Institute of Hospitality ROUND TABLE

INSTITUTE OF HOSPITALITY

WHITE PAPER

OPENING DOORS TO EMPLOYMENT: HOW HOSPITALITY CAN MAKE SUPPORTED INTERNSHIPS WORK

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IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

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DFN Project SEARCH
Unlocking Talent. Enabling Careers.

> “The hospitality industry can open doors to meaningful work. With strong partnerships, prepared teams and accessible recruitment, we can help turn people’s potential into lasting opportunity.”
>
> **Aymen Fetouak MIH, Institute of Hospitality**

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ROUND TABLE

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The background

Hospitality needs reliable routes into work and a workforce able to reflect the communities it serves. Yet many young people with learning disabilities or autism encounter barriers before they can demonstrate what they can do in a workplace. Supported internships offer a structured transition from education into employment, with practical experience, teaching and job coaching built around the young person and the host business.

At a Birmingham round table convened by the Institute of Hospitality with Compass Group UK and Ireland and DFN Project SEARCH, participants examined what the model asks of employers, what it can deliver, and why it remains difficult to expand. The discussion brought together employers, education leaders, programme specialists and people working on social value and policy. The central finding was that hospitality can offer meaningful opportunities, but successful programmes require a local partnership, prepared managers and a clear pathway from internship to paid work.

The challenge

Supported internships are still poorly understood by many employers and families. The offer can be mistaken for an apprenticeship, a short placement or a promise of a job. Employers may assume that specialist support will be their responsibility alone. Families may worry about losing educational support or changes to benefits. Colleges and providers must navigate different funding routes and recruit young people into a programme that can feel like a major step into the unknown.

The round table also identified a contradiction in entry-level recruitment. A young person may complete months of practical work yet face an online form, rigid interview or vacancy that closes before a supported application can be completed. For a programme intended to lead to employment, the transition into a paid role needs as much design as the internship itself.

> “It provides that experience. So, you can apply saying, I do have working experience, and this is what it looks like.”
>
> **Amy Mitchell, DFN Project SEARCH**

Round table findings

What a supported internship involves

Amy Mitchell described the DFN Project SEARCH model as a year-long, education-led programme, generally for young people aged 16 to 25 with a learning disability and or autism, typically in their final year of education and with an education, health and care plan. A local partnership includes a host employer, a further education college, a supported employment provider, a local authority and the charity. The young person attends the host workplace for much of the academic year and, in this model, undertakes three rotations in different roles.

The college tutor delivers an employability curriculum, covering daily workplace routines alongside practical skills such as travel, communication and payslips. A job coach gives systematic instruction alongside the young person at work, with support reducing as independence grows. The host business identifies suitable roles and mentors, while the partnership plans the programme before the first cohort arrives. As Mitchell stressed, the employer is not obliged to hire an intern at the end, although employment remains the programme's central aim.

A rotation model benefits young people who need to explore their interests, and sites with a range of departments can offer work in catering, reception, retail, housekeeping, administration and other functions. It is not the only workable design. Paul Cook described a separate Premier Inn partnership concentrated on housekeeping, where a sustained period in one role develops the skills needed for that particular job. These approaches should not be presented as interchangeable: the right model depends on the person, the employer and the intended outcome.

> Some young people don't really know what they want to do. Whereas others are very fixed.
>
> **Paul Cook MBE MIH, further education and supported internship leader**

What employers and young people gain

Compass Group described supported internships as part of its approach to social mobility and talent development. Jess Payne said that dedicated job coaches, tutors and mentors helped both interns and operational teams. Managers could learn what an individual needed and ask for help rather than trying to resolve every challenge alone. She reported employment outcomes of around 65 per cent for the Compass programmes discussed, while Mitchell cited an average of around 60 per cent for DFN Project SEARCH. These were participants' programme figures, not independently audited national rates.

The discussion included the story of a former intern who progressed into a customer service role in a Compass retail unit at a hospital and remained employed several years later. His recorded contribution illustrated the value of gaining experience, confidence and a route towards further development. The round table also heard Cook's account of strong retention in the Premier Inn housekeeping programme. These examples show what sustained employment can look like when recruitment, induction and support are aligned; they should not be read as a guarantee for every scheme.

