Year 2 equalex pilots: Insight report

A report to the Careers & Enterprise Company

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Executive summary

Delivered through six Careers Hubs within Mayoral Strategic Authorities and a Combined County Authority, the Year 2 equalex pilot aimed to test scalable delivery models through deepened curriculum integration and embedding of the framework and development of flexible, inclusive approaches to work experience delivery and school-employer collaboration.

Progress made

Employer partnerships: Across all pilots, new approaches to employer partnerships were trialled which supported progress towards sustainable and diverse employer engagement. Bringing schools and employers together through Communities of Practice or other forums was a key enabler of relationship building. Co-design, flexible approaches and encouraging longer-term partnerships also helped to raise quality and, in some cases, reduce burden.

System change: The extent to which pilots facilitated system-wide change varied, ranging from those where pilot activity helped to lay the foundation for embedding future change to others where shifts in behaviour or more extensive changes to systems, processes and culture were evident. Schools, employers and Hubs spoke of continuing the approaches trialled during the pilot into the next academic year and beyond, indicating sustained change.

Hub capacity: Where the Careers Hub role as strategic facilitator to develop partnerships, share practice and modernise systems has been strengthened the most, there have been two main drivers of this change: focussing on brokerage and support over delivery ('brokers rather than doers') and embedding equalex and modern work experience within Careers Hub structures and processes.

Senior leadership team (SLT) commitment: The strongest commitment tended to be associated with direct and meaningful SLT involvement in pilot activities. Approaches that have helped drive greater SLT commitment and ownership of change have included early engagement, emphasising the scope of ambition and linking to wider policy drivers, and SLT seeing first-hand the impact of high-quality experiences, particularly on disadvantaged learners.

Curriculum planning: Across all pilots, the equalex framework has supported schools and employers to understand work experience as part of a learner's wider education journey and skills development - an important first step towards developing whole school approaches to curriculum-integrated work experience. Further progress, including schools using curriculum mapping to inform planning and moving towards distributed responsibility for employer engagement, tended to be evident where strong existing careers provision was already in place.

Equitable access: Effective models for supporting disadvantaged learners, such as those excluded from mainstream school and/or with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), to access meaningful work experience have been developed. More widely, practice has shifted towards greater identification and monitoring of disadvantaged learners' participation in work experience activities.

Learner development: Feedback and data from across the pilots indicates that equalex aligned activities have improved learners' career readiness. Evidence of learner progression along the equalex phases was more limited, due to the pilot delivery period only encompassing one year, with the examples that did emerge tending to come from SEND and alternative provision (AP) settings.

Key insights from Year 2 pilots

The pilots generated considerable learning around what successful models for curriculum-integrated, meaningful work experience and Careers Hub support look like, and where success is still emerging.

- **In-person, place-based forums that bring schools and employers together**, **serve to strengthen collaboration and promote shared understanding.** Key to the success of these meetings is fostering passion, momentum and connection around a shared aim of changing young people's lives, with emphasis on alignment with regional and national policy also helpful, particularly for securing senior leader buy in.
- **Dedicated Hub support is most effective when Hubs act as brokers rather than doers, with equalex integrated into systems and processes.** A key element of this is the convening of schools and employers mentioned above, whilst also including the facilitation of initial meetings between schools and employers to support co-design, providing dedicated training and continuous professional development (CPD) around the equalex framework, and the sharing of relevant tools and resources.
- **There was a shift in thinking away from traditional placement models and towards flexible, progressive approaches.** This removed some of the barriers associated with the traditional model, facilitating greater employer engagement and enabling schools to deliver a wider range of work experience activities, particularly at Key Stage 3.
- **School and employer co-design, informed by the equalex framework, strengthened the quality of experiences, curriculum integration and learner development.** Although this may require a greater upfront investment in time, it has the potential to streamline activity in the future and improve employer confidence, motivation and sustainable engagement.
- **The phased model worked particularly well for learners who face barriers to accessing meaningful work experience.** Having an initial, in-school session with an employer helped learners feel more comfortable engaging with a workplace visit or placement, whilst also enabling clear progression through the equalex phases.
- **Encouraging sustained engagement, rather than one-off delivery, strengthened employer motivation**. Employers saw developing ongoing relationships with schools as an opportunity to have increased and more meaningful impact on young people.
- **Employer-linked curriculum learning projects can be low burden for the employer**. Once resources and a structured plan for employer involvement are developed, projects can be repeated or replicated in a low-burden way for both the school and the employer. They can also be delivered at scale, for example across a whole year group or Trust. A key enabler of such projects is the school having capacity to invest upfront time in developing

curriculum resources, following an initial co-design process (and in some cases, teacher encounter) with the employer.

On this last point, whilst promising models for curriculum-integrated work experience activities have been developed, progress towards whole-school approaches to curriculum integration is still emerging.

1. Introduction

Background and context

The Government's modern work experience ambition is for all young people to access a wide range of high-quality experiences, aligned to their interests and local skills needs, that broaden their aspirations beyond immediate friends and family.

From September 2026, all schools should be reforming their work experience programmes to provide a minimum of two weeks' worth of work experience by Year 11, made up of:

- At least one week of work experience activities in Years 7–9 (Key Stage 3)
- At least one week of placements in Years 10–11 (Key Stage 4)

This ambition will ensure access for all young people by enabling flexibility for schools, learners, and employers to design experiences that meet local and individual needs in line with the updated statutory guidance. The intention is to raise quality and drive equity for young people in their work experience, particularly those who face disadvantage. Supporting the Government's intention are updated Gatsby Benchmarks of Good Careers Guidance, with **Benchmark 6** including the expectation of multiple, meaningful and progressive work experiences.

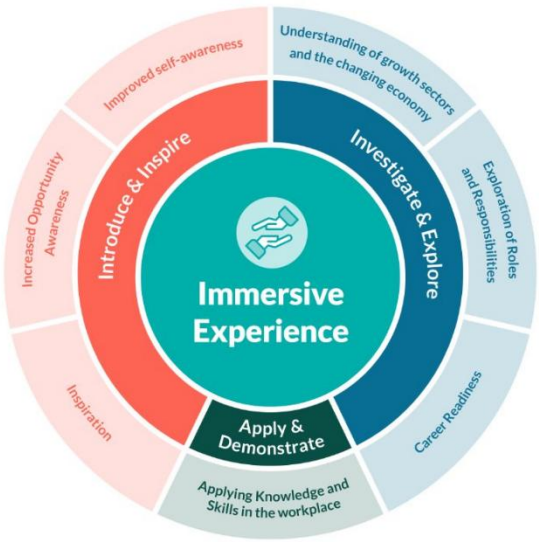
Gatsby Benchmark 6: Experiences of workplaces

Every learner should have first-hand experiences of workplaces to help their exploration of career opportunities and expand their networks. **For schools:** by the age of 16, every pupil should have had meaningful experiences of workplaces

Work experience plays a central role in preparing learners for the world of work, helping them make informed choices and build the knowledge, skills and behaviours that underpin career readiness and employability. Modern work experience will help young people to make informed choices and improve career readiness and employability by offering multiple, variable and targeted experiences throughout their education journey. To support this, The Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC) developed equalex, a framework of progressive learning outcomes supported by learner-level objectives. equalex is designed as a skills development tool, providing a consistent structure for schools, specialist settings, employers and delivery providers to shape their careers provision around. It ensures work experiences are purposeful, high-quality and measurable.

equalex provides a solution for the Government's guarantee of two weeks' worth of work experience for every young person and reflects an ambition to build a modern, equitable system of work experience that goes further than simply one-off placements. It is rooted in progressive and meaningful experiences, aligned with Gatsby Benchmark 6, and aims to ensure every young person, regardless of background, can explore a range of industries, build confidence, and develop skills valued by employers.

The equalex framework enables high-quality, targeted and multiple work experiences throughout secondary education. It drives equity and enables a progressive approach tailored to individual needs. Young people are supported to gain the skills, knowledge, and behaviours they require to make informed decisions to take their best next steps. The **equalex framework** defines learning outcomes and objectives across three phases of activity to facilitate a programme of skills development through the lens of **modern work experience.**



About the equalex pilots

Delivered through Careers Hubs based in Mayoral Strategic Authorities and a Combined County Authority, and supported by national CEC structures, the pilots tested the equalex framework in ways that aligned with regional strategic priorities, needs and contexts.

- **Year 1 pilots (2024/25)**. The equalex framework was piloted within four combined authority areas and across five multi-academy trusts (MATs). The work with Careers Hubs and employers was funded through a variation agreement from Department for Education (DfE) and the work with MATs took place within a national community of improvement.
- **Year 2 pilots (2025/26)**. Building on learning from Year 1, including identified conditions for success (see Appendix A), Year 2 aimed to test scalable equalex delivery models through: deepened curriculum integration and embedding of the framework, helping institutions prepare for updated DfE work experience guidance, development of flexible, inclusive approaches to work experience delivery and school-employer collaboration, including equitable approaches to learners receiving skills-focused experiences tied to local growth sectors. Delivered through six Careers Hubs, including two new Hubs not involved in Year 1, the Year 2 pilot was supported by national Communities of Practice facilitated by the CEC bringing together all pilot teams.

