

## North East Ambition: Good practice guide for achieving the Gatsby Benchmarks in middle schools

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The Gatsby Benchmarks were not designed with a three-tier education system in mind, consequently, they pose additional challenges for middle schools. This guide has been produced in collaboration with our North East community of middle school careers leaders. It explores approaches to each benchmark, lessons learnt from experience, and also provides useful advice and tips for achieving the Benchmarks from a middle school perspective.

\*Please also refer to the Careers and Enterprise Company - Interpreting the Gatsby Benchmarks and Compass Completion Guidance for Middle Schools [Middle School Guidance FAQs](#)

### Tools

▪ Compass+ ▪ Future Skills Questionnaire ▪ Careers Impact System ▪ Careers Leader Training



# Benchmark 1 – A stable careers programme



Every school and college should have an embedded programme of career education and guidance that is known and understood by pupils, parents, teachers and employers.

## Requirements

- Every school should have a stable, structured careers programme that has the explicit backing of the senior management team and has an identified and appropriately trained person responsible for it.
- The careers programme should be published on the school's website in a way that enables pupils, parents, teachers and employers to access and understand it. The programme should be regularly evaluated with feedback from pupils, parents, teachers and employers as part of the evaluation process



## Hexham Middle School

Paul Freeman-Myers (Assistant Headteacher – Personal Development, Senior Mental Health Lead, Careers Leader)

### What was your approach to achieving Benchmark 1?

- Getting senior leadership buy in and support - it was crucial to the development of Benchmark 1 as well as having a close relationships with our [link governor](#) as this supported strategic development
- Completion of the [Careers Leader training](#) funded by the Careers and Enterprise Company - I'd highly recommend as this can help to formulate your careers vision, strategy and programme.
- Consider conducting a desktop audit and [SWOT analysis](#) to identify the gaps within careers provision across year groups, then use to feed into your strategic planning
- Identify opportunities for staff CPD and ensure you book in yearly refreshers and sessions for new staff around careers and the schools careers programme. This allows for consistency and visibility across the school.
- Conducting focus groups with staff and curriculum leads - this helped to develop a whole school approach to careers and links within the curriculum.

### What advice would you give other middle school careers leaders?

- Make use of the North East Ambition Careers Hub for support, including resources and training on the [North East Ambition website](#) as well as other supporting organisations such as [The Skills Builder Partnership](#) and [Careers and Enterprise Company](#)
- Investment in budget is key, look at the school priorities looking at your long term objectives and vision as a starting point.
- Look at ways to engage with other middle school careers leaders or schools in the same trust to share best practice and ideas on benchmark 1.

### Sources of Support:

- [The Gatsby Benchmark Toolkit for Schools](#)
- [North East Ambition Benchmark 1 Toolkit](#)
- [CEC - Creating a Strategic Careers Plan](#)
- [Using the Future Skills Questionnaire](#)
- [CEC Learner Journey Road Map](#)
- [CDI Framework](#)
- [Impact Evaluation - resource and support guide](#)
- [Careers Impact System](#) ▪ [Website Audit Tool](#)
- [Careers - Hexham Middle School](#)



# Benchmark 2 – Learning from career and labour market information



## Valley Gardens Middle School

Samantha Wilson (Assistant Headteacher and Careers Leader)

Every student, and their parents, should have access to good quality information about future study options and labour market opportunities. They will need the support of an informed adviser to make best use of available information.

