



**Ambition  
Institute**

# NPQH School Visits Guidance



**KEEP  
GETTING  
BETTER**

## What is the purpose of the school visit on the NPQH?

As part of the national professional qualification for headship (NPQH), participants will spend a day visiting another school.

The goals of the school visits are to help leaders:

- > Gain insights into what effective application of the NPQ framework can look like in an authentic setting, beyond their own in-school experience.
- > Develop their expertise in an identified problem area of school leadership.
- > Be inspired to make improvements within their own school setting.

For the host school, the school visits can also be an opportunity to showcase strengths, articulate approaches, and contribute to the spread of effective practice across the sector.

## When should a school visit take place, and how long should it be?

- > To make the most of a school visit, we'd recommend that it takes one full day.
- > It should take place in Course 4 or, if needed, no later than the end of Course 5.
- > Expenses are not covered as part of the NPQH and this should be taken into consideration when a participant arranges their school to visit. It will be up to the participant's school or other relevant body to fund this as part of their professional development offer.

## How should delivery partners create the conditions for a successful school visit?

Ensure all NPQH participants schedule and attend a school visit to focus on a persistent problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Participants will need to determine which 'persistent problem' they wish to focus on. It is a participant's responsibility to schedule and organise their own school visit and the information in this guidance will help them to do this.</li> <li>&gt; Where participants may be struggling to find a school, you might wish to encourage them to visit their NPQ 'buddy'.</li> </ul>
Support schools to understand the significance of the school visit and ensure they are released from school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; School visits can develop further understanding as to how to tackle a problem, see what successful solutions can look like in similar and different contexts, and develop networks.</li> <li>&gt; As a delivery partner, you may wish to develop understanding of the School Visit with school leaders, highlighting their importance (e.g. by holding a webinar for your network)</li> </ul>

## What will be the focus of the school visit?

Before the school visit, participants will reflect upon their current school context and their developing levels of expertise to choose one of the following six persistent problems of school leadership to focus on:

### Persistent Problems of School Leadership

1. **School culture** | Establishing a professional and supportive school culture and enlisting staff contribution.
2. **Learning and development** | Effective approaches to learning and professional development.
3. **Curriculum** | Organising and teaching the curriculum.
4. **Behaviour** | Attending to pupil behaviour and wider circumstances.
5. **School improvement** | Analysing and diagnosing problems; planning and implementing strategies for continuous educational improvement.
6. **Administration** | Managing an efficient and effective organisation.

(For a more in-depth summary of these persistent problems, please refer to appendix one)

Participants should choose the persistent problem which they feel will best help them to develop in their role. Participants will select the workbook from Steplab which aligns with the persistent problem that they have chosen.

The workbooks guide participants to:

- > Reflect upon why they have chosen to focus on the persistent problem.

- > Reflect upon how the persistent problem aligns with the NPQH framework.
- > Explore key thinkers and research in to the persistent problem area by completing pre-reading and reflection tasks.

## How will the school visit be arranged?

The NPQH participant is responsible for arranging their school visit. They should first identify a school that they would like to visit.

When choosing a school, the participant should consider the following questions:

1. Do I want to visit a school which is a similar or different type of school to my own (for example: primary phase, secondary phase, a special school, a pupil referral unit, an all-through school, a private school etc.)? What would be the benefits of each of these options?
2. Do I want to visit a school which has a similar or different pupil intake and pupil demographic to my own school setting? What would be the benefits of each of these options?
3. Are there any schools in my local area which do particularly well in the persistent problem area I have chosen to focus on?

The participant should reflect upon their answers to these questions and consider what they would like to get out of the experience, before choosing an appropriate school.

The participant is responsible for contacting and organising the school visit.

Participants can share this guidance with their host school so that the host school understand the purpose of the school visit and can help to organise an appropriate agenda of activities.

## What will happen during the school visit?

During the visit, participants will undertake a schedule of activities that have been pre-arranged between themselves and the host-school.

