Insight briefing 2:

Modern work experience pilots

Insights from the Year 2 pilots of the equalex framework



Introduction

The rationale for modern work experience

The case for a modern, impactful approach to work experience is stronger than ever.

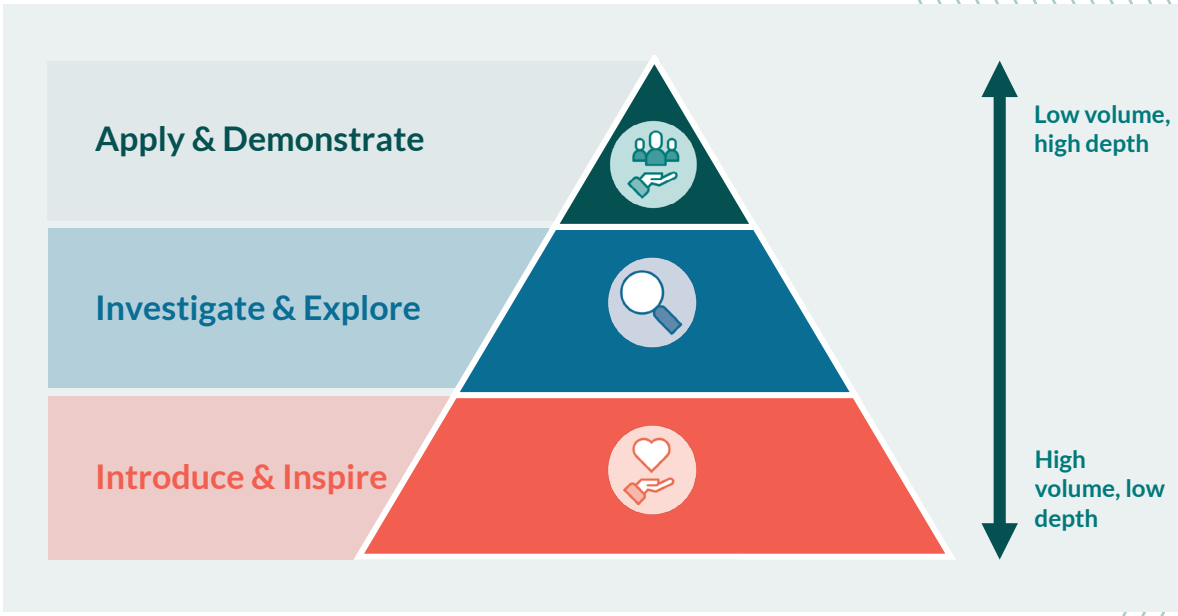
The labour market young people are entering has changed. Nearly one million 16 to 24 year olds were NEET (not in education, employment or training) between April and June 2026. Work Foundation analysis finds advertised 'starter' jobs have fallen by around 49% over the last decade. Nationally there is around one entry-level vacancy for every three young people who are NEET (one for every six in the North East). The International Labour Organization reports global youth unemployment at 12.4% with a 20% NEET rate.

Work experience is now one of the best-evidenced protective factors against young people becoming NEET. Education and Employers finds that young people with the highest levels of pre-16 employer engagement have 80% lower odds of becoming NEET.

The Milburn report From a Welfare State to a Working State cites lack of work experience is the most commonly reported barrier to entering work. It makes work experience one of the three core asks on employers, considering statutory footing, and better coordinated local support. It calls for delivery of work experience at scale to help drive work readiness, for schools to reduce pressure on employers through more flexible scheduling and emphasises equity of access to reduce dependency on parents' professional networks.

To address these long standing challenges, The Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC) developed the equalex framework, now in its second year of piloting. equalex is a framework of progressive learning outcomes, supported by learner-level objectives. The framework focuses on equitable access. Its outcomes build over time and span three phases: 1. Introduce & Inspire, 2. Investigate & Explore and 3. Apply & Demonstrate (see Fig.1). Insights from the Year 1 equalex pilots were published in November 2025.

Fig. 1: equalex is a framework of progressive learning outcomes, raising quality of work experience for learners



A growing evidence base

Why this evaluation matters

- **The ambition is clear:** The Government expects every young person to have at least two weeks' worth of high-quality work experience by Year 11.
- **Delivery needs tested models:** the equalex pilots test how work experience can be organised, targeted and scaled in real places, before wider roll-out.
- **The evidence base is growing:** Year 2 involved 13,524 young people, 221 employers and 163 schools across six Careers Hubs. Employers, sectors and Hubs are already using equalex as a shared design framework.
- **A national approach supports local change:** six places worked to one set of learning outcomes. The CEC brought the learning together and shared it across the Careers Hub network.
- **This evaluation is helping shape the future of work experience:** it shows what appears to work, for whom and under what conditions, as policy moves into delivery.

