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Research and analysis

Independent review of careers guidance in specialist settings

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Applies to England

Contents

Executive summary

High-quality careers guidance is important for all children and young people, including those in specialist settings and in alternative provision (AP). It can help to address social inequality by helping children, young people and their families understand the full range of options available to them, and how they can make the most of them.[footnote 1] High-quality careers guidance in school has been associated with better outcomes for learners, and an increased likelihood that young people will be in sustained education, employment or training.[footnote 2] Young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are less likely than their peers to be in sustained education, employment or training, meaning high-quality careers guidance may be particularly important for this group.[footnote 3]

In 2022, the Department for Education (DfE) asked Ofsted to review careers provision in specialist settings. The scope of the review was careers guidance for 11- to 19-year-olds (and for young people up to age 25 with a current education, health and care (EHC) plan) in special schools, independent specialist colleges (ISCs) and pupil referral units (PRUs). In the summer term 2023, we made 12 research visits to 5 special schools, 3 PRUs and 4 ISCs. We also gathered evidence from:

- interviews with HM Inspectors (HMIs) and with local authority officers
- focus groups with key stakeholders and employers
- a review of a sample of inspection evidence

Our overall sample size was small, and we need to be cautious in treating our findings as representative of specialist settings nationally. However, our report highlights common themes, provides examples of good practice and outlines the challenges that providers experience in giving careers guidance. We saw many common themes between the providers in our sample. There were also important differences, which we explore further in the detailed findings. While we looked only at careers provision in specialist settings, the majority of young people with SEND

and/or high needs are educated and trained in mainstream schools and further education colleges that did not feature in this review.[footnote 4]

We found that leaders regularly made sure that the voice of the child or young person was central to careers guidance. Understanding the needs, interests and aspirations of learners was important for giving high-quality careers guidance. Staff in our sample had developed close and trusting relationships with learners and their families and developed careers plans that were practical and ambitious.

All the providers we visited had a highly personalised approach. Leaders told us that the curriculum was personalised to meet the range of needs and aspirations of their learners. In many cases, they carried out an initial assessment with the young person when they joined the setting to determine their level of ability and create a bespoke plan that met their aspirations.

Most leaders had plans in place to equip learners with the knowledge they need to make informed choices about their next steps. Some providers reviewed the careers curriculum frequently to ensure it was ambitious for each individual. However, in a small number of the providers we visited, the careers programme did not provide sufficient opportunities for learners with higher levels of independence or academic ability to gain experiences that matched their aspirations.

Leaders in our sample prioritised high-quality work experience and were establishing relationships with employers. However, this was often met with mixed results. Sometimes, employers lacked the knowledge or confidence to give learners with SEND high-quality work experience. Additionally, some employers felt that they did not get enough information about the child or young person's needs, and/or support from providers, to enable them to deliver high-quality experiences. Some providers had delivered training, or developed award programmes for local employers, which seemed to increase engagement with employers. Enterprise coordinators were working hard to increase the number of inclusive employers in their areas, but their time and resources were limited.

Not all learners received impartial careers guidance from a qualified careers adviser.[footnote 5] The impact of this on learners achieving enough information about the child or young person's needs, and/or support from providers, to enable them to deliver high-quality experiences was unclear. In the best examples, we saw providers using a qualified careers adviser to deliver one-to-one careers guidance. This guidance was most effective when the adviser was knowledgeable about the options and pathways and had a good relationship with learners and their families. It was also important that the adviser understood the learner's needs and aspirations, gave highly personalised advice and had experience or training in an area that was

relevant to the learners in that provider.

All leaders in our review placed a high priority on engaging parents and families with careers guidance and transition planning. However, leaders found it hard to engage effectively with some parents and carers. Parents and carers are often anxious about the future, and providers made efforts to reduce their anxiety. Where engagement with parents worked well, it was part of well-established communication systems, such as newsletters or regular phone calls, and a well-planned series of events that linked parent evenings with career events and other key meetings.

Compared with learners in mainstream settings, learners in specialist settings were often more anxious about leaving their current provider. Leaders, career leaders and staff were aware of this, and took personalised approaches to reduce learners' anxiety and build confidence. Many of these seemed to help.

Local authorities and the partners they work with did not always give families and current education providers enough support with transitions. Local authorities and their partners have statutory obligations to ensure children and young people with SEND are supported.[footnote 6] Effective and smooth transitions into further education, training or employment are important to improve outcomes and help children and young people with SEND to succeed in their careers.[footnote 7] There were some cases where the local authority did not confirm school/college places within agreed timescales, or sent out incorrect paperwork related to transitions. This was distressing for families and children and young people, and providers' staff had to invest significant time and resource in resolving these problems.

Note on terminology

Careers guidance is sometimes formally referred to as careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG), indicating the range of potential activities for learners. In line with the DfE's statutory guidance on careers, we use the phrase 'careers guidance' in this report to mean the full range of activities set out in the Gatsby benchmarks.[footnote 8] We use a broad definition of the term 'career', to mean a pathway through life.[footnote 9] We consider a career, and thus careers guidance, to include a wide range of potential positive outcomes.

We use the term 'providers' to refer collectively to special schools, PRUs and ISCs.

We use the term 'learners' to refer collectively to pupils, students and learners.

We use the term ‘leaders’ to refer collectively to senior leaders in providers. When referring to staff leading careers education, we use the term ‘careers leaders’.

Introduction and background

Why careers guidance is important

High-quality careers guidance can help children and young people to understand the range of options available to them and reach their potential. It can help them to discover opportunities outside their immediate network, and understand the steps they need to take to build a career.[footnote 10]

High-quality careers guidance is important for all children and young people. It can be particularly important for children and young people with SEND, or from disadvantaged backgrounds, who may lack the social capital that their more advantaged peers have and are less likely to be able to access information and opportunities outside school. There are often assumptions made about the aspirations or abilities of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, for example that these groups do not aspire to achieve.[footnote 11] There is strong evidence that disabled young people and those leaving AP are more likely to not be in education, employment or training (NEET).[footnote 12]

For longer-term outcomes, evidence suggests that young people with SEND are less likely than their peers to be in sustained employment 15 years after completing key stage 4.[footnote 13] The available recent data on destinations in England supports this. Learners with SEND leaving mainstream schools are less likely than their peers to have a sustained destination 1, 3 and 5 years after completing key stage 4.[footnote 14] After one year, they were 6 percentage points less likely to have a sustained destination, and this rose to 21 percentage points after 5 years.[footnote 15] Additionally, those in AP are less likely to stay in employment, education or an apprenticeship for at least 6 months after the end of key stage 4. In 2020/21, 33.5% of learners in AP did not remain in their destination, compared with 9.5% of learners in state-funded special schools and 5.9% of learners in state-funded maintained schools.[footnote 16] The data on the destinations of 16- to 18-year-olds paints a similar picture, although the gap is not as wide. For instance, 23.3% of learners leaving special schools did not stay in education, training or employment for at least

6 months, compared with 20.6% of learners leaving mainstream schools and colleges.[footnote 17]

We have previously noted weaknesses in the national SEND system.[footnote 18] We have also published research on the use of AP in mainstream primary schools.[footnote 19] Some of our recent research found that the pandemic created new challenges, and exacerbated existing ones, for children and young people with SEND and their families.[footnote 20] There is also evidence of shortcomings in the way young people with SEND and their families receive support with their post-16 options. In a 2020 survey, over half of parents said that discussions on post-16 options came too late.[footnote 21] Survey data from our recent area SEND inspections shows that just over a quarter of parents/carers said they had not received clear information and advice about their child or young person's future from professionals.[footnote 22] Also, just over a third of parents/carers feel that their child or young person does not get the right support to prepare them for their next steps.[footnote 23]

The SEND code of practice defines 4 broad areas of SEND:[footnote 24]

- communication and interaction needs
- cognition and learning needs
- social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH)
- sensory and/or physical needs

Current guidance on careers

The national careers strategy and the statutory guidance highlight the importance of careers guidance for children and young people with SEND and make it clear that all young people should be helped to achieve their aspirations and build a career.[footnote 25]

The statutory guidance on careers was strengthened from January 2023 to specify a minimum number of 'meaningful encounters', and how and when they should take place.[footnote 26] All maintained schools and academies must provide 6 encounters with a provider of technical education or apprenticeships for learners in Years 8 to 13.

