

High-Quality and High-Impact Work Experience For All

—
Insights from regional roundtables
and policy recommendations

Contents

Part 1: Regional Roundtables – Insights from Liverpool and Manchester	4
Towards transformative work experience: Key insights from business and education leaders.....	8
Conclusion and next steps.....	14
Part 2: Futures For All’ proposal for implementing a two weeks’ worth of work experience policy	15
Introduction	15
For the employment sector	18
For the education sector	21
For young people	24

Acknowledgements

We'd like to thank the Northern Powerhouse Partnership for partnering with us on the roundtable events. Thanks also to Steve Rotheram, Mayor of the Liverpool City Region, Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester, and all the business and education leaders who shared insightful contributions at the roundtables:

ACC Liverpool
Adecco
Auto Trader Group
Busy Bees
Co-op
Dixons Academies Trust
E-ACT
Ernst & Young
Fisher German
Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce
Greater Manchester Combined Authority
Jet 2
Knowledge Quarter Liverpool
The Laurus Trust
Liverpool Chamber of Commerce
Liverpool City Region Careers Hub
Liverpool City Region Combined Authority
Manchester Airports Group
Morecrofts Solicitors
National Museums Liverpool
RSM UK
Siemens UK
SP Energy Networks
Sutcliffe
United Learning Trust
University of Liverpool

Finally, a big thank you to everyone who contributed their experiences and expertise to our implementation policy paper, including the Futures For All' Youth Council.

Part 1: Regional Roundtables – Insights from Liverpool and Manchester

Introduction

In Spring 2025, Futures For All, in collaboration with the Northern Powerhouse Partnership, hosted two regional roundtables at the Museum of Liverpool and the Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce. We welcomed the Mayor of the Liverpool City Region, Steve Rotheram, and the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, alongside business and education leaders from each region. Discussion focused on how to effectively roll-out high-quality, high-impact work experience opportunities for young people across the UK.

Talent is everywhere across our country, but opportunity is not. Many young people leave school with no experiences of work – and many who do use their parents' networks to secure it. The curriculum removed entitlement to careers education in 2012. This means careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) is patchy in quality and not guaranteed.

All young people, especially those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, can benefit from a comprehensive and coherent careers offer. An offer which broadens horizons, inspires, informs, develops skills and motivates each unique student on their future possibilities – as well as providing real-world workplace experiences.

Levelling the playing field

Work experience has the potential to be a crucial piece of the careers jigsaw. It can help level the playing field between the separate offers privately and state-educated students receive. In particular, it can ensure the most disadvantaged students have the same access to opportunities as their more affluent peers.

As the largest provider of work experience in the UK, our ambition is to ensure that all young people have access to high-quality, multi-day work experience by 2028. The Government, in their Manifesto for Change, pledged a guaranteed two weeks' worth of work experience for every young person.

To fulfil our commitment, Futures For All is dedicated to ensuring young people's work experience is meaningful, transformative and genuinely impactful. These roundtables help us get further insight into what an effective work experience roll-out across the regions looks like from their perspectives.

Education is not a devolved function. However, Mayoral Strategic Authorities will have a critical role to play in working with businesses to promote pathways into employment and helping identify placements for 16-19-year-olds as part of delivering

the Youth Guarantee¹. It's key that local approaches to secondary and further education work experience thrive. To ensure this, central Government must ensure levers like policy, funding, frameworks, resources, curriculum and statutory guidance create the right conditions regions need to generate local opportunities for young people.

High-quality work experience is vital

The consensus among roundtable participants was clear: high-quality work experience is vital for equipping young people with the skills they need to succeed in the workforce. Quality work experience plays an essential role in delivering the Government's opportunity and growth missions. It not only helps young people develop the hard and soft skills employers value but also broadens their career ambitions, exposing them to a wide range of industries.

By supporting talented young people into sectors and roles, work experience helps address the looming skills gaps that threatens future growth. Business and education leaders highlighted its importance, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are more likely to have their talents held back through lack of fair opportunities. Work experience is an important lever for social mobility and justice. It's essential to unlock the potential of the future workforce and address local and national economic and skills challenges.

For any roll-out to be truly transformative, it must be underpinned by the core principles of equity and democratisation of access to placements. It is equally fundamental that these placements, along with pre- and post-placement efforts, are of the highest quality and impact. Without these foundations, we risk repeating the mistakes of the past and hitting the target but missing the point.

A View from the Northwest: Liverpool City Region and Greater Manchester

The North of England has faced both a historical underinvestment in education², and a reduction in the value of pupil premium funding and education in real terms³. Creating more beneficial experiences which open doors and unlock future possibilities for the region's young people is vital to break down barriers to opportunity.

There are many opportunities for young people in Liverpool and Manchester. The mayors of both regions are motivated to increase employers' roles in providing these opportunities and ensuring the right people know about them.

Both Liverpool City Region and Greater Manchester are taking part in the Careers and Enterprise Company's Equalex pilot, each testing a different part of the initiative.

¹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2024) English Devolution White Paper www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper

² Health Equity North (2023) Addressing Education and Health Inequity: Perspectives from the North of England www.healthequitynorth.co.uk/app/uploads/APPG-REPORT-SEPT-23.pdf

³ Public Accounts Select Committee (2025) Improving Educational Outcomes for Disadvantaged Children <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/46799/documents/242293/default/>

To achieve a work experience roll-out, employers across the nation will need to mobilise to ensure they are offering high-quality experiences to all young people.

Liverpool City Region

Liverpool City Region is making significant strides in providing opportunities for young people. Mayor Steve Rotheram is committed to ensuring young people are aware of opportunities, have fair access to them, and that they are high-quality.

One of the mayor's key priorities is to make sure young people see others from similar backgrounds succeeding in sectors and roles they might have thought out of reach. This approach is essential for maintaining and nurturing young people's aspirations. It helps ensure that, as they grow older, their options remain open rather than feeling closed off.

