

‘We need recognition that there is so much more to being a headteacher than Education- interpersonal skills, nurture, community, running a business, people management, teacher training, finance, business management.’

‘As a new secondary headteacher I do things the business manager did in the past.’

‘The workload element is far greater now with more children in crisis.’

‘We need to be freed up to lead.’

‘I feel more vulnerable to challenge which is worse since Covid.’

‘It can be a lonely job. Professional development needs to include wellbeing and how we make that job manageable and not over-demanding. How we inspect doesn’t help.’

1. **What would the ideal professional learning for headteachers look like now and in the future?**

The importance of professional learning for headteachers cannot be underestimated with one headteacher saying, ‘if you get professional learning right, a lot of other things will look after themselves.’ Headteachers are clear about what they want from their professional learning now and in the future and this question generated interesting ideas.

**4.1 Networking and Collaboration**

The first main theme emerging from this question was the desire to network and collaborate with other headteachers with comments like:

‘We need collaborative professional learning.’

‘I want to have space to learn from others, a bit like Pedagoo & Teachmeets.’

‘We need an environment created where it’s safe to share.’

‘We need professional dialogue to get the most out of learning.’

‘Networking out of school would be good.’

‘Headteachers need to get together across local authorities.’

‘Professional learning run by headteachers sharing real experiences will have biggest impact.’

‘We need a network of headteachers with specific experiences.’

‘A network with opportunities for heads to come together, form groups and challenge each other would be great.’

‘Opportunities for headteachers to come together are wonderful, you put headteachers together they form into groups and challenge each other and ask what is important for us now?’

‘Headteachers discuss the big themes and how we make sure we are prepared for them.’

‘We need purposeful opportunities to come together and see broader than the local area’.

**4.2 A Professional Learning Pathway**

Another theme to emerge was the need for *a* ‘clear learning pathway’, especially for new headteachers as some felt the current professional learning landscape could be very confusing. This pathway should include a clear induction for new headteachers with a mentoring programme from the outset. Comments included:

‘We need a clear pathway of professional learning.’

‘We need a clear structure to support headteachers in the local authority.’

‘We need a robust induction for new headteachers with a clear pathway of professional learning.’

‘Induction needs to be better.’

‘The leadership pathway needs to be joined up and coherent regardless of context.’

**4.3 A Menu and Calendar of Professional Learning**

Some suggested a ‘menu’ of professional learning which recognises that headteachers are all at different stages of learning. Another suggested ‘an interactive professional learning toolkit built around key themes. This could include the rest of the UK.’ Other comments included:

‘A menu of offers including online like Curriculum Rationale.’

‘It should be relevant to your needs as one size absolutely never fits all.’

‘We need choice, there’s not always a lot on offer for headteachers.’

One headteacher noted that this ‘menu’ needs to fit in with the school improvement planning cycle so headteachers ‘can see in May what’s on offer and plan for the coming year.’She also noted that it would help if the ‘national organisations could work together on this for example the AHDS and Education Scotland could put out what’s being offered across Scotland, so we know in advance what’s happening.’

Another also mentioned the importance of knowing what’s available at the start of the year with ‘the option to identify our top three areas at the start of the year.’

**4.4 Protected Time away from School**

A further theme that emerged was the need for protected time away from school to think and reflect. Comments included:

‘I need the opportunity to pause, reflect and take stock as to when I’m at and where I want to be.’

‘We need time and space for focus on you.’

**4.5 Learn from Educationalists**

As well as the opportunity to work with and learn from colleagues headteachers are keen to learn from academics and educationalists with experience and credibility. Simon Breakspear was mentioned several times along with Dylan Wiliam, Shirley Clarke, and Michael Fullan. It was noted that professional learning ‘needs to be academic, challenging and stimulating, it needs an element of academic rigor, and we need high quality speakers.’

**4.6 Opportunities to Visit to Schools Nationally and Internationally**

One popular suggestion was the opportunity for headteachers to visit other schools and learn from others across Scotland and internationally. A variety of ideas included:

‘A sabbatical to other schools.’

‘A week-long visit to a school, with no paperwork needed by the school or headteacher.’