Learning insights approach

Over the period from February 2025 to July 2026, York Consulting worked with the CEC and the pilots as a learning insights partner. The Work Experience Insights: Year 1 equalex pilots report set out the early evidence. In year 2, the learning insights approach involved:

- Early meetings and support for pilot logic model refinement.
- Refinement of the national logic model (Appendix A), drawing on pilot logic models, to focus on seven conditions for success.
- Development of a framework for gathering work experience insights (see Appendix A).
- Termly contact with pilot teams, linked to local Communities of Practice and/or progress meetings.
- Attendance at termly national Communities of Practice sessions.
- Fieldwork in pilot areas, including attending work experience delivery, interviews with Careers Hub staff, Careers Leaders and employers.
- Review and analysis of additional evidence, including pilot journey trackers, case studies and (where collected), surveys and other stakeholder feedback.

Conditions for Success

- Employer partnerships
- System change
- Hub capacity
- SLT commitment
- Curriculum planning
- Equitable access
- Learner development

2. Year 2 delivery

163 Schools

12 Providers

221 Employers

13,524 Young People

West of England Combined Authority (WECA)

Developing approaches to delivering equalex aligned work experience for learners at **Alternative Provision (AP).**

6	schools
9	employers
19	activities
114	young people

Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA)

Embedding learning from Year 1 and trialling new approaches to delivering 50 hours of equalex aligned work experience, within the MBacc commitment, **for targeted cohorts** in each year group, using deprivation, SEND, EAL and NEET indicators alongside readiness measures.

1	provider
55	schools
49	employers
59	activities
1,432	young people

West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA)

Commissioning external delivery providers to support schools and employers with the delivery of equalex aligned work experience.

4	providers
20	schools
54	employers
44	activities
1,654	young people

West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA)

Delivered by Dudley Academies Trust

Testing models of **curriculum-integrated work experience** activities and flexible approaches to Year 10 work experience placements.

4	schools
25	employers
67	activities
3,758	young people

Liverpool City Region (LCR)

Embedding the equalex approach through strengthening and expanding employer-school partnerships, **working with school leaders** and developing system advocates.

1	provider
72	schools
65	employers
201	activities
4,200	young people

Devon, Plymouth and Torbay (DPT)

Developing approaches to curriculum-integrated, equalex aligned work experience activities for Key Stage 3 students, with a focus **on rural and coastal schools.**

6	providers
6	schools
19	employers
36	activities
2,366	young people

3. Progress towards the Conditions for Success

Employer partnerships: Sustainable and diverse employer engagement, with streamlined models that reduce burden and raise quality

Across the pilots, new approaches to employer partnerships were trialled which supported progress towards sustainable and diverse employer engagement.

These approaches tended to be tailored to local needs, dependent on Careers Hub priorities and economic context. For example, some facilitated networks of employers based around particular **sectors or geographical areas**, such as the LCR Game Changers network of games design companies or their localised Opportunity Forums, which provided a place-based model for collaboration between schools and employers. Targeted employer clusters and employer-led workstreams were also used in GMCA to support local embedding of partnerships, alongside the development of a centralised database to streamline brokerage between employers and schools (see case study below for further detail).

In DPT, the Careers Hub led the development of partnerships with larger employers while encouraging and supporting schools to make **independent connections with local small and medium-size enterprises (SME)**, including through Careers Hub-developed tools such as their Employer Engagement Strategy template. The WECA Careers Hub used its existing network to find employers interested in working with AP settings, whilst WYCA commissioned providers to broker relationships between schools and employers instead of the Careers Hub playing this role directly. In WMCA, whilst the MAT had strong existing partnerships with employers, the Careers Hub supported additional strategic connections with larger employers, such as the NHS.

Bringing schools and employers together, through in-person Communities of Practice or other forums, is a key enabler of sustainable employer partnerships. Most pilots involved either termly, in-person Communities of Practice or another form of meeting that brought schools and employers together. These meetings facilitated connections, built shared understanding and encouraged collaboration by getting schools and employers in the room together around the common purpose of delivering meaningful, outcomes-focussed work experience.

> *"They're very different worlds and they speak a different language, so getting them in a room together at the start helps to bridge those gaps." (Careers Hub Lead)*

A key ingredient of these meetings was fostering passion, ambition and emotional connection. Sessions were consistently framed around the overarching goal of changing young people's lives, which created a sense of shared purpose that helped sustain motivation in the face of challenges and encouraged people to remain engaged. This energy appears to be a crucial component for developing system advocates for equalex and modern work experience.

> *"I've really valued being part of the equalex project and working alongside such incredible individuals who share a genuine passion for equality of opportunity and ensuring no one is left behind. The energy and commitment in the room on meeting*

days has really stood out, and it's been inspiring to be part of those conversations." (Employer)

Key aspects of pilot activity have helped to raise the quality of employer engagement and, in some instances, reduce burden:

- **Co-design informed by the equalex outcomes.** The pilots helped develop partnerships that moved beyond standard employer offers and school requests towards genuinely collaborative development of work experiences that met the needs of both parties and were aligned with the equalex outcomes. Across the case studies detailed in this report, there are varied examples of meaningful co-design that raised the quality of experiences. For example, the WECA pilot supported employers and AP settings to co-design progressive experiences tailored to the needs of AP learners. This improved learner engagement and outcomes while also reducing burden by helping employers feel more prepared.
- **Moving towards flexible approaches to work experience** has broadened thinking about how employers and schools can work together to support learners, driving renewed motivation and engagement from employers. In many areas, thinking has evidently shifted away from the traditional work experience placement model towards activities and experiences that are better aligned with the capacity and needs of employers and schools. This increased flexibility has helped to remove barriers that often result in schools and employers saying they can't offer work experience.

  "We can't offer work placements to under 16s and even over 16s have to be office based [as opposed to construction-site based], so it was a great opportunity for us to offer work experience in an alternative format." (Employer)

- **Development of long-term partnerships as opposed to delivering one-off experiences.** In several cases, pilots raised the quality of experiences by encouraging and facilitating sustained engagement between schools and employers, moving away from the delivery of ad hoc or one-off activities. For example, partnerships facilitated by LCR between several schools and local hotels paved the way for multiple experiences integrated within curriculum subjects ranging from business studies to food technology and PE, with planning for the next academic year already underway. While an ongoing relationship inherently requires more commitment than delivering a one-off activity, sustained relationships can promote shared understanding that streamlines delivery over time. For example, in LCR, an employer and school were able to organise a work experience activity through a quick phone call because their initial investment of time into the partnership had created a clearer understanding of what both parties needed, making future planning more efficient.

Case study: Employer partnerships - Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA)

GMCA's equalex pilot tested how employer partnerships could be strengthened to reduce burden for schools and employers while raising the quality of workplace experiences for young people. Pilot activity aligned to the equalex framework, the Manchester Baccalaureate (MBacc) and the combined authority's seven growth sector gateways, ensuring that employer engagement reflected both learner needs and future workforce priorities through a sector-based lens. Activity brought together 55 schools with 49 employers (including Cornerstone Employers and SMEs/supply chain networks). Engagement with schools and employers through local authority (LA) cluster groups ensured the approach was also place-based.

Successes and impact

A more coordinated and scalable employer engagement model has emerged, built around existing relationships and clearer routes for employers to participate.

A range of activities raised employer awareness of work experience and equalex including increased Cornerstone Employer dialogue. In particular, bi-weekly webinars, advertised on LinkedIn and led by the Careers Hub, helped model and shape what work experience should look like to SMEs. This has now become a part of business as usual.

An employer Expression of Interest process through the Greater Manchester Pledge simplified how employers engaged, using an online Microsoft Form. This created a consistent access point into dialogue with schools, regardless of sector or size, and reduced the duplication often associated with repeated brokerage. The Careers Hub staff and LA cluster groups then helped schools develop the employer offer into meaningful work experience activity.

Cornerstone Employers played an increasingly strategic role. Rather than only delivering individual activities, they helped co-design solutions to common system challenges through five employer-led workstreams focused on digital inclusion, teacher encounters and CPD, SEND and Alternative Provision, cross-sector engagement and membership and increasing SME and supply chain participation. This shifted employer engagement from transactional delivery towards shared ownership of the work experience system.

- **The GMCA use of the online mechanism to capture employer offers helped drive up the scale and quality of engagement.** This was supported by a range of in person contact with employers, in groups and individually, to encourage use of the online mechanism and to refine and develop the employers' offers to the needs of specific schools. Employers became more able to engage through a clear, low-burden route, supported by consistent equalex messaging and the online mechanism. This reduced uncertainty about how to take part and enabled employers to contribute in ways aligned to their capacity and workforce priorities, creating a starting point for meaningful work experience activities.
- **Schools benefitted from more effective employer engagement.** Careers Hub delivery of Careers Leader CPD, the MBacc Educator Toolkit and Meet Your Future activities helped schools focus on what they needed from employers.

- **The Careers Hub bolstered the system through LA engagement to develop place-based brokerage models.** There is now clear understanding in the system of the importance of a progressive and inclusive approaches the work experience underpinned by equalex. This strengthened reach into local employer networks, helped ensure activity addressed sector priorities and the range of young people.
- **The Careers Hub developed a more resilient delivery model by embedding meaningful work experience** into Partnership and Quality Lead[1] (PQL) caseloads, supporting better strategic planning. When project capacity was reassigned due to organisational need, this distributed model helped maintain momentum and demonstrated the value of embedding delivery within existing systems.

The equalex framework supported a stronger focus on quality moving towards planned experiences with clearer outcomes, preparation and reflection. Meet Your Future virtual activities (as distinct from the overarching brand of Meet Your Future which is taking a strategic refocus) provided young people with scalable employer encounters to prepare them for workplace experiences or reinforce learning afterwards. Together with the Beeline Discovery Quiz, these tools created a more connected journey from career exploration to curriculum-linked learning and direct experiences of the workplace.

