



Skills Commission Interim Report

Earning or Learning: A New Agenda for Youth NEET Reduction
December 2025

Abstract

The Skills Commission's interim report sets out the evidence gathered from February 2025, when the inquiry launched, until November 2025, when consultations were closed.

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- ❖ Lord Kevin Shinkwin (Conservative Peer), House of Lords
- ❖ Josh Babarinde MP (Liberal-Democrat, Eastbourne)
- ❖ Barry Fletcher (Chief Executive Officer) – Youth Futures Foundation
- ❖ Graham Hasting-Evans (Chief Executive Officer) – NOCN Group
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- ❖ Jeremy Crook OBE (Chief Executive) – Action for Race Equality

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Executive Summary

The United Kingdom faces a significant challenge with youth inactivity, with approximately **946,000 young people (16-24)** now not in education, employment, or training (NEET). This represents 12.7% of this age group as of the most recent data from July to September 2025.¹ This figure represents a concerning increase of approximately 196,000 individuals compared to 2019, despite government efforts to prioritise reducing NEET rates. The UK's NEET rate now compares unfavourably with international benchmarks and carries a significant economic cost: analysis by Youth Futures Foundation suggests if the UK matched the country with the lowest NEET rate in the OECD, the Netherlands, approximately 567,000 more young people would be in work or education, boosting the economy by £86 billion over the long term.²

The Skills Commission gathered evidence since February 2025, collecting written submissions from stakeholders across education, youth employment, skills and industry. The evidence gathered points to a complex web of interconnected and systemic failures. A rigid, academically biased education system, driven by performance measures (such as the English Baccalaureate), marginalises vocational pathways and fails to engage many young people. Such issues are further compounded by a fragmented, underfunded, and often short-term support system that lacks coordination between government departments, local authorities, and service providers. Consequently, support is often reactive rather than preventative.

Marginalised groups are disproportionately affected by the NEET crisis. Young people who are care-experienced; justice-experienced; estranged from families; those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND); and individuals from certain ethnically minoritised backgrounds face profound and specific barriers that the current system is ill-equipped to address. A growing youth mental health crisis is also noted as a primary driver of economic inactivity, yet access to specialist support such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) is severely limited by long waiting lists and the already burdened NHS.

Key barriers identified across the sources include:

- **Structural Failings:** A decline in entry-level apprenticeships, curriculum reforms scrapping accessible qualifications such as Business and Technology Education Council qualifications (BTECs), and inflexible roll-on/roll-off training provision.
- **Financial Hardship:** Low apprentice wages, inadequate bursaries, and a benefits system that can penalise young people for entering work or training.

¹ Office for National Statistics, 'Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), UK: November 2025'.

² Youth Futures Foundation, *Youth Employment 2025 Outlook*.

- **Systemic Gaps:** Poor data sharing between institutions, a lack of transport in rural areas, and insufficient employer engagement, particularly among Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs).
- **Discrimination:** Widespread prejudice reported by young people in recruitment and the workplace.

The collective evidence advocates for a fundamental strategic shift toward a preventative, holistic, and person-centred model. Effective interventions are consistently shown to be long-term, tailored, and built on trusted relationships. Emerging recommendations include establishing a coordinated and devolved support infrastructure, providing flexible and sustained funding, and implementing targeted incentives to de-risk youth employment for businesses.

Policy Landscape 2025 (England)

Skills England

As the central coordinating body for the reformed skills system, Skills England is tasked with overcoming longstanding fragmentation and providing a single strategic centre for skills policy (or, at least for education and training beyond the age of 19). The Post-16 Skills White Paper set out expectations for Skills England to develop sector-level “job plans,” shape national and local skills pipelines, and work with Strategic Authorities and employer partners to align provision with present and future labour market needs. Further, the body’s role in qualification reform includes supporting the rollout of the newly announced V-Levels and ensuring that new pathways are grounded in occupational standards and genuine employer demand.

For NEET reduction, Skills England matters in two main ways. First, it is responsible for ensuring that funding and policy incentives favour early career and entry level skills development, including apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeship routes that can engage young people with low prior attainment or disrupted education. Second, through its partnership with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and local actors, Skills England is expected to help integrate employment support with education and training offers, a prerequisite for the effective delivery of the Youth Guarantee and for targeted interventions in areas with persistently high NEET rates.

Get Britain Working / Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper

The Get Britain Working White Paper sets out the Government’s overarching strategy to tackle economic inactivity, with the Youth Guarantee as the central mechanism for reducing youth NEET.³ The Youth Guarantee commits that every 16-24 year old in England will have

³ Department for Work and Pensions, ‘Get Britain Working White Paper’.

access to education, training, an apprenticeship, or structured help to find a job as a result of a £820 million funding package, announced in the first week of December 2025.⁴ These trailblazers seek to design joined-up youth offers that bring together further education (FE) entitlements, apprenticeships, Skills Bootcamps, and employment support, under shared local governance and with a strong emphasis on outreach to those not currently engaged with services.

The Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper, published in October 2025, reinforces many of the Get Britain Working ambitions, particularly those focussed on early prevention and intervention.⁵ This includes:

- An automatic guaranteed college place in reserve for all 16-year-olds.
- At least two weeks of work experience for all students in secondary education.
- Strengthening action to tackle poor attendance and mental-health related disengagement from school and college.

The Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper also signal potential reform of benefit rules to enable young people to develop skills alongside job search, aiming to prevent long term detachment from the labour market at the start of adult life. The Youth Guarantee represents a major shift from a largely discretionary patchwork of provision towards a clearer statutory style entitlement; however, its impact on NEET will hinge on the adequacy of funding, the robustness of local governance, and the capacity of providers and employers to offer meaningful, high-quality opportunities rather than short term or low-quality placements.

In totality, the Post-16 White Paper, Skills England and Get Britain Working constitute a new architecture for tackling youth NEET that combines systemic reform of the skills system with a more explicit entitlement-based approach to youth support. The Skills Commission's evidence review considers whether this architecture is sufficient to reach the most marginalised young people, including those "off the grid", and whether local implementation arrangements, data-sharing and accountability mechanisms are strong enough to deliver on the Government's stated ambition to "break down barriers to opportunity".

Evidence from providers, local authorities, employers, and youth organisations has been vital in testing whether the emerging system is accessible, navigable, and responsive for young people at risk of becoming, or remaining, NEET. This interim report sets out to identify any additional measures, whether that be statutory, financial, or institutional, that may be required to secure the promise of earning or learning for all.

⁴ Department for Work and Pensions, 'Almost a Million Young People to Benefit from Expanded Support, New Training, and Work Experience Opportunities'.

⁵ Department for Education and Department for Work and Pensions, 'Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper'.

Regional Variations and Devolution

The UK comprises four distinct nations, each with devolved or directly administered education and employment systems. Consequently, approaches to youth NEET reduction vary substantially across the constituent countries, reflecting differing policy philosophies, institutional structures and economic contexts.

Scotland

Scotland operates an independent devolved education and skills system. The Scottish Government's core youth employment strategy, named "Developing the Young Workforce" (DYW), launched in 2014 and evolved over subsequent years.⁶ DYW emphasises employer engagement, work-based learning, and integration of career education in the Curriculum for Excellence from early year onwards. Complementing DYW, Scotland also introduced the "Young Person's Guarantee" (distinct from England's version) in 2020. Scotland's approach integrates mainstream education provision with targeted employability support through Skills Development Scotland and regional partnerships. The Scottish Government has also invested heavily in apprenticeships (25,500 Modern Apprentices and 2,500 Foundation Apprentices annually) and wage support schemes such as the Job Start Payment.⁷

Recent Scottish policy developments include reforms to tertiary education and training through the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) Bill, which intends to align skills provision more directly with labour-market demand and economic transformation priorities.⁸

Wales

Wales has developed a distinctive, holistic framework centred on the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework (YEPF), first introduced in 2013, and significantly strengthened and updated most recently in 2022.⁹ The YEPF applies to young people aged 11–18 at risk of NEET and also integrates prevention of youth homelessness, reflecting recognition that these issues are often interconnected. The Framework operates through six core components: early identification (using data and practitioner judgment), brokerage (led by local Engagement and Progression Coordinators), monitoring progression, provision, employability and employment opportunities, and accountability.

Alongside the YEPF, Wales operates the Young Person's Guarantee, established in 2021 and applying to all young people aged 16–24 classified as NEET. The Young Person's Guarantee offers multiple pathways including:

⁶ Scottish Government, *Developing Young Workforce Strategy - Impact on Education: Evaluation*.

⁷ Scottish Government, 'Apprenticeship Funding'.

⁸ Tertiary Education and Training Funding and Governance Scotland Bill.

⁹ Welsh Government (Llywodraeth Cymru), 'Youth Engagement and Progression Framework'.

1. Jobs Growth Wales+ (a flagship programme for 16–19-year-olds with training and development support).¹⁰
2. Communities for Work Plus (for ages 20+), apprenticeships, and self-employment support through Big Ideas Wales.¹¹

Recent evaluation data (March 2024 to March 2025) indicates that since the Young Person's Guarantee launch in November 2021, over 48,500 young people have accessed employability and skills programmes, with more than 6,000 progressing into employment and over 724 starting businesses.¹² For disabled learners, the positive outcome rate has improved from 54.1% (2022–2023) to 57.9% (2023–2024). The Welsh Government has set an ambitious national milestone of at least 90% of 16–24-year-olds in education, employment, or training (EET) by 2050.

Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland's approach to youth NEET reduction differs markedly from the other nations, largely because a previous overarching strategy, "Pathways to Success," published in June 2012, lapsed in 2020 and has not yet been replaced with a new statutory strategy.¹³ Consequently, Northern Ireland currently lacks a unified, devolved youth employment strategy equivalent to those in England, Scotland, or Wales.

However, the Department for the Economy has delivered targeted initiatives. In October 2025, Communities Minister Gordon Lyons announced a new £12.4 million employment drive, JobStart, targeting working-age benefit claimants and aiming to support over 1,200 people into work through bespoke employer and employee support.¹⁴ This scheme builds on previous iterations of JobStart but does not constitute a formal, strategic NEET reduction framework.

Most recently, Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency (NISRA) released labour market data for July–September 2025 showing 23,000 young people aged 16–24 classified as NEET, representing 11.7% of the age group—an increase of 0.7 percentage points from the previous quarter (though not statistically significant) and 3.7 percentage points year-on-year (statistically significant). The female NEET rate (13.7%) significantly exceeds the male rate (9.9%).¹⁵

¹⁰ Welsh Government (Llywodraeth Cymru), 'Jobs Growth Wales Plus | Working Wales'.

¹¹ Welsh Government (Llywodraeth Cymru), 'Communities for Work Plus | Working Wales'.

¹² Welsh Government (Llywodraeth Cymru), *Young Person's Guarantee*.

¹³ Northern Ireland Executive, 'Pathways to Success | Department for the Economy'.

¹⁴ Department for Communities (Northern Ireland), 'Lyons Announces £12.4m Jobs Programme for Benefit Claimants | Department for Communities'.

¹⁵ Northern Ireland Executive, 'Northern Ireland Labour Force Survey – Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) - November 2025'.

Comparative Summary

Dimension	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland
Primary policy framework	Post-16 White Paper; Get Britain Working/Youth Guarantee	Developing the Young Workforce; Young Person's Guarantee; No One Left Behind	Youth Engagement and Progression Framework; Young Person's Guarantee	No current unified strategy (Pathways to Success lapsed 2020); targeted JobStart programme
Age focus	16–21 (statutory place); 18–21 (Youth Guarantee)	14–24 (DYW); flexible depending on intervention	11–24 (YEPF for 11–18; Young Person's Guarantee for 16–24)	Variable; no statutory framework
Key mechanisms	Skills England coordination; employer incentives; sector-based work academies	Employer-led curriculum integration; apprenticeships; regional partnerships	Early identification; lead workers; multi-agency brokerage; local partnerships	JobStart (wage subsidies); ad hoc employment support
National target	Move away from piecemeal provision toward entitlement-based guarantee	Reduce youth unemployment by specified percentage; support all school leavers	At least 90% of 16–24-year-olds in EET by 2050	No formally stated target
Latest NEET rate (Nov 2025)	12.7% (16–24 cohort, Q3 2025)	Not available	15.1% (16–24 cohort, Q2 2025)	11.7% (16–24 cohort, Q3 2025)

Evidence Review

1. The Scale and Nature of the NEET Challenge

The composition of the NEET population has undergone significant change in recent years. While unemployment (defined as actively seeking work) remains a component at approximately 41% of the NEET cohort in England, the majority (approx. 59%) are economically inactive and not actively seeking employment.¹⁶ This distinction is critical for policy design, as economically inactive young people face different barriers than the unemployed.

Emerging evidence from Youth Futures Foundation demonstrates that while some increase in mental health condition recognition has occurred, the underlying problem is genuine and

¹⁶ Treneman et al., *Young People Who Are Not in Education, Employment, or Training – What Does the Data Tell Us?*

multifactorial, driven by employment precarity, affordability pressures (particularly housing), declining sleep quality, social media impacts, and a 73% reduction in youth services funding since 2010.¹⁷ The peak age for NEET status has shifted upward, with young people aged 22-24 now representing increasing proportions of the NEET population, suggesting earlier intervention windows are being missed.

"I was sick for a while because of my rare blood disorder, and I had to not be in school for a bit. I came back when everyone was preparing for GCSE exams and to no one's surprise, I didn't pass. There was not really an option but to retake it until death, or at least that's what I thought at the time." - Young person, quoted in focus group with ThinkForward and Policy Connect

2. Regional and Geographical Disparities

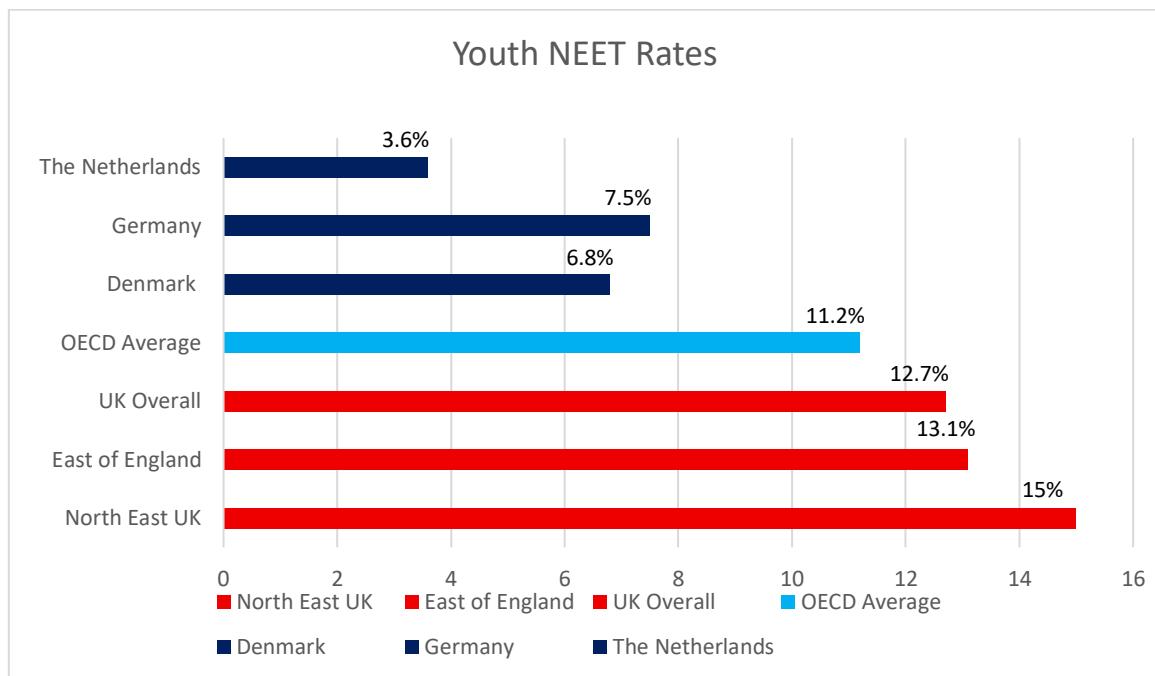


Fig.1 Youth NEET Rates (15-24 years old), Adapted from International Labour Organisation (Germany, The Netherlands, Denmark), OECD (Average), Youth Futures Foundation (UK)

The NEET challenge is not evenly distributed across the United Kingdom, revealing stark geographical inequalities in young people's opportunities. Within England, 15% of young people in the Northeast are NEET compared to 9% in London and 10% in the Southeast.¹⁸ Eight of the top ten local authority areas with the highest likelihood of young people being NEET are concentrated in the North of England and the Midlands.¹⁹ These disparities

¹⁷ Youth Futures Foundation, *Understanding Young People's Declining Mental Health* (2025)

¹⁸ Treneman et al., *Young People Who Are Not in Education, Employment, or Training – What Does the Data Tell Us?*

¹⁹ Impetus, *Youth Jobs Gap: Exploring Compound Disadvantage*.

correlate with historical deindustrialisation, particularly affecting Northern regions with fewer alternative employment pathways and lower-paid work opportunities.²⁰

Within individual local authorities, the variation is even more pronounced: areas such as Middlesbrough, Manchester, Nottingham, Kingston upon Hull, Islington, and Hartlepool all face NEET rates exceeding 20%.²¹ Rural areas generally demonstrate slightly lower NEET rates (closer to 10%) compared to urban centres, though exceptions exist. This geographical variation reflects not only differences in labour market opportunities but also variations in disadvantage, with family poverty and low-level qualifications being more concentrated in northern and post-industrial regions. Importantly, the relationship between disadvantage and NEET status is itself geographically variable: some local authorities with high average NEET rates demonstrate low inequality between advantaged and disadvantaged youth, whilst others show substantial gaps, suggesting that place-based factors interact complexly with individual characteristics.

3. Youth NEET Composition and Vulnerable Groups

The NEET population is far from homogeneous, and understanding its composition is critical for designing targeted interventions. Among the NEET population aged 16-24 in July to September 2025, approximately 512,000 were young men and 434,000 were young women, though gender patterns vary significantly by age and region.²² More critically, certain groups face dramatically higher risks of becoming NEET.

3.1 Young Carers and Young Adult Carers

A young carer is under 18 and provides care for a friend or family member with an illness, disability, mental health problem, or substance misuse problem. Young adult carers are aged 16 to 25. Young carers face a profound conflict between their educational and career aspirations and their family responsibilities, leading to significant disadvantages across all life domains.

- **Educational Disadvantage:**

- **Attendance:** Department for Education data (2023-24) shows young carers miss an average of 23 days of school a year, compared to 13 for their peers. Their persistent absence rate is 38%, nearly double the 20% for non-young carers. At secondary level, 46% of young carers were recorded as persistently absent.

²⁰ The York Policy Engine, 'Youth Inequalities in Focus - The York Policy Engine, University of York'.

²¹ Boshoff et al., *Inequality in Education and Labour Market Participation of Young People across English Localities*.