As well as adopting the Gatsby benchmarks, the national careers strategy highlights the importance of careers guidance for young people with SEND being aspirational, personalised and well informed.[footnote 27] The Gatsby foundation and Careers

Enterprise Company (CEC) have also published good practice guides, which aim to support special schools, specialist colleges and AP providers in applying the Gatsby benchmarks to their setting.[footnote 28] These reports have highlighted that the voice of the child or young person should be a key element of the careers programme. Schools, colleges and other settings should find out what the child or young person wants to do and encourage them to follow their aspirations.[footnote 29] It is also important for the learner's family to get involved in careers guidance and transition planning. The parents of children and young people in specialist settings may have communication needs themselves or may have poor education and employment outcomes. They may, therefore, need additional support to engage with the careers guidance programme.[footnote 30] Children and young people with SEND can also feel considerable anxiety about transition in general. Overcoming these feelings, and building confidence and independence help to ensure that children and young people have access to the range of appropriate options for next steps.

Involving employers in careers guidance for children and young people with SEND is important, especially in relation to Gatsby benchmarks 5 and 6.[footnote 31] Gatsby benchmark 5 states that learners should have multiple opportunities to learn from employers about the world of work. This can be through a range of activities, such as hearing from visiting speakers, attending careers fairs and receiving mentoring. Gatsby benchmark 6 concerns experiences of the workplace. These are commonly a part of careers guidance in secondary education and even more so in further education and skills, where they are a fundamental part of many programmes of study. They can include work visits, shadowing or work experience. Work experience placements are distinct from industry placements, which are a mandatory part of T levels. A 2022 report on careers guidance pilots for children and young people with SEND, and from disadvantaged groups, highlighted that developing employers' confidence was key to successful engagement. However, it also found that employers could be hesitant to get involved in delivering these programmes, despite recognising their social value. This was because they lacked confidence and experience in engaging with children and young people with SEND. Where providers were able to offer disability awareness training for employers, this helped to overcome their initial hesitancy and build their confidence.[footnote 32]

How we are defining careers guidance

Children and young people with SEND are a heterogeneous group, and career outcomes are likely to look different for each individual.[footnote 33] The specific aims of careers guidance will, therefore, differ between the type of provider and different

stages of education. For example, children and young people's aspirations and needs will change as they get closer to adult life.[footnote 34]

Careers guidance is often approached more flexibly in specialist settings, and within the context of transition more generally. In this context, a career can be considered a 'pathway through life', rather than a more traditional definition related solely to employment.[footnote 35] Some aspects of careers guidance for children and young people with SEND will be the same as for those without SEND. Other aspects will be equally important to children and young people with and without SEND but will need to be delivered differently to those with SEND. Some other aspects will need to be unique to children and young people with SEND.[footnote 36]

Where learners with SEND are educated

Learners with SEND in England are educated either in mainstream settings, such as general further education colleges, or specialist settings, including special schools, ISCs and PRUs. PRUs are a form of AP.[footnote 37] It was estimated in 2023 that over 82% of learners attending AP had some kind of SEND.[footnote 38] However, it is important to note that not all learners in PRUs will have SEND, and while PRUs are not designed as an alternative to special schools, due to shortages of places, they often provide for learners who would otherwise be in special schools. AP caters for learners with a wide range of needs that cannot typically be met in a mainstream setting. AP settings will vary in their objectives and approaches, from short-term behaviour interventions to longer-term placements.[footnote 39] Special schools provide education for children and young people with SEND whose needs cannot be met in a mainstream setting. They can cater for primary- and secondary-age learners. There are many different types of special schools, which may specialise in different areas of need.

The role of local authorities

Local authorities have a range of duties for children and young people with SEND. They have an important role to play in children and young people's transitions into and out of specialist settings and must consider the SEND code of practice when fulfilling many of their SEND duties.[footnote 40] They must develop and publish a SEND local offer that sets out what support they expect to be available for children and young people with SEND up to the age of 25. This covers a range of education

and training provision, including special schools, PRUs and post-16 education. They also have broad duties to ‘encourage, enable and assist’ all children and young people (including those with SEND) to participate in education and training. This includes securing enough suitable education and training provision for all children and young people in their area who are over compulsory school age but under 19 (or up to 25 with an EHC plan).[footnote 41]

Supported internships

Supported internships are work-based study programmes for 16- to 24-year-olds with SEND who have an EHC plan. They last between 6 and 12 months. Typically, around 70% of learning on a supported internship happens in the workplace, and central to the study programme is a substantial work placement, facilitated by an expert job coach.[footnote 42] The core aim of a supported internship is to support the young person into paid employment.

Careers guidance and the inspection framework

AP, special schools and ISCs are all inspected under the education inspection framework (EIF), using their specific handbook.[footnote 43] Careers guidance forms part of the ‘personal development’ judgement. For a more detailed overview of how inspectors evaluate and comment on the quality of careers guidance, please see our previous report on careers guidance.[footnote 44]

Inspectors consider various factors when inspecting specialist settings. For instance, they may consider whether leaders are suitably ambitious and have high expectations for learners with SEND. They also consider whether the curriculum is appropriately sequenced to meet all learners’ needs, taking account of their starting points and aspirations. Inspectors evaluate how well prepared learners are for their next steps in education, employment or training, and their adult lives. This includes a range of positive outcomes as outlined above,[footnote 45] such as the extent to which learners with SEND acquire the knowledge and skills to succeed in life.[footnote 46]

Findings

Leadership of careers

This review included a variety of provision that catered for learners with a range of needs, including some residential provision. The overall approach to curriculum, learning and careers guidance, therefore, differed between providers. Across all types of provider, where things were working well, this was because leaders focused on careers guidance, transitions and learners' next steps. This focus was often deeply embedded in the provider's strategy and informed its priorities for improvement. Leaders and careers leaders had high expectations for their learners and focused on developing their skills for work, independence and confidence. They were keenly aware of the valuable contribution that all learners can make to society and aspired to put in place a high-quality curriculum and careers programme to help them achieve this.

All the providers we visited had a member of staff who was responsible for careers. Careers leaders often had multiple roles, particularly in the smaller providers. This was especially the case in the very small PRUs in our sample. For example, one PRU had fewer than 10 learners. Other responsibilities often meant that the capacity for careers guidance was limited. As one enterprise coordinator said:

> " In SEND and AP settings, [careers leaders] have less time than any other careers leader as they wear many different hats in that school. You have careers leaders who are also safeguarding leads and full-time teachers. They are dealing with a lot of things in those settings. They are so willing, but it is about providing them with the right amount of time."

Additionally, the training and background of the careers leaders varied. For instance, some careers leaders had formal qualifications in a careers guidance subject, whereas others had not completed any training. Leaders are eligible for fully funded and bursary-supported training for careers leaders.[footnote 47] One of the careers leaders told us they did not have the time to dedicate to additional training because of their other responsibilities.

However, there were some signs of staff giving more priority to training careers leads. As one local authority officer said:

> " In general, special schools are also taking on board careers leadership. In one of our schools, the careers lead is doing a qualification. Few more [are] thinking about training careers leads."

Almost all careers leaders told us they found the Gatsby benchmarks useful as a framework to structure their careers provision across all areas of the curriculum. This

was a similar finding to our mainstream report.[footnote 48] However, we saw more variation in how useful leaders and careers leaders found all the Gatsby benchmarks. The same applied to Compass and Compass+.[footnote 49] Leaders some of the benchmarks difficult to meet. This included personal guidance, encounters with employers and experiences of workplaces. Learners with communication and interaction needs, such as autism, could find it difficult to communicate effectively in a personal guidance context, despite the work the provider was doing with the learners. Additionally, learners could sometimes be unwilling to leave their 'comfort zone' to experience the world of work. For instance, one leader from a special school with a high proportion of learners with autism said:

> " Benchmark 8 is a challenge.[footnote 50] Because of the ability of pupils to be able to talk openly with a sense of meaning (it) feels like a box tick exercise. There are a lot of people in school with the right knowledge, they know the pupils exceptionally well, but don't hold the qualification."

Sometimes leaders found it difficult to contextualise the benchmarks to their setting. In some cases, this appeared to be because the careers leader had not undertaken any careers training and did not have the specialist knowledge needed to support staff in interpreting the benchmarks. This meant the overarching careers strategy was sometimes lacking or underdeveloped.

During our visits we saw many examples of joined-up working between the different staff in the providers, for instance the careers lead and transition lead. We also saw leaders connecting with external support, such as enterprise coordinators and career hubs. Working with an enterprise coordinator who had specialist knowledge of SEND appeared to be beneficial for a provider's careers programme. For example, staff at one special school explained how working with their enterprise coordinator had helped them to improve their website and use of Compass data, resulting in 'a huge improvement on last year's data'. The specialist enterprise coordinator had also helped them to bring in visitors, such as local employers. This helped to increase the number of encounters that learners had with employers and made connections for potential work experience opportunities.

