



Speakers for Schools NI Response to the Review of the NI Curriculum Call for Evidence

30 January 2025

1. In what capacity are you responding? Please briefly explain the nature of your organisation/role (for example, parent, teacher, business leader).

My name is Vivienne Fitzroy, NI Policy Advisor for Speakers for Schools, and I am responding on behalf of our charity. Below gives a brief overview of our work, with more information available [here](#).

Who we are

- Speakers for Schools is a UK-wide social mobility charity that helps empower young people to reach their potential. We have a dedicated NI Team, based locally.
- We want to close the opportunity gap between the most and least advantaged young people in NI by providing fair, free access to high-quality work experiences and inspirational talks in schools.
- Our mission is to level the playing field for young people, so that everyone gets the chance to develop the necessary confidence, skills, and knowledge to become better prepared for the world of work.

What we do

- We work with over 30 local NI employers to create virtual and in-person work experiences, including: Kainos, BBC NI, Graham Construction, Irish Football Association, NI Assembly and Lloyds.
- Students can also freely access our UK-wide virtual programmes which involved 218 leading employers and career talks from over 1400 inspirational speakers in 23/24¹.
- We work with over 600 educators in NI, across 175 post-primary schools and 6 Further Education Colleges, to reach young people from across the region, support fair access for all and ensure placements comply with EA guidance.
- In the 23/24 academic year 3000 NI students applied to our programmes, which are freely available to grant-aided secondary schools and further education colleges.

Why work experience matters

- Our programmes open doors to opportunities for all young people, helping to tackle educational disadvantage, raise aspirations and drive social mobility.
- High-quality work experience has a transformative impact on young people's lives – of the young people in NI who completed our programmes in 23/24:
 - 90% said work experience helped them learn about industry career opportunities.
 - 67% said work experience helped them learn about skills required by employers.

¹ Speakers for Schools 2023-24 Impact Report available at: <https://www.speakersforschools.org/news/five-key-takeaways-from-our-2023-2024-impact-report/>

- 51% said it helped them understand the link between school subjects and careers²
- Our impact and evaluation research also demonstrates that the greatest positive benefit is to young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds:
 - 88% of young people eligible for Free School Meals (FSMs) said their work experience placement helped them decide on their future job (c. 44% for all attendees)
 - 52% of young people eligible for FSM reported their placement gave them practical life skills advice (c. 40% for all attendees)³.
- We welcome this curriculum review and hope it offers an opportunity to develop a progressive, skills balanced refresh that meets the needs of all young people in NI. We believe that work experience should play a vital role in a young person's education journey and have shared our evidence and asks below on how this can be achieved.

Our NI Curriculum Asks:

- Retain and develop Employability as a statutory Area of Learning within the NI Curriculum with refreshed, up-to-date guidance and supports for educators.
- Implement the recommendation within the Independent Review of Careers Guidance that DE & EA should agree a minimum work experience offer for all young people in conjunction with Area Learning Communities, as part of employability and careers education.
- Develop work experience best-practice guidance, linked to curriculum learning objectives and skills practice, to support high-quality and consistent individual school policies. This would go beyond the remit of current EA guidance, encompassing flexible delivery models, to support the quality and range of provision on offer to all young people.

2. What are your views on the strengths of the Northern Ireland Curriculum?
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I. Employability and careers as part of the statutory NI curriculum

- We believe that a key strength of the NI Curriculum is the existing inclusion of employability and careers education as a statutory requirement at key stages three and four.
- Bridging the gap between the world of work and formal education requires dedicated time and commitment in the curriculum. International models of best practice embed integrated career guidance within the curriculum and include practical work experience⁴.
- Employability and careers must be retained as a statutory entitlement for students in NI. We would welcome consideration as to whether the current curriculum configuration is working to deliver employability skills for all young people and how this key strand of education can be more rigorously supported. This is particularly relevant for students from less privileged

² Speakers for Schools Evaluation of Work Experience 23/24; NI Demographic subset data (survey responses from 362 young people from NI).