²² Impetus, *Youth Jobs Gap: Exploring Compound Disadvantage*.

- **Attainment:** Young carers are twice as likely (22.6% vs 11.2%) to leave primary school below age-related expectations.²³ University College London (UCL) research found young adult carers are 38% less likely to achieve a university degree. Those caring for 35+ hours a week are 86% less likely.²⁴
- **Health and Wellbeing:**
 - 44% of young carers "always" or "usually" feel stressed due to their caring role.²⁵
 - An NHS Digital study found a higher prevalence of anxiety and depression among young carers (13%) than non-carers (8%).²⁶
 - According to research published by the International Journal of Caring and Care, 28% of adolescent young carers in the UK think about self-harming.²⁷
- **Barriers to Support:** Support is described as a "postcode lottery," with significant regional variation in the availability of statutory assessments and dedicated services.²⁸ Many schools fail to identify this cohort; the 2025 School Census reported that 69% of schools in England recorded having no young carers, although the figure has decreased from 72% in 2024.²⁹

3.2. Care-Experienced Young People

Care-experienced young people are individuals who have been in local authority care at any stage of their life, which includes those currently or formerly in foster care, residential care, kinship care, or with a supervision order at home. They face some of the most severe barriers to progression, with statistics highlighting starkly negative outcomes. Almost two-fifths (39%) of 19 to 21-year-old care leavers are NEET, three times the rate (13%) of their peers.³⁰

- **Systemic Disadvantages:** This cohort faces disrupted education, weaker social capital, higher rates of homelessness (1 in 3 become homeless in the first two years after leaving care), and overrepresentation in the criminal justice system (24% of the adult prison population has been in care).³¹

²³ APPG for Young Carers and Young Adult Carers, *Inquiry into the Life Opportunities of Young Carers and Young Adult Carers*.

²⁴ McGowan, *Caring and Classes: The Education Gap for Young Carers*.

²⁵ Carers Trust, *Skills Commission: Written Evidence Submission*.

²⁶ NHS Digital, 'Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2017 [PAS]'.

²⁷ Lewis et al., 'The First Cross-National Study of Adolescent Young Carers Aged 15–17 in Six European Countries'.

²⁸ Carers Trust, *Skills Commission: Written Evidence Submission*.

²⁹ Department for Education, 'Schools, Pupils and Their Characteristics, Academic Year 2024/25'.

³⁰ Harrison et al., *Care Leavers' Transition into the Labour Market in England*.

³¹ Barnardo's, *Supporting Journeys to Independence: Improving Support for Young People When They First Leave Care*.

- **The "Benefits Trap":** A specific policy failure highlighted is the interaction between Universal Credit and Housing Benefit for care leavers in supported accommodation. As earnings increase, benefits are tapered away at such a rate that young people can become financially worse off by working more hours, creating a powerful disincentive to enter or progress in employment.³²

3.3 Young People with SEND and Health Conditions

Young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), learning disabilities, or other health conditions are significantly more likely to be NEET.

- **NEET Rates:** Estimates from other sources suggest that the NEET rate for young people with a health condition or disability is around 22%, compared to 8% for those without a health condition. This means that disabled young people are roughly three times more likely to be NEET than non-disabled peers.³³
- **Barriers in Education:** Many young people with undiagnosed conditions (e.g. Autism Spectrum Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) do not receive necessary support in schools due to long assessment waiting lists.³⁴
- **Employer Barriers:** Employers report a lack of confidence and capacity in supporting young people with complex needs.³⁵ Evaluations of disability employment support identify systemic barriers such as slow, complex processes and inadequate funding for schemes like Access to Work, which can delay or prevent workplace adjustments.³⁶

3.4. Young People from Ethnic Minority Backgrounds

While the overall NEET rate is lower for young people from ethnically minority backgrounds than for White youth (9.8% vs 12.1%), this top-line figure masks significant disparities between different ethnic groups and widespread experiences of discrimination.

- **Disparities:** Young people from Irish Traveller, Roma, Mixed White and Black Caribbean, and Black Caribbean backgrounds are the most likely to be NEET.³⁷
- **Discrimination:** A 2024 Youth Futures Foundation survey of 3,250 ethnically minoritised young people found:
 - 48% had experienced prejudice or discrimination when trying to enter the workplace.

³² Drive Forward Foundation, *Skills Commission: Written Evidence Submission*.

³³ Treneman et al., *Young People Who Are Not in Education, Employment, or Training – What Does the Data Tell Us?*

³⁴ Morris, 'The Rapidly Growing Waiting Lists for Autism and ADHD Assessments'.

³⁵ Youth Futures Foundation, *Supporting Young People with a Learning Disability and/or Autism into Employment*.

³⁶ Catch22, *Skills Commission: Written Evidence Submission*.

³⁷ Social Mobility Commission, *Destinations Following the End of Compulsory Full-Time Education - Social Mobility Commission State of the Nation - GOV.UK*.

- 79% of those who experienced workplace discrimination did not formally report it.
- **Systemic Barriers:** Barriers identified include a lack of culturally competent careers support, racism in the workplace, and biases in recruitment for low-paid occupations.³⁸

Evidence Session Spotlight: Dr. Alison Douthwaite and Dr. Ceri Brown (University of Bath)

On October 28 2025, the Skills Commission held an evidence session in Westminster, chaired by Lauren Edwards MP. Dr. Douthwaite and Dr. Brown were asked to elaborate on the Youth Guarantee's "Attendance Mentors", and role definition, training, and success metrics needed to distinguish genuine engagement advocacy from attendance enforcement.

Dr. Douthwaite argued that the current focus on attendance is too narrow; on the other hand, engagement captures active participation, motivation and belonging. Their research identifies that support from a trusted adult is the most important factor. The key qualities of the supporting adult should include characteristics such as communication skills, reliability, intuition and responsiveness. On top of providing personalised support, consistency of support delivery is critical in ensuring that there is enough time and opportunity to build a trusting relationship. In their testimony, Dr. Douthwaite and Dr. Brown stated that importance of belonging and emotional safety, stating that it is foundational for re-engagement.

Case Study: Somerset's Support into Employment, Education and Training (SEET) model trains NEET Advocates in the Pathway to Change and Targeted Risk Framework to unite relational practice with data insight.³⁹ Organisations such as Somerset Activity and Sports Partnership and Brighter Futures have also adopted the Pathway to Change model into their systems of working.

Based on their findings, the researchers recommended that:

- Long-term, one-to-one support should be available from a consistent practitioner to build trust, advocate for young people, and help them navigate servicesUniversity-of-Bath.docx
- The proposed "Attendance Mentors" in the Youth Guarantee could be reframed as "Engagement Advocates" to signal a relational, supportive, longer-term ethos.
- Support should be expanded to continue until at least three months into a secured EET.
- A shared system of relational support should be developed across government departments (Department for Education, Department for Health and Social Care, Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Culture, Media and Sports, Criminal Justice System) to drive consistent approaches.

³⁸ Youth Futures Foundation, *Discrimination and Work: Breaking down the Barriers Faced by Ethnically Minoritised Young People*.

³⁹ National Development Team for Inclusion, *LA Story*.

Effective Intervention Case Study: Project Apollo

Submitted by Sheffield Futures

Overview

Project Apollo, delivered by Sheffield Futures, was an award-winning employability programme commissioned by Sheffield City Council and funded through the Department for Education and a Social Impact Bond, with investments from Sheffield Futures and Big Issue Invest. Operating over three years in Sheffield, it embedded support within the Leaving Care Service, providing long-term, tailored interventions for care-experienced young people aged 16-24 who were NEET. Recognised as best practice by the DfE and winner of the 2020 Innovative and Impactful Employer Engagement Award from the Career Development Institute, the programme prioritised sustained relationships and post-outcome support to navigate transitions into EET.

Individual Profile

Joseph, a young person diagnosed with Autism and having experience in foster care, participated in the programme. Upon entry, Joseph was socially isolated and anxious, uncertain about his future career path. Through personalised coaching and exploration of options, Joseph enrolled in courses to improve his functional skills and employment readiness.

Programme Delivery

- Intensive 1:1 support was provided, with employment coaches regularly contacting Joseph for guidance, including anxiety management.
- Work placement opportunities were matched to Joseph's preferences and needs, enabling practical experience alongside continued skill development.
- A flexible approach responded to challenges such as pandemic-related shifts to online learning, which Joseph found difficult, leading to adjustments in his learning and employment pathway.

Outcomes

- Joseph secured a cleaning role at a Department for Work and Pensions office, his first paid employment role, which he sustained for over a year.
- With continued support, Joseph transitioned to his preferred role as a social care support worker, inspired by personal experience caring for his mother and his background in the care system.
- Feedback from Joseph's employer highlights his independence, empathy, and potential for progression into more senior roles.
- Joseph achieved personal milestones such as passing his driving theory test and moving from foster care into independent living.

Impact

The supported internship facilitated Joseph's journey from uncertain, isolated young person to independent employee pursuing a meaningful career. The programme's blend of educational support, real-world experience, and emotional coaching demonstrates effectiveness in overcoming the multifaceted barriers faced by young people with SEND and care experience.

Effective Intervention Case Study: Digital Skills Academy

Submitted by Catch22

Overview

Catch22, a UK charity specialising in support for disadvantaged groups, partnered with Ambitious about Autism, a leading autism charity, to co-design and deliver an employability programme specifically tailored for autistic young people aged 18-24, many of whom are NEET.

