

Careers Impact engagement and conversation guide



A guide to exploring how careers contributes to learner success, organisational priorities and long-term improvement.

Using this guide

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Purpose of the guide

This resource supports engagement with education leaders and other stakeholders through conversations, Careers Impact internal leadership reviews, Careers Impact peer-to-peer reviews, presentations, development planning and strategic discussions.

It is designed to help colleagues bridge professional dialogue and meaningful action by connecting a leader's priority, available insight and carefully selected lines of enquiry to a clear decision, next step or improvement opportunity.

The enquiry prompts, messaging and talk-lines are intended to support professional dialogue and reflection. They are not a script or checklist. Select only the two or three prompts most relevant to the leader, their priority and the intended outcome of the conversation.

It is important to recognise that some leaders may be encountering careers through a different lens than they have previously experienced. Headteachers, principals, governors and trust leaders are often accustomed to discussing priorities such as attendance, engagement, behaviour, inclusion, curriculum, transitions and destinations. They may be less familiar with careers being positioned as a strategic contributor to those priorities.

You should therefore feel confident exploring careers not simply as a programme of activity, but as a potential lever for achieving wider organisational goals. In many cases, the most valuable conversations are those that help leaders make connections between careers and the outcomes they are already seeking to improve.

The purpose of these discussions is not to persuade leaders that careers matters. It is to explore how high-quality careers provision and work experience may contribute to the things that already matter most to them, and to identify what should happen next as a result of that shared understanding.

This guide is designed to be used actively during engagement planning and professional dialogue, not read from beginning to end.

The most effective conversations do not end with agreement. They lead to clearer understanding, informed decisions and meaningful next steps.

Once you are familiar with the purpose of the guide and how to use the accompanying conversation planner, use the tabs on the right-hand side to navigate to the relevant theme.

The Careers Impact action bridge

The guide supports a simple progression:

Priority → Insight → Conversation → Decision → Action

- **Priority:** What matters most to the leader right now?
- **Insight:** What evidence, intelligence or perspective helps deepen understanding?
- **Conversation:** Which questions, messages and talk-lines will unlock thinking?
- **Decision:** What conclusions, opportunities or priorities emerge?
- **Action:** What should happen next to strengthen understanding, practice or outcomes?

How to use this guide

The guide is designed to be navigated, not completed.

Colleagues are not expected to work through every theme, row or enquiry prompt. The most effective conversations are typically shaped by:

- A clearly understood priority.
- One or two relevant themes.
- A small number of carefully selected enquiry prompts.
- A meaningful next step.

Start with the leader's priority, identify the most relevant section of the guide and then draw selectively on the questions, messaging and talk-lines that will best support the conversation.

Start with the Conversation Planner

The Conversation Planner is the primary entry point to this guide. Access the Conversation Planner [here](#).

Before selecting a theme, use the planner to identify:

- The purpose of the conversation.
- The leader's priority, challenge or opportunity.
- The most relevant theme(s).
- The most useful high-leverage row(s).
- Any opportunities for further insight, improvement or follow-up action.

Once this is clear, move to the relevant sections of the guide and use them selectively.

Using the HOOK approach

The HOOK approach helps connect a leader's priority to a meaningful conversation and a clear next step.

Begin by identifying the organisational priority, learner need or challenge that matters most to the leader.

This may relate to attendance, engagement, behaviour, inclusion, attainment, transitions, destinations, NEET prevention, staff capacity, work experience reform or another improvement priority.

H: Hear the priority

What issue, challenge or opportunity matters most to the leader?

Begin with the leader's agenda rather than careers itself. The most productive conversations start by understanding what leaders are trying to achieve, improve or resolve.

O: Open understanding through insight

What evidence, intelligence or experience is informing current understanding?

Explore what the organisation already knows, what assumptions are being made and what additional insight may be valuable. This may include learner voice, stakeholder feedback, destinations information, attendance data, NEET prevention insight, quality assurance activity or other sources of organisational intelligence.

O: Open professional dialogue

Select the most relevant theme, high-leverage row and enquiry prompts.

Use the questions, messaging and talk-lines to support reflection, challenge assumptions where appropriate and help leaders make connections between careers and the outcomes they are seeking to improve.

K: Keep the focus on action

Identify what should happen as a result of the conversation.

This may be:

- A decision.
- A development priority.
- Further investigation.
- Targeted support.
- A review process.
- An improvement activity.
- A follow-up conversation.
- Embedded adoption of a Compass digital feature.

The purpose is not simply to have an interesting discussion. It is to help leaders determine what action will strengthen understanding, improve practice or improve outcomes for learners.

Using the organisational outcomes lenses

Each theme includes an **organisational outcomes lens**.

The enquiry questions within each theme are intentionally consistent across settings. However, the outcomes careers contribute to may vary depending on learner needs, organisational priorities and context.

The outcomes lenses are designed to help colleagues interpret conversations through the outcomes that matter most within a setting.

The outcomes lens helps you decide what to listen for.

Use these lenses as listening prompts rather than as an additional framework or set of questions.

The four enquiry lenses

Colleagues should use these lenses flexibly, selecting the questions most relevant to the conversation rather than working through every prompt.

Used together, the four lenses create an action bridge: clarify the priority, understand the system, test the evidence, then identify what should be strengthened or done next.

	Lens	Purpose
	Why this?	Why does it matter? What outcomes are being sought? What challenge is being addressed?
	Systems and processes	How is it delivered? Who is involved? What structures and approaches support it?
	How do you know?	What evidence, insight or intelligence informs understanding?
	How can it be elevated?	What could be strengthened? What opportunities exist for further development?

* A note on Theme 5

Theme 5 is structured differently from the other themes because it contains two complementary ways of exploring meaningful employer encounters and workplace experiences.

Theme 5 rows (5.1-5.3)

Rows 5.1-5.3 follow the same approach as the rest of the Careers Impact engagement guide.

They are designed to help colleagues explore:

- Employer engagement
- Employer encounters
- Workplace experiences
- Learner experience
- Quality
- Progression
- Impact

through the four enquiry lenses:



Why this?



Systems and processes



How do you know?



How can it be elevated?

Use these rows when the conversation is focused on understanding current practice, impact, strengths and development opportunities.

Part B: Work experience reform conversations

Part B serves a different purpose.

Rather than being organised around Gatsby Benchmarks, it is organised around the leadership journey associated with work experience reform:

Understand the Change → See the Opportunity → Build Capacity → Strengthen Practice → Review Impact → Plan Forward

Use Part B when conversations move beyond discussing provision and towards broader questions about:

- Organisational priorities
- Strategic leadership
- Implementation
- Capacity
- Employer partnerships
- Sustainability
- Continuous improvement
- Work experience reform

Which should I use?

A useful rule of thumb is:

Use Theme 5 rows when discussing employer encounters and workplace experiences.

Use Part B when discussing what leaders need to think about, plan for or change as a result of work experience reform.

Many conversations will naturally move between both.

For example, a discussion about workplace experiences in Row 5.3 may lead to wider questions about organisational readiness, employer capacity or implementation planning. When this happens, move into Part B and use the most relevant stage of the reform conversation journey.

THEME 1: Careers leadership, vision, intent and planning for development (Benchmark 1)

Why this theme matters

Theme 1 explores whether careers is positioned as a strategic contributor to learner outcomes and organisational priorities.

At higher levels of maturity, careers is not dependent on individual enthusiasm or isolated activity. Instead, it is embedded within leadership, governance, planning, decision-making and improvement processes, helping organisations better understand and improve outcomes for learners.

Interpreting Theme 1 through an organisational outcomes lens

The enquiry questions within this theme are intentionally consistent across settings.

However, the organisational priorities and learner outcomes that careers leadership supports may vary.



Schools

- Attendance
- Attainment
- Behaviour for learning
- Successful transitions
- Destination outcomes



FE and Skills

- Retention
- Achievement
- Progression
- Employer responsiveness
- Workforce readiness



Specialist / SEND

- Preparation for adulthood
- Independence
- Self-advocacy
- Transition readiness
- Inclusive progression pathways



Alternative Provision

- Re-engagement
- Confidence and self-belief
- Belonging
- Positive destinations
- Prevention of NEET outcomes

Use these outcomes as listening prompts when exploring leadership, vision, planning and strategic influence.

Relevant Theme 1 messaging

- Careers should contribute to learner outcomes and organisational priorities.
- Leadership responsibility for careers should be clear, distributed and sustainable.
- Careers planning should function as an improvement tool rather than an activity plan.
- Careers insight can strengthen leadership understanding of learner aspirations, progression and future readiness.
- Strong leadership helps ensure careers is embedded within organisational systems rather than dependent on individuals.

Suggested Theme 1 talk-lines

"The strongest organisations move careers beyond the Careers Leader and embed responsibility across leadership, curriculum, pastoral, SEND and governance structures."

"Careers becomes strategically significant when it informs the decisions leaders are already making about learner outcomes and organisational priorities."

"The question is not whether careers is discussed, but whether it influences planning, resource allocation and improvement activity."

"The most mature organisations use careers insight as a source of organisational intelligence, helping leaders make more informed decisions about priorities such as engagement, inclusion, progression and successful transitions."

Theme 1: Core enquiry lenses

Once the leader's priority is clear, use these four lenses selectively to deepen the conversation:



Why this?

How does careers contribute to learner success and wider organisational priorities?

Explore why careers has been prioritised and the intended difference it should make to learners, leaders and the organisation.



What are the systems and processes?

How is strategic intent translated into sustainable practice?

Explore leadership structures, accountability, planning, governance, decision-making and resource allocation.



How do/will you know it works?

What evidence suggests careers is influencing learners, practice and organisational priorities?

Explore how leaders understand impact, monitor progress and use careers insight to inform decisions.



How can practice be elevated?

What would strengthen the strategic influence, sustainability and organisational value of careers?

Explore opportunities to increase impact, strengthen ownership and embed careers more deeply across the organisation.

High-leverage rows

- ✓ **1.1 Careers leadership and distributed leadership**
- ✓ **1.2 Leaders' vision and intent**
- ✓ **1.3 Strategic careers planning**
- ✓ **1.4 Strategic leadership of careers**

Explore where relevant:

1.5 Governance

1.6 Careers Hub engagement

1.7 Enterprise Adviser/business volunteer engagement

COMPASS+ Evaluation (Theme 1)

Understanding strengths, priorities and opportunities for improvement

Why might leaders want to explore this?

Compass+ provides a simple, evidence-informed way to understand how careers provision aligns with the Gatsby Benchmarks, helping leaders identify strengths, priorities and opportunities for improvement.

What can it help leaders do?

- Identify areas of strength and development.
- Inform strategic planning and improvement priorities.
- Monitor progress over time.
- Support resource allocation and decision-making.
- Strengthen leadership discussions around careers provision.
- Inform self-evaluation and continuous improvement.

Key message for leaders

Compass+ should not be viewed simply as a benchmarking tool. It provides valuable insight that can help leaders understand current performance, prioritise improvement activity and support a more strategic approach to careers provision.

Leadership reflection

- To what extent is Compass+ data being used to inform strategic decision-making, prioritise improvement activity and monitor progress over time?

Explore the Compass+ Evaluation to identify strengths, focus improvement efforts and support meaningful achievement of the Gatsby Benchmarks.

