



McDonald's Youth Confidence Index Report

2026



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Foreword

Across the UK, too many young people are ready to work but are being turned away for one simple reason: a lack of experience. Nearly a million young people are currently not in education, employment or training (NEETs), and voices like Alan Milburn are right to warn of the risk of a generation being locked out of opportunity. This is not a problem we should underestimate.

At McDonald's, we see the other side of this story every day. When young people are given a chance, the results can be extraordinary. We employ more young people than almost any other business in the UK and Ireland, and in our restaurants they are running multi million pound businesses, leading teams, solving problems and building confidence through real responsibility. One in three of our managers is under 25. That doesn't happen by chance. It happens because we believe in young people's potential and we back that belief with opportunity.

That belief is what led us to create McDonald's first Youth Confidence Index. We wanted to hear directly from young people about how they feel about their future, what's holding them back, and what would genuinely help them move forward.

The message came through loud and clear. This is not a generation lacking ambition, motivation or ability. Young people believe in what they can offer. What they lack is access to experience, to opportunity, and to employers willing to open the door.

That's why we're launching the UK's largest paid in-person work experience programme, offering 2,500 placements in its first year alone. Built in response to the socioeconomic backdrop and directly from what young people have told us, this programme is about rolling up sleeves and getting stuck in. It offers real work, real responsibility and real experience – building skills, resilience and confidence that last far beyond the placement itself.

I know first-hand the power of that first opportunity. It unlocks a catch-22 that so many young people are stuck in of needing experience to talk about it in an interview, but not being able to get that experience in the first place. Our ambition is to grow this programme year on year, using our scale, our presence in communities and our experience as a first employer to help more young people take that vital first step.

Unlocking opportunity for young people is a shared challenge and is one we must face together. I hope this index and the steps we are taking from what we have heard from young people sparks action, encourages more employers to step forward, and helps open doors for a generation that is more than ready to walk through them.



Lauren Schultz
CEO, McDonald's UK & Ireland

Who we spoke to

We surveyed young people across the UK including:

- 505 young people aged 14-16 in school
- 506 NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training) aged 16-24
- 510 young people aged 16-24 in full time education or in work

Full methodology can be found at the end of the report.



The Youth Confidence Index

What is the Index?

A snapshot of young people in the UK's confidence about the world of work and their place within it.

The Youth Confidence Index gives young people a platform to tell us how confident and able they feel to enter and succeed in the world of work. It is a composite measure drawn from nine confidence indicators, capturing

everything from how young people feel about their own skills, to how valued they feel by employers.

The index reveals a clear pattern: young people believe they have something to offer the world and that the skills and qualities they bring are ones employers are looking for. Where confidence falls away is on the things that feel beyond

their control - whether good job opportunities exist in their local area, and whether employers value their generation.

The index also reveals that whilst confidence levels are low across young people, confidence is lower amongst NEETs.

Youth Confidence Index Score*

* The index score averages the net confidence scores (% confident minus % not confident) across eight tested metrics.

