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**Start Small;
Dream Big**
Primary careers
pilot programme

THE **CAREERS &
ENTERPRISE**
COMPANY

Insight briefing 3: **The promise of primary**

Insights on the impact of career-related learning
in primary schools from The Careers & Enterprise
Company's Start Small; Dream Big pilot.

About the pilot

Children start forming ideas about who they could become from the earliest years of school. The Start Small; Dream Big pilot shows how structured careers education in primary settings can broaden horizons, challenge stereotypes, and lay the groundwork for lifelong opportunity. This third and final insight briefing draws together learning from all three waves of the pilot – backed by the Department for Education – and introduces new evidence from Wave 3.¹

From March 2023 to March 2025:

- **1,394** primary schools were recruited to participate:
- **1,333** completed their respective wave² with hundreds of thousands of children benefitting from their school being part of the programme.
- Schools worked with **20 regional Careers Hubs**, six of which took part in two waves.
- **199,244** pupils received an employer encounter, supported by over **1,000 employers**.

Schools were located in predominantly disadvantaged communities (31% of pupils were on Free School Meals [FSM] vs 25% nationally), where young people often lack access to broad social and professional networks, and so exposure to a wider range of roles and role models is especially impactful.

There were high levels of engagement from pupils and teachers in the baseline surveys included as part of their onboarding process (although engagement in the endline surveys was lower). The sample has been checked for representation and is large enough to enable us to draw insight.

The pilot was based around three interventions:

1. Matching primary schools to their local Careers Hub, where they were part of a Community of Practice and received expert support, additional resources and networks to deliver high quality career-related learning (CRL).
2. CPD provided for each participating school to build knowledge and skills to implement whole-school CRL programmes and careers in the curriculum.
3. Delivery of employer encounters for pupils, brokered by local networks of Careers Hubs and businesses.

This final insight briefing summarises the findings from all three waves of Start Small; Dream Big. It highlights the key outcomes for pupils, teachers, schools, employers, and the wider community, and captures insights for sustaining CRL in primary education.

¹ [Insight briefing 1](#) reported on wave 1 in July 2024 and [Insight briefing 2](#) reported on wave 2 in January 2025.

² In Wave 1, four Careers Hubs and 302 schools were recruited. In Wave 2, 11 Careers Hubs (one of which had participated in a previous wave) and 419 schools were recruited. In Wave 3, 11 Careers Hubs (five of which had participated in a previous wave) and 673 schools were recruited.



Insight 1

School careers provision, partnerships and leadership commitment improved

Primary schools transformed their approach to careers education. **73% of participating schools had a formal careers strategy in place** by the end of the pilot (most had none at the start). **60% of schools embedded careers education into the curriculum** (17% before the pilot). School leadership involvement grew significantly – 81% of teachers reported their senior leadership team was actively engaged in supporting career learning (46% at baseline). Teachers benefited from professional development, reporting a **21% improvement** in their ability to identify the essential skills pupils need for the future and a **14% improvement** in confidence explaining how biases and stereotypes can affect career choices.

“I think that all the jobs can be done by a woman or man, no matter what.”

Pupil

75% of teachers

saw a decrease in pupils feeling restricted by stereotypes in relation to their future job/career



Insight 2

Pupils' career horizons and understanding of the diversity of work broadened

Children's awareness of different jobs beyond those of their family increased by **8%**, and their knowledge of various types of careers rose by **6%** on average over the pilot.

Pupils began considering a more diverse range of future career options beyond “dream jobs” they initially named, moving away from the most stereotypical choices and showing new interest in less familiar fields. For example, interest in traditionally “child-popular” roles like animal care fell by 14%, while interest in sectors like business/finance and construction rose by 28% and 19%, respectively.

Notably, **girls' aspirations expanded**: their interest in business and finance careers **jumped by 31%**, alongside increases in interest in digital, law, and construction roles. Three-quarters of teachers (75%) observed that, by the end of the pilot, fewer pupils felt limited by gender stereotypes in their career dreams.

93% of employers

committed to continuing to engage with primary schools beyond the pilot



Insight 3

Employer and Careers Hub engagement and satisfaction increased, and parents engaged more in careers

Over **1,000 employers** partnered in the pilot, delivering **2,012 employer** encounters (workplace visits, career talks, and similar activities) that reached nearly **200,000 pupils**. These real-world encounters were consistently well-received by children and teachers, bringing learning to life and sparking curiosity about jobs pupils hadn't considered before. **93% of participating employers** said they are committed to continuing to engage with local primary schools beyond the pilot.