		Example lines of enquiry					
	What are we really exploring?	Why this?	Systems and processes	How do you know?	How can it be elevated?	Relevant messaging	Suggested talk-lines
 1.1 Careers leadership and distributed leadership	Whether careers leadership is dependent on individuals or embedded within systems, structures and accountability.	- Why has careers leadership been structured in this way? - How does careers leadership support wider priorities?	- How are careers responsibilities distributed across senior leadership, curriculum, pastoral, SEND and governance structures? - How resilient is the careers strategy beyond individual roles or key people, and what systems, processes or shared ownership arrangements are in place to sustain progress over time? - How are careers considerations built into decision-making?	- What evidence gives you confidence that careers leadership is influencing practice and learner outcomes across the setting? - What evidence gives you confidence that careers leadership is sustainable and not dependent on individuals? - If the Careers Leader left tomorrow or was absent for a term, what would continue effectively, what would be vulnerable, and what does that tell us about the strength of the system?	- What would help careers leadership influence organisational priorities more consistently? - How could leadership responsibility become even more distributed?	- Careers should be a whole-organisation endeavour. - Leadership responsibilities should be clear and distributed.	"The strongest organisations move careers beyond individual ownership and embed responsibility across leadership, curriculum, pastoral and governance structures." "High-quality careers provision is typically sustained through systems and shared accountability rather than the efforts of one individual."
 1.2 Leaders' vision and intent for careers	Whether there is a shared and understood vision for careers that influences leadership decisions and organisational priorities.	- What do you want learners to be able to access, achieve and progress to after they leave your organisation? - What difference do you want your organisation to make to learners' futures? - Why is careers important to achieving the outcomes you want for learners?	- Where can the vision for careers or for 'learners as leavers' be seen influencing organisational priorities, development planning or resource allocation? - Who owns the vision and how does it influence decisions? - How is it communicated and reinforced?	- What evidence suggests staff, governors and leaders understand the careers vision well enough to act upon it? - How do you know it informs decision-making? - Can you identify a recent decision that was influenced by the careers vision?	- What would need to happen for the careers vision to influence organisational decision-making more consistently? - What would help move understanding into action?	- Careers should support learner aspiration, engagement, progress, and progression. - Careers should align with organisational vision and strategic priorities.	"A strong careers vision starts with a clear understanding of the difference the organisation wants to make to learners' futures." "The most impactful careers visions connect learner success, progression and future opportunities to wider organisational priorities."

		Example lines of enquiry					
	What are we really exploring?	Why this?	Systems and processes	How do you know?	How can it be elevated?	Relevant messaging	Suggested talk-lines
 1.3 Strategic careers planning	Whether careers planning acts as a strategic improvement tool, rather than a schedule of activity.	- Which learner needs, organisational priorities or progression challenges informed the priorities within the strategic careers plan? - How do those priorities reflect what you know about your learners?	How is the careers plan connected to wider development planning, improvement planning and quality assurance cycles?	- What evidence suggests the careers plan is influencing organisational improvement, rather than simply coordinating activity? - What evidence shows that the strategic careers plan reflects your understanding of learners as future leavers?	- What would help the strategic careers plan become a stronger mechanism for addressing attendance, aspiration, inclusion, transitions or NEET prevention? - How could careers planning become more anticipatory of, or responsive to, learner and organisational needs?	- Gatsby implementation should be used as an improvement tool. - Planning should be informed by evidence, learner need and organisational priorities.	"A strategic careers plan should function as an improvement tool rather than an activity calendar." "The most mature plans are informed by learner need, progression insight and future priorities." "Planning becomes more powerful when it is integrated into whole-organisation improvement cycles."
 1.4 Strategic leadership of careers	Whether careers is routinely considered within senior leadership decision-making and improvement activity.	What are senior leaders currently trying to achieve, and where does careers contribute to that success?	- How is careers incorporated into senior leadership discussions, reporting arrangements and improvement planning processes? - What leadership structures support sustainable and strategic leadership of careers?	- How do leaders know careers is contributing to wider priorities? - What evidence is routinely reviewed? - What significant organisational decisions have been improved because careers insight was part of the discussion?	- How could careers further influence strategic decisions? - What would it look like if there was distributed leadership of careers?	- Careers should influence leadership decision-making. - Leaders should support careers teams and invest in careers provision.	"Careers becomes strategically significant when leaders use careers insight to inform wider organisational decisions." "Impact is often strongest where careers is routinely considered alongside curriculum, inclusion and improvement priorities." "The question is not whether careers is discussed, but whether it influences decisions."
1.5 Support and challenge from governance	Whether governance provides informed support, challenge and accountability.	In your context, why is careers important within governance discussions?	- How is careers reviewed and reported? - What questions or challenge do governors provide, and how does this influence action?	What evidence helps governors understand whether careers is creating value for learners and the organisation?	What would help governors move from receiving information, to providing informed challenge?	- Governing boards have responsibility for assurance and oversight. - Governors should understand careers impact and statutory requirements.	"Strong governance moves beyond receiving updates to providing informed support and challenge." "Governors can play a critical role in assuring both statutory compliance and strategic impact." "The strongest governance conversations focus on learner outcomes, progression and improvement."

		Example lines of enquiry					
	What are we really exploring?	Why this?	Systems and processes	How do you know?	How can it be elevated?	Relevant messaging	Suggested talk-lines
1.6 Engagement with Careers Hubs and networks	Whether engagement with networks strengthens planning, leadership and improvement.	What value do you expect or need network engagement to bring to your organisation?	How is engagement with the Careers Hub and wider careers networks planned and sustained?	What decisions, improvements or changes can be traced back to network engagement?	How could engagement with the Careers Hub and wider careers networks become more strategic?	Careers Hubs support challenge, improvement, Gatsby achievement and system alignment.	"Hub engagement is most impactful when it strengthens organisational capability and decision-making." "The value of network engagement is often reflected in the changes it enables rather than the activity it generates." "Strategic engagement should contribute to sustainable improvement."
1.7 Enterprise Advisers and business volunteers	Whether business insight informs strategic thinking rather than simply supporting activity.	What types of business insight most influence your thinking about learner futures and provision?	How is business insight incorporated into planning?	Can you identify examples where employer insight has shaped planning, priorities or provision?	Where could business insight challenge assumptions or strategically strengthen decisions about curriculum, provision or learner progression?	Employer engagement should inform understanding of opportunities and labour market need.	"Employer insight has greatest value when it informs planning and strategic thinking." "Business engagement can help organisations challenge assumptions about learner futures and opportunities." "Employer perspectives can provide an important lens on future progression and workforce needs."

THEME 2: Addressing the needs of all learners and impact evaluation (Benchmarks 1 and 3)

Why this theme matters

Theme 2 explores how organisations use learner insight, evaluation and careers intelligence to understand learners, design responsive provision and improve outcomes over time.

At higher levels of maturity, careers provision is not delivered through a one-size-fits-all approach. Instead, organisations use information about learner aspirations, strengths, barriers, circumstances and progression needs to shape support, inform decision-making and improve learner outcomes.

Careers evaluation is not just about proving impact. It is also about generating insight that helps organisations better understand learners, strengthen provision and respond more effectively to the needs of different individuals and groups.

Interpreting Theme 2 through an organisational outcomes lens

The enquiry questions within this theme are intentionally consistent across settings.

However, the learner needs, barriers and outcomes that organisations are seeking to understand and improve may vary.



Schools

- Attendance and engagement
- Attainment and achievement
- Inclusion and disadvantage
- Successful transitions
- Destination outcomes



FE and Skills

- Retention
- Achievement
- Progression
- Participation and completion
- Employment and further learning outcomes



Specialist / SEND

- Preparation for adulthood
- Independence
- Self-advocacy
- Transition readiness
- Inclusive progression pathways



Alternative Provision

- Re-engagement in learning
- Attendance and participation
- Confidence and self-belief
- Successful reintegration or progression
- Prevention of NEET outcomes

Use these outcomes as listening prompts when exploring learner need, evaluation, quality assurance and organisational intelligence.

Relevant Theme 2 messaging

- Careers provision should be informed by learner need rather than delivered through a one-size-fits-all approach.
- Careers learning journeys should be progressive, intentional and designed around clearly understood learner outcomes.
- Understanding learner aspirations, barriers, strengths and progression needs helps organisations provide more effective support.
- Evaluation should inform improvement, not simply demonstrate impact.
- Careers insight can help leaders identify gaps, allocate support and strengthen decision-making.
- A range of evidence sources, including learner voice, destinations information and quality assurance activity, can strengthen organisational understanding and improvement.
- Careers intelligence can provide valuable insight into wider priorities relating to engagement, inclusion, progression and successful transitions.

Suggested Theme 1 talk-lines

- “The most effective organisations use learner insight to shape careers provision in ways that support the outcomes that matter most within their setting.”
- “The most valuable question is often not ‘Did it work?’ but ‘What have we learned about our learners and what should we do next?’”
- “The strongest organisations use careers insight to better understand learner needs, identify barriers and provide more responsive support.”
- “The most mature organisations use careers evaluation as a source of insight, helping leaders better understand learners, identify emerging needs and improve the outcomes that matter most within their setting.”
- “The most mature organisations use careers intelligence as a source of organisational insight, helping leaders make more informed decisions about inclusion, engagement, progression and successful transitions.”



Theme 2: Core enquiry lenses

Once the leader's priority is clear, use these four lenses selectively to deepen the conversation:

 Why this?

How does this help the organisation understand learners and respond to their needs?

Explore how learner insight, careers-related learning outcomes and evaluation activities support more informed decision-making.

 What are the systems and processes?

How is learner information gathered, interpreted, shared and used?

Explore how intelligence from learners, destinations, participation, stakeholder feedback and quality assurance informs provision and support.

 How do/will you know it works?

What evidence suggests learners are becoming better prepared for progression, decision-making and successful transitions?

Explore what organisations are learning about learner aspirations, barriers, readiness and outcomes, and how this informs planning and review.

 How can practice be elevated?

How could learner insight be used more effectively to improve provision, support and outcomes?

Explore how information and evaluation might strengthen careers learning journeys, inclusion, engagement, progression and organisational improvement.

High-leverage rows

-  2.1 Progressive careers learning journeys
-  2.2 Addressing the needs of all learners
-  2.7 Quality assurance

Explore where relevant:

- 2.3 Recording systems
- 2.4 Destinations data
- 2.5 Learner perception
- 2.6 Stakeholder voice



		Example lines of enquiry					
	What are we really exploring?	Why this?	Systems and processes	How do you know?	How can it be elevated?	Relevant messaging	Suggested talk-lines
 2.1 Progressive careers learning journeys	Whether careers provision is intentionally designed, progressive and responsive to learner needs.	• What should learners know, understand and be able to do by the time they leave your institution? • How do those expectations shape the careers learning journey? • How have you designed the journey to prepare learners for future decisions and transitions?	• How are careers-related learning outcomes sequenced and reviewed across different year groups and transition points? • How are curriculum, SEND and pastoral colleagues involved?	• How do you know learners are progressing through the intended learning journey rather than simply participating in careers activities? • What information helps you determine whether learning journeys remain relevant and responsive to learner needs?	• How could journeys become more responsive and personalised?	• Careers programmes should be progressive and underpinned by career-related learning outcomes. • Learners should develop career readiness over time. • Provision should be tailored to need.	“Strong careers programmes are designed as journeys rather than collections of disconnected experiences.” “Progression should be visible across a learner’s journey.” “Career readiness is built through intentional sequencing and reflection.”



FEATURE SPOTLIGHT: ONTRACK+ (THEME 2)

Understanding learner need and targeting support through earlier insight

Why might leaders want to explore this?

OnTrack+ helps organisations identify learners who may benefit from responsive, targeted or personalised support, including those at risk of disengagement or becoming NEET.