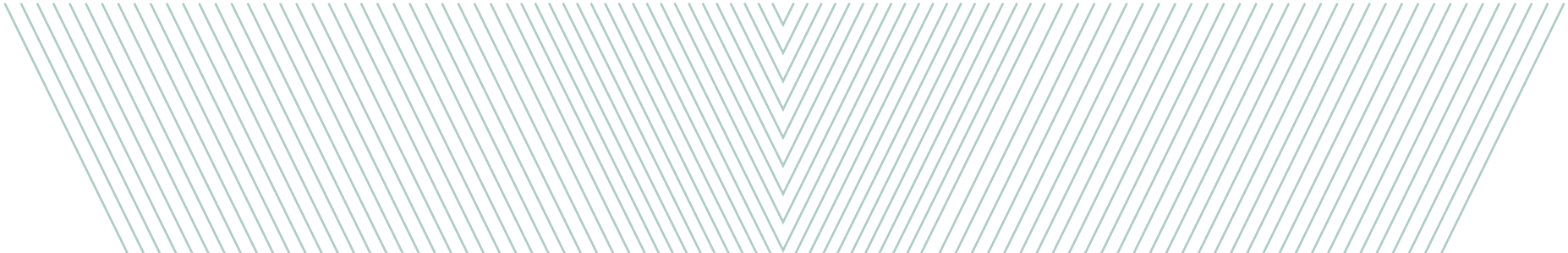
National policy ambition

One year on from the first year of piloting, the expectation on education settings in relation to work experience is greater. The Department for Education's (DfE) updated statutory guidance sets out that schools should be reforming their work experience programmes from September 2026. This ambition is underlined in the Government's post-16 education and skills white paper. All young people should receive a minimum of two weeks' worth of high-quality work experience by Year 11, made up of:

- One week's worth of work experience activities in Years 7 to 9.
- One week's worth of placement(s) in Years 10 to 11.

Schools and employers should co-design experiences that meet local and individual learner needs. Gatsby Benchmark 6 specifies the expectation of multiple, meaningful and progressive work experiences.

The Government has also launched a National Mission on Work Experience. It calls on employers to provide an additional 200,000 work experience placements for 14 to 16 year olds. With more employers recognising the value of work experience, the CEC is working with No 10 to identify and address capacity issues across the country.



Impact of the equalex framework

Work experience is becoming more strategically organised, increasingly targeted towards those facing the greatest barriers, and is beginning to scale in response to growing demand.

- **We see evidence that employers are changing how they commit and collaborate:**
  - Employers well versed in delivering accessible support for young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) are enabling others to replicate their success through the SEND Employer Activation Group and our partnership with British Association for Supported Employment (BASE), ensuring scaled SEND provision is available in more places.
  - Some employers such as Sainsbury's are refreshing their offer to deliver against the new requirements for meaningful work experience.
  - Whole sectors are amplifying their impact, with the Institute of Grocery Distribution (IGD) mobilising its supply chain to reach every school by 2030 through the CEC's network.
- **Curriculum co-design is connecting learning with local economic opportunities:**
  - In Liverpool City Region, co-design was the default approach by the end of the pilot. An eight-lesson module co-designed with Jaguar Land Rover (JLR) saw learner interest in manufacturing careers rise from 50% to 74%.
  - The Greater Manchester Baccalaureate (MBacc) has embedded equalex across each of its five industry gateways, bringing early technical education to life, particularly for young people facing additional barriers.
  - The Industrial Strategy Jobs Plans are putting work experience and strategic school engagement at the centre of sector pipeline ambitions.
- **The national framework and support are helping to shape place-based strategies:**
  - Some pilots used NEET risk indicators, such as low attendance, to identify learners and shape plans. Greater Manchester offered 50 hours (equivalent to ten days) of equalex aligned activity to targeted cohorts.
  - Continuous improvement is a central aim, with educational settings embedding the framework within whole-school improvement planning through the Careers Impact System, while regions are adapting future strategy in response to emerging learning.
  - West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) has centred equalex within its regional NEET prevention strategy, supporting early intervention to stem disengagement.
- **We are beginning to see that these experiences are broadening horizons and supporting progression:**
  - The West of England pilot saw two alternative provision (AP) learners who completed a four-day placement at Wessex Water apply for the company's apprenticeship programme.
  - The equalex model is replicated within the JPMorganChase Future Ready Fund, testing long-term support and outcomes for learners facing barriers.
  - The learning from our pilot areas is reshaping the way young people see future opportunities. Working with Goldman Sachs, Sir Richard Harpin and the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority, enterprise education is being mapped against equalex to unlock learners' entrepreneurial skills and potential.

