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Careers Action Plan 2025-2028

JUNE 2025

Joint DfE/DE Careers Action Plan

Ministerial Foreword

Careers education and services equip our citizens with the knowledge and skills to access opportunities and make good decision makers in respect of career choices and progression pathways. The increased choice of pathways available to young people, and the growing importance of lifelong learning and career mobility means it is crucial that people have access to high quality careers education and guidance.

There is much to commend in the current careers system. It is an integral part of our schools' curriculum, and our careers services have been assessed as punching above their weight when compared internationally. However, the speed of change in our economy, labour market and wider education system mean that effective and accessible careers support for people of all ages has never been more important. How we work together to enhance careers has a central role to play in shaping the future of our economy and society. This is why we are working together to produce this joint action plan that sets out the important work we will be delivering to enhance the careers system.

The action plan outlines the steps needed to create a new careers system that benefits not only young people in skills and education but also adults and those furthest from the labour market. Our vision is for a universally accessible, high-quality service that supports people across all stages of their career journey. The plan builds upon recommendations and commitments from key policies and strategies including the *'Independent Review of Education'*, the *'14-19 Framework'* and the *'Skills Strategy'*. We extend our gratitude to Associate Professor Deirdre Hughes OBE for the invaluable *'Independent Review of Careers'*, which has provided clear direction and engaged important stakeholders in shaping the future of our careers system.

Collaboration is the cornerstone of this action plan. Officials across our Departments have worked collectively to gather and respond to the views and experience of a wide range of stakeholders to produce the actions outlined here with a shared goal of achieving greater consistency and continuity in careers advice and guidance. By continuing this collaborative effort, we aim to deliver on these actions and establish a careers system that supports the ambitions and potential of all citizens.

Dr Caoimhe Archibald
MINISTER FOR THE ECONOMY

Paul Givan
MINISTER OF EDUCATION

Executive Summary

Meaningful careers education, information, advice and guidance helps people understand and reflect on their talents, interests and views on the world of work. It involves exploring relevant information on subject choices, pathways, labour market information and tackling misconceptions held by individuals of their own potential, which have been shaped by a wide variety of factors, such as social background or gender.

Engaging young people with the world of work has an impact on their academic achievement. It makes an important connection between what they learn in the classroom and the world of work. It can help them to understand career options, broaden their horizons and inspire them towards new and exciting opportunities. This is also the case for adults who wish to pivot into new sectors through reskilling or upskilling.

There are many stakeholders in the careers ecosystem and careers services¹ are delivered by a wide range of partners. The success of this plan will depend upon much closer working relationships across partners. This includes our careers teachers in post-primary schools, the professional advisers of the Careers Service and employers. Through implementation of this plan, we want to see greater agility, continuity and consistency of careers education, advice and guidance. We want to ensure that there is shared knowledge and best practice across the 'careers ecosystem'.

The overall aim of this Action Plan is to “*establish a joined-up careers system that delivers a universally accessible, high-quality service that supports people across all stages of their career journey*”. It will ensure that all careers providers work closer together to share resources and knowledge, embrace new technologies, drive professionalism and collaborate to benefit all of our people.

The action plan sets out seven key strategic outcomes to deliver this aim:

1. Establish a careers ecosystem that connects people of all ages to learning and employment opportunities throughout their lives.
2. Introduce careers education in primary school with impactful initiatives and programmes, supported by information resources at each stage.
3. Build quality and capacity across the careers system by establishing quality standards and developing the capacity of all partners to deliver high quality and consistent support.
4. Reform careers delivery, including the provision offered in schools, further and higher education with adults and better identify and target those most in need.
5. Strengthen provision for those with special educational needs (SEN) and those who experience barriers at all ages.
6. Develop a Careers Portal providing resources for people of all ages which will bridge the gap between education, skills and the economy.
7. Working with parents, carers and other community partners as key influencers of the users of our services including resources and enhanced communication.

A series of actions have been attributed to each of these seven key strategic outcomes to bring about significant change across the careers ecosystem and deliver improvements for users. Figure 1 outlines the breadth of work that this Action Plan will initiate and the all-age, multi-background nature of the challenge it presents.

These actions build on existing good practice and will ensure that our commitments in several key strategic documents, including the *‘Independent Review of Careers’*, are taken forward. Through implementation of the actions outlined in this document, and maximizing our collective assets, we can bring about meaningful and impactful transformation to benefit everyone.

