

An evaluation of

careers provision in post-primary
schools

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This evaluation of careers education, information, advice and guidance (careers) by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) was commissioned by the Department of Education (DE) in September 2025. It is in response to concerns raised by the Northern Ireland Assembly Public Accounts Committee, as set out in their report, [Developing the skills for Northern Ireland's future \(May 2025\)](#), about the consistency and quality of provision across post-primary schools. The key focus of the evaluation is to establish how well post-primary pupils are supported in understanding and making decisions about their future pathways, and to provide an overview of current practice, identifying key features associated with stronger provision.

The findings are based on evidence gathered from evaluation visits to 22 post-primary schools. The visits included observations of lessons, meetings with pupils, teachers, school leaders and a sample of meetings with parents and external partners. Evidence is also drawn from school documentation and responses to ETI's pre-inspection learner questionnaire issued to all post-primary schools inspected during 2024 to 2025.

Key findings

Across the schools visited, there is a strong commitment to careers education and to supporting pupils in their decision-making. At Key Stage (KS) 4 and post-16, pupils benefit from a broad range of careers learning, guidance, employer engagement and work-related learning. As a result, they are increasingly confident in discussing their career aspirations and have a clearer understanding of the range of progression pathways available to them.

At KS 3, pupils' experiences of careers are more variable. In nearly all of the schools visited, pupils' main experience of careers at KS 3 is through the taught employability strand of Learning for Life and Work (LLW). The associated delivery models differ considerably across schools, and too often the learning is not sequenced or revisited sufficiently. In particular, where the provision is delivered in short blocks or through infrequent activities, the pupils find it difficult to recall prior learning. Consequently, their understanding of progression pathways, including vocational routes and apprenticeships, is less well developed.

Access to work experience differs considerably across the key stages. It is limited or unavailable for a majority of pupils at KS 4 but is a consistent feature of provision in almost all schools at post-16. Schools identify practical and administrative challenges in providing work experience at KS 4.

In all the schools visited, there is a designated member of staff with responsibility for careers education, and leaders are committed to developing provision. However, the time and administrative support available to leaders of careers vary across schools, affecting their capacity to plan, co-ordinate and evaluate the provision effectively. Access to relevant professional learning for staff leading and delivering careers is not sufficiently systematic.

All schools engage with the Department for the Economy's (DfE) Careers Service, and pupils value access to personalised and impartial guidance. In a small number of schools, however, the support available through the Careers Service is not planned and co-ordinated sufficiently well by the school to ensure that it aligns with pupils' needs and key decision points.

All schools use a range of digital resources to support careers education. The effectiveness of these resources depends on how well they are used to support pupils' independent research, access to relevant information and progression planning, rather than on the digital platform available.

The more effective careers provision is characterised by regular and progressive learning experiences, clear connections between learning and future pathways, and effective collaboration between staff and external partners. Pupils experiencing these features are better able to articulate their skills and interests and make informed decisions about their next steps.

The careers provision, overall, is meeting the needs of the pupils in most of the schools visited. This is reflected in suitably structured careers programmes, effective learning and decision-making in most of the lessons observed, and increasing levels of pupil preparedness for progression. Careers learning becomes progressively more structured from KS 3 through KS 4 to post-16. For a minority of schools, however, pupils' experiences are too variable at KS 3 and their understanding of progression pathways is not sufficiently secure.

Going forward

Building on the effective practice identified, this evaluation highlights the key next steps to develop further the careers provision in post-primary schools. These are:

- strengthen continuity and progression in careers learning, particularly at KS 3;
- strengthen leadership and delivery of careers provision within schools;
- extend pupils' access to meaningful work-related learning and work experience; and
- strengthen planning and co-ordination of external careers support.

MAIN REPORT

Background information

Context

This evaluation of careers provision in post-primary schools by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) was commissioned by the Department of Education in September 2025. It is in response to concerns raised by the Northern Ireland Assembly Public Accounts Committee (PAC) in its report, [Developing the skills for Northern Ireland's future \(May 2025\)](#), about the consistency and quality of provision across post-primary schools. The evaluation was undertaken within the wider context of scrutiny of careers education and skills training, including findings from the Northern Ireland Audit Office report, [Developing the skills for Northern Ireland's future, \(September 2024\)](#), which informed the PAC's subsequent consideration of this issue.

The evaluation

The evaluation focuses on how effectively schools support pupils to understand the range of available pathways and make informed decisions about their future progression. It considers the extent to which provision is coherent, appropriately timed and responsive to pupils' needs across the key stages of their post-primary education. The associated Terms of Reference are set out in Appendix 2.