### Requirements

- By the age of 14, all pupils should have accessed and used information about career paths and the labour market to inform their own decisions on study options.
- Parents should be encouraged to access and use information about labour markets and future study options to inform their support to their children

### What was your approach to achieving Benchmark 2?

- Providing CPD for staff – this helped to support their understanding of the local labour market, growth sectors and skill shortages in the North East. It also provided examples of ways to embed careers into the curriculum, especially around incorporating routes into sectors, this really supported the progress of Benchmark 2.
- Look regularly at websites such as [North East Evidence Hub](#) for up to date labour marketing information, this ensures you are up to date with the regional and national LMI landscape.
- Utilise opportunities within the curriculum to provide labour market information, for example make use of resources such as [Explore careers - icould](#) where you can share 2-3 minute video clips about different careers and sectors, this provides pupils with exposure to a variety of jobs and pathways.
- Strategies such as career of the week can help to showcase different careers to pupils and staff including the job role, responsibilities, salary and qualifications, this can then be used to inform career conversations with pupils.
- During educational visits offsite we ask pupils to consider careers in action if they are visiting a museum or landmark, get them to identify/record who have they spoken to and what was their role.
- Having information on your school website is an essential aspect of achieving Benchmark 2 this could include links to websites such as [National Careers Service](#) and [Careerometer – LMI For All](#) (available until Oct 2025) as well as including key information for parents/carers. [Valley Gardens Middle School website](#)

- As a school KS3 pupils use [Unifrog](#) this is an online platform where pupils can log any activities they have participated in and have access to careers videos and pathway information.
- Working closely with local partners who deliver workshops and assemblies in school for pupils focusing on LMI and careers in different sectors this helps to provide exposure to LMI for pupils and staff.

### What advice would you give other middle school careers leaders?

- It is important to have a whole school approach to Benchmark 2, ensuring that all staff have an understanding of local labour market information.
- Get senior leadership team backing, it is crucial to ensure you have the support needed to implement Benchmark 2.
- Attend the North East Ambition regional conferences, these are brilliant for keeping up to date, providing networking opportunities and insights into up to date labour market information.

### Sources of Support:

- [The Gatsby Benchmarks Toolkit for Schools](#)
- [North East Ambition Benchmark 2 Toolkit](#)
- [North East Ambition SEND students and the North East Labour Market](#)
- [CareerMap TV](#) ▪ [LMI lessons in keystage 3](#)



# Benchmark 3 – Addressing the needs of each pupil

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Pupils have different career guidance needs at different stages. Opportunities for advice and support need to be tailored to the needs of each pupil. A school's careers programme should embed equality and diversity considerations throughout.

## Requirements

- A school's careers programme should actively seek to challenge stereotypical thinking and raise aspirations.
- Schools should keep systematic records of the individual advice given to each pupil, and subsequent agreed decisions. All pupils should have access to these records to support their career development.
- Schools should collect and maintain accurate data for each pupil on their education, training or employment destinations for at least three years after they leave the school



## Gosforth Central Middle School

Joseph Veitch (Head of Enterprise and Careers Leader)

### What was your approach to achieving Benchmark 3?

- As a careers leader I made use of [Compass+](#) to track activities and opportunities for each pupil and year group.
- It is important to ensure that careers activities are offered to each and every pupil providing exposure to a number of career pathways, the critical thing is to make sure your programme is tailored to your young people.
- First and foremost, it is important to have a system in place where pupils can track their own career activities. At Gosforth Central Middle School they have created their own google site for pupils called ' Expedition' where pupils develop their [Expedition Journal](#) during their time at middle school.
- Every Friday afternoon the curriculum is dedicated to enterprise time where pupils can choose from a range of activities and taster sessions led and planned by both school staff and external organisations.
- Challenging gender stereotypes throughout our programme is essential by providing a range of experiences and encounters for pupils we can tackle this such as myth busting that construction is just for boys.

### What advice would you give other middle school careers leaders?

- Take advantage of the compass+ webinar series to help you to understand how best to log and track careers activities across the school to support progress with Benchmark 3.
- Allow time for pupils to access and update their own careers learning journey however you are recording the information in your school.
- Make sure you maintain communications with High schools to ensure effective tracking.

