



Beyond Horizons: Rethinking work experience for Key Stage 3

**Year one insights paper
September 2026**





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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The EY Foundation supports young people eligible for free school meals (FSM) in England and Scotland to overcome barriers to employment. Through partnerships with employers and schools, we help young people build the skills, experiences and networks they need to succeed, while addressing structural barriers that limit access to opportunity. This work supports our ambition for young people from low-income backgrounds to have an employment and earnings potential that is equitable with their peers. This underlines the importance of ensuring that efforts to expand work experience have an explicit focus on equity, so that young people from lower-income backgrounds can benefit from high-quality experiences.

In 2024, the EY Foundation commissioned research into the UK work experience landscape, highlighting the need to begin careers education earlier, strengthen employer engagement and recognise the role of local systems in delivering high-quality workplace experiences.¹ Since then, the policy landscape has evolved. Updated statutory guidance has strengthened Gatsby Benchmark 6,² placing greater emphasis on multiple, meaningful workplace experiences throughout secondary education. More recently, the government has announced plans to give 14-year-olds earlier access to technical education, work experience and

connections with employers, signalling a wider shift towards earlier and more sustained engagement with the world of work.³

These developments come at a critical time. With the number of young people now not in education, employment or training (NEET) hovering around one million, there is growing recognition that becoming NEET rarely begins at 16. As Alan Milburn's Young People and Work review argues, the factors influencing transitions into positive destinations emerge much earlier, reinforcing the importance of earlier intervention to build confidence, aspirations and career readiness.⁴

While schools and colleges are making progress towards the Gatsby Benchmarks, barriers faced by both employers and educational institutions continue to limit access to high-quality careers guidance and work experience, with young people from lower-income backgrounds disproportionately affected. This focus on equity is particularly important as access to work experience expands. A universal entitlement to workplace experiences does not necessarily guarantee equitable access to high-quality opportunities or outcomes. Inequalities are already evident by Year 8, with The Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC) data showing a seven-percentage point gap in essential skills between pupils eligible for FSM and their peers⁵.

1. EY Foundation, [‘Now is the time for a work experience revolution’](#)
2. Department for Education (2026), [Statutory Guidance: Careers guidance and access for education and training providers](#).
3. Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, Press Release: [PM: ‘From today Britain will value the hard hat as much as the graduation cap’ - GOV.UK](#)

4. Department for Work and Pensions (2026), [Independent Report: Young people and work: interim report - GOV.UK](#)
5. The Careers & Enterprise Company (2025), [Insight briefing: Learner career readiness in 2024/25. Design Accessibility Report Review](#)



In response, the EY Foundation co-designed Beyond Horizons through the CEC's *equalex* model,⁶ working with more than 150 stakeholders across Bradford to test a place-based approach to workplace experiences for Year 8 pupils. The programme was designed to translate the ambitions of the updated statutory guidance into practice while generating evidence about what high-quality workplace experiences look like, how they can be delivered sustainably, and the wider system changes needed to improve access and quality. This report presents interim findings from the first year of delivery. Five emerging insights have implications for schools, employers, local partnerships, and national policymakers.

First, earlier employer engagement is most effective when embedded within a broader careers education programme and delivered progressively, rather than as a one-off experience. Key Stage 3 represents an important phase for careers education, helping young people develop awareness, confidence and aspirations before key decisions such as GCSE choices. This aligns with wider policy ambitions for modern work experience introduced through updated statutory guidance for careers education, which recommends a sequenced approach to meaningful workplace experiences across secondary education.

Second, initial findings suggest the need to rethink what constitutes a workplace experience under Gatsby Benchmark 6. While traditional workplace visits can be difficult to deliver, particularly for smaller, remote or hybrid employers and younger pupils, the pilot shows that meaningful experiences can be achieved through alternative models that provide purposeful employer interaction and clear learning outcomes. This could support more inclusive and scalable approaches to work experience in line with emerging policy expectations.

Third, the pilot highlights the value of a more holistic approach to career readiness, combining career and labour market awareness with the confidence, self-awareness and motivation needed to navigate future pathways. This aligns with research from the EY Foundation and the Institute for the Future of Work (IFOW), which identified internalised and intrinsic forms of motivation as a key factor for young people to become active in improving their employability.⁷ Helping young people connect their strengths, interests, and aspirations to future opportunities can increase engagement, and support more informed transitions into education and work.

6. The Careers & Enterprise Company, [equalex Framework](#)

7. EY Foundation, ['New approach focused on intrinsic motivation could boost young people's readiness for the future of work' - EY Global](#)



Fourth, the programme highlighted the potential role of brokerage organisations in improving outcomes for young people. While schools and employers welcomed participation, capacity and coordination challenges remained, suggesting that scaling workplace experiences may require stronger local infrastructure and facilitation. This will be explored further through a hybrid delivery model in the programme's second year.

Finally, the pilot highlighted the potential of place-based approaches to make career opportunities more visible and accessible to young people. By connecting careers education with local employers and sectors, Beyond Horizons helped young people understand the opportunities around them while building stronger connections between schools, employers and the wider local skills system. Place-based approaches can therefore provide an important foundation for careers education, while recognising that young people should also be exposed to opportunities and sectors beyond their immediate local labour market.