**Young people
(In Education, Employment or Training aged 14-24)**

36%

**NEETs
(Not in Education Employment or Training)**

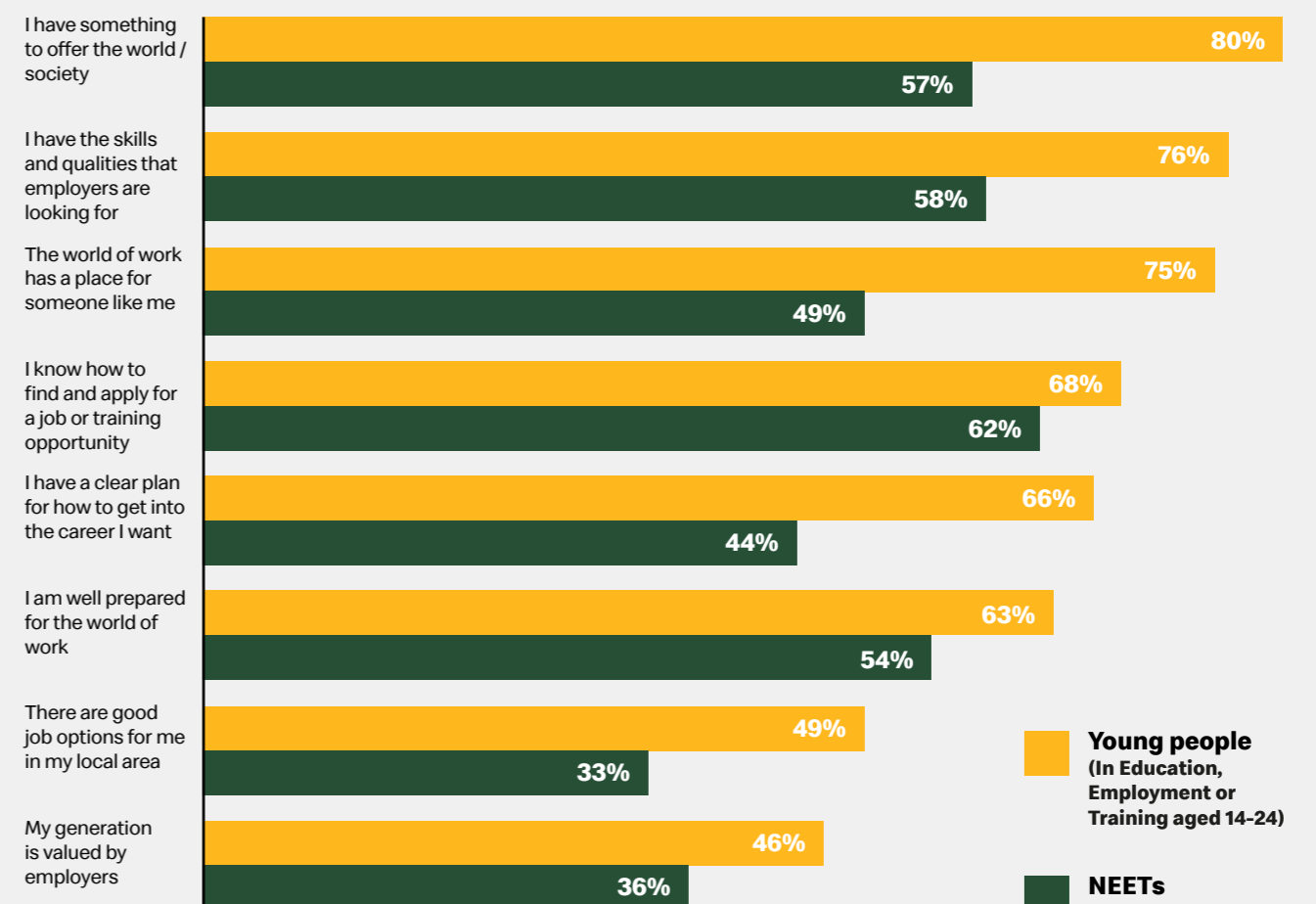
8%

Young People's Confidence Levels

Across every measure in the Youth Confidence Index, NEETs return lower scores than young people in education, employment or training — and in some areas, the gap is striking. Whilst eight in ten (80%) young people in education, employment or training are confident they have something to offer the world, **among NEETs just 57% say the same.** Where confidence holds up most strongly is in practical knowledge: **62% of NEETs say they know how to find and apply for a job,** only six points behind those in education, employment or training.

Where it falls away is on measures that speak to belonging and belief — whether **the world of work has a place for someone like them (49% vs. 75%),** and whether **they have a clear plan for the career they want (44% vs. 66%).** At the bottom of the index, both groups share the same concern: just **46% of young people in education, employment or training and 36% of NEETs feel their generation is valued by employers,** a reminder that confidence is shaped not only by individual mindset, but by how young people feel they are seen.

Levels of confidence among young people (Fairly / very confident)



Q. How confident, if at all, are you about each of the following statements?
Base: Young People aged 14-16 in school + Young people aged 16-24 in full time education or work (n=1015), NEETs (n=506)

“

Even though I know that I'm trying my hardest...it's hard to ignore when it's such a loud voice [saying] you're a burden on society and it's easy to get a job.

Young Person, 16-24



With more than 1,600 restaurants in every nation and region of the UK and Ireland, McDonald's is one of the country's largest youth employers. Last year alone, the business hired over 47,000 young people, with 85% of new starters under 25.

This nationwide presence means young people can access jobs, training, and support close to home, regardless of where they live. From large cities, to smaller towns, McDonald's continues to provide stable, flexible entry-level roles that help young people get their start in life.

Setting the scene:

Who are today's young people?

A caring generation.

When it comes to personal values: **being kind (45%)**, **treating people fairly (39%)** and **being loyal to the people they care about (38%)** are what young people consider most important (when asked to select their top values from a list). This is a generation who care about the people around them, and about how they treat others.

Yet they feel misrepresented in the world.

Three quarters of young people (75%) believe they are **portrayed unfairly in the media**, and 80% feel that portrayal centres on a damaging narrative: that the media portray young people as lazy and unmotivated. It is difficult to feel optimistic about a world that does not appear to see you clearly. Just 23% of the young people we spoke to described themselves as optimistic about the world, and only a third (33%) say they are optimistic about their generation's future.