Activities will be focused around the persistent problem of school leadership that participants have chosen. The visit should focus on a mixture of what strategies are in place, how they have been implemented, and why the leaders in the host school made these choices in their context.

Throughout the day it is useful if the leaders in the host school take the time to narrate the processes, the rationale, and any obstacles faced and overcome. It is hoped that the participant will develop a good understanding of both the surface features and the deep structure of the practices they see. An understanding of deep structures is the most useful when adopting or adapting approaches. When school leaders focus on the surface structure (what they see), without attending to the deep structure (the 'how' and the 'why' of what is happening) they are likely to deploy these approaches 'at the wrong times, in the wrong places, or for the wrong reason' (Kennedy, 2016 p.9).

## What preparation does the host-school need to do?

The participant should work collaboratively with their host school to agree an agenda of activities for the day. Some suggested activities could include:

### Suggested shadowing visit activities

<b>Activity 1</b>	<p><b>Observe Leadership activities</b></p> <p>Preceded by the leader revealing their planning and thought process and followed by an opportunity to ask questions to reveal the leader's choices.</p> <p><b>Example:</b> observing a senior leadership team (SLT) meeting. The headteacher being shadowed has used a really thorough planning approach and has routinised these meetings, to minimise extraneous load for the SLT. The visitor observes and plans questions to follow the meeting.</p>
<b>Activity 2</b>	<p><b>Engage with a school policy</b></p> <p>Meet with stakeholders involved in enacting the policy to find out how the policy works at multiple levels.</p> <p><b>Example:</b> the headteacher talks the visitor through the culture and behaviour policy. The visitor talks to the senior leaders in charge of behaviour, a head of year, a form tutor and pastoral support and a pupil, to find out what they know about the policy and how they were supported to do those things well.</p>
<b>Activity 3</b>	<p><b>Select an aspect of the persistent problem to explore more deeply</b></p> <p>Track how a particular aspect of the persistent problem is tackled and embedded through every layer of the school.</p> <p><b>Example:</b> this might involve starting with policies, talking to people, seeing the policy in action around the school, seeing it in books, meetings, agendas, assemblies. This would be most useful where narrated by the headteacher to explain how this interwoven approach was achieved.</p>
<b>Activity 4</b>	<p><b>Explore recent implementation</b> related to the persistent problem focus area.</p> <p><b>Example:</b> visit a professional development session, visit a classroom/assembly/meeting, where this strategy is used and discuss the next steps with the headteacher.</p>
<b>Activity 5</b>	<p><b>Undertake joint lesson visits, with a defined focus.</b></p> <p><b>Example:</b> the headteacher explains what they expect to see prior to the visits and the visitor has the opportunity to ask questions following the visits.</p>

### What preparation does the participant need to do?

The participant should:

- ✓ Identify a persistent problem to focus on and locate the relevant workbook on Steplab.
- ✓ Identify and contact an appropriate host school.
- ✓ Confirm the date and time of the visit.
- ✓ Liaise with the host school to agree an agenda of activities for the day.
- ✓ Complete the pre-reading and reflection tasks in the workbook.

### What next?

In their workbook, participants are provided with guidance on how to appropriately reflect upon what they see on their visit, and how to approach any changes that they might want to make in their own school contexts. There is nothing additional that the host school needs to do, following the visit.

## Appendix 1:

### Persistent Problems of School Leadership

At Ambition Institute we have identified seven 'persistent problems of school leadership' (influenced by Mary Kennedy (2006)), which participants who are undertaking the NPQH are introduced to in the introductory conference. The seven persistent problems are:

1. **School culture:** Setting direction and building alignment;
2. **Professional Development:** Enlisting staff contribution and ensuring staff development;
3. **Curriculum:** Organising and staffing the curriculum;
4. **Behaviour:** Attending to pupil behaviour and wider circumstances;
5. **School improvement:** Diagnosing, prioritising and managing resources effectively to build and implement strategy;
6. **Administration:** Managing an efficient and effective organisation/administration;
7. **Self:** Developing personal expertise, self-regulation and resilience.