A national approach driving place-based change

Each pilot shaped equalex around local need. Examples below show how the pilots approached the national framework:

- **One framework, local delivery:** all six pilots took different approaches working to the same equalex learning outcomes. Areas adapted delivery to local economies and priorities, including growth sectors, AP and rural and coastal schools.
- **National connection and shared tools:** termly national Communities of Practice brought the six pilot teams together. Learning was shared across the Careers Hub network. Common tools, including Compass+, the Careers Impact System and the Curriculum Audit Tool, supported consistency.
- **Local leaders are seeking national partnership:** five of the six pilots sat within Mayoral Strategic Authorities. Mayoral Strategic Authorities are increasingly seeking to work with the CEC to design activity.
- **The national role adds value:** the pilots show how the CEC's national role connects local change to a model that is high quality, inclusive and scalable.

About the Year 2 pilot evaluation

Focus and methodology

The second year of piloting (2025/26) focused on testing scalable models for equalex. With funding from the Department for Education, pilots engaged:

- 13,524 young people
- 6 Careers Hubs - 5 within Mayoral Strategic Authorities and a Combined County Authority
- 221 employers, 163 schools and 12 delivery providers

Place-based pilots with Careers Hubs	Focus
West of England Combined Authority (WECA)	Delivering equalex aligned work experience for learners in AP
Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA)	50 hours of equalex aligned activity for targeted cohorts, within the MBacc commitment
West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA)	Commissioned delivery providers to support schools and employers
West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA)	Curriculum-integrated activities and flexible Year 10 placements, through a multi-academy trust
Liverpool City Region (LCR)	Strengthening employer-school partnerships and developing system advocates
Devon, Plymouth and Torbay (DPT)	Curriculum-integrated activity at Key Stage 3, with a focus on rural and coastal schools

Each pilot tested how equalex could be embedded more deeply within the careers system in its local context. Pilots focused on testing the programme logic model and short-term conditions for success:

- Curriculum integration: linking work experience to learning outcomes
- Flexible, inclusive delivery: including approaches for learners who face barriers
- School-employer collaboration: with Careers Hubs supporting the partnership
- Preparation and reflection: preparing learners and employers before experiences, with reflection afterwards, linked to equalex outcomes
- Sustainable system change: building equalex into existing Careers Hub structures and processes

Pilots also considered how schools and employers could prepare for the updated DfE guidance on work experience.

York Consulting worked with the CEC and the pilots as the learning insights partner from February 2025 to July 2026. The approach was developmental, focusing on key stakeholder groups, also considering the local strategic role of Careers Hubs. The logic model focused on these questions for each stakeholder:

Key logic model questions for each stakeholder

Employers and schools	Do flexible, co-designed approaches strengthen sustainable partnerships and raise quality?
Careers Hubs	Does a broker role, with equalex embedded in Hub structures and senior leadership team (SLT) commitment, support change that lasts?
Learners	Do equalex aligned activities improve career readiness, particularly for learners who face barriers?

Pilots included a range of focused activities by Careers Hubs, schools and employers to review and adapt practices and deliver more structured experiences. The evaluation approach included:

- Refining the Year 1 national logic model with pilots, to focus on seven conditions for success (see Appendix A). The three insights in this briefing draw findings from across these conditions.
- Termly contact with pilot teams, and attendance at termly national Communities of Practice.
- Fieldwork in pilot areas, including attending delivery and interviewing Careers Hub staff, Careers Leaders and employers.
- Review of additional evidence, including pilot journey trackers, case studies, surveys and other stakeholder feedback.

This insight briefing summarises the key findings from the full Year 2 report by York Consulting.

Insights at a glance

Insight 1: Progress

School and employer partnerships transformed, becoming flexible, co-designed and sustained

Flexible approaches replaced the traditional placement models

Thinking shifted away from the traditional placement towards activities that fit employer and school capacity. This helped remove barriers and enabled a wider range of activities, particularly at Key Stage 3.

...Co-design was informed by equalex learning outcomes and raised quality

Schools and employers developed experiences together. The equalex outcomes gave both sides a shared reference point. Co-design may need more upfront time, but it has the potential to streamline future activity.

...Sustained engagement strengthened employer motivation

Employers saw ongoing relationships as a way to have more meaningful impact on young people. Shared understanding streamlined delivery over time.

Insight 2: System change

Careers Hubs acting as brokers rather than delivery providers drove change that is starting to embed

Careers Hubs focused on brokerage and support over delivery

Hubs convened schools and employers, supported co-design and planning, and shared tools and resources. They acted as strategic brokers rather than delivery leads.

...equalex was embedded within Careers Hub structures and processes

equalex was built into processes Careers Hubs already run, including Internal Leadership Reviews (ILR) and peer-to-peer reviews within schools. This brought work experience within the scope of the wider careers strategy, rather than a standalone project model, and helped embed quality and equity from the outset.