Under Steve Rotheram, the region has invested in the Cradle to Career programme⁴ in partnership with Right to Succeed. The award-winning programme works to tackle inequities faced by families from birth to entering work. Rolled-out across the region's most deprived areas, it has improved literacy and helped communities achieve more – as measured by key statistical indicators. The mayor says its success is down to: "Creating long-lasting change, breaking down barriers and giving every child in the Liverpool City Region the best possible start in life, regardless of their background⁵."

The region has made targeted investments in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), including the development of Eureka! – the Liverpool science discovery centre, which opened in 2022. The centre is designed for children aged 0–14 and focuses on introducing STEM concepts at an early age. The city is also home to InnovateHer, a social enterprise that runs free programmes to encourage more girls to explore careers in STEM. These initiatives aim to broaden participation in STEM by engaging young people from diverse backgrounds.

Liverpool's Combined Authority expresses its commitment to building a strong and fair economy through growth in its Corporate Plan⁶, published last year. This includes the Life Sciences Innovation Zone, aimed at creating 8,000 jobs, and taking advantage of opportunities through its Freeport, to attracting new business and creating 13,000 jobs over the next 20 years. Opportunities like these, and others the city region has invested in, will need young people's talents.

Futures For All emphasises that the challenge many young people face is not a lack of talent, but a lack of awareness of opportunity. However, with ongoing investment in the Liverpool City Region and a strong commitment to inclusivity, there's a real

⁴ Right to Succeed (2025) Cradle to Career: Liverpool City Region

<https://righttosucceed.org.uk/working-collectively/cradle-to-career-liverpool-city-region/>

⁵ Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (2024) News: Top UK Award for Liverpool City Region Programme that's Transforming the Life Chances of Young People

www.liverpoolcityregion-ca.gov.uk/news/top-uk-award-for-liverpool-city-region-programme-thats-transforming-the-life-chances-of-young-people

⁶ Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (2024) Liverpool City Region: Innovation for Growth
<https://api.liverpoolcityregion-ca.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/Corporate-Plan-2024-28.pdf>

chance to change that. By creating accessible pathways and raising awareness of what is available locally, a future can be built where every young person has the chance to succeed.

Greater Manchester

Earlier this year, Greater Manchester published its ambitious ten-year plan to boost growth and create tens of thousands of new jobs. The area is the fastest-growing economy in the UK and attracts the most foreign direct investment⁷. To realise the ambitions of these plans, education, skills development and transitions into employment will need to prepare young people to enter the world of work. Successful transitions are also linked to addressing challenges faced by many young people, such as poverty, adverse childhood experiences and mental health needs. This means it's important to take a holistic approach to make sure young people embark on positive, fulfilling futures.

One example of how the Greater Manchester Combined Authority is responding to these issues is the #BeeWell programme, launched in 2019. The programme gathers input from young people about their wellbeing and responds with actionable solutions. This annual survey, now expanding to other regions, helps identify what impacts youth wellbeing and how to improve it. It also measures the level of hope young people have for their future, with the mayor advocating for equal opportunities for all, regardless of background.

Andy Burnham has publicly championed better valuing of technical and vocational pathways. He supports T Levels as a possible “game-changer... giving young people real-world experience and giving employers the skilled talent they need to grow⁸.” With a mission to become the UK's leading Technical Education city region, he views T Level placements as key to making this happen. He also calls on Greater Manchester employers to get involved in shaping the workforce of the future.

As part of Andy Burnham's ambitions to shift parity of esteem and focus in education between technical and academic pathways, he's introduced the Greater Manchester Baccalaureate (MBacc)⁹. This aims to provide a high-quality, prestigious alternative to university. It links technical education with local employer needs in seven growing sectors like Digital and Technology, Construction and Green Economy, and Creative, Culture and Sport. This is particularly important for the region, as two-thirds of school leavers don't follow a university pathway.

The MBacc enables 14-year-olds to choose from the seven pathways, aligned with local labour market data. It offers access to T levels, apprenticeships, and other

⁷ Greater Manchester Combined Authority (2025) News: Greater Manchester Sets Out Trailblazing Plan to Kickstart a New Decade of Growth

www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/news/greater-manchester-sets-out-trailblazing-plan-to-kickstart-a-new-decade-of-growth/

⁸ Greater Manchester Combined Authority (2024) Greater Manchester Employers Urged to Pledge T Level Placements

www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/news/greater-manchester-employers-urged-to-pledge-t-level-placements/
⁹ Greater Manchester Combined Authority (2025) The Greater Manchester Baccalaureate

www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/work-and-skills/technical-education-city-region/the-greater-manchester-baccalaureate/

technical qualifications, ensuring equal access to work placements through a central application system. The mayor also supports expanding post-16 work placements, with the goal of offering all young people in Greater Manchester a 45-day work experience placement by 2030. He believes this will provide deeper, more meaningful workplace experiences for those on the cusp of entering employment.

Like Liverpool, Manchester is working hard to attract investment and create opportunities. The mayor recently announced plans¹⁰ for Manchester to become a sister city with Austin, Texas, fostering new partnerships. Additionally, Innovation Greater Manchester has partnered with Innovate UK to strengthen research clusters and accelerate long-term innovation investments, aiming to position the city as a leading innovation hub with a high-growth, high-wage economy. With many prospects developing in the area, young people need opportunities to carve their own path and be part of them.

For both mayors, identifying pathways in the local economy for young people is essential in providing them with routes to work experience placements and career opportunities. Collaboration between education, businesses and the combined authority is an important step to help ensure local businesses can play a key role making sure all young people recognise career opportunities.