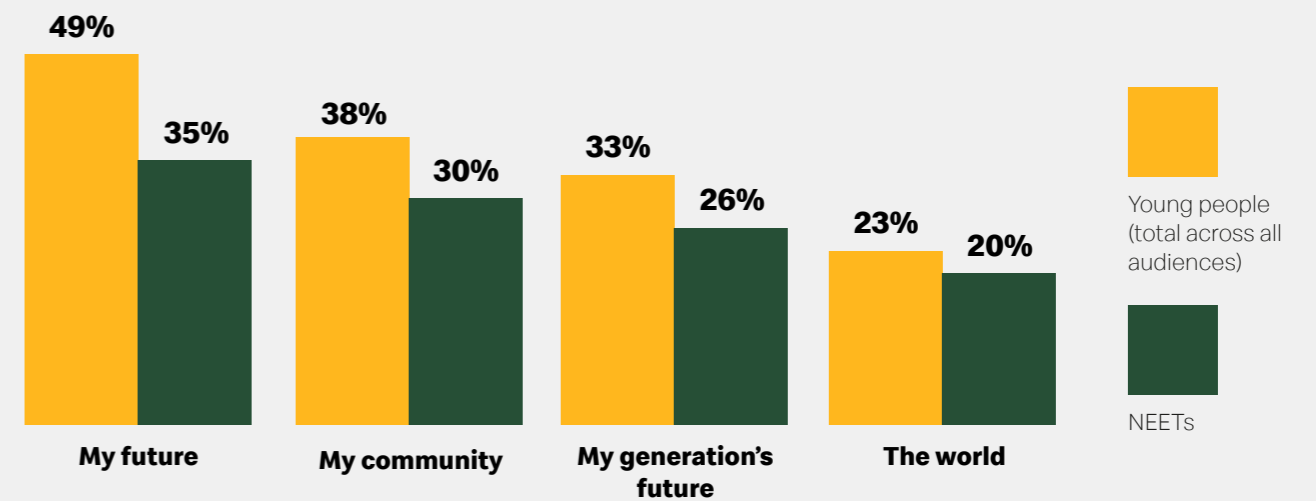
Whilst there are signs of hope, with around half (49%) of young people saying they are optimistic about their futures, it's clear that

confidence is not felt by all. Among young people not in education, employment or training (**NEETs**), **just one in three (35%) feel confident about their own future, and only one in four (26%) are optimistic about their generation's future.**

“**I really really do want to work. I know a lot of people think we're lazy or we don't want to [work] but it's all I really want.**

Young Person, 16-24

Levels of optimism among young people (Fairly / very optimistic)



Q. How optimistic or pessimistic do you feel about each of the following?
Base: Young People (n=1521), NEETs (n=506)

A generation waiting to be let in: Young people's relationship with the world of work

Young people see themselves as having a lot to bring to the world of work.

Notably, these include character traits such as reliability (39%), a positive attitude (36%) and determination (34%).

Top strengths young people feel they can offer an employer



Q. Which of these do you feel are your greatest strengths to offer an employer?
Base: Young People (n=1521)

“ I have a good work ethic and I am loyal. I want my employer to see I am worth investing in — because I will give something to the company rather than being trained to go elsewhere.

Young Person, Survey Open End

“ I am empathetic, reliable, resilient, organised and determined.

Young Person, Survey Open End

But despite this self-belief, confidence in young people significantly drops when asked about their prospects in the world of work.

Almost two-thirds of young people (65%) are worried about finding a job, and six in ten (60%) feel that their generation faces fewer opportunities than those who came before them.

That uncertainty is reflected in how young people describe their own sense of direction: just one in three (32%) say they have a clear idea of what they want to do and are actively working towards it, while a further three in ten (29%) have some sense of direction but are not sure how to get there.

“
The biggest problem is the lack of jobs.