...SLT commitment provided the lever for school-level change

The strongest commitment came from SLT taking part in pilot activity directly. Early engagement, links to policy drivers and seeing impact first-hand helped drive ownership.

Insight 3: Impact

equalex improved career readiness and confidence, particularly for learners facing barriers

The phased model worked for learners facing barriers

An initial in-school session with an employer helped learners feel more comfortable about a later workplace visit or placement. The examples came mainly from SEND and AP settings.

...Learners demonstrated increased career readiness and confidence

Feedback and data indicated greater confidence and knowledge of career and education pathways. Learners were better able to discuss their skills and future options.

...Employers and settings developed replicable models

Employers expanded or improved their offer in line with equalex. Alternative provision settings now have a 'blueprint' they can reuse.

Employer network grew from around 70 to over 200 employers

Liverpool City Region relaunched its Employer Network and rebuilt it with new membership options, which widened engagement.

Five employer-led workstreams

In Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Cornerstone Employers across five sectors co-designed solutions to shared system challenges, as part of the MBacc 14 to 16 pathway.

Learner interest increased from 50% to 74%

Learner interest in manufacturing careers increased substantially after an eight-lesson module co-designed with JLR.

Insight 1: School and employer partnerships transformed, becoming flexible, co-designed and sustained

Flexible approaches replaced the traditional placement models

Across all the pilots approaches shifted away from the traditional work experience placement in favour of activities aligned with the capacity and needs of employers and schools. This increased flexibility and helped remove barriers that often prevent schools and employers from offering work experience. It led to a wider range of work experience activities being offered, particularly at Key Stage 3.

Careers Hubs shaped their approach around local need and economic context. Liverpool City Region built sector-based employer clusters, including the Game Changers network of games design companies. It also ran localised Opportunity Forums in each borough. These facilitated conversations where co-design could begin, built relationships and helped employers and educators understand each other's drivers and perspectives.

Greater Manchester Combined Authority created a single online route for employers to register an offer through the Greater Manchester Pledge, aligned to their MBacc gateways and local need. West Yorkshire Combined Authority commissioned four delivery providers to broker relationships for the Careers Hub. Devon, Plymouth and Torbay supported rural and coastal schools to build their own connections with local small and medium-sized enterprises.

Flexibility also widened access to a greater pool of opportunities. Employers unable to host Key Stage 3 on site offered in-school sessions, curriculum-integrated projects and virtual encounters instead. This brought organisations into the system that had previously been unable to engage.

13,524 young people

took part in equalex aligned activities during 2025/26, supported by 221 employers, 163 schools and 12 delivery providers across six Careers Hubs.

> "We can't offer work placements to under 16s and even over 16s have to be office based, so it was a great opportunity for us to offer work experience in an alternative format."
>
> **Employer**

...Co-design was informed by equalex learning outcomes and raised quality

Pilots developed partnerships that moved beyond standard employer offers and school requests, towards genuinely collaborative development of experiences that met the needs of both. The equalex learning outcomes gave both sides a shared reference point for quality.

In Liverpool City Region, co-design had become the default approach by the final Community of Practice. Co-design of experiences linked to the equalex outcomes became a norm for schools and employers in the region, with system advocates beginning to share that message beyond the pilot.

Careers Hubs made co-design easier to engage with. Pilots used standard planning templates aligned to the equalex outcomes to structure discussions. This built quality into experiences from the planning stage. The West of England Careers Hub went further, facilitating initial planning meetings between AP settings and employers. That helped employers pitch content at the right level and build in short, interactive activities, raising the quality of the experience for learners.

Co-design may require a greater upfront investment in time, but it has the potential to streamline future activity and improve employer confidence, motivation and sustainable engagement.

Fig. 2: The equalex framework defines standard learning outcomes and objectives across three phases of activity to facilitate a programme of skills development through the lens of modern work experience.



"It [the equalex framework] helped me understand employer encounters and work experience as part of a 'journey' rather than ad hoc activities - part of a process with planning before and reflection afterwards to ensure it's meaningful and impactful."

Employer

…Sustained engagement strengthened employer motivation

Pilots raised the quality of experiences by encouraging sustained engagement between schools and employers, moving away from isolated, ad hoc activities. Employers saw ongoing relationships as an opportunity to have a greater and more meaningful impact on young people.

Shared understanding also streamlined delivery over time. In West Midlands Combined Authority, Dudley Academies Trust ran six-week curriculum projects with two established employer partners. Once the relationship was established, employer input stayed light. Employers provided a project brief and introduced each project through a live virtual broadcast to the whole year group. The Trust plans to deliver the projects annually.

