

FROM UNCERTAINTY TO OPPORTUNITY: STRENGTHENING CAREER GUIDANCE

PROJECT ZERO'S YEAR 10 WORK EXPERIENCE PROGRAMME

PROJECT
ZERO

November 2025

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ABOUT US



Project Zero is a Waltham Forest based Community Interest Company (CIC) committed to seeing a year when there are been zero deaths of a young person from knife or violent crime. Project Zero seeks to make this happen through our aims:

- engaging young people in positive activities to promote social inclusion, reduce anti-social / offending behaviour and strengthen community cohesion
- raising the aspirations of young people in reaching their full potential and grow into well-adjusted adults
- helping young people to feel safe and part of their community.



**Our mission is to see
a YEAR when there
has been ZERO
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Executive summary

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Project Zero ran a Year 10 Work Experience Programme for 7 days aimed to provide students with an early introduction to the world of work. The programme was designed to help young people:

- Increase their awareness of workplace skills and expectations
- Reflect on their own strengths and skills
- Gain experience in writing CVs
- Begin to explore education and career aspirations

At the end of the week, participants presented their learning to staff, sharing reflections on themselves, employment, and Project Zero.

Participation

- A total of 9 students participated.
- Students represented a mix of ages, ethnic backgrounds, and postcodes across Waltham Forest and outside of the borough.
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Key Findings

- Skills Awareness: The majority of participants reported being more aware of their skills following the placement.
- Skill Development: Students highlighted improvements in teamwork, communication, confidence, and organisation.
- Participants reported significant increases in confidence across all areas, particularly in teamwork and presenting ideas, where average ratings rose from 2–3 before the programme to 4–5 after.
- Career Awareness: Many participants reported having clearer ideas about what they might study in Year 12 and the career paths they might pursue.
- Confidence and Aspiration: Participants expressed increased belief in their ability to achieve their future goals.
- Programme Quality: All or nearly all students said they would recommend the experience to a friend.

Impact

- The programme provided students with a safe and supportive introduction to the workplace, contributing to their self-efficacy, motivation, and career readiness.
- By offering equitable access to work experience, the programme aligns with Waltham Forest's commitment to reducing inequalities and ensuring all young people have the best start in life.

Areas for Improvement

- Strengthening support for students who were less confident about their career path.
- Extending the programme where possible to allow more time for skill-building.
- Building stronger links between student reflections and borough employment priorities (e.g. growth sectors).

Conclusion

The evaluation shows that Project Zero's Year 10 Work Experience Programme is a valued, impactful intervention that supports young people in Waltham Forest to develop skills, confidence, and career aspirations. The programme not only contributes to individual growth but also supports borough wide goals of improving employment outcomes and tackling inequalities.

Introduction



Employment plays a vital role in supporting both physical and mental health, as well as overall community wellbeing. Secure jobs and good working conditions not only provide income but also help strengthen social connections and resilience. In Waltham Forest, 140,200 residents aged 16 to 64 were in employment in 2021–22, representing 73.6% of the working-age population. This rate is lower than both the London average (75.2%) and the national average (75.4%), highlighting the importance of initiatives that build pathways into work and raise aspirations locally. Project Zero offers a Year 10 work experience programme to provide Year 10 students an early insight into the world of work.

The programme aligns with the London Borough of Waltham Forest's strategic priorities, particularly the ambition to give all young people the best start in life, tackle inequalities in access to opportunity, and prepare the next generation for education, training, and employment. By offering accessible, supported work experience, the initiative seeks to reduce local skills gaps and promote equity of opportunity for young people from diverse backgrounds.

This evaluation report captures feedback from participants to assess the programme's impact, identify areas for improvement, and demonstrate alignment with borough-wide priorities. The findings will inform the development of future work experience offers and provide an evidence base to show the value of investing in early employment focused interventions for young people in Waltham Forest.



Introduction



Funding

Project Zero does not receive funding to run its Year 10 work experience programme.



The Programme

Project Zero's Year 10 Work Experience Programme was designed to support young people in building early awareness of the world of work. The programme provides a structured one-week placement in which students develop an understanding of workplace skills, reflect on their own strengths, gain experience of CV writing, and begin to explore future career aspirations. At the end of the week, students present back on what they have learned about themselves, employment, and Project Zero. The students from this cohort were from a local school.