Young Person, 16-24

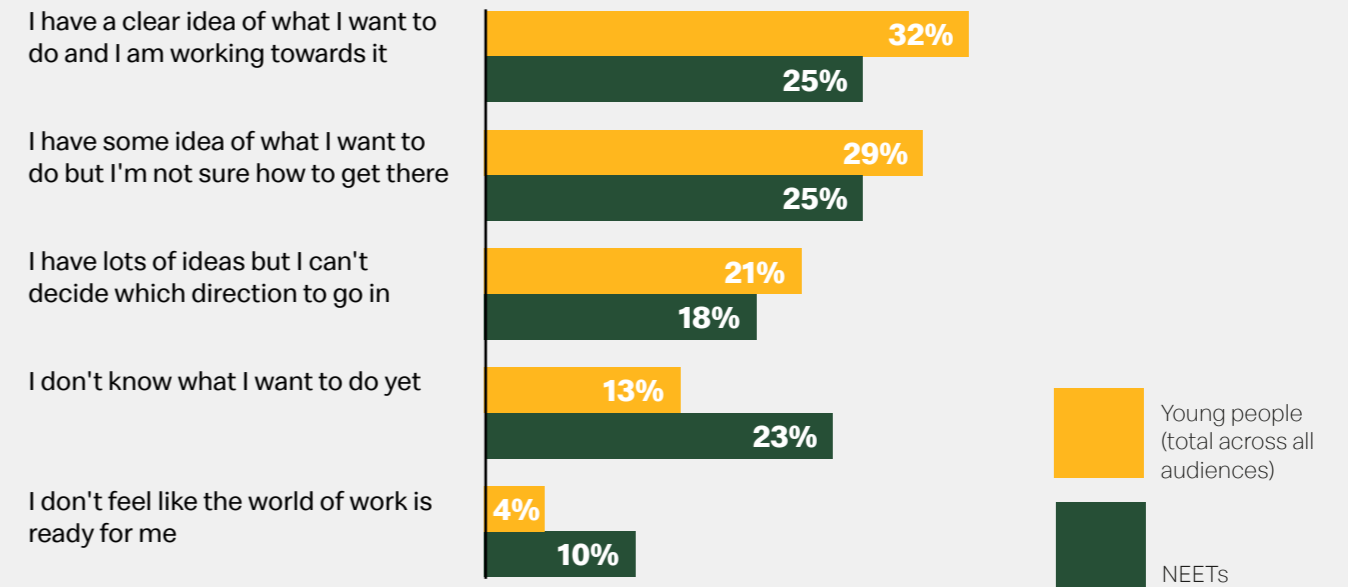
“
I applied to fifty jobs in three weeks and only heard back from six.

Young Person, 16-24

“
I’m applying for jobs but there’s nothing, I feel lost.

Young Person, 16-24

Sense of direction regarding future employment



Q. When you think about your future in the world of work, which of the following best describes how you feel?
Base: Young People (n=1521), NEETs (n=506)

That fear is compounded by a deeper sense of not being valued.

These concerns about the entering the world of work are amplified among NEETs with seven in ten NEETs (70%) worried about finding a job which is significantly higher than the substantial overall figure among young people we spoke to (65%). For young people who are already contending with a competitive job market, the perception that employers have written them off before they have even walked through the door is a significant additional burden.

NEETs

NEETs face more than just higher anxiety about getting a job. A quarter (23%) say they don't know what they want to do, and one in ten (10%) feel the world of work is simply not ready for them.

This is a group who are not disengaged by choice but face the greatest distance between where they are now and where they want to be, and who need the most support to bridge that gap.

Beyond the practical:

What do young people see as holding them back?

The barriers young people face in entering the world of work are not simply practical - they are emotional too.

In fact, **60% of young people are worried that they are not prepared for the world of work**. A lack of experience is the single most cited obstacle, with over **one in three young people (37%) identifying it as something they are worried is holding them back**.

Practical **concerns about not having the right qualifications and skills (31%)** are also top of mind, alongside more emotional ones, including a **lack of confidence (36%)** and being **afraid of failure (35%)** which rank among the top barriers, a reminder that the path into work is as much a psychological journey as a logistical one for many young people.

Anxiety about meeting new people or being in unfamiliar environments (31%) and feeling **overwhelmed by the process of job-seeking itself (29%)** also show that entering the workforce can be daunting for young people. These top selected barriers highlight just how important meaningful work experience is for young people, equipping them with both the skills and confidence needed to enter the workplace.

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It's the lack of experience. You need experience to get a job, but you need experience to get experience.