Employer network grew from around 70 to over 200 employers

Liverpool City Region relaunched its Employer Network during the Year 1 pilot, returning to its most engaged employers and rebuilding it with new membership options and a clarified Careers Hub support offer.

Consistency helped too. In the areas with the strongest evidence of culture change, equalex was a common thread across Communities of Practice, one-to-one support and training. Stakeholders were speaking 'equalex language' and were committed to sustained engagement rather than one-off delivery.

Best practice: building partnerships that last

- **Convene in person:** termly Communities of Practice and localised forums bring schools and employers together around a shared purpose.
- **Offer one simple route in:** a single expression of interest process reduces the duplication often associated with repeated brokerage.
- **Map what employers can offer:** aligning employer offers to the equalex phases shows where each employer fits from the outset.
- **Plan the next year during this one:** some pilots were already planning the following academic year while activity was live.



Insight 2: Careers Hubs acting as brokers rather than delivery providers drove change that is starting to embed

Careers Hubs focused on brokerage and support over delivery

Where Careers Hubs were strongest as strategic facilitators, they helped schools and employers build relationships. They developed a shared understanding of equalex and modern work experience and helped both sides work together more effectively. In practice that meant facilitating Communities of Practice, supporting co-design and planning and sharing tools and resources. Careers Hubs acted as strategic brokers rather than delivery leads.

The West of England Careers Hub convened AP settings and employers through Communities of Practice. The equalex lead also facilitated planning meetings and followed up on actions. West Yorkshire Combined Authority reached the same end through partnership. It commissioned four delivery providers to broker and design activity for the Careers Hubs.

In several areas, the intention is for reliance on the Careers Hubs to reduce over time, as school and employer confidence grows. This could release Hub capacity to focus on bringing more employers into the system and drive up the quality of provision.

> "[On pilot benefits] Collaborating with the AP schools themselves. It has been fantastic to be able to design engagements that work for their students. … The mix of employers, schools, and other providers has helped us share experience and best practice."
>
> **Employer**

…equalex was embedded within Careers Hub structures and processes

equalex did not operate as a separate project. It was built into the processes Careers Hubs already run. Schools engaged with it through their ILR and peer-to-peer reviews, both part of the Careers Impact System. Careers Hub communications and Enterprise Coordinators promoted it too. This reduced reliance on a standalone project model, brought work experience within the scope of the wider careers strategy and helped embed quality and equity from the outset.

In Devon, Plymouth and Torbay, the Enterprise Coordinator led practice sharing between participating schools. They also ran a peer-to-peer review process focused on equalex. In Greater Manchester Combined Authority, delivery sat within core Partnership and Quality Lead caseloads rather than a separate workstream. Pilots described how this strengthened longer-term sustainability. When project capacity was reassigned, a more distributed model with wider ownership helped maintain momentum.

Consistency mattered as much as local fit. All six pilots worked to the same equalex learning outcomes. National Communities of Practice brought the six pilot teams together termly. Pilots used a range of tools, including:

- Employer Standards: employers self-assess their careers education offer.
- Compass+: schools benchmark and track provision, and record ILR responses.
- Unifrog: used by some schools to record learner reflections and monitor progress.
- Future Skills Questionnaire (FSQ): inform planning and local priorities. One pilot used it as the basis for its own baseline and follow-up surveys.
- CEC's Curriculum Audit Tool: some pilots used curriculum mapping tools aligned to the equalex outcomes to help schools see strengths and gaps.

Alignment to local priorities supported buy-in and engagement. In Greater Manchester Combined Authority, equalex was embedded within the MBacc and the combined authority's growth sector gateways. In Devon, Plymouth and Torbay, the focus was on the barriers facing rural and coastal schools.

Five employer-led workstreams

In Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Cornerstone Employers moved from delivering individual activities to co-designing solutions to shared system challenges, across digital inclusion, teacher encounters and CPD, SEND and alternative provision, cross-sector engagement, and SME and supply chain participation.

"Delivery responsibilities were integrated into Partnership and Quality Leads' existing caseloads, embedding modern work experience within core roles rather than creating a separate workstream. This strengthened local ownership within our own team and created a more sustainable delivery model."

Careers Hub

…SLT commitment provided the lever for school-level change

SLT commitment was a crucial lever for embedding work experience in school strategy. The strongest commitment came from direct SLT involvement in pilot activity, not from oversight and updates. Where senior leaders took part in the pilot activity itself, they were more likely to own and champion the decisions that followed.

Several approaches helped drive this ownership. Early engagement mattered, as did emphasising the scope of ambition and linking it to wider policy drivers. Senior leaders also changed their attitudes after seeing the impact of high-quality experiences first-hand. Some pilots built in an expectation for senior leader attendance at Communities of Practice. Liverpool City Region built this into onboarding by making ILR completion (which engages school leaders) a condition of participation.