Work experience is essential. Leaders at the Liverpool roundtable spoke about how we can't expect young people to thrive in work without giving them experiences of it. It is also unrealistic to expect young people, parents and schools alone to ensure students are aware of available opportunities. Local businesses play a crucial role in making sure all young people have a clear view of the opportunities available in the region.

Towards transformative work experience: Key insights from business and education leaders

We're committed to ensuring high-quality and high-impact placements are non-negotiables in the efforts to scale-up work experience. Roundtable discussions were underpinned by the understanding that the work experience we're striving for must centre on these principles if we're to break down barriers to opportunity.

The willingness to drive change and ambition from both combined authority mayors was matched by employers who are keen to be part of the movement towards high-quality work experience for all young people. The consensus was that we should consider work experience, and overall educational and skills development ambitions for young people, as linked to the wider aspects of their lives. These include everything from physical and mental health to housing. Providing fair access to work

¹⁰ Greater Manchester Combined Authority (2025) News: Mayor of Austin Commits to visiting Greater Manchester following Successful Trade Mission to Texas
www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/news/mayor-of-austin-commits-to-visiting-greater-manchester-following-successful-trade-mission-to-texas

experience placements should take these factors into account to ensure inclusive practice.

To translate these aspirations into meaningful opportunities, addressing what's needed from employers and educators is paramount. Our roundtables gave platforms to business and education leaders so that we could understand both the opportunities and barriers to effective work experience, find solutions and create the conditions for a successful system. These next sections outline the different themes we covered.

1. Ensure schools have sufficient capacity and funding

For a national roll-out of work experience to be truly impactful, schools and colleges must have adequate funding, workforce capacity and space in the curriculum and timetable. High-quality placements require careful organisation, planning and provision at every stage, including before, during and after the placement. To achieve this, schools need sufficient staff capacity. Education leaders, supported by businesses, highlighted significant funding and staffing challenges which make this difficult.

If the Government is committed to its promise of universal work experience, and wants placements to be as impactful as possible, it must increase investment in schools. This will enable them to organise and support young people to access, attend and get maximum value from transformative placements. It would be an investment in both opportunity and growth.

Investing in careers education would not only support schools in delivering and organising work experience, it would also raise the profile of life and work skills on the educational agenda. Another profile-raising suggestion at the roundtables focused on how young people can showcase their abilities through a 'skills passport' or profile that reflects their skills beyond academic attainment. This would also be useful for their future educators or employers, helping the young person demonstrate their potential.

Attendees recognised that making work experience more meaningful starts with embedding it into careers education - rather than treating it as something unique and separate - and integrating careers education into the curriculum. Skills such as teamwork, problem-solving and communication were highlighted as valuable to employers. Ensuring schools have capacity in the curriculum to develop these skills in young people would be welcomed by employers. Strong spoken English was identified as a crucial skill to develop in school and practise during work experience placements.

2. Start early for long-term success

Attendees agreed that, to achieve long-term benefits and make work experience as meaningful as possible, it should be integrated into a careers education framework

that begins at an early age. Many noted that young children often naturally have high aspirations for themselves. However, these aspirations can quickly diminish if they develop limiting beliefs about their capabilities or lack the information, guidance, support and opportunities needed to pursue their ambitions. Some primary schools already offer robust career learning from the Early Years Foundation Stage, exposing students to a range of careers, challenging stereotypes and promoting a variety of pathways. This good practice should be expanded across the country, with schools supported to offer it.

An example of business engagement in early careers education came from the Co-op. The Co-op provides resources to build skills in primary education, including interview and application techniques for Year 6 students. Through collaboration with their suppliers, the Co-op also creates project-based opportunities for young people to develop skills and showcase their creative talents in a real-world work context. For example, one initiative involved a collaboration with a major company, where Key Stage 3 students were challenged to develop and market a new product concept.

Some businesses may not have the same resources as larger companies and it was acknowledged that larger businesses should lead by example. Plus, collaboration between smaller businesses can help ensure that the number and range of opportunities needed for young people are available, while ensuring smaller organisations are supported. Businesses of all sizes could also take advantage of remote and hybrid placement opportunities, where the placement closely replicates face-to-face experiences.

Attendees acknowledged that all schools should be enabled to provide careers learning from the start of a young person's educational journey. They emphasised that, in response to national concerns around school attendance and engagement, linking learning to careers, life skills and aspirations can make education more applied, meaningful and engaging for students. This approach can in turn motivate students and better equip them for the world of work. Attendees also argued that early exposure to diverse pathways can help young people better understand their own interests and identify the opportunities they wish to pursue. This supports efforts to achieve well-matched work experience placements, from which they can draw the most benefit.

3. Clear lines of sight for young people

Roundtable attendees agreed that work experience is an important part of the broader ambition to ensure every young person can clearly see achievable career pathways from their current position to their future aspirations.

This includes reflecting on their own skills and interests and gaining insight into paths they can take to achieve their ambitions. Work experience is an opportunity to develop these skills while also advancing a young person on their career journey. Young people should get tailored guidance and support to navigate these pathways as a key part of a wider careers offer.

There was clear agreement that shifting the culture in society, education and industry to achieve true parity of esteem between university and technical or vocational pathways is fundamental. University remains a key pathway for some young people. But there's a need for other routes, and the young people who pursue them, to be more recognised and valued.

Some attendees were concerned that some young people are made to feel less successful than their peers for not attending university. This can lead to lower self-esteem and motivation. Instead, both pathways should be recognised as equally important routes to different career types. Those attending the Manchester roundtable were encouraged by the MBacc as a response to this problem.

Attendees shared that this shift would also ensure young people are on the right path for them, based on their ambitions rather than society's expectations or presumptions. Work experience was recognised as playing a transformative role. It highlights different pathways available for various careers, while providing young people the opportunity to develop and practice their skills, and build the confidence needed to pursue these routes.

