



Careers Impact System: National System Review 3

In pursuit of modern work experience that works for every learner: Improving engagement, equity and progression

Executive Summary

Careers Impact: National System Review 3

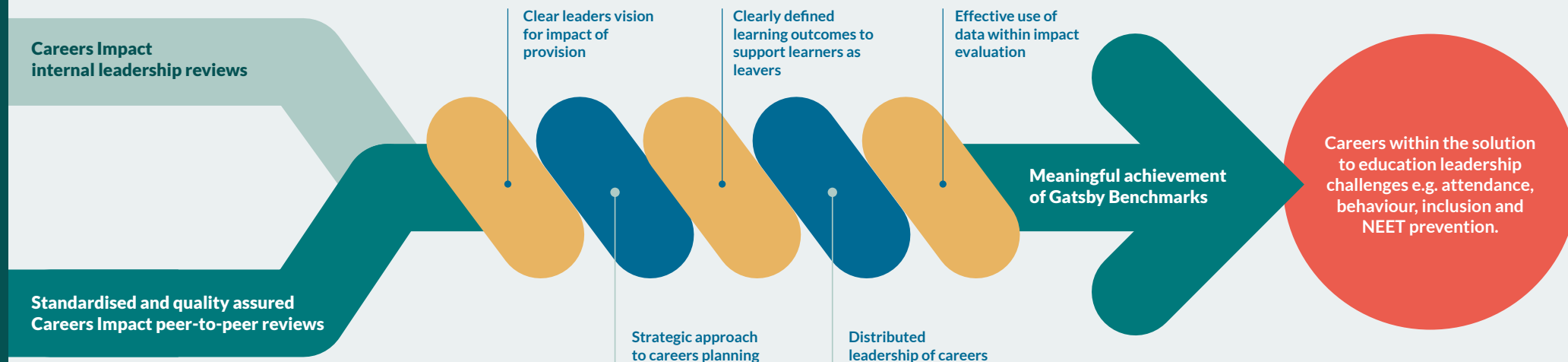
In pursuit of modern work experience that works for every learner: Improving engagement, equity and progression

This insight briefing summarises key insights from the third National System Review (NSR), conducted by The Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) in 2025/26. **The review focused on how education settings deliver impactful work experience for learners whose needs might otherwise go unmet, examining what works, for whom and how.**

Between January and March 2026, 47 educational settings took part in NSR3 by hosting a visit or taking part in an online research forum. Of these, 20 were mainstream secondary schools (including a UTC and an all-through school), 10 were Further Education (FE) and sixth form colleges, 12 were special schools and specialist SEND colleges, and five were Alternative Provision (AP) settings.

[The Careers Impact System](#) is a process that drives continuous improvement in the quality of careers education. National System Reviews offer independent, system-wide insight and thought leadership, taking a cross-cutting, thematic approach.

[Chrysalis Research](#) - an independent research agency, facilitated the online research forum and produced the technical report. Further resources and support, including practical examples, are available here. Additional Educator Guides, providing more detailed implementation support, will be shared [here](#) from September 2026.



Reforming work experience: A moment of opportunity

Since the review took place, [Statutory guidance](#) now states that all schools are expected to reform their work experience provision from September 2026. This comes at a critical moment, with [nearly one million young people not in education, employment or training \(NEET\)](#).

As highlighted in the Milburn Review:

“Work experience is too often an afterthought. The young people who most need exposure to work are the least likely to receive it.”

This reflects a broader system challenge: while education is intended to act as a bridge into employment, that transition is not yet working consistently, particularly for learners from under-served cohorts.

For the first time, national expectation, a [growing evidence base](#) and pressing system needs around engagement, inclusion and progression are aligned. There is a clear opportunity to move from isolated pockets of activity to consistent, high-quality implementation at scale.



Key Findings

The review identified four key findings, summarised below, together with identified best practice.



Understanding learner need is essential to effective work experience

Learner need extends beyond formal categories such as SEND and Pupil Premium. Settings increasingly recognise the importance of understanding factors such as confidence, aspiration, mental health, engagement and access to professional networks. However, there is less consistency and maturity in how identified needs are used to inform the selection of appropriate and responsive work experience opportunities.

Building on findings from National System Review 2, which focused on [driving equity and tackling disadvantage through careers provision](#), the review found increasing use of both quantitative and qualitative information to identify learners whose needs might otherwise go unmet.

Best practice:

- **Use multiple sources of evidence:** Draw on attendance, behaviour, attainment, SEND, progression, careers readiness data and risk of NEET indicators to build a more complete understanding of learner needs.
- **Strengthen cross-team collaboration:** Share information across careers, curriculum, SEND and pastoral teams to identify needs early and coordinate support effectively.
- **Personalise interventions:** Use learner-level insight to shape work experience opportunities, preparation activities and progression support that respond to individual needs.



Work experience provision is highly variable

The review identified significant variation in how work experience is designed and delivered.

The review identified two broad approaches to work experience. Some settings continue to rely primarily on individual placements delivered as stand-alone activities. Others provide progressive programmes that combine multiple experiences over time, linked to wider careers education, curriculum learning and learner development.

The difference is less about available resources and more about how provision is designed, led and embedded across the institution.

Best practice:

- **Plan experiences progressively:** Sequence activities over time so learners can build confidence, skills and workplace understanding gradually.
- **Embed work experience within a broader programme:** Position work experience as part of a progressive learner journey rather than a one-off activity.
- **Provide multiple forms of employer engagement:** Combine placements, workplace visits, industry projects, mentoring, careers talks and virtual experiences to broaden access and participation.



