



Department
for Education

Evaluation of the strengthening of the supported internship programme

Annex 2: Case studies

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Introduction

Supported internships are structured, work-based study programmes for 16 to 24-year-olds with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) who have an education, health and care plan (EHCP).

The Department for Education (DfE) aimed to strengthen the supported internship programme, by making an £18m investment from September 2022 to March 2025. This was delivered through the Internships Work consortium and aimed to allow the supported internship programme to grow sustainably, so that more young people could pursue a supported internship, while also driving up the quality of provision.

The programme was expanded in 2023 to include a Pilot of supported internships for young people without an EHCP but with identified or unidentified SEND, social, emotional or mental health needs (SEMH), or Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities (LDD), or were furthest from the labour market.¹

CooperGibson Research, with St Mary's University, was commissioned by the DfE to establish how, and to what extent, the investment in the supported internship programme has improved employment outcomes for young people taking part in a supported internship. The evaluation was also expanded to include the Pilot of supported internships.

This annex provides a series of case studies developed from the qualitative evidence gathered during the evaluation.² They are based on the accounts of local authorities, providers, interns and employers. All case studies included in this annex are anonymous, and no real names or identifying details have been used.

¹ The Internships Work contract has been extended for an additional year to March 2026 with a focus on targeted support and engagement. The Pilot of supported internships for young people without EHCPs, is included in this extension. The evaluation was also extended for one year, to February 2027, but with a specific focus on the Pilot and with adjusted aims around exploring how well the supported internship model works for a cohort of young people without an EHCP but with SEND or LDD. The extended Pilot evaluation is expected to report in spring 2027.

² Findings of the evaluation are presented in the final report for the [Supported internship programme: evaluation of investment](#).

Case study 1: Diversity in supported internship models

The evaluation findings showed that a range of supported internship models were implemented across case study sites. These designs encompassed the more widely recognised models, such as one placement with one employer, a placement with a single employer encompassing three rotations, and interns placed with a different employer each term. However, some providers offered more than one model and others were offering very bespoke models. The following vignette describes how one provider was offering two supported internship models.

One provider – two supported internship models

The provider, a further education college, began delivering the supported internship programme in 2019 with two interns and has since expanded to offer two different models aimed at preparing interns for employment.

The original model was designed as a bespoke model and was currently placing 15 interns with 9 employers across a range of sectors, including large and small organisations, as well as private, public, and third-sector employers. The provider offered flexible starting times to allow as many interns as possible to benefit from the programme. Interns spent two days per week on placement and one day in the classroom. To strengthen their employability skills, a level 2 customer service course was to be integrated into this model in the next academic year. This addition aims to develop transferable skills and professional behaviours relevant to a wide range of roles. Overall, the provider described how this model offers flexibility to meet individual interns' needs and vocational interests.

However, aware of the benefits of other models, the provider had recently started to deliver a rotational programme based on three placements with a single employer - in this case, a hospital. As part of this model, interns spend approximately 70% of their time on placement and the remainder in education. There were currently 9 interns enrolled in this model.

Several factors were cited as contributing to this diversity of internship models. Participants indicated that the primary reason was the need to respond to the individual profiles and contexts of the interns. For instance, some young people, due to the nature of their SEND and/or because of high levels of anxiety, were considered unlikely to succeed if placed full-time with an employer on a three-rotation model. In other cases, a young person might express interest in working in a different sector than that offered, which could present a barrier to course participation. Additionally, in certain regions, there were few, if any, large employers available to recruit into the supported internship programme; however, smaller organisations were often willing to accommodate one or two young people. There were risks for more bespoke models as well. For example, if a smaller organisation employed an intern after the programme, this could result in the loss of a

placement for the following year. This model often required additional effort in recruiting and training new organisations, employers, and mentors.

Case study 2: Interns' stories

The following short case studies offer an overview of interns' experiences before, during and after their programmes. Together, they illustrate the outcomes achieved to date and highlight the diversity of young people involved, including their varying levels of prior qualifications, the wide range of sectors in which they have worked, the different SEND needs represented, and the multiple pathways taken into employment, apprenticeships and university.

Pathway to employment

Arun's story: Arun began the supported internship having already achieved a level 2 qualification. When he finished that course, both he and his tutors felt that progressing to level 3 might be too challenging. He learned about the supported internship programme through local networks and decided to apply. As part of the supported internship, Arun undertook a placement in a hospital department, where he developed practical skills and workplace confidence. By the time of his research interview, he was permanently employed for 20 hours a week in the same department at the hospital and increasing his working hours is being considered.