One example of this in action is from Liverpool's Combined Authority's investment of £1.13m via its Life Sciences Innovation Zone awarded to Knowledge Quarter Liverpool, who also participated in the roundtable. The funding will help expand their KQ Futures programme over the next five years, preparing young people for high-tech jobs of the future. The initiative will educate students on innovation in Liverpool and career pathways in sectors such as digital, creative, health and life sciences, and advanced manufacturing. It builds on the Knowledge Quarter's previous outreach efforts, including Careers Insight Week, which welcomed over 250 secondary and sixth-form students.

4. Incentivise employers and address challenges in participation

Employers highlighted the need for mass mobilisation of businesses to ensure that work experience is rolled-out nationally. To achieve this, employers of all sizes must be empowered to offer placements. In particular, large employers, who typically have more resources, must use their greater capacity to provide work experience opportunities. Similarly, attendees acknowledged smaller and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) face unique challenges, such as capacity constraints, resource limitations, and logistical and financial demands, which can deter participation. To tackle this attendees suggested any Government initiatives that remove these barriers would be welcome and could drive participation.

Attendees recognised that businesses may take years to see the fruits of their effort and investment. This means that long-term rewards for meeting future workforce skill needs should be emphasised, alongside social value. Some roundtable participants suggested more specific incentives for businesses to provide placements. Proposals included financial support or access to public sector contracts as potential ways to encourage businesses to offer quality placements.

Some business leaders supported the idea of greater flexibility within the Apprenticeship Levy reform into the Growth and Skills Levy to help SMEs offer work experience placements. This could remove barriers for smaller businesses to provide vital opportunities to young people. Collaboration between smaller employers and larger organisations, or between SMEs in the same local sector, could also help tackle these challenges and provide a more scalable solution for offering work experience.

Another aspect of addressing challenges for businesses that leaders shared was the importance of clear guidelines, roles and responsibilities to help them feel confident in delivering high-quality work experience. When safeguarding and legal requirements are not well understood, offering placements can appear complicated and daunting. This may deter employers. Similarly, businesses are eager for work experience to be impactful. Understanding what makes up best practice helps demystify the process. Leaders said tackling administrative burdens was crucial in helping to make placements less complex for businesses. Making sure businesses are more confident means they're more likely to take on young people for work experience and provide better-quality opportunities.

Businesses supported the idea of place-based approaches that reflect business demographics. Cultivating and personalising work experience, with employability at the forefront, was seen as key, rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach. Some sectors and organisations face perceived barriers unique to them. This may require more tailored guidelines for them to feel confident in delivering placements - for example, guidelines on confidentiality issues in legal settings or health and safety in manufacturing.

5. Democratise access to work experience

Education and business leaders were concerned about inequality of access to work experience placements. Too many students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, leave school without work experience. Those who do complete placements often rely on personal networks to secure them. This creates inequitable access to opportunities and can also result in a mismatch between young people and their experiences. This doesn't benefit either the young person or the organisation hosting them.

To overcome these barriers, the process of securing work experience should be transparent, democratised and accessible to all students, regardless of their background. Futures For All is committed to democratising access to high-quality placements. We've invested in rebuilding our website portal so that from September 2025 all businesses, whether or not they offer placements through Futures For All, can market opportunities there. This will create a one-stop-shop for work experience placements and expand businesses' reach to a wider group of young people, fostering a fairer system.

Some business leaders spoke of the importance of making sure the application process – or thresholds required to access the placement, like academic attainment

– do not become a barrier due to inaccessibility. For work experience to be a powerful tool for challenging stereotypes, particularly in sectors where certain groups are underrepresented, it's vital opportunities are open to all, with a simple and clear application process.

Both roundtable discussions covered how to ensure specific groups of young people who would particularly benefit from more work experience are able to access it. Data on specific groups underrepresented in certain sectors should also be taken into account. This helps make sure the future workforce benefits from diverse talent. Plus, it means more young people could see themselves represented in their ambitions, helping to increase participation from those who've much to offer industries and roles they're traditionally underrepresented in. After all, employers want the best talent to work for them. This means it's crucial to ensure there are no barriers to the best talent finding work experience opportunities.

Employers and educators alike recognised that offering a variety of placement formats, and adapting them to the current working landscape, allows more employers to offer placements and increases accessibility for students to engage in a wider range of opportunities. This includes face-to-face, remote or hybrid formats. However, whatever the format, the experience has to be consistently high-quality.

6. Harness the power of devolution

Where different regions have different economies, roundtable attendees were keen to develop place-based solutions to the rising numbers of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET). They shared how devolution provides an opportunity to tailor work experience programmes to meet the specific needs of local economies and local authorities and businesses. With this in mind, schools should collaborate to develop region-specific solutions that align with the skill demands of the local labour market.

To increase the uptake of work experience placements, young people must be made aware of the opportunities available in their local area. Highlighting successful employers and industries in each region will inspire students to explore a broader range of career options. As both mayors affirmed, place-based approaches respond to place-based needs: those of the young people, employers and local economy. Successful models can be scaled across the country by sharing best practice, tailored to the local context.

The English Devolution White Paper¹¹, published in December 2024, outlined that 16-19 education remains a nationally contracted programme. However, it also highlighted the critical role of Mayoral Strategic Authorities in working with employers to promote clear pathways from education and training into employment, as well as helping identify local industry placements. This may create more opportunities for

¹¹ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2024) *English Devolution White Paper*
www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper

local responses to challenge the status quo and significantly contribute to advancing high-quality work experience across regions.

It's essential to ensure that areas without combined authorities, particularly social mobility 'cold spots,' have the necessary resources to provide young people with the same range and quality of opportunities as their peers in Mayoral Strategic Authorities. The Government must ensure that no area is left behind as this agenda progresses.

Conclusion and next steps

Our roundtable discussions highlighted the critical importance of high-quality work experience. For young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, meaningful work placements are essential in equipping them with the skills, knowledge and confidence needed to succeed in the workforce.

