



GATSBY CURRICULUM DESIGN GROUPS

IMPACT REPORT 2025/26

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Why curriculum design groups?

Qualification reform is creating opportunities for further education, with post-16 providers redesigning programmes to make sure learners develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours they need to progress into further study, apprenticeships and employment.

No single college has all the answers. But across the sector there is a huge amount of expertise and experience to draw on, and curriculum design groups provide a way for colleges to learn from one another rather than navigating the changes alone.

The Curriculum Design Groups (CDGs) bring together curriculum leaders, practitioners and sector experts to work through the potential approaches, and consider the implementation challenges that come with any curriculum changes. They give time and space to test ideas, share what works and design practical solutions that reflect the realities of delivering high-quality technical education.

The aim is stronger curriculum design, greater confidence in responding to reform and a growing network of professionals who continue to learn from and support one another, all with the shared goal of improving outcomes for learners.

CDGs in numbers

The CDGs are designed to help colleges respond confidently to curriculum reform through collaboration, shared expertise and practical curriculum design.

Of the surveyed participants:

- 96% were satisfied or very satisfied with their experience
- 77% were very satisfied with the programme
- 100% said the programme met or exceeded their expectations
- four in five said they would actively recommend the CDGs to a colleague, giving it a Net Promoter Score of 80

Behind these figures are curriculum leaders and practitioners who have developed new approaches, shared their expertise across the sector and designed practical solutions that will benefit learners.

'Working with highly focused, like-minded professionals who were deeply committed to improving opportunities for our students was invaluable'.

Senior leader, Health and Care CDG

This report explores the impact of the CDGs through the experiences of the people who made them happen.



A year of collaboration

The CDGs were first established in the 2024/25 academic year. This second cohort of CDGs brought together 67 institutions and more than 140 senior and middle leaders from across the further education sector to respond collectively to curriculum reform.

Each CDG was supported by a strategic steering group that brought together senior leaders to guide the direction of the work. Curriculum experts led dedicated working groups where practitioners collaborated to explore opportunities, reflect on challenges, share expertise and co-design practical curriculum solutions.

Informed with sector insight

Every CDG was facilitated by an experienced curriculum adviser seconded from a further education college. Their expertise ensured that discussions remained practical, relevant and firmly rooted in the realities of further education.

This year also saw the introduction of New to T-levels groups, which draw on the lived experience of colleges that were early adopters of T-levels in particular subject areas. By sharing what they have learned, along with practical ideas and approaches that have proven effective, these groups are helping colleges implement these T-levels with greater confidence.



Demonstrating impact

This section explores the impact of the programme through four themes:

- designing better curricula together
- turning policy into practice
- developing curriculum leaders
- emerging impact

Designing better curricula together

- Colleges co-designed curriculum models rather than working in isolation.
- Employers helped shape curriculum content and progression outcomes.
- Resources were developed collaboratively, reducing duplication and sharing expertise.
- Practical approaches will now be piloted and refined by participating colleges.

Qualification reform and curriculum planning are complex, and no CDG college wanted to tackle this alone. The CDGs bring curriculum leaders, practitioners and employers together to share ideas, test different approaches and develop practical responses to change.

One of the programme's strengths was its two-tier structure, which gave equal attention to strategic leadership and hands-on curriculum development. Strategic steering groups brought together senior leaders to set priorities and guide the overall direction of the work, while working groups gave curriculum practitioners the time and space to develop resources, explore ideas and solve practical challenges together. This meant that strategic decisions were informed by the people delivering the curriculum, while colleagues at participating colleges had the opportunity to contribute and develop their own practice.

'The systematic approach enabled colleagues at every level of the organisation to make meaningful contributions'.

Senior leader, Animal Management CDG

Participants consistently described collaboration as one of the programme's greatest strengths. Working with colleagues from other colleges gave them the opportunity to compare ideas, learn from different approaches and solve problems together. Many felt the end result was stronger because it reflected the experience and expertise of colleges across the sector, rather than the perspective of a single institution.

'It was an opportunity to collaborate with other colleges during a period of significant change in further education, sharing expertise to help shape a better future for young people'.

Senior leader, Engineering and Manufacturing CDG

'... it reminded me of university seminars ... lots of really smart people bringing an evidence-based approach and challenging one another'.

Senior leader, Creative and Media CDG

In the Engineering and Manufacturing CDG, 11 colleges collaborated to redesign a level 2 study programme, starting not with the qualification itself but with the knowledge, skills and behaviours that learners need to progress into T-levels, apprenticeships and employment.