Taken together, these findings suggest that improving work experience is not just about increasing access, but about ensuring that

expanded access translates into high-quality and equitable experiences. This requires meaningful experiences that start earlier, are embedded within careers education and can be delivered sustainably at scale, with particular attention to young people who face additional barriers to opportunity. The findings point to practical implications for schools, employers, local partnerships and policymakers, particularly around coordination, quality and the support needed to ensure greater access to work experience translates into meaningful opportunities for young people from low-income backgrounds.

As an early-stage pilot, Beyond Horizons will continue into 2026/27, testing approaches to reach more young people, and exploring how brokerage functions can be embedded within schools and local partnerships. The next phase will help identify which elements of the approach could be adopted more widely, how they may need to be adapted to different local contexts, and the conditions needed to maintain quality and outcomes. We welcome opportunities to share learning and work with schools, employers, local partners and policymakers interested in supporting or testing approaches as the programme develops.

A photograph of two young women with long brown hair, wearing dark school blazers over navy blue collared shirts. They are focused on a task, with the woman on the right holding a thin, light-colored strip of material. The background is blurred, showing other people in a bright, indoor setting.

2 INTRODUCTION

Why this work matters

The transition from compulsory education into employment is receiving growing policy attention. Alan Milburn's Young People and Work interim report warned of a "NEET crisis" and a "structural weakening of the transition to work", leaving many young people without opportunities to develop the skills and experiences valued by employers.⁸

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Employers still ask for confidence, experience and work-readiness. But the labour market now offers fewer ways of acquiring them... Young people are caught in a trap: employers ask for experience, but the pathways through which it was once gained have narrowed or gone.

Milburn Review, May 2026

The first Annual Skills Report, published by Skills England in June 2026, also referenced high NEET statistics. Youth employability and skills development were a notable focus, with "supporting young people's employability" featuring as one of the five challenges identified in the report.⁹

This is not only an issue of youth engagement and employment; it is also one of social mobility.¹⁰ Young people from lower-income backgrounds can face additional barriers to developing the skills, experiences and networks they need to enter and thrive in the labour market. Growing up in poverty also impacts earnings potential, with children who grow up in poorer households earning around 25% less than their peers at age 30.¹¹

Evidence shows that early employer engagement can improve employment outcomes. Young people who participated in work experience before age 16 were 62% less likely to be NEET between ages 16 and 18 than comparable peers who did not.¹² Furthermore, young people who engaged with employers before age 16 were more likely to report that it was easy to decide on their next steps after Year 11 and to achieve their goals, suggesting that employer engagement can improve both outcomes and confidence about the future.

Introducing Beyond Horizons

As part of the EY Foundation's place-based approach to systems change, we worked with local stakeholders in Bradford and social impact consultancy Renaisi-TSIP, to develop a shared theory of change and identify local barriers and opportunities.

8. Department for Work and Pensions (2026), [Independent Report: Young people and work: interim report](#) - GOV.UK

9. Department for Work and Pensions and Skills England (2026), [Skills England annual skills report 2026](#) - GOV.UK

10. Impetus (2019), *Research briefing I: Establishing the Employment Gap*, [Youth-Jobs-Gap-Establishing-the-Employment-Gap-report.pdf](#). Cf. Impetus (2025), *Youth Jobs Gap: Exploring compound disadvantage: Research briefing* 10. [Impetus Youth Jobs Gap - Exploring compound disadvantage](#)

11. Cabinet Office (2026), [Our Children, Our Future: Tackling Child Poverty](#)

Through co-design sessions with employers, civil society organisations, schools, the local authority, parents, carers and young people, we explored what high-quality work experience should look like. Stakeholders highlighted limited awareness of career opportunities, the importance of confidence and human-centred skills, the reality of increasingly non-linear careers, and a desire for more interactive experiences that build self-agency.

These insights informed the design of an earlier, more inclusive model of work experience that broadens awareness of local growth sectors while helping young people recognise their strengths, interests and aspirations. In response, we developed Beyond Horizons, a Year 8 programme designed to improve career readiness, employability skills, attitudes and outlook.

Piloted in Bradford and co-designed with more than 150 local stakeholders, Beyond Horizons aims to make careers learning more relevant to local opportunities while making it easier for schools and employers to deliver meaningful workplace experiences. Four secondary schools took part, reaching over 100 pupils eligible for free school meals.

Aligned with Gatsby Benchmark 6, the programme comprises four sessions delivered by employers and EY Foundation facilitators.¹³

1. Discovering strengths: developing self-awareness, motivation and career autonomy
2. Understanding local growth sectors: exposure to local jobs and industries
3. Immersive workplace experience: simulated challenges co-developed with businesses
4. Reflection & future planning: creating a career roadmap to guide long-term aspirations

This paper presents initial findings from the EY Foundation's evaluation of the pilot, drawing on pupil feedback and pre- and post-programme surveys from 89 young people, surveys and interviews with four school staff, interviews with a host institution, surveys and interviews with seven employer partners, and reflections from the EY Foundation delivery team.