The findings are based on evidence gathered from evaluation visits to 22 post-primary schools. Inspectors observed careers and employability lessons and met with school leaders, teachers, pupils and parents. Evidence was also drawn from school documentation and ETI pre-inspection questionnaires completed by pupils and parents.

Inspectors engaged with external partners, including the Department for the Economy's Careers Service, and considered how schools plan, deliver, monitor and evaluate careers provision across the key stages.

The evidence provides an overview of current practice across the schools visited and identifies common features of effective provision and areas where provision can be strengthened.

Main Findings

This section sets out the findings and summary points relating to key areas of provision, as identified in the Terms of Reference.

1. Models of delivery and curriculum continuity

The Employability strand of Learning for Life and Work (LLW) is part of the statutory curriculum and provides a foundation through which pupils develop their skills and economic awareness in the classroom. The wider careers programme provides

opportunities for pupils to personalise this learning by considering their subject strengths, likes, dislikes, skills, dispositions and attributes, alongside personalised advice and guidance. This information can then be used to help pupils consider and plan potential pathways into careers, often referred to as career planning.

In almost all of the schools visited, the pupils' main experience of careers at KS 3 and KS 4 is through the taught Employability strand of Learning for Life and Work. The evaluation indicates that Employability is most effective when it forms part of a wider careers programme that provides opportunities for pupils to explore progression pathways and apply their learning to personal career planning.

Findings

- Across the schools visited, careers education is delivered through a range of curriculum and timetabling approaches. While LLW Employability is part of the statutory curriculum and schools' governors have a duty to ensure careers provision as part of a broad and balanced curriculum, there is no specific statutory approach to the organisation and delivery of a wider careers programme. Effective provision, however, was evident across the different models of delivery.
- At KS 3, across the schools visited, there were eight different models of delivery. The most common model is a carousel approach, where the Employability strand of LLW is delivered in a block, typically 12 weeks, once per year.
- Some pupils report difficulty recalling prior learning following extended periods between taught Employability lessons. Inspection evidence, including schemes of work, also indicates that in some schools these lessons can be displaced by other whole-school activities. Where this occurs, pupils have fewer opportunities to revisit and build on their careers learning over time. Pupils' understanding of progression pathways, particularly vocational pathways, apprenticeships and labour market opportunities, is also less secure at KS 3.
- In a small number of schools, the carousel model is supported by additional careers-related learning experiences and enterprise activities across the curriculum and throughout the school year. In a minority of schools, careers education in Year 10 is delivered more regularly through weekly timetabled lessons combining LLW Employability with discrete careers lessons. Where pupils have opportunities to revisit their careers learning and connect it with wider experiences, they are better able to identify their skills and interests and make connections with future pathways.
- At KS 4, eleven different models of delivery were identified across the schools. The most common model is a discrete careers lesson delivered weekly, often by a consistent team of teachers. Where this model is supported by a planned programme of careers-related learning, including CV workshops, mock interviews, employer engagement and options guidance, pupils demonstrate a stronger understanding of progression pathways than in schools where such provision is less developed.

- In a majority of schools, careers provision at KS 4 has clearer sequencing of learning than at KS 3. Pupils are more confident in talking about careers and demonstrate increased awareness of the range of available pathways. However, in a minority of schools, the provision is inconsistent. In these schools, careers education is delivered through occasional events or collapsed timetable days, with limited evidence of progression or continuity in learning. Pupils report gaps in their understanding, particularly in relation to vocational and apprenticeship pathways.
- At post-16, careers provision is the most consistent across the schools visited. This is supported by additional opportunities for pupils to develop leadership, employability and life skills (referred to as 'enrichment' in the majority of schools). Most pupils receive regular timetabled careers lessons and benefit from structured support in relation to progression to higher education (HE), further education (FE), training and employment opportunities. The schools provide a wide range of support, including personal statement guidance, application workshops and interview preparation. Almost all schools provide work experience at post-16, which pupils identify as the most valuable aspect of their careers education. Where work experience is matched well to pupils' aspirations, it enhances their understanding of career pathways and informs their future decisions.
- In most schools, provision in Year 14 changes once Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) applications have been submitted, with a greater emphasis on preparation for life after school, such as budgeting, finding accommodation and applying for student loans.
- Across the key stages, the most effective provision is characterised by opportunities for pupils to revisit and build progressively on their careers learning and to connect their skills, interests and learning with future pathways.

Summary

Schools organise and deliver careers education in a range of ways to reflect their individual contexts. Effective provision is mostly evident across the different models of delivery and enables pupils to revisit and build progressively on their careers learning and to connect this learning with their developing interests, aspirations and understanding of future pathways.

