

From Activity to Impact

Using Volunteering to Evidence Gatsby Benchmarks 5 and 6

A practical, tool-agnostic guide for Careers Leaders under the new Ofsted report card | Companion to *The Green Bar Illusion* (Career Matters)

The Green Bar Illusion: In our conversations with Careers Leaders across several regions, the same gap keeps surfacing: schools can show the register, the assemblies, the employer talks, the workplace visits, but they cannot show the impact. Under the new Ofsted report card, **Personal Development and Wellbeing is now graded as a standalone evaluation area**. A Compass+ self-assessment that says “fully achieved” is not the same as an evidence base that holds up when an inspector opens the folder. Inspectors are no longer asking “*what did you organise?*” They are asking “*what did pupils gain, and how do you know?*”

Volunteering is a professional encounter, not “charity work”

When structured properly, volunteering meets the rigorous definitions of both Gatsby Benchmarks 5 and 6 (Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2024). This is the insight most schools are missing: a single, well-designed volunteering programme can generate evidence for **two benchmarks simultaneously** and fill the gaps left by traditional one-off work experience placements. We are currently piloting this structured framework with secondary schools, testing it across Year 10 volunteering placements to measure exactly what evidence each placement generates.

Gatsby 5: Encounters with Employers	Gatsby 6: Experiences of Workplaces
<p>A pupil volunteering for a local charity, social enterprise, or NHS trust is interacting with a professional employer. Each briefing, induction, or project review constitutes a meaningful encounter, provided it includes two-way dialogue about the workplace and the skills required. Unlike a one-off careers assembly, volunteering creates repeated, progressive encounters across the year.</p> <p>✓ Meets the updated Gatsby definition: pupils learn about work, skills valued, and recruitment processes, with built-in time for reflection.</p>	<p>Project-based or sustained volunteering provides a genuine workplace environment. Whether a community site, a charity office, or a digital workspace, the pupil operates under a supervisor, performs real tasks, and follows organisational policies. This meets the criteria for a meaningful workplace experience without relying on the Enterprise Adviser’s employer network or family connections.</p> <p>✓ Updated benchmarks pluralise pre-16 experiences and recognise varied, progressive encounters over one-off placements.</p>

The “Inspector-Ready” Volunteering Checklist

Use this five-point framework to ensure every volunteering placement generates the evidence inspectors will ask for.

1	<p><input type="checkbox"/> The Professional Briefing [GB5 — Encounters]</p> <p>Does the pupil have a designated supervisor at the host organisation? Ensure at least one session involves the supervisor discussing their own career path and the organisational structure. This transforms a “volunteering slot” into a documented employer encounter that is logged in Compass+ alongside your other Benchmark 5 activities.</p>
2	<p><input type="checkbox"/> The Workplace Immersion [GB6 — Experiences]</p> <p>Is the pupil performing tasks that contribute to the organisation’s actual goals? Document the work environment: retail, office, community site, or digital workspace. If the pupil is doing real work for a real organisation, you have a workplace experience, whether it looks like a traditional five-day placement or not.</p>
3	<p><input type="checkbox"/> The Skill Log [Impact Evidence]</p> <p>Move beyond logging hours. Have pupils record one specific skill used or developed per session, e.g. “Communicated with the public,” “Resolved a scheduling conflict,” “Managed stock inventory.” This is the evidence that turns a destinations data entry into a story of development.</p>
4	<p><input type="checkbox"/> The Employer Validation [External Verification]</p> <p>Obtain a written or digital sign-off from the host organisation after each placement block. A single sentence from the supervisor on the pupil’s employability skills is gold dust for an inspector. Keep it short: one rating, one comment, one signature. Schools we’ve spoken with say this is the piece they’re missing most.</p>
5	<p><input type="checkbox"/> The Reflection and Upload [Compass+ Integration]</p> <p>Upload the activity to your tracking system (Compass+ or equivalent) along with a pupil reflection linking the experience to their future career aspirations. Use a structured reflection model, Gibbs’ Reflective Cycle works well, so pupils articulate what they gained, not just what they did. This closes the loop from activity to inspectable impact.</p>

Why volunteering fills the gaps left by traditional work experience

	Traditional Work Experience	Structured Volunteering
Frequency	Once, typically Year 10 or 11	Repeatable across every year group, term on term
Gatsby coverage	Mainly GB6; GB5 requires separate activity	GB5 and GB6 from the same programme
Impact evidence	Often limited to a diary or participation log	Skill tracking, employer sign-off, reflective outputs
Equity and access	Pupil-level gaps masked by school-level Compass+ parity; access dependent on family networks	School-brokered via local charities; accessible to all pupil groups, including PP and SEND
Progression	One-off, limited follow-up or destinations linkage	Cumulative skills growth mapped to career aspirations

The bottom line: The question is no longer “*Did we do enough activities?*” It is “**Can we show what pupils gained?**” This five-point framework provides a repeatable, progressive programme that generates inspection-ready Gatsby 5 and 6 evidence, with built-in impact data. We are currently testing it with schools in the pilot and would welcome the opportunity to share emerging findings with the CDI community.

Platforms such as *Vinspired for Schools* support this structured approach. Visit vinspired.com or contact info@vinspired.com.