Jenny's story: Jenny entered the supported internship programme having previously completed several GCSEs. She dropped out of a college course but later heard about supported internships through local networks and chose to pursue it. At the time of her research interview, Jenny was working for a training company, contributing her lived experience to their Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) training offer. The day before the research interview, she had supported an event with 100 attendees, reflecting her growing confidence and professional capability. Jenny is employed 3 days a week, a pattern that suits due to the role requiring significant travel.

Ben's story: Ben entered the supported internship programme having previously completed 2 level 1 courses. He was told of the supported internship programme by his tutors and researching it online with support from his mother, he applied. At the time of his research interview, Ben was working 3 days a week in an administrative packing role for a large organisation. He was nearing the end of his second year after initially working 2 days a week in his first year. It had been his placement throughout the supported internship, during which many of his colleagues learned key British Sign Language (BSL) signs to support his communication, and the canteen displayed a rolling screen of 100 work-placement-related BSL signs for 6 months to help foster a more inclusive environment for Ben.

Pathway to apprenticeship

Kyle's story: Kyle began the supported internship having completed A levels and a BTEC at a special school. Although he briefly considered going to university after finishing school, a positive short work-experience in his final year motivated him to pursue employment instead. His mother first learned about supported internships through a local area magazine delivered to their home, which prompted them to explore the opportunity further. During the supported internship, Kyle had an administrative role in 3 departments with a local council. By the time of his research interview, he had successfully applied for and secured a level 3 technical support apprenticeship with the council, which was due to start in September. He was also employed by the library on Saturdays – which had been one of his placements – where he particularly enjoyed the public-facing nature of the role.

Pathway to university

Jamie's story: Whilst completing a level 3 BTEC at college, Jamie had been encouraged to apply for university. However, at the time, he did not feel confident enough to make this transition. He also felt disillusioned with education, believing that the education system had contributed to a sense of stigma that he had carried throughout his life to date. As part of the supported internship, he undertook a placement with a digital agency. During his placement, he asked to work on music for social media content and podcasts, which led him to begin developing his first album. With the support of the agency, he went on to apply for - and successfully secure - a place on a university foundation degree in music, marking a significant step forward in both his confidence and career aspirations.

Supported interns without an EHCP

Finn's story: Finn left school without any qualifications after experiencing a period of disrupted education during Year 11. When he and his mother visited the job centre, they were introduced to the supported internship programme offered locally. He applied and was successful. The provider offered a personalised and tailored programme and when Finn expressed his goal of being a personal trainer, the job coach secured a placement at a local gym, and the provider funded his enrolment on a personal training course. Towards the end of the programme, the gym offered him a paid position. Finn initially worked from 10am–2pm each day, and as he gained confidence and experience, his hours were gradually extended.

Beth's story: Beth first learned about supported internships through her college tutor, while she was studying a level 2 course that she was not enjoying. She had a strong interest in sport, played weekly for a local team, and knew she wanted to work with children. With support from her mother, she completed the online application for a supported internship and attended the interview. Beth was placed with a sports charity that delivers programmes and activities across the county. In her role as a school games organiser, she helped to run tournaments, score for social leagues and support sports events in primary schools. She completed a first-aid training course, and she was able to draw on the Makaton learned from her previous course to communicate with children and young people who needed additional support. Beth was enjoying her placement and planned to apply for a paediatric nursing course at the end of the internship.

Case study 3: Why confidence matters - one intern's account

One of the most significant outcomes of the supported internship for interns was the marked increase in their confidence. Sustained exposure to the workplace, combined with structured, step-by-step support from job coaches and mentors, enabled each intern to embark on a personal journey toward building self-assurance. These incremental steps produced a powerful cumulative effect by the conclusion of the programme. This newfound confidence extended beyond the professional setting, positively influencing multiple aspects of the intern's life. This impact is illustrated by the following account, in the words of one intern working as a care assistant on a placement.