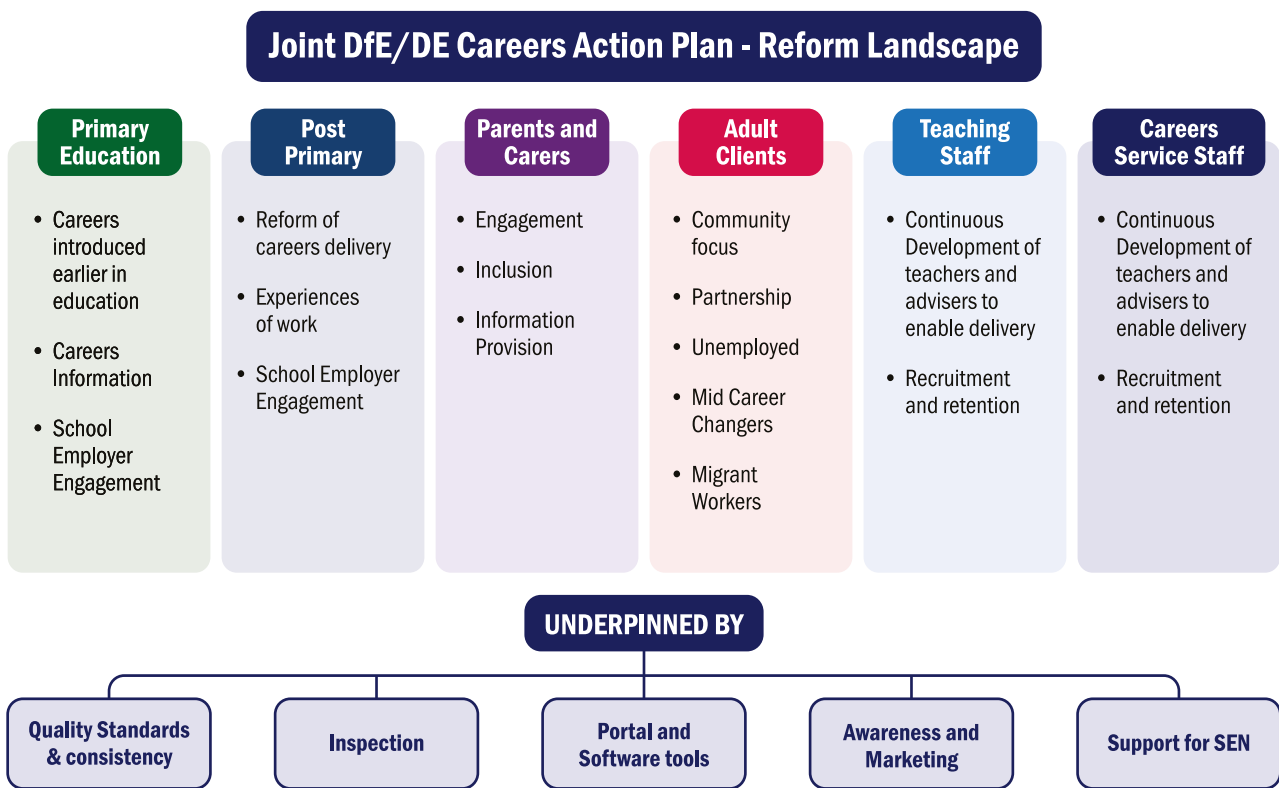


Figure 1: Joint Careers Action Plan Reform Landscape

Endorsement from Associate Professor Deirdre Hughes OBE

The people of Northern Ireland possess an abundance of knowledge, talent, and skills. In a rapidly changing world, individuals need hope, resilience, and support to achieve their ambitions. Over recent years, I have had the privilege of conducting research in Northern Ireland, listening to and capturing the voices of young people, adults, businesses, sector and professional bodies, and community organisations. This research has directly informed the development of this new Careers Action Plan, which is backed by two major government Departments committed to working more closely with partners to strengthen all-age careers provision in Northern Ireland.

This commitment goes beyond being all-age - it is about ensuring that people of all abilities, including those most vulnerable and disadvantaged, have the support they need to build a brighter future.

I want to formally congratulate the two Ministers and government officials for prioritising practical and effective ways of co-creating a more agile careers system going forward. By working collaboratively with the Northern Ireland Careers Service and other key stakeholders in education, business and communities, together we are fostering a system that connects and builds upon innovative careers and employability policies and practices from Northern Ireland and around the world.

This Action Plan serves as a shared blueprint for progress - one that individuals and organisations can rally behind to co-develop and co-create resources that maximise opportunities for all. There is a well-known saying: *"You can't be what you can't see."* That is why a dynamic, forward-thinking Action Plan is essential - to ensure that no-one is left behind in career exploration and development.

By working together, we can inspire, empower, and open doors to opportunities that will shape a thriving future for everyone in Northern Ireland. The journey ahead is filled with possibilities, and with this shared vision, we can help individuals turn their aspirations into reality.

Associate Professor Deirdre Hughes OBE
DIRECTOR, DMH ASSOCIATES & WARWICK UNIVERSITY,
INSTITUTE FOR EMPLOYMENT RESEARCH (IER)

Background to the Careers Action Plan

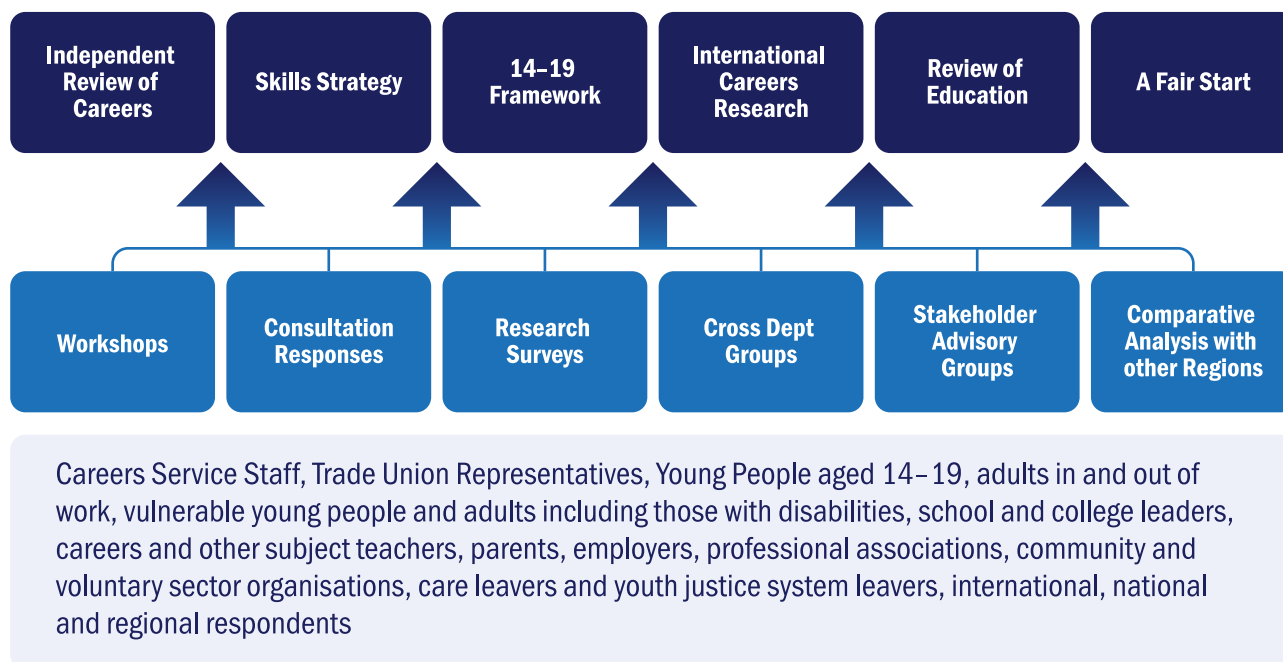
Our careers system aims to provide support for individuals of all ages, backgrounds and abilities. To achieve this there needs to be close collaboration across a wide variety of Departmental, and place-based providers of education, skills and employability policy and provision.

For learners in schools, the careers system is the responsibility of both DE and DfE. DE has responsibility for the policy and delivery of careers education while DfE has responsibility for the policy and delivery of an all-age careers guidance service delivered by suitably qualified careers advisers. Both Departments have worked collaboratively on the careers system for several years. This work has been taken forward under various formal strategies and policies most notably, '*Preparing for Success - A Guide to Developing Effective Career Decision Makers*' which was first introduced in 2009 and updated and republished for 2015 – 2020 as '*Preparing for Success 2015-2020 – a Strategy for Careers Education and Guidance*'².