"Employers have been central to delivery, co-designing meaningful experiences of the workplace with schools. By encouraging employers to sustain relationships beyond initial delivery, partnerships became more sustainable and reduced reliance on repeated brokerage." (Careers Hub Modern Work Experience Team)

What is needed for scaling streamlined employer engagement

- **Maintain a single, simple route for employer participation.** The GM Pledge Expression of Interest process acted as a consistent mechanism to start the employer engagement process. Quantity of employer opportunities remains as a hub target, resulting in broader thinking around commissioning a service to enhance place based and sectoral based approaches to effective employer engagement.
- **Strengthen place-based brokerage.** Once Careers Hub contact has been established with LAs, then LAs are well placed to connect employers, schools and local priorities, particularly where they can open up SME networks and tailor activity to borough-level economic strengths.
- **Maintain and build on low-burden CPD and practical resources.** Careers Leader CPD, teacher encounters, industry webinars and the MBacc Educator Toolkit have helped, based on employer needs and curriculum constraints and opportunities.
- **Share learning into existing structures to influence a system at scale**. Careers Hub distributed responsibilities and ownership provide accountability, promoting early experiences (using case studies), developing strategic cluster meeting dialogue, newsletters and internal reporting, should be used to share what works, avoid reinvention and improve consistency as delivery scales.

System change: Evidence of scalable delivery approaches, embedded through local coordination

The extent to which pilots facilitated system wide change varied, ranging from those where pilot activity helped to lay the foundation for embedding future change to where shifts in behaviour or more extensive changes to systems, processes and culture were evident. (For the latter, see the LCR case study below for further detail).

Across all pilots, there was evidence of an **emerging shift in practice towards a co-designed, outcomes-focused approach to work experience.** In some areas, this shift in practice was evident among a small number of schools and employers, while in others there was stronger evidence of wider culture change. For example, at the final LCR Community of Practice, it was clear that co-design of experiences linked to equalex outcomes had become the default approach, with evidence of emerging system advocates as schools and employers spoke of sharing this message with others not involved in the pilot.

> *"The equalex pilot has influenced strategic planning and it has moved from just being a project to being a part of Trust wide careers planning. There has been a shift in mindset regarding careers activities, the focus now clearly sits with the learners and what they will develop, achieve or learn as part of the process." (MAT Leader)*

In addition to this move towards a co-designed and outcomes-focused approach, there was evidence of emerging shifts towards different models of work experience delivery, including:

- **Multiple-experience model,** rather than single-experiences, including the two-stage approach for engaging those who may face barriers to accessing meaningful experiences, detailed further in the WECA equitable access case study.
- **A flexible model of curriculum-integrated work experience**, involving co-design of a project-based curriculum module or series of lessons delivered by teachers. Employer input varied (and in the future could be tailored based on employer capacity), ranging from providing a project brief and initial introduction (either virtually or in-person), to leading parts of lessons or culminating in a workplace visit.
- **Distributed responsibility and shared ownership for employer engagement to support curriculum integration and scalability**. This was an emerging change in some pilot schools, with employer engagement starting to be delegated to curriculum leads or other staff.

Whether laying the foundations for changing practice or facilitating more wholesale system change, key elements of local coordination that have helped to embed changes included:

- **Dedicated Careers Hub support and communication,** including facilitated meetings to support relationship building and planning, targeted engagement with senior leadership team (SLT) and governors, and delivering CPD and training on the equalex framework, modern work experience and curriculum integration.
- **Sharing and supporting the use of tools and resources**, both CEC and Careers Hub developed. For example, equalex planning documents and templates to support co-design,

[1] Equivalent of Enterprise Co-ordinators in other Careers Hubs

curriculum mapping tools to help schools identify strengths and gaps, Internal Leadership Review (ILR) and peer-to-peer reviews to provide structured opportunities for reflection on prioritisation and impact, and facilitating the use of Future Skills Questionnaire (FSQ) to inform planning.

- **Bringing schools and employers together:** Either through Communities of Practice, hyper-localised forums, or other formats, these meetings supported relationship building and collaboration, generated enthusiasm and momentum, and helped to develop a shared vision grounded in the equalex framework.
- **Local delivery providers embedding the equalex framework**, with training and practice sharing around equalex with schools and employers planned beyond the pilot period.
- **Alignment to local priorities:** For example, in GMCA, equalex was embedded within the Manchester Baccalaureate (MBacc) approach, whilst LCR linked employer engagement to local growth sectors through employer cluster groups. Others focussed on addressing specific local challenges, such as the barriers to delivering work experience faced by rural and coastal schools in DPT. This situated the pilot activity within the relevant regional context, supporting stakeholder buy in and engagement.

> *"The Careers Hub and the equalex pilot have played a significant role in supporting the development of our workplace experiences this year. Through the pilot, we have had access to practical resources, guidance and opportunities to reflect on our current provision, enabling us to identify strengths as well as areas for further development. Support from the Careers Hub has provided valuable opportunities to collaborate with other schools, share good practice, and learn from successful approaches across the region. Training sessions, network meetings and regular contact with our Careers Hub team have helped us embed improvements into our careers programme and align our work with the Gatsby Benchmarks and statutory guidance." (Careers Leader)*

Where there was the strongest evidence of shifting culture and system change, equalex was a common and consistent thread across all pilot activity, including Communities of Practice, one-to-one support for schools and employers, and training. In these areas, it was clear at Communities of Practice that stakeholders were speaking 'equalex language', saw the value of outcomes-focused, curriculum linked work experience and co-design, and were committed to sustained employer engagement rather than one-off delivery.

Case study: System change - Liverpool City Region (LCR)

The structures and support delivered through the LCR equalex pilot have played a key role in supporting system-level change, with the Careers Hub acting as both a broker and convenor to strengthen partnerships and facilitate the sharing of infrastructure, tools and effective practice. The Careers Hub has developed capacity and network building across the region, enabling knowledge exchange and system learning through Communities of Practice (embedding peer learning and shared accountability), localised Opportunity Forums (facilitating place-based collaboration between schools and employers), and development of expert schools and employers acting as equalex system leaders. Pilot activities helped schools and employers build the capacity and structures needed to deliver high-quality, sustainable work experience provision, introduced schools and employers to more streamlined processes, and established scalable equalex-aligned models.

Successes and impact

The Careers Hub-led coordination model helped to transform delivery from isolated activity to a coherent, locally owned system, driving embedded system change aligned with equalex principles.

The evidence of long-term sustainability of these activities is reflected in the shift to shared ownership across schools, employers and the Careers Hub. In particular, they have achieved the following:

- **Embedding the equalex framework within the curriculum and school strategy:** Schools have taken steps to ensure that work experiences and employer encounters are more closely linked to the curriculum, introducing interactive, hands-on learning and a more structured approach to planning experiences (e.g., one school developed Year 10 workplace experience guidance for employers and another incorporated direct engagement with industry professionals into interactive sessions).

  "Following our peer-to-peer review, we developed a clear action plan to further strengthen careers education across Years 7, 8 and 9. We have increased the range of career-related experiences available to students, ensuring earlier and more meaningful exposure to future pathways. We have introduced Career Clusters, enabling students to access more personalised careers experiences aligned to their interests, aspirations and strengths" (School Senior Leader)

- **Strengthening focus on equity and inclusion:** By using data and insights to monitor participation more closely and ensure that disadvantaged students, students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and other vulnerable groups are not excluded from valuable opportunities. Careers clusters also supported personalised career experiences for students.

- **More streamlined processes for partners and employers:** The Knowledge Quarter Liverpool utilised the Careers Hub's established networks to reduce administrative burden and enable a focus on quality and accessibility of their programmes; Wirral Council used equalex-informed guidance from the Careers Hub to engage a wider range of service areas

to support work experience activity in a practical and sustainable way, widening the Council's offer to schools.

- **Stronger, more reciprocal employer partnerships:** New partnerships led to increased opportunities for school-employer engagement and greater understanding of education routes and local labour markets. Partnerships included co-design of the curriculum to integrate employers' expertise, for example, an eight-lesson curriculum module co-designed with JLR (Jaguar Land Rover) for Year 9 Design Technology students.
- **Scalable equalex-aligned models**, including curriculum-integrated co-design**,** an Employer Network model, providing opportunities for multiple employer encounters and not just single placements, and a Cluster model which brings together strategic employers within local growth sectors to develop coordinated outreach plans and offer meaningful workplace experiences to local students (clusters so far for gaming organisations and creative industries with plans to develop in advanced manufacturing, built environment and maritime and logistics).
- **A cultural shift towards continuous improvement and system learning:** Careers Leaders and senior leaders are working together to ensure work experience forms part of wider school improvement priorities, with use of Future Skills Questionnaire and Internal Leadership Review to support evidence led practice. They are encouraging improvement through the introduction of systems for monitoring, to respond to gaps in provision. Feedback mechanisms have also been included, to gain insight from students and employers on the success of work experience provision and support continuous improvement.

  "The Liverpool City Region Careers Hub has been instrumental in helping us think beyond compliance and towards genuine system change. The Opportunity Forums and equalex pilot have created valuable opportunities to collaborate with other schools, employers and strategic partners, allowing us to share effective practice and learn from different approaches across the region.

  The practical nature of the network has been particularly valuable. Rather than simply providing information, it has enabled schools to develop relationships, share resources, discuss barriers honestly and work collectively towards improving the quality and consistency of Modern Work Experience.