At KS 3, some pupils have difficulty recalling prior learning and aspects of their understanding of vocational pathways, apprenticeships and labour market opportunities are less secure. At KS 4, careers learning has clearer sequencing in a majority of schools, while at post-16 provision is the most consistent. Pupils at these latter stages demonstrate greater confidence and awareness of progression pathways.

The most effective provision is characterised by careers education being integrated within a broader, well-planned programme of learning and experiences, including employer engagement and work-related learning.

2. Work-related learning and work experience

Findings

- Work-related learning and work experience are key components of careers provision across all schools. Inspectors found that both are highly valued by pupils and play a significant role in supporting career decision-making. However, there is considerable variation in the availability, quality and timing of work-related learning and work experience across the key stages.
- At KS 3, pupils have limited direct experience of the workplace. Work-related learning is mostly delivered through indirect experiences such as employer talks, careers events, enterprise activities and school-based projects. These activities provide pupils with an introduction to the world of work and help to raise awareness of different career options. In a majority of schools, however, these experiences are not yet part of a clearly structured or progressive programme. Instead, they are often delivered on an ad hoc basis, depending on opportunities available to the school. As a result, pupils' experiences vary significantly across schools. While pupils said that they enjoy these activities, inspectors noted that they do not consistently support the development of deeper understanding or sustained progression in careers learning.
- At KS 4, provision for work experience is more variable, linked in part to the insurance, health and safety, and child protection requirements associated with the Education Authority (EA) [Work Experience Arrangements \(2019\)](#). Schools report that the administrative demands and time required to implement these arrangements can limit their capacity to provide work experience for all pupils by the end of statutory education.
- In a minority of schools, pupils have access to work experience placements of three to five days. In these cases, pupils said that the experience is highly valuable in helping them to understand workplace expectations, develop employability skills and inform their future decisions. However, in a majority of schools, access to work experience at KS 4 is limited or not available. Instead, schools rely on alternative approaches such as local employer engagement activities, workshops, mock interviews and area learning community (ALC) careers events.
- School leaders report a number of challenges in providing work experience at this stage, including difficulties in securing appropriate placements, safeguarding and health and safety requirements, administrative burden, and limited availability of employers in some sectors and geographical areas. Consequently, pupils do not have consistent and equitable access to work experience at KS 4, although schools use a range of alternative work-related learning activities to support pupils at this key transition point.

- At post-16, work-related learning and work experience are consistent features of provision across almost all schools. Almost all schools provide pupils with access to work experience placements throughout the school year, which are often closely aligned to pupils' career aspirations. In many cases, schools actively support pupils in sourcing flexible and timely placements that match their intended progression pathways.
- Pupils consistently identify work experience at post-16 as the most valuable aspect of their careers education. They report that it helps them to develop a clearer understanding of specific career pathways, build confidence and employability skills, confirm or reconsider their career choices, and prepare for transition to FE, training or employment.
- In a minority of schools, work experience is integrated into a wider programme of careers education, including preparation before placements and structured reflection afterwards. In these schools, the curriculum is also enhanced by a range of co-curricular, enrichment and extra-curricular opportunities for pupils to connect their learning with real-life experiences while developing life skills, confidence, and personal and social development to support progression to the next stage of education, training or employment.

Summary

Pupils' access to work-related learning and work experience differs considerably across the key stages. At KS 3, pupils have limited direct experience of the workplace and work-related learning is not always part of a structured and progressive programme. At KS 4, limited access to work experience, alongside identified logistical barriers, reduces the opportunities available to some pupils to experience the workplace before the end of statutory education. In contrast, more consistent and better-aligned provision at post-16 supports pupils in developing clearer understanding of career pathways, alongside increased confidence and employability skills. Provision is strengthened where work-related learning is planned as part of a coherent programme, including preparation and reflection, and where pupils can access experiences across the curriculum that are closely matched to their aspirations.

3. Leadership, staffing and capacity for careers

Findings

- In all the schools visited, there is a designated member of staff with responsibility for careers. Leaders of careers are committed to developing provision across the school and supporting pupils in making informed career decisions. However, there is considerable variation in the amount of non-contact time allocated to the role across the schools visited.