With the conclusion of '*Preparing for Success*' in 2021, the Independent Review of Careers, '*Transforming Careers Support for Young People and Adults in Northern Ireland*'³ was commissioned and published in 2022. The report, carried out by Associate Professor Deirdre Hughes OBE, made 15 specific recommendations aimed at improving the targeting, timeliness, effectiveness and efficiency of all-age career guidance services.

During the same period the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) published its post-primary Phase Report September – December 2020⁴ (March 2021). The Expert Panel, appointed by the Minister of Education under the 'New Decade New Approach' agreement published its report '*A Fair Start*'⁵ (May 2021) and the joint DE and DfE '*14-19 Education and Training Framework*'⁶, which seeks to ensure that every young person is equipped to fulfil their potential and to improve awareness and understanding of pathways available, was published in June 2022. The Independent Panel published its *Review of Education*⁷ in December 2023. Common themes in relation to careers have emerged across the various reports and reviews.

These reviews included extensive engagement with a wide range of stakeholders, and we are grateful for the time they have invested in highlighting the current position in respect of careers, the current challenges and suggestions of actions that will drive improvement.



Evidence Base – Over 4,500 individuals

Figure 2: Careers Action Plan - underpinning strategic evidence base and engagement activity

This plan outlines how we will work together to implement the actions that have emerged across the important reports referenced above and which aim to transform and modernise the careers offer.

Careers Education in Schools

High quality careers education and guidance is crucial in ensuring learners are aware of their future options and available pathways. The increased choice of career, education and training pathways available to young people, and projections that citizens will change job several times in their career, means that it is more important than ever for young people to be given the opportunities to develop key employability skills and receive high quality careers education and guidance.

Careers provision in school sits within a wider landscape of connected legislation and strategies which inform the careers programme within a school.

The offer to learners should include:

Careers education - the discrete provision which enables learners to develop their knowledge, understanding, skills and experience of opportunities to manage their careers development and make relevant informed choices, ensuring successful transition into education, training or employment and become lifelong learners.

Cross-curricular opportunities for development of employability skills - including communication, numeracy, digital skills, working with others, problem solving decision making, self-management and managing information.

Careers information - a broad range of relevant and up to date high quality careers information and resource materials; a core element of this is access to labour market information including information on the existing and future skills needs of the labour market.

Work-related learning - work experience, work-based assignments, visits, enterprising activities and the application of employability skills; and

Planned opportunities for high quality, impartial careers advice and guidance - through Partnership Agreements, schools work collaboratively with the Careers Service to support the careers education programme.

The Careers Service

The Department for the Economy's Careers Service provides impartial guidance on career planning to individuals in education, employment, training, and to the unemployed, with a priority focus on people who are facing or vulnerable to social exclusion. It offers personalised careers information, advice and guidance on an all-age basis provided by professionally trained and qualified advisers.

The following key areas of work represent the role and contribution of the Careers Service which operates in all areas.

Work with Post-Primary Schools - the Careers Service's work is carried out under the terms of agreed Careers Education and Guidance Partnership Agreements which are negotiated annually and agreed with each post-primary school. In the last academic year, the Careers Service delivered around 50,000 pupil interventions using a range of contact methods including comprehensive guidance interviews.

Supporting Pupils with Barriers - careers services are prioritised for pupils with barriers including those with a disability, a medical condition and/or a statement of special educational need (SEN). In the 2023-24 academic year, Careers Advisers attended 2,086 transition planning/annual review meetings for school pupils with a SEN.

Work with Adults - the Careers Service delivers approximately 14,000 careers interactions annually to adults. Careers Advisers help with CVs and covering letters, job application forms, job interview techniques and career planning. Careers Advisers can also help adults explore their personal strengths, skills and abilities, and opportunities for reskilling and up-skilling and informed by the needs of the labour market.

Redundancy Clinics with the Department for Communities - targeted help is provided for those facing redundancy or unemployment, and individuals hoping to return to the labour market. Since April 2023 Careers Advisers have attended over one hundred customer-facing events such as Job Fairs, Careers Fairs and Redundancy Clinics.

Work with Further Education Colleges and Universities - Careers Advisers work with young people and adults in colleges, training providers and in the community. This includes outreach work and inputs at required points associated with the delivery of various training initiatives.

Careers Occupational Information Unit (COIU) - the Careers Service produces regular sector focused online bulletins and subject specific careers resources. These publications involve significant and detailed engagement with Sectoral Partnership forums, relevant professional bodies, Invest NI, Departmental economists, and Curriculum Hubs within the Further Education and Higher Education sectors. All COIU publications include career profiles and important industry perspectives, which highlight the range of opportunities available at all levels. The COIU regularly focuses on new or lesser-known sectors and provides information on many different career pathways. This work is underpinned by the Skills Barometer which contains valuable projections of the future skills needed by new entrants to the labour market. All Careers Service publications are available via the Department's website, social media and other distribution channels including schools and colleges.

Quality Standards – the Careers Service has established a Steering Group to work across the skills system to develop a set of common quality standards for the delivery of careers guidance.

Careers Portal - a project has been launched to develop a new bespoke standalone Careers Portal. This is an area that will be progressed as a discrete action within the Careers Action Plan and will include work to embrace the latest tools and technological advances.

Specialist Careers Resources – the current focus in this area is developing innovative digital solutions that will support autistic learners and adults in the careers guidance process. Subsequent phases of this work will also consider widening use of the solution to those with other additional needs and barriers.

Careers Policy Development – *'An International Evidence Review: Targeted and Effective Careers Support Interventions'*⁸ was published in 2024. The research covered many common careers guidance themes and also noted several positive aspects of the DfE Careers Service, some of which will assist other nations in development of their own Careers Services.

A return on investment study carried out in 2024⁹ observed that **based on the analysis to date, stakeholders should be confident that current investments in the Department for the Economy's Careers Service generate positive returns for the taxpayer, with each pound (£) invested estimated to return at least two pounds (£) of future fiscal benefit.**

THE ACTION PLAN

Our Vision for Careers Development

We will establish a universally accessible, high quality service that supports people across all stages of life.

Our Key Initiatives over the next 3 Years



Figure 3: Careers Action Plan Vision

1. Establishing a Careers Ecosystem

Shifting demographics and rapid technological changes mean that it is more important than ever that children, young people and adults have the support of a high quality and connected careers system to help navigate their education and employment journeys. The skill levels of our young people are increasing, with many staying longer in education and with a wider range of pathways available.