A more detailed outline of each of the persistent problems is below:

- > **School Culture:** Enabling a professional and supportive school culture and enlisting staff contribution. School culture is made up of the way school staff and wider stakeholders of the school think, feel and act about school. It is the job of the leadership team to create and influence this, to ensure that the school environment reflects the culture the leadership team wishes to create. In what are increasingly pluralistic environments, it is the responsibility of leaders to establish cultural norms, build alignment across the school and motivate people towards an explicitly shared common purpose. Strong and supportive environments enable teachers to perform to their potential; improve faster and continue to become more effective, creating the environments in which this is possible is a core purpose of school leaders. The impact of a strong professional environment has been noted on both teacher absenteeism, retention and pupil achievement.
- > **Professional Development (PD):** Developing expertise in any field takes a long time and is particularly challenging in a school for a variety of reasons. Staff members will have gone through different training routes, had differing experiences of professional development in the past and be at different stages of their career, meaning that their prior knowledge will vary, making it difficult for a school leader to prioritise knowledge and sequence teacher learning. In addition, the demands on teachers' time and the conditions within a school can make PD hard to prioritise. To support the development of school staff, PD needs to be driven by the needs of pupils so resulting development enables teachers or other staff to increase their impact on pupil outcomes. To achieve this, school leaders will need to know their staff, school, contextual challenges and the relevant literature and research base from which to draw upon to understand how professional development can be most impactful.
- > **Curriculum:** Designing a curriculum which has a clear purpose, aligns with school vision, sets high expectations for all students, and develops pupils' domain-specific expertise requires a plethora of knowledge within the senior team to be able to guide middle leaders through making curriculum decisions. Curricula, teaching and assessment, by its nature, requires subject specificity, some of which will sit outside the expertise of school leaders. Ensuring leaders and wider school staff are equipped to manage this tension means school leaders need to see teaching, curriculum and assessment as an ever-evolving construct and need to create time and resource to building and preserving curriculum and subject knowledge within their staff.

- > **Behaviour:** Ensuring that children are safe, able to engage in and get the most out of their education is essential for school leaders. The broad range of individual needs found within any school environment will inevitably be significant and the work leaders will need to do to understand these needs and ensure they do not become a barrier to pupil learning will be significant. To achieve the high expectations leaders will have of pupils, a core aspect of this persistent problem is the structure and system in place for enabling positive behaviour of pupils and staff.
- > **School improvement:** Schools are complex systems with several interacting elements. The interactivity of these elements can bring a level of uncertainty and unpredictability making it difficult for leaders to know where to place their 'best bets' on what needs to be improved and to know how to improve it. We also know that developing expertise takes a long time and acts in opposition to the perceived need for rapid improvement. A school leader needs to know their school and its complexities to understand where sustainable improvements can be made, breaking larger improvements into small steps to acknowledge, to avoid lethal mutations, and to reduce the risk posed by the unpredictability of a complex school system.
- > **Administration:** Schools are large organisations with multiple areas requiring understanding and resource. The ability to deal competently and credibly with matters of finance, law, personnel, governance, complaints and risk management present a significant challenge to school leaders who may not have developed their knowledge of these domains. Work relating to this persistent problem will vary according to the specific context and so a key challenge for leaders is having enough knowledge to know whether issues are being dealt with appropriately.
- > **Self:** The demands of a school leader's role are significant. This persistent problem reflects the challenge of undertaking a difficult role in a way that enables you to reflect who you are as a person as well as the need to develop significant expertise to be successful in the role. Effective school leadership requires a large body of knowledge, drawing on different domains on a day to day basis to ensure the efficient running of a complex school system in an ever-shifting educational landscape. In order to respond to these challenges, school leaders will need to prioritise their own development, seek to extend their experience and gather regular feedback about their performance.

**Reference:**

Barker, J., Rees, T., (2020) 'The Persistent Problems of School Leadership', *Ambition Institute*.  
<https://www.ambition.org.uk/blog/persistent-problems-school-leadership/>