³ Speakers for Schools 2023-24 Impact Report available at: <https://www.speakersforschools.org/news/five-key-takeaways-from-our-2023-2024-impact-report/>

⁴ Independent Review of external careers delivery in NI – international exemplars (2022), Pg2-3, available at <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/Independent-external-review-of-careers-delivery-international-exemplars.pdf>

backgrounds, to address educational disadvantage. See detail in Q3 for further discussion on this issue.

II. **Local Area flexibility – this must be supported by best-practice guidance and a minimum work experience offer**

- Work experience is not a statutory requirement within the employability curriculum. Nonetheless it is widely recognised as a key activity for young people to meet employability learning objectives, support skills practice and career planning. Both the CCEA and the Education Authority⁵ reference the value of work experience in their specific guidance and resources.

Without a doubt 3 days of a work placement is the most beneficial.... it really opens their eyes to the demands of the job and the expectations of employers.

Educator

- There is a broad and evidenced consensus that earlier exposure to the world of work can help better inform pathway choices. Local research by Pivotal Public Policy Forum NI (2021) highlighted in a that over half (55%) of young people indicated that work-based learning experiences were most helpful aspects of career education⁶.
- Currently schools have flexibility to determine their own work experience policy and identify their own learning outcomes. We believe flexibility in work experience policies at a local level is important. At best, flexibility enables schools to respond to their own pupils' needs and local context, including the local market and employment opportunities. See Matei's story below.

"It is really essential for preparing the students for university interviews and creating personal statements for UCAS."

Educator

Case Study – Matei's Story

Matei is a year 14 student who moved to Northern Ireland with his family when he was in primary school. He is studying Maths, Physics and Computer Science at school in Belfast and plans to be the first in his family to attend University.

Matei wants to pursue a career in the tech field, with a particular interest in software engineering. Matei first learned about Speakers for Schools from his teachers in Year 13 and has shared how online work experience has helped him.

"When I began Year 13, my school highlighted the fact that work experience was something vital for us to do. Not just to figure out what job we wanted to do, but also what exactly we would want to study."



⁵EA Work Experience Arrangements (2019) Pg 3, available at <https://www.eani.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-03/FINAL%20EA%20Work%20Experience%20Arrangements%20-%20Feb%202020.pdf>

⁶ Transforming the 14-19 education and skills system in Northern Ireland – youth voices and solutions (2021), Pivotal Public Policy Forum NI, available at <https://www.pivotalppf.org/cmsfiles/14-19-final.pdf>

I applied for work experience because it seemed like an incredible opportunity for me to get a better insight in the tech space and other industries that I have always been curious about. It allowed me to see whether they would be something I was interested in.

I completed multiple online work experiences and workshops in 2023 and 2024, throughout the whole of Year 13. Some were one day insights, while others were three days experiences, with group projects and many activities.

Work experience helped me decide what I wanted to study at university. It has been a massive help whenever I've had to do interviews, it's an incredible talking point.

I think all young people should get access to work experience. My school were really supportive, giving me plenty of time to explore my interests. I think too many young people are missing out on being able to do a career they love just because they never actually got the opportunity to try it. I'd recommend virtual work experience programmes with Speakers for Schools to any employer who wants to engage with young people too."