Examples from the Liverpool City Region and Greater Manchester demonstrate the strong willingness, optimism and ambition for the work experience guarantee to be a transformative initiative. However, for this vision to be realised, it's crucial to find solutions that overcome the barriers hindering the nationwide roll-out of impactful work experience placements. These opportunities must be embedded into education and business. Which means a coordinated approach is necessary to create a framework that works effectively for young people, educators and employers.

To achieve this, challenges facing schools and colleges, such as limited resources, capacity constraints and unequal access for students must be addressed. At the same time, we need to empower and support employers of all sizes to offer placements, ensuring that all young people have the opportunities they need.

The challenges outlined are not insurmountable – they're solvable and can be affordably addressed. A strong commitment to providing high-quality, impactful work experience will be transformative. Not only for young people but also for the future workforce and the economy that the Government is striving to grow.

To help meet these challenges, we've developed a set of policy recommendations addressing key requirements for an effective national roll-out of high-quality, high-impact work experience placements.

These draw on insights from the roundtables, plus our expertise as a leading provider of work experience, and our extensive research. They're also shaped by reflections and insights from our vast network of educators, employers and young people, including our Youth Council.

Part 2: Futures For All' proposal for implementing a two weeks' worth of work experience policy

Introduction

Young people are the most valuable asset in shaping our nation's future. Yet too many face barriers that prevent them from fulfilling their potential. While talent is evenly distributed across the UK, opportunity is not.

The Government's ambitious efforts to break down barriers to opportunity and drive economic growth will only succeed if we fully harness the diverse talent of young people well before they move into employment – no matter what their background or location. By equipping every young person with the skills, knowledge and experiences they need to succeed while they're in education, we can foster a generation ready to meet the workforce demands of the future. This, in turn, will contribute to the nation's economic and social prosperity and ensure more equitable life chances for young people.

Social mobility is a critical indicator of a country's economic success and fairness. Unfortunately, the UK lags behind many developed nations in this area, with structural barriers and regional inequalities as powerful amplifiers of disadvantage. For young people in state schools, these disparities are especially pronounced, often limiting their access to the same opportunities available to their peers in independent schools. Thirty-nine per cent of 'top jobs' in the UK are occupied by alumni of independent schools – even though these schools educate just 7% of the population¹².

This inequity needs urgent attention. Without equal access to career-related opportunities, many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds will face an uphill battle before they even begin their careers. We cannot ignore this disparity, particularly given the widening participation gap for higher education access and high NEET rates for 16-24-year-olds – with one in eight currently classified as NEET¹³.

Breaking down barriers

Work experience breaks down barriers to opportunity. The benefits are well-established and far reaching. It enhances employability, provides invaluable insights into the working world and builds self-esteem and confidence. Young people who engage in work experience tend to perform better academically, earn higher wages

¹² Social Mobility Commission and The Sutton Trust (2019) *Elitist Britain 2019*
<https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/elitist-britain-2019>

¹³ Office for National Statistics (2025) *Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK: May 2025*
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneet/may2025>

once employed and are less likely to become NEET¹⁴. If the UK could match the lowest NEET rate in the OECD, such as the Netherlands', the economic benefit could be as high as £69 billion¹⁵.

Disadvantaged students, particularly those who are at risk of becoming NEET, stand to benefit the most from work experience. These young people are particularly vulnerable to falling through the cracks, making it even more urgent to level the playing field. By ensuring that all young people have access to meaningful work experience, we can bridge the inequality gap, boost social mobility, drive economic growth and unlock the next generation's potential.

However, the work experience system is not working. Despite its well-documented benefits, availability remains inconsistent – and for many it's left to chance. Currently, around half of state school students leave school without any work experience. Many who manage to secure a placement rely on their social networks to do so. In stark contrast, independent school students are twice as likely to have had three or more work experience placements during their secondary education¹⁶.

Boosting social mobility

Overall, young people from the most advantaged backgrounds are twice as likely to benefit from multiple work experience placements compared to those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This deepens the divide, with inequality directly impacting young people's future prospects, since access to this critical learning opportunity is determined largely by location, school and family networks. As a result, a cycle of inequality persists between students in state and independent schools. This limits social mobility and holds back large proportions of the younger generation.

A young person's future should never be dictated by their postcode or the networks they're born into. However, this problem can be fixed. Encouragingly, our data shows that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit most from work experience, highlighting a tangible way to close the opportunity gap¹⁷. We must act now to ensure that all young people have access to the opportunities that will allow them to thrive, inspiring their optimism for the future and empowering them to shape their own paths.

Investing in work experience is not only crucial for young people, but also essential for businesses and the economy. By empowering young people with the skills and experiences they need to succeed, we are shaping a workforce capable of meeting the challenges of an evolving economy. Addressing skills shortages, promoting

¹⁴ Futures For All and Social Market Foundation (2023) *Learning from Experience: How to Make High Quality Work Experience a Reality for All*

www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Learning-from-experience-March-2023.pdf

¹⁵ Youth Employment Group (2023) *The Young Person's Guarantee*

<https://impetus-org.files.svdcdn.com/production/assets/publications/Young-Persons-Guarantee.pdf>

¹⁶ Futures For All and Social Market Foundation (2023) *Learning from Experience: How to Make High Quality Work Experience a Reality for All*

www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Learning-from-experience-March-2023.pdf

¹⁷ Futures For All (2025) *Impact Report 2023-24*

www.speakersforschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/SfS-Impact-Report-2023-to-2024-Updated.pdf

social mobility, and closing the opportunity gap will help create a fairer, more prosperous society for all.

The solution

Successful policy and implementation start with the Government clearly defining 'work experience' and distinguishing it from other career-related activities. Work experience consists of placements with live employers linked to selected learning outcomes. It should help young people develop skills with learning outcomes appropriate for their age and needs. Placements should mimic most aspects of the real working world, from recruitment to personal development and feedback.