12. Cabinet Office (2026), *Policy Paper: Our Children, Our Future: Tackling Child Poverty*. [WorkEx-report_June2026_FINAL.pdf](#)

13. Gatsby Benchmarks, A guide to Gatsby Benchmark 6: Experiences of workplaces. [A guide to Gatsby Benchmark 6 | Gatsby Benchmarks](#)

A photograph of two young women in school uniforms, likely Key Stage 3 students, sitting in a classroom or lecture hall. They are both looking off to the right with thoughtful expressions. The woman on the left has dark hair in a braid and is wearing a dark blazer over a blue shirt. The woman on the right has long brown hair and is also wearing a dark blazer over a blue shirt. The background is blurred, showing blue and white patterns, possibly a wall or another person.

3 EMERGING INSIGHTS

1.

Earlier employability support

The findings show that Year 8 represents an important opportunity for earlier careers support before young people make key educational decisions. Beyond Horizons affirmed the value of employer encounters and workplace experiences early in a young person’s educational journey, indicating that Key Stage 3 can be a valuable phase for careers exploration.

Pupils were asked questions about their career and job awareness before and after the programme. When asked “Do you know about the different job sectors (types of work) you could go into in the future?”, 72% of pupils showed improvement in outcome post-programme. Many of the intended outcomes of Beyond Horizons align with the Future Skills Questionnaire developed by CEC, which is widely used by English schools. We therefore measured several aspects relating to career readiness to enable a comparison with these national averages. In the vast majority of cases, the proportion of pupils giving a positive response moved from being substantially below the benchmark (before the programme) to being well above (after). For example, pupils’ self-perception of skills increased over the course of the programme:

	% of pupils giving a positive response		CEC 24/25 National Year 8 Comparison
	Pre-pilot	Post-pilot	
Speaking in a way that keeps people interested using my voice, facial expressions and gestures*	30%	67%	62%
Taking part in group decision making	51%	83%	74%
Looking for help and support in difficult situations*	50%	77%	56%
Recognising strengths and areas for development in yourself and others	38%	75%	60%

*Where indicated, question wording was altered from the original for the purposes of readability or relevance to the specific context of the pilot. Questions remain comparable with the original CEC baseline data.

Source: Careers & Enterprise Company (2025), *Insight briefing: Learner career readiness in 2024/25* (Future Skills Questionnaire national dataset). National Year 8 comparison based on 51,355 Year 8 learners

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It really helped me become more confident and helped me discover much more skills I have.

Year 8 Pupil, Oasis Academy Lister Park

In addition to essential employability skills, pupils also found that the programme positively impacted clarity over upcoming GCSE choices. When asked “Do you know which subjects you want to study for GCSE?”, positive responses rose from an average of 42% (pre-programme) to 74% (post-programme), surpassing the 67% CEC national Year 8 benchmark for this question.

Teachers consistently reported the efficacy of the programme, agreeing that it “fully” or “mostly” achieved its intended outcomes relating to the development of key skills and aspirations. They frequently mentioned how the programme was well-pitched to pupils’ current level and will support them to transition more smoothly into careers provision in Year 9. Teachers also reflected on the wider value of the programme, particularly in supporting pupil confidence, engagement and future-focussed conversations.

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It has taught me the importance of knowing what to do in the future.

Year 8 Pupil, Immanuel College

“

The change in some of the pupils on the course has been huge. [We must] never underestimate how this can change their lives – the impact is immeasurable. Students have already asked me for careers interviews and started being more communicative in school with members of staff.

Maria Humpherson, Associate Assistant Head Teacher, Beckfoot Oakbank School

Employer volunteers were similarly enthusiastic about supporting future Key Stage 3 provision and viewed Beyond Horizons as an effective model for earlier careers education. Together, these reflections suggest that engaging young people before key transition points can help build confidence, aspirations and engagement, while encouraging more sustained conversations about future pathways both in school and beyond.

On the third day of the programme, each school visited local sixth-form college, New College Bradford, for an Immersive Workplace Experience Day. The college viewed Beyond Horizons as well suited to Year 8 pupils, helping them engage with a wider range of employers, opportunities and education pathways at an earlier stage. Pupils were asked which elements of the programme they most enjoyed, and the immersive workplace experience proved popular, especially given that it was off-site: 33 referenced the sixth-form college visit. Teacher and employer interviewees reflected that this external visit format incentivised pupil engagement and participation. It also facilitated engagement with a further education provider, partially fulfilling Gatsby Benchmark 7 (encounters with further and higher education). This exposure to further education was an intentional addition to the programme. Bradford has a low progression rate to higher education, and a higher rate of residents with no formal qualifications (24%) compared to both England nationally (18.2%) and Yorkshire and the Humber (20.6%) where further and technical education are therefore often the progression routes of choice.¹⁴

More broadly, these responses from young people, teachers, the college and employers indicate the effectiveness of earlier work experience interventions. This is consistent with wider policy moves towards earlier careers guidance and workplace experiences. Building on CEC's results from their 2024/25 Future Skills Questionnaire (FSQ), makes the case for early careers education

at both primary level and in Key Stage 3, to combat dips in essential skills that occur in secondary school and ensure young people are better prepared for transitions.¹⁵ Updated statutory guidance for 2026 intends to ensure two weeks' worth of work experience for young people, and this academic year, schools should be reforming their work experience programmes to implement this across both Key Stage 3 ("at least one week of work experience activities in Years 7-9") and Key Stage 4 ("at least one week of placements in Years 10-11").¹⁶