Programme Design

- The programme, known as the Digital Skills Academy, focussed on digital and artificial intelligence (AI) skills training alongside employability development.
- Ambitious about Autism provided expert training to Catch22's skills coaches and facilitators to enhance their Autism confidence and knowledge.
- Course contents and delivery methods were adapted for accessibility and sensory sensitivities typical among autistic learners.
- Recruitment and onboarding included targeted outreach through Ambitious about Autism's network to engage autistic young people.
- The course ran over three weeks, with participants working on team projects and developing presentation and soft skills.

Outcomes and Impact

- 15 autistic young people completed the course, surpassing expected completion rates.
- All participants gained digital skills and improved confidence in presentation and teamwork.
- Post-course, participants received six months of ongoing support from Catch22 to build career readiness and facilitate re-engagement with education or employment.
- The tailored approach led to better engagement, motivation, and skills growth than typical programmes.

Key Success Factors

- Ambitious about Autism's involvement ensured that the programme was fully inclusive and sensitive to the needs of autistic learners.
- Specialist training for staff increased programme delivery effectiveness.
- Joint recruitment efforts broadened reach into the autistic community.
- The partnership model demonstrated how combining expert knowledge with front-line delivery organisations can design impactful, accessible employability support.

Stakeholder Feedback

- Catch22 highlighted the partnership as key to creating inclusive pathways and praised the Autism training that improved their team's delivery capabilities.
- The collaboration is cited as a model for other organisations aiming to tailor employability programmes for neurodiverse young people.

Effective Intervention Case Study: DFN Project SEARCH

Submitted by Youth Futures Foundation

Overview

DFN Project SEARCH is an employer-led supported internship programme providing young people, particularly those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), a year-long series of work placements with host employers. Interns combine workplace learning with classroom instruction in essential skills such as math and English. Since its inception 14 years ago, it has supported over 2,900 interns into employment.

Programme Design

- One-year academic programme providing real work experience combined with employability training and independent living skills in a business setting. Interns participate in three rotational work placements (typically 10-12 weeks each) across different departments of the host employer.
- Delivered through partnerships between host employers, education providers, local authorities, and professional supported employment providers.
- Eligibility: aged 18-24 (some sites 17-24), must have Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP), desire to progress into employment, and ability to access public transport.

Outcomes and Impact

- 60% of graduates move into meaningful paid employment after completing the programme. Average working hours for employed graduates were 25 hours per week.
- Some host employers achieve exceptional outcomes: Harrogate and District NHS Foundation Trust achieved 100% of graduates into permanent full-time employment in the last academic year.
- Early evaluation data from UK sites (n=315 young people) suggests Project SEARCH achieves employment rates of around 50%.⁴⁰
- Graduates secure diverse roles including apprenticeships, admin assistants, learning support assistants, catering, retail, and healthcare positions.
- Programme has proven particularly effective compared to the baseline employment rate of less than 5% for people with learning disabilities known to local authorities.

Key Success Factors

- Host employers actively involved in selection, training, mentoring, and often recruitment of graduates.
- In-work Support: Coaching and mentorship during and after placements help interns transition to permanent roles
- Skills Integration: Combining academic instruction with practical experience builds confidence and competence
- Inclusive Adaptations: Employers adopt workplace adjustments (e.g. assistive technologies) recommended by interns.

4. Systemic Failures in Education and Skills

The education and skills system are frequently cited as a primary driver of NEET outcomes, characterised by a structural bias against vocational learning, a curriculum misaligned with employer needs, and fragmented careers guidance.

4.1. The Bias Towards Academic Qualifications

Government accountability measures have created powerful incentives for secondary schools to prioritise a narrow set of academic subjects, to the detriment of vocational, technical, and creative courses.

- **EBacc and Progress 8:** The English Baccalaureate (EBacc) and Progress 8 performance measures have led to a decline in GCSE entries and teacher numbers for non-EBacc subjects like Art, Music, and Design & Technology.⁴¹ This has marginalised courses that often improve engagement, confidence, and self-esteem for pupils at risk of becoming NEET.
- **Impact on Vocational Courses:** According to the Department for Education's (DfE) research in 2019, Technical Awards are associated with a 23% reduction in unauthorised absences and a 62% reduction in permanent exclusions. Despite this, GCSE entries outnumber Technical Awards by 14 to 1.⁴²
- **Undermining UTCs:** University Technical Colleges (UTCs), which offer a more vocational curriculum, have been undermined by nearby schools using them as a "dumping ground for the difficult or disaffected". There has been some evidence to suggest that UTC leavers are less likely to become NEET in certain cases, such as the Baker Dearing Trust's submission to the House of Lords Youth Unemployment Committee in 2021 (where only 3% of UTC leavers were NEET, compared to 5% nationally), but there is not a national representative figure as of 2025.⁴³

"I go to school thinking about exams. I spend all day at school thinking about exams. I am just constantly thinking about 'what if I have to resit because I fail Maths, which I feel like I don't even need. It just depresses me." – focus group participant, ThinkForward and Policy Connect

4.2. A Fragmented and Inaccessible Vocational System

The UK vocational training system has experienced significant contraction. The pathways into vocational training and apprenticeships are confusing, underfunded at the entry level, and misaligned with the needs of both young people and employers.

- **Decline in Entry-Level Apprenticeships:** Entry-level apprenticeship starting rates at Levels 2 and 3 have experienced a substantial decline, decreasing by 33% from 327,000 in 2017 to 218,000 in 2024.⁴⁴ This decline directly correlates with the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy in 2017, which incentivised employers to

⁴⁰ Kaehne, 'Project SEARCH UK - Evaluating Its Employment Outcomes'.

⁴¹ Department for Education, 'Key Stage 4 Performance (Revised National Tables, Multiple Years)'.

⁴² Department for Education, *Non-GCSE Qualifications in England: Key Stage 4 Entries and Absence and Exclusions Outcomes*.

⁴³ Youth Unemployment Committee (House of Lords), *Skills for Every Young Person*.

⁴⁴ House of Commons Library, *Apprenticeship Statistics for England*.

prioritise higher-level apprenticeships for existing employees rather than recruiting young people at entry level.

- **Qualification Reform:** The removal of established qualifications like BTECs in favour of T-Levels is creating a Level 2-3 suitability gap. Many learners who would have progressed to a Level 3 BTEC do not meet the academic entry requirements for a T-Level, leaving them without a clear progression route.⁴⁵ According to the Protect Student Choice Campaign (2025), over 200,000 students are currently enrolled in qualifications that are either being scrapped or face an uncertain future.⁴⁶
- **T-Level Challenges:** While promising in principle, employers raise concerns about T-Levels' lack of hands-on training and misalignment with industry needs. For example, in the automotive industry, T-Levels are ranked as the lowest-ranked training route among employers surveyed, with only 1% considering them effective for preparing candidates for work.⁴⁷ Ofsted's thematic review in 2023 found that many students were not getting the high-quality industry placements required.⁴⁸
- **Funding Constraints:** Further education (FE) colleges report that funding constraints limit their capacity to offer vital foundation and Level 1 courses, which are a lifeline for young people with low prior attainment. There is a disincentive to provide Level 1 and Level 2 courses for employers because the programme funding often falls below the associated support costs required for these students.⁴⁹

4.3. Work Readiness and the Skills Gap

Employers across multiple sectors report that young people entering the workforce are not adequately prepared, lacking both technical and essential "soft" skills.⁵⁰

- **Employer Perspective:** The Institute of the Motor Industry (IMI) found 67% of automotive employers are 'very' or 'extremely' concerned about the work readiness of new entrants. 87% believe new entrants are not prepared for the workforce.⁵¹
- **Skills Deficits:** The most frequently cited missing skills are communication, motivation, teamwork, problem-solving, and resilience. The 2019 Employer Skills

⁴⁵ Activate Learning, *Skills Commission: Written Evidence Submission*.

⁴⁶ Protect Student Choice Campaign, 'Protect Student Choice - Don't Scrap BTECS'.

⁴⁷ Institute for Motor Industries, *Driving the Future: Building a Workforce That Reflects the Sector's Full Potential* | Institute of The Motor Industry.

⁴⁸ Ofsted, *T-Level Thematic Review*.

⁴⁹ Activate Learning, *Skills Commission: Written Evidence Submission*.

⁵⁰ Richmond and Regan, *Finding a NEET Solution: How to Prevent Young People from Falling out of Our Education System*; Institute for Motor Industries, *Driving the Future: Building a Workforce That Reflects the Sector's Full Potential* | Institute of The Motor Industry; Fitzgerald et al., *Understanding Employer Experiences in Supporting Apprentices*.

⁵¹ Institute for Motor Industries, *Driving the Future: Building a Workforce That Reflects the Sector's Full Potential* | Institute of The Motor Industry.

Survey (ESS) found that 38% of organisations recruiting 16-year-olds for their first job felt these young people were 'poorly prepared' or 'very poorly prepared' for work.⁵²

- **The "Skills Trap":** The Skills Builder Partnership identifies a vicious cycle where young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have fewer opportunities to build essential skills, leading to low-skilled jobs that offer little further development.⁵³ They advocate for a Universal Framework to create a common language for these skills across the system.⁵⁴

4.4. Inadequate Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance

Submissions consistently argue that high-quality, sustained careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) is central to preventing young people becoming NEET, but that current provision is fragmented, patchy post-16, and not always accessible to those who need it most.