‘Time to shadow, to spend the day in school shadowing another headteacher.’

‘I would like to spend two weeks or a month in another school nationally or internationally, either Scandinavian countries or Australia.’

‘Heads should have the opportunity to do the following: run another school, work at the centre, work in a special school. Headteachers need this ‘on the ground’ experience shadowing or swapping roles, learning through building experience.’

‘Heads need opportunities to visit other schools. The inspection process could feed into this as could the RICs.’

‘Scotland and England could learn from each other.’

‘Sabbaticals for headteachers to undertake research say for a year either locally or internationally would reinvigorate them.’

**4.7 Opportunities for Succession Planning**

As well as benefitting headteachers the idea of sabbaticals and visits would also provide opportunities for aspiring senior leaders to act up in the headteacher’s absence. Many headteachers mentioned the importance of building in succession planning to professional learning:

‘We need to provide for the leaders of the future, especially in the denominational sector.’

‘Sabbaticals for headteachers would develop opportunities for senior leadership teams if the headteacher was out for a year.’

‘There are headteacher vacancies with not a lot of applicants, we need to make it an attractive post.’

**4.8 Working with the Inspectorate**

The idea of visits was not just confined schools but could also be more involved with the inspectorate. Two headteachers I spoke to were Associate Assessors (AA) and said that this role not only kept them ‘current’but gave them a ‘most valuable learning opportunity’ They learned from the AA training and from the schools they visited and could reflect on how their learning relates to their own practice. One headteacher commented that schools can be very insular, but this model certainly helps headteachers be more outward looking.

**4.9 Coaching and Mentoring**

The ideal professional learning for headteachers would also include support in the form of coaching and mentoring ‘with a clear structure to support headteachers.’One said that he felt‘local authorities and Education Scotland should be able to see where you are and support you with interactions with quality and with no judgement.’ Other comments included:

‘We need a national mentoring/coaching programme.’

‘Heads need access to a coach or mentor from a high-quality team of coaches.’

‘Headteachers should have access to a coach or mentor from a national network of professional coaches.’

**4.10 Professional Review and Development**

The Professional Review and Development (PRD) process was mentioned by many of the headteachers and the need for high quality coaching to support that process. One suggested PRDs with headteacher peers with another advocating that PRD meetings could be even more valuable with more senior colleagues with credibility and experience as well as professional ‘courage and confidence.’

**4.11 Policy ‘Sense-Making’**

The need to manage the volume and content of policy was a further theme that emerged with headteachers commenting that they need support around policy ‘sense making.’ ‘It would also help to have advanced warning when important documents were about to land, and professional learning linked to them.’ Other comments included:

‘We need help in how to manage volume of policy and change.’

‘There needs to be engagement with headteachers to bring policy to life.’

‘Headteachers need support in strategies to make policy work.’

‘We need to discuss the difficulties and barriers with policy.’

**4.12 Operational Training**

Practical training for the operational skills of headship was also mentioned, especially in the ASN sector.

‘We need Health and Safety at work, commitment to IOSH training for headteachers.’

‘We need the practical skills to run a school.’

‘We need help with budgets.’

‘We need a suite of practical courses.’

**4.13 Time to learn with your teachers**

One headteacher suggested an extra in-service day for headteachers to learn with their teachers about subjects pertinent to their own schools. This year there was one less in-service day in her local authority which has meant that ‘time for learning together has been squeezed’, putting more pressure on her own health and wellbeing.

1. **In what ways could headteachers be involved in the design and delivery of the professional learning which is available to them?**

**5.1 Headteacher Voice**

Headteachers want systematic involvement and opportunities to be engaged in discussions about their professional learning. They need to be heard and, as one commented, ‘not be confined to saying the right things as opposed to having a voice.’It is felt that greater diversity is needed to reflect the entire headteacher community rather than using just ‘the same names on the boards’ and those from the ‘Central Belt’.A headteacher noted that‘we want the best for education but feel unable to say what we want to say.*’* They want to be consulted about what they need and what is missing in terms of professional learning and this consultation needs to be ‘systematic with all headteachers having the opportunity to be involved in something.’ Other comments included:

‘We need consultation on the professional learning we need. Groups of headteachers can be involved with Education Scotland (or other) in the design and content.’

