

# Levelling the landscape: Rethinking professional development through mentoring and coaching in rural and coastal schools

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## Introduction: Why place matters

In rural and coastal settings such as Cornwall, professional development is not simply a route to career progression – it is fundamentally a matter of equity, teacher retention and long-term sustainability. Schools in these contexts face unique challenges: small staff teams, geographic isolation, long travel times to metropolitan training centres and constrained access to high-quality CPD (continuing professional development) and leadership development (Ovenden-Hope and Passy, 2019; Ovenden-Hope et al., 2025; NIOT, 2024).

For example, the Pretty Poverty Report (Ovenden-Hope et al., 2025) highlights how conventional measures of deprivation underestimate disadvantage in remote communities, showing how transport dependency, housing precarity and professional isolation amplify inequities. Similarly, a report into educationally isolated schools found that coastal and rural school leaders reported greater difficulties with staff recruitment and retention than urban schools, and higher levels of isolation in leadership and CPD (Plymouth Marjon University, 2019).

Moreover, national CPD and teacher development frameworks often assume urban-proximate access. Evidence shows that schools in remote locations have fewer connections to national funding streams and collaborative networks (NIOT, 2024; Sharples et al., 2021). Unless CPD policy and frameworks are designed to reflect rural/coastal realities, such schools risk being inadvertently disadvantaged.

This perspective piece, offered by CAPH, argues for rethinking professional development. Rather than replicating centralised, one-size-fits-all models, schools and systems should embrace approaches that are relational, responsive and rooted in place. Coaching and mentoring are not optional extras: they are essential for sustaining staff, nurturing leaders and ensuring that no teacher or leader is disadvantaged by location.

## The limits and opportunities of standardised CPD models

National CPD frameworks often assume easy access to large-scale provision, strong networks and available cover. For schools in Cornwall and other rural areas, travelling to centralised courses can mean hours on the road, overnight stays and unsustainable costs. Small staff teams feel the strain acutely when colleagues are absent. Beyond logistics, relevance is also a challenge: CPD designed for urban contexts can feel abstract or detached from the lived experience of small, isolated schools (Ovenden-Hope et al., 2025). Teachers and leaders report that many national offers fail to recognise the pressures of staff wearing multiple hats, fragile succession planning and professional isolation (Ovenden-Hope and Passy, 2019).

The **Department for Education** (2019) similarly notes that rural leaders face unique operational pressures, including limited access to professional networks, staff shortages and challenges in covering classes during training.

Yet standardised CPD also has benefits. External programmes provide access to specialist expertise, expose schools to innovative practice from other contexts and can spark ideas that would not emerge in isolation. For example, online CPD and digital platforms have grown significantly, reducing the burden of travel, costs and cover requirements. Webinars, virtual workshops and asynchronous learning resources can provide flexible, accessible professional learning that complements local provision.

In rural settings, these tools are most effective when integrated with mentoring, coaching and collaborative networks. Digital CPD can deliver knowledge and examples from wider contexts, while local mentoring and coaching support teachers and leaders in translating this learning into actionable strategies that fit their specific school circumstances. In this way, rural schools can

benefit from both the reach of standardised programmes and the depth of context-sensitive, relational professional development.

Some research shows that effective professional learning must be sustained, collaborative and practice-based (Cordingley et al., 2015). Standardised, one-size-fits-all approaches risk widening – rather than narrowing – the development gap (Popova et al., 2021; Sharples et al., 2021) but, when combined with relational and reflective practices, they can be a valuable component of an effective rural CPD model.

## Mentoring and coaching as a response

For rural and coastal schools, mentoring and coaching can help to bridge the gap between national frameworks and local realities. By fostering sustained, practice-based collaboration, they make professional learning more personal, responsive and relevant to the challenges of small, isolated settings.

Research demonstrates the positive impact of mentoring and coaching on professional learning and pupil outcomes. Kraft et al. (2018) found that structured, sustained coaching significantly improves instructional quality and student achievement. *Coaching* is typically a non-hierarchical, collaborative process in which a coach supports a teacher to reflect on and refine specific aspects of their practice through questioning, feedback and goal-setting (van Nieuwerburgh, 2017; Sharples et al., 2021). It often involves short cycles, focuses on classroom practice and helps teachers to translate research into action within their own context. *Mentoring*, by contrast, is a developmental relationship in which a more experienced practitioner provides guidance, challenge and emotional support to a less experienced colleague (Hobson and Malderez, 2013). It often has a longer-term, pastoral dimension and is especially valuable for early career teachers (ECTs) or those working in professional isolation, offering perspective and sustained encouragement.

Coaching and mentoring take many forms:

- **Pastoral mentoring:** Taking place via headteacher or education organisations, such as CAPH's Pastoral Associate Programme, this offers confidential, context-specific support to headteachers
- **Coaching in professional learning conversations:** This uses open and non-judgemental questioning to surface reflection and next steps
- **Peer mentoring networks:** This is where clusters of schools support each other collaboratively.