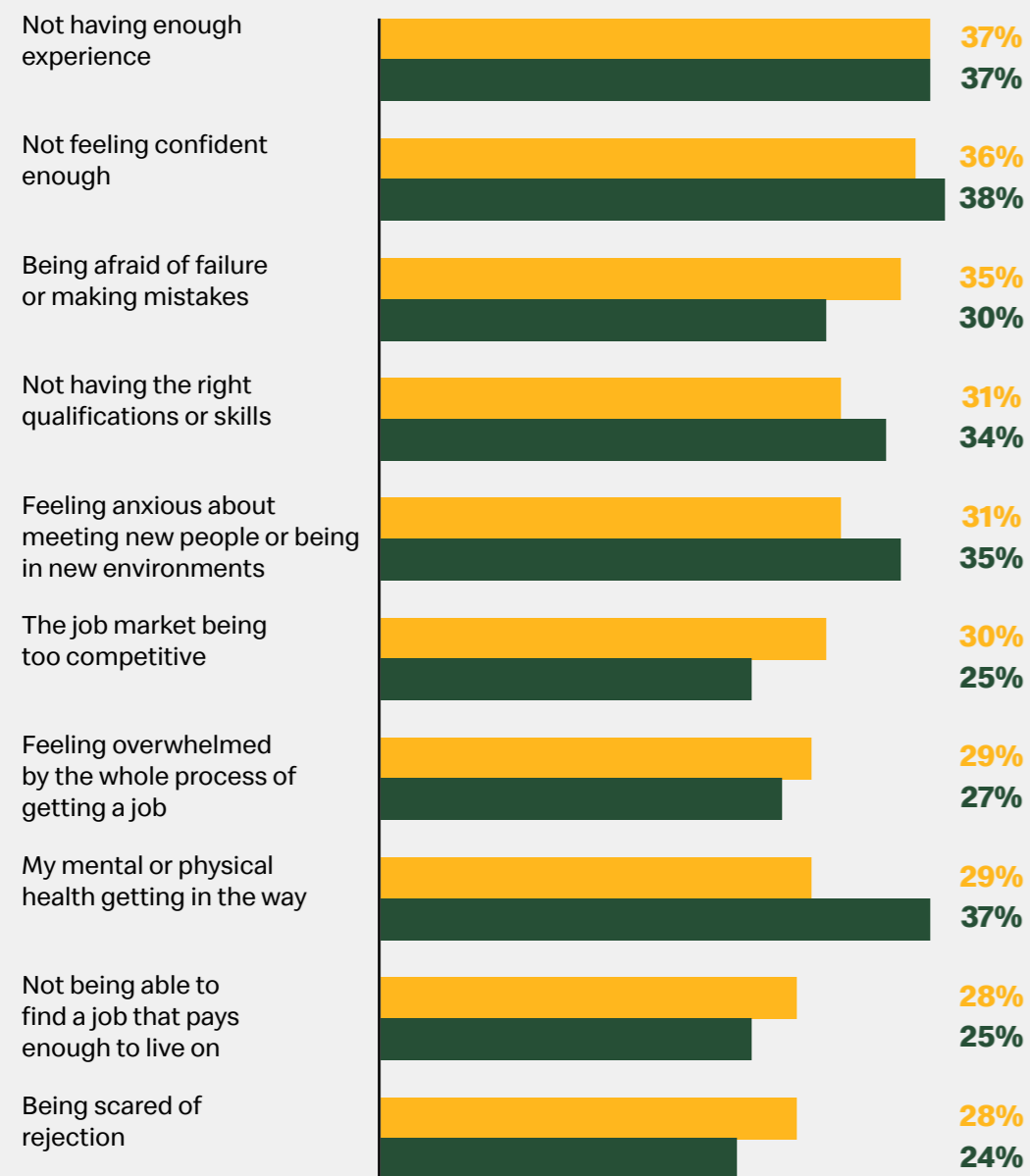
Young Person, 16-24

“

For me, it's always the confidence thing... the interview process can be brutal.

Young Person, 16-24

Top 10 barriers to entry into the workplace



■ Young people (total across all audiences)
■ NEETs

Q. When you think about getting a job or starting a career, what practical things are you worried about holding you back, if anything? / Here is a list of other things you might be worried about when getting a job or starting a career. Which of these are you worried about, if any?
 Base: Young People (n=1521), NEETs (n=506)

Beyond these concerns, there is also felt to be a **lack of information** about jobs and career opportunities with more than half of the young

people we spoke to **(55%) reporting that they find it difficult to find such information**, rising to **60% among NEETs**.



NEETs

For young people not in education, employment or training, many of these barriers are felt more sharply. Nearly half of NEETs **(47%) believe that the world of work is simply not for people like them**, and a similar proportion **(46%) feel that their background is holding them back** from the job they want.

Mental health is particularly significant for this group. More than one in three NEETs **(37%) say their mental or physical health is a barrier** to entering work, and among those who have previously held a job, one in three **(33%) say that poor mental health was one of the main reasons they are no longer in work, education or training**. For these young people, the challenge is not simply getting into work but ensuring they have the support to stay there and thrive.