However, there were some instances where joined-up working was not happening effectively. Planning for careers guidance was ad hoc and unstructured in 2 ISCs and one PRU we visited. These providers lacked an overall careers strategy and did not plan careers guidance in a systematic way. They did not monitor or measure the impact of their guidance. In one of these providers, learners had very little knowledge of possible next steps, such as apprenticeships, supported internships or higher education. Additionally, parents did not receive any formal communication about what their child or young person had been doing outside of EHC plan review

meetings.

Personalisation, independence and high aspirations

All the providers we visited took a highly personalised approach to finding the right next step for learners. Leaders told us that they personalised the curriculum to meet the range of needs and aspirations of their learners. In many cases, they carried out an initial assessment with young people when they joined the setting, to determine their level of ability and create a bespoke plan. This plan took account of the learner's aspirations and what would be a realistic career goal for them to work towards. A few of the PRUs in our sample said they got very little information about their learners from mainstream schools. Learners had sometimes received little to no career guidance before they arrived at the setting. This was mostly either because of poor attendance or because their previous mainstream school had not provided good-quality careers guidance.

Leaders aimed to tailor the curriculum accordingly so that learners could better understand their ability and future aspirations. They used information on previous attainment, information from the learner's EHC plan and conversations with the learner, their family, other professionals and the learner's previous setting. Leaders ensured that learners' voices were heard in decision-making, particularly at times of transition. Leaders adapted resources to support learners with specific needs, such as autism or severe learning difficulties, to make choices and express their preferences. For instance, one special school we visited used augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) aids and symbol-supported text to ensure learners were able to contribute to their annual reviews. During our focus groups, learners shared their portfolios using Makaton, key word communication and AAC voice output to communicate the range of work experience placements they had attended.

For looked-after children, we heard from our focus groups that ensuring careers are dealt with on the personal education plan, through either a careers section or checklist, has been helpful. Additionally, we heard it was important for everyone involved in the child or young person's care, for example foster parents or care home staff, to have some knowledge about careers guidance. Sometimes providers missed opportunities to engage looked-after children with careers guidance because of poor attendance and other barriers. Some hubs we spoke to in our focus groups gave specific attention to working with providers to ensure that looked-after children were not missing out. However, there was variation in the extent to which areas were focusing on looked-after children.

Leaders and careers leaders prioritise helping learners to find out what they are interested in. They work with the young person and their families to understand the

basis of their interests. They then create a plan to meet their needs in ways that are realistic and achievable, but still aspirational.

For example, one learner in an ISC wanted to become a Hollywood director or actor. Over the course of several meetings, the careers adviser worked with the learner to understand why this interested them and to find an achievable way to fulfil their interest. The learner transitioned into social care, and now volunteers at a radio station and belongs to a drama club. Both the adviser and the ISC said the learner is very happy with what they are doing.

In all the providers we visited, careers staff knew the learners well and had developed close and trusting relationships with them. This helped foster engagement from learners who might otherwise have been unwilling to participate in meaningful and realistic conversations about their career aspirations, such as those with SEMH needs. For these learners, staff told us they had to work with the young person to help them think about their future, and building a good relationship helped with this. Many parents told us that the providers' focus on careers guidance, and willingness to understand their child or young person's interests, had helped their child to develop new ambitions and career goals. For example, in one PRU, the parent of a child with SEMH needs said that, before their child came to the provider:

> " [They] did not have an ambition. Now [they're] doing careers work, [they know] the different options, and there are a few things that they want to explore. [The provider staff] found out that they have an interest in cars and booked a visit. [The learner] told the career adviser about their interest and she looked into what they can do."

Leaders in providers also thought it was important that, across their whole provision, learners developed independence and essential life skills to help them succeed in their careers. This was particularly the case in special schools and ISCs, which provided travel training so that learners learned how to travel independently. Learners were also given plenty of opportunities to apply the skills they learned to real life situations. For example, in a special school, this included exchanging money in a café or washing up in a kitchen. Learners valued the focus on developing their independence and saw how this would benefit them in their careers. For example, when we asked a learner in an ISC what the most useful thing was in helping them make decisions about what they will do next, they said:

> " Independent living training. This has helped me see this as an option that I can move on to quickly in the future. Aim is to live semi independently or independently if I could."

In all types of provider, learners and their families could be anxious about leaving their current provider and transitioning to a new setting. Leaders were fully aware of this challenge and were implementing a range of personalised strategies to help reduce feelings of worry. For instance, special school E had a progressive sequence of transition-related activities that were adapted and personalised for learners. Staff were committed to spending as much time on transition as needed for each learner. They created a personalised communication passport for learners and supported them with social stories about transition and their next steps. Staff had organised a series of supported transition visits to college, which the learner and parent/carer attended, along with the transition lead. The school communicated regularly with parents throughout the transition process, and also maintained contact with learners and their parents until learners were settled in their new provider. These kinds of activities seemed to help learners and their families feel more confident about the future.

Monitoring and evaluation

Leaders from providers told us that frequently reviewing and evaluating their careers strategy helped them ensure that their careers programme met the needs of each group of learners. As one leader of a PRU said:

> “ We develop an annual careers plan that seeks to adapt to the interests and needs of our small cohort. That is, think about the students first.”

Most staff had a structured way of monitoring and evaluating their provision. For example, one ISC reviewed their strategy 3 times a year. This process used feedback from every stakeholder, including employers, parents and learners. Three special schools, 2 PRUs and one ISC that we visited used Compass or Compass+ to audit their provision. In one case, the provider used Compass reports in discussions with the enterprise coordinator. Others used the Gatsby benchmarks directly, for example in a special school and an ISC. The majority of the providers in our sample asked parents for their views when reviewing their careers offer. Additionally, they appeared to gather the views of learners more extensively than was evident in mainstream provision. For instance, a leader in a special school told us:

> “ We self-assess against Gatsby benchmarks. We have started working with Compass+ – we should have it solidly in place from September. We [are] always seeking to review termly and weekly for the pupils as they are doing the tracking forms with teachers – pupils are involved with coordinators, so we capture pupils’ voice.”

However, participants in the ISC felt that the Compass system was not ‘bespoke’ enough for the ISC’s needs – they said that there is a special schools and college version, but nothing similar for ISC settings.

Three ISCs, one PRU and 4 special schools that we visited had a governor with specific responsibility for careers. In a couple of cases, the governor responsible for careers had previous expertise in careers. This meant that they were able to provide additional, targeted support and challenge to leaders.

Provider and careers leaders also told us they tracked destinations of their learners to understand the impact of their careers programme. In our mainstream review, we reported that obtaining destinations data was made more difficult by data protection requirements.[footnote 51] One special school found a way to overcome this problem by arranging for parents to sign a declaration agreeing that the school could keep in touch with them for 3 years after they had left.

Linking curriculum learning to careers

The careers curriculum

Almost all leaders in our sample had developed their curriculum with careers education and preparation for adulthood in mind. Careers guidance was integrated into transition planning and preparation for next steps. There was a cross-curricular focus on understanding future career pathways and developing confidence, independence and employability skills. When this was working well, leaders planned how to equip learners with the knowledge they needed to make informed decisions. The curriculum was well planned and clearly structured. It addressed individuals’ needs, gaps and barriers and helped them to plan and make good decisions. Leaders ensured that the curriculum built progressively and were clear about how to target and focus careers activities.

Leaders felt that maintaining high expectations and aspirations for their learners was one of the most important aspects of careers guidance. Almost all leaders recognised that the curriculum for careers should be ambitious and provide sufficient challenge.

However, this was not always the case. For example, in one ISC, there were

insufficient external work placements for learners with higher levels of independence and academic ability. As a result, these learners could not practise and apply skills in a real-life setting, and in a minority of cases were not prepared for their next steps.

Linking the wider curriculum to careers

We saw some effective examples of staff integrating careers guidance into the wider curriculum, especially on more vocational pathways. How they did this depended on the type of provider and the profile of the learners.

In one PRU, learners received one careers lesson per week, which included topics such as the world of work, employability, jobs and CV writing, preparation for interviews, mock interviews, job applications and discrimination in the workplace. In each topic, the learning was further broken down, and the core knowledge that leaders wanted each learner to know was clear. In another PRU, the approach was slightly different. Careers guidance was built into the personal, social and health education curriculum, with off-timetable days, careers fairs, events and assemblies being used to supplement other lessons. Staff said this approach was necessary, as poor attendance meant that many learners often missed what was covered in scheduled lessons. Key workers and the careers adviser gave further one-to-one help to learners who were absent, so that they could catch up. Additional one-to-one sessions also helped learners with attention, speech and language difficulties get a better understanding of their career options and next steps.