Used effectively, it can help leaders move beyond reactive intervention towards earlier identification, coordinated support and more informed decision-making.

What can it help leaders do?

- Identify emerging need earlier.
- Strengthen inclusion and equity.
- Target support more effectively.
- Inform transition planning.
- Support NEET prevention strategies.
- Coordinate support across careers, pastoral, SEND and leadership teams.
- Evaluate whether interventions are reaching the learners who need them most.

Key message for leaders

OnTrack+ should not be viewed simply as a mechanism for flagging learners. It is a strategic intelligence tool that helps leaders identify emerging need, target support earlier, strengthen inclusion and evaluate whether interventions are reaching the learners who need them most.

Leadership reflection

To what extent is learner-level insight being used proactively to identify emerging need, inform targeted support and improve outcomes?

Explore the OnTrack+ Practice Guide to learn how learner-level data can support earlier identification, coordinated intervention, inclusion priorities and NEET prevention planning.

	What are we really exploring?	Example lines of enquiry					
		Why this?	Systems and processes	How do you know?	How can it be elevated?	Relevant messaging	Suggested talk-lines
 2.2 Addressing the needs of all learners	Whether learner information is used effectively to identify need, coordinate support and shape provision.	Why is important to identify learners and cohorts who may benefit from different, or additional careers-related support?	- How is learner need identified and diagnosed (e.g. OnTrack+, Future Skills Questionnaire, destination data, attendance, attainment, SEND or pastoral indicators)? - How are different sources of learner information brought together to build a comprehensive understanding of need? - How are careers, SEND, pastoral and senior leaders using learner information to identify priority learners and cohorts and develop a shared understanding of learner need? - How are decisions made about which learners receive additional or differentiated careers support? - How are learner-level insights converted into targeted support, meaningful encounters, workplace experiences or transition interventions? How is this support coordinated across teams?	- How do learner needs and cohort characteristics, influence decisions about curriculum, pastoral support, transitions and careers provision? - Can you identify an example where careers-related insight led to a wider organisational response, rather than a careers-specific response? - What decisions have changed because of what OnTrack+, attendance, behaviour, destination and learner perception data are telling you? - What learners, cohorts or needs became visible through these insights that may otherwise have been missed?	How could collaboration between careers, SEND, pastoral and curriculum teams be strengthened further?	- Attention should be given to disadvantaged learners, vulnerable learners and learners with SEND. - Provision should be equitable and responsive.	"High-quality careers provision recognises that some learners need different experiences, information, guidance and support to achieve comparable career readiness and progression outcomes." "Career development is most effective when provision is adapted to learners' aspirations, circumstances, barriers and next steps." "The Gatsby Benchmarks place particular emphasis on tailoring careers support to the needs of each young person, including those who may require additional or different support."

		Example lines of enquiry					
	What are we really exploring?	Why this?	Systems and processes	How do you know?	How can it be elevated?	Relevant messaging	Suggested talk-lines
2.3 Effective use of recording systems	Whether recording systems function as useful organisational infrastructure.	- Why is it important that information about careers provision is visible beyond the Careers Leader? - Which decisions rely on having accurate careers information available?	How do you ensure careers information is accessible, reliable and available to those who need it?	- Which leadership, planning or operational decisions are informed by information about careers provision? - What decisions would leaders make less effectively if this information was unavailable?	How could information about careers provision become a more influential part of organisational planning and review?	Information and data should support decision-making and targeted support.	"Recording systems are most powerful when they help leaders identify need, coordinate support and plan responsive provision." "Careers information becomes most valuable when it moves beyond recording participation to help leaders identify gaps, target support and strengthen decision-making about learner progression." "Strong careers recording systems provide leaders with visibility of who is receiving what support, when, and to what effect." "The question is not whether information is recorded, but whether it helps improve learners' careers journeys."
2.4 Destinations data	Whether destinations data informs leadership understanding and planning.	Why is destinations information important when planning for current learners?	How is destinations information collected and analysed?	- What patterns in destinations data are influencing careers provision or wider organisational priorities? - What does destinations information tell you about how successfully learners are prepared for leaving your institution? - Which decisions have changed because of what destinations information is telling you?	How could destinations insight play a greater role in curriculum, transition and improvement planning?	Destinations data provides insight into learner progression and can help leaders understand the effectiveness of provision, inform organisational decision-making and identify future improvement priorities.	"The most valuable destinations conversations are often not about where learners went, but what those patterns tell us about aspirations, opportunity, preparedness and progression." "Destinations insight becomes most powerful when it informs future decisions about curriculum, learner support, careers provision and transition planning."



FEATURE SPOTLIGHT: FUTURE SKILLS QUESTIONNAIRE (FSQ)

Understanding learner readiness through learner voice

Why might leaders want to explore this?

The Future Skills Questionnaire (FSQ) helps leaders understand learners' career readiness, confidence, aspirations, pathway knowledge and essential skills at key transition points.

Organisations using FSQ systematically across cohorts can establish learner baselines, identify emerging needs, evaluate progress over time and better understand the impact of careers provision.

What can it help leaders do?

- Gather meaningful learner voice.
- Understand learner confidence and aspirations.
- Measure career readiness at key transition points.
- Identify differences between learner groups and cohorts.
- Target support more effectively.
- Evaluate the impact of careers provision.
- Inform continuous improvement and strategic planning.

Key message for leaders

The most effective organisations use FSQ to move beyond measuring participation and towards measuring readiness.

By embedding FSQ across cohorts and transition points, leaders can establish learner baselines, track progress over time and understand whether careers provision is improving learners' confidence, aspirations, knowledge and preparedness for future transitions.

Leadership reflection

Use alongside Theme 2.5, particularly where leaders are exploring learner experience, learner voice, readiness for transition and evidence of impact.

To what extent is learner voice being used systematically to evaluate readiness, identify need and inform improvement?

Next step

If leaders would benefit from a clearer understanding of how prepared learners feel for their next steps, FSQ may provide valuable insight into confidence, readiness and progression planning across cohorts. Find out more: Explore the Future Skills Questionnaire resources to learn how FSQ can be used to establish learner baselines, identify priorities, evaluate impact and strengthen careers provision across cohorts and transition points.

		Example lines of enquiry					
	What are we really exploring?	Why this?	Systems and processes	How do you know?	How can it be elevated?	Relevant messaging	Suggested talk-lines
2.5 Careers impact evaluation: Learner perception	Whether learner reflections are used as a meaningful source of insight.	What can learner perception of their career readiness tell you that other sources of information cannot?	How do learners reflect on the development of their career readiness?	- What are learners telling you that has influenced your thinking or planning? - What has learner perception data revealed that leaders did not already know? - Which organisational decisions have been influenced by learner perception insight? - What insight about learner perception has challenged your assumptions?	How could insights into learners' perceptions of their career readiness play a greater role in shaping provision and improvement priorities?	Learner perceptions provide strategic insight into how effectively the organisation is preparing young people for future decisions, transitions and progression. Understanding how learners view their aspirations, opportunities and readiness can help leaders evaluate the impact of wider organisational priorities and improvement efforts.	"Learner perceptions can help leaders understand whether organisational intentions are translating into meaningful learner preparedness and progression." "The most valuable learner feedback is often not about individual careers activities, but about learners' confidence, aspirations and preparedness for what comes next."
2.6 Careers impact evaluation: Stakeholder voice	Whether stakeholder perspectives contribute to organisational understanding and improvement.	What can stakeholder perspectives help leaders understand about the quality and relevance of careers provision that other evidence may not reveal?	How are perspectives gathered and reviewed?	- What is stakeholder feedback telling you that is influencing thinking or decision-making? - Which leadership assumptions have been challenged by stakeholder feedback?	How could stakeholder insight be used more consistently to inform planning, review and improvement?	- Stakeholder perspectives can provide valuable insight into the relevance, quality and impact of careers provision. - Multiple perspectives help organisations challenge assumptions and identify improvement opportunities. - Stakeholder voice should inform review, planning and continuous improvement. - Feedback is most valuable when it influences decisions and action.	"Stakeholder perspectives can help leaders understand how effectively the organisation is preparing learners for future opportunities and progression." "The most effective organisations use stakeholder voice as strategic intelligence to inform planning, partnership development and continuous improvement."

FEATURE SPOTLIGHT: CAREERS IMPACT INTERNAL LEADERSHIP REVIEW

Strengthening careers as a driver of whole-institution improvement

Why might leaders want to explore this?

The Careers Impact internal leadership review provides a structured opportunity for leaders and colleagues to reflect on the maturity of careers leadership and provision across their organisation.

Based on the Careers Impact Maturity Model, it creates a shared language for discussing how careers contributes to wider organisational priorities and learner outcomes.

What can it help leaders do?

- Engage leaders in strategic careers leadership.
- Create a shared understanding of strengths and priorities.
- Align careers with wider organisational improvement priorities.
- Support distributed leadership of careers.
- Strengthen quality assurance and impact evaluation.
- Inform improvement planning
- Celebrate success and effective practice.

Key message for leaders

The most effective organisations use the internal leadership review as more than a self-assessment exercise.

It provides a structured framework for leadership discussion, helping colleagues develop a shared understanding of current practice, future priorities and the contribution careers can make to whole-institution improvement.

When embedded within annual review cycles, it supports continuous improvement, quality assurance and more strategic careers leadership.

Leadership reflection

To what extent do leaders have a shared understanding of how careers contributes to organisational priorities, learner outcomes and improvement planning?

Use alongside Theme 2.7

Particularly where leaders are exploring quality assurance, strategic planning, continuous improvement and leadership accountability.

FEATURE SPOTLIGHT: CAREERS IMPACT PEER-TO-PEER REVIEW

Strengthening improvement through external challenge and collaboration

Why might leaders want to explore this?

The Careers Impact peer-to-peer review is an expert-facilitated process that brings structured external challenge to support improvement planning and strengthen careers leadership.

It enables institutions to test assumptions, validate strengths and refine priorities through professional dialogue with trained peers.

What can it help leaders do?

- Bring external challenge to self-review.
- Strengthen improvement planning.
- Validate strengths and identify development opportunities.
- Refine priorities emerging from the internal leadership review.
- Support quality assurance.
- Strengthen leadership confidence and decision-making.
- Learn from effective practice across the system.

Key message for leaders

The most effective organisations combine internal reflection with external challenge.

Peer-to-peer review builds on the internal leadership review by bringing fresh perspective, professional dialogue and evidence-informed challenge to improvement planning.

It supports leaders to test thinking, refine priorities and strengthen careers provision as part of a wider culture of continuous improvement.

Leadership reflection

How does external challenge contribute to evaluating strengths, refining priorities and strengthening improvement planning?

Use alongside Theme 2.7

Particularly where leaders are exploring quality assurance, external validation, improvement planning and continuous improvement.

	What are we really exploring?	Example lines of enquiry					
		Why this?	Systems and processes	How do you know?	How can it be elevated?	Relevant messaging	Suggested talk-lines
 2.7 Careers impact evaluation: Quality assurance	Whether quality of the careers provision is embedded within wider quality assurance and improvement processes.	Why is it important to review careers provision in a structured and systematic way?	- How is careers provision incorporated into wider quality assurance and review cycles? - How do findings from careers reviews inform wider organisational planning and improvement priorities?	- What does careers review activity help leaders understand that they would otherwise not know? - What wider organisational decisions have been influenced by careers review findings?	How could careers review insight play a stronger role in wider organisational planning, evaluation and reporting?	Quality assurance should provide leaders with meaningful insight into the contribution careers makes to learner outcomes, organisational priorities and long-term improvement. At higher levels of maturity, review activity becomes a source of strategic intelligence, rather than assurance alone.	"The most mature organisations use careers quality assurance to inform strategic decision-making, not simply evaluate provision." "Reviewing careers through the lens of learner outcomes, progression and organisational priorities can provide valuable insight for whole-setting continuous improvement."