What would actually help:

The support young people are asking for

The support young people want is practical, targeted and closely tied to the barriers they feel are holding them back.

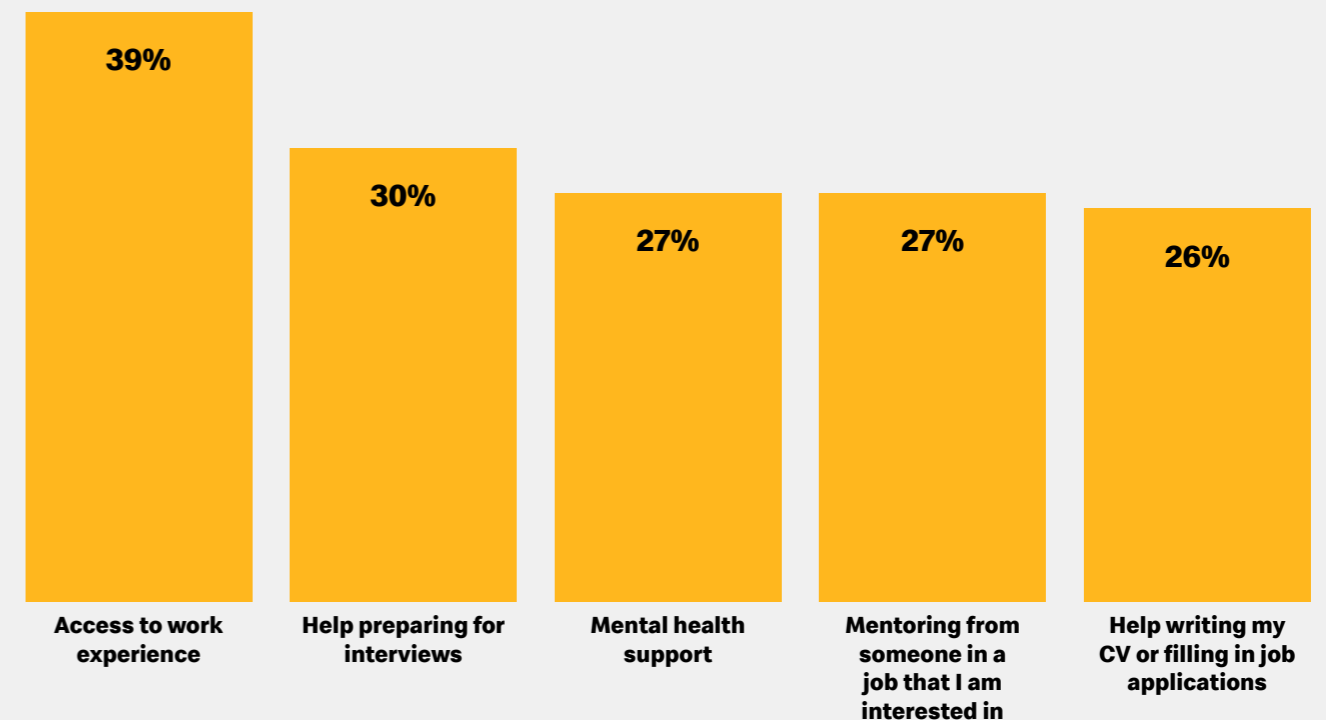
Access to work experience comes out as the **clear priority (39%)** - a direct response to the lack of experience that so many identified as their biggest obstacle.

“**There’s not enough work experience in secondary school - how are you supposed to know what you like? All you know is maths and science.**”

Young Person, 16-24

Help preparing for interviews (30%), mental health support (27%), mentoring from someone working in a field they are interested in (27%), and help writing CVs and job applications (26%) round out the top five: a wish list that is about being given the tools to compete on a level playing field.

Top 5 things that would help young people enter the workforce
(Young people - total across all audiences)



Q. Thinking about entering the workforce, which of the following, if any, would you find helpful?
Base: Young People (n=1521)

Young people want to see more mentoring opportunities and our results show how important it is for young people to have role models in this space.

