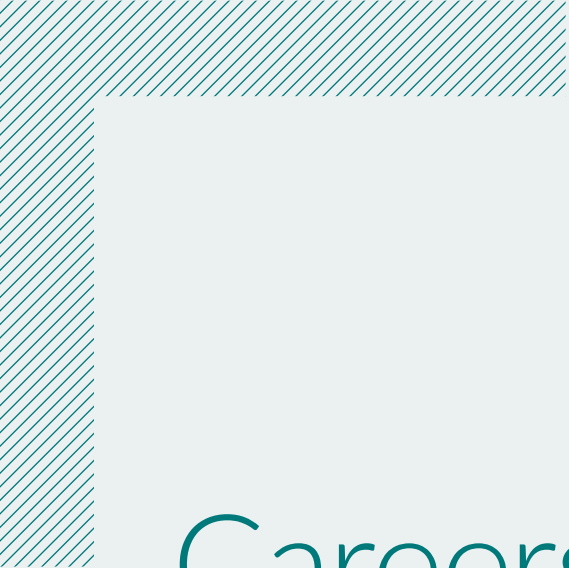
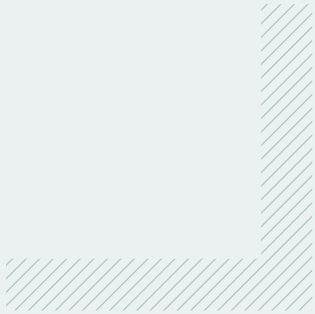




Careers Education in Alternative Provision

A Guide for Education Leaders



About This Guide

Careers education has a unique and important role within alternative provision. For many learners, it provides a route to renewed engagement, increased confidence and a stronger sense of purpose. When viewed strategically, careers education can also contribute to wider organisational priorities, including attendance, personal development, transitions and tackling disadvantage.

This guide has been developed to support education leaders in alternative provision to understand their role in creating the conditions for effective careers education. It explores the leadership, systems and approaches that enable careers provision to become a meaningful part of the learner journey and a driver of positive outcomes.

The guide combines national evidence, statutory expectations and practical considerations for alternative provision. Throughout, leaders are encouraged to reflect on their current practice, identify strengths and consider opportunities for further development.

Resources referenced throughout this guide are listed in full within the Key Resources section at the end. This is intended to support uninterrupted reading and encourage leaders to engage with the guide as a whole before exploring additional resources and support.

Who is this guide for?

This guide is intended for education leaders in alternative provision, including headteachers, principals, senior leaders, governors and trustees with responsibility for strategic oversight of careers education. It may also be useful for Careers Leaders seeking to strengthen leadership engagement with careers provision.



Contents

1 About This Guide	2
2 Who is this guide for?	2
3 Context	4
4 Careers at the Heart of Education and Leadership	4
5 Learners as Future Leavers	5
6 Careers as a Strategy for Tackling Disadvantage	5
7 Statutory Guidance	6
8 Strategic Leadership of Careers	6
9 Embedding Careers Across the Setting	7
10 Curriculum, Relevance and Pathways	7
11 Meaningful Encounters and Modern Work Experience	8
12 Impact	8
13 Reviewing and Improving Provision	9
14 Catalyst for Change	9
15 Next Steps	10
16 What Support Is Available?	10
17 Key Resources	11



Context

Learners in AP often arrive with disrupted educational experiences, unmet needs and limited trust in formal systems. As a result, careers education must begin from a different starting point than in mainstream settings.

Rather than focusing immediately on destinations, effective careers education in AP prioritises rebuilding belief, confidence and engagement. For many learners, identifying a strength, expressing an interest or beginning to think positively about the future represents meaningful progress and trust in education.

For leaders, this requires a broader definition of success. Impact is not measured solely through destinations data, but through increased readiness, improved engagement and a growing sense of agency.

The Future Skills Questionnaire (FSQ) is a tool that measures learners' career readiness. Embedded within our free digital product, Compass+, it enables you to assess key aspects of learners' knowledge, skills and attitudes that support successful transitions. The insights generated can help you make targeted interventions, evaluate the effectiveness of your careers programme and identify the impact of careers education within your setting.