### Sources of Support:

- [The Gatsby Benchmarks Toolkit for Schools](#)
- [North East Ambition Benchmark 3 Toolkit](#)
- [WOW Show Careers Guides](#)
- [Challenging Stereotypes session](#)



# Benchmark 4 – Linking curriculum learning to careers

All teachers should link curriculum learning with careers. For example, STEM subject teachers should highlight the relevance of STEM subjects for a wide range of career pathways.

## Requirements

- By the age of 14, every pupil should have had the opportunity to learn how the different STEM subjects help people to gain entry to, and be more effective workers within, a wide range of careers.



## Highfield Middle School

Rob Mills (Head of Year 7, Citizenship, PSHE and Careers Leader)

### What was your approach to achieving Benchmark 4?

- When looking at Benchmark 4 I conducted careers CPD in conjunction with my the North East Ambition Careers Hub team. I did this with all subject leads to first look at an audit and consider the importance and relevance of careers in each subject.
- During the CPD staff used A3 sheets of paper to map out topics across each year group and look at clear alignment to careers and industry including the focus on skills development.
- A great way to bring careers into the curriculum was encouraging staff to update displays in their classroom – linking careers into their own subject areas, for example what jobs can you get through studying maths etc.
- Providing staff with the tools and resources to start bringing careers into the classroom is really important. It's helpful to create external links, for example bringing visitors and employers in, such as authors within English to talk about their role and career and how they use English to support their day job.
- As a school we pay yearly into [Primary Enterprise World | Northeast](#) who provide a number of careers related activities to pupils across school.
- [National Careers Week](#) - our school uses this as a great opportunity to raise the profile of careers consider how staff can get involved by sharing their own career journey, as well

as inviting local businesses or providers into school to offer activities for pupils.

### What advice would you give other middle school careers leaders?

- The [Careers Leader Training](#) funded by Careers and Enterprise Company helped to provide scaffolding to develop a strategy and plan. I was able to effectively articulate why all teachers are teachers of careers.
- Consider conducted a questionnaire with parents and staff to look at opportunities for engagement and links across curriculum areas this worked really well to engage with the wider school community.
- Make sure pupils are aware of careers and how it links to what they are learning in the classroom.

### Sources of Support:

- [The Gatsby Benchmarks Toolkit for Schools](#)
- [North East Ambition Benchmark 4 Toolkit](#)
- [Benchmark 4 Careers in the Curriculum Guide](#)
- [CEC Benchmark 4 Modelling Tool](#)



# Benchmark 5 – Encounters with employers and employees

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Every pupil should have multiple opportunities to learn from employers about work, employment and the skills that are valued in the workplace. This can be through a range of enrichment opportunities including visiting speakers, mentoring and enterprise schemes.

## Requirements

- Every year, from the age of 11, pupils should participate in at least one meaningful encounter\* with an employer.
- \* A 'meaningful encounter' is one in which the student has an opportunity to learn about what work is like or what it takes to be successful in the workplace.



## Newminster Middle School

Sumeena Razzaqi (Assistant Headteacher Curriculum and Enrichment, Careers Leader)

### What was your approach to achieving Benchmark 5?

- Although the Gatsby Benchmarks are only applicable from KS 3, as a middle school we have focused on more practical and hands on activities for KS1 and a focus on curriculum links and connections with pathways such as college/university for KS2. This has helped to plan more progressive opportunities across a pupils learning journey.
- We have developed a pre-planned programme of activities for pupils that means we can build upon each year, this includes Year 5 hopes and dreams day, whole school science day and our Year 8 careers conference.
- It is good to consider a mixture of free and paid for activities within our programme and different sectors to make sure pupils are exposed to opportunities to help raise their aspirations.
- It is essential to utilise your [Enterprise Adviser](#) as they have links with wider employer networks they can draw upon to support activities within school.
- Social media is a great tool to support with recruiting employers and providers to come and engage with our school as well as showcasing events and activities that happen within school.