- The time and administrative support available to leaders of careers vary across the schools visited and influence the extent to which they can plan, co-ordinate, monitor and evaluate provision effectively. Careers leaders report that a substantial proportion of their time can be spent on administrative and organisational tasks, including arranging events, co-ordinating work experience and liaising with external partners. Where sufficient time and administrative support are available, the leaders are better able to focus on the strategic leadership, development and evaluation of careers provision.
- In a majority of the schools visited, the leader of careers is relatively experienced in the role. Collaborative networks such as sub-careers ALC groups and membership of Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association (NISCA) and Career Development Institute (CDI) support professional learning and the sharing of local labour market information. Some leaders of careers are self-funding and/or sourcing funding to support their own part-time study towards recognised Careers Adviser qualifications. The professional learning available to leaders and teachers of careers is provided through a range of routes, including internal staff professional learning, ALC careers subgroups, employers and industry, NISCA and, in some cases, recognised Careers Adviser qualifications.
- Schools use a range of approaches to monitor careers provision, including gathering feedback from pupils. However, this information is not always analysed and used systematically to evaluate the quality and impact of provision or to inform planning and improvement. In a minority of schools, careers provision is not sufficiently integrated into whole-school planning.
- Careers education is delivered by a range of staff, including LLW teachers, careers teachers and, in some cases, staff from other subject areas. Staff confidence and expertise in delivering careers vary across the schools visited. Where staff have appropriate knowledge and understanding of careers pathways and labour market information, pupils demonstrate greater awareness of progression options. In a small number of schools, staff report less confidence in aspects of careers, particularly vocational pathways, apprenticeships and labour market information, and pupils' understanding of the full range of pathways is also less secure.
- In a minority of schools, limited careers-related staff professional learning and variation in staff expertise contribute to inconsistency in the quality of provision. Where careers is not sufficiently prioritised within the school, the guidance and careers learning experienced by pupils are also less consistent.
- In a minority of schools, there is a clear and coherent careers programme that is planned across the key stages and informed by the needs of pupils. In these schools, leaders of careers monitor provision through a range of approaches, including classroom observation and evaluation of careers-related events, and use this to inform planning. Staff professional learning is linked to local labour market information, pupils' aspirations and analysis of leavers' destination data.

Summary

There is notable variation in the time, administrative support and staff expertise available to support the leadership and delivery of careers provision across the schools visited. The time and administrative support available to careers leaders influence the extent to which they can undertake strategic planning, co-ordination, monitoring and evaluation. While a majority of leaders of careers are relatively experienced in the role, variation in the confidence and expertise of the wider staff involved in delivery contributes to differences in the quality and consistency of pupils' experiences.

Schools gather information to monitor careers provision, including feedback from pupils, but this is not always analysed and used systematically to evaluate the quality and impact of provision or inform improvement. Staff access professional learning through a range of routes; however, access to relevant professional learning for those leading and delivering careers is not sufficiently systematic, particularly in relation to progression pathways and labour market information.

Where careers provision is stronger, it is a clear strategic priority within the school development plan; is well led and managed by senior and middle leaders who allocate appropriate time for careers learning and work-related experiences; is well planned and sequenced across the curriculum and informed by pupils' needs; is supported by ongoing staff professional learning; and is underpinned by systematic monitoring, evaluation and analysis of information, including leavers' destination data.

4. Partnership working and external guidance

Findings

- All schools visited engage with the Department for the Economy's Careers Service, which provides impartial careers advice and guidance to pupils at key transition points. Careers advisers provide support through a range of delivery approaches, including individual and small-group guidance and, in a small number of schools, online provision.
- The Department for the Economy's Careers Service now offers a blended model of delivery to all schools. The nature and method of delivery are set out in a partnership agreement between the school and the Careers Service, agreed by the principal and careers adviser at the beginning of each academic year and reviewed mid-year and at the end of the year. The agreed model of support differs across schools, reflecting the needs identified and the provision agreed through this process.
- Careers teachers and leaders in some schools report reduced access to one-to-one guidance and greater use of group support, in line with the model agreed through the partnership agreement. It is important that all relevant staff, including leaders of careers and Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs), are fully involved in developing the agreement and aware of the arrangements. Where this is not the case, the support provided by the Careers Service is less well matched to pupils' needs.

- In a small number of schools, elements of careers guidance are delivered online. Pupils report that face-to-face engagement provides greater opportunity for discussion and personalised guidance. Where online provision is not complemented by in-person engagement, pupils report a more limited experience.
- In a minority of schools, careers advisers attend a range of school events to support pupils and their parents/carers, such as options evenings and parent-teacher meetings. The nature and frequency of this wider engagement vary across schools and reflect the arrangements agreed through the partnership agreement, alongside factors including the working relationship between the school and Careers Service and staff availability.
- Pupils who have access to one-to-one guidance interviews value the opportunity to discuss their aspirations and receive personalised and impartial advice. They report that these interactions help them to clarify their career goals, understand the requirements for different pathways, and make decisions about their next steps. The timing of guidance is also important. In a minority of cases, pupils report that guidance is provided later than expected or is not aligned with key decision points.
- Provision for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in relation to the Careers Service varies across schools. In a minority of schools, pupils with SEN have earlier and more frequent engagement with careers advisers. Schools work with the Careers Service, parents/carers and external agencies to support transition planning. In contrast, in a minority of the schools visited, pupils with SEN do not receive consistent or personalised guidance. The partnership agreement, however, provides an opportunity for schools to identify the needs of pupils with SEN and agree the nature and timing of Careers Service support.
- In addition to the Careers Service, schools engage with a range of external partners, including employers, FE, HE and work-based learning (WBL) organisations. Collaboration between the leader of careers, pupils, parents/carers, internal staff and external partners such as the SENCo, Careers Service, EA Transition Officer, employers, FE, HE and WBL organisations contribute positively to careers provision. Collaborative networks such as sub-careers ALC groups and NISCA membership support teachers' professional learning and the sharing of local labour market information.
- Where partnerships are more established and sustained, schools provide a broader range of work-related learning opportunities, careers guidance and transition support. Effective partnership working is characterised by schools identifying pupils' needs, planning the support required and co-ordinating the contribution of external partners.