Careers at the Heart of Education and Leadership

Careers education plays a distinctive and powerful role in alternative provision (AP). It is not simply a statutory requirement, but a key mechanism for re-engaging learners, rebuilding confidence and restoring a sense of purpose. When embedded thoughtfully, careers education can act as a driver for whole-setting improvement, influencing culture, curriculum, relationships and learner outcomes.

This guide supports education leaders in AP to understand their responsibilities for careers education, including statutory expectations, leadership roles and the contribution careers can make to meeting learners' needs. In AP, careers education is most effective when it sits at the heart of the learner journey, shaping experiences throughout a young person's time in provision and supporting successful transitions beyond it.

In alternative provision, careers education can support wider educational goals by helping learners build confidence, develop relevant skills and begin to consider realistic yet ambitious next steps. Strong leadership is essential in ensuring careers education is embedded throughout the learner journey, balancing learners' immediate needs with a sustained focus on progression, future opportunities, and positive destinations.



Learners as Future Leavers

National System Reviews highlight the importance of strategic leadership in creating the conditions for effective careers education. Settings making the strongest progress are often characterised by clear leadership vision, alignment with improvement priorities, distributed responsibility, intentional learner journeys and a focus on understanding impact.

In AP, careers education is not just about choice making. It helps learners reconnect with learning, see relevance in what they are doing and begin to imagine achievable futures. Evidence shows that high-quality careers provision can mitigate disadvantage, improve career readiness and reduce the risk of young people becoming NEET. Learners who are lower attaining or disengaged often benefit most from meaningful encounters with the world of work.

Careers education should be viewed as part of a broader AP learner journey. Progression is rarely linear and learners may join provision at different points, with varying levels of confidence, engagement and career readiness. Effective leaders ensure careers education is responsive to these starting points, helping learners make meaningful progress towards future goals, regardless of where they begin.

As you reflect on your current approach, consider the following questions:

- To what extent do leadership discussions focus on learners' long-term outcomes?
- What do we know about our learners' aspirations, interests and ambitions?
- How effectively are we preparing learners for successful and sustained transitions?
- Which learners may require additional support to thrive in their future pathways?

Careers as a Strategy for Tackling Disadvantage

In AP, careers education should not be viewed as an additional programme. Effective settings use careers as a strategic tool to tackle disadvantage, improve engagement, strengthen attendance, support personal development and enable successful transitions.

Many of the most successful AP settings position careers at the centre of their improvement strategy. By helping learners develop aspirations, understand opportunities and build confidence in their future pathways, careers education becomes a practical mechanism for reducing the impact of disadvantage and improving outcomes over time. Frameworks such as equalex can support leaders and Careers Leaders to take an equity-led approach, identifying barriers, targeting support and maintaining high aspirations for all learners.

As you reflect on current practice in your setting, consider the following questions:

- Which groups of learners are least likely to access high-quality opportunities?
- How effectively do we identify and address barriers to participation and progression?
- Which learners may be most at risk of destination disadvantage?
- How do we evaluate the impact of careers provision on equity and learner outcomes?

The OnTrack+ Practice Guide provides practical tools, reflective questions and examples of effective practice to support leaders in reviewing how they identify, monitor and support learners who may be at risk of destination disadvantage. It can be used alongside this guide to help inform planning, evaluation and continuous improvement.

Statutory Guidance

The Department for Education updated Careers guidance and access for education and training providers in June 2026, building on the significant changes introduced in 2025. The guidance reinforces the expectation that careers provision is delivered through a stable, structured careers programme aligned to the Gatsby Benchmarks and supported by senior leadership.

The updated guidance provides further clarity on the government's commitment to ensure every young person receives the equivalent of two weeks of work experience by the end of Key Stage 4. This includes a combination of meaningful workplace experiences across Years 7 to 11, with experiences remaining purposeful, progressive and tailored to learner need.

The guidance also includes updated information on Ofsted's approach to careers provision, expectations around progress towards the Gatsby Benchmarks, and the use of tools and resources such as OnTrack+ to support the identification of learners who may require additional support.

In AP, leaders should apply statutory guidance in ways that reflect learners' starting points and individual needs, using flexible and adapted approaches while maintaining ambition for future progression. Work experience and employer engagement should form part of a broader learner journey that supports confidence, career readiness and successful transitions.