  For senior leaders, it has reinforced that successful implementation requires strategic leadership, cultural change and whole-school ownership rather than relying solely on the Careers Leader. It also strengthened my own understanding of how senior leaders can remove barriers, align priorities and create the conditions for long-term, sustainable change." (Assistant Headteacher)

What is needed for scaling system change

The Careers Hub Capacity case study in the following section provides more detail about the elements of LCR's approach that facilitated system change, including what is needed for scaling impact.

Careers Hub Capacity: Enhanced hub role as strategic facilitators, with dedicated support to develop partnerships, share practice and modernise systems

Key insights related to Careers Hub capacity overlap with points covered elsewhere in the report, particularly around enablers of system change and employer partnerships. Overall, where the Careers Hub's role as strategic facilitators to develop partnerships, share practice and modernise systems has been strengthened the most, there have been two main drivers of this change:

Focus on brokerage and support over delivery ('brokers' rather than 'doers'), helping schools and employers to build relationships, develop shared understanding of equalex and modern work experience, and work together more effectively. This included facilitating school and employer Communities of Practice, as well as providing dedicated support with co-design and planning.

For example, alongside the WECA Careers Hub convening schools and employers through Communities of Practice, the equalex lead provided support to APs and employers by facilitating planning meetings, helping them to understand the equalex framework and following up on actions. This enabled co-design of meaningful outcomes-focused experiences, with the intention that reliance on the Careers Hub reduces as confidence and capability grows.

In LCR, this was reflected in the Careers Hub-led tripartite model, which is outlined further in the case study below.

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

Embedding equalex and modern work experience within Careers Hub structures and processes, including ILR and peer-to-peer reviews and consistent messaging and support from Enterprise Coordinators and Careers Hub Officers. This reduced reliance on a standalone project model, therefore strengthening longer-term sustainability. For example, in DPT, the Enterprise Coordinator played a central role in sharing best practice between participating equalex schools and facilitating discussions around successful approaches, challenges and solutions, including a peer-to-peer review process focused on equalex.

> *"Delivery responsibilities were integrated into Partnership and Quality Leads (PQLs) [Enterprise Coordinator] existing caseloads, embedding modern work experience within core roles rather than creating a separate workstream for modern work experience. This strengthened local ownership within our own team and created a more sustainable delivery model." (Careers Hub)*

Case study: Careers Hub capacity - Liverpool City Region (LCR)

The Year 1 equalex pilot coincided with a rebranding and relaunching of the Hub's Employer Network. The Hub 'stripped back' the group, initially focussing on developing quality approaches with around 70 of their most engaged employers. They subsequently built the Network back up to over 200 employers, with new membership options alongside a clarified support offer and expectations. This re-built Network provided the core underpinning for facilitating school-employer partnerships, operationalising the equalex framework and stimulating system change.

The Careers Hub's approach involved modern work experience and equalex framework criteria being embedded across all Hub activity, including the wider team, Employer Network and all programmes. The Hub was keen to ensure coherent delivery across all priority agendas (equalex, modern work experience, Employer Standards and Networks), meaning "nothing was discussed in isolation".

Successes and impact

There has been an evident **shift in the Hub's role, moving from 'doer' to 'broker'** through the development of a **tripartite delivery model** supporting clear and evolving roles for:

- the Careers Hub as system leader and coordinator of place-based training and partnerships
- schools as co-designers of curriculum-integrated delivery
- employers as strategic partners in curriculum design

Key elements of the Hub's approach to facilitating this tripartite delivery model include:

A structured and progressive approach to managing the employer engagement pipeline: The Hub's process for employer onboarding includes communication about the Hub support offer and an expectation for all employers to complete the Employer Standards. The latter provides an important baseline understanding of the employer's starting point and what they can offer, from which the Hub can tailor their support to help the employer progress and develop. The Hub also mapped the Standards to the equalex framework, which has further streamlined this process by providing an initial view of which equalex phases the employer can support upon joining the Network.

Sector-based employer networks: The Hub's cluster model brings together employers from local growth sectors to identify sector strengths and challenges, whilst also helping them to develop a coordinated outreach plan. Termly cluster meetings are facilitated by Careers and Skills Officers (CSO), with the approach supporting dissemination and adoption of the equalex framework within local priority sectors. There are also early signs that the model is supporting sector-based scalability. For example, Cornerstone Employer Keepmoat has developed an equalex aligned employer offer framework, to support co-design of work experiences within the construction sector.

Communities of Practice and localised Opportunity Forums facilitated employer-school partnerships. Termly Communities of Practice brought schools and employers together to share learning and practice, including Hub training aimed at developing understanding of the equalex framework and other CEC tools such as OnTrack+. Localised Opportunity Forums within each borough, also termly, provided a place-based structure through which schools and employers could network, build relationships and explore opportunities for developing work experience.

Realignment of the CSO role for a greater focus on employer engagement: Hub CSOs now spend at least half of their time on employer engagement, with reduced focus on meeting Careers Leaders one-to-one. Instead, Opportunity Forums, Communities of Practice and training sessions are positioned as the Hub's core engagement with Careers Leaders, with CSOs encouraged to have targeted conversations with Careers Leaders at these events where needed. This shift has required rapid upskilling of staff, with training on effective employer engagement and relationship building.

A strategic approach to securing school senior-leader buy-in: School participation in the pilot was conditional on senior leadership engagement, including completion of the Internal Leadership Review (ILR). This helped ensure there was the necessary leverage to generate changes in practice, with the ILR process also providing (much like the Employer Standards) a useful baseline understanding of each school.

What is needed for scaling Careers Hub capacity

Establish effective place-based and sector-based structures, aligned to local need, to facilitate school-employer partnerships and peer-to-peer networking and practice sharing.

Embed an equalex informed approach to developing modern work experience across all Hub activity. Including Hub training and CPD, network meetings, and events bringing schools and employers together. Realignment of the CSO role and upskilling for a greater focus on employer engagement may be a key scaling factor in this.

Build on the experience and expertise of early adopters (schools and employers) to share learning and support broader system change, including generating a sense of 'FOMO' (fear of missing out) by communicating impact. LCR has recently developed a structured approach to developing system advocates, through establishing an advisory group of senior leaders from 11 schools, to inform the work of the Hub and promote engagement from other schools.

Continue to develop a more comprehensive and data-informed approach to tracking and evaluation, making greater use of systems like Compass+, Unifrog and OnTrack+ to help track experiences and participation, measure impact, and embed feedback approaches.

SLT commitment to ensure work experience is embedded in school strategy

SLT commitment was a crucial lever for embedding work experience in school strategy, with senior leaders having the required influence to drive strategic change. Across the pilots, the strongest commitment tended to come from direct and meaningful SLT involvement in pilot activities (for example, attending Communities of Practice), rather than SLT involvement through oversight and updates. This greater involvement often led to senior leaders taking increased ownership of relevant strategic decisions.

However, Careers Leaders with strong links to SLT were also able to drive strategic changes, even without extensive involvement of SLT in the pilot. For example, at one school in LCR there has been an evident culture shift amongst SLT and wider staff in terms of how careers and work experience is viewed, with embedding careers now a strategic priority. The school has rewritten their careers strategy to align with the equalex framework, including new work experience opportunities for Key Stage 3 and 4 students, invested in Unifrog to track work experience activities and prioritised embedding careers in the curriculum. This shift was partly driven by a passionate Careers Leader with strong links to SLT and relationships with other staff, and by a key member of SLT seeing first-hand the impact of high quality, outcomes-focused work experience on disadvantaged learners.

> *"The support provided through the Careers Hub 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)*

Securing MAT senior leader buy in also has the potential for considerable impact at scale. See the WMCA case study below for insight into how strong engagement and input from a MAT Director of Learning enabled a consistent, whole-year group approach to curriculum-integrated work experience across four schools in the Trust.

Approaches trialled by the pilots that have helped to drive greater SLT commitment and ownership of change included:

- **Involving SLT early in the project**, to ensure a shared understanding of aims and objectives from the outset. Some pilots achieved this by making SLT involvement, including attendance at Communities of Practice, a requirement for being part of the project. Others had initial meetings or communication with headteachers to secure commitment, with involvement in the pilot activities then delegated to the Careers Leader. LCR have expanded this principle through their structured onboarding process, which makes completing an ILR a condition for schools joining the Careers Hub.
- **Emphasising the scope of ambition**, embedding equalex-aligned curriculum-integrated work experience within the whole-school strategy – from the outset, to "broaden the coalition" of those involved. This included linking careers to wider school improvement work, highlighting alignment with regional strategy and national policy drivers such as curriculum reform, Ofsted and inclusion, and positioning career readiness as a core curriculum outcome.
- **SLT seeing first-hand the impact of high-quality experiences on learners**. This acted, in several cases, as a catalyst for greater SLT buy in to embedding work experience

within whole school strategy. This either happened by design, through SLT being invited to specific events with the intention of showcasing the pilot work and impact on learners, or by accident, through SLT members supervising work experience visits.

> *"High-quality experiences of workplaces organised by the Careers Hub acted as a real catalyst for staff buy-in, as teachers saw the benefits for students. It created a real buzz." (Careers Leader)*

Case study: SLT commitment – West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA)

The WMCA equalex pilot was delivered by Dudley Academies Trust, with WMCA Careers Hub providing strategic and advisory support. A key focus of the project was embedding careers-related learning directly into the curriculum across the Trust, rather than delivering it as a standalone activity. The aim was to challenge the perception among teachers and school senior leaders that careers education is an 'add-on', instead demonstrating how it can form an integral part of everyday teaching and learning. The project was driven strategically by senior Trust leaders, ensuring a clear vision and consistency across the academies.