In parallel, we have high levels of economic inactivity and a significant disability employment gap. Our economy has struggled to secure the skills it needs to grow, while a distinctive feature of our labour market remains the high level of employees with low or no qualifications. This brings significant risk as the range of jobs that do not require intermediate and higher levels of skills decreases each year. This trend is only set to continue with further development of the green economy and the drive towards de-carbonisation, automation and Artificial Intelligence.

More broadly, our demographic changes will continue to shape our labour market and make it more challenging for businesses to access the skills they need. Focusing on any one group will not be sufficient to address this challenge. To realise our economic and social ambitions it is essential to have a clear and well understood careers offer for people of all ages. Helping people access opportunities contributes to significant health, wellbeing and economic benefits.

There are many stakeholders who play an important role in the wider delivery of careers services and there are numerous examples of excellent practice. However, the overall experience of users can be varied. There is a need to establish a new strategic framework that not only clarifies the roles of partners but also provides support to ensure greater consistency and alignment with the current and future needs of users and our economy. Drawing on sources, including the future skills needs intelligence set out in the Skills Barometer is essential in this process.

Given all these challenges, careers must be repositioned into a lifelong offer that prepares and supports people to navigate their entire careers journey. This action plan proposes a step change for careers, by establishing a careers ecosystem that clearly defines the roles and responsibilities of the different partners within the system; provides systems of quality and local accountability; and incorporates new structures to support the development of this system.

This first strategic outcome of the Action Plan is establishing a careers ecosystem that is clearly understood and draws together experience and expertise from across the whole system in order to maximise the impact of our collective resources.

Strategic Outcome 1:

Establishing a wider inclusive Careers Ecosystem that connects people of all ages to learning and employment opportunities throughout their lives.

Supporting Actions

Publish a joint vision for careers that sets out a clear offer of a universal entitlement for people of all ages, background and abilities.

Establish structures and partnerships to ensure a strategic and collaborative approach at every level.

Establish a Joint Ministerial Group to set clear priorities across the shared skills and education system.

Collaborate with the Careers Advisory Forum to advise on the delivery of this action plan.

Establish a careers community stakeholder group to co-design a wider vision for careers, defining roles and responsibilities and the support available.

Establish partnership working with organisations including the Children and Young People Strategic Partnership, all eleven Labour Market Partnerships and the Educational Welfare Service to ensure more citizens can access careers services.

Develop partnerships across jurisdictions to ensure the framework of careers services includes relevant wider information, opportunities and sources of support.

This will include the Four Nation Careers Group, Careers Service of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in Ireland; and Careers Development Institute.

Formalise the sharing of best practice, information on pathways and labour market needs to ensure wider careers services reflect the labour market.

2. Primary School Careers Education

A future career seems a long way off for most primary school children. Making a connection between what they learn in primary school and the jobs they might one day pursue is not easy, particularly for those from areas where local unemployment is high or in a rapidly evolving labour market.

Careers reviews and reports have highlighted that all children and young people, particularly those most disadvantaged, must have greater access to inspirational role models and a more accurate picture of the world of work and jobs in the growth sectors. They can see emerging around them. Exposing children to more real-world examples in a way that is both exciting and embedded in everyday school life, as well as being age-appropriate, can help transform the way children view certain professions and roles.

The Independent Review of Careers highlighted the need to ensure that careers-related learning starts much earlier, that it is informed by the future needs of the economy, and that it encourages children to broaden their career ideas and to raise aspirations. The review highlighted that early engagement with children on careers education is beneficial, recommending the need to increase careers education in primary schools and that appropriate information resources be provided and uploaded to the Careers Portal. The value of early careers engagement was highlighted in data collected by YouGov for the charity Education and Employers¹⁰.

It found that:

- 90% of Primary Head Teachers thought that engaging children with the world of work has an impact on their academic achievement.
- 52.1% believed that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to experience positive impacts from engagement activities with the world of work on their academic achievement.
- 83.9% agreed that meeting with volunteers from the world of work can be very influential in helping young people understand career options.
- 75.7% agreed that engagement with the world of work can change young people's attitudes positively towards school.

Prioritising careers early will also provide scope to enhance career decision making required at later stages in the curriculum in areas such as subject choice and prepare pupils more effectively to understand advice and guidance offered later by the Careers Service. In response to those recommendations calling for effective careers related learning at a younger age, the Primary Futures programme was identified as a cost-effective way in which to support careers education in primary schools.

An initial study, *Drawing the Future – Children’s Career Aspirations in Northern Ireland*¹¹ (July 2024) was managed by the Education Authority (EA) and completed by Education and Employers. Education and Employers programmes have featured as examples of good practice in OECD case study collections and been developed in countries outside the United Kingdom, such as New Zealand and Australia.

Some of the report’s key findings included:

- There is a significant misalignment between the jobs children aspire to and economic forecasts. For example, 35% of children aspire to culture, media, or sport occupations but only 1% of projected new jobs in those areas.
- Children’s aspirations only cover 31% of current employment.
- The jobs children aspire to are influenced by socio-economic factors.

The Primary Futures ‘Drawing your Future’ programme in primary schools, will be built upon as a support programme and delivered through a mixture of in-person and virtual events.

Strategic Outcome 2:

Introduce careers education in primary schools with impactful initiatives and programmes, supported by information resources at each stage.

Supporting Actions

Publish the *Drawing the Future – Children’s Career Aspirations in Northern Ireland* report by March 2025.

Through engagement with EA increase participation in the *Drawing the Future* programme for learners aged 7-11 in Primary schools through a mixture of virtual and in-person events.

Review international delivery to inform best practice.

Engage with industry to build a network of relevant volunteers to help deliver age-appropriate careers information.

Work with stakeholders including CCEA, COIU and others to produce high quality primary school focused careers resources.

3. Building Quality and Capacity Across the Careers System

Careers services are provided in a range of settings including schools, colleges, universities, training providers and in local communities. Many stakeholders play a role in the delivery of careers education and guidance across a wide range of users, with many examples of excellent practice. The majority of young people report that through the careers education and guidance received, they feel confident about decision-making and our evidence shows that in most cases they are able to progress successfully from school to positive destinations in further or higher education, training or employment.

However, the current careers system does not work for everyone. The ‘*Young Persons’ Behaviour and Attitudes Survey 2022 Key Findings*’¹² notes that while two thirds of learners were confident in making decisions about their careers, a third of learners lacked confidence. This is an important finding given that the survey also noted that 64% of young people in years 11 and 12 had chosen subjects with a career in mind.

In recent years it has been difficult to assess the quality of careers education in our schools due to a prolonged period of industrial action that has impacted on school inspections. However, inspection has now resumed. Indicators of effective practice will be evaluated in all sectors in the new inspection strategy – *Empowering Improvement: A New Framework for Inspection*.¹³ This includes learners being well prepared for the future through careers education; information, advice and guidance; developing appropriate skills, knowledge and understanding that underpins informed decision making.