Summary

All schools visited engage with the Department for the Economy's Careers Service, and pupils value personalised and impartial guidance, particularly where it is timely and aligned with key decision points. The partnership agreement provides schools with an opportunity to agree a model of Careers Service support that reflects the needs of their pupils. In some schools, not all relevant staff are sufficiently involved in developing the agreement or fully aware of the support available and the model agreed. More effective planning and co-ordination are evident where relevant school staff contribute to identifying pupils' needs, agreeing the support required and ensuring that the agreed arrangements are understood and implemented.

Pupils particularly value opportunities for personalised, face-to-face guidance, while the timing of guidance influences how well it supports their decision-making at key transition points. The partnership agreement also provides an important mechanism through which schools can identify and plan appropriate Careers Service support for pupils with SEN.

More broadly, provision is stronger where partnerships with the Careers Service and other external organisations are well established and sustained, and where their contributions are planned as part of a coherent programme of careers guidance, work-related learning and transition support.

5. Quality of teaching, learning and assessment in careers

Findings

- Across the schools visited, the quality and consistency of careers education vary, although there is a clear commitment in all schools to help pupils become informed, confident and realistic career decision-makers. Planning, teaching and assessment were effective in supporting successful learning in most of the careers/employability lessons observed.
- When learning was most successful, lessons were characterised by learning related to real-life scenarios and contexts; clear relevance and importance of the skills being developed; strong links between the careers programme and future progression pathways; and opportunities for pupils to develop self-awareness and independence. These lessons demonstrated appropriate pace and questioning, enabling pupils to consider their choices and pathways.
- When learning was less effective, it was too dependent on the software applications being used. Tasks were low level, pace was slow, and there was limited progression and repetition linked to weaknesses in planning across the school. In these lessons, insufficient sequencing and challenge limited opportunities for pupils to build on their learning and develop their understanding.

- In most of the schools visited, there are suitably structured careers programmes that support pupils' decision-making and are complemented by input from the Department for the Economy's Careers Service. In these schools, careers/employability teachers work as part of a team, supported by the careers leader, and pupils experience careers learning alongside guidance and other careers-related opportunities.
- In a significant minority of schools, careers learning is connected to the wider curriculum and, in some cases, mapped across subjects. Individual subjects, together with co-curricular and extra-curricular experiences, provide opportunities for pupils to connect their learning and developing skills with careers and future pathways.

Summary

Planning, teaching and assessment were effective in supporting successful learning in most of the careers/employability lessons observed. The more effective learning was relevant to pupils' interests and future pathways, connected to real-life contexts and provided appropriate pace, challenge and opportunities for pupils to develop self-awareness and independence.

Where learning was less effective, over-reliance on software applications, low-level tasks, repetition and insufficient challenge limited progression in pupils' learning.

Pupils' learning benefits most when the careers learning is part of a structured programme and is connected to guidance, wider curriculum experiences and future progression pathways.

6. Pupil experiences, understanding and outcomes

Findings

- Pupils across the schools visited value careers education and recognise its importance in supporting their future decisions. In the most effective provision, pupils are confident, articulate and well prepared for progression, benefiting particularly from high-quality careers guidance, meaningful work-related learning and strong pastoral support. Pupils have opportunities to learn about a range of employment and progression pathways, although the breadth and depth of their understanding vary across the key stages.
- Across most schools, pupils report increasing levels of preparedness as they progress through school. This is reflected in the ETI pre-inspection questionnaires, where most of pupils in Years 11 to 14 report that their school is preparing them well to move on to the next stage of their learning. In contrast, a majority of Year 10 pupils report that their school is preparing them to move on to the next key stage.