These approaches, whether formal or informal, share trust, reflection and context-responsiveness as core principles.

## Cost, time and the role of hubs

Two frequent barriers for rural and coastal schools are cost and time out of class. Paying for external coaches or releasing staff can be prohibitive, especially for small schools (DfE, 2019). These practical constraints can limit access to professional development, reinforcing inequities between urban and rural settings.

Network and hub models can help to address these challenges. Impartial, collaborative hubs (e.g. PTI Primary Hubs) reduce cost, spread expertise and embed coaching and mentoring as

sustainable practice. By pooling resources and providing structured opportunities for professional learning, hubs ensure that staff in small, isolated schools can access high-quality CPD on a more equal footing with urban colleagues. Hubs also provide neutral spaces where leaders and teachers can share challenges, reflect creatively and develop solutions collectively, without pressure from internal hierarchies (Fletcher and Mullen, 2012). In this way, hubs address both practical barriers and equity, making professional development more accessible, sustainable and responsive to local context.

## Creative thought leadership

When professional learning is relational and reflective, it not only strengthens practice but also cultivates *creative thought leadership*. Coaching and mentoring provide the psychological safety and professional trust that enable teachers and leaders to think critically about entrenched challenges and to design innovative, contextually relevant solutions.

In rural and coastal settings, where professional isolation can restrict fresh thinking, these approaches offer structured opportunities for dialogue and experimentation, helping staff to move from compliance to creativity. Organisations such as Creativity, Culture & Education (CCE), through *The Playbook* (2020), illustrate how collaborative, inquiry-based approaches can nurture innovation across schools. Similarly, sector bodies including CAPH, the PTI Primary Hubs, and the Chartered College of Teaching foster impartial professional networks that connect schools, share learning across contexts and sustain values-driven, evidence-informed growth.

## Examples from Cornwall

CAPH's programmes exemplify how relational approaches can strengthen leadership and staff wellbeing across Cornwall's schools:

- **Pastoral peer-mentoring network for headteachers:** Regular confidential conversations with trained associates allow leaders to share challenges openly
- **Leadership coaching for succession planning:** Rural heads work with coaches to prioritise, delegate and build leadership capacity in small teams, sustaining continuity despite high staff turnover
- **Thematic leadership networks:** SEND special educational needs and disabilities/inclusion and safeguarding networks enable leaders to share expertise, discuss practice and plan collaboratively, reducing isolation and fostering collective problem-solving
- **Embedded coaching in professional learning:** Structured questioning and reflective dialogue in conference keynotes, workshops and weekly webinars turn everyday conversations into professional growth opportunities.

Importantly, these approaches also help to level the playing field, ensuring that rural and coastal educators have equitable access to development opportunities that might otherwise be concentrated in larger, urban schools.

## Digital solutions: Opportunities and limits

Digital platforms can extend access to expertise and reduce travel burdens. Webinars, online coaching and virtual networks proved especially valuable during the pandemic. However, online approaches can lack relational depth. Trust and openness are harder to establish digitally, and

virtual sessions are most effective when complemented by in-person interaction (Fletcher and Mullen, 2012). Hybrid approaches – blending online accessibility with human connection – offer the greatest potential.

## Practical implications for schools and leaders

Key considerations for rural and coastal schools include:

- Recognise the variety of professional development approaches – mentoring, coaching, digital learning and collaborative networks can each play complementary roles
- Integrate relational approaches, such as mentoring and coaching, strategically to support reflective practice and context-specific problem-solving, particularly where staff are isolated
- Use digital tools thoughtfully to extend access to expertise, reduce travel and cost burdens and complement in-person professional learning
- Develop collaborative networks or hubs (e.g. PTI Primary Hubs) to share expertise, reduce isolation and embed contextually relevant professional learning
- Consider how standardised CPD can provide exposure to broader practice and specialist knowledge, but adapt it locally with reflective, supported application
- Prioritise context-sensitive planning: assess which approaches best meet local needs, recognising that no single model will address all challenges
- Support equity by ensuring that all staff, regardless of school size or location, can access high-quality professional development opportunities.

## Conclusion: Towards impactful and equitable professional development

Equity in education requires attention to the professional development of rural and coastal educators, but the ultimate measure of effectiveness is its impact on pupils. Centralised CPD can provide valuable expertise and broaden teachers' perspectives, yet its benefits are maximised when adapted to local context and supported by relational approaches such as mentoring, coaching and collaborative networks.

In Cornwall, mentoring and coaching have helped leaders and teachers to translate professional learning into classroom practice, sustain staff wellbeing and foster problem-solving that addresses local challenges. Digital and hybrid solutions further extend access to expertise, complementing these relational approaches and reducing barriers imposed by geography or small staff teams.

Reframing professional development around flexible, context-sensitive strategies – combining mentoring, coaching, digital tools and collaborative hubs – ensures that professional growth translates into tangible improvements for pupils. No teacher or leader should feel professionally isolated due to location; equitable, well-supported development enables schools to deliver consistent, high-quality learning experiences that benefit all children.

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