The Careers & Enterprise Company's Careers Statutory Guidance: At a Glance Guides for School, College and ITP Leaders provide a concise summary of the key legislative and statutory requirements outlined in the government's careers guidance, alongside signposting to additional resources and support. The guides offer a useful reference point for leaders seeking to understand and implement their statutory responsibilities.



Strategic Leadership of Careers

Education leaders in alternative provision hold a critical responsibility for creating the conditions in which careers education can thrive. In complex and often highly responsive environments, Careers Leaders cannot be expected to drive improvement alone. Successful careers programmes are characterised by strong strategic leadership, clear accountability and a shared commitment to preparing learners for their futures.

Leaders are responsible for positioning careers strategically, ensuring the Careers Leader has influence over curriculum, pastoral and improvement planning rather than operating at the margins of the setting. They should provide sufficient capacity, clear expectations and access to decision-making processes, while championing careers across the setting and investing in professional development for both Careers Leaders and wider staff.

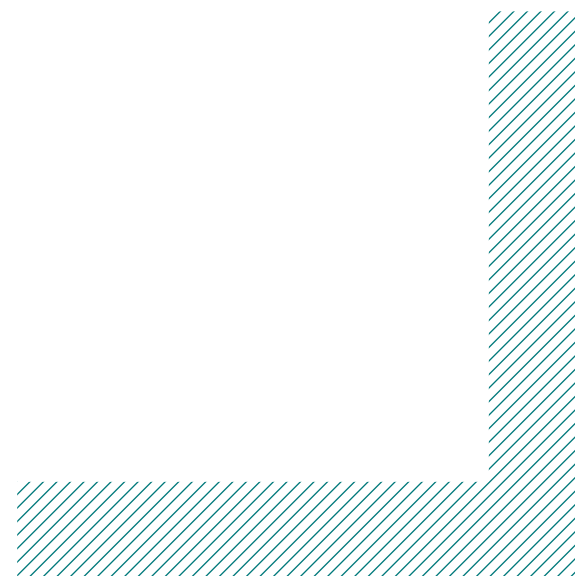
National System Reviews identified a consistent set of leadership conditions associated with effective careers provision and whole-setting improvement. These include a clear leadership vision for careers, strategic planning that aligns careers provision with improvement priorities, distributed leadership across the setting, intentional careers learning journeys with measurable milestones, and robust approaches to evaluating impact. In practice, this means creating strong cross-team collaboration, with Careers Leaders working closely with pastoral teams, SENCOs and SEND specialists, therapists and teaching staff to provide holistic support. Staff share responsibility for learner relationships and future planning, using inclusive approaches that build trust, confidence and aspiration. Ongoing professional development helps ensure staff understand progression pathways and can confidently support learners to consider their futures. Together, these approaches create the conditions for careers education to contribute meaningfully to learner outcomes and wider organisational improvement.

Where leaders actively empower Careers Leaders and create a culture of shared ownership, careers education is more likely to influence culture, practice and outcomes across the provision.

The Careers & Enterprise Company's Understanding the Role of the Careers Leader guide outlines the strategic and operational responsibilities of the role

and explores how senior leaders can create the conditions for success. This resource highlights the core principles of effective careers leadership that apply across education settings. It can support education leaders in clarifying expectations, strengthening accountability and ensuring careers leadership is embedded within wider improvement planning.

Additional resources to support strategic careers leadership, role clarity and continuous improvement are provided in the Key Resources section at the end of this guide.



Embedding Careers Across the Setting

The most effective AP settings take a whole-setting approach to careers education, as reflected within the Gatsby Benchmarks. Careers is not owned by one person or department; it is embedded throughout the organisation and reinforces the setting's wider vision for learners.

This means curriculum learning is connected to real-life opportunities and future pathways, pastoral support actively develops aspiration and self-belief, and staff consistently reinforce future-focused thinking through everyday interactions. Careers education should also be integrated into personal development programmes and reflected within improvement planning, ensuring it contributes to priorities such as attendance, behaviour, wellbeing and successful transitions.