The programme seeks to:

- Provide young people with early exposure to the world of work through a structured and supportive placement.
- Develop transferable employability skills, including teamwork, communication, and problem-solving.
- Support students to identify and reflect on their strengths, building confidence and self-awareness.
- Introduce practical career preparation, such as CV writing and presentation skills.
- Build connections between schools, employers, and Project Zero to strengthen pathways into future education, training, and employment.



Evaluation purpose and objectives

This evaluation seeks to understand what participants gained from the programme, assess changes in behaviour, and confidence, and finally collect feedback to improve future delivery.



Evaluation process

The monitoring, evaluation and learning team (MELT) recognised that quantitative data collection through questionnaires were the most appropriate method of data collection. The questionnaire design was a collaborative process which featured the Project Zero staff (MELT and senior management) to determine the most appropriate outcomes and outcome measures. A one-time retrospective questionnaire was shared at the end of the programme among the young people that completed the work experience to recount their experiences from the previous 7 days.



Evaluation findings



Nine young people took part in the evaluation, all of whom were in Year 10 (aged 14–15). Two-thirds of the group were male and one-third female, with participants reflecting a range of ethnic backgrounds. To protect anonymity, these are not listed individually.

All participants lived in areas experiencing mild to high deprivation, with an average **Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) decile of 3** (on a scale of 1–10, where lower numbers indicate higher deprivation). Their scores ranged from 2 to 4, showing that the group mainly comes from disadvantaged communities. Figure 1 shows where participants live, and Figure 2 highlights how these areas sit within borough-wide employment deprivation in Waltham Forest.

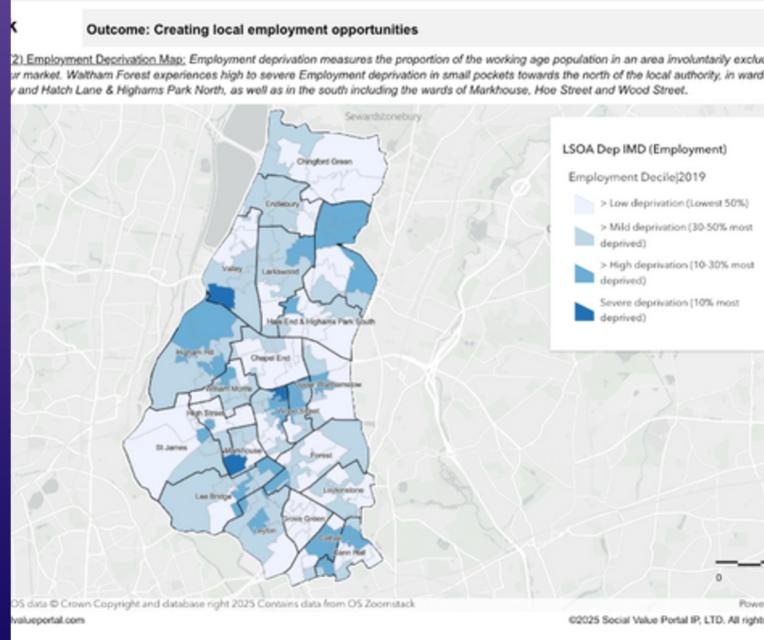
Who took part?



Figure 1: Participant locations by postcode



Figure 2: Employment Deprivation Map (source Waltham Forest Local Need Analysis)





Skills and confidence

Before joining the programme, most students (78%) felt only a little aware of their skills, while the remainder (22%) said they were somewhat aware. After completing their placement, this shifted significantly: over half (56%) reported being very aware of their skills, while the rest (44%) felt somewhat aware.