The group developed content that weaves mathematics into real engineering projects, strengthens learners' readiness for work and gives employers a greater role in shaping learning. They are now building a shared bank of project-based learning resources, employer-set projects and practical mathematics activities, which will be trialled by participating colleges.

'It was an opportunity to share ideas and bring colleagues together to identify solutions'.

Engineering working group member

Like the Engineering and Manufacturing CDG, the Health and Care CDG started by asking what learners need to progress into further study, apprenticeships and employment, rather than focusing solely on the level 2 qualification content.

Working closely with NHS expertise, the group developed a progression passport to recognise the wider achievements learners build throughout their programme. They also designed a qual+ framework, bringing together additional qualifications and enrichment activities that help learners develop the digital, professional and sector-specific skills employers are looking for.

York College will pilot the offer during the 2026/27 academic year, helping this CDG understand how the curriculum supports learner progression and where it can be strengthened before being rolled out more widely.

The Health and Care CDG plans to continue working together beyond the project and has also been having conversations with the Engineering and Manufacturing CDG, looking at how the two CDGs can work together on employer engagement and cross-sector industry internships to open up new opportunities for learners.

The Digital CDG has taken a similar approach to preparing learners for what comes after they complete their qualification. Recognising that strong technical skills alone are not enough to succeed in the workplace, the group defined a set of digital progression skills covering areas such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, planning and professional behaviours.

Rather than adding separate employability activities to a learner's study programme, they are being built into employer-set projects. Learners take on realistic workplace roles and responsibilities, giving them opportunities to practise professional behaviours alongside their technical learning. The group has developed practical guidance, skills mapping and exemplar projects that colleges can adapt to their own curriculum and employer relationships.

As identified by the other CDGs, collaboration has been a key part of the process. By bringing together practitioners with experience of digital T-level delivery, colleges have been able to share existing practice and develop sector-specific resources that would have been difficult to create individually.

Turning policy into practice

- Shared understanding of qualification reform.
- Practical curriculum models informed by evidence.
- Reliable policy updates and expert facilitation.
- Strategic discussion leading to implementable solutions.
- Greater confidence in curriculum decision-making.

Understanding qualification reform is only part of the challenge. Colleges also need to decide what those changes mean for their curriculum and how they will put them into practice in a way that works for learners, employers and their local communities.

The CDGs give curriculum leaders the chance to work through those decisions together. Regular policy updates, input from sector experts and open discussions help participants make sense of the changes, test ideas with colleagues and take practical approaches back to their own colleges.

Participants repeatedly said they valued the opportunity to discuss qualification reform with peers also working through the changes.

'A good source of reliable, simple information about qualification changes'.

Working group member, Creative and Media CDG

Collaborating with colleagues from other colleges gives participants greater confidence in the decisions they make. They can compare different approaches, learn from one another's experience and take away ideas that have already been tested in practice.

'Discussions with others in similar positions across a range of colleges encourage you to think outside the box'.

Working group member, Digital CDG

Developing curriculum leaders

- Greater confidence to lead curriculum change.
- Strategic thinking informed by collaboration and evidence.
- Professional networks extending beyond individual colleges.
- Increased leadership capability at both strategic and operational levels.
- New ideas and approaches taken back into colleges to drive improvement.

The groups created opportunities to think strategically, influence curriculum development and collaborate with peers facing similar challenges. Participants consistently emphasised the value of stepping away from day-to-day operational pressures to focus on longer-term curriculum innovation.

'There are so many competing priorities in education. What I learnt through the process was how to refine those into an achievable goal and an achievable outcome'.

Senior leader, Creative and Media CDG

'The CDGs created the space for respectful challenge, evidence-based discussion and strategic thinking'.

Working group member, Creative and Media CDG

The same message was clear across the programme: participants valued the chance to learn from colleagues in similar roles, hear how other colleges were approaching the same challenges and take new ideas back to their own organisations.

'The opportunity to network and share practice and ideas, time away from the day-to-day, and the chance for colleagues to think differently, share and build contacts'.

Senior leader, Engineering and Manufacturing CDG

The programme also gave colleagues at different levels of their organisation the opportunity to contribute to curriculum design. For many, being involved in both strategic discussions and practical work was an important part of their own professional development.

'The opportunity to work at both strategic and working group level is a great idea. It's been a great CPD opportunity and has allowed colleagues to network and consider one problem in detail, a luxury we don't often have'.

Senior leader, Engineering and Manufacturing CDG

Emerging impact

- Shared curriculum resources developed for use across the sector.
- Ongoing networks committed to sharing practice beyond the project.
- Reduced duplication through collaborative resource development.
- Practical solutions that continue to evolve through implementation.