The Year 8 focus of Beyond Horizons aligns with these changes and allows the programme to reach young people at a formative stage. This matters because the factors shaping later transitions into further education and employment develop well before age 16. For young people from low-income backgrounds in particular, earlier intervention provides an opportunity to build essential skills, confidence, and awareness of pathways before key educational decisions are made. Against a backdrop of concern about youth unemployment, these insights demonstrate the potential for embedding meaningful workplace experiences earlier in secondary education, and as part of a progressive model of careers guidance that builds from Key Stage 3 through to Key Stage 4. The findings reinforce the importance of embedding experiences within a wider careers programme, ensuring that exposure to employers is supported by clear learning outcomes, preparation, and reflection throughout the educational journey.

14. Bradford Producing Hub (2024), Bradford Data Review. [Bradford-Data-Review-rev-b-2023.pdf](#)

15. The Careers and Enterprise Company (2025), Insight briefing: Learner career readiness in 2024/25, [Design Accessibility Report Review](#)

16. The Careers and Enterprise Company, *Modern Work Experience*. [Modern Work Experience | CEC Corporate Web](#)

2.

Rethinking meaningful workplace experiences

Work experience is a well-documented vehicle for enhancing youth employability and social mobility. The updated Gatsby Benchmark 6 places a greater emphasis on providing “meaningful” experiences of workplaces, to provide young people with “the opportunity to explore what it is like to work in that environment, what skills are valued in the workplace, their recruitment processes and what it takes to be successful”.¹⁷ The outcomes should include extensive two-way interactions with employees, a clear purpose, learning outcomes appropriate to the young person, opportunities to meet a range of people from the workplace, an employer-set task, feedback, and reflection.¹⁸

Ideally, young people would have the opportunity to experience workplaces in person. However, we recognise that many employers are unable to facilitate hosting young people in a traditional workplace setting. This is especially true for organisations with hybrid, remote, or co-working locations, and those who may face logistical barriers when hosting pupils under the age of 16, such as safeguarding or insurance. Hybrid and remote working are increasingly common; ONS data shows that 28% of working adults in Great Britain hybrid worked between January and March 2025.¹⁹ A further 13% were working fully remotely.²⁰ This raises the question: how can

employers provide workplace experiences, when their day-to-day work does not always take place in a physical space with the capacity to host young people? This may limit the number of opportunities available for young people.

If careers provision is intended to reflect local labour markets, it must be flexible enough to work with the employers that exist there. Beyond Horizons engaged 16 unique employer and institutional partners, including 9 (56%) small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). In addition, New College Bradford, acted as a host education partner for the immersive workplace experience day. A third of employer partners involved in this day came from SMEs. The host college model created a flexible way for smaller employers to participate, including those without suitable facilities to accommodate school visits. Using the college as a venue for this immersive workplace experience day enabled participation from these employers and broadened the range of sectors and careers represented.

This approach suggests that meaningful workplace experiences, when defined by quality of employer engagement and achievement of intended outcomes, can still be achieved outside a traditional workplace setting. This aligns with the intent of Gatsby Benchmark 6, while demonstrating

17. Gatsby Benchmarks, *A guide to Gatsby Benchmark 6: Experiences of workplaces*. [A guide to Gatsby Benchmark 6 | Gatsby Benchmarks](#)

18. Gatsby Benchmarks, *A guide to Gatsby Benchmark 6: Experiences of workplaces*. [A guide to Gatsby Benchmark 6 | Gatsby Benchmarks](#)

19. Office for National Statistics (2025), *Who has access to hybrid work in Great Britain? Who has access to hybrid work in Great Britain? - Office for National Statistics*

20. Jane Parry (2025), *Hybrid working and UK Government policy*. House of Commons Library. [Hybrid working and UK Government policy](#)

how alternative delivery models can broaden participation amongst smaller, less resourced, or remote-operating organisations. The DfE statutory guidance acknowledges that, while the physical workplace is the preferred setting for work experience in Years 7 to 9, there remains scope for innovation: “Activities should mostly take place within the workplace. Schools and employers are able to take proportionate decisions where alternative venues unlock opportunities for pupils”.²¹ Given that the same guidance also indicates that these work experience activities at Key Stage 3 should include a diverse range of employers, flexible delivery models may

provide an important mechanism for widening employer participation. This also has an important equity dimension; where participation depends on employers having the physical space and capacity to host pupils, the range of opportunities available to young people may be constrained by the employer landscape around their school or community. As working patterns continue to evolve, policymakers and practitioners should consider how flexible delivery models such as Beyond Horizons can expand access to meaningful workplace experiences in innovative ways while maintaining the quality and outcomes intended by the guidance.