- At KS 3, some pupils have difficulty recalling prior careers learning. Inspectors found that, in some cases, pupils at KS 3 have a limited understanding of the range of available pathways. In Year 10, pupils' understanding is focused more strongly on subject choices for KS 4, while their understanding of vocational pathways, apprenticeships and labour market opportunities is less secure.
- At KS 4, pupils' experiences are generally more positive. Most pupils said that careers education supports them in making subject choices and considering their next steps. Pupils demonstrate a stronger understanding of progression pathways than at KS 3 and benefit from a broader range of careers-related experiences. However, there remains variability in the depth of understanding, particularly in relation to vocational routes and apprenticeships, including current and emerging skills needs for the economy. In a minority of schools, pupils said that careers education is not sufficiently tailored to their individual needs and that they would benefit from more personalised guidance.
- At post-16, pupils are generally confident and well informed about their next steps. They benefit from structured support, including guidance on UCAS and higher-level apprenticeship (HLA) applications, FE, training and employment opportunities. Pupils report that they feel well prepared for transition beyond school. They consistently identify work experience as particularly valuable in providing practical insight into the world of work and informing their career decisions.
- Parents and past pupils who met with inspectors report that careers provision supports pupils in developing confidence, raising aspirations and preparing for their next steps. They highlight clear communication, guidance at key transition points, and the support provided by staff and, where applicable, the Department for the Economy's Careers Adviser and EA Transition Officer. Parents of pupils with SEN also refer to collaborative approaches taken to support transition planning.
- A minority of parents identify the need for earlier and more detailed information on vocational routes, including apprenticeships, and how to access and apply for higher-level apprenticeships. In a small number of cases, parents indicate that they would welcome additional guidance where subject choice at KS 4 and post-16 limits access to preferred pathways. In the ETI pre-inspection questionnaires, 66.5% of parents report that their child benefits from good careers/employability advice, while 26% report that they do not know.

Summary

Across most of the schools visited, pupils are becoming confident, articulate and well prepared for progression. Questionnaire evidence indicates increasing levels of preparedness as pupils progress through school, from a majority of pupils in Year 10 to most of pupils in Years 11 to 14. At KS 3, aspects of pupils' understanding of the

full range of progression pathways are less secure, particularly in relation to vocational routes, apprenticeships and labour market opportunities. As pupils progress through KS 4 and post-16, they become increasingly confident and better informed about their options and next steps.

Evidence from pupils and parents highlights the value of high-quality guidance, work-related learning and timely communication in supporting informed decision-making. Pupils are better informed where they have access to personalised guidance, a broad range of careers-related experiences and clear information about academic and vocational pathways at appropriate points in their learning.

7. Provision for pupils with SEN

Findings

- Across almost all of the schools visited, careers provision for pupils with SEN includes sensitive, tailored and timely guidance, particularly for those with a statement. Provision is supported by partnerships between pupils, parents/carers, the SENCo, learning support classroom assistants, the careers co-ordinator and multi-agency support from the EA Transition Officer and the Department for the Economy's Careers Advisers in Years 10, 12 and 14. In these schools, there are established working arrangements between staff and external partners.
- In the more effective practice, pupils with SEN are prioritised for early and more frequent engagement with careers advisers. Schools work with the Careers Service, parents/carers and external agencies to support transition planning. This early and personalised approach is associated with pupils having a clearer understanding of their options and being better supported in decision-making.
- In a small number of schools, pupils with SEN do not receive consistent or sufficiently personalised guidance. The timing and quality of support are less consistent, and this is reflected in transition planning. In these cases, pupils may not receive guidance early enough or at key decision points.
- A small number of schools provide bespoke programmes and adapted work experience models for pupils with additional needs to support accessibility and personalisation of careers provision. In these schools, progression outcomes for pupils with statements are identified by school leaders, including progression to education, training or employment. For example, in one school, targeted support for a small number of pupils is provided through project-based learning in collaboration with a social enterprise organisation, with a focus on developing confidence and employability skills.
- Where provision for pupils with SEN is most effective, early engagement, personalised guidance, multi-agency collaboration and planned transition support combine to provide pupils with a clearer understanding of their progression options and the support available to them.

Summary

Across almost all of the schools visited, careers provision for pupils with SEN includes tailored guidance and established partnership working. Where provision is most effective, early engagement, personalised guidance, multi-agency collaboration and planned transition support provide pupils with a clearer understanding of their progression pathways and support them in planning for transition. In a small number of schools, the timing and personalisation of guidance are less consistent, and pupils have more limited access to appropriate support at key decision points.

Effective provision is characterised by early engagement, co-ordinated transition planning and sustained collaboration between schools, families, the Careers Service and other relevant external partners.