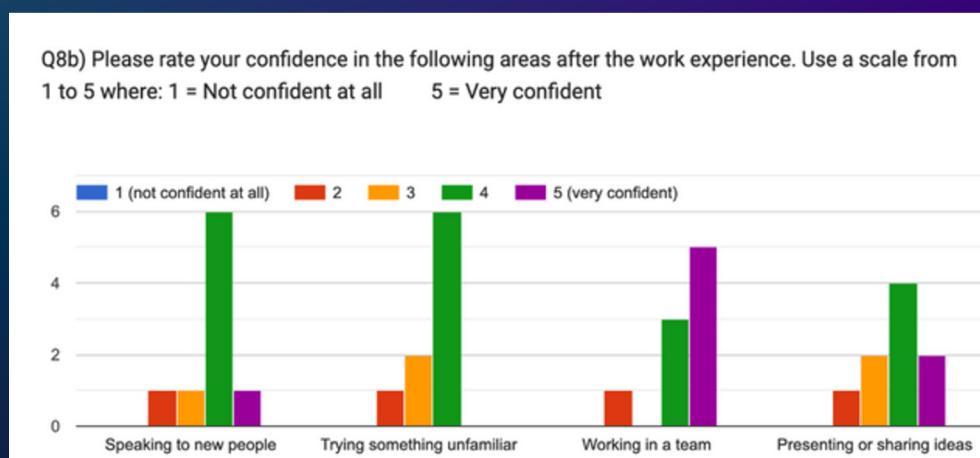
All participants said they had improved during their work experience. When asked to rate their confidence across four **areas speaking to new people, trying something unfamiliar, working in a team, and presenting or sharing ideas**, students reported clear gains in every area (Figures 3 and 4).

The most striking improvements were in communication skills. Confidence in both **speaking to new people and presenting ideas** rose sharply, highlighting the programme's effectiveness in building skills that employers consistently value. Improvements were also seen in teamwork and trying new things, showing that the programme helped students develop across the board.

Figure 3: Pre work experience confidence



Figure 4: Post work experience confidence



When asked more broadly about employability skills, nearly all participants (89%) said they had strengthened their **confidence, communication, and teamwork**. Importantly, every young person reported at least one area of improvement none selected "None of the above." However, **leadership** was identified less often, suggesting an opportunity to do more to encourage leadership development in future cohorts.

Evaluation Findings



Academic confidence and future plans

When asked about their GCSEs, just over half (56%) felt confident they could achieve their target grades, while a third (33%) were unsure and 11% did not feel confident. Some students expressed concerns about fully understanding the content or about reaching higher grades (e.g. 7s and above).

Looking ahead, most participants (56%) planned to continue into further education through A Levels, T Levels, or BTECs. Around a fifth (22%) were interested in apprenticeships or traineeships, while another 22% were still undecided.

In terms of career ambitions, two-thirds (67%) had some idea of what they wanted to do, one-fifth (22%) had a clear idea, and 11% were unsure. Career interests mentioned included computing, football college, engineering, and social work.

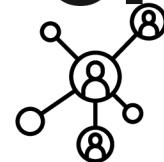
However, knowledge about how to access these careers was mixed. Almost half (45%) said they had no idea how to get into their chosen field, 33% said they were not very aware, and only 22% felt they knew the pathway forward.

Experience quality and impact

The programme was very well received. All participants rated their work experience between 9 and 10 out of 10, and every single student said they would recommend it to a friend.

The majority (89%) reported that taking part had made a positive difference to them. When asked how long this change might last, a third (33%) thought the impact would last more than a year. However, 44% were unsure, and a small number felt the benefits might fade within 3–6 months.

Strategic Alignment with Waltham Forest Priorities



The Project Zero Work Experience Programme makes a direct contribution to the London Borough of Waltham Forest's strategic priorities for children, young people, and communities. The programme provides a structured, supportive, and engaging opportunity for Year 10 pupils to explore their skills, build confidence, and consider future pathways in education and employment. The evaluation findings demonstrate alignment with the following borough-wide strategies:

1. Tackling Inequalities

The Borough Strategy (2020–2030) commits to reducing inequalities across life chances. Participants in this programme largely live in areas of higher deprivation (IMD deciles 2–4). By offering free, accessible work experience and skill development opportunities, Project Zero helps reduce barriers to opportunity and ensures that those furthest from advantage have the chance to develop confidence, skills, and aspirations.

2. Giving Children and Young People the Best Start

The Children and Young People Plan emphasises ensuring that every young person has high aspirations, positive role models, and opportunities to thrive. Through hands-on work experience, CV workshops, and exposure to professional environments, the programme supports young people to better understand their strengths and build the foundations for success in Further Education, training, or apprenticeships.