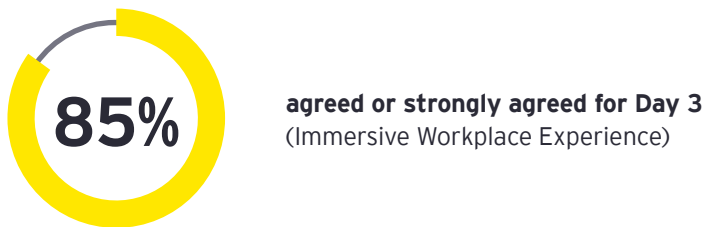
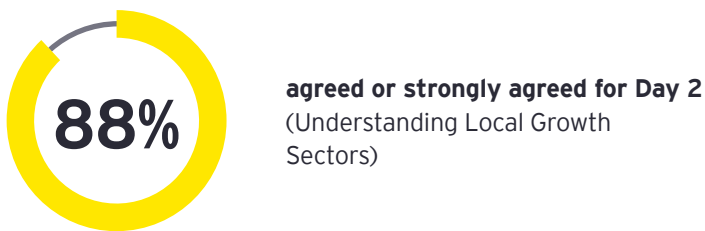
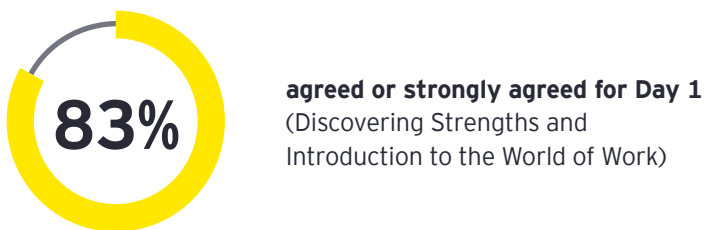
21. Department for Education (2026), *Statutory Guidance: Careers guidance and access for education and training providers*. [Careers guidance and access for education and training providers - GOV.UK](#)



3.

Career readiness as holistic

Beyond Horizons combined employer engagement with structured reflection on pupils' strengths, interests and future aspirations. Pupils provided feedback throughout the programme, including rating the usefulness of each session. When asked whether they agreed that "Today's session was useful to me":



The consistently positive feedback across all four sessions suggests that value stems not only from employer engagement, but from the combination of strengths-based activities, local labour market learning, and structured future planning.

“

I got given advice that can help me move forward in life and push me to my full potential.

Year 8 Pupil, Beckfoot Oakbank School

Some of the strongest improvements were in participants' confidence and self-perception. The proportion who felt positive or hopeful about their future career increased from 48% before the programme to 85% afterwards, compared with 62% in comparable data collected by The Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC). Positive responses to public speaking rose from 30% to 67%, while recognition of personal strengths and areas for development increased from 38% to 75%, compared with 60% in the corresponding CEC data sets.²²

22. The Careers and Enterprise Company (2025), Insight briefing: Learner career readiness in 2024/25.
[Design Accessibility Report Review](#)

“

It was fun and I learned a lot and got better at public speaking and teamwork.

Year 8 Pupil, St Bede's and St Joseph's Catholic College

When asked, “What is the one thing you will do differently because of the Beyond Horizons programme?”, pupils most commonly cited increased confidence (15), stronger commitment to a subject or career goal (13), clearer GCSE choices (9), and improved understanding of future career pathways (8). These responses suggest the programme supported both practical career knowledge and personal development, including communication skills, self-awareness and motivation.

“

I enjoyed it very much and I might have a new job I want that better matches my strengths and qualities.

Year 8 Pupil, Oasis Academy Lister Park

These findings reinforce a key insight from the EY Foundation's research with IFOW: employability is shaped not only by skills, qualifications and labour market knowledge, but also by intrinsic factors such as confidence, motivation and agency.²³ Many of the strongest changes observed through Beyond Horizons related to how young people viewed themselves and their futures, including greater confidence, stronger recognition of personal strengths, clearer aspirations and increased optimism. Career readiness is therefore not solely about “knowing what careers are out

there” (knowledge acquisition), but also about “knowing who I am” (personal development). The Beyond Horizons pilot suggests that these personal dimensions should be considered alongside career knowledge when designing employability and careers interventions.

This has wider implications for how employability is framed. While policy debates often focus on addressing skills shortages and labour market demand, findings from Beyond Horizons suggest that employability is not simply about matching young people to skills gaps. The improvements seen in confidence, self-awareness and career clarity also have wider economic relevance, helping young people to recognise their strengths, navigate future pathways and prepare for successful transitions into a labour market being reshaped by technological change.

This aligns with the EY Foundation's research with IFOW, which found that intrinsic motivation underpins the development of skills such as communication, creativity, resilience, adaptability, and problem-solving. The resulting report, *Channelling Motivation*, recommends embedding reflective practice – informed by Self-Determination Theory – more strongly within the Gatsby Benchmarks and National Curriculum.²⁴

Beyond Horizons supports this conclusion. Strengths-based activities, labour market learning, employer engagement and structured reflection each played an important role in helping young people connect career opportunities to their own interests, strengths and aspirations. As schools and employers expand work experience opportunities, the challenge is not simply to increase the number of encounters available, but to ensure they form part of a coherent process of learning, exploration and reflection.