- However, flexibility can also risk exacerbating existing inequalities in the system. Often access to high-quality careers and work experience depends on your own family network and what support school can offer. This is borne out by recent research by Speakers for Schools and Social Market Foundation which demonstrates that students from affluent families or those with university-educated parents have a significant advantage in understanding how the education and careers systems work, and how to navigate them⁷. A third of young people (33%) from least advantaged backgrounds did not receive careers advice from family or friends, compared to just 5% of those who have a parent/guardian with a post-graduate degree⁸.
- As outlined above in Q1, Speakers for Schools research demonstrates that high-quality work experience is effective in supporting employability and careers learning objectives, and particularly so for young people entitled to FSM⁹. It helps to narrow the disadvantage gaps in outcomes and opportunities as it provides a way to demystify industries and career paths for those young people who might otherwise not get that information.
- Educators in NI often highlight that not all schools have access to the same networks and local opportunities – this is also a challenge for rural schools. We are concerned that without best-practice guidance and a minimum offer, this variation can lead to unequal opportunities for young people and potentially exacerbate the disadvantage gaps.
- To mitigate this risk, we believe that there should be a minimum work experience offer for young people, as recommended by the Independent Review of Careers¹⁰. Flexibility on how a minimum offer is best achieved for pupils should be retained by schools and Area Learning Communities, as

⁷ Social Market Foundation (2024) *Things worth knowing* Report available at <https://www.smf.co.uk/publications/assumed-knowledge-in-youth-transitions-from-education-to-employment/>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Speakers for Schools 2023-24 Impact Report available at: <https://www.speakersforschools.org/news/five-key-takeaways-from-our-2023-2024-impact-report/>

¹⁰ Transforming Careers Support for young people and adults in Northern Ireland (2023), Department for Economy, pg. 102, available at <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/Transforming-careers-support-report.pdf>

outlined in the review recommendations. This would ensure that all young people get equal access of opportunity.

III. Moving towards early careers education and work-related learning

- We support the recommendation made by the Independent Review of Careers¹¹ that employability must be introduced earlier in the curriculum. Our industry spotlight talks and careers inspiration talks range in age suitability from age 11-19. Talks can be filtered by both industry and age suitability from our website.
- We are aware of early pilot work in NI to embed careers-related learning within primary education. Part of the Fair Start Action Plan¹², the aim is to raise children's aspirations, challenge gender and socio-economic stereotypes. We believe this approach offers a foundation for developing a continuous, progressive careers and employability curriculum strand flowing from primary school through to secondary level.

"Employability should be in primary curriculum as well."
Educator

- Speakers for Schools' work highlights that talent is everywhere, but opportunity is not. We support employers to run programmes to tackle under-representation of groups in certain industries - see the Into Tech story below. The success of these programmes would be enhanced by ensuring that children's aspirations are raised and stereotypes challenges from the earliest age.

Into Tech: A partnership between the Hg Foundation and Speakers for schools

To address the UK's persistent diversity gap in the tech industry, The Hg Foundation are partnering with Speakers for Schools – the UK's largest social mobility charity and provider of work experience - to launch a new tech programme.

This ambitious partnership - jointly funded by both charities – will span five years. It is beginning with a pilot year that includes 10,600 opportunities created for young people aged under 16, with an emphasis on young people from under-represented backgrounds, to explore and pursue careers in technology. If successful, the following four years will provide further 84,400 opportunities to students UK-wide.

The UK tech sector is a cornerstone of the economy, employing over 1.7 million people and contributing over £150 billion annually, but it continues to struggle with diversity. Currently, only 9% of tech employees come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and 29% are female or non-binary, even as 95% of employers report difficulties in recruiting talent.

¹¹ Ibid, Pg 12

¹² A Fair Start Progress Report #6 (June 2024), Department of Education, available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-01/A%20Fair%20Start%20Progress%20Report%20%236%20as%20at%2030%20June%202024.pdf>.

The **'IntoTech'** initiative aims to bridge this gap by demystifying careers across the sector, providing high-quality experiences of the workplace and inspiring the next generation of the tech workforce, as well as broadening the scope of who enters it.

The initiative will be independently evaluated, with the results aiming to inform other transformational social mobility initiatives across multiple industries and lead to concrete national policy recommendations.