3. Preparing for Skills and Future Employment

The Corporate Plan highlights the need to equip residents with the skills required for the future economy. While many participants reported being unsure about their career aspirations at the outset, post-programme feedback shows improved awareness of transferable skills and greater clarity about post-16 choices. This reflects a step towards the borough's goal of ensuring that young people are prepared for and connected to sustainable employment opportunities.

4. Building Stronger, Healthier Communities

The evaluation highlights the programme's positive impact on wellbeing, confidence, teamwork, and communication. With an average programme rating of 9.3/10 and 100% of participants saying they would recommend it to their peers, the findings reflect the borough's ambition for services that are trusted, youth-led, and rooted in co-production.

Discussion

This evaluation provides strong indications that Project Zero's work experience programme is highly valued by young people and can make a meaningful contribution to the Mission Waltham Forest principle of creating a more equal future. By building skills, confidence, and aspirations among participants, the programme addresses local challenges around inequality and below-average employment outcomes. Importantly, participants were drawn from areas of relatively high deprivation (IMD deciles 2–4), reflecting the borough's wider socioeconomic context. Young people from disadvantaged areas face additional barriers to employment and often report feeling less in control of their futures; this programme offers an important intervention in levelling the playing field.

Despite these barriers, the majority of young people reported substantial improvements in transferable employability skills, particularly in communication, confidence, and teamwork. These are consistently ranked among the attributes most valued by employers, suggesting that the programme is equipping participants with skills that are directly relevant to workforce readiness. However, leadership skills were cited less frequently. This finding reflects broader borough-level trends identified in the Waltham Forest Local Needs Analysis, which shows lower representation in managerial and senior roles across gender and ethnic groups compared to London averages. For Project Zero, this presents an opportunity to embed structured leadership development into the programme for example, by assigning responsibility within group tasks, enabling young people to present to peers or employers, or creating peer mentoring roles. Over time, such approaches could help normalise leadership aspirations and contribute to addressing local gaps in managerial representation, particularly among underrepresented communities.

The evaluation also highlights the programme's influence on career aspirations and pathway knowledge. While most participants had some ideas about potential careers, many expressed uncertainty about how to access these pathways, with 45% reporting "no idea how to get in." This suggests that while the programme boosts self-confidence, it does not necessarily increase young people's confidence in navigating education or employment systems. Incorporating careers guidance, employer talks, and mentoring into future iterations would help bridge this gap, ensuring that aspirations are matched with actionable knowledge.

Similarly, while over half of participants expressed confidence in achieving their GCSE goals, a significant proportion were less certain, underlining the importance of integrating academic mentoring and study support alongside practical work placements.

Satisfaction with the programme was extremely high: all participants rated their experience 9 or 10 out of 10 and said they would recommend it to a peer. Almost all reported a positive impact, though some expressed uncertainty about how long the benefits would last. This suggests the need for longer-term engagement strategies, such as alumni networks, follow-up workshops, or referral pathways into further opportunities, to sustain positive outcomes beyond the immediate placement.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Project Zero's work experience programme is highly effective in building transferable soft skills, particularly confidence, teamwork, and communication. Crucially, every participant reported at least one area of improvement, showing that the programme benefits a wide range of young people not only those who are already confident or extraverted. However, confidence gains alone may not translate into long-term employment outcomes without additional career navigation and sustained support. A model that includes follow-up engagement and stronger employer linkages would help extend the programme's impact and align it with Waltham Forest's strategic goals for sustained youth employment, aspiration, and progression.

Project Zero is therefore playing an important role in helping to level the playing field, providing meaningful opportunities for young people to gain work experience they might otherwise struggle to secure.



Learning and recommendations

Strengthen evaluation design



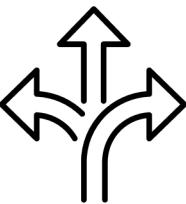
Project Zero should move towards collecting baseline and follow-up data (including a six-month check-in). This will give a clearer picture of the programme's impact on young people's skills, confidence, and career readiness, strengthening the case when reporting to funders or making bids for further support. Furthermore, this encourages sustained progression and not just one off intervention. Project Zero sees 100s of work experience students per academic year and should apply this evaluation to all students it engages with to provide more context to what has been learned.