Feedback from careers teachers and co-ordinators has been an important source of information that has shaped this action plan. A Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association (NISCA) survey found that 40% of careers teachers in schools have been in post for less than five years, with half of those having taken up post in the last couple of years. Feedback from careers teachers and coordinators has highlighted the need for access to current and reliable information; a careers framework which clarifies the offer to learners’, continuous professional development; and further opportunities to network and share effective careers strategies.

The OECD assessed that careers education, advice and guidance here is characterised by systemic fragmentation across the skills system, identifying a lack of consistency across the various providers and calling for the development of “*clear, common, transparent and accountable quality standards.*” There have been other calls for greater coherence in how careers education and careers guidance is delivered and ‘*A Fair Start*’ called for improved and more effectively communicated careers information and guidance to help learners make appropriate decisions.

The *'Independent Review of Careers'* identified inconsistency in training and development provided across practitioners engaged in careers education, career guidance or employability occupations. It highlighted, *"shortfalls in continuous professional development (CPD) for those working with young people, adults, employers and parents in complementary education, careers, employability, and community development settings"*.

The Review also pointed to "barriers" to joint and shared CPD opportunities which should be broken down and noted *'the need to strengthen the service provided by careers teachers using the expertise of Careers Service staff'*. Equipping Careers Advisers and teaching staff with up-to-date skills and relevant training is essential to ensure quality and accuracy of careers education advice and guidance provided in all settings.

This Action Plan recognises the importance of building capacity in central careers services; and supporting a wider range of partners to help them deliver high quality and relevant support.

Strategic Outcome 3:

Establishing quality standards and developing the capacity of all partners within the careers system to deliver high quality and consistent support.

Supporting Actions

Adopting quality careers standards across the Careers Service, Community and Voluntary Sector, Further Education and Higher Education for provision at all ages and abilities that help all our citizens.

Working in partnership with the Northern Ireland Schools & Colleges Careers Association (NISCA) to develop shared standards for careers in schools.

Develop a Careers Education Delivery Framework in consultation with NISCA which details the expected schools' careers education model for KS3 through to Post 16.

Work with ALC Careers sub-groups to disseminate best practice in careers delivery across all ALCs.

Strengthen teacher training programmes to include careers education and career guidance theory, research and best practice.

Develop careers best practice which sets out the services that should be available within local communities. This will involve collaborating with Area Learning Communities and other community stakeholders such as Councils through local Labour Market Partnerships to drive consistency across the system relevant to local needs.

Expand existing relations with careers services, professional bodies and academic institutions locally, nationally and internationally to share best practice, learning and innovative delivery methods. To include closer links with International Association for Vocational and Educational Guidance and member countries.

Expand and promote the development and dissemination of information centrally from the Careers Service to ensure stakeholders can access high quality relevant information.

Develop partners awareness of key sectors through:

- increased sharing of Careers Occupational Information Unit (COIU) resources and bulletins; and
- arranging COIU Roadshow events in ALC areas, to share labour market focused insights and knowledge directly with teachers and college staff, using guest contributing employers and sector representatives.

Engage with ETI for inspection reports and evaluations to review and improve the standard of provision of careers.

Develop long-term, sustainable workforce planning solutions. The Careers Service will:

- examine alternative recruitment methods including expansion of the current trainee pilot model;
- examine changing workforce needs and demographics and consider innovative recruitment solutions as the reform of services gets under way. This can include consideration of a new careers adviser higher level apprenticeship; and
- work closer with other jurisdictions to agree collective recruitment solutions and share research.

4. Reforming Careers Delivery

The OECD evidence is that we can no longer rely on the traditional career pathway of education – work – retirement. Wider economic changes have significantly accelerated the pace of change in the labour market. The ‘life cycle’ of skills is shorter than ever before. This means that individuals must access learning at several stages throughout their lives, to ensure their skills remain relevant in an ever changing world.

The Independent Review of Careers acknowledges that although the Careers Service has “*strong foundations to build on,*” it “*simply cannot deliver the level of personalised, one-to-one support that many thousands of young people, adults, and employers might want and expect.*” With that in mind, and in order to reach a broader range of citizens of all ages, there is a need to revise current delivery methods.

The Careers Service delivered around 50,000 interventions (78% of total) to pupils in schools in the 2023-24 academic year. Other national careers services no longer concentrate as intensively on this age group and have instead adopted a more flexible delivery model. Finland and Estonia both focus on continual career development with citizens of all ages and ‘lifelong learning’. The Independent Review called for “*a new chapter in Northern Ireland’s post-primary schools*” with a “*move away from ‘blanket interviewing’ towards more enhanced targeted career guidance activities.*”

We will examine and review how our careers services are deployed for all ages and abilities across the ecosystem. The Careers Service will critically re-examine its delivery model to ensure that the needs of a broader range of citizens are met. We will pilot several different methods of delivery in schools and introduce a new ‘triage’ system to ensure that those most in need of advice and guidance get priority access to our services.

Countries such as Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and Wales have invested significantly in adult career initiatives. Using best practice evidence from these regions we will review how we deliver our services to adults, irrespective of where they are on their career journey. This will be managed collaboratively with other partners and stakeholders, including the Department for Communities (DfC).

We will work with partners to increase our work with adults. The Careers Service will develop ways to integrate careers services into initiatives and programmes offered by DfC and continue to work with Labour Market Partnerships to understand and address local and regional opportunities and needs. We will also work to ensure that everyone is aware of the services that we offer and how to access them.

An area for improvement already in train is the opportunity for learners to engage with employers. Engaging young people with the world of work has an impact on their academic achievement and makes an important connection between what they learn in the classroom and the world of work. The Independent Review of Careers noted that there should be “*more employer and enterprise engagement, understanding of the workplace through virtual and non-virtual work experiences.*”

Work experience is recognised as having a key role in ensuring young people are provided with relevant labour market information on current and future employment opportunities. While work experience is not a statutory requirement in post-primary schools, it is a core component and is seen as best practice in the provision of a quality careers programme. It is important that employers are encouraged to support schools by providing opportunities for young people to engage in work experience.

This strategic outcome recognises that we face the significant challenge to develop capacity a wider all age careers journey whilst also maintaining vital support to existing learners and individuals. This will require a reform of how careers services are delivered.

Strategic Outcome 4:

Reform the delivery of careers, including the provision offered in schools and with adults and better identify and target those most in need.