THEME 3: Future opportunities, pathways and informed decision-making (Benchmarks 2 and 7)

Why this theme matters

Theme 3 explores how learners, and those who influence them, develop the knowledge, understanding and confidence needed to make informed decisions about future opportunities, pathways and progression.

At higher levels of maturity, organisations move beyond simply providing information about opportunities and progression routes. Instead, they help learners understand the opportunities available to them, explore how these relate to their aspirations, strengths and circumstances, and develop the confidence and understanding needed to make informed decisions about their futures. This supports successful transitions, positive progression and improved learner outcomes.

Understanding how learners perceive opportunities, pathways and progression routes can provide valuable insight into aspirations, decision-making, transition readiness and future destinations, helping organisations better support successful progression outcomes.

Interpreting Theme 3 through an organisational outcomes lens

The enquiry questions within this theme are intentionally consistent across settings.

However, the opportunities, pathways and progression decisions learners are preparing for may vary.



Schools

- Informed post-16 and post-18 decisions
- Successful transitions
- Broadened aspirations
- Opportunity awareness
- Positive destinations



FE and Skills

- Employment and career progression
- Apprenticeships and higher education
- Sector-specific pathways
- Workforce readiness
- Sustainable progression



Specialist / SEND

- Preparation for adulthood
- Supported employment and internships
- Independence and self-advocacy
- Community participation
- Inclusive progression pathways



Alternative Provision

- Aspirations and future orientation
- Re-engagement with learning and progression
- Transition confidence
- Positive destinations
- Prevention of NEET outcomes

Use these outcomes as listening prompts when exploring opportunity awareness, pathways, progression and informed decision-making.

Relevant Theme 3 messaging

- Learners need support to interpret information in order to make informed decisions.
- Families, staff and other influencers play an important role in learner choices and progression.
- Careers provision should broaden horizons, challenge assumptions and expand awareness of opportunities.
- Understanding opportunities, pathways and progression routes supports successful transitions and future outcomes.
- Insight into learner aspirations and decision-making can help organisations strengthen transition planning and progression support.

Suggested Theme 3 talk-lines

“The goal is not simply to provide information, but to help learners make sense of it.”

“Learners are better equipped to make informed decisions when they understand the opportunities, pathways and progression routes available to them.”

“The most effective organisations help learners explore possibilities they may not previously have considered and make decisions with greater confidence and understanding.”

“Understanding how learners think about their futures can provide valuable insight into aspirations, progression needs and transition readiness.”

“The most mature organisations use insight into learner aspirations, choices and progression decisions to strengthen support for the outcomes that matter most within their setting.”

Theme 3: Core enquiry lenses

Once the leader's priority is clear, use these four lenses selectively to deepen the conversation:



Why this?

How does this help learners make informed decisions, broaden opportunities and prepare for successful transitions?

Explore how learners are supported to understand future opportunities, challenge assumptions and make decisions that are informed by their aspirations, circumstances and future goals.



What are the systems and processes?

How is understanding of opportunities, pathways and progression routes developed, reinforced and revisited over time?

Explore how learners, parents, carers and staff are supported to access, interpret and apply information throughout the learner journey.



How do/will you know it works?

What evidence suggests learners are becoming more informed, confident and prepared decision-makers?

Explore what learners understand about opportunities, pathways and progression routes, and how that understanding influences aspirations, choices and transition readiness.



How can practice be elevated?

What would strengthen opportunity awareness, informed decision-making and progression outcomes for all learners?

Explore how understanding could be deepened, misconceptions challenged and support strengthened for learners and those who influence them.

High-leverage rows

- ✓ 3.1 Learner understanding and application of Labour Market Information (LMI)
- ✓ 3.2 Learner understanding of pathways and progression routes
- ✓ 3.7 Effective provider engagement

Explore where relevant:

- 3.3 Challenging misconceptions and stereotypes
- 3.4 Parent and carer understanding of LMI
- 3.5 Parent and carer understanding of pathways and progression routes
- 3.6 Staff understanding of pathways and LMI
- 3.8 Success stories and alumni engagement



		Example lines of enquiry					
	What are we really exploring?	Why this?	Systems and processes	How do you know?	How can it be elevated?	Relevant messaging	Suggested talk-lines
 3.1 Learner understanding and application of Labour Market Information (LMI)	Whether learners are supported to understand, interpret and apply LMI when considering future opportunities, progression pathways and decision-making.	- Why is Labour Market Information important for your learners? - What do you want learners to understand about future opportunities and trends?	- How is LMI introduced and revisited throughout the learner journey? - How are learners supported to interpret LMI rather than simply access it?	- What evidence suggests learners use LMI when considering future choices? - How do you know learners understand the relevance of LMI to their own aspirations and circumstances? - What assumptions or misconceptions have been challenged through learners' growing understanding of LMI?	- How could LMI have greater influence on learner decision-making? - How could LMI be used more effectively across curriculum and careers provision?	- Learners need support to interpret information, not simply access it. - LMI should help learners understand opportunities, trends and future possibilities. - Understanding LMI should support informed decision-making.	"The value of Labour Market Information lies not in access to information, but in learners' ability to interpret and apply it." "Strong careers programmes help learners use Labour Market Information to inform decisions rather than simply receive it."
 3.2 Learner understanding of pathways and progression routes	Whether learners understand the full range of progression opportunities available to them and can make informed comparisons between different routes at key transition points.	- Why is it important that learners understand the full range of progression opportunities available to them? - What decisions are learners expected to make at different transition points?	- How are opportunities and pathways introduced and revisited over time? - How are all learners supported to compare routes objectively?	- What evidence suggests all learners understand the options available to them? - How do you know all learners can make informed comparisons between different routes? - What learner decisions suggest increasing confidence and understanding?	- How could all learners' understanding of pathways be strengthened further? - What would help all learners make more confident and informed decisions?	- Learners should understand the full range of progression opportunities available. - Information should support informed decision-making. - Pathway awareness should be built progressively over time.	"Learners are best placed to make informed choices when they understand the full range of progression opportunities available to them." "Effective careers programmes help learners evaluate options rather than simply receive information about them."

		Example lines of enquiry					
	What are we really exploring?	Why this?	Systems and processes	How do you know?	How can it be elevated?	Relevant messaging	Suggested talk-lines
3.3 Challenging misconceptions and stereotypes	Whether careers learning helps learners recognise and challenge assumptions that may limit aspirations, choices or opportunities.	- Why is it important that careers provision helps challenge stereotypes and misconceptions? - How can stereotypes and misconceptions restrict learner aspirations, choices or access to opportunity? - Why is it important that learners are exposed to a broad range of pathways, sectors and role models? - How does challenging stereotypes support equity, social mobility and informed decision-making?	- Which assumptions most commonly influence your learner choices and aspirations? - How are misconceptions identified and addressed? - Where are learners given structured opportunities to explore and challenge assumptions?	- What evidence suggests learners are developing broader awareness of future opportunities? - What common misconceptions have been challenged through careers provision? - How do you know learners are considering opportunities they may previously have discounted?	- How could careers learning play a stronger role in broadening horizons and expanding opportunities? - What would help challenge misconceptions more consistently across the learner experience?	- Misconceptions can influence decision-making and progression. - Careers programmes should broaden horizons and expand opportunities. - Challenging stereotypes contributes to equity and inclusion.	"Careers education can play an important role in helping learners recognise and challenge limiting assumptions." "Broadening awareness of opportunities can help learners make choices based on informed understanding rather than perceived barriers."
3.4 Parent and carer understanding of Labour Market Information	Whether parents and carers understand Labour Market Information (LMI) and can use it when supporting learner decision-making.	- Why is parent and carer understanding of LMI important? - How does this support informed decisions and successful transitions?	- How is LMI shared with parents and carers? - How are families supported to understand and interpret information?	- How do you know parents and carers understand LMI rather than simply receiving it? - What feedback suggests LMI is supporting informed discussions at home?	- How could parent and carer engagement with LMI be strengthened? - What would help LMI become more accessible and relevant to families?	- Parents and carers are influential partners. - Understanding opportunity trends can support informed discussions and decisions. - Engagement should be accessible and inclusive.	"Parents and carers are often key influencers of learner choices and can benefit from understanding accessible Labour Market Information." "The strongest approaches help parents and carers make sense of Labour Market Information rather than simply providing it."

FEATURE SPOTLIGHT: YOUR CHILD'S FUTURE (YCF)

Understanding family readiness through parent and carer voice

Why might leaders want to explore this?

Your Child's Future (YCF) helps leaders understand how parents and carers perceive careers, pathways, progression routes and transition planning.

It provides valuable insight into how confident parents and carers feel supporting career-related conversations and decisions, how well they understand the options available to their child, and how aware they are of the careers support provided by their education setting.

Organisations using YCF systematically can build a stronger understanding of family perspectives, identify areas where additional communication or support may be needed, and strengthen partnerships with parents and carers to improve progression and transition outcomes.

What can it help leaders do?

- Gather meaningful parent and carer voice.
- Understand confidence levels in supporting future decisions.
- Identify gaps in knowledge and awareness of pathways and progression routes.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of communication and engagement strategies.
- Tailor support for different parent and carer groups.
- Strengthen progression planning and transition support.
- Inform continuous improvement and strategic planning.

Key message for leaders

YCF should not be viewed simply as a parental engagement questionnaire. It is a strategic improvement tool that helps leaders understand whether parents and carers have the confidence, knowledge and support they need to help young people make informed decisions about their future.

The most effective organisations use YCF to move beyond measuring engagement and towards understanding family readiness.

By gathering and responding to parent and carer insight, leaders can identify gaps in confidence and understanding, strengthen communication, and ensure families are better equipped to support progression decisions and successful transitions.

Without meaningful parent and carer insight, it can be difficult to know whether families feel informed, engaged and equipped to support their child's next steps.

Use alongside Themes 3.4 and 3.5

Particularly where leaders are exploring:

- How effectively information about pathways and progression is communicated.
- How parents and carers are supported to contribute to informed decision-making.
- How the organisation understands and responds to parent and carer perspectives.

- How families are supported through key transition points.
- How stakeholder feedback informs improvement.

Leadership reflection

To what extent is parent and carer insight being used systematically to strengthen communication, engagement and support for progression and transition decisions?

Potential next step

If leaders would benefit from a deeper understanding of parent and carer confidence, awareness and support needs, YCF may provide valuable insight into how effectively families are being prepared to support young people with future decisions and transitions.

Find out more

Explore Your Child's Future (YCF) resources to learn how parent and carer insight can inform communication strategies, engagement planning, progression support and successful transitions.