Clarify and target skill development



Current questionnaires grouped "skills" broadly. Future evaluations should specify skills such as teamwork, leadership, and communication. For example, leadership was identified as a weaker area of development Project Zero could introduce more structured opportunities for young people to take on leadership roles within placements or projects.

Enhance career guidance and pathways



Many young people were unsure how to progress into their chosen careers. Project Zero can build stronger links with local employers, apprenticeship providers, and further education institutions to offer clearer pathways. Creating short "career routes handouts" or follow-up guidance sessions would extend the value of the programme.

Support academic confidence



Several participants expressed uncertainty about achieving their target GCSE grades. Project Zero could integrate light-touch academic mentoring or signposting to local study support services. This would reinforce the link between school achievement and future employability.

Sustain high engagement and satisfaction



Young people rated the programme 9–10/10 and all said they would recommend it. Project Zero should highlight this strong endorsement in communications with stakeholders and funders. Maintaining a high-quality placement offer will continue to build trust with schools and families.



Improve outreach and equity of access

Collecting information on schools attended and referral routes will allow Project Zero to spot gaps in access. This insight can inform future outreach strategies, ensuring opportunities reach young people from a wider range of schools, particularly those in areas of higher deprivation.

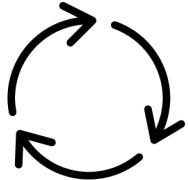


Strengthen Project Zero's positioning with Waltham Forest

By showing how the programme builds employability skills, improves confidence, and connects young people with careers, Project Zero can position itself as a key delivery partner for Waltham Forest's employment and skills strategy. This alignment can be emphasised in future funding applications and partnership conversations.



Practical Recommendations for Building Leadership Skills



Rotating Roles in Group Tasks

During group projects or activities, assign rotating roles such as team leader, timekeeper, or presenter. This ensures each student has the chance to lead, make decisions, and practise responsibility in a safe environment.



Peer-to-Peer Mentoring

Pair students so that one takes on a mentor role (e.g. supporting a peer to complete a task, offering feedback, or sharing what they've learned). This builds confidence in guiding others and reinforces responsibility.



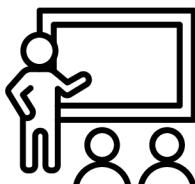
Mini-Presentations

At the end of placements, ask each student to briefly present something they learned to their peers or supervisors. Even short 2–3 minute presentations help normalise public speaking and responsibility-taking.



Leadership Challenges

Introduce small leadership-based challenges, such as planning part of a schedule, delegating roles in a task, or pitching a new idea to the group. These encourage creativity and decision-making in real time.



Employer-Led Leadership Workshops

Invite local professionals from managerial or entrepreneurial backgrounds (especially from underrepresented groups) to run short workshops or Q&A sessions. Hearing leadership journeys from relatable role models can help students imagine themselves in those positions.



Reflection and Feedback

Include reflective questions in end-of-day or end-of-week sessions that encourage students to think about moments where they took initiative, supported others, or influenced group outcomes.

Conclusion

The Project Zero Year 10 Work Experience Programme has demonstrated clear benefits for participating young people, particularly in building confidence, communication, and teamwork skills. All participants reported improvements in at least one employability skill, with many showing substantial increases in confidence across multiple areas. The programme was also highly valued by students, with every participant rating their experience positively and recommending it to peers.

While the evaluation was limited by a small sample size and retrospective data collection, the findings provide encouraging evidence that Project Zero is making a meaningful contribution to young people's personal development and readiness for future education and employment.

Importantly, the programme is reaching young people from areas of higher deprivation, ensuring that opportunities are targeted where they are most needed.

Looking forward, there is an opportunity to strengthen the evidence base through more robust data collection, expand support around academic confidence and career pathways, and continue to build partnerships with schools, employers, and the local authority. By doing so, Project Zero can consolidate its role as a trusted provider of impactful youth programmes in Waltham Forest, contributing to borough-wide goals of improving skills, confidence, and long-term employability among young people.

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