Commitment at multi-academy trust level extends the reach further. In West Midlands Combined Authority, Dudley Academies Trust delivered its projects to two year groups across all four of its secondary schools. This followed early meetings with Principals and Directors of Learning. In some pilot schools, responsibility for employer engagement is now starting to spread across subject areas. Some Hubs also ran Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for school staff on tracking tools such as Unifrog and OnTrack+.

"The support provided through the Careers Hubs and the equalex pilot has been instrumental in helping us move from isolated careers activities towards a more strategic and embedded approach to workplace experiences across Years 7–11."

SLT Lead for Careers

Best practice: what pilots identified as needed for scaling

- **Lead-in time:** embedding work experience in the curriculum required planning ahead of the academic year, not within it.
- **Careers Hub capacity to support curriculum embedding:** West Yorkshire reflected that its curriculum support could have been more intensive if it had worked with fewer schools.
- **Senior leader levers:** pilots that made SLT involvement or ILR completion a condition of taking part had the leverage to change practice.
- **Consistent tracking:** some pilots pointed to greater use of Compass+, Unifrog and OnTrack+ to track experiences, participation and impact.

Insight 3: equalex improved career readiness and confidence, particularly for learners facing barriers

The phased model worked for learners facing barriers

An initial in-school session with an employer helped learners feel more comfortable about a later workplace visit or placement. It also supported clear progression through the equalex phases. This practice emerged mainly from SEND and AP settings.

In the West of England Combined Authority, early dialogue with AP leaders identified a key barrier for AP learners accessing work experience: a lack of confidence and trust. The phased model was designed in response. An Introduce & Inspire session at the setting came first. An Investigate & Explore visit to the workplace followed. For some learners, an Apply & Demonstrate placement came after that.

The same approach worked in a SEND setting in West Yorkshire Combined Authority working with McVitie's. A scaffolded in-school session introduced learners to the manufacturing sector before a visit to the factory. Reflection activities showed learners with increased confidence, better understanding of the workplace and greater knowledge of career pathways.

> "It [the phased model] makes them feel more comfortable, instead of just throwing them in at the deep end with a visit or work experience placement."
>
> **AP Careers Leader**

Case study: a phased approach in AP

In the West of England Combined Authority pilot, the Centre for Modelling and Simulation, a not-for-profit digital engineering company, visited an AP setting to deliver an Introduce & Inspire session for Year 8 learners. The session was co-designed with the AP headteacher and built around short, practical activities: identifying objects on an employee's desk from a photo to open a discussion about their role, and a competitive LEGO design challenge showing how the company creates and tests ideas.

Two learners then visited the company's office, with planned introductions to different staff members and demonstrations of digital equipment. AP staff noted that neither would have had the confidence to attend the visit without the session at their setting first.

Elsewhere in the same pilot, two learners completed a four-day placement at Wessex Water following an introductory session and workplace visit. Both went on to apply for the company's apprenticeship programme, including attending an assessment centre and interview.

…Learners demonstrated increased career readiness and confidence

Feedback and data from across the pilots indicate that equalex aligned activities improved learners' career readiness. Learners showed increased confidence and greater knowledge of career and education pathways. They were also better able to discuss their skills and future options.

In Greater Manchester Combined Authority, a group of learners facing barriers took part in an immersive 'workplace safari' at a law firm, focused on the Introduce & Inspire phase. They reported greater confidence and a better understanding of the legal sector.

In Devon, Plymouth and Torbay, a workplace experience with Great Western Railway helped a targeted group of learners facing barriers connect school subjects to career pathways. This was captured through pre- and post-reflection activity in Unifrog. Staff reported that the level of questioning exceeded expectations, and that previously disengaged learners showed real curiosity.

Insight into learner development was captured in several ways. Some pilots used Unifrog to record learner reflections and monitor progress. Some areas used student logbooks alongside it. FSQ is completed once a year, so it informed planning rather than measuring before-and-after change. One pilot used the question taxonomy as the basis for its own baseline and follow-up surveys.

…Employers and settings developed replicable

Learner interest increased from 50% to 74%

Learner interest in manufacturing careers increased after an eight-lesson curriculum module co-designed with JLR in Liverpool City Region. The module included employer involvement in lessons and a visit to the JLR plant.

> "I didn't realise the number of different jobs available in one company, and I didn't realise so many people would work for Great Western Railway. It made me think whether it is something I might like to do and apply for."
>
> **Learner**

Employers expanded or improved their own work experience offer in line with the equalex framework, in some cases rewriting it entirely. In West Yorkshire Combined Authority, commissioned providers engaged employers who had never previously offered work experience, helping them understand equalex and co-design activities that were well received by schools and young people.