In one special school, careers education was primarily delivered through the ‘personal development’ curriculum. Careers education began in Year 7 with a focus on understanding the world of work. In Year 9, learners spent a term developing their understanding of different career pathways and identifying their aspirations. They also participated in additional lessons, in which they experienced vocational activities such as animal care and maintenance. Learners spoke highly of these opportunities. Throughout Years 10 and 11, weekly personal development lessons focused on careers, and the school offered internal or external work experience placements. Learning to travel independently and extending independence skills in the wider community were also important parts of the key stage 4 programme. For those who had not learned to travel independently by the end of key stage 4, this formed a part of their post-16 action plan.

One ISC aimed to prepare all its learners for employment. Every aspect of the learners’ curriculum featured life skills that would help them prepare for work. This

included skills such as communication, timekeeping, professional behaviour and appropriate language. All learners, whether on academic, vocational or mixed pathways, completed work-related training. The college developed links with local businesses, for example a hair salon, to provide external work placements. It also created in-house working environments, for example a café/restaurant, where learners could get experience of the workplace. Learners studied English and mathematics in the classroom and while doing work-based training.

In all special schools, 2 PRUs and 2 ISCs that we visited, departmental staff made sure that clear strands for careers and employability skills were woven into schemes of work. For example, as a leader of one ISC told us:

> “ Careers is embedded into everything [the learners] do. It is threaded throughout the week. Working together, we try to use every opportunity to expose learners to the local labour market, exposure to different sectors, and application to things like health and safety and being work ready.”

When this was working well, providers focused on how to develop learners’ skills and knowledge related to next steps and future careers. In lessons, they explained clearly how what learners were learning would benefit them in the future.

The effectiveness of careers guidance in the curriculum varied across providers. In the best providers, it prepared learners for next steps. In others, it was less effective. It did not build learners’ knowledge about career pathways or help them to develop the skills to succeed in their next steps. For instance, in one ISC, there were no dedicated lessons on work readiness until learners were in their final term of transitioning out of the college. This was because of a lack of planning and strategic thinking about careers guidance from leaders, who also were not prioritising helping learners to understand the importance of next steps, including getting a job.

In the majority of providers in both our visits and in our review of inspection evidence, subject teachers had received limited training on careers. A few providers had plans to increase this, but the impact of these plans was unclear. For example, in a small number of providers, a lack of training meant that teachers were less able to provide well-informed careers guidance. This resulted in inconsistencies across the careers provision, such as some learners being better informed about particular pathways than others.

Conversely, in 2 special schools we visited, not all staff had formal careers training. However, in one of these schools, staff were knowledgeable about the range of next steps, knew the learners and their families well and were able to weave personalised guidance through the curriculum. Learners, therefore, did not appear to miss out,

and a high percentage progressed to positive destinations. This, however, relies heavily on having the right staff member in post and creates risks if there are changes to staff.

Only one special school, one PRU and one ISC we visited made sure that staff delivering the curriculum received training in careers guidance. This was sometimes provided by the careers leader. Examples of training included understanding the Gatsby benchmarks, linking curriculum learning to careers, using labour market information related to their subject and learning how to embed employability skills in the curriculum. One ISC used 'career champions', who were members of staff who would feed back to staff about industry visits and any information that needed to be shared with the learners. Staff we spoke to in these providers felt well supported by leaders to deliver careers. For example, a science teacher in one PRU told us they valued the support from the careers leader to help ensure the Gatsby benchmarks were being met in their subject.

Impartial careers guidance

We saw a range of approaches to providing personal guidance, and not all the providers in our sample used a qualified careers adviser.[footnote 52] In the providers we visited, 3 special schools did not have a qualified careers adviser at all; one PRU and one ISC used internal qualified careers advisers and the remaining 2 special schools, 3 ISCs and 2 PRUs commissioned external careers advisers.

In the 3 special schools that did not use a qualified careers adviser, school leaders told us that this was because school staff were best equipped to give learners one-to-one guidance. Personal guidance was delivered informally through the curriculum by staff who worked closely with the learners. These staff had not received any formal training in careers guidance, nor any detailed in-house training. These schools were, therefore, not technically compliant with the statutory guidance for learners to meet with a qualified careers adviser.[footnote 53]

The remaining providers we visited used a qualified careers adviser, who was either an internal member of staff, or someone they commissioned externally. Providers that commissioned external qualified advisers said it was helpful for parents and learners to speak to someone 'beyond the school' who was impartial and knew about the range of options available. As one careers leader told us:

> " That's what the careers adviser does – breaks down why, offers alternatives. Trying to also give them a range of different things to experience. They

[learners/families] don’t know what exists.”

When using an external qualified careers adviser, it was important for the adviser to build a strong relationship with the learners and their families, and to know about the learners’ needs, background and previous experience. For example, one PRU used an adviser with a background in youth offending, which leaders said helped to meet their learners’ needs. One ISC used a careers adviser with a background in visual impairment, which matched the intake of the college. Feedback from learners was positive. For instance, one learner with visual impairment said:

> “ Amazing meeting with careers adviser today. Inspiring, looked at goals, looked at steps to prepare for this. Very positive – made feel comfortable and understood what to do to make it work for example gap year and work experience and then move back into education.”

However, in one special school, teachers said that because learners were anxious about leaving, they struggled to talk to an external member of staff they did not know very well. This was despite the work the school was doing to reduce learners’ anxieties about their next steps. In another ISC, the external careers adviser came in for 2 days per year. These days were fixed, and as learners could start at any point in the year, it could be a long time before they met the adviser. Additionally, not all learners could meet with the adviser in this time. Learners we spoke to in this provider struggled to recall meeting with an adviser and did not identify it as something that had helped them. Learners felt the advice was not personalised. As one learner said:

> “ Met with careers adviser – lots of maybes. Advice was too generic. Tutors are best place[d] to support.”

The 2 providers that used qualified internal members of staff had more flexibility, and leaders said that they knew the learners well. For example, in one ISC, the careers leader was also the careers adviser. This allowed them to engage with learners who they knew would be less likely to want one-to-one meetings, such as those with SEMH needs. Learners we spoke to said this was helpful. Using an internal adviser worked well; however, this is not an approach all providers could take. For example, in smaller providers, such as small PRUs, there was neither the resources nor the capacity to hire or train staff to act as an internal adviser.

Overall, personal careers guidance was important for children and young people, whether delivered by someone internal or external. In general, personal guidance appeared to be more effective if:

- learners could build a trusting relationship with the person giving the guidance
- the guidance was highly personalised
- the person giving the advice was highly knowledgeable about the range of next steps
- the person giving the advice had a background or training in an area relevant to the learners in that provider

It was unclear from the providers in our sample whether it was beneficial to have an adviser with a specific qualification in careers guidance. One special school suggested that jointly commissioning a careers adviser with other special schools in the area could help the adviser to build that specialist knowledge.

Working with employers, the local authority and other external partners

Gatsby benchmark 6 states that every learner 'should have first-hand experiences of the workplace, through either work visits, work shadowing and/or work experience'. [footnote 54] Leaders considered experiences of the workplace to be an essential part of learners' careers guidance. In general, the learners we spoke to were positive about their experiences and were able to recall examples of visits and work experience placements. As one Year 13 learner with autism in a special school said:

> " I did work experience at a gym – [I] took the train and bus to work.' Another learner with SEMH needs in a PRU told us how 'work experience shows us how the jobs work."

Providers used a mix of internal and external work placements, depending on the individual needs of the learner and availability of external placements. In a number of the ISCs we visited, work experience placements led to paid employment. This was also reflected in our inspection evidence review. However, not all providers in our sample were ensuring there were enough opportunities for learners to experience the workplace.

Parental involvement was common among the providers we visited, either through supporting or organising work experience placements, or through helping placements to be tailored to the young person's individual needs and aspirations. However, travel and access to placements proved more difficult when families lived some distance away. This was particularly the case in some special schools and ISCs where many learners might not be able to travel independently. These learners

often had more complex needs. Additionally, some of the employers we spoke to told us they did not always get sufficient information or support from the providers they engaged with. For example, as a manager of one courier company said:

> “ As long as we agree to take them for a week, there doesn’t appear to be a concern with what the student is actually doing. We ask the school how can we ensure they engage and they just say, “Do anything you can, it’s fine.” […] I know there is work being done on work experience to improve it, but that hasn’t reached SEND schools yet. Not enough guidance for employers on what to do with work experience.”