8. Resourcing, infrastructure and digital platforms

Findings

- In a small number of schools, there is dedicated careers accommodation or space for the teaching of careers, including flexible interview and research spaces for pupils and staff. These facilities provide pupils with specialised facilities for guidance interviews, independent research and preparation for next steps.
- For the most part, pupils use digital technology to conduct research and source information. Xello was a jointly funded Department of Education and Department for the Economy digital platform available to all post-primary schools in Northern Ireland. Department of Education data indicate that the platform was accessed by a minority of pupils in Years 10 and 12 between 2021 and 2024. Following the end of the Xello contract, schools have adopted a range of digital approaches to support careers learning. Just under half of the schools visited have subsequently purchased commercially available alternatives, with the associated ongoing costs met from school budgets.
- Other schools use a combination of school-developed resources, publicly available information and support from external partners. Schools therefore use a range of digital resources to support careers education. Their contribution to pupils' careers learning is influenced by how well they are integrated into the careers programme to support independent research, access to labour market information and progression planning.
- The administrative demands associated with careers provision, particularly the co-ordination of work experience, also have implications for school resources. As identified in Section 2, school leaders report that securing placements, implementing safeguarding and health and safety requirements and liaising with employers place demands on staff time and school resources.

- Across the schools visited, there is variation in the accommodation, digital resources and administrative support available for careers provision. Dedicated accommodation and digital resources can facilitate guidance, independent research and preparation for progression; their contribution is influenced by how effectively they are used within the wider careers programme.

Summary

Schools use a range of resources and approaches to support careers education. Following the end of the Xello contract, just under half of the schools visited have purchased commercially available digital platforms, while others use school-developed and publicly available resources. The particular digital platform available does not, on its own, determine the quality of pupils' careers learning. Its contribution is influenced by how effectively it is used to support independent research, access to relevant information and progression planning.

Differences in accommodation, digital resources and administrative support influence how schools organise and facilitate aspects of careers provision. Dedicated careers accommodation can support guidance and independent research, while the administrative demands associated with careers provision, particularly work experience, place additional demands on staff time and school resources.

Going forward

The careers provision, overall, is meeting the needs of the pupils in most of the schools visited. This is reflected in suitably structured careers programmes, effective learning and decision-making in most of the lessons observed, and increasing levels of pupil preparedness for progression. Careers learning becomes progressively more structured from KS 3 through KS 4 to post-16. For a minority of schools, however, pupils' experiences are too variable at KS 3 and their understanding of progression pathways is not secure enough.

Access to work experience differs considerably across the key stages. It is limited or unavailable for a majority of pupils at KS 4 but is a consistent feature of provision in almost all schools at post-16.

In those schools where the provision is less effective, the continuity and progression of careers learning, staff expertise, the time and support available to leaders of careers, and the planning and co-ordination of external careers support require further development.

This evaluation highlights the key next steps to build on the effective practice identified and focus on those aspects of provision requiring further development. The next steps should also be considered alongside the Department of Education's new statutory curriculum for Northern Ireland, covering Foundation Stage to KS 3, where Personal, Social, Citizenship and Careers is a new subject area replacing Learning for Life and Work at KS 3.

Next steps

I. Strengthen continuity and progression in careers learning, particularly at KS 3, by:

- ensuring that, irrespective of the model of delivery used, pupils have opportunities to revisit and build progressively on their careers learning;
- improving the sequencing, timing and frequency of careers learning experiences across the key stages;
- strengthening connections between careers education, subject learning and wider curriculum experiences; and
- providing pupils with sufficient opportunities to develop their understanding of the full range of progression pathways, including vocational routes, apprenticeships and labour market opportunities.

II. Strengthen the leadership and delivery of careers provision within schools by:

- reviewing the time and administrative support available to leaders of careers to enable them to plan, co-ordinate, monitor and evaluate provision effectively;
- integrating careers provision more effectively within whole-school planning and improvement processes;
- using information gathered through monitoring, including pupil feedback, more systematically to evaluate the quality and impact of careers provision and inform improvement; and
- strengthening access to relevant teacher professional learning for those leading and delivering careers, particularly in relation to progression pathways and labour market information.

III. Extend pupils' access to meaningful work-related learning and work experience by:

- reviewing approaches to work-related learning and work experience, particularly at KS 4;
- considering how schools, employers and the EA can work together to facilitate access to appropriate work experience and support schools in implementing the EA Work Experience Arrangements (2019);
- strengthening collaboration with employers, FE, HE and WBL providers to broaden pupils' work-related learning experiences; and
- improving opportunities for pupils to connect their learning, interests and aspirations with future pathways through relevant work-related experiences.