### What advice would you give other middle school careers leaders?

- Utilise platforms like Compass+ for recording activities and keeping an employer database in one central place.
- Tap into alumni, previous pupils who may have an invested interest in supporting the school.
- Show appreciation to employers – send thank you cards from students, letters of thanks, photographs etc, it's personal touches that mean they may be more likely to re-engage for future events.
- Develop a booklet for pupils to capture their learning and reflections on employer encounters and activities as this helps to inform evaluation of the impact of your careers programme.
- Plan for large scale events in advance, consider at least a 3-month lead in time, it's crucial in getting all the activities and providers booked in.

### Sources of Support:

- [The Gatsby Benchmarks Toolkit for Schools](#)
- [North East Ambition Benchmark 5 Toolkit](#)
- [North East Linkup Portal](#)



# Benchmark 6 – Experiences of workplaces



Every pupil should have first-hand experiences of the workplace through work visits, work shadowing and/or work experience to help their exploration of career opportunities and expand their networks.

## Requirements

- By the age of 16, every pupil should have had at least one experience of a workplace, additional to any part-time jobs they may have.
- By the age of 18, every pupil should have had one further such experience, additional to any part-time jobs they may have.



## Wellfield Middle School

Lianne Davies (Careers Leader)

### What was your approach to achieving Benchmark 6?

- From a middle school perspective considering different models of experience of the workplace is useful for achieving Benchmark 6. Utilise educational visits offsite across the school to encourage a focus on careers and skills.
- One approach we developed with the help of the North East Ambition Careers Hub for Benchmark 6 was a 'Careers Safari', where the pupils get the chance to meet with multiple local businesses, ask questions, interact etc, this built a more meaningful experience of the workplace.
- To develop the Careers Safari, it was important to work in partnership with local businesses, we met with each business to discuss logistics and focus for each session. This helped to build sustainable partnerships whilst ensuring that both the business and pupils are prepared in advance.
- In collaboration with the businesses and the Careers Hub we created a booklet for pupils to complete during the experiences, we also used the safari as an opportunity to learn about apprenticeships some of the sessions were delivered by alumni apprentices from our school!

### What advice would you give other middle school careers leaders?

- Utilise the North East Ambition Careers Hub for ideas and support around how to approach any of the benchmarks, but especially benchmark 6, including their virtual workplace tours, they are easy to access on the website [Explore the Workplace - North East Ambition \(northeast-ca.gov.uk\)](https://www.northeast-ca.gov.uk).
- Gain senior leadership buy in and support – this helps with logistics and planning for workplace experiences including any time out of curriculum or costs for transport.
- Develop a survey to share with pupils to help identify places of interest and or sectors to visit which can support with your careers programme planning.

### Sources of Support:

- [The Gatsby Benchmarks Toolkit for Schools](#)
- [North East Ambition Benchmark 6 Toolkit](#)
- [North East Ambition : Work Experience](#)
- [Stem Learning](#)
- [Barclays life Skills - virtual work experience](#)
- [Speakers for schools - virtual work experience](#)



# Benchmark 7 – Encounters with further and higher education



All pupils should understand the full range of learning opportunities that are available to them. This includes both academic and vocational routes and learning in schools, colleges, universities and in the workplace.

## Requirements

- By the age of 16, every pupil should have had a meaningful encounter\* with providers of the full range of learning opportunities, including sixth forms, colleges, universities and apprenticeship providers. This should include the opportunity to meet both staff and pupils.
- By the age of 18, all pupils who are considering applying for university should have had at least two visits to universities to meet staff and pupils.