Gatsby benchmark 5 concerns encounters with employers, and states that ‘every learner should have multiple opportunities to learn from employers about work, employment and the skills that are valued in the workplace’.[footnote 55] The extent to which providers were ensuring there were sufficient high-quality encounters with employers varied across the providers in our sample. Sometimes the learners had a broad range of needs, which made it difficult for the provider to ensure that whole-school or college events, such as careers days, were appropriate for all of them. Where this appeared to be working well, providers offered a well-sequenced range of encounters that were tailored to the career needs and aspirations of individual learners. As one leader told us:

> “ These [meaningful encounters] are all very individualised. [Learners] can see wealth of opportunity, and this is done to support pupils to choose their options for next steps… Doing an en masse approach is not helpful.”

Often, a great deal of work went into establishing collaborative relationships with employers. Three of the employers in our focus groups said the CEC and local careers hubs helped them make connections with specialist settings. Two of these employers were cornerstone employers and said they had been ‘overwhelmed with how many SEND schools wanted to work with an employer’ once contact had been made through the careers hub. Providers had a range of approaches to finding employers, and it was often down to the tenacity of staff and local links and networks to help establish these relationships.

Some of the employers we spoke to were passionate about providing opportunities for children and young people with SEND to experience the workplace. For instance, one employer in the courier/postal industry we spoke to had introduced a ‘world of work day’, where young people with sensory needs could touch items, listen to the sounds they make, and try on the work uniforms. However, we also heard that some employers could lack confidence, knowledge or resources to offer placements to those with additional needs. For instance, as one manager in a professional services

company said:

> “ We’ve been asked by SEND schools to work together but we’ve never really had an offer for it. That is why we are trying to work with schools to create that and become more comfortable with the terminology. It’s around the knowledge from our side as to why we have never done it.”

This meant leaders were sometimes struggling to develop initial encounters with the world of work into high-quality experiences of the workplace, such as work experience placements. As an employability lead for an autism charity said during our focus groups:

> “ For us, we are desperate for any employer who is willing to take a work experience [person]. Want young people to be at the heart of what we do, and to make sure the work experience is tailored. But it is difficult to get any employer in any sector.”

Some providers told us they would like more help developing relationships with employers. One special school felt that some of their employers could be better educated to help understand the potential of their young people to contribute to the workplace. Although they said the CEC had been a good source of help, they felt this was an area that could be improved by having further support. However, the capacity of careers hubs to help with this could be limited. As one careers hub lead we spoke to said:

> “ We are trying hard in our area to promote the number of inclusive employers, but it is a marathon not a sprint. We only have a certain amount of resource; our enterprise coordinators only have a certain amount of time each day.”

Three special schools and 2 ISCs delivered training to employers, such as disability awareness training. This appeared to help improve employers’ confidence and foster engagement. For example, one special school developed an autism award programme for local employers to achieve. As a result, leaders found employers had become more aware of their role in changing attitudes in society and providing a better level of support for work experience placements.

Supported internships

The ISCs and special schools we visited were working with a range of external partners on supported internships. Leaders we spoke to considered them to be an important pathway into paid employment for career SEND group 1.[footnote 56] The PRUs we visited appeared to have less of a focus on this pathway. This may have been due to the profile of their learners. However, the careers leader in one PRU

was working on exploring supported internships further.

In the best examples from our inspection evidence review, leaders ensured that supported internship opportunities were ambitious and provided young people with access to high-quality, real-life working environments. These enabled them to enhance their employability skills and independence and to improve their confidence. Some leaders used labour market information to inform their supported internship pathways, for instance by linking opportunities to local labour market shortage areas such as construction or hospitality. Leaders also ensured that learners were well prepared for a supported internship, and had provided impartial guidance to the young person to make sure it was a suitable option.

These providers had established effective working relationships with a range of employers and other partners to deliver supported internships, and leaders and managers provided a range of high-quality training to both staff and employers. This ensured they could best meet learners' needs and maximise the effectiveness of the supported internship programme. For example, in one ISC, job coaches attended external training on how to be an effective coach, which enabled them to provide high-quality support and guidance to learners. Leaders also provided training to employers, which included autism awareness and behaviour management training. Leaders adopted a rigorous approach to safe working practices to safeguard young people's safety and well-being. For instance, they undertook comprehensive risk assessments at the employer's premises.

During our focus groups, key stakeholders we spoke to – such as charity leaders, enterprise coordinators and careers hub leads – highlighted the importance of high-quality supported internships. They pointed to the supported internship quality assurance framework as a tool to help providers assess the quality of their supported internship programme.[footnote 57]

However, they also highlighted what they saw as some of the challenges and areas for development. For instance, some felt that to increase the number of young people who go on to get permanent jobs, it would be helpful if there was more funding and help for young people after internships, and more upskilling of the local community and businesses to take on young people once they finish a supported internship. One leader of a charity highlighted that their supported internship outcomes have been most successful when they managed to secure funding for a supported employment provider to deliver follow-on support. They said it was helpful to have someone to 'touch base' with the young person for 6 to 12 months after they had completed the internship, and to provide individual employment support to young people with SEND.

Stakeholders also highlighted that the attitudes of parents/carers can sometimes prevent young people from doing an internship. They told us this is because, in some circumstances, young people can lose benefits payments when they take up a supported internship. There is no requirement for supported internships to be paid, so this may result in families losing out financially and parents/carers are able to withdraw their young person from the internship.

Additionally, although the number of supported internships is increasing, and this was generally viewed positively by those we spoke to, one leader of an autism charity said they are not suitable for all young people with SEND. For example, young people will often need to be travelling independently, and not all of them are able to do this. Other pathways, or some kind of 'tiered supported internship', are therefore needed for these young people.

Working with the local authority

During our visits, we saw a great deal of regional variation in how well local authorities support leaders and families in planning transition. Leaders told us that many families struggle to get the right level of support from the local authority. Parents felt that their local authority did not always help them to find the right destination for their child or young person through the EHC plan placement and annual review process. They said they could not always get hold of the right person in the local authority, and plans were not in place early enough. This was often a source of frustration for parents.

Leaders worked closely with parents and families to secure the right placements for their child or young person. However, in some instances, the local authority did not confirm placements at selected and agreed settings, even when, for example, the learner had a successful college interview. The local authority sent out inaccurate or out-of-date paperwork, meaning the placement was delayed or could not be agreed. Leaders needed to invest significant time and resources in working to help resolve this. It also meant that the provider was unable to start important transition work early enough to ensure the transition went smoothly and the learner stayed at their placement. As one leader said:

> " The school are having to invest a huge amount of time in working to help resolve this, and confirmed placements are changing on a daily basis – taking up a lot of time. The main barriers to pupils are around the local authority delay in providing the appropriate paperwork, and this limits the time we have to ensure transition is successful."

The local authority officers we spoke to cited system-wide issues, such as the

sufficiency of specialist provision in their local area, as areas of challenge. For instance, they said it can be particularly challenging to find specialist provision, especially after the learner has turned 19. They also expressed concerns about the numbers of level 1 and 2 college courses being reduced and said there were not always sufficient suitable places in providers to meet learners' needs.

Where things were working well, local authority officers said there was good communication, early planning, and close relationships with staff in the providers. This helped to ensure that children and young people and their families got the right level of support. As one officer said:

> " It's about starting those conversations early about the likely pathway that that young person is going to go through. Rather than it just being sprung on them in their Year 13 annual review."

And as a parent of a child in a special school said:

> " A clear pathway set out as early as possible helps everyone to work as a team to find the right setting."

However, local authority officers also acknowledged that there were some instances where the wrong information was given to parents and providers, and there was sometimes a lack of joined-up working between education, health and social care, which often caused difficulties for children and young people and their families.

These findings reflect some of what we have seen in our area SEND inspections. We have observed strengths and weaknesses in transition planning across all ages and phases in education, health and social care. Typically, where local areas are getting it right, there is early planning, effective working with the careers hubs and good communication from education, health and social care professionals, along with close working with families and key partners.

Post-16 options

Leaders in all types of providers we visited felt there had been a reduction in the number of options for learners with SEND, especially for careers SEND group 1. For example, many special schools and PRUs had observed a decline in the number of level 1 and 2 college courses. In some areas, traineeships had been stopped. There was concern about the potential drop in the number of BTECs and a move towards apprenticeships or T levels. As one learner told us:

> " I like [the] BTEC but [they're] getting rid of it."