I am much more confident in terms of skills and the ability to do the job, trying new things or tasks and independent travel. My family can really see the difference in me now. A week ago, a next-door neighbour's husband fell down the stairs and she knocked on the door at midnight. Normally I would have been panicking, but since doing this [placement] I kept calm. Normally I would not be good with blood, but I was sat there putting a bandage on his head. I did my full first aid training here, so knew what to do. The ambulance asked over the phone if I knew CPR [Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation] and what to do if he goes in shock – so I said to mum, just say yes, I know all about it. The neighbour passed out and mum asked if I was okay and I was.

Doing this [supported internship] has calmed me down as a person and given me so much more confidence, because I wasn't before. I can think on my feet much better. In an emergency I have learnt that you can't panic, because if you do, the client panics. So, you have to remain calm.

The job coach and the staff here have been really good and supportive. If I have a barrier they offer me alternative ways to get around things. It has been really good.

You have to sometimes ask a client a different question or ask it in a different way to try and find an alternative if they don't understand what you mean. If I can't get anywhere, I can always contact a carer who knows the client well, and ask for help. When I first go to a new client, whilst I am still learning, I go with another carer who can help me understand what the clients are saying. But I don't have to ask often.

Since doing the internship and gaining so much confidence, I now have things that I want to do. I keep going home to my family and saying things that I now want to do. They keep asking 'who are you?' It has changed my future plans.

High school wasn't easy with my disability and a speech problem too. They told me I wouldn't be able to get on in life and do things. Now I look at where I am now and what I have overcome with my conditions. In my life outside, I used to not want to do things unless someone came with me. Now I am off to do things on my own.

Case study 4: The SIQAF in practice

This case study examines the use of the Supported Internship Quality Assurance Framework (SIQAF) and its impact on improving the quality and consistency of supported internship provision. The first vignette shares a provider's positive experience of participating in a SIQAF peer review, highlighting the benefits the process brought to their developing programme. The second vignette offers insights from a local authority professional who was using the SIQAF to strengthen practice and promote greater consistency across providers within their area. Together, these accounts, described by the providers in their own words, illustrate the value of the SIQAF as both a developmental tool and a mechanism for improving the quality of provision.

A Provider's experience of SIQAF

We also recently did the SIQAF through BASE [the British Association of Supported Employment]. They offered lots of different training and they did the two lots of job coach training. BASE recommended other providers who had good models for us to visit whilst setting up the new supported internship programme.

We did decide to do the SIQAF [peer review] ... we did one in November of 2024 when we had only been running for two months. We did it because I wanted to make sure that we were doing it right. And the best way to find that out was to get somebody in. We then did another one in March this year just to see how much we had improved.

It was brave, but we got a really good rating. It improved massively between the two visits. Our improvement would have been even better, but we couldn't because the last section is about destinations, and we hadn't been running it long enough to have any [data] to track destinations.

SIQAF was also important for us to do because we are a new department. Every department in the college has their own quality review. Because we are very new and a bit individual, we also have to account for quality to senior leaders and across the college campuses. It allowed us to say we are good at what we do as [the provision] has been assessed by BASE. It was a good way to show why we are doing what we are doing.

I would recommend doing SIQAF to any provider. It was so supportive. It wasn't anything like an [external inspection]. We had somebody come in from BASE and also somebody from another provider came in with her from [name of city]. That gave us the link so that then we went down to [link provider] to see what they were doing and best practice, it opened up collaborative working.

Using SIQAF for consistency in practice across a local authority

We have ensured that education providers offering supported internships are basing their programmes on the supported internship guidance by meeting with each provider and outlining our expectations around placements and outcomes. Some local programmes have gone through the SIQAF process and 2 have had peer reviews as part of the Internships Work programme.

We looked at a supported internship programme which was not meeting outcome expectations. We determined that this was more of a pre-supported internship programme rather than a supported internship study programme and have worked with the setting to promote it as a great pathway onto a supported internship and then into employment.

We had a couple of education projects where they said they were a supported internship, but when we dug into it, they weren't, they were more like long term work experience placement – they didn't have proper job coach support, young people were going back into college afterwards. We did a lot of work on those, and one has now turned into a really good pre-supported internship programme.

Case study 5: How one supported internship provider improved quality in their programme

This case study describes one provider's account of how they worked to improve quality across their supported internship programme. In doing so, the provider had established a stronger, more sustainable programme that better meets the needs of learners, employers, and the wider community.