23. EY Foundation, [‘New approach focused on intrinsic motivation could boost young people's readiness for the future of work’](#). EY - Global

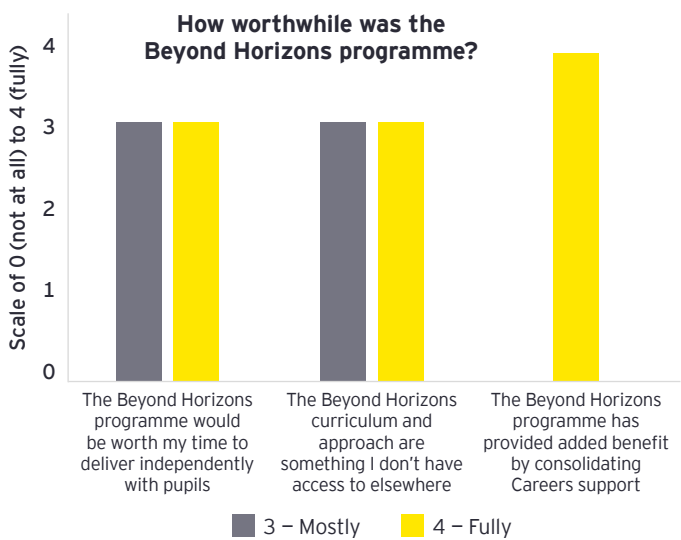
24. EY Foundation, [‘New approach focused on intrinsic motivation could boost young people's readiness for the future of work’](#). EY - Global

4.

The role of brokerage organisations

A future intent of the programme is to support teachers and employers to move towards delivering the model independently, to allow for scaling up. The pilot phase offers an opportunity to initially test where this is succeeding and where it can be improved. Teachers and employers both suggested a continuing need for some kind of brokerage function from the EY Foundation, and the next phase will test whether and how this can be altered to make the programme more sustainable with a reduced intermediary role.

We interviewed four teachers and educators (one from each of the four schools we worked with), who agreed that the programme was worthwhile and provided additional benefits, on a scale of 0 (not at all) to 4 (fully):



While school staff reported confidence in delivering the session content, all four interviewees identified a need for continued support to implement the programme independently. This included access to pre-prepared resources, external facilitation, and coordination of employer engagement.

These findings suggest that scaling meaningful workplace experiences may depend not only on school willingness or programme design, but on the presence of local coordination capacity. Consistent with our *Economies of Coordination* research with Demos, where employers and education settings are willing to engage but struggle to connect, effective local coordination can bridge this gap by bringing partners together, organising participation and sustaining relationships over time.²⁵ The next phase of Beyond Horizons will test which coordination functions require an intermediary and which can be embedded within schools, resources and local partnerships.

25. EY Foundation, [‘Stronger links between SMEs, council and local partners could unlock almost two million apprenticeships and up to £28bn each year in growth, new research finds’](#). EY - Global

5.

Place-based approach

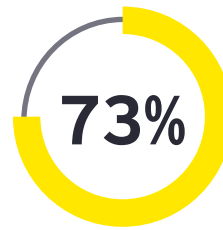
The final insight from this pilot is the potential of place-based approaches to make career opportunities more visible and accessible to young people. By connecting young people with local employers, labour market information and education pathways, Beyond Horizons helped make future opportunities more tangible and relevant, while strengthening connections between schools, employers, Careers Hubs and the wider system. Beyond Horizons also provides an early example of how national ambitions for meaningful workplace experiences can be translated through local systems. National entitlements can establish expectations around access and quality, but effective delivery depends on the relationships between schools, employers, education providers, local government and intermediary organisations within individual places.

Awareness of local employers and opportunities was one of the programme's strongest areas of impact, with pupils' awareness rising from 31% pre-programme to 81% post-programme for businesses and employers in Bradford and West Yorkshire. Three of the four teachers interviewed said Beyond Horizons fully supported access to local labour market information, while the fourth said it mostly did so. One teacher also highlighted the value of the programme's localised labour market insights, including information they had not previously encountered.

“

It helped me understand things better, and showed me I have a wide range of opportunities.

Year 8 Pupil, St Bede's and St Joseph's Catholic College



of pupils reported an increased awareness of businesses and employers in Bradford and West Yorkshire

This finding is particularly important given persistent regional inequalities in education, employment and opportunity. Outcomes are shaped not only by individual circumstances but also by where young people grow up, with disadvantage, educational attainment and NEET risk unevenly distributed across the country. The Sutton Trust's 2025 *Opportunity Index* found that the 20 constituencies with the highest levels of opportunity were all located in London,²⁶ while Impetus found that eight of the ten local authorities

with the highest NEET risk were in the North of England or Midlands.²⁷ For many young people, career pathways can therefore feel distant, abstract and disconnected from their everyday lives.

Beyond Horizons was piloted in Bradford, a city where significant socioeconomic challenges sit alongside a strong commitment to inclusive growth and improving opportunities for young people. While two of its constituencies (Bradford East and Bradford West) rank among the five most deprived in England in the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2025,²⁸ Bradford is also home to emerging growth sectors and a network of local partners working to strengthen pathways to education and employment. Beyond Horizons was designed to connect careers education with local employers, role models and opportunities, helping young people better understand the pathways available across Bradford and West Yorkshire. As a result, participants reported significantly greater awareness of local employers and career opportunities.