		Example lines of enquiry					
	What are we really exploring?	Why this?	Systems and processes	How do you know?	How can it be elevated?	Relevant messaging	Suggested talk-lines
3.5 Parent and carer understanding of pathways and progression routes	Whether parents and carers understand the range of progression opportunities available to learners and feel confident supporting informed decisions at key transition points.	- Why is parent and carer understanding of progression routes important? - How do parents and carers influence learner choices and aspirations? - What role do families play in supporting successful transitions?	- How are progression routes and pathway options shared with parents and carers at key transition points? - How are parents and carers supported to understand and compare the full range of available routes, including academic, technical and vocational pathways? - How is parent and carer feedback used to review and improve the way progression information and support are provided?	- What evidence suggests parent and carer understanding is influencing learner decisions? - What feedback suggests families feel confident supporting progression decisions? - What decisions or conversations have improved because of greater understanding? - How do you know families understand less familiar routes as well as traditional pathways? - What evidence suggests parent and carer understanding is supporting learner decision-making and transition planning?	- What would strengthen parent and carer understanding of progression routes? - How could information become more accessible, timely or relevant? - How could families be supported to engage more confidently in progression discussions?	- Parents and carers are influential partners in learner decision-making. - Families should be supported to understand the full range of progression opportunities available. - Accessible information and engagement can strengthen informed choices and successful transitions. - Supporting families to understand progression routes can help ensure learners make decisions based on informed understanding rather than familiarity or assumption.	"The challenge is often not whether information reaches families, but whether families feel confident interpreting and discussing the choices available." "Learners are more likely to make confident and informed decisions when the important adults around them understand the opportunities available." "Supporting parents and carers to understand the full range of progression routes can help ensure learners make decisions based on informed understanding rather than familiarity or assumption."

		Example lines of enquiry					
	What are we really exploring?	Why this?	Systems and processes	How do you know?	How can it be elevated?	Relevant messaging	Suggested talk-lines
3.6 Staff understanding of Labour Market Information and pathways	Whether staff have the knowledge and confidence to contribute to careers learning and support informed learner decision-making.	- Why is staff understanding of Labour Market Information and progression routes important? - How does staff knowledge influence learner experiences, aspirations and future decisions?	- How are staff supported to develop their understanding of Labour Market Information and progression routes? - How is information about pathways and opportunities shared across the organisation? - How are staff kept up to date with changes to qualifications, progression routes and local opportunities?	- What gives you confidence that staff can discuss opportunities, pathways and progression routes accurately? - How do you know learners receive consistent messages from different members of staff? - What evidence suggests staff understanding is influencing learner experiences?	- What would strengthen staff confidence and consistency? - How could understanding of LMI and pathways become more embedded across the organisation? - How could careers, curriculum and pastoral teams work together more effectively to support informed learner decision-making?	- Careers is a whole-setting responsibility. - Staff influence learner aspirations, awareness and decision-making. - Consistent and accurate messages help learners navigate opportunities more confidently. - Professional learning can strengthen staff confidence when discussing pathways, opportunities and future options.	"Learners are often more engaged when staff can help them understand why their learning matters and where it could lead." "Understanding future opportunities is not only about helping learners make decisions later. It can help learners see greater relevance in their education today." "When staff confidently connect learning, opportunities and future possibilities, careers becomes a tool for motivation and engagement, not just progression planning." "Staff understanding of pathways and opportunities can help broaden aspirations, challenge misconceptions and encourage learners to consider possibilities they may not otherwise recognise." "Where curriculum, pastoral and careers teams share a common understanding of opportunities and progression routes, learners are more likely to experience consistent support and make informed decisions."

	What are we really exploring?	Example lines of enquiry					
		Why this?	Systems and processes	How do you know?	How can it be elevated?	Relevant messaging	Suggested talk-lines
 3.7 Effective provider engagement	Whether provider engagement is strategically planned and used to help learners understand the full range of progression opportunities available to them, make informed comparisons between pathways, and prepare for successful transitions.	• Why is provider engagement important for your learners? • How does provider engagement contribute to informed decision-making and successful transitions? • What do you hope learners gain from encounters with different education and training providers?	• How are providers selected and engaged? • How do you ensure learners encounter the full range of appropriate pathways? • How is provider engagement planned across the learner journey and at key decision points? • How are provider encounters linked to careers education, personal guidance and transition planning?	• What evidence suggests provider engagement is influencing learner choices or progression decisions? • How do you know learners are encountering the full range of appropriate pathways? • What decisions or improvements have been influenced by provider engagement? • How do you know learners understand the similarities, differences and implications of different routes? • What feedback suggests provider encounters are influencing learner aspirations, confidence or decision-making?	• How could provider engagement become more strategic? • What would strengthen the contribution provider engagement makes to learner progression and transitions? • How could provider engagement respond more effectively to learner need? • How might provider engagement contribute more strongly to aspiration, opportunity awareness and transition readiness?	• Learners should encounter the full range of appropriate progression routes. • Provider engagement should support informed and impartial decision-making. • Encounters should be planned and sequenced rather than isolated events. • Provider engagement can help learners understand opportunities, compare pathways and prepare for future transitions. • Effective provider engagement contributes to progression, transition readiness and destination outcomes.	"The purpose of provider engagement is not simply exposure to opportunities but helping learners make informed comparisons between different routes." "Learners are better placed to make confident choices when they encounter a broad and representative range of providers and pathways." "The question is not whether providers visit the organisation, but whether those encounters genuinely improve learner understanding and decision-making." "Provider engagement is most effective when it helps learners explore opportunities they may not otherwise have considered." "Well-planned provider engagement can help learners broaden aspirations, strengthen confidence and prepare more effectively for future transitions." "The strongest organisations use provider engagement to strengthen progression planning, transition readiness and informed choice, rather than simply meeting requirements."

		Example lines of enquiry					
		Why this?	Systems and processes	How do you know?	How can it be elevated?	Relevant messaging	Suggested talk-lines
3.8 Effective use of success stories and alumni engagement	Whether success stories and alumni engagement broaden aspirations, challenge assumptions and help learners understand possible futures and progression pathways.	- Why are success stories and alumni engagement important for your learners? - What do you want learners to gain from these experiences?	- How are success stories and alumni engagement planned across the learner journey? - How do you ensure learners encounter a diverse range of experiences and pathways?	- What evidence suggests success stories are influencing learner aspirations and understanding? - How do you know all learners are relating these stories to their own futures? - What assumptions or misconceptions have been challenged through alumni engagement?	- How could success stories and alumni engagement contribute more strongly to informed decision-making? - What would strengthen representation and relevance further?	- Success stories should help learners understand progression routes, transitions and future opportunities. - A diverse range of alumni and former learners can provide authentic insight into different pathways and destinations. - Representation should help learners see a broad range of possible futures and informed choices.	"The purpose of success stories is not simply to celebrate achievement, but to help learners understand what different progression routes can look like in practice. Hearing from individuals who once sat where they are sat makes success feel more relatable and attainable, helping learners recognise that future opportunities are open to them too. In essence, if they can see it, they can be it." "A diverse range of alumni and success stories can help learners explore opportunities, challenge assumptions and make more informed decisions about their futures."

THEME 4: Linking curriculum learning to careers (Benchmark 4)

Theme 1

Theme 2

Theme 3

Theme 4

Theme 5

Theme 6

Why this theme matters

Theme 4 explores how learners are supported to understand the relevance, application and future value of their learning.

At higher levels of maturity, organisations move beyond occasional references to jobs and careers. Instead, connections between learning, skills, opportunities and future pathways are intentionally embedded within curriculum thinking, helping learners understand why their learning matters and how it can support future aspirations, progression and success.

When learners understand the purpose and application of what they are learning, organisations can strengthen engagement, motivation, confidence and preparedness for future transitions.

Interpreting Theme 4 through an organisational outcomes lens

The enquiry questions within this theme are intentionally consistent across settings.

However, the outcomes that curriculum relevance and careers-connected learning support may vary.



Schools

- Learner engagement and motivation
- Attendance
- Attainment and achievement
- Aspiration
- Successful transitions



FE and Skills

- Occupational competence
- Industry relevance
- Achievement and retention
- Workforce readiness
- Progression



Specialist / SEND

- Preparation for adulthood
- Independence
- Confidence and self-advocacy
- Functional application of learning



Alternative Provision

- Re-engagement in learning
- Confidence and self-belief
- Future orientation
- Participation and motivation
- Positive progression outcomes

Use these outcomes as listening prompts when exploring curriculum relevance, learner engagement, skills development and future readiness.

Relevant Theme 4 messaging

- Careers should strengthen the relevance, purpose and future value of learning.
- Learners should understand how their learning connects to future opportunities, pathways and wider life experiences.
- Careers should be embedded within curriculum thinking rather than added to it.
- Understanding the application of learning can strengthen engagement, aspiration and motivation.
- Skills development contributes to confidence, readiness for transition and successful progression.
- Curriculum learning can help learners make meaningful connections between their current learning and future possibilities.

Suggested Theme 4 talk-lines

- “Learners are more likely to engage when they understand why learning matters and how it connects to their future.”
- “The strongest organisations do not add careers to the curriculum. They use careers to strengthen the relevance, purpose and application of learning.”
- “Careers-connected learning helps learners make meaningful connections between what they are learning today and the opportunities available to them in the future.”
- “Understanding the value and application of learning can be a powerful driver of engagement, confidence and aspiration.”
- “The most mature organisations use careers-connected curriculum learning to strengthen the outcomes that matter most within their setting, whether that is engagement, achievement, preparation for adulthood, progression or successful transitions.”



Theme 4: Core enquiry lenses

Once the leader's priority is clear, use these four lenses selectively to deepen the conversation:

 Why this?

How does careers strengthen the relevance, purpose and future value of learning?

 What are the systems and processes?

How are careers embedded within curriculum design, delivery and review?

 How do/will you know it works?

What evidence suggests learners understand the relevance and application of their learning?

 How can practice be elevated?

What would strengthen curriculum relevance, learner engagement and future readiness?

High-leverage rows

-  4.1 Careers education
-  4.2 Staff highlighting the relevance of their subjects and making links from the curriculum
-  4.4 Learner skills development

Explore where relevant:

4.3 Staff learning and development to support understanding of Labour Market Information (LMI) and pathways, to inform careers in the curriculum.

		Example lines of enquiry					
	What are we really exploring?	Why this?	Systems and processes	How do you know?	How can it be elevated?	Relevant messaging	Suggested talk-lines
 4.1 Careers education	Whether careers education is planned as a progressive learning journey that prepares all learners for informed decision-making, successful transitions and future opportunities.	- Why has careers education been designed in this way? - What do you want all learners to know, understand and be able to do as a result?	- How is careers education planned, sequenced and reviewed? - How is it connected to curriculum learning and key transition points?	- What evidence gives you confidence that careers education is influencing how learners think about their future, make decisions and prepare for transitions? - What evidence suggests all learners are building careers knowledge, understanding and career readiness over time?	- How could careers education become more responsive to learner need and organisational priorities? - What would help strengthen progression across the learner journey?	- Careers education should be planned, progressive and learner centred. - Careers learning should support informed decision-making and successful transitions. - Careers education should contribute to wider organisational priorities and learner outcomes.	"Strong careers education is designed as a progressive learning journey rather than a series of disconnected activities." "The most effective careers education helps all learners develop the knowledge, confidence and skills needed for future decisions and transitions."
 4.2 Staff highlighting the relevance of their subjects and making links from the curriculum	Whether curriculum learning helps learners understand how their subjects connect to future opportunities, pathways and the wider world.	- Why is it important that all learners understand the relevance of what they are learning? - How does this support learner engagement and progression?	- How are careers links identified and planned within curriculum areas? - What support helps staff make meaningful curriculum-to-careers connections?	- How do you know learners understand why their learning matters beyond qualifications and assessments? - What evidence suggests curriculum relevance is influencing learner engagement or aspiration?	- How could curriculum-to-careers links become more consistent across subjects and phases? - What would strengthen learners' ability to connect learning to future opportunities?	- Careers should help learners understand the relevance of their learning. - Careers-linked curriculum learning should be meaningful and authentic. - Curriculum relevance can support engagement, aspiration and progression.	"Learners are more likely to engage when they understand why their learning matters and where it could lead." "Careers in the curriculum connects subject learning to future opportunities, choices and aspirations."