Teachers and headteachers overwhelmingly plan to sustain these efforts as well – **94% of schools** intend to continue CRL after their wave ended. Stakeholder satisfaction was high across the board, with **87% of teachers** satisfied with the pilot and 94% of employers satisfied with their engagement with schools.

The pilot also began to draw parents into career conversations. **A third of parents (36%)** reported a better understanding of how societal biases could affect their child's future job choices, and 24% gained a greater understanding of the variety of careers open to their child. Many parents started talking more with their children about work and doing so in more depth – 40% said they had more conversations with their child about careers and 38% said they were talking about more varied jobs and careers paths than previously. In fact, schools increasingly involved parents in activities like career weeks and assemblies each wave, with parental engagement rising from ~35% of schools in Wave 1 to 42% by Wave 3.



Insight 1

School careers provision, partnerships and leadership commitment improved

Structured and embedded

The three waves of the Start Small; Dream Big pilot transformed how primary schools approach CRL. At the start, few of the participating schools had any structured careers programme: most had no written careers strategy (10% in Wave 1 and 2 and 19% in Wave 3) and treated career learning as an ad-hoc add-on. By the end nearly three-quarters of schools (73%) had developed a formal careers strategy to guide their activities. This represents a major institutional shift, laying groundwork for sustained CRL provision. Schools increasingly embedded careers into the curriculum: by the final wave, 60% of schools had incorporated CRL into classroom teaching across subjects, up from just 17% before the pilot. In practice, this meant teachers were finding natural connections between their regular lessons and the world of work, for example, highlighting the role of scientists and engineers during science classes, or discussing writing careers in English lessons. One teacher noted they now have **“career links for every subject in the National Curriculum,”** integrating career examples throughout learning.

73% of schools

had a careers strategy in place by the end of their wave

Teacher capability and buy-in

Through continuing professional development (CPD) delivered by Teach First, primary teachers increased their knowledge of careers education principles and practices. Teachers reported a 21% improvement in their ability to identify key skills that pupils will need to develop to manage their future careers (such as teamwork, communication, problem-solving) and a 14% increase in identifying biases and stereotypes that exist in the world of work.

Equipped with this training, teachers became more proactive and intentional in delivering career-related content. They also grew more comfortable having careers conversations with pupils (24% improvement in confidence responding to questions from pupils related to careers) and there was a 61% improvement in schools engaging parents in careers-related plans and activities – an important step in normalising these discussions in primary settings. Levels of improvement for each area of knowledge were consistently higher for each successive wave. For example, improvement for ‘I feel confident challenging pupils’ assumptions about the ‘correct’ jobs for them’ increased from 15% in Wave 1, to 20% in Wave 2, to 23% in Wave 3.

“It’s great to provide the opportunity to gauge and challenge stereotypes among our pupils and also provide them with the insight of the world of work.”

Teacher

Leadership backing

Senior leadership teams (SLT) in schools also became strong supporters of the careers agenda. At baseline, many headteachers were unsure how careers fit into primary education; by the pilot’s end, 81% of teachers reported that their SLT was engaged in embedding CRL in the school, up from 46% at the start. This is a crucial development: with leadership backing, changes like dedicated curriculum time for careers, teacher release for CPD, and partnerships with employers were implemented and prioritised. In fact, some schools assigned specific staff as careers leads or created working groups to continue the work post-pilot. Nearly all participating schools (94%) indicated they plan to continue CRL activities in the coming years, demonstrating that the pilot’s impact will persist as a legacy in school culture and planning.

Local collaboration and support

Beyond the numbers, schools built new relationships and networks that reinforce their capacity. Careers Hubs facilitated connections between primary schools and external partners, resulting in a 54% increase in schools' reported links to local employers, and a 74% increase in schools taking part in a network of primary schools working on embedding careers related plans and activities. These partnerships meant that even after each wave ended, schools had ongoing contacts and community support to draw on for future activities. Teachers also benefited from being part of Communities of Practice via their local Careers Hub – sharing ideas and resources with peers and creating a clear connection between learning from the pilot and sustainable long-term delivery in each school and the wider community. This also helps to build a supportive ecosystem around primary careers education.

54% increase

in schools' reported links to local employers

"My daughter used to want to be an ice cream driver when she grew up but she now wants to be an architect after a construction company came to the school to talk about the work they do."

Parent



Insight 2

Pupils' career horizons and understanding of the diversity of work broadened

Broadening horizons

Beyond survey numbers, anecdotes from schools highlight how exposure to new people and jobs ignited students' imaginations. Many pupils talked excitedly about meeting engineers, artists, doctors, or entrepreneurs and how these encounters opened their eyes to careers they never knew about. As one teacher described, **"It has been a fantastic opportunity for our children to explore their aspirations and develop key skills for the future... helping to broaden their horizons and ignite their ambitions."** Classroom discussions about careers shifted from a few common themes to a much richer dialogue, with children saying they now dream about creative or engineering roles – sometimes moving on from earlier child-typical ideas of being YouTubers or footballers.