From Futures For All' perspective, work experience is different from other crucial career education activities. These activities, like talks from employers, may link to the other Gatsby Benchmarks, but are not sufficient to be classed as work experience. Similarly, streaming recorded videos or passive online materials are not classified as high-quality, high-impact work experience.

A Government guarantee of two weeks' worth of work experience for all young people is an affordable and achievable solution to democratise access to the workplace. It's recognised as highly beneficial by young people, educators and employers. By building links between schools, businesses and communities, state educated young people can gain access to a wide range of career possibilities and networks.

To achieve a national roll-out of work experience for all, we need to empower all stakeholders involved and make sure they have everything they need to ensure effective, impactful and transformative experiences.

Without employers, sufficient capacity in schools and young people's understanding of the importance and impact of work experience, the policy will fail. All stakeholders need to be informed, engaged and incentivised. The focus of the developed policy must be underpinned by striving for equitable access to meaningful, high-quality opportunities for everyone. Otherwise, we risk another patchy system which fails to make a tangible difference and meet its aims.

The work experience system is not working for everyone. We need to create a system which makes work experience easy for everyone.

For the employment sector

1. Incentivise employers

To build a skilled talent pipeline and ensure the future workforce is well-prepared for employment, businesses must be incentivised and supported to offer high-quality, meaningful pre-16 work experience. This will support national growth and provide employers with young people ready for work.

Work experience, training, apprenticeships and vocational courses should be part of coordinated long-term workforce planning. This means joined-up thinking between the Government, local authorities, employers and educational providers to address skills shortages for the benefit of young people. Businesses need supportive but flexible systems in place to suit their needs so they can offer impactful opportunities. For any post-18 careers or employment strategy to meet their aims, pre-16 career pipeline initiatives, including work experience placements, must be prioritised. Funding could be expanded through a flexible Growth and Skills Levy to help businesses who would otherwise struggle to offer placement opportunities.

2. Provide clarity

The Government should provide a clear definition of work experience, plus requirements and expectations for employers. There should be one agreed central guide shared between stakeholders to clarify roles and responsibilities of each party involved.

Clear specifications, templates, and guidelines outlining what constitutes high-quality work experience, covering aspects from safeguarding and legal requirements to best practices, should be provided. This will help reduce the administrative burden on businesses and challenge the negative perceptions around the complexity of offering work experience placements. By creating a seamless process for employers of all sizes and backgrounds, we can significantly increase the likelihood of their engagement.

We should aim to build employer confidence in hosting students, while also enhancing the quality and impact of placements over time. For employers requiring additional support, the system should connect them with work experience providers that offer tailored guidance in delivering effective work experience. This approach enables employers to focus on delivering meaningful opportunities that help young people develop the skills essential for today's workforce, while also increasing their willingness to offer placements by removing uncertainty around what is required, what needs to be done, and where to start.

Futures For All' policy recommendations to achieve these include:

Short term

Provide a framework of best practice and clear guidance of what's required from safeguarding and legal perspectives.

The Government should consult with existing work experience providers to share clear guidance on how to offer high-quality work experience placements and examples of best practice. Safeguarding and legal requirements must underpin the framework.

To alleviate bureaucratic burdens on employers, there should be clarification on what's necessary and standard forms and documents where appropriate. A single agreed digital document shared between stakeholders outlining roles, responsibilities and expectations will help instil confidence for employers. This can create shared expectations for employers, educators, young people and their parents/carers.

A framework of best practice, with resources to support employers to deliver, should be provided. Employers should have access to the knowledge required to offer a high-quality placement. Clear resources, such as our evidence-based framework for high-quality work experience¹⁸ and our WEX in a Box guide¹⁹ should be used to help employers host impactful multi-day placements. The guide includes checklists, model timetables, tools, and suggested activities.

Use work experience providers to support employers to engage in work experience.

Employers report that they value proactive outreach, which reduces administrative burdens, and welcome input from work experience providers that simplify the process.

Providers play a vital role in bridging the gap between employers, schools, and young people. They work closely with stakeholders to shape meaningful opportunities, manage the end-to-end placement process - from advertising and applications to targeting and preparation and coordination - and offer tailored support throughout. By handling logistics and facilitating reflection and feedback, they reduce the burden on employers and ensure roles and responsibilities are clear at every stage.

¹⁸ Futures For All (2025) *What makes high-quality work experience?*

www.speakersforschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/SFS-High-Quality-Research-Report.pdf

¹⁹ Futures For All (2024) *WEX in a Box*

www.speakersforschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/SfS-Wex-In-A-Box-For-Employers.pdf

Medium term

Enable the Growth and Skills Levy to allow employers to support the cost of facilitating work experience placements for disadvantaged students.

Investing in pre-16 careers preparation, of which high-quality work experience is a key part, supports better-informed young people and contributes to building more sustained pathways into apprenticeships, training and employment.

Reforming the Apprenticeship Levy into a Growth and Skills Levy would enable funds to be used for delivering universal work experience. Work experience placements should be included in the guidelines set by Skills England regarding the allocation of levy funds or alternative allocation of funding to incentivise employers.

Employers who provide placements through Futures For All provide financial assistance to young people in receipt of pupil premium to cover travel and food costs during placements. They also cover small costs associated with set-up and delivery such as insurance and safeguarding practices. While some businesses can absorb these costs, others may struggle. Enabling the Growth and Skills Levy to have provision for employers to cover limited costs of facilitating placements will remove financial disincentives for businesses who would otherwise struggle. It will also ensure disadvantaged students are not locked out of any opportunities. This would recognise work experience as an increasingly important part of the pipeline towards employment.