When careers becomes part of everyday practice rather than a standalone programme, learners receive consistent messages about their future from all adults across the setting. This helps learners to recognise the relevance of their learning, understand available opportunities and develop confidence in their ability to progress.

This whole-setting approach reflects the intent of Gatsby Benchmark 1, which emphasises careers education as a strategic programme supported by leadership and embedded across the institution.



Curriculum, Relevance and Pathways

Careers education is most impactful when learners can see how learning connects to real life. In AP, this is often achieved through practical, hands-on and multi-sensory experiences that make learning meaningful, contextualised and relevant to vocational pathways.

Leaders should promote flexible, realistic pathways, including vocational routes, supported internships, further education and local employer-led opportunities. Non-linear progression should be normalised and setbacks reframed as part of learning rather than failure. Restorative approaches should underpin this work, ensuring relationships remain strong and that setbacks become opportunities for reflection, growth and renewed engagement rather than points of disconnection.

Strong partnerships with employers, training providers and local services help ensure careers education is grounded in real opportunities rather than abstract aspirations.

The Careers & Enterprise Company's My Learning, My Future resource suite can support leaders and staff to strengthen links between curriculum learning, careers and the world of work. Covering a wide range of subject areas, the resources help teachers demonstrate the relevance of their subjects to future pathways and employment opportunities, supporting

learner engagement and meaningful implementation of Gatsby Benchmark 4.

The following questions are designed to help leaders reflect on whether learners are experiencing a curriculum and careers programme that is relevant, aspirational and connected to realistic progression opportunities.

- How do we help learners make connections between their current learning, their individual strengths and possible future pathways?
- Are the progression routes we present ambitious, realistic and tailored to learners' needs and circumstances?
- How do we know learners can see the relevance of what they are learning and its connection to their future?

Meaningful Encounters and Modern Work Experience

Access to meaningful encounters with employers and experiences of workplaces is a critical part of career readiness.

Modern work experience should not be viewed solely as a single block placement. Instead, it is built over time through a combination of employer encounters, workplace visits, projects and curriculum-linked activity, creating meaningful, cumulative experiences.

For learners in AP, this flexible approach:

- Supports participation at the right pace.
- Builds confidence gradually.
- Connects learning to real-world relevance.
- Enables learners to experience success through progressive exposure to the workplace.

Leaders should ensure these experiences are planned, progressive and aligned to learner need, rather than delivered as isolated events.

The Careers & Enterprise Company's equalex framework can support leaders in designing high-quality, progressive workplace experiences. Built around structured learning outcomes and objectives, it provides a flexible and inclusive approach that helps learners build knowledge, skills and confidence through multiple meaningful workplace experiences over time, rather than through a single placement alone.

The following questions can support leaders in evaluating the quality, inclusivity and progression of employer encounters and workplace experiences within their setting.

- Are workplace experiences planned as part of a coherent learner journey or delivered as isolated activities?
- How effectively do we remove barriers that might prevent learners from accessing meaningful encounters with employers and workplaces?
- What evidence do we use to evaluate the impact of workplace experiences on learners' confidence, career readiness and progression?
- What opportunities can we create to build relationships with employers?



Impact

Traditional careers measures do not always capture impact in AP. Leaders should focus on a broader range of indicators, including:

- Career readiness.
- Engagement and attendance.
- Confidence and self-belief.
- Positive experiences.
- Learner voice and aspiration.
- Destinations and transition outcomes.
- Development of employability skills.

Careers data can inform improvement planning by highlighting barriers, aspirations and support needs. Used effectively, careers education becomes not just an outcome, but a diagnostic tool that informs wider improvement priorities.

The following questions can support leaders in evaluating the impact of careers provision and considering how effectively careers-related data is used to inform wider improvement planning.

- How do we define and measure success in careers education for our learners, beyond destination outcomes alone?
- What evidence do we have that careers provision is improving learners' confidence, aspirations, engagement and readiness for their next steps?
- How effectively do we use careers-related data and learner voice to identify barriers, inform support and drive continuous improvement?



Reviewing and Improving Provision

Continuous improvement is essential if careers education is to remain responsive to learner needs.

Leaders should make use of the Careers Impact System and internal leadership review process to understand current strengths, identify gaps and prioritise future developments.