3. What are your views on the weaknesses of the Northern Ireland Curriculum?

I. Need to modernise Employability / Learning for Life and Work Curriculum

- Currently Employability is contained within the Learning for Life and Work (LLW) strand of the curriculum, which is wide-ranging. Calls for reform of the LLW curriculum are well-documented in NI. The Secondary Students Union of NI 'Let us Learn' Report (2023) called for a curriculum that inspired young people, highlighting:
 - 86.8% of respondents did not find LLW to be viewed as a priority subject in their schools like English or Maths would be.
 - 72.9% of young people do not believe they have received adequate LLW education.
 - 69% of young people felt that the employability aspects of LLW had not helped them at all (36%), or helped very little (33%), to prepare for the world of work¹³.
- Research undertaken by NI Think Tank Pivotal in 2021 also highlighted the need for reforms-only 21% of young people felt they were learning the skills needed for future employment. It proposed that employability and careers education should be developed as a more engaging curriculum area for young people and given greater priority within the school timetable.

"It (Employability) isn't currently well covered in the vast majority of schools due to demands on time and schools wanting to dedicate more time to exam subjects."

Educator

- Recent feedback from educators we work with indicates much of the same challenges remain – educators often cite the need to prioritise exam subjects over LLW. We are hopeful that this review will consider how the structure and priority for Employability could be improved to best serve young people and respond to their views. Also, whether high-quality employability and careers education is best served by the current configuration as part of a wide-ranging LLW strand.

¹³ 'Let us Learn – A Learning for Life and Work report', December 2023, Secondary Students Union NI, available at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f242309f8a3f0421545e958/t/656dffe1f75edf6d56c8cb63/1701707747114/Let+Us+Learn+Report%21+.pdf>

4. To what extent do you think the Northern Ireland Curriculum has been successfully implemented in schools, and what do you perceive to be the barriers (if any) to its implementation?

We believe that the below issues are barriers to successfully implementing a world-class employability and careers education for all young people here.

I. Lack of support and investment in Employability and Careers

- We are unaware of any dedicated funding to support the development and implementation of the employability aspects of the curriculum in recent years. This is something we feel must be redressed given the fast-paced changing nature of the world of work and the limitations of capacity often shared by career and work experience leads.
- Our understanding is that available resources, for example from the CCEA and EA, to support employability curriculum delivery are limited and often pre-date the COVID pandemic. As such they do not reflect changing practices around virtual work-related learning and employment practices both locally and nationally.

“In my experience, I believe students enjoy the employability strand however, I'm not sure if they see the relevance of it...It would be really useful if there were case studies from local and well-known companies that could be studied and the roles and responsibilities of professionals within that workplace could be discussed.”

Educator

- In a 2024 report, the Audit Office highlighted a lack of progress on the implementation of the jointly owned 14-19 Framework¹⁴ which aims to support young people at a vital point in their transition between education and employment. The NIAO cited a lack of allocated funding and unclear objectives among the key barriers to progress.
- The Department for Economy has outlined that the priority for careers development is the creation of a modern, all-age careers portal and we welcome this¹⁵. We are keen to understand how the portal will link across to the delivery of the employability curriculum – will it include a repository for work experience and industry / professional talks? Will this portal be used to encourage employers to consider work experience?

II. Need to implement a minimum work experience offer for young people with local flexibility for delivery

- The support system to find, access and quality-assure work experience is inconsistent for young people and administratively burdensome for educators and employers. Work experience should not be limited to one placement in year 13.

¹⁴ 'NI Audit Office Report - Developing the Skills for NI's Future', September 2024, available at <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/files/niauditoffice/documents/2024-09/NI%20Audit%20Office%20Report%20-%20Developing%20the%20Skills%20for%20NI%27s%20Future.pdf>

¹⁵ Department for Economy, (Jun 2024) <https://consultations.nidirect.gov.uk/dfe/careers-portal/>

- As outlined above, Speakers for Schools believe that DE/EA and ALCs should start the work needed to progress the recommendation within the independent review of careers to agree a minimum work experience offer for young people here. Young people's voices should be central to this work. We believe that any work experience offer should adopt a flexible delivery model, improve access and increase accountability.
- Any minimum work experience offer is also relevant for the Department for Economy, as part of their responsibility for 14-19 policy and careers guidance. DfE expertise could help consider ways to incentivise employers to consider work experience highlighting social value and, where possible, align with broader economic priorities, including regional balance and carbon reduction. It is also vital the community and voluntary sector is involved as a key partner – particularly youth-led organisations and delivery partners including Speakers for Schools.