IV. Strengthen the planning and co-ordination of external careers support by:

- ensuring that partnership agreements with the Department for the Economy's Careers Service are informed by a clear assessment of pupils' needs and involve relevant school staff, including leaders of careers and SENCos, as appropriate;
- ensuring that the nature and timing of Careers Service support agreed with schools are understood by relevant staff and aligned with key transition and decision points;
- strengthening the co-ordination of support between schools, the Careers Service and other external partners, including the EA Transition Service, employers, FE, HE and WBL providers; and
- supporting timely, personalised and co-ordinated guidance and transition planning, particularly for pupils with SEN.

Appendix 1: Features of effective practice

The features of effective practice, as illustrated graphically in Appendix Four, are provided below.

1. Models of delivery and curriculum continuity

In the most effective practice:

- careers education is delivered through regular, timetabled lessons across the year, ensuring continuity in learning;
- provision is sequenced progressively across key stages, enabling pupils to build on prior experiences; and
- careers learning is revisited regularly and linked across subjects, supporting deeper understanding.

2. Work-related learning and work experience

In the most effective practice:

- work experience is integrated into a coherent programme, including structured preparation and reflection;
- placements are closely aligned to pupils' aspirations and intended pathways; and
- pupils engage in a range of employer encounters and real-life experiences, supporting informed decision-making.

3. Leadership, staffing and capacity for careers

In the most effective practice:

- leaders of careers are provided with sufficient time and administrative support to plan and co-ordinate provision including access to relevant professional learning;
- schools have a clear, coherent programme across all key stages, informed by pupil need and destination data; and
- provision is monitored and evaluated systematically to inform improvement.

4. Partnership working and external guidance

In the most effective practice:

- schools maintain sustained relationships with careers advisers and external partners;
- pupils receive timely and personalised guidance aligned to key decision points; and
- external partnerships are integrated into a coherent programme, rather than delivered as one-off activities.

5. Quality of teaching, learning and assessment

In the most effective practice:

- lessons are grounded in real-life contexts with clear links to future pathways;
- teaching supports pupils to develop self-awareness, independence and decision-making skills; and
- careers education is embedded within whole-school planning and delivered consistently by informed staff.

6. Pupil experiences, understanding and outcomes

In the most effective practice:

- pupils benefit from regular, structured careers provision, particularly at KS 4 and post-16;
- pupils are able to articulate their skills, understand progression pathways and make informed decisions; and
- provision supports a clear understanding of both academic and vocational routes.

7. Provision for pupils with SEN

In the most effective practice:

- pupils with SEN receive early, personalised guidance supported by multi-agency collaboration;
- provision includes well-co-ordinated transition planning at key stages; and
- schools provide bespoke programmes and adapted work-related experiences.

8. Resourcing, infrastructure and digital platforms

In the most effective practice:

- pupils have access to reliable digital tools and structured careers information;
- schools provide appropriate spaces and resources to support guidance and independent research; and
- administrative systems support the effective coordination of careers provision, including work experience.

Appendix 2: Terms of Reference

Evaluation of careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) in post-primary schools

The evaluation was commissioned by the Department of Education (DE) in response to the Public Accounts Committee's (PAC) concerns, as set out in Report on Developing the skills for Northern Ireland's future, May 2025, about the quality, timing, and consistency of careers education in Northern Ireland.

The evaluation key objectives are:

- to assess the extent to which schools provide effective CEIAG that equips young people with the knowledge and skills to make informed decisions about their education, training, and employment pathways;
- identify areas of highly effective practice that can be disseminated more widely to empower improvement at system-level; and
- to inform DE's action planning to improve further the CEIAG provision for learners, as stated in the PAC Recommendation 10.

To evaluate the extent to which CEIAG provision in post-primary schools equips young people with the knowledge and skills to make informed decisions about their education, training, and employment pathways, the evaluation will include the following key areas.

- Consider the quality of careers education provided within post-primary education settings and identify aspects of effective practice in developing effective careers decision makers, including highly effective practices which can be disseminated more widely.
- Review models and structures for delivery of CEIAG from KS 3 to post-16. This includes a review of the school's current staffing, timetabling and physical resources for CEIAG.
- Review the work experience opportunities and/or work-related learning offered by schools at: KS 3; KS 4; and at post-16.
- Consider the extent, timeliness and impact of schools' engagement with the Department for the Economy's careers advisers.
- Consider learners' experiences of CEIAG across the key stages and post-16, including how confident they feel in making their careers decisions for the future, and their knowledge of a range of progression pathways and skills areas.

Appendix 3: Quantitative Terms

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	- more than 90%
Most	- 75% - 90%
A majority	- 50% - 74%
A significant minority	- 30% - 49%
A minority	- 10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	- less than 10%

Appendix 4: Features of best practice



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