Successes and impact

SLT commitment at the Trust level enabled the development and delivery (at scale) of curriculum-integrated work experience projects that were low-burden for the employers involved and strengthened buy-in for curriculum-integrated careers learning amongst school senior leaders and subject teachers.

The 6-week long projects, built around project briefs and materials provided by employers, were delivered by subject teachers to two-year groups across all four secondary schools in the Trust. For example, Balfour Beatty VINCI tasked Year 9 design and technology students with developing ideas for the sustainable development of a real piece of land owned by the company in the centre of Birmingham. Each project began with whole year group assemblies at each of the four schools, where the employer introduced the project through a live, virtual broadcast. The project culminated in a celebration event at Millenium Point, which saw selected teams from the four schools present their ideas to representatives from the two employers.

The pilot projects have resulted in the following key impacts:

- **A noticeable shift in mindset and practice amongst teachers.** At the start, there was some initial concerns from teaching staff about additional workload and interruption to their planned lessons throughout the year. However, seeing the success of the project has completely changed this view, with teachers commenting on how well the students engaged and thinking about how they can integrate similar approaches into their other lessons.

  > *"It's been brilliant, the children have really got involved and are committed to their ideas." (Teacher)*

- **Strengthened employer engagement, through a high-impact, low-burden model**. The employers valued the opportunity to contribute to curriculum learning, viewing this as more impactful than the ad-hoc, standalone activities they usually deliver. In addition, the project was not seen as particularly time intensive, with one employer suggesting it could have been improved by having more employer input, such as a preparatory session with teachers or a workplace visit.
- **An embedded and scalable model:** The projects are now embedded within the curriculum, with the Trust planning to deliver the projects annually for Year 8 and Year 9

learners across the four academies. Now they have an easily replicable model, they are also exploring a possible third company project to deliver for Year 7 learners. In addition, the Careers Hub plan to promote the pilot project as an example of a proven model of flexible, curriculum-integrated work experience, particularly amongst their Cornerstone Employers.

What is needed for scaling

- **Securing buy-in at all levels, early on, was critical to the success of the project.** An early meeting to convene Principals at the four Trust secondary schools helped to identify appropriate curriculum areas for delivery, whilst a separate meeting with Directors of Learning supported these staff to embed the projects within subject areas. This early engagement created a sense of shared ownership across staff and supported a consistent, whole-Trust approach.
- **Trust senior leaders having the capacity to invest time upfront** to develop teaching resources, including all handouts and additional materials required, and liaise with the employers. This helped to remove barriers and minimise burden for teaching staff by ensuring that teaching materials could be used 'off the shelf'. Now the resources are developed, they can be used again in future years, representing a low burden model once the initial time investment to produce the materials is made.
- **Ongoing communication between the Trust leader and school staff**, to review progress and refine delivery. This was particularly important for ensuring a consistent approach across the four academies and addressing challenges as they arose.
- **Sufficient lead-in time and clarity around what is needed from employers.** Despite the project representing a low-burden model for employers, working with the Trust to develop the teaching resources still required early communication and careful planning, to ensure a shared understanding of what the Trust needed, what the employer could offer, and the delivery timescales required.

Overall, initial momentum, direction and input from high up in the Trust, combined with wider staff buy-in generated through seeing the impact of successful delivery, meant that high-quality, sustainable work experience activities are now embedded within the curriculum across two year groups Trust-wide.

Curriculum planning: A scalable delivery model that supports curriculum-integrated planning, aligned with learning outcomes

It is evident that implementing a model of curriculum embedded work experience often requires schools to have a strong existing careers programme - this was where the greatest success was seen across the pilots in terms of curriculum integration.

In some schools, particularly those with strong existing careers provision and good SLT buy in, pilot activity supported a shift from 'bolt-on' careers activities to embedded, curriculum-integrated work experience activities. In a few cases, this was accompanied by a move towards more distributed ownership of careers across subjects. For example, in some DPT schools, systems and processes were developed to ensure curriculum departments take responsibility for delivering at least one curriculum-linked workplace experience activity during Key Stage 3. This can include achieving 'quick wins' by adapting existing school trips to ensure they meet meaningful workplace experience criteria. Whilst this more distributed model is key to scalability, it can be challenging to achieve, particularly when it involves delegating responsibility for employer communication to other members of staff who may need guidance and support to manage these relationships well.

> *"Modern Work Experience has become a genuine school improvement priority rather than simply a careers initiative. Senior leadership has become much more actively involved in shaping our strategy, ensuring careers is considered alongside curriculum development, teaching and learning, personal development and enrichment. This has increased visibility, accountability and organisational support across the school." (School Senior Leader)*

> *"The support of the Careers Hub, especially [the Careers Hub Officer], has been invaluable. We have had a successful Ofsted inspection this year and the input and training that was provided, as well as the equalex pilot, made a significant contribution to this success. As a school with dedicated careers sessions on the curriculum, the equalex framework has been extremely useful as a way of structuring our 12-week programme." (AP Careers Leader)*

The pilots have also supported many schools and employers to understand work experience as a part of a young person's wider education, as opposed to a one-off activity separate to their curriculum learning. This represents a positive first step towards developing whole school approaches to curriculum-integrated 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)*

In addition, tailored solutions have been developed where an approach to curriculum integration structured at the school level may not be the best option. In WECA, the dialogue between AP settings facilitated through the pilot supported the development of a bespoke tool – the Career Learner Passport - to plan individualised, career-linked curriculum for AP learners. As AP learning is often very tailored to individual need, it can be hard to consistently map the curriculum across the whole school. The passport enables AP settings to assess learners when

they first arrive against the equalex outcomes and then plan activities and monitor progress during their time at the AP, helping to ensure that careers activities (including work experience) are integrated within their overall individualised curriculum plan and aligned to the equalex learning outcomes. The passport can also be shared with their next school, to support their onward progression and development.

> *"We've always used pupil passports to communicate between schools about learning needs. But careers education is so vital to their development – it's their best pathway out of low income – so we needed something to capture that." (AP Careers Leader)*

Models and approaches used by Careers Hubs to support curriculum-integrated planning included:

- **School and employer co-design:** This was key to ensuring experiences were meaningfully linked to the curriculum, as it provides an opportunity to tailor an employer's offer to needs of the schools, as opposed to delivering an off the shelf activity. The WMCA case study provides an example of a low-burden, scalable model of curriculum-integrated work experience, whilst LCR and WECA used co-design planning templates that were aligned with equalex learning outcomes to streamline the co-design process.
- **equalex curriculum mapping tools:** Some pilots used equalex curriculum mapping tools to help schools identify strengths, gaps and opportunities to align existing activity with equalex learning outcomes. This mapping then informed work experience planning, with tailored support provided by the Careers Hub. As mentioned, schools with more established careers programmes typically got the most out of the mapping exercise, as they had a good foundation of careers activities and systems to draw on.
- **Practice sharing and collaboration via Communities of Practice and other forums, including CPD**: As with other Conditions for Success, Communities of Practice or other meetings bringing schools and employers together supported understanding about the value of curriculum-integrated models. Careers Hubs also used these forums and others to deliver CPD for school staff on approaches to curriculum integration and equalex, curriculum mapping and tracking tools such Unifrog and OnTrack+.
- **Aligning existing tools and resources to equalex:** GMCA aligned the MBacc Educator Toolkit with equalex and modern work experience, helping schools connect curriculum learning with real workplace experiences. Meet Your Future (virtual event series) was also realigned to support a progressive careers education journey, using virtual employer encounters to prepare young people for work experience activities or to reinforce learning following workplace activity. This helped schools move away from isolated interventions towards a more connected programme of careers education.

In addition to these models and approaches, learning from across the pilots - both those that have seen success and where progress on curriculum integration has been more limited - shows that embedding work experience into the curriculum requires strong SLT engagement (to provide the necessary strategic levers) and sufficient lead-in time.

Case study: Curriculum planning – Devon, Plymouth, Torbay (DPT)

DPT's equalex pilot included the development of a curriculum mapping tool built around the equalex learning outcomes, support for schools to identify strengths and gaps in current work experience provision, and delivery of some collaborative and co-designed work experience activities. Careers leaders received a full day of equalex training, and schools completed mapping exercises, received detailed reports and gap analyses and had access to tools designed to support strategic planning. A Community of Practice session in January 2026 enabled links between schools and employers, providing the opportunity to share ideas and identify the potential for delivering curriculum-linked work experiences. Insights and learning from these developments and activities were shared across schools and employers via conferences, facilitated discussions, peer-to-peer reviews and development of practical resources to support implementation and sustainability.

Successes and impact

A replicable curriculum mapping approach with the potential to support longer-term curriculum planning and development and delivery of integrated, scalable and sustainable work experience approaches.