> The teams that get involved in these internship programmes are more engaged.
>
> **Jess Payne, Compass Group**

Make the first step possible for families

Programme places cannot be filled by employer willingness alone. Mitchell said that recruiting young people was a significant challenge even as new host programmes opened. Families may have spent years securing educational support and can be understandably cautious about a transition that touches an education, health and care plan, financial support, independent living and travel. A journey requiring several buses, or an early shift before transport runs, can make an otherwise promising placement impractical.

Participants argued for conversations with families well before the final year of education, supported by colleges and specialist providers who understand the transition. Employers can also make modest adjustments: a later shift start to match the bus timetable, a clear task brief, or a different interview format can remove a barrier without changing the essential work. Benefits and eligibility questions need individual advice from qualified services; the round table did not establish a single rule that applies to every family.

Equip managers as well as interns

Several contributors emphasised that managers need preparation. A mentor may be keen to help but unsure how to communicate, make reasonable adjustments or respond to a difficult day. The presence of a job coach provides support, but capability should not depend on one enthusiastic manager. Staff turnover and restructures can otherwise erase knowledge built during the internship.

Cook described training managers across an employer's organisation so that an intern or graduate can move teams without losing the benefit of an informed workplace. Mitchell said that DFN Project SEARCH runs recurring training for managers and mentors. The same principles apply to recruitment: sending questions in advance, offering a suitable interview format and explaining tasks clearly can allow a candidate to show their abilities. Managers should agree each adjustment with the individual rather than assuming all neurodivergent people need the same thing.

> Managers need to have a really good grasp of reasonable adjustments.

Paul Cook MBE MIH, further education and supported internship leader

Funding and policy can enable or obstruct

The local partnership brings together education funding linked to the young person's plan and support for job coaching through separate arrangements. Participants described these as complex and, in some cases, slow. Mitchell reported lengthy delays in Access to Work payments to providers and raised concern about shorter periods of support for internship job coaching. Cook warned that sustained coaching matters in hospitality workplaces, where operational pace and safeguarding responsibilities require confidence from the young person and the team.

The round table explored whether regional coordination, local skills planning and public procurement could help. Jess Campion asked how devolved funding might be used wisely without adding new risks; Cook saw potential for alignment but warned that funding pots can shrink when they move. Chris Petty suggested that public contracts could encourage or require provision for supported internships, balanced against the risk of deterring employers. These were ideas for further policy work, not agreed changes or descriptions of current tender requirements.

Best practice & practical solutions

- Start with a local partnership. Identify a host site, nearby further education college, supported employment provider and local authority, then agree responsibilities before recruitment begins.

- Design the work around real jobs. Map tasks, possible rotations or a focused pathway, line managers, travel routes and what paid roles might be available after the programme.

- Prepare the whole team. Train mentors and managers in communication and reasonable adjustments; retain that knowledge when managers change.

- Engage families early. Explain the programme, the transition from education, the route to paid work and where families can obtain individual benefits advice.

- Review recruitment. Give candidates accessible application routes, clear tasks and adjustments agreed with the individual; avoid losing capable candidates to unnecessary process barriers.

- Measure lasting outcomes. Track entry into paid work, retention, quality of experience for interns and teams, and the resources needed to deliver the programme.

Next steps

The group identified a need for simple, shared material that tells employers what a supported internship is, what a host contributes, what specialist partners provide and how to make first contact. Amy Mitchell offered programme information and signposting through DFN Project SEARCH. Participants also discussed introductions between local education and hospitality networks, including University College Birmingham, and a follow-up contact exchange so those ready to act could build partnerships.

For the Institute of Hospitality and its partners, the immediate opportunity is to make these routes visible to senior hospitality decision-makers, then support a small number of well-planned local conversations. The strength of the model lies in turning goodwill into a suitable role, a confident manager and, ultimately, a paid job.

Methodology

This paper is based on a facilitated round-table discussion on 23rd September 2026 at the Xcelerate Regional Skills and Community Training Hub, Edgbaston Stadium, Birmingham. The Institute of Hospitality convened the discussion with Compass Group UK and Ireland and DFN Project SEARCH. It is a thematic account, not an independent programme evaluation.

Contributors identifiable in the transcript included Aymen Fetouak MIH, Callum Greene of Xcelerate, Jonathan Foot of Compass Group, Jess Payne and Jess Campion of Compass Group, Amy Mitchell of DFN Project SEARCH, Paul Cook, Chris Bailey and other representatives of education, hospitality and social-value organisations.

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