		Example lines of enquiry					
	What are we really exploring?	Why this?	Systems and processes	How do you know?	How can it be elevated?	Relevant messaging	Suggested talk-lines
4.3 Staff learning and development to support understanding of Labour Market Information (LMI) and pathways, to inform careers in the curriculum	Whether staff have the knowledge and confidence to make meaningful links between curriculum learning, LMI and progression opportunities.	- Why is staff understanding of LMI and pathways important? - How does staff knowledge influence learner experiences?	- How are staff supported to understand labour market trends and progression routes? - How is this learning developed and refreshed over time?	- How do you know staff feel confident making careers-related links? - What evidence suggests professional learning is influencing practice?	- What would help staff apply labour market and pathway knowledge more consistently? - How could professional learning become more embedded within curriculum development?	- Careers is a whole-setting responsibility. - Professional development supports consistent learner experiences. - Staff understanding influences learners' awareness and aspirations.	"The strongest organisations ensure all staff understand how their curriculum area connects to future opportunities and pathways." "Careers becomes more sustainable when staff confidence and understanding are built through ongoing professional learning."
 4.4 Learner skills development	Whether learners are developing, recognising and applying essential skills through curriculum learning, careers education and wider experiences.	- Why have these skills been prioritised? - How do they support learner success and progression?	- How are skills developed, reinforced and revisited across the learner journey? - How is a shared language around skills promoted?	- How do you know learners can recognise, apply and articulate their skills? - What evidence suggests skills development is supporting career readiness and progression?	- How could skills development become more visible and coherent across the organisation? - What would help all learners make stronger connections between skills, aspirations and future opportunities?	- Essential skills should be developed progressively over time via a progressive careers learning journey. - Learners should understand and be able to articulate their skills. - Skills development contributes to confidence, readiness and successful transitions.	"Skills development is most powerful when learners can recognise, apply and communicate their strengths in different contexts." "A shared approach to skills development can strengthen learner confidence, career readiness and future progression."

THEME 5: Encounters with Employers and Employees and Experiences of the Workplace (Gatsby Benchmarks 5 and 6)

Why this theme matters

Theme 5 explores how meaningful employer encounters and workplace experiences contribute to learner outcomes, organisational priorities and successful transitions.

At higher levels of maturity, organisations move beyond viewing employer engagement and work experience as standalone careers activities. Instead, they are positioned as strategic tools that help improve outcomes for learners while strengthening priorities such as engagement, aspiration, inclusion, skills development, progression and destination outcomes.

This theme has taken on increased significance following the Government’s expectation that schools reform work experience provision from September 2026, ensuring that all learners benefit from:

- One week’s worth of work experience activities across Years 7-9.
- One week’s worth of work experience placement(s) across Years 10-11.

This expectation comes at a time when policymakers, employers and education providers are increasingly focused on improving progression outcomes and addressing the challenge of more than one million young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).

The strongest organisations do not ask “(How) do we provide employer encounters and/or work experience?”, instead, they ask “How can meaningful employer encounters and workplace experiences help us achieve the outcomes that matter most for our learners and organisation?”.

In this context, meaningful achievement of Benchmarks 5 and 6 becomes a contributor to organisational improvement rather than an additional responsibility.



Interpreting Theme 5 through an organisational outcomes lens

The enquiry questions within this theme are intentionally consistent across settings. However, the outcomes that meaningful employer encounters and workplace experiences support may vary according to learner need, organisational priorities and setting context.



Schools

- Attendance and engagement
- Behaviour for learning
- Aspiration and opportunity awareness
- Essential skills development
- Transition readiness
- Destination outcomes



FE and Skills

- Retention and achievement
- Occupational competence
- Industry readiness
- Employer responsiveness
- Progression into employment, apprenticeships and higher education
- Workforce readiness



Specialist / SEND

- Preparation for adulthood
- Independence and self-advocacy
- Confidence and self-belief
- Supported employment and supported internships
- Community participation
- Transition readiness



Alternative Provision

- Re-engagement in learning
- Confidence and belonging
- Positive learner identity
- Aspiration and future orientation
- Successful progression
- Prevention of NEET outcomes

Use these outcomes as listening prompts when exploring employer engagement, workplace experiences, organisational readiness and implementation.

Relevant Theme 5 messaging

- Meaningful employer encounters and workplace experiences should be designed around learner need, helping learners develop the knowledge, skills, confidence, aspirations and readiness required for successful progression, positive destinations and future transitions.
- Employer encounters and workplace experiences should contribute to the outcomes and priorities that matter most within the setting, including engagement, motivation, inclusion, attendance, preparation for adulthood, transition readiness and progression.
- The purpose of Benchmarks 5 and 6 is not simply to provide access to employers and workplaces, but to help learners understand the relevance and application of their learning. By connecting education to future opportunities, meaningful encounters and workplace experiences can strengthen learner engagement, aspiration, essential skills development and informed decision-making.
- Meaningful achievement of Benchmarks 5 and 6 should be judged not only by participation, but by the extent to which learners develop workplace understanding, essential skills, confidence, career readiness and preparedness for future transitions.
- Work experience reform provides an opportunity to move from an activity-led approach towards a learner-centred and outcomes-focused model. Through progressive employer encounters, workplace experiences and strategic partnerships, organisations can create coherent learner journeys that support learner success while contributing to wider setting improvement priorities, including engagement, inclusion, progression, destination outcomes, preparation for adulthood and the prevention of NEET.

Suggested Theme 5 talk-lines

“The most effective organisations use employer encounters and workplace experiences to strengthen the outcomes they are working hardest to improve, including engagement, inclusion, progression, successful transitions and positive destinations.”

“The real measure of success is not participation. It is whether employer encounters and workplace experiences are contributing to stronger learner engagement, inclusion, progression, transitions and destination outcomes.”

“Meaningful employer encounters and workplace experiences can help learners answer some of education’s most important questions: Why does this matter? Where could this lead? What do I need to do next?”

“Strategic employer partnerships create value far beyond individual activities, helping organisations strengthen curriculum relevance, skills development, learner aspiration, transition readiness and workforce preparation.”

“Work experience reform provides an opportunity to move from isolated events and placements towards a coherent, progressive learner journey that supports learner development while contributing to wider setting improvement priorities.”

Theme 5: Core enquiry lenses

Once the leader’s priority is clear, use these four lenses selectively to deepen the conversation.

 Why this?

How do meaningful employer encounters and workplace experiences contribute to learner success and organisational priorities?

 What are the systems and processes?

How are meaningful and progressive employer encounters and workplace experiences planned, sequenced and sustained?

 How do/will you know it works?

What evidence suggests meaningful employer encounters and workplace experiences are influencing learners and organisational priorities?

 How can practice be elevated?

What would strengthen the impact, equity and strategic contribution of meaningful employer encounters and workplace experiences?

High-leverage rows

-  5.1 Working in Partnership: Effective Employer Engagement
-  5.2 Meaningful Encounters with Employers
-  5.3 Meaningful Experiences of the Workplace

The enquiry within Rows 5.1-5.3 is designed to explore the quality, progression and impact of employer encounters and workplace experiences. If discussions move beyond provision and towards questions of leadership, implementation, organisational readiness, work experience reform planning or strategic employer partnerships, see Part B for stakeholder-specific questions, messaging and talk-lines. These additional conversations help explore how employer encounters and workplace experiences can become strategic contributors to learner development, organisational priorities and work experience reform.



		Example lines of enquiry					
		Why this?	Systems and processes	How do you know?	How can it be elevated?	Relevant messaging	Suggested talk-lines
 5.1 Working in Partnership: Effective Employer Engagement	Whether employer engagement has moved beyond maintaining relationships and delivering opportunities towards a strategic partnership model that is planned, evaluated and used to support learner outcomes, curriculum relevance, transition readiness and wider organisational priorities.	• What do you want employer partnerships to contribute to learner outcomes, organisational priorities and future progression? • How does employer engagement support your wider ambitions for curriculum relevance, skills development and transition readiness? • What defines a high-quality employer partnership in your context?	• To what extent is employer engagement informed by learner need, Labour Market Information and regional or national skills priorities? • How are employer partnerships planned and sustained so they support multiple parts of the learner journey rather than isolated activities? • How are employers used to strengthen curriculum learning, encounters and workplace experiences in a joined-up way? • Where is responsibility for employer partnership quality, sustainability and development held? • How embedded are employer partnerships within planning, review and reporting processes?	• How do you know employer engagement is strengthening learner aspiration, relevance, inclusion and preparedness over time? • What evidence helps leaders understand whether employer partnerships are contributing to wider organisational priorities? • How is employer feedback, learner voice and participation information used to review partnership quality and future need? • If key relationships disappeared tomorrow, what would continue and what would that tell you about the resilience of the system?	• Where might employer engagement still rely too heavily on individual relationships rather than organisational systems? • What would help employer partnerships become a more strategic contributor to curriculum relevance, skills development and progression? • How could employer insight play a stronger role in development planning and organisational improvement? • What would a mature employer partnership model look like in three to five years?	• Strategic employer partnerships create value across the learner journey. • Employer engagement should be aligned to learner need and organisational priorities. • Sustainable partnerships rely on systems rather than individual relationships. • Employers can contribute to curriculum relevance, skills development and transition readiness.	"The strongest organisations view employers as partners in learner and curriculum development rather than providers of individual activities." "Strategic employer partnerships create value far beyond individual encounters and placements."

		Example lines of enquiry					
		Why this?	Systems and processes	How do you know?	How can it be elevated?	Relevant messaging	Suggested talk-lines
 5.2 Meaningful Encounters with Employers	Whether employer encounters are intentionally sequenced, informed by learner need and embedded within wider careers, curriculum, pastoral and inclusion approaches rather than delivered as individual events.	- What do you want learners to know, understand, feel or do differently because of employer encounters? - How do employer encounters contribute to learner engagement, aspiration, transition readiness and future decision-making? - What role should meaningful employer encounters play within the wider learner journey?	- How are meaningful employer encounters sequenced across year groups and transition points to support progressive learner development? - How does planning reflect learner need, participation patterns and the needs of under-served groups? - How are meaningful employer encounters connected to curriculum learning, careers education and wider learner support? - How are preparation, reflection and follow-up embedded within delivery? - How are meaningful employer encounters incorporated into development planning, evaluation and reporting processes?	- How do you know meaningful employer encounters are contributing to aspiration, engagement, inclusion and preparedness rather than simply raising awareness? - What patterns are emerging from participation data, learner voice and evaluation activity? - Which learners appear to benefit most and what are leaders learning from this? - How is insight from meaningful employer encounters influencing future planning and decision-making?	- What would help meaningful employer encounters become more progressive, purposeful and responsive to learner need? - How could evaluation be used more sharply to improve quality, relevance and equity? - How could meaningful employer encounters contribute more consistently to transition readiness and progression outcomes? - What would it look like if every learner experienced a coherent sequence of meaningful employer encounters throughout their education?	- Meaningful encounters are defined by learner learning rather than participation. - Preparation, reflection and progression are critical to impact. - Encounters should help learners connect opportunities with their own futures. - Quality and inclusion matter as much as access.	"A meaningful encounter is not simply one that happens. It is one that changes what a learner knows, understands or feels capable of." "The quality and progression of encounters often matter more than the quantity."