8% improvement

in pupils' understanding of jobs beyond those of their immediate family

Eye-opening

Introducing the world of work at primary level broadened pupils' perspectives on what their futures could hold. The evaluation found strong evidence that introducing the world of work at primary level broadened pupils' horizons. Awareness of jobs beyond family improved by 8%, with two-thirds of teachers (67%) noting improved pupil confidence and a stronger sense of equal access to future labour market opportunities.

Two-thirds of teachers

noted improved pupil confidence and a stronger sense of equal access to future labour market opportunities

Pupils moved away from "child-typical" roles such as animal care (-14%) and teaching (-13%), showing increased interest in sectors including administration and finance (+28%) and construction (+19%).

"I think that all the jobs can be done by a woman or man, no matter what."

Pupil

Debunking gender stereotypes

Crucially, career interests also became less gender stereotyped. Girls showed rising interest in business, finance, law, digital and construction (e.g. +31% in business/finance), while interest in caring and teaching fell (-12% and -9%). In teacher surveys, 75% agreed that pupils were less constrained by gender stereotypes after the pilot, and 67% observed their pupils' confidence in accessing a variety of jobs had grown.



Insight 3

Employer and Careers Hub engagement and satisfaction increased, and parents engaged more in careers

Diverse employer interactions

A wide range of employers, spanning small local businesses to multinational companies, successfully delivered 2,012 professional encounters across the 20 areas, reaching 199,244 pupils. These interactions featured a variety of enriching activities, including in-class presentations, immersive careers fairs, curriculum-based projects and assemblies. These were all co-designed with over 1,000 employers. 35% of schools engaged with parents in Wave 1, 33% in Wave 2 and 42% in Wave 3. As a result of this engagement, 41% of parents were aware of a careers programme taking place at their child's school. This awareness rose slightly throughout the pilot, with 35% of parents aware during Wave 1 and 45% aware during Wave 3. Given the challenges in engaging parents, this figure represents a positive outcome and suggests schools had some success in communicating with parents.

Sustained connections between educators and employers

Feedback from schools was resoundingly positive. Teachers observed that the encounters “brought learning alive” for their pupils, encouraging them to think about the world of work ahead of them and consider career options they may not have considered previously. Many pupils discovered careers they had never heard of before and made personal connections with the visitors. Importantly, employers found the experience rewarding as well. Initially, some businesses were unsure what engaging with 9- or 10-year-olds would entail. By the end, 93% of participating employers were committed to continuing to support the same or other local primary schools in relation to CRL, while 69% agreed that they now understand more about the benefits of working with primary schools.

“Our children have benefited from visits from local employees who shared their career and educational experiences with them. Children had the opportunity to question the visitors and were so inspired. One of our visitors to our Year 6 children...was a female Funeral Celebrant. The children were fascinated by this role; many of them had no idea that this role even existed.”

Teacher

2,000+ employer encounters

delivered to primary pupils through the pilot, across 20 Careers Hubs

The impact of Careers Hubs

Local Careers Hubs were instrumental in making these connections possible at scale. Hub staff served as brokers and facilitators – 97% of Careers Hubs introduced primaries to local employers, and most hosted regular meetings or events to link educators and businesses. Hubs also supported schools with planning activities and troubleshooting challenges (like transportation for site visits or finding age-appropriate content). This coordination role proved critical, as primary schools often lack the capacity or networks to engage employers on their own. The success of Start Small; Dream Big indicates that a hub-and-spoke model – with a central team connecting schools to external opportunities – can dramatically increase primary schools' access to the world of work.

Pilot learnings and legacy

The pilot was delivered within a challenging operating context, in part shaped the ambitions of the initial DfE programme specification, which necessitated intensive school support in specific areas and within a limited timeframe. The existing careers infrastructure, nationally coordinated and locally enabled through Careers Hubs, was essential to enable rapid delivery. Careers Hubs worked with compressed timelines to build new relationships with primary schools and design appropriate CRL approaches, building on their experience with secondary education. Substantial CPD content was created and delivered at pace. Despite these challenges, schools engaged with their local Careers Hubs with clear commitment, demonstrating a strong appetite to strengthen careers provision and embed CRL across the curriculum.