These findings suggest that place-based approaches can play an important role in making career pathways more visible, relevant and attainable, particularly in areas facing entrenched inequality. This reinforces findings from the *Economies of Coordination* research, which highlighted the importance of local infrastructure and coordination in connecting employers, education providers and other local partners

around shared priorities. Beyond Horizons provides an example of how this coordination can help translate national ambitions for work experience into delivery that responds to local context.

This direction of travel is increasingly reflected in national policy. The Government's proposals would give young people earlier access to technical education, work experience and employer engagement from age 14, with mayors, local leaders, schools, colleges and employers working together to shape pathways around local industries and growth sectors.²⁹ Beyond Horizons provides an early example of how locally coordinated employer engagement can support young people to understand different pathways, while highlighting the infrastructure and relationships needed to make it work in practice.

A place-based approach should not mean limiting young people's aspirations to the opportunities immediately available in their local areas. National and digital approaches can broaden access to sectors and employers beyond a young person's geography, while local coordination can provide the relationships, context and sustained engagement needed to make opportunities tangible. These approaches can therefore be complementary, combining the strengths of local delivery with access to a wider range of opportunities.

26. Erica Holt-White, Carl Cullinane and Rebecca Montacute (2025), *Research brief: The Opportunity Index*. Sutton Trust. [The Opportunity Index](#)

27. Impetus (2025), *Youth Jobs Gap: Exploring Compound Disadvantage*, [Impetus Youth Jobs Gap - Exploring compound disadvantage](#)

28. Brigid Francis-Devine (2025), *Research Briefing: Deprivation in English constituencies, 2025*. House of Commons Library. [CBP-7327.pdf](#)

29. Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street, Press Release: [PM: 'From today Britain will value the hard hat as much as the graduation cap' - GOV.UK](#)



4 PRACTICE AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

While the emerging insights are drawn from the first year of the pilot, they raise a number of considerations for schools, employers, local partnerships and policymakers. Collectively, they suggest improving work experience is not simply a question of increasing access, but of reconsidering when workplace experiences begin, what makes them meaningful and how they can be delivered sustainably at scale.

Implications for schools

The insights suggest that meaningful workplace experiences may be most effective when embedded within a broader programme of careers education, rather than delivered as a standalone placement. Beginning employer engagement earlier in secondary school, alongside opportunities for skills development and structured reflection, may help young people build confidence, explore future pathways connected to their interests and motivations, and make more informed decisions before key transition points such as Year 9 subject options and GCSE choices. As schools respond to updated careers guidance, the findings suggest that meaningful workplace experiences should be embedded within a coherent careers programme, underpinned by clear learning outcomes and connected to wider careers provision. The pilot also highlights the importance of providing schools with practical, adaptable resources that can be integrated into existing careers provision while recognising the capacity pressures many schools face.

Implications for employers

The pilot demonstrates the value employers can bring when engagement is purposeful and embedded within a wider learning journey. Beyond introducing young people to different careers, employer engagement can help develop aspirations, challenge perceptions, and connect classroom learning with future opportunities. As expectations around meaningful workplace experiences grow, employers have an opportunity to engage with young people earlier, broaden awareness of career opportunities, and contribute to more diverse and inclusive talent pipelines. This is increasingly important as employers seek to address skills shortages while ensuring young people from all backgrounds can access emerging opportunities in a rapidly changing labour market.

From January 2027, changes to government procurement and the Social Value Model will place greater emphasis on good jobs and skills, including how suppliers support people facing barriers to employment and young people transitioning from education into work. Work experience is explicitly recognised as one way employers can create pathways into employment, alongside skills training, apprenticeships and jobs.³⁰ For employers delivering central government contracts, this creates a further incentive to consider how meaningful workplace experiences can inform part of their wider approach to skills and social value.

30. Cabinet Office, (2026), *Procurement Policy Note 026: The Social Value Model*. PPN 026: [The Social Value Model.docx](#)

Implications for local systems

The findings reinforce the value of place-based approaches that bring together schools, employers, and local partners around shared priorities. Grounding careers education in local employers, sectors and opportunities can help make future pathways more tangible, and act as a powerful driver of motivation, while strengthening connections between education and local economic needs.³¹ More broadly, the pilot also highlights the importance of effective local coordination. Consistent with the EY Foundation's research with Demos in *Economies of Coordination*, Beyond Horizons demonstrates the value of building stronger relationships between local partners around a shared purpose, supported by evidence and continual learning.³² These elements can help create the conditions for more coordinated and sustainable approaches to careers education and employer engagement. The next phase of Beyond Horizons will build on these findings by exploring which aspects of coordination are essential to delivering meaningful workplace experiences and which can be embedded within schools or local partnerships, helping to inform scalable approaches for wider adoption.

Implications for national policy

The updated statutory guidance and strengthened Gatsby Benchmark 6 represent a significant shift in careers education, moving away from a single work experience placement towards a progressive model of multiple, meaningful workplace experiences across Key Stages 3 and 4. The guidance emphasises that these experiences should form part of a coherent careers programme, supported by structured learning outcomes, preparation, and reflection.

While the statutory guidance sets out what meaningful workplace experiences should look like, Beyond Horizons begins to show how these ambitions can be realised in practice through a coherent programme that combines employer engagement, strengths-based activities, self-reflection and structured learning outcomes.