The internal leadership review supports leaders to reflect on the effectiveness of careers leadership, vision and strategic intent, careers learning journeys, improvement planning and approaches to impact evaluation. Used regularly, it can help leaders identify priorities, celebrate strengths and maintain momentum for improvement.

Regular review helps ensure careers remains aligned to both learner need and organisational priorities, supporting continuous improvement over time.

The following questions are designed to support strategic reflection on the quality, effectiveness and impact of careers provision, helping leaders identify strengths, prioritise development and drive continuous improvement.

- How are we using the Careers Impact System and internal leadership review to inform strategic decision-making and improvement planning?
- What does our review activity tell us about the strengths of our current provision and the areas requiring further development?
- How do we evaluate whether improvements in careers provision are having a meaningful impact on learners?



Next Steps

Every setting will be at a different stage of its careers journey. The following actions can help leaders reflect on current practice and identify priorities for further development:

- Understand your starting point by reviewing your current position through the Careers Impact System.
- Review provision and identify priorities through an internal leadership review and by exploring opportunities to participate in a peer-to-peer review through your Careers Hub.
- Align careers provision with wider organisational priorities, including attendance, engagement, personal development, transitions and tackling disadvantage.
- Strengthen strategic leadership, reviewing the role of careers within improvement planning and ensuring sufficient leadership capacity and support for Careers Leaders and staff.
- Review learner experiences, including meaningful employer encounters, workplace experiences and how work experience is planned to ensure progression and responsiveness to learner need.
- Evaluate impact, considering how careers provision contributes to learner readiness, confidence, aspirations, progression and positive transitions.

Catalyst for Change

In alternative provision, careers education can do more than prepare learners for next steps. When led strategically, it can strengthen relationships, support re-engagement and contribute to sustained improvement.

The challenge for leaders is not to replicate mainstream models, but to adapt careers education to reflect their learners, context and values. With strong leadership, empowered Careers Leaders and a whole-setting approach, careers education can become a powerful catalyst for change for young people who need it most.

What Support Is Available?

Your first point of contact should be your local [Careers Hub](#), which can provide tailored support, strategic guidance and connections to employers and partners.

In addition, The Careers & Enterprise Company offers several platforms that provide free, evidence-informed resources, tools and training to support education leaders, governors, Careers Leaders and teachers in alternative provision, including:

[Primary Platform](#): Supports inclusive, age-appropriate careers learning and the early development of aspirations.

[Resource Directory](#): A curated collection of high-quality careers resources aligned to the Gatsby Benchmarks, supporting planning, delivery and continuous improvement.

[The Careers & Enterprise Academy](#): Free online courses designed to build knowledge, confidence and leadership capability, with training available for leaders, governors and staff at all levels.

Key Resources

Across these platforms, a range of resources are available to support both individual leaders and whole-setting improvement. Many have been referenced throughout this guide and include:

[Future Skills Questionnaire \(FSQ\)](#): A tool that measures learners' career readiness and supports evaluation of programme impact.

[equalex](#): An equity-focused framework that supports Careers Leaders and education settings to identify barriers to participation, plan meaningful learning outcomes and create more inclusive careers education and workplace experiences.

[OnTrack+ Practice Guide](#): Provides practical tools, reflective questions and examples of effective practice to support leaders in identifying, monitoring and supporting learners who may be at risk of destination disadvantage.

[Careers Statutory Guidance: At a Glance Guides for School, College and ITP Leaders](#): Concise summaries of the key legislative and statutory requirements outlined in the government's careers guidance, with signposting to additional resources and support.

[Understanding the Role of the Careers Leader](#): Outlines the strategic and operational responsibilities of the Careers Leader and explores how senior leaders can create the conditions for success.

[My Learning, My Future](#): A suite of resources to support leaders and staff to strengthen links between curriculum learning, careers and the world of work.

[The Careers Impact System](#): A structured, evidence-led improvement cycle that makes careers a strategic driver of outcomes across institutions. It drives internal insight, external challenge and system-wide impact.

These resources can be used flexibly to support strategic planning, governance oversight, staff development and effective careers provision across alternative provision settings.



THE CAREERS & ENTERPRISE COMPANY

Our Impact

Our evidence