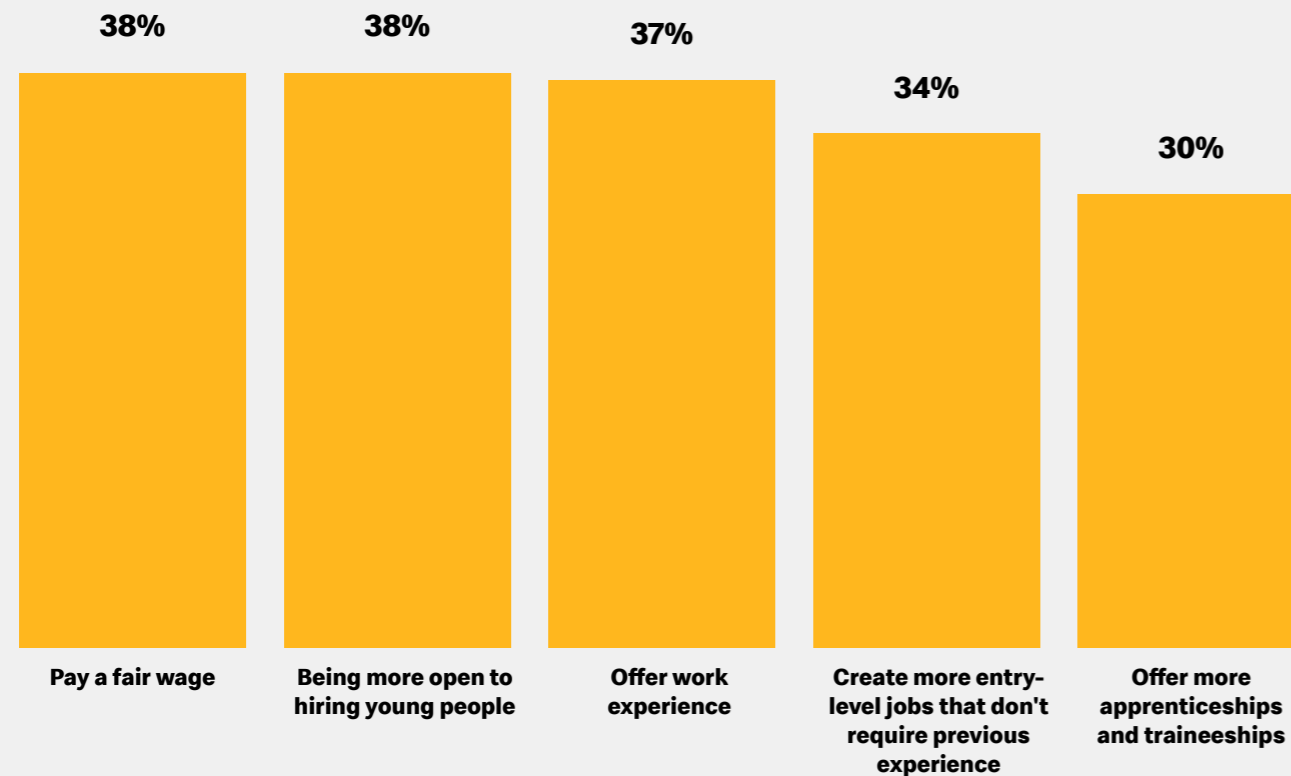
Nearly three quarters of the young people we spoke to **(72%) agree that it is important to have a role model** or anyone to look up to **who has been in their situation in the workplace**. Currently young people are **most likely to look up to a family member (59%) or friend (37%) that inspire them** but there is clearly a desire for them to find people in the world of work that they can look up to, too.

Young people also have a clear sense of what they want from employers specifically - not just fair pay but also a belief that they bring something valuable to the workplace. Paying a **fair wage is the joint top priority (38%)** — but crucially, it sits level with something equally telling: **being more open to hiring young people (38%)**. Young people want to feel **valued** and **appreciated** by their employers.



Top 5 things that employers could do to help young people enter the workforce

(Young people - total across all audiences)



Q. And what could employers do to help young people like you?
Base: Young People (n=1521)

Work Experience

Work experience sits at the heart of what young people say they need — yet for many it remains out of reach. Work experience is seen as a key way to help them to get into work. In fact, two thirds of young people (67%) say they would love to do work experience but there are not enough opportunities for them to do so.

The barriers to young people accessing work experience are seen to be:

- **A lack of work experience in their local area (69%)**
- **Not being able to afford to do unpaid work experience (61%)**
- **A belief that work experience is only for people who have the right connections (52%)**
- **Not knowing how to apply for work experience (51%)**



In response to the findings of its inaugural Youth Confidence Index, McDonald's is launching the UK's largest employer-led in-person work-experience scheme. From 2026, the five-day placement will give young people hands-on experience across service, production and customer areas, supported by crew trainers, daily check-ins and a final-day mock interview. Facilitated by McDonald's Franchisees, local business owners who know the communities they serve inside out, the programme will offer a structured pathway to build communication, teamwork, time management, resilience and business awareness - often a first vital step toward a job, further training or a long-term career.