A leader of special school A said:

> “ Apprenticeship providers come in… but it is almost impossible for pupils to get apprenticeships when they have an EHCP […], so although school get providers in to talk about this route – it is a significant barrier… so it is hard for pupils to secure this even if they feel they want to.”

Many of the courses available require formal qualifications in maths and English, which can present a significant barrier for some. Providers felt that these courses were too academic for some young people. Employers in our focus groups also saw this as a barrier, particularly for young people who want to do apprenticeships. It may be more appropriate for some learners to continue to study for maths and English while undertaking further study, and this is often what happens.

Additionally, PRU leaders told us that some learners’ attitudes to learning and their punctuality can be a barrier. For example, although they may want to work, they are often late to school. This, when carried over into a work placement or supported internship, can cause it to fail. To mitigate this, providers were arranging experiences with employers to prepare the learners for future work placements. However, they often found it difficult to get enough employers on board. For example:

> “ We need to get them to a place where they are able to manage themselves and we do this with work opportunities that are more sympathetic to their needs and these are actually very few.”

Leaders of PRUs felt that, for young people in career SEND group 1, who may have social and behavioural needs, there was more of a gap in provision. Options were further limited if they did not have an EHC plan.

The enterprise coordinators we spoke to told us there could be a lack of options in some local areas. It was part of their role to lobby for more options, and they worked with the local community and the local authority to do this. However, they found it to be a lengthy and challenging process. The provider access legislation has helped specialist settings ensure young people consider the range of options available. However, the number of options for children and young people transitioning from specialist settings was too often ‘thin on the ground’.

Involving parents and families in careers guidance

The SEND code of practice states that many of local authorities’ responsibilities

towards children and young people with SEND also apply to their parents and families.[footnote 58] All staff we spoke to showed a clear commitment to engaging with parents. However, in most providers, parental engagement was mixed. This was because the needs and situations of some families were complex, and there were challenges with geographical distance. Parents sometimes had additional needs themselves. Leaders also told us that the aspirations of families can vary greatly. In some cases, they are not high, and this is sometimes linked with the level of need their child has, or due to their own socio-economic background. These challenges were common across all provider types, and leaders were working hard to overcome them. The careers adviser, careers leader, work experience coordinators and/or transition lead were often key points of contact regarding careers and next steps. When these staff worked closely together and communicated regularly, it helped parents get in contact with the right person easily.

Providers used a range of strategies to engage parents, such as careers fairs, parents' evenings, annual review meetings and parent workshops. Providers ensured there was individual, personalised support for learners and their families when attending open evenings and visiting colleges. For example, in one PRU, there was a family liaison officer who played an important role in building relationships with parents/carers. They knew the families well and understood that many parents/carers have learning difficulties themselves. Particularly in Year 11, staff helped parents to understand the 'jargon' around next steps and transition. They took them on visits to colleges to ensure they were comfortable and arranged transport for this if necessary. Parents in this provider told us how they felt they were 'kept in the loop' through regular phone calls, and that the provider helped them research what would be the most appropriate next step for their child or young person. Learners spoke positively of being 'take[n] to college during the day so [we] can experience what it is like.'

When parental engagement appeared to work well, it was as a result of well-established communication systems and a well-planned programme of events and meetings over time. Leaders understood the needs of their parents, what would work for them, and what they were most likely to engage with. For instance, in one PRU, they often contacted parents by text message in the first instance, because parents preferred communicating in this way.

In some providers, parents and families received regular newsletters. In one ISC, when staff knew parents have a learning need, they telephoned them and read out the newsletter to them. In other providers, leaders had thought about how to sequence careers events with parents' evenings and annual review meetings. For instance, in one special school, the parents' evenings were linked with the careers fair, which included a range of stalls and providers. This was aimed at Years 9 and

10 and meant that anything discovered during the fair could then be discussed in further detail at parents' evenings. It also linked to the timing of the annual review meeting.

The relationship that staff built with parents and families was important. These relationships meant that there was a collaborative approach to planning for learners' futures. The parent's voice was valued, and they were empowered to advocate for their child and work together with school staff to make sure their child or young person went on to an appropriate destination. One PRU told us that some parents and families mistrust education providers because they had had a bad experience with their previous setting, and this may make them hesitant to engage. Building strong relationships with them helped to overcome some of the mistrust and hesitancy and allowed for more effective planning with families.

Some parents/carers were worried about their young person becoming more independent, and could potentially limit their opportunities as a result. Providers used a range of strategies to try and ease these concerns. For example, special school A had a well-being officer who ran workshops for parents to manage anxiety about transition. They also offered online workshops to learners, which were funded by the local authority/NHS as a trial project. In one ISC, the transition lead did transition visits and taster and transition days with parents and learners to make them feel more comfortable. In another ISC, leaders had conversations with parents and families about the learners' aspirations from the very first visit to the college. Leaders noted that, when parents could see their young person growing in confidence, they were less anxious. The ISC held most of their family meetings in the community café, where the parents and families could see learners working, either serving customers or making products. Staff found that this helped some parents and families understand what their child could achieve.

Generally, parents/carers were positive about the careers guidance and support for transitions and next steps given by the providers in our sample. They thought their child or young person was being prepared well for their next steps and often said the work being done to build their child or young person's independence and confidence was effective. One parent from a special school in our inspection evidence sample said:

> " My daughter is in Year 11 and she and myself have received useful and comprehensive careers advice and help in deciding on her post-16 path."

Parents valued regular communication, visiting possible next destinations with staff from the current provider (for example, the transition lead) and talking about careers and next steps at parents' evenings. Parents said they could often feel overwhelmed

by the range of possible options and concerned that the next setting would not be able to meet their child or young person's needs. Having opportunities to discuss this with knowledgeable staff helped alleviate some of these concerns. One parent from special school A said:

> " Staff are excellent at building confidence for the pupils, and they support them to overcome their needs… feel that staff here planted the seed for uni in the future, and so he can aspire to this – they did not limit him."

Future research

While this study adds to the existing literature on careers guidance in specialist settings, there are still gaps that we have identified. For instance, future research could consider looking at careers guidance for young people with SEND in mainstream further education and skills settings, as this is an understudied area. It could also look at further investigating effective strategies to raise employers' confidence in employing young people with SEND, so that there are more opportunities for children and young people with SEND to gain high-quality experiences of the workplace as part of their careers guidance programme.

Annex

Methods

The scope of this review was to consider careers guidance for children and young people in special schools, ISCs and PRUs. Our review focused on the extent to which:

- careers guidance and support are tailored to meet the needs of individual learners
- high expectations are set for transition and next steps, taking into account the abilities of the individual learner
- schools and colleges work collaboratively with families and parents in providing effective careers guidance and support within the context of planning for transition/next steps

- careers guidance and support are embedded effectively within planning for transition/next steps
- particularly in PRUs, settings work effectively with host mainstream schools in relation to effective careers guidance and support
- school, local authorities, employers, employer networks and providers of supported internships work collaboratively to meet the needs of individual learners
- leaders ensure that careers guidance and support are seen as purposeful activities across the whole setting, integrating leadership, whole-curriculum planning, employers and parents
- there is quality and depth in supported internships
- learners perceived the careers guidance they received to be of high quality

We gathered evidence from:

- a targeted literature review
- analysis of inspection evidence of 6 special schools, 8 PRUs and 5 ISCs
- research visits to 5 special schools, 3 PRUs and 4 ISCs
- analysis of area SEND reports and interviews with HMIs
- five interviews with local authority officers
- a focus group with 9 employers
- a focus group with 12 key stakeholders, including leaders from third-sector organisations supporting transition to employment for learners with SEND, careers hub leads and enterprise coordinators.

We visited providers in 3 Ofsted regions covering 6 local authorities. The local authority officers we spoke to were from 4 of these 6 authorities.

During the research visits, we spoke to 110 learners across the 4 broad SEND areas of need.[footnote 59] We also spoke to 56 parents/carers in 10 of the 12 providers we visited. These were typically the parents of the learners we spoke to. Two of the 22 learners we spoke to in PRUs did not have an identified SEND. We analysed the data from the different research activities thematically to identify emerging themes, examples of strong practice and challenges.

To determine good practice, we used our literature review, the expectations of the quality of provision as laid out by the EIF, and the evaluative insights from HMI, including SEND specialist advisers.

When writing the report, we considered all data sources and participant groups in order to triangulate findings. We were led by the themes that occurred across the

data sets.