The mapping tool enabled schools to understand the extent to which existing careers education and workplace experiences across Key Stage 3 aligned with equalex learning outcomes and Gatsby Benchmark 6 criteria. The reports identified what schools do well and gaps in their provision. Future Skills Questionnaire data was also used to help understand gaps in learners' knowledge and areas of interest, to inform planning of opportunities and experiences. Tailored Hub support identified opportunities to build capacity for delivering meaningful and curriculum-linked workplace experiences, including in some schools:

- **New systems to encourage cross-departmental engagement and sharing of practice**, one school sought subject departments to take responsibility for delivering at least one curriculum-linked workplace experience activity during Key Stage 3; another distributed the mapping tool across departments to identify further opportunities to embed work experience within subject areas.
- **Teacher encounters with employers** helped teachers build employer networks, identify new work experience opportunities and strengthen relevance and quality of employer engagement activities for students. For example, one school met with Army representatives to brief them on the school's work experience needs within the curriculum, creating tailored opportunities.
- **Co-designed curriculum** with a focus on career readiness and exploration of roles and responsibilities, one school and employer co-designed and delivered two industry-embedded lessons for Year 7 pupils. These provided real-life experience, understanding and practical application of maths in a working environment (traffic management). The lesson plans and tools included theory and practical elements and provided teachers with replicable materials to use and/or adapt for future similar or new groups of learners.
- **Innovative, low-burden experiences were developed building on the school as an employer**. One school's catering team involved Year 7 students in a bread baking project and another developed and supported a student interview panel who contributed to new

staff recruitment processes. These activities across schools provided students with opportunities to interact confidently with adults, understand professional settings and recruitment practices, apply communication and evaluation skills, and develop decision-making skills.

What is needed for scaling curriculum development

- **Mapping existing experiences in the curriculum** to equalex learning outcomes and Gatsby Benchmark 6 criteria to understand what is already delivered and gaps in provision.
- **Building capacity for career leaders and teachers:** Embedding work experience within the curriculum requires time and resource. The commitment and role of the senior leadership team in supporting Career Leaders to work closely with subject leads and recognise this within school resource planning will be critical to sustaining and expanding curriculum-integrated approaches.
- **Providing practical guidance for schools:** The employer engagement strategy guidance, developed by the Careers Hub, will support schools in the future to plan, coordinate and embed employer engagement more strategically within curriculum delivery.
- Continuing to incorporate work experience opportunities into **regular review and curriculum planning** as well as encouraging subject leads to use the tools and guidance provided.
- **Sustaining and scaling opportunities**, including using replicable template approaches (e.g., co-designed lessons) and developing curriculum-integrated approaches across subjects.
- **Ongoing opportunities to bring employers and schools** together (e.g. through communities of practice) and **share practice** across schools, employers, Careers Leaders and teachers (case studies, peer-to-peer review, conferences/events).

> *"The mapping tool was really useful as a framework to think about the objectives and learning outcomes for existing and potentially new work experience activities" (Careers Leader)*

> *"I have filtered the framework down to subject leads and encouraged them to use it to consider where work experience could add to curriculum intent." (Careers Leader)*

> *"This co-designed lesson model should be ready to go elsewhere – the lesson plans and materials are all shareable, and we have donated the [traffic] cones for future use within this school. We have also discussed future development/design of new experiences as part of GCSE lessons (e.g. for physics stopping distances)." (Employer)*

Equitable access: Barriers to participation removed, enabling disadvantaged learners to access meaningful experiences

For some pilots, identifying and removing barriers to participation for disadvantaged learners was one of several aims that Careers Hub activity sought to address. In these areas, supporting disadvantaged learners to access meaningful experiences tended to involve broadening the scale of work experience opportunities (for example, supporting schools to deliver curriculum-integrated work experience opportunities to a whole year group as opposed to a small group), and/or increased identification and monitoring of disadvantaged learners' participation in work experience activities, to ensure these learners were included in the existing offer.

Identification of disadvantaged learners often used existing systems and data, using a range of indicators including SEND, Children Looked After (CLA), Pupil Premium (PP), Free School Meals (FSM) and Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) status, alongside other risk of not in education, employment or training (NEET) indicators such as low attendance.

In many areas, pilot activity also included supporting employers to develop more inclusive approaches to delivering work experience and their wider careers offer.

> *[When asked about changes as a result of the pilot] "Moved from standalone interventions to a more strategic, embedded and inclusive approach. Through working with other employers, supply chains and the Careers Hub, we developed a comprehensive careers offer that can be tailored to the needs of different educational settings, including mainstream, SEN and AP. Activities are designed to be flexible, accessible and responsive to needs of individual schools and learners. It includes a blend of workplace visits, industry insight sessions, practical activities, employee engagement and curriculum linked experiences. Students have been able to develop understanding of the world of work, while building confidence, aspiration and employability skills." (Employer)*

For a couple of pilots, developing targeted approaches to identifying and removing barriers to participation for disadvantaged learners was a primary aim. For example, the WECA pilot used early discussions with AP leaders, including a pre-project planning meeting in Summer 2025, to identify the barriers to participation that AP learners faced. As highlighted in the case study below, this early dialogue was key to developing the phased model that subsequently proved very successful in supporting AP learners to access meaningful work experience.

> *"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)*

The GMCA pilot focused on developing approaches to work experience for a targeted group of learners at each of the 55 participating schools, with successful new models trialled. For example, one school's Enterprise Adviser supported a local restaurant to make adaptations and adjustments to their 8-week hospitality work experience programme to meet the needs of SEND learners.

Case study: Equitable access - West of England Combined Authority (WECA)

WECA's equalex pilot tested approaches to delivering meaningful work experience for learners at Alternative Provision (AP) settings. Pilot activity aimed to bring employers and APs together in a structured and supportive way, drawing on the equalex framework to help them rethink how work experience could be planned and delivered. Overall, nine employers worked with six AP settings to co-design and deliver work experience activities aligned to the equalex outcomes.

Successes and impact

A replicable and flexible delivery model, following a phased approach, was developed to support AP learners to access meaningful work experience.

Through early dialogue with AP staff, a lack of confidence and trust was identified as a key barrier to AP learners accessing work experience. To address this, a phased model was designed, whereby a group of learners would have an initial Introduce and Inspire session with an employer – at their AP setting – followed by a visit to the workplace. Some employers were also able to offer a short work experience placement for smaller numbers of students showing interest in the career pathway after the workplace visit. Co-design was a key element of the process, with AP and employers working to ensure that activities and experiences were tailored to learners' needs and aligned with the equalex outcomes.

The model has shifted employer and AP practice towards delivering more accessible and meaningful experiences, which has positively impacted learners' engagement and career readiness:

- **Employers became more confident in working with AP learners**, with the phased model broadening their thinking about what activities and experiences they could offer. There was clear motivation to continue working with AP, with employers better able to adapt their offer to ensure experiences are engaging, accessible and impactful for AP learners.
- **AP settings now have a proven 'blueprint' for designing and delivering future work experience**. There has been an evident shift in practice towards taking a more flexible, outcomes focused approach to employer engagement. For AP with less well-established careers provision, careers has become more of a priority within the school through showing that it is possible to deliver high-quality, meaningful work experience outside of the traditional placement model.
- **Learners showed genuine interest in and engagement with the employers**, with evidence of increased confidence being in a workplace environment and improved knowledge of career pathways and skills. AP staff commented that, compared to previous employer activities, students were more engaged and that many would likely not have been able to visit the workplace without the Introduce and Inspire session at their school first.

See the Learner development case study for examples of what the phased approach looked like in practice and further detail on the impact on learners.

"We now have a model for delivering meaningful work experience." (AP Careers Leader)

"As a result of being part of the pilot, we have taken a more intentional and structured approach to our practices, particularly in relation to work experience and outreach. We have reviewed and aligned all our work experience programmes to the equalex framework, ensuring they are more inclusive, purposeful and accessible." (Employer)

What is needed for scaling equitable access

- Using the **equalex outcomes** to develop the phased approach. This helped to shift thinking away from traditional models like one off visits and placements, towards a more progressive, outcomes-focused model which - crucially - started with an Introduce and Inspire session at the AP setting.
- **Facilitated meetings between employers and schools, supported by a Careers Hub planning document**. This helped to ensure that planning was informed by the equalex outcomes and that experiences would meet the needs of learners. For example, helping employers think of ways to make activities as interactive as possible and ensure that information presented to learners was pitched at the right level. Scaling this approach could be challenging due to the time required from Careers Hub staff to provide this level of support, although solutions could include delivering training on effective co-design meetings, sharing planning tools and guidance documents, and targeting Careers Hub support at facilitating experiences for those facing the greater barriers to access.
- **Inviting a wide range of employers to take part.** The Careers Hub 'cast a wide net' rather than making assumptions about the types of employers that may be appropriate for working with AP learners. Most of the nine employers who delivered activities were SMEs, including a law firm and a data modelling and simulation company.
- **Bringing employers and AP together.** Termly Communities of Practice, plus a pre-meeting in Summer 2025, had the dual aims of facilitating ideas and practice sharing whilst also developing employer and AP knowledge, understanding and practical application of the equalex outcomes. By the Spring term Community of Practice there was clear buy in to equalex from both AP and employers and evident enthusiasm for the project amongst the group.
- **Low-burden training for employers on working with AP learners.** An AP headteacher delivered a one-hour, online session to employers on trauma-informed practice training. This was a low burden way of developing employers' understanding of the varied needs of AP learners and the ways they might behave during activities. Employers spoke very positively about how the training helped them feel better prepared for working with AP learners.