Enhanced local authority engagement: The provider had significantly strengthened their relationship with the local authority, resulting in clearer and more efficient referral pathways. This partnership now supports earlier identification of young people who are well-matched to programme expectations and ensures alignment with local labour market needs. As a result, learner placements were described as more meaningful, better targeted, and more likely to lead to sustainable outcomes. In addition, regular quality review meetings within the team and with active local authority participation, and focused Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities, have created a culture of continuous improvement. Programme staff now draw more routinely on data to shape programme decisions and tailor intern support.

Implementation of a regional Employment and Health Skills Framework: The provider had adopted a regional Employment and Health Skills Statement which had given the programme a shared, values-led foundation to their programme. The framework sets out what high-quality work experience should look like and has helped unify expectations across tutors, employers, and support staff. This has led to greater consistency in delivery and improved clarity for learners about the skills and behaviours they are working towards.

Improved planning and monitoring systems: The introduction of digital platform planning and monitoring tools has transformed the programme's ability to track interns' progress. These systems have enabled real-time updates, clearer communication between all stakeholders, and earlier identification of any emerging concerns about an intern. Consequently, any additional individual support was delivered earlier, and tutors had a more accurate picture of each learner's development and readiness for progression.

Increased focus on independence and progression: The programme had shifted from a support-dependent model to one that actively promoted learner independence. Tutors and support staff had been trained to reduce over-reliance, encourage self-advocacy, and develop learner agency. Recent CPD included training on assessment, independence-building strategies, and supporting learners with complex needs. This approach aligned closely with the Preparing for Adulthood agenda and had resulted in more interns progressing into employment or further training pathways.

Employer engagement and co-production: Employer involvement had grown substantially, with many placements now co-designed with employers to reflect both intern aspirations and employer workforce needs. This co-production approach strengthened the relevance and authenticity of placement experiences for interns and employers. In feedback, employers had reported increased confidence in the programme, and many continue to offer placements year after year, citing strong intern preparation and support.

Job coach training and development: A growth in the number of interns had enabled the provider to employ more job coaches, which brought greater flexibility with the staffing model and allocation of tasks. The provider had invested in developing the skills of the job coaches by offering them access to level 5 training modules, which were previously available only to teaching staff. This has deepened job coaches' understanding of the interns' learning needs and strengthened their capacity to support interns more effectively in the workplace and classroom environments. The result is a more knowledgeable, confident support team with a shared professional vocabulary and stronger pedagogical understanding.

Case study 6: One employer's experience of the supported internship programme

This case study presents one employer's account of why he and the organisation became involved in the supported internship programme 4 years ago, the business and financial benefits to the organisation and the impact for one intern.

Reasons for engaging with supported internships: [I] started the supported internships in the business, it was 'my baby'. I moved here to take on my current role (social responsibility). Because we are part of a large corporate, social responsibility is a key part of the business. When I looked at the make-up of the staff here it didn't reflect the town. When I looked at the data on a government website, the biggest impacted group in this area was young people with a disability, the figures were shocking, it didn't sit well with me. Effectively what we are saying is that [for these] young people, once they leave education, everybody washes their hands of them and all they have is a life of benefits. If you are genuinely going to do something that has an impact, we needed to do something for that group of people and that is basically what I aimed for.

Business and financial benefits to the organisation: [it] doesn't cost us a penny. The adjustments we have made, most of them we wanted to do anyway, and most of them were low cost. The only things we have paid out for are some equipment for some Roger mics [to support hearing in noisy situations], but the cost of that will be covered by Access to Work, and the automated doors which cost £20k... but we have more than one person in a wheelchair now and it benefits all of the employees, not just [the intern].

... [if you] think about recruitment costs, it's c. £25k per person, that's the spend on recruitment, training, etc, then they leave a few weeks later. The turnover of staff is not too high, but you spend time and invest in recruiting and training someone, only for them to go and work down the road for 50p per hour more. So, then you have to repeat that cycle again...[with] the interns – you spend the same amount on training, but don't have any recruitment costs and they are loyal, they stay, so you save money. The time and effort you put in is less than for a bad employee who doesn't want to be here, managing sickness, absence, behaviour etc, so you save money overall.

The experience of a (now) employee: One autistic intern who is an employee here now, for 3 years [before the programme] he did not speak, he didn't even speak to his parents. After 6 months on the internship here, the college awarded him intern of the year because of progress he made – he got up and did an acceptance speech in front of whole college. [It was] the first time his friends, peers, tutors, and family had heard him speak [all that time] ...he now has his jet ski license...[it was] a massive transformation in his life.



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