The Ofsted research ethics committee approved the research, which was in line with our research ethics policy.[footnote 60]

Limitations and detailed research methods can be found in the Annex.

We would like to thank all participants who took part in the project.

Limitations

When carrying out case study research, our aim is to gain sufficient depth of understanding from the individual cases so that the phenomenon being studied can be understood, rather than for cases to be representative of a wider population.

In this instance, the cases comprised providers of different types (special schools, PRUs and ISCs). Recruitment of settings took place within 3 regions, where we aimed to visit settings that were varied but that operated within the same local context (for example, sharing a similar local labour market and range of local educational settings). We did not seek participation from settings that had been graded inadequate by Ofsted, so that we would not place an additional demand on these settings. Although we achieved a varied sample, which was balanced in relation to various characteristics of interest, only settings graded by Ofsted as outstanding or good agreed to take part in the voluntary research. To ensure that settings graded as requires improvement were represented in the study, we increased the number of providers at this grade in the group from which we studied Ofsted inspection evidence.

Detailed research methods

Research questions

1. How well do leaders in specialist settings:
   - fulfil their statutory duties to provide independent careers guidance?
   - ensure that careers education is of high quality?
2. To what extent do specialist settings:
   - engage with stakeholders (such as employers, providers of supported

internships, careers networks and other providers)?

- ensure careers education and support meets the needs of individual learners in relation to their next steps?
- ensure that high expectations are set for learners in terms of transition and next steps?
- work collaboratively with parents and families of learners to ensure the effective transition of individual learners to their next steps?

3. How does the curriculum help learners make informed choices about their future education, employment and training?

Literature review

We carried out a narrative review of the national and international academic, policy and grey literature, focusing on relevant reviews and reports on careers guidance in England.[footnote 61]

Inspection evidence analysis

We analysed the inspection evidence of a sample of special schools, PRUs and ISCs that had been inspected over the 22/23 academic year. In total we analysed the inspection evidence for 19 providers.

Table 1: Special schools, PRUs and ISCs in our inspection evidence analysis including contextual data

Attribute	Range	Number	% of sample
Type	Special School	6	32
Type	PRU	8	42
Type	ISC	5	26
Region	South West	2	11
Region	East Midlands	2	11
Region	West Midlands	3	16
Region	London	2	11

Region	East of England	3	16
Region	South East	2	11
Region	North East, Yorkshire and Humberside	3	16
Region	North West	2	11
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding	4	21
Overall effectiveness	Good	8	42
Overall effectiveness	Requires Improvement	7	37
Rural/ urban	Rural	5	26
Rural/ urban	Urban	14	74

Note: Percentages are rounded so may not total 100

Research visits

During the summer term 2023 we carried out 12 research visits to special schools, PRUs and ISCs. We constructed a varied but balanced sample of special schools, PRUs and ISCs that we invited to participate. We selected regions and local authorities that had a substantial mix of special schools, PRUs and ISCs.

The exact balance of providers we visited was affected by recruitment challenges, and we acknowledge that this is a limitation of the study.

Table 2: Special schools, PRUs and ISCs visited included contextual data

Attribute	Range	Number	% of sample
Type	Special School	5	42
Type	PRU	3	25

Type	ISC	4	33
Region	London	3	25
Region	South East	5	42
Region	North East, Yorkshire and Humberside	4	33
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding	4	33
Overall effectiveness	Good	8	67
Rural/ urban	Rural	1	8
Rural/ urban	Urban	11	92

Research visits were led by a single HMI who had received research training. All the HMI leads had experience of inspecting special schools, PRUs or ISCs. A researcher shadowed the HMI for 3 of the visits, one to each type of provider. Research visits took place over one day for special schools and PRUs, and one or 2 days for ISCs, depending on the size of the provider and practicalities.

We wanted to speak with a range of learners from the 4 main areas of need identified in the SEND code of practice.[footnote 62] We include a flexible period of time to do this in a way that was most appropriate for the individuals. We consulted with an external expert in research methods for children and young people with SEND to develop a toolkit of the different methods we could use.

Table 3: The total number of learners we spoke to, including category of need

Category of need	Number of learners
Autism spectrum disorder/autism spectrum condition	56
Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder	7
Moderate learning difficulties	6

Severe learning difficulties	18
SEMH	21
Visual impairment	12
Speech, language and communication needs	10
Deaf/hearing impairment	6
Physical disabilities	2
Downs syndrome	2

Note: some learners had multiple needs

The table below gives more information about the providers visited. When we refer to specific providers throughout the report, we will use the name in the 'provider' column, for example special school A.

Table 4: Providers we visited, including contextual information

Provider	Number of learners (approx.)	Main areas of need	Careers hub	Age Range	Deprivation Index
ISC A	More than 200	Speech language and communication, physical disability, moderate and severe learning difficulties	Wave 3	16 to 25	2 (E&T)
ISC B	50 to 100	Speech language and communication, physical disability, moderate and severe learning difficulties	Not in a hub	16 to 25	1 (E&T)
ISC C	50 to 100	Autism, moderate and severe learning difficulties	Not in a hub	13 to 18	2 (E&T)

ISC D	Fewer than 50	Autism, SEMH, moderate and severe learning difficulties, physical disability, speech language and communication	Not in a hub	16 to 25	2 (E&T)
PRU A	Fewer than 50	SEMH, autism	Wave 2	14 to 19	3
PRU B	50 to 100	SEMH, speech language and communication	Wave 5	5 to 19	4
PRU C	Less than 50	SEMH	Not in a hub	12 to 16	3
Special School A	More than 200	Autism and SEMH	Wave 5	4 to 16	5
Special School B	150 to 200	Autism	Wave 4	8 to 19	4
Special School C	More than 200	Autism, physical disability, moderate and severe learning difficulties	Wave 4	2 to 19	4
Special School D	More than 200	Autism, SEMH, speech language and communication, moderate and severe learning difficulties	Wave 5	11 to 17	5
Special School E	More than 200	Autism, SEMH, speech, language and communication, physical disability, moderate and severe learning difficulties	Wave 4	3 to 19	5

Notes: Whether providers were in a careers hub, and if so which wave. Wave 1 = longest time in a hub, Wave 5 = shortest time in a hub

1 = most deprived, 5 = least deprived

E&T refers to the deprivation quintile for student cohorts on 'education and training' programmes

During the research visits, we also spoke with parents. Typically, these were the parents of the learners we spoke to. In total we spoke with 56 parents from 10 of the 12 providers we visited.

Participating in the research was voluntary. We asked providers to distribute an information sheet to all participants and parents before the visit. We also asked providers to explain the research to learners in a way that was most appropriate for them. We asked parents for written consent for their child to participate in the research.

For each activity, we developed an interview guide to shape the conversation. HMI had the flexibility to ask additional questions and follow new lines of enquiry. A separate set of interview guides was developed for each type of provider.

We asked about:

- the overall intake of the provider, and their approach to teaching, learning and the curriculum
- the overall approach to careers guidance
- the overall approach to transition planning
- how careers guidance and transition planning met the individual needs of learners
- how careers guidance was embedded in transition planning
- the approach to evaluating and monitoring careers
- how providers engaged with employers, the local authority, careers networks, other providers, and parents
- how careers guidance was integrated into the curriculum
- how providers ensured that learners and their families understood the range of academic and vocational options available to them
- what training staff had received to deliver careers guidance and/or support

HMI and/or researchers took notes throughout each activity. We did not audio record the activities. Activities were not transcribed verbatim. In the visit summary, we asked visit leads to identify any strong practice and challenges, and to provide a summary of the leadership, engagement with stakeholders and curriculum integration they saw on the visits.

We also asked 2 HMI to review evidence from other visits to identify strong practice and emerging themes. We used this alongside our literature review and expectations of quality in the EIF to determine examples of good practice.

Local authority and HMI interviews

During our research visits, we asked each provider to give us contact details of a local authority officer with whom they worked concerning careers. We contacted these individuals separately by email and invited them to take part in a 30-minute interview to discuss how they supported specialist settings with their careers provision. We gave each participant an information sheet. Participation was voluntary.

In total, we spoke with 5 local authority officers in 4 of the 6 local authorities we visited. We spoke to at least one local authority officer in each Ofsted region we visited. The interviews were carried out virtually and were not recorded. One member of the research team led the interview, and a second member of the team made notes. We analysed these notes alongside our other data sources.

We interviewed 2 HMI with expertise in area SEND who had led recent area SEND inspections. We also read and analysed the most recent area SEND inspection report for the local areas we visited. The HMI interviews were held virtually, and each interview lasted one hour. The interviews were not audio recorded. The notes were analysed alongside our other data sources.