FEATURE SPOTLIGHT: ONTRACK+ (THEME 5)

Understanding learner need and targeting support through earlier insight

Why might leaders want to explore this?

An early insight tool that helps identify which learners may benefit from different, additional or more personalised employer encounters, workplace experiences and transition support.

What can it help leaders do?

- Supports targeted work experience planning.
- Strengthens inclusion and equity.
- Helps personalise employer encounters and workplace experiences.
- Supports transition readiness.
- Helps identify learners needing additional preparation or follow-up.
- Supports evaluation beyond participation.

Key message for leaders

Work experience reform creates an opportunity to move beyond providing the same experiences for all learners. OnTrack+ can help leaders use learner insight to design more targeted, inclusive and impactful employer encounters and workplace experiences.

Use alongside Theme 5.3: Meaningful Experiences of the Workplace

Particularly:

- How is planning informed by learner needs assessment, participation data and inclusion considerations?
- How do meaningful workplace experiences contribute to wider organisational priorities?
- Which learners appear least well served and how is this influencing future planning?
- How do you know meaningful workplace experiences are improving readiness for transition rather than simply providing exposure to work?

Explore the OnTrack+ Practice Guide to learn how learner insight can inform employer engagement, workplace experiences, transition planning and targeted support.

		Example lines of enquiry					
	What are we really exploring?	Why this?	Systems and processes	How do you know?	How can it be elevated?	Relevant messaging	Suggested talk-lines
Remember: When conversations move beyond the quality of workplace experiences and towards implementation, leadership, capacity, reform readiness or strategic employer engagement, see Part B for stakeholder-specific enquiry, messaging and talk-lines.							
 5.3 Meaningful Experiences of the Workplace	Whether workplace experiences are positioned as a deliberate and integral aspect of learner development, progression and transition readiness, embedded within whole-setting approaches to engagement, inclusion and successful progression.	- What is the intended contribution of meaningful workplace experiences to learner development and future success? - How should meaningful workplace experiences support aspirations, engagement, confidence and readiness for transition? - How do meaningful workplace experiences contribute to wider organisational priorities?	- How are meaningful workplace experiences sequenced across the learner journey rather than treated as standalone opportunities? - How is planning informed by learner needs assessment, participation data and inclusion considerations? - How are curriculum, pastoral, inclusion and careers teams contributing to planning and delivery? - How are preparation, reflection and evaluation built into workplace experiences? - How are meaningful workplace experiences embedded within wider planning, review and reporting processes?	- How do you know meaningful workplace experiences are improving readiness for transition rather than simply providing exposure to work? - What evidence suggests meaningful experiences are contributing to engagement, aspiration, inclusion and progression? - Which learners appear least well served and how is this influencing future planning? - What insight from OnTrack+, attendance, learner perception or destinations is helping you identify which learners may benefit from different workplace experiences? - How are learner reflection, destination information and evaluation informing improvement activity?	- What would help meaningful workplace experiences become more intentionally planned around learner need? - How could meaningful workplace experiences become a stronger contributor to engagement, inclusion and successful progression? - How could evaluation be used more effectively to refine sequencing, quality and equity? - What would a mature and sustainable workplace experience model look like in your context over the next three to five years?	- Workplace experiences should be designed around learner development rather than logistics. - Quality, inclusion and progression matter as much as participation. - Workplace experiences should form part of a coherent learner journey. - Reflection and evaluation help transform experience into learning.	"A placement is not the outcome. The outcome is what learners understand, can do and are prepared for because of the experience." "The most mature organisations use workplace experiences to strengthen learner development, progression and successful transitions rather than simply to provide exposure to work."

PART B: Work Experience Reform Conversations

Why Part B exists

Rows 5.1-5.3 explore the maturity, quality and impact of employer encounters and workplace experiences.

As conversations deepen, leaders can be supported to move beyond questions about participation, compliance and operational delivery towards wider questions about organisational priorities, learner outcomes, implementation readiness, employer partnerships and long-term sustainability.

Part B supports these conversations.

Rather than being structured around Gatsby Benchmarks, Part B is organised around the work experience reform education leader journey, helping to support leaders at different stages of understanding, planning, implementation, improvement and long-term sustainability.

Understand the Change → See the Opportunity → Build Capacity → Strengthen Practice → Review Impact → Plan Forward

Work experience reform provides an opportunity for leaders to think differently about the role meaningful employer encounters and workplace experiences can play within their organisation.

The most effective organisations do not view employer engagement and workplace experiences as standalone careers activities.

Instead, they position them as strategic tools that help improve the outcomes they are already working hardest to achieve.

Depending on context, those outcomes may include:

			
Schools	FE and Skills	Specialist / SEND	Alternative Provision
• attendance and engagement • behaviour for learning • aspiration and opportunity awareness • essential skills development • transition readiness • destination outcomes	• retention and achievement • occupational competence • employer responsiveness • progression • workforce readiness	• preparation for adulthood • independence and self-advocacy • confidence and self-belief • supported employment • transition readiness	• re-engagement in learning • confidence and belonging • aspiration and future orientation • successful progression • prevention of NEET outcomes

As conversations progress, it can be helpful to explore three interconnected areas:

- How employer encounters and workplace experiences contribute to learner and organisational outcomes.
- How leadership, systems, capacity and accountability support sustainable implementation.
- How employer partnerships are developed, strengthened and aligned to learner need, organisational priorities and future improvement goals.

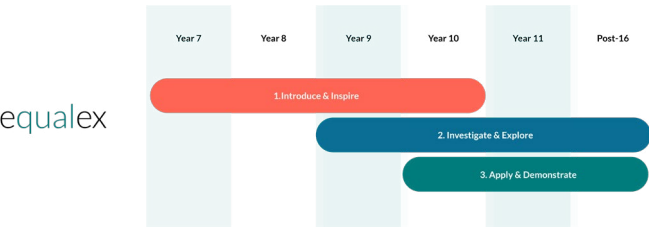
The key question throughout Part B is not "How do we deliver employer encounters and workplace experiences?" instead it is "How are meaningful employer encounters and workplace experiences helping us improve the outcomes that matter most for learners and our organisation?"

Understanding the equalex approach

The equalex framework provides a practical model for implementing modern work experience and delivering meaningful achievement of Gatsby Benchmarks 5 and 6.

Rather than viewing work experience as a single placement or isolated activity, equalex supports a progressive approach in which learners build knowledge, skills, confidence and workplace understanding over time through a sequence of meaningful employer encounters and work experiences.

This reflects both the findings of National System Review 3 and the Government's ambition for work experience reform.



Introduce and Inspire

- Self-awareness
- Opportunity awareness
- Aspiration

Investigate and Explore

- Workplace understanding
- Pathway awareness
- Essential skills
- Career readiness

Apply and Demonstrate

- Applying knowledge and skills
- Experiencing workplaces
- Receiving employer feedback
- Making informed progression decisions

The equalex journey also supports wider Gatsby outcomes, particularly those relating to employer encounters, curriculum relevance, future opportunities and informed decision-making.

1. Understand the Change: What is changing and why?

What leaders are doing?

Building a shared understanding of work experience reform, the evidence informing it and the shift from a placement-focused model towards progressive workplace experiences.

Relevant stakeholders

- › Headteachers and Principals
- › Governors and Trustees
- › Senior Leaders
- › Strategic Careers Leaders
- › Central Strategic Careers Leaders

Questions that unlock thinking

- When you hear the term work experience, what assumptions or expectations come to mind?
- Which elements of current provision in your setting already align with the direction of work experience reform?
- What aspects of current thinking, language or practice may need to change?
- What might it mean to view workplace experiences as an entitlement for all learners rather than an opportunity for some?
- How well do leaders, governors and staff understand the rationale behind the reform?

Suggested talk-lines

"Work experience reform asks us to think about work experience as a series of meaningful workplace experiences across a learner's journey, rather than solely as a placement in Key Stage 4."

"Before considering implementation, it is important to understand what is changing, what remains the same and what the evidence tells us about effective work experience practice."

2. See the Opportunity: Why does this matter to our learners and to our priorities?

What leaders are doing

Exploring how meaningful workplace experiences can contribute to educational priorities such as engagement, attendance, confidence, aspiration, inclusion, progression and successful transitions.

Relevant stakeholders

- › Headteachers and Principals
- › Strategic Careers Leaders
- › Curriculum Leaders
- › Careers Leaders
- › Trust Leaders

Questions that unlock thinking

- Where could meaningful workplace experiences make the greatest contribution to learner engagement, attendance, confidence, aspiration, progression or successful transition?
- Which groups of learners stand to benefit most from high-quality workplace experiences, and why?
- How well does current provision respond to the needs of the learners who may benefit most?
- What opportunities might be missed when workplace experiences are viewed primarily as a careers activity rather than a contributor to wider educational priorities?
- Beyond participation, what difference would you hope learners experience as a result of meaningful workplace experiences?
- If workplace experiences were fully embedded within your approach to learner development, what might look different for learners?

Suggested talk-lines

"The reform provides an opportunity to think beyond delivery and consider how workplace experiences can support the outcomes that matter most for learners."

"The strongest approaches start with learner need and explore how workplace experiences can contribute to wider educational priorities."

3. Build Capacity: What will it take to make work experience reform happen effectively here?

What leaders are doing

Assessing whether the leadership, systems, partnerships, resources and organisational structures are in place to support effective and sustainable implementation of work experience reform.

Relevant stakeholders

- › Headteachers and Principals
- › Strategic Careers Leaders
- › Governors and Trustees
- › Central Strategic Careers Leaders
- › Senior Leaders

Questions that unlock thinking

- To what extent is successful implementation dependent on individual people, relationships and opportunities, rather than embedded systems, shared ownership and strategic planning?
- How visible is work experience reform within wider leadership, improvement and governance conversations, and what does that tell you about its perceived value?
- Which employer partnerships create the greatest strategic value for learners and the organisation, and how resilient would provision be if those partnerships changed?
- Which learners may currently be least well served, how do leaders know, and what does that reveal about implementation capacity, equity and reach?
- What are the biggest barriers to achieving a model that is consistent, sustainable, equitable and scalable over time?

Suggested talk-lines

“Sustainable implementation depends on distributed leadership, systems and partnerships, not simply commitment and enthusiasm.”

“The strongest models are designed to withstand changes in people, partnerships and circumstances.”

4. Strengthen Practice: What should great practice look like?

What leaders are doing

Exploring how meaningful workplace experiences can be designed, sequenced and targeted to maximise value for different learners.

Relevant stakeholders

- › Careers Leaders
- › Curriculum Leaders
- › SEND and Inclusion Leaders
- › Attendance and Pastoral Leaders
- › Strategic Careers Leaders

Questions that unlock thinking

- How does learner need influence decisions about meaningful employer encounters, workplace experiences, support and progression opportunities?
- How are tools such as OnTrack+, FSQ, attendance and destination data helping leaders identify which learners may require different employer encounters, workplace experiences or additional transition support?
- Which learners are likely to benefit from a different offer, rather than additional access to existing provision, and how do you know?
- How intentionally are meaningful employer encounters and workplace experiences sequenced so learners progressively develop workplace understanding, essential skills, confidence and readiness for future transitions?
- Where might preparation, reflection or follow-up be limiting the impact of otherwise valuable experiences?
- Which learners appear to gain the greatest benefit from current provision, and which may gain less?
- To what extent do experiences reflect learner need, curriculum learning, local opportunity and future pathways?
- How do leaders know that inclusion is being strengthened through participation and not simply assumed through access?
- To what extent do experiences reflect learner need, curriculum learning, local opportunity and future pathways?