Holistic and progressive approaches to work experience drive stronger outcomes

The strongest examples demonstrated a clear focus on learner development and progression. Work experience was intentionally designed around learner needs, integrated into wider careers provision and connected to future pathways.

These approaches reduced reliance on personal networks, prior confidence or family connections, creating more equitable access to opportunity.

Best practice:

- **Define clear [learning outcomes](#):** Design experiences with specific objectives linked to skill development, career readiness and progression.
- **Build in preparation and reflection:** Help learners maximise value through structured pre-placement preparation and post-experience reflection.
- **Integrate work experience across the learner journey:** Connect workplace experiences with curriculum learning, careers programmes and personal development activity.



Work experience is a proven lever for engagement, inclusion and progression

Where work experience was intentionally designed and delivered, settings consistently reported positive outcomes for learners.

Benefits included increased confidence, motivation and aspiration, alongside improvements in attendance, engagement and employability skills. Settings also reported that meaningful work experience supported learners to make more informed progression decisions and reduced the risk of becoming NEET.

The evidence suggests that work experience can play an important role in addressing some of the education system's most pressing challenges, particularly for learners whose needs might otherwise go unmet.

Best practice:

- **Ensure work experience is meaningful and impactful** by planning all activities in line with the Gatsby Benchmark 6 definition of meaningful work experience, and by embedding structured reflection and evaluation opportunities so learners can recognise, articulate and build on what they have learned.
- **Use work experience to support informed career decision-making** by helping learners explore different pathways, develop their understanding of opportunities, and make confident choices about their next steps.
- **Evaluate and continuously improve provision by monitoring outcomes** across different learner groups, identifying who benefits and where participation gaps exist, and using this insight to strengthen the quality, inclusivity and impact of work experience programmes.

Next steps

Education leaders and governors

Position work experience as a core educational entitlement and strengthen ownership and accountability:

-  Embed workplace experience within whole-institution priorities, ensuring every learner benefits from a progressive, high-quality programme from Key Stage 2 onwards.
-  Establish shared ownership across senior leaders, curriculum teams, SEND leaders, pastoral teams and careers professionals, rather than locating responsibility with a single coordinator.
-  Commit the leadership capacity, staffing and resources required to deliver high-quality provision consistently and sustainably.
-  Position work experience as a driver of whole-setting improvement, aligning careers provision with strategic priorities and securing measurable learner outcomes.
-  Develop strategic partnerships with employers to support your approach to work experience.
-  Use the [Careers Impact internal leadership review](#) (with a focused lens on Theme 5) as a structured, evidence-informed process to drive collaborative leadership, reflection and impact.

“Work experience is an integral part of our curriculum not an add on. All students take part in WEX there are no exceptions only adaptations.”

Participating mainstream secondary school, National System Review 3, 2026

Careers Leaders

Design provision around learner need:

-  Use learner voice, destination data, labour market intelligence and local context to identify who needs additional support and what kind.
-  Ensure provision is flexible, inclusive and responsive, particularly for learners who stand to benefit most.
-  Work with employers as partners in the design and delivery of workplace experiences, not simply as placement hosts.
-  Design sequenced workplace experiences that build knowledge, skills and confidence over time.
-  Apply the [equalex](#) framework and work with employers as partners in design and delivery.

“We use up to date Labour Market Information (LMI)... and work closely with our network of employers to identify skills gaps, emerging opportunities, and roles suitable for young people.”

Participating Sixth Form College, National System Review, 2026

Employers

Work in partnership to develop the skills, confidence and aspirations of future talent:

-  Offer inclusive opportunities to learners from SEND and Alternative Provision settings, supported by schools and colleges where needed.
-  Help learners understand current and emerging career pathways, workplace expectations and skills requirements.
-  Use the [Employer Standards](#) to plan, evaluate and continuously improve careers education outreach and engagement.
-  Explore your role as co-designers of workplace experiences, contributing to activity design, learner feedback and curriculum development.
-  Consider how equalx approach and support from [The Careers & Enterprise Company](#) can support a structured approach to work experience provision.

“Strong employer partnerships enable meaningful, curriculum-linked placements that give learners real insight into workplace expectations, build their confidence, and support progression into employment and apprenticeships.”

Participating Further Education College, National System Review, 2026

Further resources and support

Resources, guidance and support are available to help schools, colleges, employers and system leaders reform work experience provision:

- [The Careers Impact System](#) provides a structured framework to support strategic careers leadership, continuous improvement and meaningful achievement of the Gatsby Benchmarks.
- [The equalex framework](#) offers practical tools and insights to help organisations design, deliver and evaluate high-quality, equitable work experience. This includes implementation guidance, case studies, resources and emerging evidence from ongoing development and testing.
- [The Employer Standards](#) and supporting resources help employers plan, evaluate and enhance their careers education outreach and engagement activities, including guidance on creating inclusive opportunities for young people with SEND and those in Alternative Provision settings.
- [The Careers & Enterprise Company's Resource Directory](#) provides access to more than 400 trusted careers education resources, tools and examples of effective practice. Schools, colleges, employers and wider partners can explore practical guidance, research, implementation tools and case studies to support the design, delivery and continuous improvement of high-quality work experience provision.



THE CAREERS & ENTERPRISE COMPANY

equalex

Our Impact

Our evidence

Careers Impact System