- **Proven Impact:** Analysis by The Careers & Enterprise Company found that improved careers provision in schools and colleges has generated £300 million in annual savings to government through reduced NEET costs, preventing approximately 6,000 young people from becoming NEET annually, saving £1.4 billion over five years.⁵⁵
- **Lack of Post-Education Support:** Young people face a "cliff edge" of support when they leave education. Post-16 careers provision is described as scarce and confusing. According to the 2025 Youth Voice Census, only 32% received face-to-face career advice (down from 40% in 2024), and just 23% had an employer visit.
- **Failure to Promote Vocational Routes:** Despite the 'Baker Clause' legislation, 32% of surveyed young people responded 'never' when asked how often apprenticeships were discussed with them whilst studying.⁵⁶ Participants of the youth focus group with Youth Futures Foundation also reported that promotion of apprenticeships and alternative pathways were non-existent.

⁵² Department for Education, 'Employer Skills Survey 2019'.

⁵³ Skills Builder Partnership, *Skills Commission: Written Evidence Submission*.

⁵⁴ Skills Builder Partnership, 'Universal Framework'.

⁵⁵ Careers Enterprise Company, 'Government Saves £300m a Year through Improved Careers Education to Avert Young People Becoming NEET | The Careers and Enterprise Company'.

⁵⁶ Youth Employment UK, *Youth Voice Census 2025*.

5. Barriers to Employment and Progression

Submissions to the Skills Commission inquiry extensively detail the types of support and incentives necessary to encourage employers, particularly SMEs, to offer opportunities to young people who are NEET or at risk of becoming so. The evidence points to a need for a multi-faceted approach encompassing financial incentives, practical non-financial support, and systemic policy reforms.

5.1. Employer Engagement and Incentives

Engaging employers, particularly SMEs, is a significant challenge. They are often deterred by perceived risks, administrative burdens, and a lack of resources to support young people with complex needs.

- **SME Challenges:** SMEs struggle with the complexity of the apprenticeship system. The British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) found that just 13% of businesses have a specific recruitment plan for workers under 25.⁵⁷
- **Coherent Strategy and Local Alignment:** The Government should create a cross-departmental employer engagement strategy and a single front door for businesses wishing to engage with the skills system, instead of having to navigate multiple agencies like schools, colleges, and local authorities.
- **Incentives:** Wage subsidy schemes like the Future Jobs Fund and Kickstart are cited as effective models. Recommendations call for a permanent, simplified wage subsidy programme. Crucially, submissions have argue that the salary costs for Foundation Apprenticeships should be funded via the Growth and Skills Levy, as it is unreasonable to expect an employer from an SME to pay the same salary for a young person starting at a foundational level as they would for a higher-level apprentice.
- **Practical Support:** Employers need practical support, such as trauma-informed training, neurodiversity awareness, and access to job coaches to help them support young people with diverse needs.⁵⁸

“More employers would offer apprenticeships if there were more financial incentives. With [National Insurance] and [National Minimum Wage] increases across the board, employers are reducing their employment opportunities due to affordability. Foundation Apprenticeship salary costs should be funded via the Apprenticeship Levy / Growth and Skills Levy. It is unreasonable to expect an employer to pay the same salary to someone who is furthest away from employment to someone who has a degree and is starting an Advanced or Higher Apprenticeship.” – Rochdale Borough Council, Call for Evidence Response

⁵⁷ British Chambers of Commerce, *Growth Through People - Taking on the NEET Challenge: Creating Job Opportunities for Gen Z*.

⁵⁸ Greater Manchester Learning Provider Network, *Greater Manchester Position Paper - Tackling the NEET Challenge across Greater Manchester*.

5.2. The Youth Mental Health Crisis

Poor mental health is a primary and growing driver of NEET status, yet support services are overwhelmed. Submissions stress that effective employability programmes increasingly integrate mental health and wellbeing support as a core component, rather than an add-on.

Statistic	Source
40% of 16- to 25-year-olds have experienced a mental health problem, while a fifth (21%) report their mental health has got worse in the last year. Over half (54%) of young people say the cost-of-living crisis and pandemic has had a negative impact on their mental health, with over a third reporting that they always or often feel down or depressed (36%).	The King's Trust Youth Index 2024 ⁵⁹
Over a third of children accepted onto CAMHS waiting lists in 2020-21 are still waiting for treatment.	Children's Commissioner ⁶⁰
1 in 6 of those NEET currently report having a mental health condition, a rate that has nearly tripled since 2012.	Department for Education ⁶¹
50% of children in care meet the criteria for a psychiatric disorder, compared to 10% of the general population.	NSPCC ⁶²

⁵⁹ The King's Trust, *NatWest Youth Index 2024*.

⁶⁰ Children's Commissioner, *The State of Children's Mental Health Services 2020/21*.

⁶¹ Department for Education, 'NEET Age 16 to 24, Calendar Year 2024'.

⁶² Luke et al., *What Works in Preventing and Treating Poor Mental Health in Looked after Children?*

Evidence Session Spotlight: Adrian Tallon, CEO of CatZero

On the 2nd of September 2025, the Skills Commission held an online evidence session focused on mental health as a key driver of NEET rates. Chief Executive Adrian Tallon represented CatZero, a Humber-based personal development charity working with vulnerable and disadvantaged young people and families in Hull, Grimsby, North and Northeast Lincolnshire. The organisation combines land-based personal development with a distinctive sailing-based offer on a 72-foot yacht, using high-challenge, high-support experiences to build confidence, resilience and social skills that conventional provision often struggles to unlock. Tallon emphasises that CatZero's success in reducing NEET risk rests on a "broad and person-centred" approach, rather than "overly prescriptive" schemes designed backwards from qualifications or narrow output targets.

Tallon reports that CatZero achieves completion rates of around 95 per cent on its employability programmes, despite working with young people who often present with multiple and complex mental health and social needs. For CatZero, sustained engagement is treated as a precursor to formal outcomes, with employment, training and qualifications following only once a foundation of trust, self-belief and routine has been established. As Tallon puts it, "young people stay with us because they feel listened to and supported and not because they're chasing a certificate." This model is underpinned by theoretical frameworks such as restorative practices and outcomes-based accountability, which position CatZero as a relevant and unique exemplar for national efforts to lower UK NEET rates through relational, place-based and preventative support.

Through its Full Families work, CatZero has also demonstrated how tackling root drivers such as poverty, family breakdown and trauma can improve both mental health and community safety outcomes, thereby reducing the likelihood that children in those households will become NEET in adolescence or early adulthood. In 2024, around 70 per cent of the families supported lived in the most deprived 10 per cent of areas nationally, and CatZero's experience is that "the same issues sit underneath both poor mental health and community safety problems... all kind of mixed together often, all at the same time." Tallon argues that national investment in Youth Services and Young Futures Hubs should "fund quality and engagement first," back locally rooted organisations to respond flexibly to their area's specific needs, and embed high-challenge, high-support relational practice; if that happens, he contends, "you'll see the same results we've achieved down the years – people completing at high rates and crucially moving on positively afterwards."

5.3. Financial and Structural Hurdles

A range of practical and financial barriers prevent young people from accessing and sustaining opportunities.

- **Low Pay and Insecure Work:** Young workers are almost four times more likely to be on zero-hours contracts. The low apprenticeship wage is a significant deterrent, with research showing the poorest households can lose around £80 a week in benefits when a 16-year-old starts an apprenticeship.

- **Transport:** A University of Bath study identified transport as a major barrier, particularly in rural areas, where a lack of public transport compromises access to FE colleges and workplaces for young people from low-income families.
- **Financial Support:** The Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), which was shown to improve participation and attainment, was scrapped. Its replacement, the 16-19 Bursary Fund, has only a quarter of the funding.
- **Housing:** Housing insecurity is a critical issue, especially for care leavers, who are at high risk of homelessness. In July 2025, the government removed the local connection test for care leavers under 25, allowing them to bid for social housing in areas where they were placed while in care rather than being restricted to their local authority area. This was a significant reform, though charities argue further measures are needed.⁶³

“The current bursary system is poorly aligned with the lived realities of students from low-income households. The £1,200 annual bursary often fails to cover basic costs such as travel, course materials, or meals, and eligibility rules, such as the inability to claim travel support within a three-mile radius, leave some students walking up to six miles each day to access education.” – Activate Learning, Call for Evidence Response

⁶³ Drive Forward Foundation, *Skills Commission: Written Evidence Submission*.

Focus Group Spotlight: Resurgo / Spear

Overview

Resurgo (transitioning to Spear brand) operates as a UK charity providing intensive coaching support to young people aged 16-24 facing complex barriers to employment and training. The programme targets young people who experience multiple, intersecting barriers to employment, averaging 3-4 barriers per individual. Common barriers include poor mental health, low educational attainment (particularly in mathematics and English GCSEs), criminal records, care system experience, and chronic low confidence and aspiration. The programme identifies and engages a growing "hidden needs" cohort—young people not claiming benefits who fall outside traditional job centre support systems. This population has increased from approximately one in four to one in three of the programme's participants, representing substantial unmet need outside conventional benefit-linked NEET provision.

Programme Design

Intensive Foundation Phase (Six Weeks)

- Small group coaching model: three coaches per approximately fifteen trainees
- High staff-to-trainee ratio enabling personalised support
- Focus on soft skills: confidence-building, communication, and professional behaviour
- Trainees articulate personal goals and legacy aspirations early in programme
- Barriers to employment questionnaire administered at entry and midpoint

Extended Support Phase (Six to Twelve Months)

- Graduated reduction in support intensity whilst maintaining relationship continuity through Spear Career
- Ongoing coaching availability for employment challenges and life events
- Evidence indicates trainees contact coaches 6-9 months post-programme for workplace navigation and personal support
- Career progression support for trainees moving through employment

Outcomes and Impact

Case 1: John (Leeds, Care-Experienced)

John successfully transitioned to employment through Spear support, demonstrating programme capacity to address the particularly complex needs of young people with social services involvement. Success factors include relationship-based support combined with direct employer engagement, which proved effective for this highest-need group.