Suggested talk-lines

- “Learner need should drive design decisions.”
- “Equity should be evidenced rather than assumed.”

5. Review Impact: What difference is it making?

What leaders are doing

Evaluating the difference meaningful workplace experiences are making for learners and using evidence to inform future improvement and decision-making.

Relevant stakeholders

- › Senior Leaders
- › Governors and Trustees
- › Strategic Careers Leaders
- › Careers Leaders
- › Trust Leaders

Questions that unlock thinking

- How do you distinguish between participation, satisfaction and impact?
- How do you know learners are becoming better prepared for future transitions?
- What evidence suggests encounters and experiences are influencing aspiration, engagement or decision-making?
- Which learners benefit most and least, and what might explain that?
- What are employers telling you about learner strengths and development needs?
- What are employer encounters and workplace experiences teaching you about your learners?
- What organisational decisions have been strengthened because of the insight gained through this work?

Suggested talk-lines

“The real measure of success is not participation, but the difference experiences make.”

“The most mature organisations use evaluation as a source of organisational intelligence.”

6. Plan Forward: How do we continue to improve and sustain work experience reform over time?

What leaders are doing

Using insight, evidence and experience to refine, strengthen and sustain meaningful workplace experiences that continue to meet the needs of learners.

Relevant stakeholders

- › Headteachers and Principals
- › Governors and Trustees
- › Strategic Careers Leaders
- › Central Strategic Careers Leaders
- › Trust Leaders

Questions that unlock thinking

- Looking ahead three to five years, what would mature practice look like in your context?
- What should be strengthened, refined, stopped or scaled?
- Which employer partnerships create the greatest long-term value?
- How will employer engagement remain responsive to changing learner needs and labour market opportunities?
- What would make the current approach more resilient if staffing, partnerships or local circumstances changed?
- How will you know practice is improving year on year?
- How could employer engagement become a stronger contributor to organisational priorities over time?

Suggested talk-lines

- “The goal is not simply to sustain activity but to increase the value it creates.”
- “The strongest organisations build systems that are sustainable, inclusive and continuously improving.”

THEME 6: Personal guidance (Benchmark 8)

Why this theme matters

Theme 6 explores how personal guidance supports informed decision-making, successful transitions and learner progression.

At higher levels of maturity, organisations move beyond viewing personal guidance as a standalone careers intervention. Instead, personal guidance forms part of a coherent learner journey, helping learners understand themselves, explore opportunities, navigate barriers and make informed decisions about their futures.

Personal guidance can provide valuable insight into learner aspirations, motivations, concerns and progression needs. When considered alongside wider organisational information, this insight can help organisations better understand learner need, strengthen support and improve outcomes relating to engagement, inclusion, transition readiness and successful progression.

Understanding what learners think, feel and aspire to can provide valuable intelligence for leaders, helping them identify barriers, allocate support and strengthen approaches to learner success.

Interpreting Theme 6 through an organisational outcomes lens

The enquiry questions within this theme are intentionally consistent across settings.

However, the progression needs, barriers and outcomes being explored through personal guidance may vary.



Schools

- Subject and pathway decisions
- Successful transitions
- Aspiration and confidence
- Progression planning
- Positive destinations



FE and Skills

- Retention and achievement
- Employment readiness
- Progression into employment, apprenticeships or higher education
- Career development
- Sustainable progression



Specialist / SEND

- Preparation for adulthood
- Independence and self-advocacy
- Transition planning
- Supported progression
- Inclusive destination outcomes



Alternative Provision

- Confidence and aspiration
- Re-engagement and participation
- Transition readiness
- Positive progression pathways
- Prevention of NEET outcomes

Use these outcomes as listening prompts when exploring personal guidance, learner support and progression planning.

Relevant Theme 6 messaging

- Personal guidance should support learners to make informed decisions about future opportunities, pathways and progression.
- Personal guidance is most effective when it forms part of a coherent learner journey rather than a standalone intervention.
- Personal guidance should be integrated with wider pastoral, SEND, inclusion and transition arrangements.
- Access to personal guidance should be equitable, responsive to need and supported through effective systems and processes.
- Insight gathered through personal guidance can strengthen organisational understanding of learner aspirations, barriers and progression needs.
- High-quality personal guidance relies on professional standards, ethical practice and appropriately qualified practitioners.
- Personal guidance intelligence can help organisations strengthen support for inclusion, engagement, transition readiness and successful progression.

Suggested Theme 6 talk-lines

“The strongest organisations position personal guidance within a wider framework of learner support, progression and transition planning rather than viewing it as a standalone careers activity.”

“Personal guidance can provide valuable insight into learner aspirations, barriers and readiness for transition, helping organisations better understand and respond to learner need.”

“Personal guidance becomes most powerful when it supports both individual learner decision-making and organisational understanding of learner needs.”

“The most mature organisations use insight from personal guidance to strengthen support, improve progression outcomes and better understand the challenges their learners face.”

Theme 6: Core enquiry lenses

Once the leader's priority is clear, use these four lenses selectively to deepen the conversation:



Why this?

How does personal guidance support learner progression, informed decision-making and successful transitions?



What are the systems and processes?

How is personal guidance planned, coordinated and integrated with wider learner support arrangements?



How do/will you know it works?

What evidence suggests personal guidance is improving learner progression outcomes and supporting wider priorities relating to engagement, inclusion, transitions and NEET prevention?



How can practice be elevated?

What would strengthen the contribution personal guidance makes to learners, leaders and organisational priorities?

High-leverage rows



6.1 Engagement with personal guidance



6.2 Meaningful approach to personal guidance



6.3 Personal guidance resourcing

	What are we really exploring?	Example lines of enquiry					
		Why this?	Systems and processes	How do you know?	How can it be elevated?	Relevant messaging	Suggested talk-lines
 6.1 Engagement with personal guidance	Whether all learners are systematically supported to access personal guidance through clear, equitable and well-coordinated processes, and whether engagement is embedded within wider systems for learner support, transitions and ethical information-sharing.	• Why is engagement with personal guidance important for your learners? • How does personal guidance contribute to learner support, progression and successful transitions?	• How are learners informed about and supported to access personal guidance? • How are parents and carers informed about the role and availability of guidance? • How are learners identified and referred for personal guidance? • What systems are in place to monitor engagement and follow-up activity? • How is information shared ethically and appropriately before and after guidance meetings?	• How do you know learners who may benefit most from guidance are engaging with it? • What patterns can you identify in engagement across different groups of learners? • What happens when learners do not engage with personal guidance? • How do you know engagement processes are equitable and responsive to need? • What evidence gives confidence that communication, referral and follow-up processes are working effectively?	• How could engagement become more proactive rather than relying on learner take-up? • What would strengthen referral pathways and supported access arrangements? • How could parent and carer engagement strengthen preparation and reflection? • What would help engagement processes contribute more effectively to wider learner support systems?	• Access to personal guidance should be actively supported rather than simply offered. • Learners should be able to access guidance at appropriate points in their journey. • Clear referral, communication and monitoring processes help ensure equitable access. • Parents and carers can play an important role in supporting preparation and reflection. • Effective engagement systems help organisations understand who is accessing support and who may be at risk of missing out.	“Strong engagement processes ensure that personal guidance reaches learners who need it most, rather than relying solely on learner confidence or self-referral.” “The most mature systems do not simply track who received guidance. They help leaders understand who is not engaging, why, and what additional support may be required.” “Access becomes more equitable when guidance sits within wider support systems rather than depending upon individual staff or informal processes.”

Example lines of enquiry							
	What are we really exploring?	Why this?	Systems and processes	How do you know?	How can it be elevated?	Relevant messaging	Suggested talk-lines
 6.2 Meaningful approach to personal guidance	Whether personal guidance forms a meaningful and coherent part of the learner journey, supporting informed decision-making, progression and successful transitions through effective integration with wider careers, pastoral, SEND and inclusion arrangements.	• What role should personal guidance play within the wider careers learning journey? • Why has guidance been organised and timed in the way it has?	• How are guidance meetings timed around key decisions, transition points and learner needs? • How is personal guidance connected to careers education and wider learner support? • What preparation and reflection opportunities are built around guidance meetings? • How do careers, pastoral and SEND colleagues work together to support learners? • How are self-referral and supported referral processes managed?	• How do you know guidance is helping learners make informed decisions about their futures? • What evidence suggests guidance is strengthening transition readiness and progression? • How do you know guidance is supporting different learner groups effectively? • What patterns, trends or emerging needs are becoming visible through guidance activity? • How is guidance insight contributing to wider organisational understanding of learner need?	• How could guidance be sequenced more intentionally across the learner journey? • What would strengthen preparation, reflection and follow-up activity? • How could guidance become more integrated with inclusion, attendance and transition planning? • What would help move evaluation beyond individual cases towards identifying wider patterns of need?	• Personal guidance should be part of a progressive learner journey. • Timing matters. Guidance is most effective when aligned to key decisions and transitions. • Guidance should complement and strengthen wider learner support arrangements. • Personal guidance can contribute to aspirations, inclusion, engagement and transition readiness. • Evaluation should help identify patterns and emerging needs, not simply review individual meetings.	"Personal guidance is most powerful when it is positioned as part of a learner's journey rather than an isolated conversation." "The impact of guidance is often influenced as much by when it happens and what follows it as by the conversation itself." "Personal guidance can provide an important bridge between careers learning, learner support and transition planning." "The strongest organisations use guidance activity not only to support individual learners, but also to better understand patterns of need across the setting."

		Example lines of enquiry					
	What are we really exploring?	Why this?	Systems and processes	How do you know?	How can it be elevated?	Relevant messaging	Suggested talk-lines
 6.3 Personal guidance resourcing	Whether personal guidance is sustainably resourced, professionally delivered and systematically quality assured through appropriately qualified practice, ongoing professional development and effective leadership oversight.	- Why is it important that personal guidance is delivered and quality assured through recognised professional standards? - How does the quality of guidance influence learner outcomes and experiences?	- How is personal guidance provision resourced and organised? - How are Careers Advisers supported to maintain and develop professional practice? - How is quality assurance undertaken? - How are engagement, capacity and quality routinely reviewed? - How are findings from quality assurance and review activity used?	- What evidence gives confidence that guidance provision is consistently high quality? - How do you know quality assurance activities are improving practice? - What patterns in learner engagement are informing decisions about provision? - How do leaders know current resourcing is sufficient to meet learner need? - What changes have been made as a result of review, observation or quality assurance findings?	- How could quality assurance provide greater organisational insight? - What would strengthen leadership oversight of guidance quality and capacity? - How could review activity contribute more directly to workforce planning and professional development? - What would help ensure provision remains sustainable as needs and expectations evolve?	- Personal guidance should be delivered by appropriately qualified Careers Advisers. - Professional development supports current, high-quality practice. - Quality assurance should support improvement, not simply compliance. - Leadership oversight should consider quality, capacity, equity and sustainability. - Review activity can provide valuable intelligence about workforce development and future provision needs.	"High-quality personal guidance relies on both professional expertise and strong organisational systems." "Quality assurance is most powerful when it improves practice and informs decision-making, rather than simply checking compliance." "The strongest organisations consider guidance quality, learner engagement, workforce development and resourcing as connected issues." "Leadership oversight should focus not only on whether guidance is delivered, but whether it is delivered well, equitably and sustainably."

THE CAREERS & ENTERPRISE COMPANY

Our Impact

Our evidence