"The equalex framework has been really helpful. It's made us realise we need to introduce learners to the employer first… help them understand the sector, employer expectations, routines, skills etc – then do work experience. That way, the experience will be much more successful." (AP Careers Leader)

Learner development: Students demonstrate increased career readiness, confidence and progression along equalex phases, supported by curriculum-linked experiences

Qualitative feedback, observations from school staff and employers, and (in some instances) learner survey data, provide indications of learners' **improved career readiness** through engagement with pilot-facilitated work experience and activities. For example:

- Learners who took part in an immersive 'workplace safari' at a law firm in GMCA gave feedback suggesting the experience had increased their confidence and understanding of the legal sector and raised their aspirations. The experience focused on the Introduce and Inspire equalex phase and was targeted at a group of disadvantaged learners.
- For another targeted group of disadvantaged learners in DPT, a workplace experience with Great Western Railway helped them develop their confidence and make connections between school subjects and career pathways. This progress was evident in the pre- and post- reflection activity that the school delivered using Unifrog. In addition, staff felt the level of questioning from learners during the experience exceeded expectations and that previously disengaged students showed strong curiosity and interest.
- Amongst learners participating in an eight-lesson curriculum module with JLR (Jaguar Land Rover) in LCR, interest in manufacturing careers rose from 50% to 74%, demonstrating increased knowledge of career pathways. The module was co-designed with JLR around the Introduce and Inspire tier and included employer involvement in lessons and a learner visit to the JLR plant to present their ideas.

Feedback received across other pilot facilitated work experience and activities also demonstrated improved career readiness amongst learners, including increased knowledge of (and readiness to explore) career and education pathways.

> *"That's what I want to do when I'm older [hospitality]." (Learner)*
>
> *[After a Workplace Safari, followed by several follow-up visits to the employer and a successful application to their engineer apprenticeship] "I didn't really know what I wanted to do, I just knew I wanted something practical. I say this to everyone; I think I've chosen the perfect job for me." (Learner)*
>
> *"Not all jobs will fit your preference and it's better to try out jobs even if it turns out not to be your thing." (Learner)*
>
> *"I didn't realise the number of different jobs available in one company, and I didn't realise so many people would work for GWR. It made me think whether it is something I might like to do and apply for." (Learner).*

Insight into learner development was captured in several ways. FSQ informed planning, in some instances, although it could not be used as a baseline and follow-up evaluation tool as it is only completed once per year. The WECA pilot sought to overcome this limitation by drawing on the FSQ to develop baseline and follow-up surveys, tailored to the pilot and AP learner needs, to understand outcomes across the pilot (see the case study below for further details on these outcomes). Unifrog was used by many schools as a tool to capture learner

reflections and monitor progress with career readiness, with some areas using other tools such as student logbooks.

Evidence of **learner progression along the equalex phases** was more limited, due to the pilot delivery period only encompassing one academic year. The examples that did emerge tended to come from SEND and AP settings taking a phased approach to engagement with one employer, with an initial Introduce and Inspire session at the school followed by an Investigate and Explore workplace experience (which was, in some cases, followed by an Apply and Demonstrate work experience placement).

In addition to the WECA case study below, **this phased approach was used with learners at a SEND setting** in WYCA when working with McVitie's. A scaffolded, in-school session introduced learners to the manufacturing sector and the workplace, which was crucial for reducing anxiety and building confidence. This was followed by an Investigate and Explore visit to the McVitie's factory. Reflection activities embedded through the experiences showed learners demonstrating increased confidence, understanding of the workplace and knowledge of career pathways and improved ability to discuss their skills and future options.

Whilst examples of learner progression along the equalex phases were concentrated amongst specialist settings, the pilots clearly supported all schools to introduce new work experience opportunities – particularly Introduce and Inspire and Investigate and Explore activities at Key Stage 3, supporting progression towards work experience placements in Key Stage 4. This will enable learners to progress through the equalex phases between Years 7 and 11 and, particularly in areas where pilot activity was strongly aligned with regional priority sectors, provide learners with an early line of sight to career pathways within local growth industries

Case study: Learner development - West of England Combined Authority (WECA)

The WECA equalex pilot aimed to support Alternative Provision (AP) learner development through trialling co-designed work experience activities following a phased approach aligned with the equalex outcomes and AP learner needs. Key to the model was building ongoing relationships with employers to support learners' development, as opposed to delivering one-off activities or traditional work experience placements. An adapted version of the Future Skills Questionnaire, that could be completed at multiple time points during the year, was developed to understand progress and impact on learners.

The example below highlights what the phased model looked like in practice. See the Equitable access case study for details on how the model was developed.

The Centre for Modelling and Simulation (CFMS), a not-for-profit digital engineering company, visited the AP setting to deliver an Introduce & Inspire session for Year 8 students. The session was co-designed with the AP headteacher and included short activities such as identifying objects on the employer's desk from a photo, to spark a discussion about his role, and a competitive LEGO design challenge to show how the company creates and tests ideas. Following this session, two students visited the CFMS office where they had planned introductions to different staff members and saw demonstrations of various pieces of digital equipment.

Successes and impact

A key success of the model was **improved learner engagement.** This included learners showing greater enthusiasm and interest compared to previous employer engagement activities and demonstrating increased confidence in engaging with employers. For example, in one employer session at an AP, the discussion ran on longer than expected because learners had so many questions. Baseline and follow-up survey data also indicated that learners felt more confident speaking with employers as a result of the activities.

> *"This is the most engaged I have seen some of these students for a visitor. They clearly enjoyed the LEGO activity and it sustained their interest." (AP staff)*

> *"Really, really useful - better than expected." (AP Learner)*

In addition, feedback from AP staff frequently indicated that AP learners had attended workplace visits who ordinarily would not have had the confidence and/or motivation to do so, because of the initial introduction to the employer at their AP.

> *"We took the two students that were the most engaged and were deemed to be ready – they loved it. Introduced them to a range of different people at the office. The intro session [with the employer] at the AP was key though – couldn't have done the visit without that." (AP Careers Leader)*

There was also evidence of **increased career readiness** amongst learners because of the pilot activities, mostly linked to the Introduce & Inspire and Investigate & Explore equalex outcomes, as these were the equalex phases that most activities focused on.

Survey data showed positive change regarding learners' understanding of what skills employers look for, in addition to increased awareness of post-16 pathways and understanding of the type of workplace environment that might suit them. AP staff commented that learners demonstrated greater readiness to consider future education and employment pathways, with some starting to make links between their personal interests and potential future roles.

> *"I can imagine myself working somewhere like this." (AP Learner)*

> *"I never realised it took so many teams to make it all happen." (AP Learner)*

There was also evidence of employers supporting young people beyond the work experience activities delivered. One learner, who has now transitioned from their AP back to mainstream school, is receiving ongoing mentoring from an employer involved in the pilot.

Whilst Apply & Demonstrate outcomes were more limited, as fewer pilot activities were aimed at this equalex phase, two learners successfully applied for a 4-day work experience placement at Wessex Water (following an introductory session at their AP and workplace visit), during which they practiced their teamwork and communication skills through group tasks. The opportunity provided a springboard for further development of employability skills, as both students applied for Wessex Water's apprenticeship programme, which included taking part in an apprenticeship assessment centre and interview.

What works for scaling learner development

- **Planning informed by the equalex learning outcomes.** The outcomes helped to focus planning and link activities to the curriculum, whilst also providing impetus and validation for the phased approach to work experience over more traditional models, which AP typically find challenging to deliver. The pilot has demonstrated that the equalex learning outcomes already align well with AP learner needs, so the framework does not need to be adapted for AP.
- **Employer and AP co-design** ensured that experiences were tailored to the learners' needs, for example, making sure they included short, practical and engaging activities and that the information presented was pitched at the right level. This also built employers' confidence in delivering the sessions, as they felt better prepared.
- **Prioritising the building of ongoing relationships with employers,** as opposed to ad hoc involvement. This was key to the phased approach and therefore building learner confidence to engage, but it also helped students feel valued and invested in, something which is particularly important for AP learners who have been excluded from mainstream school. For example, one staff member described the joy of a student upon hearing that an employer was visiting the school again ("She came back!").
- **Involving a wide range of employers.** This helped to broaden aspirations and challenge stereotypes of what AP learners could achieve. However, it was noted that this must be paired with information about how learners could find a pathway into the career opportunities available, otherwise it would be counterproductive to present learners with an opportunity that is inaccessible to them.

Case study: West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA)

WYCA's pilot involved the commissioning of four providers who worked with schools and employers to design and deliver work experience activities aligned with the equalex framework (and away from the traditional 'block two-week placement' model).

A total of 20 schools and 56 employers took part, with representation from across all five of the West Yorkshire local authorities. Most of the employers operate within one of WYCA's priority growth sectors (digital and technology, financial and professional services, health technology and life sciences, advanced manufacturing, creative industries and the green economy).

The West Yorkshire Careers Hub provided consultancy and CPD to schools to identify gaps in current provision and help better embed modern work experience within the curriculum.

Successes and impact

Employers: The WYCA pilot successfully engaged employers who had never previously offered work experience. The providers helped these employers to understand equalex and have co-designed activities which have been well-received by schools and young people. Examples were also evident of employers being more familiar with work experience and expanding or improving their offer in line with equalex, in some cases rewriting their offer entirely. There is evidence of greater collaboration and networking between employers, together with the emergence of a forum for the future development of work experience. In addition, Cornerstone Employers have acted as advocates for the programme, championing its objectives within their organisations and wider business networks.

> *"It was a fantastic experience speaking to students and hearing about their aspirations and seeing how intrigued and eager to learn they were." (Employer)*

Schools: The WYCA pilot has benefited schools by providing CPD, employer brokerage and practical curriculum resources, in some cases leading them to engage in off-site work experience for the first time in several years. Other schools have adapted and improved existing activities. Curriculum links are being strengthened, helped by guidance documents produced by the providers which contain practical examples of how to embed careers and equalex into different areas of the curriculum. There have also been catalytic effects on strategic planning, with schools and multi-academy trusts acting on Internal Leadership Reviews, undertaking peer-to-peer reviews and working together to plan work experience activities that are aligned with equalex.