Case 2: Gurleen (London, Multiple Intersecting Barriers)

Background: Immigrant from Afghanistan; had served as primary carer for her mother for approximately two years, resulting in extreme social isolation and lost confidence in public interaction. Represented the "hidden needs" cohort—not claiming benefits despite significant employment barriers.

Gurleen engaged Spear via social welfare referrals and went on to complete the foundation phase group coaching that focuses on social confidence development. After completion, Gurleen was able to secure an interview at Nando's and successfully obtained an employment position. She has since progressed to a supervisor-level position within the organisation and is currently on formal progression track with the employer. This case exemplifies programme effectiveness in addressing social confidence deficits through group-based coaching, bridging the gap between social isolation and active employment participation, building confidence in interactive work environments (hospitality, customer-facing), and leveraging employer partnerships for both employment access and ongoing workplace integration.

Effective Intervention Case Study: Individual Placement Support for Young people (IPS-Y)

Submitted by Youth Futures Foundation and West Midlands Combined Authority

Overview

IPS-Y is an adapted version of the well-established Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model, tailored specifically for young people aged 14-25 experiencing mental health challenges. IPS-Y is currently the best-evidenced intervention for supporting young people with mental illness into work and education, as it integrates employment and education specialists directly into mental health treatment teams and youth services. The model operates on the "place then train" principle, enabling young people to access real employment or education quickly, with support provided simultaneously rather than after extensive preparation.

Programme Design

- Dual outcomes focus: Unlike the adult IPS model which prioritises employment, IPS-Y gives equal weighting to both employment and education outcomes, recognising the developmental needs of younger people.
- Employment specialists work collaboratively with NHS mental health teams, CAMHS, and youth services to provide integrated support.
- Fidelity-based model with defined standards; most participants receive support lasting approximately 5 months initially.

Outcomes and Impact

- Employment and education success (12-month RCT in early psychosis cohort):
 - 78% of IPS-Y participants achieved employment, education or training (EET) at 15+ hours per week compared to 54% in treatment-as-usual groups—a 24-percentage-point difference.
 - When controlling for baseline NEET status, the advantage increased to 31 percentage points.
 - 30% higher employment rate for IPS compared to control groups.
 - Duration of engagement significantly longer for IPS group.
 - All IPS participants in competitive employment at baseline remained employed at end of study; similarly, those in education remained engaged.
- 46% employment rate at follow-up; 13% pursuing further education; one participant started an apprenticeship.

Cases

- The WMCA Thrive into Work programme, which is based on the Individual Placement and Support in Primary Care (IPSPC) model, reported successful outcomes. The programme has achieved higher engagement (78% vs. 68%) and job entry rates (34% vs. 30%).⁶⁴
- Oxfordshire Early Intervention in Psychosis Service (EIS) was one of two teams where IPS was originally trialled in Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust. After piloting IPS-Y, they hired a full-time worker to offer IPS-Y support, with 20% of caseload consisting of IPS-Y clients.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ West Midlands Combined Authority, 'Job Scheme Launches after Trial Helps More than 600 into Work'; West Midlands Combined Authority, *Skills Commission: Written Evidence Submission*.

⁶⁵ IPS Grow, *Oxford Health*.

6. A Framework for Effective Solutions

The sources heard by the Skills Commission collectively point towards a consensus on the principles that should underpin a new agenda for NEET reduction. The focus must shift from short-term, reactive measures to a long-term, preventative strategy that is holistic, evidence-based, and locally led.

6.1. The Primacy of Prevention and Early Intervention

Support must begin long before a young person is at risk of leaving the system.

- **Early Identification:** Tools like the Risk of NEET Indicators (RONI) can help identify at-risk pupils, but this identification must be linked to concrete, funded interventions.
- **Flexible Pre-16 Provision:** Evidence from past schemes like the 'Increased Flexibility Programme' and 'Young Apprenticeships' shows that offering vocational options and work experience for 14–16-year-olds improves engagement, confidence, and progression.
- **Building Foundational Skills:** Interventions should focus on building essential life skills and confidence from an early age.

6.2. Holistic, Personalised, and Relational Support

The most effective programmes are those that provide long-term, tailored support built on a foundation of trust.

- **The Trusted Adult:** The Youth Futures Foundation highlights the critical role of a "trusted adult" (i.e. a consistent, trained figure like a youth worker, mentor, or coach) to help young people navigate complex services and sustain engagement.
- **Wraparound Support:** Support must be holistic, addressing a young person's wider needs, including mental health, housing, and wellbeing, before focussing on job-readiness. The University of Bath's 'Pathway to Change' model shows that supporting emotional wellbeing and generating a sense of "feeling cared for" are essential first steps.
- **Long-Term Investment:** Short-term pilots deliver only temporary impact. Organisations like Sheffield Futures and Catch22 demonstrate that sustained support, including up to 6 months of in-work mentoring after a job start, is crucial for achieving lasting outcomes.

6.3. Importance of Youth Services

Longitudinal studies and cost-benefit analyses indicate that youth work yields significant returns for both individuals and the wider public sector. Research by UK Youth and supported by the National Youth Agency (NYA) demonstrates that for every £1 invested in youth work, there is a return of between £3.20 and £6.40 to the taxpayer, primarily through

reduced crime, improved mental health, and enhanced employability.⁶⁶ A major decline in youth service funding has been robustly associated with increased youth vulnerabilities, including a measurable rise in educational underperformance and criminal exploitation. Polling commissioned by the NYA also confirms overwhelming youth demand for greater access to clubs and youth support: three-quarters of young people report wanting more youth club provision in their local area.⁶⁷

Submissions highlight that access to youth work and services:

- Enhances young people's confidence, social skills, and aspirations.
- Supports school engagement and learning outcomes.
- Offers protection from violence, offending, and exploitation, with trusted adults playing a pivotal role in early intervention and safeguarding.
- Promotes social inclusion and mental wellbeing, reducing loneliness, and anxiety.

A strong and growing evidence base, including from the NYA and Youth Futures Foundation, confirms that youth services grounded in trusted adult relationships are effective in improving wellbeing, education, and employability, while helping to reduce crime and long-term public spending. Both quantitative and qualitative research highlight that trusted adult support is not merely a desirable extra, but a fundamental component of an effective and equitable youth strategy, especially for those most at risk of becoming NEET.

6.4. Devolved, Coordinated, and Evidence-Based Systems

The current fragmented system must be reformed to be more coherent, with greater power and flexible, long-term funding devolved to local and regional authorities.

- **Place-Based Solutions:** Mayoral Strategic Authorities, such as West Yorkshire Combined Authority, argue they are best placed to design and deliver place-based solutions that respond to local labour markets and the specific, complex barriers young people face.
- **Joined-Up Funding:** Stakeholders call for a move away from fragmented, short-term funding pots towards multi-year, flexible settlements that allow local areas to pool budgets across education, employment, and health to deliver integrated pathways.
- **Data and Evidence:** A robust system requires better data-sharing protocols between schools, providers, and local authorities to enable timely interventions. There is a need for investment in a 'What Works' evidence base, championed by organisations like the Youth Futures Foundation, to ensure funding is directed towards interventions with proven impact.

⁶⁶ UK Youth, '#Untapped: The Economic Value of Youth Work - UK Youth'.

⁶⁷ Back Youth Alliance, *Back Youth Alliance Rapid Evidence Review Insights to Inform the National Youth Strategy*.

Effective Intervention Case Study: Connected Futures Partnership

Submitted by Youth Futures Foundation / Skills Builder Partnership

Overview

The Connected Futures Partnership represents a strategic, place-based initiative led by the Youth Futures Foundation in Blackpool, designed to address the acute challenge of youth unemployment and economic inactivity in one of England's most disadvantaged areas. The programme is demonstrating promising early results as measured by an ongoing external evaluation conducted by independent evaluators and has also been cited in the House of Lords Social Mobility Policy Committee's recent report as an effective intervention.⁶⁸ The partnership is led by place-based change charity, Right to Succeed, who work alongside Blackpool Council, Blackpool & the Fylde College, Business in the Community, Blackpool Football Club Community Trust, Fylde Coast Academy Trust, Lancashire Careers Hub, Blackpool Youth Advisors, and parents/carers and professionals across the town.

Programme Design

The Blackpool Connected Futures programme has 4 key work streams which are interlinked to ensure that young people in Blackpool are given the right support to enable them to access further education, gainful employment or training opportunities at post 16. The four streams include the connected curriculum; data and systems; tiers of support; and youth leadership.

Impact and Outcomes

Young people participating in the Connected Curriculum are actively building the essential skills needed for employment and wellbeing. On average, students have made 2.11 steps of progress in their Aiming High skills within a single year. This represents a meaningful increase in foundational capabilities related to self-management, resilience, and motivation.

This measured increase in essential skills is directly associated with a 2.6% decrease in the likelihood of future unemployment. In economic terms, this skills boost carries a significant 6.4% wage premium, equating to a potential £218,299 in additional gross earnings over a career for the average participant.

⁶⁸ Social Mobility Policy Committee (House of Lords), *Social Mobility: Local Roots, Lasting Change*.

Effective Intervention Case Study: Vulnerable Learning Tracker Application

Submitted by Activate Learning

Overview

Activate Learning operates a network of eight further education colleges serving over 20,000 learners across Surrey, Berkshire, and Oxfordshire—regions situated within the top 80 most disadvantaged areas nationally according to the Youth Opportunity Index. In the context of approximately 10,000 students aged 16–19 in the 2024–2025 academic year, Activate Learning developed a Vulnerable Learner Tracker (VLT), a live risk-flagging system designed to identify and support young people at imminent risk of becoming NEET.