Enabling the levy to cover these costs will support long-term apprenticeship and training goals. The Government's introduction of Foundation Apprenticeships and ambitions to build a strong apprenticeship pipeline are key to helping young people access meaningful careers. There must be greater emphasis on raising awareness of technical and vocational pathways earlier, alongside proactive career pipeline-building before young people reach 16.

Long term

Build a system where work experience placements are seen for their benefits rather than as a burden.

Through robust evaluation and impact data, the long-term benefits of work experience placements for employers' talent pipelines and place-based and national skills needs can be highlighted. The Government's long-term ambition should be to move to a culture where placements are first and foremost seen for their benefits, rather than as a burden.

Hosting work experience needs to become a natural part of workforce planning for employers of all sizes and types. To support this shift, there could be an offer of enhanced incentives, especially for smaller businesses. This would help create a

system where they can support a strong foundation for the skills pipeline by improving quality, skills development and access to careers in their industry.

Employers could be motivated to offer placements if offering work experience was incorporated into social value guidelines and expectations for them and their supply chains. This would make work experience a requirement for taking on Government contracts and work. It would help build a system where a range of businesses of all sizes outreach into education and career pipeline activities, enhancing the offer to young people.

For the education sector

Embed careers education in the curriculum, underpinned by additional resources and capacity to deliver high-quality provision in every school across the country.

High-quality work experience provision must be central to this policy implementation. For work experience placements to be as impactful as possible, they require proper planning and organisation before, during and after the placement.

To ensure this, schools need adequate curriculum time and staff with the capacity to manage and oversee the process effectively. An effective careers strategy should integrate careers and skills education into the National Curriculum as a core component, with work experience placements a key element. This approach will increase the impact of placements. It will ensure there's adequate time for pre- and post-placement learning, which should be incorporated into the secondary curriculum with sufficient space for maximum impact.

In addition, providing high-quality progressive career provision at every stage of secondary education requires adequate workforce capacity. Successful careers provision in schools relies on strong leadership and clear responsibility. This is typically achieved through the involvement of a senior leader dedicated to careers and a governor overseeing careers provision. Their authority ensures that careers education is prioritised at the highest level. A robust approach also includes investing in the careers workforce, with a designated staff member coordinating work experience networks, placements, and the overall delivery of careers education. This role supports, rather than replaces, the essential work of Careers Advisers, who provide individual guidance to all students.

Futures For All' policy recommendations to achieve this include:

Short term

Implement a comprehensive careers strategy that embeds high-quality, sequenced careers provision, including work experience, into the secondary school curriculum.

With the updated statutory careers guidance now published²⁰, incorporating the revised Gatsby Benchmarks, there is much that schools can get right from Key Stage 3. The guidance references the Government's plans to implement the work experience guarantee and encourages schools to start to adapt their work experience programmes, where possible, in line with the principles outlined in the guidance from September 2025.

This development coincides with the ongoing Curriculum and Assessment Review, presenting a timely opportunity to embed careers education in the curriculum. However, the review's omission of work experience from its scope risks relegating this vital aspect of learning and career preparation to an 'add-on'.

Furthermore, over the past few years, analysis of youth voice has consistently highlighted work experience as one of the most requested initiatives. Integrating work experience into an applied curriculum has the potential to make learning more meaningful and improve student engagement, supporting the Government's efforts to reduce school absenteeism. This is especially important given that 37% of disadvantaged pupils are persistently absent²¹, highlighting the need to improve participation among lower socioeconomic groups.

For a national roll-out of work experience to be meaningful and align with the opportunity and growth mission aims, it must be a key part of a comprehensive careers strategy that embeds high-quality, sequenced careers provision into the secondary school curriculum. High-quality, impactful work experience requires time for young people to prepare for, attend, and reflect on their placements. This must be built in from the outset, so that schools have sufficient capacity within the curriculum and timetable to accommodate it.

²⁰ Department for Education (2025) *Careers guidance and access for education and training providers*
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/careers-guidance-provision-for-young-people-in-school>

²¹ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2024) *Deep-Seated Education Inequalities and Growing Absence and Mental Health Challenges Await Next Government*
<https://ifs.org.uk/news/deep-seated-education-inequalities-and-growing-absence-and-mental-health-challenges-await-next>

Medium term

Ensure schools have sufficient workforce capacity to deliver high-quality provision at every stage.

Schools require better guidance on how to provide meaningful, impactful placements. High-quality placements demand careful planning and support at every stage: preparation, during the placement, and follow-up activities, including reflection, CV development, and integrating the learning into the classroom.

To achieve this, schools need staff with sufficient capacity beyond the responsibilities of the Careers Lead. They should not be expected to oversee the design and delivery of all provision across Key Stages 3 and 4, as outlined in the new government guidance. The Careers and Enterprise Company's Careers Impact System²² is a useful initiative aimed at improving and quality-assuring the careers system. Additionally, schemes like Teacher Encounters²³, which aims to involve every teacher in delivering careers education within the curriculum, offer valuable support. However, there is limited evidence to suggest that this workforce strategy is the most effective means of ensuring high-quality careers provision in every school across the country. The question we ask is, are we asking too much from one member of staff?

An international evidence review Futures For All conducted²⁴ highlighted that the most successful systems have a designated staff member focused solely on managing and maintaining the quality of work experience placements. State schools have expressed a need for funding to employ someone specifically for this role, overseen by the Careers Lead, who should ideally be part of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). Currently, 5% of secondary schools don't have a Careers Lead²⁵ and some do not sit at SLT level, which limits the effectiveness of the role and risks making the careers system more complex.

The Careers Lead must have the time, authority, and expertise, gained through professional development, to drive the school's careers strategy. This includes ensuring that work experience is embedded into the curriculum, supported by senior leadership. Every secondary school should also have a governor dedicated to overseeing careers provision, ensuring both accountability and support. By ensuring that all schools have the right staff in place, the necessary funding, and clear roles and responsibilities, we can achieve high-quality work experience provision and help prepare young people for success in their futures.