III. Need to review EA guidance to reduce administration and include virtual work experience

- EA guidance (2019) relates to the health & safety, safeguarding and insurance obligations of schools when securing / approving in-person work experience placements. These elements are necessary and cannot be overlooked. Nonetheless exploring ways in which the administrative burden could be reduced for employers and schools would be a welcome step.

The demand on time and people to ensure all students are visited during a work placement is incredibly difficult, time consuming.
Educator

- We believe EA guidance should reflect a blended approach and not act as a barrier to employers or schools. We support employers in NI to navigate their way through existing requirements, however, it is labour intensive and often discourages employers.
- Our front-line learnings align with the research by Pivotal in 2021 into the 14-19 education and skills system in NI. Their report made several recommendations pertaining to EA guidance including that the guidance should be “re-examined....to ease the organisation of work experience.”¹⁶
- EA guidance is also limited around the timing of work experience being restricted to term-time only. We would welcome consideration of how holiday-time placements could be facilitated, potentially through engagement with parents, in a way that would benefit schools and young people.
- Young people have voiced their wish to be able to access virtual work experience and industry work-related learning¹⁷. The EA guidance does not make any reference to virtual placements. We believe that these can support work-related learning and offer one way to help overcome barriers to participation and access, including economic disadvantage, special educational needs, and geographical location.

¹⁶ Transforming the 14-19 education and skills system in Northern Ireland – youth voices and solutions (2021), Pivotal Public Policy Forum NI, available at <https://www.pivotalppf.org/cmsfiles/14-19-final.pdf>

¹⁷ Transforming Careers Support for young people and adults in Northern Ireland (2023), Department for Economy, pg. 52, Feedback from young people 14-18, available at <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/Transforming-careers-support-report.pdf>

- Speakers for Schools has developed a high-quality virtual work-experience model, which sets out clear learning objectives, uses Google Classroom and includes interactive activities and offline projects. Learning outcomes and skills practise are evidenced through pre and post evaluation with students which we collate, share with employers, and use to measure impact. Schools must support students to ensure they have a suitable space, and the devices needed to participate effectively in the placement as well as provide an administrative and safeguarding point of contact.

IV. Lack of best-practice work experience standards and guidance

- Given the limited remit of the EA guidance, we believe that best-practice work experience guidance for schools would help to reduce variability by better supporting schools, colleges and ALCs. This could encompass access to information and resources; guidance on how to deliver a more flexible model across key stages and throughout the academic year; and how to utilise and showcase the associated learning and skills practice to serve the employability curriculum.
- Schools and colleges must be recognised and rewarded for the time, commitment and energy needed to oversee and support access to high-quality work experience for their students. We also believe that greater accountability and visibility in term of data and standards is required to measure future success.

<p>5. Bearing in mind this is a review of the curriculum, and not of qualifications or assessment, is there anything else you would like to draw attention to that you think should be a focus of the review?</p>
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- Employability and careers education has been the subject of several reviews and research in NI over the past five years, most recently by the Independent Review of Education¹⁸. Young people have also shared their views that reform is needed. Recommendations are plentiful and well-evidenced. We hope our research and evidence are useful to the review and that your work can move us from recommendations to action.

For more information, please contact Vivienne Fitzroy, Speaker for Schools NI Policy Advisor, at Vivienne.fitzroy@speakersforschools.org.

¹⁸ The Final report by the Independent Review of Education in NI, 'Investing in a Better Future' (Dec 2023) available at <https://www.independentreviewofeducation.org.uk/key-documents/investing-better-future>