Employers also became more confident working with learners who face barriers. In West of England Combined Authority, an AP headteacher delivered a one-hour online session on trauma-informed practice. Employers said it left them better prepared.

AP settings now have a proven 'blueprint' they can reuse when designing and delivering future work experience, with a clear shift in practice towards a more flexible, outcomes-focused approach to employer engagement. For settings with less well-established careers provision, careers has become more of a priority, through showing that high-quality, meaningful work experience is possible outside the traditional placement model.

Replicability extends to schools. In West Midlands Combined Authority, project materials developed once can be used again across year groups and academies. In Devon, Plymouth and Torbay, an employer and school co-designed two industry-embedded maths lessons for Year 7, leaving the lesson plans, materials and equipment with the school for future use.

In West Yorkshire Combined Authority, the four delivery providers have integrated equalex into their wider careers offers. Each has been approached by schools or employers outside the pilot. Beyond the six pilots, the framework is being taken up elsewhere: Central London Careers Hub has built an equalex Employer Charter around it, and Local London has published an equalex employer toolkit. This suggests a common framework travels beyond the places where it was tested.

Best practice: designing for reuse

- **Write it down once:** project briefs, lesson plans and handouts developed during the pilot become an off-the-shelf model for following years.
- **Keep employer input proportionate:** an employer-provided project brief and live virtual introduction can support six weeks of teacher-led curriculum work.
- **Share the blueprint:** Careers Hubs are promoting pilot models to wider employer and school networks as proven approaches.
- **Prepare employers for the learners they will meet:** short, practical training from settings themselves built employer confidence quickly.

Conclusions and lessons learnt

The equalex Year 2 pilots generated learning about what successful models for curriculum-integrated, meaningful work experience and Careers Hubs support look like. The extent of system change varied across the six pilots. Some laid the foundations for future change, whereas others showed significant shifts in behaviour, systems, processes and culture.

Learning was captured throughout the pilots and shared across the Careers Hub network. This helped Hubs begin to prepare the system and set strong foundations with schools and employers ahead of wider roll-out to support the work experience guarantee.

Year 2 therefore moved the question from 'Can equalex be delivered?' to 'What appears to make it work, for whom, and under what conditions?'

Lessons for stakeholders

The points below draw on what Careers Hubs, schools and employers reported worked in Year 2:

Careers Hubs

- Convene schools and employers through in-person, place-based forums such as Communities of Practice.
- Facilitate initial planning meetings between schools and employers. Use planning templates aligned to the equalex outcomes to structure co-design.
- Offer employers one simple route in to work with schools, such as a single online form.
- Build equalex into existing programmes, such as ILR peer-to-peer reviews and caseload work.
- When commissioning providers, allow time to upskill them early and agree consistent reporting. One Hub (West Yorkshire) reflected that its curriculum support to schools could have been more intensive if it had worked with fewer schools.

Schools and trusts

- Involve senior leaders early and invite them to see activity first-hand. Some pilots made SLT attendance at Communities of Practice, or ILR completion, a condition of taking part.
- Hold early meetings with Principals and Directors of Learning to build commitment at trust level.
- Map existing provision to the equalex outcomes and Gatsby Benchmark 6, to see strengths and gaps. The CEC's Curriculum Audit Tool supports this.
- For learners who face barriers, begin employer engagement in school to build readiness. An Introduce & Inspire session with an employer should ideally precede a workplace visit and then a placement (not start with a placement which they might not be ready for).
- Invest time upfront in reusable resources, such as project briefs, lesson plans and handouts. Share responsibility for employer engagement with subject leads.

Employers

- Co-design with the school, using the equalex outcomes as a shared reference.
- Offer another opportunity to engage if they cannot host under-16s on site, such as an in-school session, a curriculum project or a virtual encounter.
- Keep input proportionate. In one pilot, employers provided a project brief and a live virtual introduction. Teachers then ran six weeks of curriculum work from this.
- Prepare for the learners they will meet. A short online session on trauma-informed practice left employers better prepared to work with learners in AP settings. Find out how employers can get involved with Aspiring Pathways.
- Build ongoing relationships and plan ahead for the next year while activity is live.

Where next?