‘Consultation can be through HMI inspections/Twitter/Other social media platforms/email.’

‘Collaborative groups of cross authority heads need to be involved the ‘what’ and the ‘how’.’

‘Local authority groups can identify priorities linked to local authority improvement plans.’

‘If this is a priority, then Scottish Government and local authorities need to fund time for it.’

‘We need to align the system, professional learning is not a short-term fix e.g., around closing the attainment gap. The Scottish Government needs to understand professional learning.’

‘Heads need opportunities to think in a radical way and challenge educational orthodoxy. Healthy debate and challenge are a crucial part of any learning system.’

‘As the people on the ground, headteachers need to shape professional learning as they are experiencing it.’

‘Professional learning needs to be shaped by headteachers are they are the ones who are seeing what is happening and know the barriers.’

‘We could have an executive group of headteachers from each sector with a place at Education Scotland / Scottish Government.’

**Conclusion**

Headteachers understand the importance of professional learning not only to enhance their own leadership skills but also for the good of their school communities with ‘headteacher professional learning being fundamentally connected to school.’ It is clear from what they are saying that there is currently some very impactful headteacher professional learning in Scotland, the best of which, should certainly inform the new professional learning landscape.

Headteachers wish for a ‘coherent learning pathway’ with a menu or choice that recognises the different stages of headship as ‘one size does not fit all’. They want the time and space to reflect on and share their experience and their ‘combined expertise with other headteachers, not in a ‘show and tell way’, but where they can share wisdom and support and challenge’ each other. Professional learning needs to help headteachers ‘make the job manageable’ and improve their wellbeing as they deal with ‘the barrage of policy, guidelines and the big post-pandemic challenges.’

Finally, headteachers want a voice in this process. They want to be ‘done with and not done to.’

**Eight Provocations arising from the Listening Exercise**

The final part of the think piece is a set of propositions or provocations that synthesise the repeating themes arising from the conversations and group tasks.

1. Headteachers need the opportunity to influence the design, delivery, and timing of the professional learning available to them.
2. The most impactful headteacher professional learning connects with their professional values and moral purpose.
3. Headteachers need the time and space to reflect on and share their own experience and learn with others.
4. Professional learning needs to be underpinned with theory from credible sources.
5. Headteachers need the support and time together to make sense of and translate policy into practice.
6. Headteachers need the opportunity to learn from schools in different, contexts, local authorities, and systems both nationally and internationally.
7. All headteachers should have access to high quality Professional Review and Development.
8. All headteachers should have access to a professional coach or mentor depending on the stage in their career.

NB The National Model of Professional Learning (2021) identifies the key principles and features of effective learning that builds capacity and promotes collaborative practices. It is based on best evidence about what makes effective professional learning that has impact on outcomes, for the learner and for the children and young people they work with. This model should continue to inform the professional learning landscape.

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**Appendix A**

**Core Questions**

1. Name (optional)
2. Contact details (optional)
3. Number of years as a headteacher
4. Sector
5. School size
6. Local authority
7. Previous headteacher professional learning

**Appendix B**

**Discussion Questions**

1. Where do you currently access professional learning which supports you in your role as a headteacher?
2. What is the most impactful professional learning you have had as a headteacher? For what reason? (e.g., impact on self, school)
3. What have been the past barriers to effective professional learning for you?
4. What would the ideal professional learning for headteachers look like now and in the future?
5. In what ways could headteachers be involved in the design and delivery of the professional learning which is available to them?

**Appendix C**

**Shallow, Deep and Profound Learning**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Leadership Learning** | | | |
|  | **Shallow** | **Deep** | **Profound** |
| **Means** | Memorisation | Reflection | Intuition |
| **Outcomes** | Information | Knowledge | Wisdom |
| **Evidence** | Replication | Understanding | Meaning |
| **Motivation** | Extrinsic | Intrinsic | Moral |

(West- Burnham 2005)

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