Supporting Actions

Reform how careers services are delivered. The Careers Service will:

- test and review delivery methods used with young people and adults of all ages and settings. In line with best practice, we will adopt a more agile delivery model that makes the optimum use of resources and that meets the needs of all;
- test and learn different and more innovative delivery methods, learning from other regions. This will include increased use of technologies where appropriate;
- roll out a new agile delivery model following the completion of test and learn pilots; and
- seek to adopt a new system to help triage and prioritise young people and adults.

Reform of delivery will allow us to expand our existing work with adults.

- We will collaborate with DfC and other partners such as LMPs to explore how the Careers Service can integrate with ongoing adult and community-based projects that aim to help adults furthest from the workforce, including ethnic minorities and migrants.

Develop a work experience programme and build employer links

- We will explore current barriers and consider a minimum work experience offer for students which includes exposure to growing and emerging sectors.
- Develop a work experience model / programme to ensure equity of provision and appropriate work experience opportunities for young people.
- Develop links with other stakeholders and employers.
- Develop a toolkit to support and enhance school employer engagement.
- Further connect schools with Labour Market Partnerships to enhance work experience opportunities.
- Review the existing work experience administrative process with the Education Authority with a view to producing a more streamlined and user-friendly system.

We will test and explore targeted marketing and awareness raising approaches that focus on specific needs.

5. Strengthen SEN Provision

The Careers Service offers impartial and personalised advice and guidance on an all-age, all-ability basis. Established and effective partnership working arrangements exist with a wide range of community, voluntary and statutory disability organisations. This ensures that effective referral mechanisms are in place to support the career planning needs of young people and adults with a special educational need, including those who are seeking employment. All DfE Careers Advisers are trained to provide tailored support based on the needs of the person presenting to them, taking account of any additional barriers the individual may have, including disability, health condition or educational need.

However, the employment rate for people with disabilities (37%) is less than half the employment rate for people without disabilities (79.9%). The difference between these rates is known as the *disability employment gap*, which is an outlier (at 42.9 percentage points) compared to other jurisdictions. The co-design work, led by DfC, on the new Disability and Work Strategy has clearly identified that the transition from education to employment presents a real risk of economic inactivity for young disabled people and those with health conditions and SEN. Ensuring the provision of appropriate, timely and specialised careers guidance to individuals with disabilities is therefore key to enabling them to make informed decisions.

As a key element of this Action Plan, we will strengthen support for those who experience barriers at all ages. Work in support of SEN will look more widely than just at basic entitlement - it will build on dedicated initiatives already under way across DE and DfE, including the use of digital technology.

This work will also take into account the Programme for Government commitment to better support for children and young people with SEN and will see collaborative work across all relevant Departments to improve the pathways to appropriate opportunities, with the Careers Service having a key role in this work.

Strategic Outcome 5:

We will strengthen support for SEN individuals and those who experience barriers at all ages. We will ensure all our practitioners have continual up to date training and that we have appropriate plans in place to fully meet the needs of this group.

Supporting Actions

Review and improve the careers support provided to children with a statement of SEN, including those at age 19+

- When designing our delivery model, we will prioritise SEN pupils in schools and vulnerable adults.
- We will pilot different methods of delivery with SEN pupils, including examining the impact of repeated careers interventions.
- Ensure Careers Advisers Continuous Professional Development includes relevant SEN information and specialist training to work effectively with SEN young people and vulnerable adults.
- Hold regular upskilling sessions for Careers Advisers and other practitioners to ensure they are aware of latest demographics in relation to those with SEN to ensure future provision is appropriately tailored. First session to be held before 31 March 2025.

Provide focused careers advice for people of all ages and stages of their career including 14–19 year-olds who have SEN and/ or a disability, health condition or special educational need.

Develop innovative digital technology solutions for SEN young people and adults

- Procure and implement a software tool for autistic young people and adults.
- Then consider opportunities to widen to ensure needs of other SEN young people and adults are met.

Explore the development of a SEN specific careers bulletin to provide timely and updated information on the relevant pathways, sources for additional information and support, related advice.

6. Develop a Careers Portal

A key enabler to reform the careers ecosystem is the development of a new Careers Portal. The need to improve the online careers offer is referenced in several published strategies and reports including the Independent Review of Careers. These reports all recognise that more needs to be done to improve visibility and access to careers and skills information, with a critical need to align careers services with the changing needs of the economy.

The careers ecosystem can be complex and difficult for users to navigate. Successful operation of the system requires collaboration between a wide range of partners including the Careers Service, schools, Further Education colleges, Higher Education institutions, training organisations, employers, the voluntary and community sector and many more. A new Careers Portal will facilitate more effective collaboration among all these stakeholders, bringing much needed clarity and cohesion to the system.

We will deliver a digital transformation project to develop a new Careers Portal that will provide whole careers system support to all users and stakeholders, bridging the gap between education, skills and the economy.

The aim is to create a platform to act as a single starting point that will support individuals at every stage of their career journey, whether they are a primary pupil, a young person in post-primary education or an adult. The Portal also needs to act as a tool for those who support individuals to navigate their career journeys such as parents/carers and careers professionals.

In order to meet the needs of users, the Portal will need to provide a wide range of tools and resources that will allow them to better understand themselves and their skills, raise awareness of the world of work and understanding of the pathways and career options available to them and also to find help and support either via the Portal or by signposting to other relevant websites and resources.

A key requirement of the Portal will be that it provides equitable access to inclusive and accessible content for people of all ages and backgrounds, including groups who experience additional barriers.

Successful delivery of this project will ensure everyone is able to understand and develop their skills, and access pathways and the opportunities available to them, driving both individual career success and broader economic growth.

Strategic Outcome 6:

We will develop a new Careers Portal providing resources for people of all ages which will bridge the gap between education, skills and the economy

Supporting Actions

Deliver an initial insight gathering phase by engaging with a wide range of end users and stakeholders from a diverse range of backgrounds to establish their collective needs for the Portal.

Deliver a Discovery report, bringing together stakeholder focused engagement and research, that identifies the specific benefits and the optimum technical solutions for a new Careers Portal.

Foster user and stakeholder engagement throughout the life of the project.

- Establish mechanisms to facilitate system level engagement with stakeholders.
- Utilise the Careers Advisory Forum expertise at all stages of the project.
- Take a co-design approach with end users to ensure their needs are met.
- Carry out user and beta testing at various stages of development.
- Test and learn from applied AI and Large Language Models (LLMs) drawing on lessons learned from within and outside of Northern Ireland.