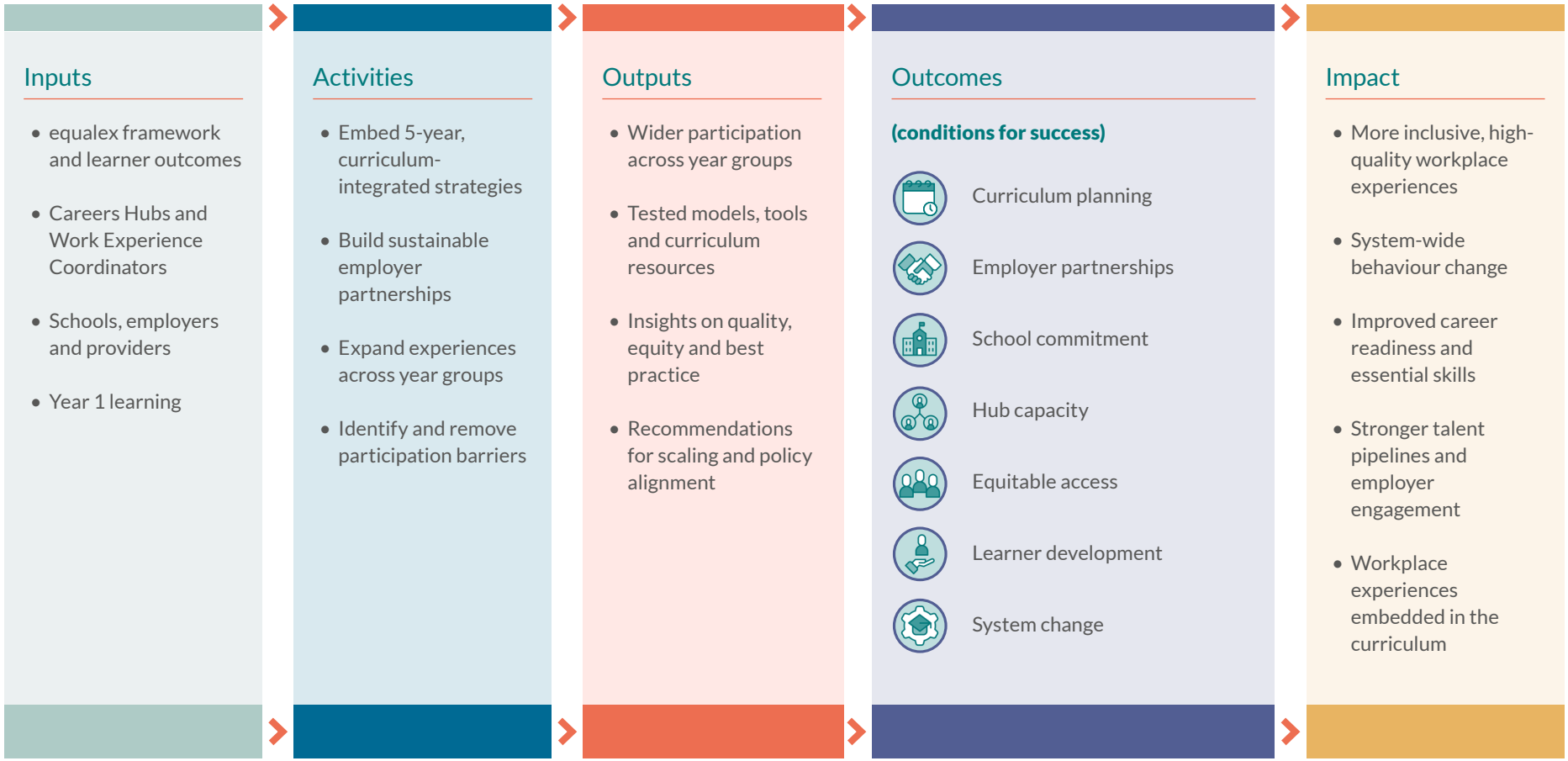
Year 2 of piloting has shown how equalex can support schools, employers and Careers Hubs to deliver modern work experience equitably and reach all learners. With updated statutory guidance now in place and the National Mission on Work Experience under way and strong support for work experience from the Milburn report, there is growing momentum and shared commitment across the system to make high-quality, equitable work experience a reality for all learners.

The CEC will continue to support this through:

- The Aspiring Pathways programme: Backed by £8.5 million of Department for Education funding, the programme will enable every state-funded AP setting in England to offer meaningful work experience. Delivery is through the Careers Hub network. The phased approach tested in the West of England pilot offers early learning for this work.
- **National tools and resources:** The CEC is supporting roll-out through practical resources. These include the equalex learning outcomes and objectives framework, the Curriculum Audit Tool, the Careers Impact System and the Let's make it work campaign.
- **Measurement:** Compass+ will continue to track provision and learner access in line with the work experience guarantee.
- **Careers Hub brokerage:** Careers Hubs will continue to broker workplace experience between schools and employers. Employers can contact their local Careers Hub to find out how to offer placements.
- **Longer-term evidence:** Supported by the JPMorganChase Future Ready Fund, equalex will reach over 3,700 young people in 250 schools across 10 Careers Hubs. The CEC will use this to extend the evidence base on learner progression and career readiness.



Appendix A: national logic model



THE CAREERS & ENTERPRISE COMPANY

Our Impact **Our Evidence**