This builds on McDonald's long-standing investment in youth: over 100,000 under-25s currently work across the UK business, nearly half of managers are Gen Z, and initiatives like Taste for Work have helped 144,000+ young people develop essential employability skills alongside apprenticeships, training and youth-work support in local restaurants.

More than a pay cheque:

What work really means to young people

Financial stability matters — **having a steady income is the single most cited definition of what the world of work means to young people (27%)**. But what sits immediately alongside it is that young people **want a job they enjoy going to every day (26%)**, in fact one in seven **(14%) say they would choose passion over pay** if it came to it. Add in the **desire to learn new skills (9%)**, **to help others (9%)** and the **ambition to run their own business (8%)**, and what emerges is a generation that wants work to mean something - not just to sustain them, but to fulfil them.

“**[Having a job] is a confidence boost, it helps you build your personality, have a community and a routine.**”

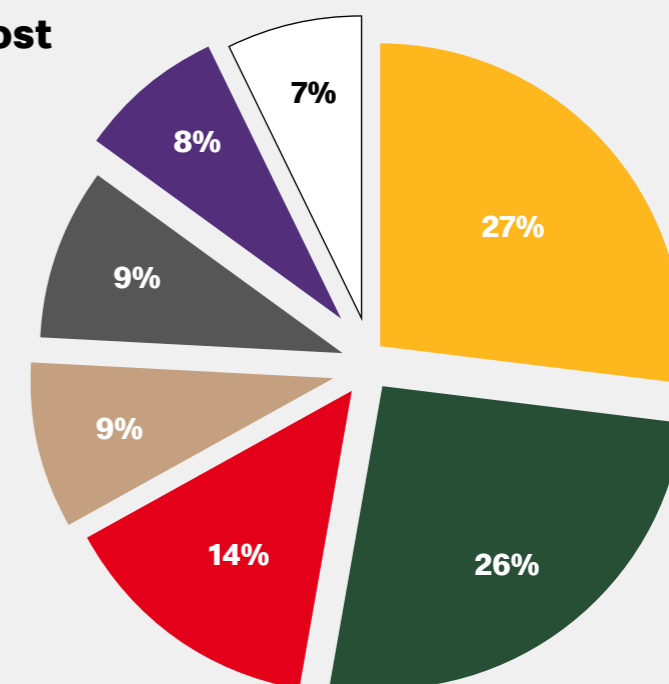
Young Person, 16-24

“**You can meet new people, and do something different every day and learn new things.**”

Young Person, 16-24

What young people value most in future employment

- Having a steady income and financial security
- Having a job that I enjoy going to everyday
- Having a job I am passionate about, even if it doesn't pay the most
- Having the opportunity to learn new things / skills
- Doing work that helps others or makes a difference in the world
- Running my own business
- I haven't thought about it



Q. Thinking about the kind of work you would like to do one day, which is most important to you right now?
Base: Young People (n=1521)

Conclusions

Young people across the UK are clear about what they want: real experience, fair chances, and employers who recognise their potential. But as the Youth Confidence Index shows, too many feel locked out, held back by a lack of experience, a lack of opportunities in their local areas, and a belief that employers don't value their generation. These insights sit at the heart of McDonald's commitment to young people.

For decades, McDonald's has provided one of the most accessible first steps into work, employing over 100,000 under-25s and offering development pathways ranging from apprenticeships and Taste for Work to local initiatives such as youth workers, CV clinics and school partnerships. These programmes are designed around exactly what young people say they need most: confidence-building, skills development and a supportive environment where they can succeed.

The launch of McDonald's new nationwide Work Experience programme represents the next step in this commitment, offering thousands of structured, accessible placements and directly addressing the barriers young people themselves identify, from lack of experience to anxiety about entering the workplace.

What unites all of this activity is a simple guiding belief: when young people are given a fair chance, they thrive. McDonald's is proud to play its part in helping a new generation build the skills, confidence and optimism they need to make it in work and in life.

Methodology

Republic conducted an online survey of 1,521 young people in the UK between 3rd - 16th March 2026. This included:

- **505 young people aged 14-16 in school**
- **506 NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training) aged 16-24**
- **510 young people aged 16-24 in full time education or in work**

The survey was scripted and hosted by our operational partner Omnisis - MRS Company Partners and members of the British Polling Council.

Quotes attributed to Centre for Young Lives, our research partners, who conducted focus groups with young people (16-24) not in education, employment or training (NEET) to explore themes of youth inactivity and unemployment. In partnership with McDonald's, the Centre for Young Lives has published a report which can be found [**HERE**](#).

All fieldwork was carried out in accordance with market research ethical standards, with informed consent obtained for use in this report.