Build the capacity, partnerships and structures required to ensure the Portal continues to evolve and is kept up-to-date and relevant.

7. Parents, Carers and Other Community Partners

Local and international evidence has highlighted 'family' as a key influencer in careers related decision making. Young people often identify parents and/or carers as the most significant influencers in their career choices and decisions. It is also important to note that for adults, partners can also be an important support in terms of career decision making.

Research carried out by the Gatsby Foundation¹⁵ outlined the important role of parental discussion with children at an early stage in their learning.

'...many parents discuss education and career options with their child before year 10. One in ten parents first discuss careers options in year 7 and by year 8 a fifth have done so, and by year 9 a third have. Many parents are therefore discussing career and education options before they are aware of the school or college careers programme.'

In the consultation that has been taken forward as part of the development of the new careers portal, parents have also expressed a need for online skills self-assessment tools to use with their children in careers decision-making. They also report a need for enhanced communication with parents and carers across the school and wider careers system and have noted that messaging needs to be impartial in relation to services available beyond formal schooling and must retain focus on the best interests of the young person.

Steps to enhance careers support for those with SEN has been outlined earlier in this Action Plan. Existing transition planning work undertaken by the Careers Service (including the important role of parents) will be strengthened, to ensure it meets the needs of those moving into post-19 provision and adulthood.

We are also conscious that parents and carers may also value advice themselves in respect of their own career paths, including advice on upskilling and reskilling due to ongoing changes that occur in the labour market. This highlights the need to ensure that information systems for all users are accessible and easy to navigate.

Strategic Outcome 7:

Work to meet the needs of parents, carers and other community partners as key influencers of the users of our services, including resources and enhanced communication

Supporting Actions

Include parental engagement from the earliest decision-making stages of young peoples' career journey including through parent/teacher evenings and other school events.

Strengthen existing work in engagement/transition planning with parents of SEN learners.

Test webinars outlining support for parents and carers especially at subject choice and other key milestones.

Develop themed resources, for parents, carers and community partners which are readily accessible, including via the new Careers Portal.

Provide a dedicated area on the new Careers Portal to offer information to support parents' career conversations with their young people to understand skills in demand from employers and suggest ways to explore the different routes and pathways available.

TABLE OF ACTIONS

Strategic Outcome 1:

Establishing a wider inclusive Careers Ecosystem that connects people of all ages to learning and employment opportunities throughout their lives

Publish a joint Vision for careers that sets out a clear offer of a universal entitlement for people of all ages, background and abilities.	DfE, DE	Yr 1
Establish structures and partnerships to ensure a strategic and collaborative approach at every level.	DfE, DE Partners	Yr 1
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a Joint Ministerial Council / Forum to set clear priorities across the shared skills and education system. 	DfE, DE partners	Yr 1
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborate with the Careers Advisory Forum to advise on the delivery of this Action Plan. 	DfE, DE	Yr 1
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a careers community stakeholder group to co-design a wider vision for careers, defining roles and responsibilities and the support available. 	DfE, DE, Partners	Yr 1
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish partnership working with organisations including the Childrens' and Young Peoples Strategic Partnership, all eleven Labour Market Partnerships and the Educational Welfare Service to ensure more citizens can access careers services. 	DfE	Yr 1-3
Develop partnerships across jurisdictions to ensure the framework of careers services includes relevant wider information, opportunities and sources of support.	DfE, DE	Yr 1-3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This will include the Four Nation Careers Group, Careers Service of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in Ireland; and the Career Development Institute. 	DfE, Partners	Yr 1-3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formalise the sharing of best practice, information on pathways and labour market needs to ensure wider careers services align with the permeability of the labour market. 	DfE	Yr 1-3

Strategic Outcome 2:

Introduce careers education in Primary Schools with impactful initiatives and programmes, supported by information resources at each stage

Publish the Drawing the Future – Children’s Career Aspirations in Northern Ireland report by March 2025.	DE	Yr 1
Expand the Drawing the Future programme in primary schools through a mixture of virtual and in-person events.	DE	Yr 1-3
Engage with industry to build a network of relevant volunteers to help deliver age-appropriate careers information.	DE	Yr 1-3
Work with stakeholders including CCEA, COIU and others to produce high quality primary school focused careers resources.	DE	Yr 1-3

Strategic Outcome 3:

Establishing quality standards and developing the capacity of all partners within the careers system to deliver high quality and consistent support

Adopt quality careers standards between the Careers Service, Community and Voluntary Sector, Further Education and Higher Education for provision at all ages and abilities that help all our citizens.	DfE	Yr 1
Work in partnership with the Northern Ireland Schools & Colleges Careers Association (NISCA) to develop shared standards for Careers in schools. Develop a Careers Education Delivery Framework in consultation with NISCA which details the expected schools’ careers education model for KS3 through to Post 16.	DE	Yr 1
Work with Area Learning Communities Careers Subgroups to disseminate best practice across all ALCs.	DE	Yr 1-3
Strengthen teacher training programmes to include careers education and career guidance theory, research and best practice.	DE	Yr 1-3
Develop a careers framework which sets out the services that should be available within local communities. This will involve collaborating with Area Learning Communities and other community stakeholders such as Councils through local Labour Market Partnerships to drive consistency across the system relevant to local needs.	DE	Yr 1-3

Strategic Outcome 3:

Establishing quality standards and developing the capacity of all partners within the careers system to deliver high quality and consistent support

Should be Strategic Outcome 3 (contd):

Expand existing relations with careers services, professional bodies and academic institutions in other regions locally, nationally and internationally to share best practice, learning and innovative delivery methods. To include closer links with International Association for Vocational and Educational Guidance and member countries.	DfE	Yr 1-3
<p>Expand and promote the development and dissemination of information from Careers Service to ensure stakeholders can access high quality relevant information.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop partners awareness of key sectors. • Increased sharing of Careers Occupational Information Unit (COIU) resources and bulletins. • COIU Roadshow events will be arranged in ALC areas, to share labour market focused insights and knowledge directly with teachers and college staff, using guest contributing employers and sector representatives. 	DfE, DE, Partners	Yr 1-3
Engage with ETI for inspection reports and evaluations to review and improve the standard of provision of careers education in Post primary Schools.	DE	Yr 1-3
<p>Develop long-term work-force planning solutions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Careers Service will examine alternative recruitment methods including expansion of the current trainee pilot model. • The Careers Service will examine changing workforce needs and demographics and consider innovative recruitment solutions as the reform of services gets under way. This can include consideration of a new careers adviser higher level apprenticeship. • Work closer with other nations such as England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland to agree collective recruitment solutions and share research. 	DfE	Yr 1-3