The scale of the challenge is significant: in the academic year 2024-2025, the VLT identified 4,728 students aged 16-19 (47% of total cohort) and 765 students aged 19-24 (30% of total cohort) presenting with measurable risk indicators. Of these, over 5% (16-19-year-olds) and nearly 7% (19-24-year-olds) presented with scores of eight or more of a possible 13 in relation to risk weightings. In the same year, the Student Support and Safeguarding team consulted approximately 2200 EHCPs and will have worked with and supported over 7000 learners with additional support needs (many of whom will have been identified using the VLT). The VLT, which works in conjunction with a wider ecosystem of prevention and support systems, demonstrates a working model of how further education colleges can systematically operationalise early identification and intervention at scale to prevent NEET outcomes.

Programme Design

- 7 attribute risk scoring: Attendance patterns, last attendance date, RAG pass likelihood, GCSE Eng/Maths (grade 4+), retention/wellbeing panel status; sub-categories: EHCP/high needs, pupil premium, LAC/care leaver, young carer/parent, mental health flags, deprivation
- Dynamic percentage score calculated from live data, triggering Safeguarding Team interventions (retention panels, wellbeing reviews, external referrals)
- Addresses RONI guidance gaps through proactive identification vs fragmented self-disclosure systems

Impact and Outcomes

- Scale: 47% of 16-18 cohort (4,728) and 30% of 19-24 cohort (765) flagged; ~7,000 interventions annually across 10,000+ learners
- Successes: 75% Supported Internship cohort into employment; 2/8 high-deprivation EHCP learners on a bespoke intervention programme have successfully progressed into cross-college courses
- Limitations: risk of missing vulnerabilities/implementing interventions in a workforce where ~50% of staff begin their role unqualified/relatively little attention is given to SEND in ITT; fragmented school-college-LA data sharing; only 2/3 regions have post-16 EET teams; capacity can't match demand (2,200 EHCPs consulted)

This design represents a departure from the fragmented, self-disclosure-dependent identification systems that characterise much current practice. Rather than relying on informal pastoral observation or reactive identification following crisis, the VLT enables proactive early intervention. Despite these, successes, the VLT operates within the structural constraints that limit impact at scale, which includes capacity mismatch, data fragmentation, geographic inconsistency, and service gaps.

6.4 Structural and Systemic Change

- **Social Value in Procurement:** Strategic procurement that embeds social value can significantly enhance opportunities for apprenticeships, education, and youth

employment, especially when led by local councils. Leverage the social value in procurement can also reintroduce SME financial incentives for young apprenticeships (e.g., promoting national insurance exemptions for under-25s)

- **Skills and Education reforms:** Address the lack of Level 2 qualifications (a primary risk factor) through flexible funding, embedded employability skills, and clear progression pathways that align training with local labour needs.
- **Multi-Agency Local Coordination:** Local coordination through initiatives such as NEET Prevention Panels combines educational, social care, health, and employment agencies to identify and support young people at risk early, including SEND, care-experienced, and youth justice cohorts. Using data-driven tools like RONI indicators, these panels enable timely, tailored interventions and reduce status "Not Known" cases, improving service accuracy and impact.

"Positive procurement requirements have seen some success (see Durham Social Value in Procurement 2023 – 2025 Policy Statement).⁶⁹ This method requires all contracts and commissioned work to include the training and employment of local youth participants from NEET categories. This requirement makes it a standard expectation that employers invest in supporting local young people." – Dr. Rachel Wilde, University College London, Call for Evidence Response

Next Steps for the Inquiry

The findings presented in this interim report demonstrate both the scale of the NEET challenge and the clarity of effective intervention pathways. As we advance toward the final report, the Skills Commission inquiry team will continue intensive engagement with stakeholders across education providers, employers, local authorities, and voluntary and community sector organisations to deepen our understanding of implementation barriers and opportunities. These conversations will be essential in translating evidence into a suite of actionable and practical policy recommendations that address the structural, systemic, and local factors influencing youth transitions into education, employment, and training. Alongside this stakeholder work, the inquiry is committed to supporting and contributing to the Independent Report into Young People and Work.⁷⁰ Our findings on place-based approaches, early intervention, and targeted support for the most marginalised young people directly inform that wider social mobility agenda, and we will ensure that the Commission's work aligns with and strengthens the evidence base for the report's conclusions.

⁶⁹ Durham County Council, *Social Value in Procurement 2023 – 2025 Policy Statement*.

⁷⁰ Department for Work and Pensions, 'Terms of Reference for the Independent Report into Young People and Work'.

Annex A – Call for Evidence Respondents and Contributors

We have received 74 original submissions to our open-ended questionnaire, which was open throughout May-September 2025. We sincerely thank the following organisations and colleagues who submitted evidence. Those who are not listed below have not given permission to be cited.

ACCA Global	Activate Learning	APPG for Young Carers and Young Adult Carers
British Chambers of Commerce	Association of Colleges	Bury Council
Buttercups Nursery	Confederation of British Industries	C + K Careers
Carers Trust	Catch 22	Careers Connect
Careers and Enterprise Company	CIMSPA (Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity)	Careers Development Institute
City St. George's	Drive Forward Foundation	EDSK (Tom Richmond)
Gateway Qualifications	Greater Manchester Learning Provider Network	Enginuity UK
Hull City Council	IMI (Institute of Motor Industries)	Groundwork UK
Leeds Beckett University	Leicester and Leicestershire Business and Skills Partnership	Jisc
Bournemouth University	Miss Macaroon CIC	Manchester City Council
MyPocketSkill	NCFE	NOCN Group
Nuffield Foundation	Pearson Plc	Pilot 2 Work CIC
Salford City Council	Sheffield Futures	Rochdale Borough Council
Stockport Council	ThinkForward	Skills Builder Partnership
UCL Institute of Education (Dr. Rachel Wilde)	University of Bath	Trade Union Congress
West Yorkshire Combined Authority	Business Board Network	West Midlands Combined Authority
Yorkshire Learning Providers	Youth Futures Foundation	West Yorkshire Combined Authority
NoLimits	Learning and Work Institute	CatZero
National Youth Agency	Resurgo	Youth Employment UK
CAPE Tuition and Mentors	Chartered Management Institute	EngineeringUK
Coach Core Foundation	Bath & North-East Somerset Council	Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors
Commercial Education Trust	Newcastle University	

Annex B – Consultation Events

Focus Group 1: ThinkForward (29 May, 2025)

- ❖ Pre-16 Focus Group Session (Morning and Afternoon) (N=15)

Focus Group 2: Youth Futures Foundation, Future Voices Group (3 June, 2025)

- ❖ Post-16 Focus Group Session (N=10)

Evidence Session 1: (2 September, 2025)

- ❖ Barry Fletcher, Youth Futures Foundation
- ❖ Elizabeth Gerard, Learning and Work Institute
- ❖ Adrian Tallon, CatZero
- ❖ Natalie Webb, NoLimits

Business Board Network / Policy Connect Online Session (18 September, 2025)

Skills and Business Hub	Buckinghamshire Business First	East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA)	Greater Lincolnshire Combined County Authority
Liverpool City Region Combined Authority	Tees Valley Combined Authority	Worcestershire County Council	East Riding of Yorkshire Council
Buckinghamshire Skills Hub	Greater Manchester Combined Authority	Leicester and Leicestershire Business and Skills Partnership	Enterprise Oxfordshire
Norfolk County Council	Swindon Borough Council		

Evidence Session 2: (28 October 2025)

- ❖ Rosie Ginday MBE, Miss Macaroon CIC
- ❖ Dr. Alison Douthwaite and Dr. Ceri Brown, University of Bath
- ❖ Dr. Peter Wilson, Youth Futures Foundation
- ❖ Eddie Playfair, Association of Colleges

Evidence Session 3: (10 November 2025)

- ❖ Open Roundtable Discussion Format on Place-Based Approaches to Youth NEET Reduction with West Midlands Combined Authority
- ❖ Discussion co-chaired by Helene Dearn OBE (West Midlands Combined Authority) and Alfie Allison, Lincolnshire Young Voices Chair

Focus Group 3: Resurgo (18 November 2025)

- ❖ Chernise Neo (Head of Impact and Strategic Projects)
- ❖ Lydia Caveney (Employers Partnership Manager)
- ❖ Tim Lovell (Senior Partnership Manager)
- ❖ Pete Bacon (Deputy CEO and Director of Impact and Partnerships)

Annex C – Focus Group Writeups

Over May-June 2025, Policy Connect ran a series of focus groups with two organisations: ThinkForward and Youth Futures Foundation. Each of the sessions were recorded and transcribed with all participants giving consent – this document draws out thematic findings and summarises each session.

The focus group with ThinkForward took place on 29 May from 10:30am-10:00pm. There was a total of 11 participants, with good gender balance (5 male, 6 female). All participants were aged 16 or below, with most of the participants having just completed KS3. Due to safeguarding reasons, private information such as exact ages or racial identifiers was not collected. However, all participants are young people enrolled in ThinkForward's flagship "FutureMe" programme, which is tailored towards young people who are facing a multitude of challenges such as living in poverty, having learning disabilities, or facing discrimination due to their race, gender, or class. In speaking to one of the senior leaders of the organisation, we were informed that many participants of the programme are high risk of NEET, with many of their schools reporting the students for being at risk of school exclusion and being unable to transition into further study or work. The focus group session, where the researcher led the group through the questions, took part over two hours (excluding ice breaker activities and breaks).