The benefits of the CDGs do not end when the project finishes. Participating colleges have created resources, curriculum models and ways of working that are already being used and refined. Many of the groups also want to continue working together, sharing ideas, developing resources and supporting one another as the reforms are introduced.

The Construction CDG developed a shared employability skills framework, drawing on employer feedback and research, alongside project briefs and curriculum resources that colleges across the sector can adapt. While the group continues to build and share new resources, they are also now looking at how learners can better demonstrate the wider skills that employers value.

The Creative and Media CDG focused on a different challenge: how to define creativity and recognise it as a transferable skill. Together, the group developed a framework that sets out the knowledge, skills and behaviours associated with creativity, giving colleges a common starting point for embedding these skills across their programmes.

City College Norwich is piloting this framework through a creative skills passport, helping more than 740 learners recognise, reflect on and evidence the creative skills they develop during their studies. The college is also exploring how the approach could be used in other curriculum areas.

Perhaps one of the strongest outcomes has been the relationships formed through the programme. Participants were keen to keep the groups going, building on the trust, networks and shared sense of purpose that had developed over the year:

‘Maintain the groups to build on the work and the resulting network’.

Senior leader, Health and Care CDG

‘The groups should continue beyond the initial six months to support implementation’.

Senior leader, Engineering and Manufacturing CDG

Shaping the next phase

Participant feedback has played an important role in shaping the CDGs for 2026/27. Although satisfaction with the programme was high, participants identified some opportunities for improvement.

The most consistent desire was for more face-to-face collaboration in the working groups. Participants recognised the value of online meetings but felt that additional opportunities to work together in person would strengthen relationships, accelerate collaborative problem-solving and support the development of practical curriculum resources.

There was also considerable support for creating smaller groups to enable greater participation, stronger relationships and a shared commitment to developing and implementing solutions.

These recommendations have been built into the design of the next phase of the programme. Working groups will include more face-to-face collaboration and will operate with smaller cohorts to encourage deeper engagement and more effective collaboration.

The 2026/27 CDGs will align with the national qualification reform timetable, with planned groups including business and administration, digital, education and early years, care services, engineering and manufacturing, sport and exercise science, and health and science. Building on the success of this year's programme, the popular New to T-level groups will be expanded, enabling colleges introducing new qualifications to learn directly from providers with first-hand implementation experience.

If your college would like to be part of the next phase of the CDGs, further information and details of how to get involved are available on the [Technical Education Networks](#) website.

CURRICULUM DESIGN GROUPS IN 2025/26

CDG	Curriculum advisers
Animal Management	Nick Holbrooke-Sutcliffe Assistant CEO East Kent College
Construction	Ben Robinson Vice Principal Curriculum and Quality Lakes College
Creative and Media	Cat Marin Principal Milton Keynes College Group
Digital	Morag Davis Group Executive Director for Strategy and Transformation East Lancashire Learning Group
Engineering and Manufacturing	Neil Thomas Curriculum Adviser
Health and Care	Christine Kenyon MBE Specialist Adviser The Manchester College
Independent Training Providers	Dr Kate Webb Curriculum Adviser
New To Health and Science T-levels	Lynette Leith OBE Principal and Chief Executive Boston College Pete Joddrell Deputy CEO/Group Principal South Hampshire College Group

PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS

Activate Learning Ada, the National College for Digital Skills Barnet and Southgate College Barnsley College Bedford College Group Best Practice Network Bexhill College Big Creative Education Bishop Burton College Blackburn College Boston College Brockenhurst College Brooklands College Cadbury Sixth Form College Cambridge Regional College Capel Manor College Chichester College Group City College Norwich City College Plymouth Coastland College Craven College Derby College East Kent Colleges Group East Lancashire Learning Group Harlow College Heart of Worcestershire College Herefordshire, Ludlow and North Shropshire College Hertford Regional College Hopwood Hall College Juniper Training Lakes College Leeds College of Building Leyton Sixth Form College London South East Colleges	Loughborough College The Manchester College Middlesbrough College Milton Keynes College Morthyng Group Moulton College Myerscough College New Collaborative Learning Trust New College Durham New College Swindon Newcastle and Stafford Colleges Group Newham College NKC Hadlow College Shooters Hill Sixth Form College Shoots Training Solihull Sixth Form College South Essex College South Hampshire College Group South Staffordshire College St Francis Xavier Sixth Form College St Helens College Trafford and Stockport College Group United Colleges Group Washwood Heath Academy West Herts College West Suffolk College Wiltshire College & University Centre Windsor Forest Colleges Group Wirral Metropolitan College WQE College (Wyggaston and Queen Elizabeth I College) Wyke Sixth Form College YMCA Key College York College
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