Strategic Outcome 5:

We will strengthen support for SEN individuals and those who experience barriers at all ages. We will ensure all our practitioners have continual up to date training and that we have appropriate plans in place to fully meet the needs of this group

Review and improve the careers support provided to children with a statement of SEN, including those at age 19+ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When designing our delivery model, we will prioritise SEN pupils in schools and vulnerable adults. • We will pilot different methods of delivery with SEN pupils, including examining the impact of repeated careers interventions. • Ensure Careers Advisers Continuous Professional development includes relevant SEN information and specialist training to work effectively with SEN young people and vulnerable adults. • Hold regular upskilling sessions for Careers Advisers and other practitioners to ensure they are aware of latest demographics in relation to those with SEN to ensure future provision is appropriately tailored. First session to be held during 2025. 	DfE	Yr 1-3
	DE	Yr 1-3
	DfE	Yr 1-3
	DfE	Yr 1-3
Provide focused careers advice for people of all ages with disabilities and at all stages of their career including 14–19 year-olds who have a disability, health condition or special educational need.	DfE	Yr 1-3
Develop more innovative tools. Procure and implement a software tool for autistic citizens and consider opportunities to widen to ensure needs of other SEN individuals are met	DfE	Yr 1-3
Explore the development of a SEN specific Careers bulletin to provide timely and updated information on the relevant pathways, sources for additional information and support and related advice.	DfE	Yr 1

Strategic Outcome 6:

We will develop a new Careers Portal providing resources for people of all ages which will bridge the gap between education, skills and the economy

Secure and embed the resources required to ensure successful delivery of the project. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project to operate under Prince II model • Include external IT expertise 	DfE	Yr 1
Taking a co-design approach carry out a research and insight gathering phase. Engage with a wide range of end users and stakeholders from a diverse range of backgrounds to establish their collective needs for the Portal.	DfE	Yr 1
Bring the findings of the user and stakeholder engagement phase together with IT specialists to carry out an IT Discovery Phase. The outcome of this phase will be to establish the overall future IT estate requirements needed to build the portal and also the best technical solution that will best meet user needs to be taken through to development.	DfE	Yr 1
Foster User and Stakeholder Engagement throughout the life of the project. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish mechanisms to facilitate system level engagement with stakeholders. • Utilise the Careers Advisory Forum expertise at all stages of the project. • Take a co-design approach with end users to ensure their needs are met. • Carry out user and beta testing at various stages of development. 	DfE	Yr 1-3
Appoint IT Specialists to develop the Portal. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build databases necessary for the successful operation of the Portal. • Build content library in partnership with Stakeholders. • Procure and build applications required to ensure user friendly experience (including gamification and AI). • Continuously horizon scan for digital innovations. 	DfE	Yr 2-3
Build the capacity and structures required to ensure the Portal continues to evolve and is kept up-to-date and relevant.	DfE	Yr 2-3
Identify and implement ongoing IT support requirements to ensure long term technical expertise remains available to the Department.	DfE	Yr 2-3

Strategic Outcome 7:

Work to meet the needs of parents, carers and other community partners as key influencers of the users of our services including resources and enhanced communication

Include parental engagement from the earliest decision-making stages of young peoples' career journey, including through parent/teacher evenings and other school events. Strengthen existing work in engagement/transition planning with parents of SEN learners.	DfE	Yr 1-3
Test webinars outlining support for parents and carers especially at subject choice and other key milestones.	DfE	Yr 1-3
Develop themed resources, for parents, carers and partners which are accessible via the new Careers Portal.	DfE	Yr 1-3
Provide a dedicated area on the new Careers Portal to offer information to support parents' career conversations with their young people. Tailor and provide information from Skills Barometer, LEO, official statistics and research to help parents and carers understand skills in demand from employers and suggest ways to explore the different routes and pathways available.	DfE	Yr 1-3

References

Ref Num	Referenced Publication	Published by	Link	Year
1	*information Note on Definition of Careers Services*	N/A	All references to “Careers Services” include Careers Education, Information Advice and Guidance (CEIAG)	N/A
2	Preparing for Success 2015-2020 – a Strategy for Careers Education and Guidance	Department for Employment and Learning and Department of Education, Northern Ireland	Preparing for Success	2015
3	Transforming careers support for young people and adults in Northern Ireland	Associate Professor Dr Deirdre Hughes OBE and Chris Percy, (The Independent Review of Careers)	Transforming careers support for young people and adults in Northern Ireland (economy-ni.gov.uk)	2022
4	Post Primary Phase Report September 2018 – December 2020	Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI)	Post Primary Phase Report (etini.gov.uk)	2021
5	A Fair Start – final Report and Action Plan	Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland	A Fair Start - Final Report and Action Plan (education-ni.gov.uk)	2021
6	14-19 Education and Training Framework	Dept of Education and Department for the Economy	14-19 Education and Training Framework (education-ni.gov.uk)	2022
7	Independent Review of Education	Northern Ireland Executive (under New Decade, New Approach)	Independent Review of Education (education-ni.gov.uk)	2023
8	An International Evidence Review: Targeted and Effective Careers Support Interventions	Associate Professor Dr Deirdre Hughes OBE	International Evidence Review: Targeted and Effective Careers Support Interventions (economy-ni.gov.uk)	2024
9	Return on Investment Study for The Careers Service	Dr Chris Percy, Hughes Associates	Return on Investment Study for the Careers Service (economy-ni.gov.uk)	2024
10	Teachers Perception on the impact of the engagement with the world of work on students' academic achievement in primary education	Education and Employers' Research	Teachers Perceptions on the Impact of the engagement with the World of Work on students' academic achievement in primary education (educationandemployers.org)	2017
11	Drawing the Future – Children's Career Aspirations in Northern Ireland	Education and Employers Charity, Dr Chris Percy Associate Professor Dr Deirdre Hughes OBE, Nick Chambers	Drawing the Future – Children's Career Aspirations in Northern Ireland (education-ni.gov.uk)	2025
12	Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitude Survey 2022, Key findings	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA)	Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitude Survey (nisra.gov.uk)	2022
13	Empowering Improvement: New Framework for Inspection 2024	Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI)	Empowering Improvement: New Framework for Inspection 2024 (etini.gov.uk)	2024
14	Skills Strategy Northern Ireland (United Kingdom) Assessment and Recommendations	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)	Skills Strategy Northern Ireland Assessment and Recommendations (oecd.org)	2020
15	Parents' engagement in the career guidance of their children	Gatsby Foundation	Parents engagement in the career guidance of their children (Gatsby.org)	2020