Focus groups

We held 2 virtual focus groups in July 2023, one for employers and one for key stakeholders in the SEND careers sector, including charity leaders, specialist enterprise coordinators and careers hub leads. Each focus group lasted one-and-a-half hours. We spoke to 9 employers and 4 key stakeholders, 5 enterprise coordinators and 3 careers hub leads. The aim of the focus groups was to understand how employers, key stakeholders and careers hubs work with specialist providers on their careers provision, and the challenges in this area. Each participant received an information sheet distributed in advance of the focus groups.

The focus groups were held virtually and recorded with the participants' consent. They were chaired by a member of the research team. A second member of the research team monitored the chat function and took notes. Themes were drawn from these notes and triangulated against our other data sets.

1. Good career guidance: perspectives from the special educational needs and disabilities sector, The Gatsby Foundation, The Careers and Enterprise Company and Disability Rights UK, 2019. ↩
2. Trends in Careers Education 2021, The Careers and Enterprise Company, 2021. ↩
3. Alternative provision: effective practice and post-16 transition, Department for Education, 2017; Post-16 education and labour market activities, pathways and outcomes (LEO), Department for Education, 2022; Longer term destinations academic year 2020/21, Department for Education, 2023. ↩
4. Evidence from mainstream schools and further education colleges is available in our Independent review of careers guidance in schools and further education and skills providers, Ofsted, September 2023. ↩
5. The DfE statutory guidance states that guidance interviews can be with an internal or external member of staff, provided they are qualified to the appropriate level (level 6). ↩
6. Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years, Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care, January 2015. ↩
7. Transition programmes for young adults with SEND. What works?, The Careers and Enterprise Company, 2017. ↩
8. Careers guidance and access for education and training providers, Department for Education, January 2023. For more information on the Gatsby benchmarks, see Good career guidance, The Gatsby Foundation. ↩
9. Good career guidance: perspectives from the special educational needs and disabilities sector, The Gatsby Foundation, The Careers and Enterprise Company and Disability Rights UK, 2019. ↩
10. J Matheson, A G Watts and B Cutts, Advancing ambitions: the role of career guidance in supporting social mobility, The Sutton Trust, October 2014; Independent review of careers guidance in schools and further education and skills providers, Ofsted, 2023. ↩
11. Careers education, information, advice and guidance, House of Commons Education Committee, June 2023

    Good career guidance: perspectives from the special educational needs and disabilities sector, The Gatsby Foundation, 2019 ↩
12. Alternative provision: effective practice and post-16 transition, Department for

Education, 2017. ↩

13. ‘Post-16 education and labour market activities, pathways and outcomes (LEO), Department for Education, 2022 ↩
14. To be counted in a destination, young people have to be recorded as having sustained participation for a 6 month period in the destination year.’ Sustained destinations include education, an apprenticeship or employment. For more information, please see Longer term destinations academic year 2020/21, Department for Education, July 2023. ↩
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16. Key stage 4 destinations measures academic year 2020/21, Department for Education, 2023. ↩
17. 16-18 destination measures academic year 2020/21, Department for Education, 2023. ↩
18. HMCI commentary: consulting on Ofsted’s new area SEND framework, Ofsted and Amanda Spielman, June 2022; Local area SEND inspections: one year on, Ofsted and Care Quality Commission, 2017. ↩
19. Alternative provision for primary-age pupils in England: a long-term ‘destination’ or a ‘temporary solution’?, Ofsted, 2022 ↩
20. SEND: old issues, new issues, next steps, Ofsted, 2021 ↩
21. How young people with special educational needs and disabilities find out about their post-16 options, Natspec, 2021. ↩
22. Inspections from January to August 2023. 1,623 responses. Parents/carers of children and young people in special schools, ISCs or PRUs aged 11 to 25. The fields we use in the data for restricting the setting type are: a special school or college; AP (a setting that provides education for learners who would not otherwise receive suitable education, because of exclusion from their school, illness or other reasons, for example, a PRU, AP, academy or hospital school). ↩
23. Inspections from January to August 2023. 1,194 responses. Parents/carers of children and young people in special schools, ISCs or PRUs aged 11 to 25.The fields we use in the data for restricting the setting type are: a special school or college; AP (a setting that provides education for learners who would not otherwise receive suitable education, because of exclusion from their school, illness or other reasons, for example, a PRU, AP, academy or hospital school). ↩
24. Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years, Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care, January

2015. ↩

25. Careers strategy: making the most of everyone's skills and talents, Department for Education, December 2017; Careers guidance and access for education and training providers, Department for Education, January 2023. ↩
26. Careers guidance and access for education and training providers, Department for Education, January 2023. ↩
27. Careers strategy: making the most of everyone's skills and talents, Department for Education, December 2017. ↩
28. Good career guidance: perspectives from the special educational needs and disabilities sector, The Gatsby Foundation, 2019; The SEND Gatsby Benchmark Toolkit, The Careers and Enterprise Company, 2022. ↩
29. Good Career Guidance perspectives from the special educational needs and disabilities sector, The Gatsby Foundation, 2019. ↩
30. The SEND Gatsby Benchmark Toolkit, The Careers and Enterprise Company, 2022. ↩
31. The SEND Gatsby Benchmark Toolkit, The Careers and Enterprise Company, 2022. ↩
32. J Buzzeo, C Manzoni, G Akehurst, DJ Ebanks-Silvera and R Patel, Evaluation of the Careers & Enterprise CEF18 Part B Fund for disadvantaged groups final report, The Careers and Enterprise Company, June 2021. ↩
33. Good career guidance: perspectives from the special educational needs and disabilities sector, The Gatsby Foundation, 2019. ↩
34. Chapter 8 of the SEND code of practice gives a more detailed overview of preparation for adulthood at different stages. See Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years, Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care, January 2015. ↩
35. Good career guidance: perspectives from the special educational needs and disabilities sector, The Gatsby Foundation, 2019; ↩
36. See the same and different model in The SEND Gatsby Benchmark Toolkit, The Careers and Enterprise Company, 2022. ↩
37. Local authorities must arrange education for young people who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education. AP is delivered in a range of settings, including but not limited to: AP academies, AP free schools, PRUs, colleges and independent AP. As well as providing education, AP settings also meet learners' specific personal, social and health needs and can offer different learning opportunities such as vocational

courses or preparation for adulthood lessons. ↩

38. Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and alternative provision (AP) improvement plan, Department for Education, March 2023. ↩
39. Our approach to inspecting the curriculum in alternative provision, Ofsted, 2023. ↩
40. Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years, Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care, January 2015. ↩
41. Participation of young people: education, employment and training, Department for Education, 2016. ↩
42. Supported internships, Department for Education, February 2022. ↩
43. Education inspection framework, Ofsted, July 2022. ↩
44. Independent review of careers guidance in schools and further education and skills providers, Ofsted, September 2023. ↩
45. School inspection handbook, Ofsted, May 2019; Further education and skills handbook, Ofsted, March 2023. ↩
46. School inspection handbook, Ofsted, May 2019. ↩
47. Careers leader training, Careers and enterprise company, 2023. ↩
48. Independent review of careers guidance in schools and further education and skills providers, Ofsted, 2023. ↩
49. Compass is a free tool for eligible mainstream schools and colleges, special schools, specialist colleges and PRUs in England. It allows providers to track their progress against the Gatsby benchmarks. There is a version of Compass for special schools. Compass+ is a free upgrade available to eligible secondary schools, special schools, sixth forms and PRUs in England. It enables providers to track individual learners. Other tools are also available for providers to track their careers provision. ↩
50. Gatsby benchmark 8 states that 'Every learner should have opportunities for guidance interviews with a careers adviser, who could be internal (a member of school staff) or external, provided they are trained to an appropriate level.' ↩
51. Independent review of careers guidance in schools and further education and skills providers, Ofsted, September 2023. ↩
52. The statutory guidance states that this should be qualified to level 6 in a careers guidance subject. ↩
53. Careers guidance and access for education and training providers, Department for Education, January 2023. ↩

54. J Holman, Good career guidance, Gatsby, April 2014. ↩
55. J Holman, Good career guidance, Gatsby, April 2014. ↩
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58. Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years, Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care, January 2015. ↩
59. Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years, Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care, January 2015. ↩
60. How we carry out ethical research with people, Ofsted, December 2019. ↩
61. 'Grey literature' is a term used for literature produced by organisations outside of the traditional commercial or academic publishing and distribution channels. ↩
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