Given the age group, the focus group began with a preamble regarding policymaking and what policy is, as participants had different levels of understanding on what types of decisions at the local or national level affects their transitions from school to work and so on. Questions were also tailored to factor in their age group.

The focus group with Youth Futures Foundations took place on 3 June, 6:00pm-7:30pm with members of the Future Voices Group. The members are aged 18 to 24 from across England who have intersectional identities and are underrepresented and marginalised in the labour market. The focus group took place online over Zoom call and the session was recorded and auto transcribed. There was a total of 7 participants, and the session and questions were posed by the participants themselves as an effort to encourage ownership of the discussion from the young people.

The group also used Menti, which is an interactive polling/Q&A software that allowed the participants to write down their answers to key questions. After they uploaded their answers, they were encouraged to elaborate and discuss their insights.

Thematic Findings: ThinkForward (pre-16)

Health as a Key Barrier

- Participants discussed various health issues, including dyslexia, Down syndrome, mental health problems, and physical disabilities that affect their education and

future plans. Participants emphasised the difficulty of explaining health conditions and their impact on quality of life to others, especially teachers or school executives who demand official diagnosis.

- Participant 7 shared experiences of a rare blood disorder that caused them to miss two months of college, leading to falling behind in coursework. Because there were no plans set up in place for the student to reintegrate into the classes, they had to catch up on their own.
- Participant 3 noted that mental health issues affect confidence, especially during crucial exam periods. This leads to feelings of uneasiness, difficulty thinking straight and make informed decisions about their future. They added that their teachers were not fully empathetic and did not understand how crucial mental health is to a child's development, saying, "I don't think teachers take into consideration as [how] much mental health affects a student going through life".
- Participant 1 emphasised how negative self-perception and talk can impact performance and engagement in school, stating, "When you say that, I'm going to fail this, you will fail because you have no motivation and you don't have any faith". This participant shared stories of their classmates who would give up and start disengaging from school because they were set on the possibility of failure.
- Multiple participants agreed that while schools talk about mental health via Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) classes, there is a lack of practical and concrete actions to support students who are struggling.

Academic Pressure and Stress

- Participants discussed the intense pressure surrounding GCSEs and other exams. Participant 7 highlighted the cyclical nature of academic stress, saying, "Once your GCSEs are done, you then have the stress of waiting for your results... And then when you finish college, it's the exact same cycle over and over and over again." They reported feeling helpless and frustrated with the lack of flexibility in their options, especially since those who struggle with the subject are pushed to retake and resit their exams to continue their education at A-Levels.
- Participant 7 also expressed frustration with mandatory maths classes, stating, "I don't actually need maths" for their chosen career path in film and TV. This led to the group debating the relevance of certain math topics to real-life situations and future careers. Participant 8 raised the point that key subjects such as math is supposed to teach problem-solving skills and other competencies, showing a divide in views towards the curriculum. In agreement, Participant 1 emphasised the need for schools to teach more about life outside of school, beyond maths and science.
- Participant 1 questioned the importance of GCSEs, stating that they do not always determine future success, but teachers and parents place an overwhelming emphasis

on the final grades. Participants criticised schools for focussing too much on exam results rather than preparing students for future careers.

- When asked about the PSHE lessons, participants described the lessons as ineffective, often used as free time or for minimal writing tasks. Participant 1 stated that they personally used PSHE time for catching up on coursework and wished that it was more common practice.
- Participant 7 recommended using PSHE lessons to teach about work experience, jobs, and life skills outside of school. When asked to elaborate further, Participant 7 stated that a “step-by-step guide for getting into college and understanding post-education options” would be useful.

Educational Pathways and Information Sources

- Participants mentioned the challenge of understanding the application process and steps needed to get into college. Participant 7 highlighted their struggles with getting clear guidance on how to get into college, beyond choosing a course and meeting requirements. All participants expressed a desire for more information about life after college and university.
- Family members were mentioned as sources of information but also inspiration. Those who had parents who were in industries such as manufacturing and construction, encouraged thinking about different pathways to get ahead in their respective fields. Participant 2 noted that their knowledge of the options regarding construction came from their family, who were professionals in the industry. They stated, “I don’t think I would have known otherwise [...], none of my friends know what they’re doing”.
- Numerous participants noted the ThinkForward programme as critical support when exploring different career options. Participant 3 spoke about their coach as a valuable source of guidance and information. Participant 10 highlighted ThinkForward’s role in opening new doors, providing information about apprenticeships (which they then pursued), and organising trips to meet successful professionals in various fields.
- Participant 7 stated that they found information independently through personal research, as not many adults or peers were knowledgeable about the area they were interested in. This included going online, reading forums and social media to gain a better understanding of their interests.

Worries and Challenges

- Participant 7 mentioned concerns about getting into university and building resilience for the workload. They stated the lasting impacts of COVID-19, changing skills demands, and uncertainty about the future as their main worries.
- Participant 4 expressed worry about math performance in GCSEs and its impact on future opportunities. They were particularly concerned about a resit, and how it did

not make sense for them to continue being pushed to retake the exam as it just caused further emotional scarring.

- Participant 5 mentioned concerns about meeting new people in new environments, stating that social skills were not developed through school.
- Participant 2 expressed uncertainty about which path to take within the military and concerns about independence. They stated that becoming financially active by being in military school would enable them to earn while learning but came with the cost of “growing up too fast” away from support structures like family and friends.
- Participants discussed various health issues, including dyslexia, Down syndrome, mental health problems, and physical disabilities that affect their education and future plans.

Thematic Findings: Youth Futures Foundation Futures Voices Group (16+)

Promotion and Awareness of Apprenticeships

- Participants discussed the lack of promotion of apprenticeships in universities and schools, highlighting that apprenticeships are often overshadowed by traditional university routes.
- Participants shared personal experiences, noting that apprenticeships were not adequately advertised during their academic journey, especially during A-levels and university applications. There was an overt focus on pursuing university degrees for the prestige and better labour market prospects, in combination with a lack of, or poor careers guidance during schooling.
- Participant 1 and Participant 2 emphasised misconceptions and stigma surrounding apprenticeships, particularly among families who prioritise university education over vocational training.
- Participant 3 stated that apprenticeships require a higher level of maturity and may feel limiting for young people who are uncertain about their career paths at 18.
- Participants agreed that apprenticeships are valuable for skill-based learning but noted that they are less accessible due to funding cuts, travel barriers, and limited availability of programs.

Accessibility and Barriers to Apprenticeships

- Participants discussed barriers such as transportation issues, funding cuts, and limited apprenticeship opportunities in certain sectors, which make vocational training less accessible.
- Participant 1 highlighted that apprenticeships can feel restrictive, as they often limit individuals to specific industries, unlike university degrees that offer broader career options.

- Participant 4 shared that social services could play a more active role in promoting apprenticeships and providing alternative routes for young people who do not wish to pursue academic pathways.
- The group noted that stigma around job centres and Universal Credit further discourages young people from seeking vocational training or employment support.

Comparison Between University and Apprenticeships

- Participant 3 and Participant 4 debated the perceived security of university education versus apprenticeships, with Participant 3 noting that universities offer broader extracurricular opportunities and larger cohorts, while Participant 4 highlighted the struggle of university graduates to find jobs in their chosen sectors.
- Participants discussed the misconception that university is a safer option, with Participant 3 pointing out that apprenticeships in certain fields, like law, take longer and may require additional qualifications.
- The group agreed that apprenticeships at the postgraduate level seem more appealing, as they provide targeted training for specific sectors while allowing individuals to gain work experience.

Need for Better Information and Resources

- Participants emphasised the need for more information hubs and resources in local areas to promote vocational training and employment support, particularly for young people.
- Participant 4 suggested that local charities could host information hubs as safe spaces for young people to access career advice, apprenticeship opportunities, and mental health support.
- The group discussed the importance of apprenticeship fairs, supported internships, and job fairs to raise awareness about alternative career pathways.
- Participants noted that online platforms are increasingly used to access information, but Participant 4 highlighted that not all young people have access to the internet or devices, making physical hubs equally important.

Stigma Around Job Centres and Universal Credit

- Participant 4 shared their personal experience of feeling stigmatized when attending work coach appointments at job centres, noting that young people often associate job centres with unemployment or lack of ambition.
- The group discussed the negative perception of job centres and Universal Credit among young people, suggesting that more flexible and supportive appointment options, such as phone or online consultations, could help reduce stigma.

- Participant 3 proposed that job centres could offer more personalised support, such as administrative help, to make their services more accessible and appealing to young people.

Suggestions for Improvement in Vocational Training Promotion

- Participants recommended increasing the visibility of apprenticeships through better advertising, more diverse program offerings, and collaboration with local authorities and social services.
- Participant 4 suggested that social services could actively promote apprenticeships and offer more opportunities for young people to access vocational training without attending university.
- The group agreed that combining online resources with physical information hubs and fairs would provide a comprehensive approach to addressing the lack of awareness and accessibility of apprenticeships.

Further Challenges

- The group noted that young people may feel isolated as they are not surrounded by others with similar experiences, leading to further challenges on their journey to employment, education, or training. This can include childcare issues, lack of reasonable adjustments, judgement from peers, lack of flexibility, or difficulties faced in managing caring responsibilities or finances.
- Participants also noted the lack of clear pathways to support, with a participant noting in their written response that not everyone is aware if they meet criteria for support avenues, such as mental health support.
- Participants also noted that another challenge is job retention or maintaining sustainable employment, which can be exacerbated by intersecting qualities such as caring responsibilities.
- Participants also provided answers that suggest a lack of confidence in their workplace skills, such as time management or juggling multiple responsibilities, which also prohibit young people from pursuing further education or employment.

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