Learners: The available data points to the equalex activities having improved learners' interest in the world of work, their knowledge about different roles in specific industries, their understanding of the skills, qualifications and entry routes into those roles, and their self-belief and self-confidence. High proportions of the learners for whom data is available said that taking part in the equalex activities had inspired and motivated them and caused them to think about their goals. Improvements in teamwork and problem-solving were also reported.

"I have learnt that there are so many different jobs out there that don't have to be 'normal' or 'regular' jobs." (Learner)

"It's expanded my knowledge on different career options and fields of work I could potentially work in." (Learner)

Post-pilot momentum: The four providers in West Yorkshire have now integrated the equalex framework into their wider careers offers. Each has also been approached by schools and/or employers not involved in the equalex pilot, but who have heard about it and are interested in adopting the model. This bodes well for the ongoing expansion of the equalex approach in West Yorkshire post-pilot. The pilot has also been an important foundation for the development of the West Yorkshire Promise, has influenced WYCA's wider work experience plan and is informing sector-specific activity to help professional and financial services employers engage with work experience.

Reflections on a commissioning model

The WYCA pilot has generated some useful learning which could benefit other Careers Hubs contemplating or implementing a commissioning model. These include:

- **Timescales:** Make sure that time is factored into the delivery plan for upskilling providers on the Careers Impact System and ensuring they have a comprehensive understanding of the equalex framework at the outset.
- **Logic model:** Put in place a logic model as an early priority, share it with providers and ask them to use it as the basis for their delivery plans.
- **Curriculum embedding:** When considering how many schools to involve, keep in mind Careers Hub capacity to support them with curriculum embedding. With hindsight, the curriculum embedding support element of the WYCA pilot could have been more hands-on and intensive if they had worked with fewer schools.
- **Reporting:** Put in place monitoring and reporting structures such that consistent and comparable information is obtained from all participating providers.

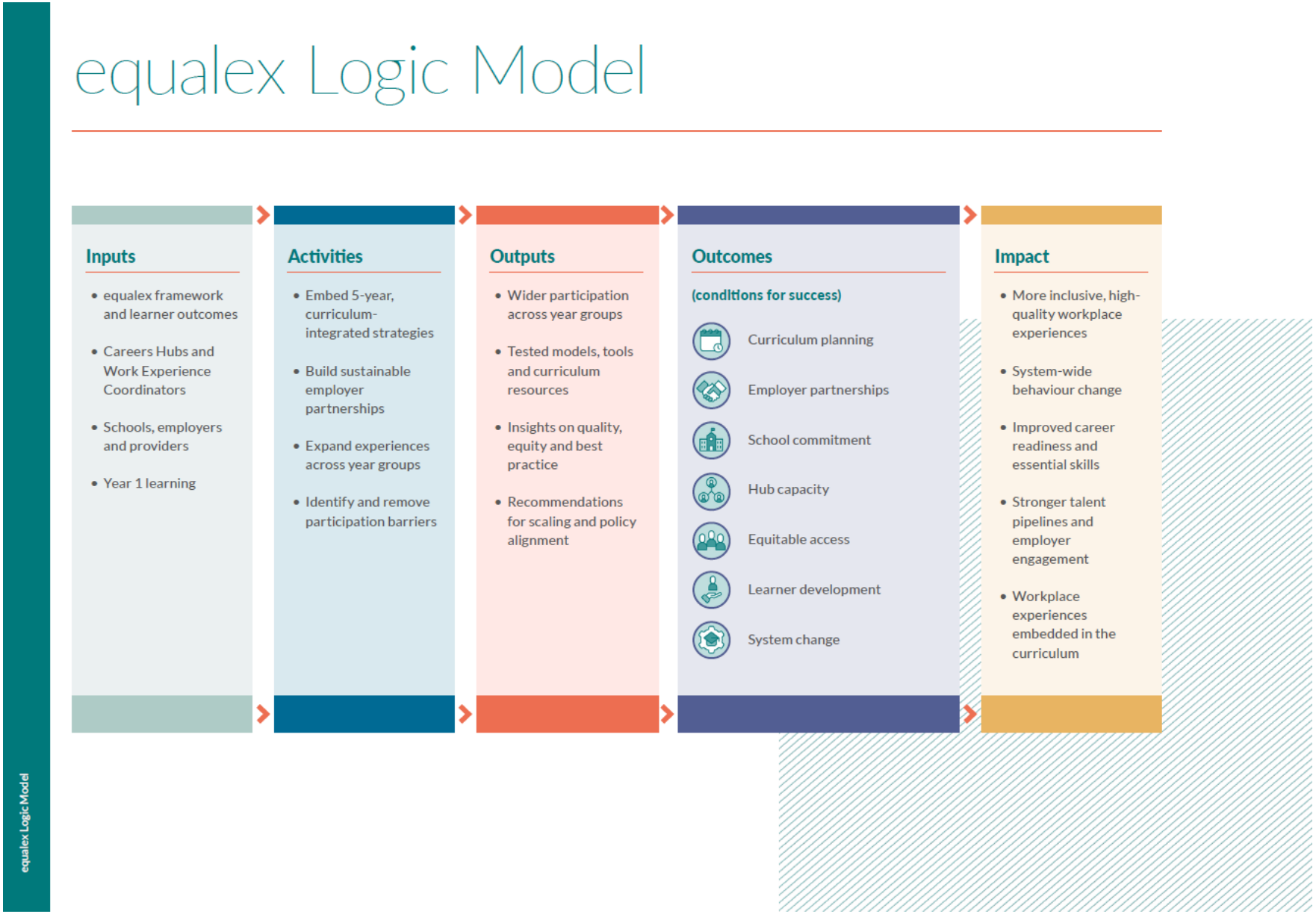
4. Conclusion

Across the pilots, schools and employers have been supported in new ways to develop approaches to work experience informed by the equalex framework. This has generated considerable learning around what successful models for curriculum-integrated, meaningful work experience and Careers Hub support look like, and where success is still emerging. Key messages include:

- **In-person, place-based forums that bring schools and employers together serve to strengthen collaboration and promote shared understanding.** Key to the success of these meetings is fostering passion, momentum and connection around a shared aim of changing young people's lives, with emphasis on alignment with regional and national policy also helpful, particularly for securing senior leader buy in.
- **Dedicated Careers Hub support is most effective when Careers Hubs act as brokers rather than doers, with equalex integrated into systems and processes.** This includes integration with ILR and peer-to-peer reviews, Hub communications and Enterprise Coordinator support. A key element of this is the convening of schools and employers mentioned above, whilst also including the facilitation of initial meetings between schools and employers to support co-design, providing dedicated training and CPD around the equalex framework, and the sharing of relevant tools and resources.
- **There was a shift in thinking away from traditional placement models** and towards flexible, progressive approaches. This removed some of the barriers associated with the traditional model, facilitated greater employer engagement, and enabled schools to deliver a wider range of work experience activities, particularly at Key Stage 3.
- **School and employer co-design**, **informed by the equalex framework, strengthened the quality of experiences, curriculum integration and learner development.** Although this may require a greater upfront investment in time, it has the potential to streamline activity in the future and improve employer confidence, motivation and sustainable engagement.
- **The phased equalex model** worked particularly well for learners who face barriers to accessing meaningful work experience. Having an initial, in-school session with an employer helped learners feel more comfortable engaging with a workplace visit or placement, whilst also enabling clear progression through the equalex phases.
- **Encouraging sustained engagement, rather than one-off delivery, strengthened employer motivation.** Employers saw developing ongoing relationships with schools as an opportunity to have increased and more meaningful impact on young people.
- **Employer-linked curriculum learning projects can be low burden** for the employer. Once resources and a structured plan for employer involvement are developed, projects can be repeated or replicated in a low-burden way for both the school and the employer. They can also be delivered at scale, for example across a whole year group or Trust. A key enabler of such projects is the school having capacity to invest upfront time in developing resources, following an initial co-design process (and in some cases, teacher encounter) with the employer.

On this last point, whilst promising models for curriculum-integrated work experience activities have been developed, progress towards whole-school approaches to curriculum integration is still emerging. Areas for further focus across the system include the meaningful use of curriculum mapping tools aligned to equalex to inform planning and the distribution of responsibility for employer engagement among wider school staff. Strong senior leadership team buy-in, along with sufficient time for Careers Leaders and subject staff, is required to do this well. The most progress in this area was seen in schools where the existing careers programme was already well developed.

Appendix A: equalex national logic model



Appendix B: Glossary of acronyms

Acronym	Meaning
AP	Alternative Provision
CEC	The Careers & Enterprise Company
CLA	Children Looked After
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CSO	Careers and Skills Officer
DfE	Department for Education
DPT	Devon, Plymouth and Torbay
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
FSM	Free School Meals
FSQ	Future Skills Questionnaire
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GMCA	Greater Manchester Combined Authority
ILR	Internal Leadership Review
LA	Local Authority
LCR	Liverpool City Region
MAT	Multi-academy trust
MBacc	Manchester Baccalaureate
NEET	Not in education, employment or training
PP	Pupil Premium
PQL	Partnership and Quality Lead
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SLT	Senior Leadership Team
SME	Small and medium-sized enterprise
WECA	West of England Combined Authority
WMCA	West Midlands Combined Authority
WYCA	West Yorkshire Combined Authority