The evaluation highlighted important learning about the nature of CRL at primary level. Pupils developed broad awareness of the world of work and responded well to exposure to diverse roles but progressed more slowly in developing detailed understanding of employment pathways or the skills and qualifications required for future roles. This suggests that deeper career knowledge can only be achieved through sustained, long-term commitment. At the same time, engagement in CPD revealed the limits of school capacity in a sector under significant pressure - for example in terms of competing priorities - underlining the need for realistic expectations and flexible models of delivery.

The pilot has therefore provided both proof of concept and insight into the conditions required for success. Its legacy lies in demonstrating the willingness of primary schools to embrace CRL, the adaptability of the national careers infrastructure and Careers Hubs in extending their remit, and the importance of sustained investment to secure long-term impact for pupils.

Across three waves, the pilot showed consistent improvement on the short-term outcomes in the Theory of Change³. Lead teachers understood the importance of CRL in primary and gained the knowledge and skills to embed it; many began shaping an effective whole-school approach to careers. Teachers and senior leaders reported greater awareness of bias and stereotypes and how these affect delivery and pupil choices. Schools improved knowledge of local employer networks and what they can offer. Pupils improved their understanding of the world of work, showed greater awareness of the diversity of jobs and pathways, began to connect curriculum learning to skills for work, and reported gains in essential skills for life and work. Parents felt more confident talking to their child about jobs. Employers increased their understanding of the benefits of working with primary schools.

In relation to intermediate outcomes, by the end of each wave, whole-school CRL plans were put in place and CRL began to be embedded in the curriculum with repeat engagement from a network of employers. Teachers and senior leaders across schools reported a stronger understanding of the value of CRL and a commitment to embedding it in the curriculum, with many consciously adapting their practice to challenge stereotypes. Pupils showed increased interest in a diverse range of jobs and career paths, alongside early signs of self-efficacy and motivation gains. Parents were more likely to talk to their child about the world of work, covering a broader range of roles and employer engagement with primary schools increased.

If these conditions are sustained, the Theory of Change anticipates that ongoing employer engagement, teachers promoting a diverse range of careers while reducing bias, and pupils making educational choices aligned to their ambitions and skillset, will lead to young people progressing into more varied training and education pathways post-16, with smoother transitions, higher attainment and fewer becoming NEET.

The promise of the impact of primary careers education is now proven. The task ahead is to build on this momentum, ensuring that every primary-aged child – regardless of background – gets the chance to start dreaming big about their future. By doing so, we keep their horizons as broad as possible for as long as possible, setting them on a path to explore their talents and ambitions to the fullest.

“The programme has highlighted CRL in primaries and its importance not just to pupils but to parents/ carers and staff on how to engage students early to raise aspirations and break down stereotypes in young people. The programme initiated this process. Without it I think it would still be a thought!”

Careers Hub

3 A Theory of Change (ToC) was developed in the initial stages of the evaluation and used to inform design of the methodology and intended outcomes. The ToC can be found in the full report [here](#).

Forward look

Looking ahead funded by the DfE, the CEC will now focus on consolidating the gains made through Start Small; Dream Big and embedding them for the long term. The CEC will continue to provide sustainable teacher development for primary schools, expanding the offer beyond those involved in the pilot through The [Academy](#) and [Primary Platform](#), ensuring that every primary school can access high-quality CPD and practical support.

The pilot has highlighted the pivotal role of Careers Hubs, and the CEC will continue to work with them through a new, National Primary Community of Improvement (CoI). Through the CoI, all Careers Hubs will have the opportunity to play a central role in the maintenance of a supportive and developmental network around primary careers education, seeking to build alignment to that which exists at secondary level. At the same time, insights from the pilot will be distilled into a Primary impact model, giving Hubs and schools a clear framework for effective practice.

With national communications, enhanced resources, and deeper collaboration across Hubs, schools and employers, this next chapter will aim to embed primary CRL as a core part of school improvement, ensuring that every child, regardless of their background, can broaden their horizons and dream big. At the same time, if momentum is not sustained, there is a real risk of losing the significant progress made to date, particularly as many primary schools are starting from a very low baseline in relation to CRL. Continued support and structured opportunities to engage will therefore be essential to bring more schools along on the journey and to ensure that all children benefit from the strong foundations already laid.

Read the full report [here](#).



THE CAREERS & ENTERPRISE COMPANY

Associated pilot delivery partners:

Cornwall & the Isles of Scilly
CAREERS HUB

Devon, Plymouth & Torbay
CAREERS HUB

Dorset
CAREERS HUB

East Midlands County Combined Authority
CAREERS HUB

East Sussex
CAREERS HUB

Cambridgeshire & Peterborough
CAREERS HUB

Greater Lincolnshire
CAREERS HUB

Greater Manchester
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Lancashire
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