²² Careers and Enterprise Company (2025) *Careers Impact System*
www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/educators/careers-impact-system/

²³ Careers and Enterprise Company (2025) *Teacher Encounters*
www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/employers/engage-with-education/teacher-encounters-tools-and-resources/

²⁴ Futures For All and SQW (2022) *International Work Experience Practices*
www.sqw.co.uk/application/files/1216/7102/7753/SQW-Rapid_Review_of_Evidence_on_Work_Experience-FINAL.pdf

²⁵ The Sutton Trust (2022) *Paving the Way: Careers Guidance in Secondary Schools*
www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Paving-the-Way-1.pdf

Long term

Equip schools to link work experience with students' career ambitions and pathways.

For work experience to have the greatest impact, students must be able to connect their placement learning to their long-term career goals. This connection can only be made through accurate, personalised careers guidance, which is crucial in helping students understand how their work experience fits into their broader aspirations and individual strengths.

Currently, 15% of secondary school pupils have not had any sessions with a Careers Adviser²⁶, and those at schools in deprived areas are less likely to have access to one. Our research shows that a third of young people (33%) from disadvantaged backgrounds didn't receive careers advice from family or friends, compared to just 5% of those with a parent or guardian holding a postgraduate degree²⁷. This highlights the need for school Careers Advisers to address this support gap.

Every secondary school should have a qualified Careers Adviser so that every young person, regardless of their location or background, benefits from their professional expertise. This is crucial to maximise the impact of work experience placement learnings and reflections for the young person. With a £2.50 return on investment for every pound spent on youth guidance²⁸, the cost-benefit is compelling.

For young people

1. Provide a marketplace for opportunities

A democratised system in which all young people have equitable access to work experience opportunities across the country should be created. This would mean using a digital database through which they can see the full range of opportunities on offer, with no barriers towards accessing placements based on background or location. Ensuring young people aren't held back from specific opportunities, be it remote, hybrid or in-person, will be a challenge.

2. Establish a quality mark

Opportunities on the digital database should have a clear quality mark and information enabling students to make confident decisions. All young people should know where to go to find placements, feel informed and empowered when making decisions, and have access to all they need to successfully do work experience.

²⁶ The Sutton Trust (2022) *Paving the Way: Careers Guidance in Secondary Schools*
www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Paving-the-Way-1.pdf

²⁷ Futures For All and Social Market Foundation (2024) *Things Worth Knowing: The role of assumed knowledge in youth transitions from education to employment*
www.speakersforschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Things-worth-knowing-Oct-2024.pdf

²⁸ Careers Development Policy Group (2023) *Investing in Careers: What is Career Guidance Worth?*
https://adventuresincareerdevelopment.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/91271-investing-in-careers-report-final2_edit.pdf

3. Remove all barriers of access

To ensure equitable opportunity for all, any barriers in system should be removed. Personal costs associated with placements could present hidden challenges for the most disadvantaged young people. The Government should ensure that all students, regardless of their financial background, can fully access the opportunities they desire.

Futures For All' policy recommendations to achieve these include:

Short term

Create a digital database showcasing all work experience placement opportunities.

Democratising access to placement opportunities can be achieved by building a database through a digital platform which showcases all opportunities locally and nationally. A single marketplace enables any young person or school to see opportunities in their area, allowing them to participate in placements in their local community and industries. It also means they can apply to opportunities across the nation, so they're not limited in what they can access and attend.

A wide range of employers and providers can use the website to advertise opportunities. Access to the digital database should be embedded into school time so everyone is aware and making use of it.

This year, Futures For All have committed significant further investment to rebuild our own website and work experience platform. From September 2025, all businesses, whether they deliver work experience through Futures For All or not, can advertise their placements on our website marketplace.

This means businesses will be able to reach wider pools of interest and talent by promoting opportunities across a wider group of communities and schools. It will create a central, accessible portal for young people from every background to find quality work experience placements, laying the groundwork for a fairer, democratised system.

Medium term

Establish a clear quality mark for work experience opportunities.

Regardless of background, location and school, all young people seeking opportunities should be able to easily identify high-quality placements. To achieve this, all opportunities should have a clear quality mark. This way, young people will have equal access to making informed decisions and feel confident that their expectations and high standards for placements will be met by employers.

Reviews will allow young people and schools to share their experiences and an employer's capacity to meet the specific needs of young people – including specific special educational needs, disabilities or other requirements. This will be clear when browsing opportunities.

Long term

Increase Pupil Premium funding to enable schools to cover the personal costs of work experience placements.

Pupil Premium can be spent on high-quality teaching, targeted academic support and wider strategies including social, emotional needs and enrichment activities.

There should be clear guidance from the Government stating that Pupil Premium funding can be used by schools to pay for personal costs associated with work experience placements. This would include expenses for clothing, equipment, or accommodation required for multi-day in-person placements.

These costs could present hidden barriers for disadvantaged young people, preventing them from considering competitive opportunities, especially for those living in areas with limited or low-quality offers. By specifying that Pupil Premium funding can cover work experience placement costs, the Government will help ensure that all students, regardless of their financial background, can fully access their desired opportunity.

Without this uplift, there's a risk the work experience system will inadvertently exclude students who lack the financial means to afford what they require. Adequate funding is essential to improve outcomes for disadvantaged students and ensure equitable access to valuable work experience placement opportunities.

Conclusion

Futures For All has worked with a broad network of employers, educators, and young people. Over the years, we've listened to their challenges and solutions. We hope our recommendations will create a system that makes it easier for employers, educators and young people to engage in meaningful, equitable, and transformative work experience. We hope this policy avoids becoming a rushed, tick-box exercise, and instead truly supports inclusive engagement that leaves no community behind.