The findings also suggest that reflection is more than simply a feature of meaningful work experience; it may be one of the mechanisms through which workplace experiences translate into greater confidence, motivation and career readiness. This complements the EY Foundation's research with IFOW, which highlights the importance of helping young people develop the personal capabilities needed to navigate future pathways.³³

31. EY Foundation, 'New approach focused on intrinsic motivation', (ibid).

32. EY Foundation, 'Stronger links' (ibid).

33. EY Foundation, 'New approach focused on intrinsic motivation', (ibid)

The expansion of work experience also raises an important question about equity. A universal entitlement will not necessarily result in equitable outcomes if existing inequalities to access opportunities are not addressed. The experience of Beyond Horizons suggests that implementation should consider which young people face the greatest barriers and the additional support they may need to benefit from work experience.

As expectations of schools and employers increase, the challenge shifts from expanding access to ensuring high-quality, meaningful experiences can be delivered consistently at scale. Beyond Horizons has begun to identify some of the implementation questions this raises, including how schools, employers and local partners coordinate delivery, the support schools need to embed progressive workplace experiences, and where intermediary support adds the greatest value. The next phase of the programme will test these questions through a hybrid delivery model, generating evidence to inform future policy, implementation guidance, and the resources needed to support wider adoption.



A photograph of a woman with brown hair tied back, smiling broadly. She is wearing a dark brown top and a red lanyard with the word 'VISITOR' repeated in white. She is surrounded by other people, some of whom are also wearing red lanyards. The background is slightly blurred, showing an indoor setting with a blue wall.

5 NEXT STEPS

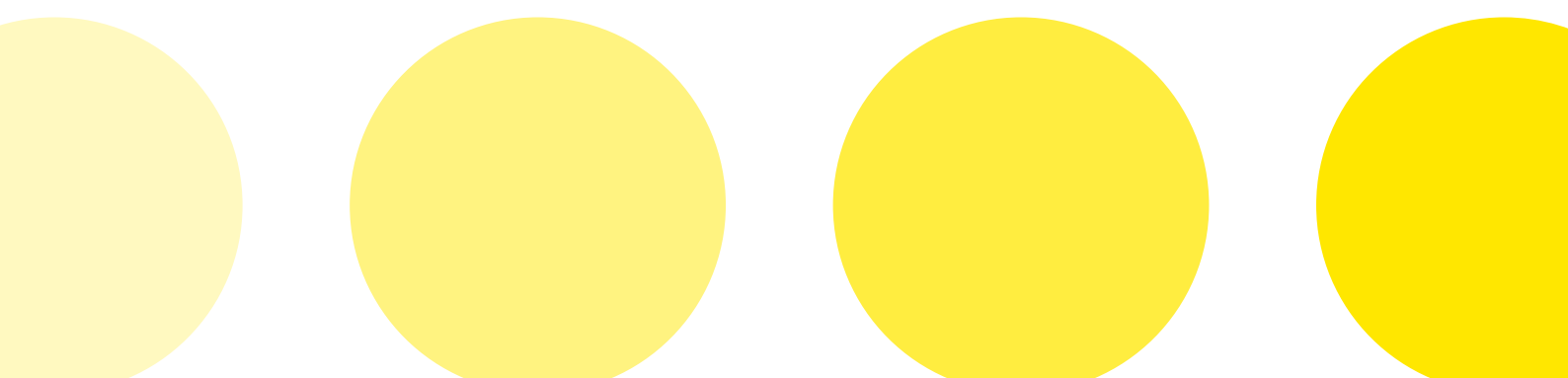
Building on findings from the first year of delivery, the next phase of Beyond Horizons will explore how meaningful workplace experiences can be delivered to Year 8 pupils in ways that are impactful, accessible, sustainable and scalable for the young people, schools, employers and local partners involved.

The programme will continue to test approaches that support earlier employer engagement, strengthen career readiness, and help young people connect their aspirations to opportunities within their local communities. This will include testing hybrid and school-led delivery models across a select number of schools to reflect our confirmed approach.

The next phase will explore how the programme can be embedded within existing careers provision, which elements can be delivered independently by schools, and where coordination or brokerage functions add the greatest value. Rather than assuming the model can simply be

replicated across different places, this will help identify which elements are core to achieving its intended outcomes, where they may need to be adapted to different local contexts, and the conditions needed to deliver meaningful workplace experiences at scale, without compromising quality, employer engagement or pupil outcomes.

By trialling different delivery approaches across a range of contexts, Beyond Horizons will generate further evidence on what can be adopted more widely, what needs to be adapted to local circumstances, and how progressive workplace experiences can be implemented sustainably at scale. This will inform future programme design, local delivery models and the implementation of evolving careers policy. As the programme develops, we welcome opportunities to work with schools, employers, local partners and policymakers to test these approaches in different contexts and build the evidence on what is needed to deliver meaningful workplace experiences more widely.



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The EY Foundation

About the EY Foundation

The EY Foundation is a UK registered charity that works directly with young people and employers to create or support pathways to education, employment or enterprise. EY Foundation operates and is incorporated independently of EY and is governed by a separate trustee board.

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