## Corbridge Middle School

Dean Johnston (Deputy Headteacher, Careers Leader)

### What was your approach to achieving Benchmark 7?

- Planning ahead is key to meeting your Provider Access Legislation requirements, and Benchmark 7. I made sure we incorporated guest speakers, talking about different pathways and routes into their profession through a whole school assembly rota.
- Sharing updates with staff and utilising CPD time to provide information about post 16 and 18 pathways available including apprenticeships, A Levels and T Levels so staff can better inform pupils of these options.
- Utilising tutor time to build in experiences of encounters with further and higher education to help pupils learn about different pathways organisations such as [North East Raising Aspiration Partnership - NERAP](#) can provide a range of in-school and online workshops/activities on a variety of topics on behalf of all of our university Partners on the North East for students in Key Stage 2 and 4.
- KS3 have 12 hours per year of careers during their ambition unit of work they focus on pathways where pupils research different pathways then present their findings back to peers.
- We ask employers involved in activities to outline their career pathways and the routes into their industry/business, this all goes towards helping you meet your Provider Access Legislation.
- We host a bi-annual careers fair for our KS 3 pupils, with providers from education and training organisations.

### What advice would you give other middle school careers leaders?

- Look at the timing of your careers fair, having one in the autumn may help to maximise attendance from FE/HE providers and employers, it can also tie in with transition.
- Develop links with feeder high schools and other institutions and organisations to support with pathways insight if they have a sixth form or for options evenings.
- Consider hosting an annual or bi-annual careers fair involving apprenticeship, FE and HE providers aimed at KS3 pupils this can support with transition and provide an exposure of pathways available post 16 and 18.

### Sources of Support:

- [The Gatsby Benchmarks Toolkit for Schools](#)
- [North East Ambition Benchmark 7 Toolkit](#)
- [Unlocking Apprenticeship Potential - North East Guide](#)
- [A Parent and Carer Guide to Apprenticeships and Technical Education](#)
- [North East Ambition Provider Portal](#)
- [CEC Example Provider Access Policy Statement](#)
- [CEC - Making Apprenticeships and Technical Education part of the conversation](#)





# Benchmark 8 – Personal Guidance

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## Marden Bridge Middle School

Lynsey Jackson (Faculty Leader Humanities & Life Studies, Careers Leader)

Every pupil 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. These should be available whenever significant study or career choices are being made. They should be expected for all pupils but should be timed to meet their individual needs.

### Requirements

- Every pupil should have at least one such interview by the age of 16, and the opportunity for a further interview by the age of 18.

### What was your approach to achieving Benchmark 8?

As a school we explored two different approaches to Benchmark 8:

1. Initially, we considered linking with our feeder high school to request some time from their Careers Adviser to conduct one to one interviews for those pupils who requested it.
2. Buying in an independent, appropriately qualified Careers Adviser through an external provider (in our area, this was available through Connexions service via our Service Level Agreement).

### We decided to progress with option 2:

- When approaching benchmark 8 it is important to ensure you have full senior leadership buy in and approval to buy into a service level agreement with careers guidance specialists who would provide 1:1 guidance interviews for groups of pupils. It's worth remembering qualified Careers Advisers can conduct group as well as one to one interventions.
- From a middle school perspective conducting guidance interviews with pupils in KS3 is important in supporting the transition to the high school and to supports the evaluation of our careers programme.
- Utilising the [Unifrog](#) platform for pupils enabled us to record careers aspirations and conversations with the Careers Adviser. This in turn informed our transition arrangements to the high school.

- To gain an understanding of pupils interests and aspirations we utilised the Future Skills Questionnaire, this also helped us to plan our careers programme.
- In addition to targeted 1:1 conversations, we made time for careers and aspiration conversations across the curriculum, in all key stages from Year 5 – Year 8.

### What advice would you give other middle school careers leaders?

- Consider if any member of staff within school is L6 qualified to offer 1:1 guidance and if not is it possible to train them?
- Link with your feeder high school as part of transition arrangements and consider requesting help with guidance, this could be asking for a morning or afternoon every half term.
- Utilise the future skills questionnaire alongside the 1:1 interviews.
- Use Compass + to record activities and guidance interviews.

### Sources of Support:

- [The Gatsby Benchmarks Toolkit for Schools](#)
- [North East Ambition Benchmark 8 Toolkit](#)
- [Careers Guidance in Schools - best practice guide](#)

