

CENTRE
FOR
YOUNG
LIVES

Turning the tide on rising NEETs

**How young people are falling
out of education, employment
or training and how to help
them find their way back**

2026

Commissioned by & in partnership with McDonald's UK & Ireland



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Foreword

For a young person, leaving school should mark the beginning of the rest of their lives – full of promise, ambition and aspirations for their future. And yet, too many young people – almost one million – are falling into unemployment or inactivity with little support to help them find their way back.

Being out of education, employment or training at a young age is not a temporary setback from which all will easily recover. The evidence is clear that early experiences of unemployment or disengagement can cast a long shadow across a lifetime, shaping earnings, health, and wellbeing for years to come.

What our research has made clear is that the rise in young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) is not the result of individual failure. Young people want to work. They want financial independence and stability, and they have hopes, ambitions, and aspirations for their lives and their futures.

Instead, the trend is a consequence of systemic failures to meet need early which have allowed barriers to become entrenched over time. An education system that too often prioritises attainment without adequately preparing young people for life beyond the classroom. A labour market that is becoming less accessible to those taking their first steps into work. A support system that can feel fragmented, impersonal, and at times counterproductive.

There are encouraging signs that this challenge is being recognised at the highest levels. Recent policy commitments signal a growing understanding that tackling youth disengagement is not only a moral obligation to our young people, but also fundamental to national prosperity and economic growth.

Haroon Chowdry
Chief Executive
Centre for Young Lives

There is also increasing recognition among employers of the importance of the young workforce, and an appetite to play their part in reversing the trend. We are delighted to be partnering with McDonald's for this research – one of the largest private employers of young people – who recognise the potential of unlocking more opportunities for young people.

But now this recognition must be matched by sustained ambition and coordinated action – the scale of the challenge demands nothing less. Our report draws directly on the voices and experiences of young people who are behind the headline figures of one million NEETs, to ensure that young people are at the heart of Government's efforts to reverse the trend. Building on recent commitments, Government must now go further in transforming the system for young people if change is going to be long-term.

In this report, we set out a new vision for support for young people – which begins at the earliest possible moment and continues throughout their journey to adulthood – preparing them for life after school and the world of work. In embedding early intervention and joined-up support for young people – particularly those at greater risk of becoming NEET – Government could not only reduce the number of young NEETs but unlock the potential of generations to come.





**IF YOUNG
PEOPLE ARE
'WORK-SHY'
HOW DID WE
HIRE 47,000
OF THEM
LAST YEAR?**

**Like Oba, 23, who we trust
to run a multi-million-pound
restaurant.**

**resilience
making it happen at**



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A view from our partners

Across the UK and Ireland, too many young people are ready to contribute, to learn and to work – yet find themselves shut out of opportunity at the very point they are trying to take their first steps. The rising number of young people not in education, employment or training should concern all of us. Not because it reflects a lack of ambition or capability among young people – this report makes clear it does not – but because it exposes a system that too often fails to meet them where they are.

At McDonald's, we see both sides of this challenge every day. We see the barriers young people face: the experience gap, the loss of early stepping stone jobs, and the anxiety and loss of confidence that can follow repeated rejection. But we also see what happens when those barriers are removed. When young people are trusted with responsibility, supported to build skills, and given a genuine first chance, the results can be transformational – for individuals, for communities, and for the economy.

That belief in young people is something we have sought to reflect publicly as well as operationally. Our recent Makin' It at McDonald's campaign was designed to challenge lazy stereotypes and shine a light on the real achievements of young employees across our business.

It is that lived experience which led us to commission this research with the Centre for Young Lives. We wanted to better understand the scale and nature of the challenge through independent analysis, and – crucially – to listen directly to young people themselves. This report does exactly that. It shows clearly that these

challenges are not inevitable, and that progress is possible if we act early, work together, and remain focused on what young people need to succeed.

Alongside our franchisees, McDonald's is one of the largest employers of young people in the UK & Ireland and we believe business has a responsibility to be part of the solution. That means using our scale and reach not just to create jobs, but to create opportunity – particularly for those at risk of being left behind. It also means learning from expert partners and being honest about where employers can play a constructive role alongside government, schools, local authorities, the voluntary sector and others.

We commissioned this report because we believe in hope grounded in action. The voices of young people throughout these pages are clear: they want to work, they want independence, and they want a fair chance to build their future.

Our role – and the role of every employer serious about the future workforce – is to help open those doors, so that no young person is left without the opportunity to take their first step into work.



Andrew Moys
Vice-President for Impact
McDonald's UK & Ireland

Acknowledgements.

The Centre for Young Lives (CFYL) would like to thank our partner McDonald's for their support in commissioning and funding this research, and their long-standing recognition of the potential of young people and efforts to support them across the country. All analysis, findings and recommendations throughout this report are those of the Centre for Young Lives.

We would especially like to thank all of the young people we engaged with for sharing their experience and guiding our research and recommendations. We give particular thanks to Onside, The King's Trust, ThinkForward and Young Women's Trust for sharing their expertise and experience working with young people.

We would also like to thank Youth Futures Foundation, Leeds Beckett University, Shaw Trust, EveryYouth, UK Youth, Three Spires Trust and Oasis Charitable Trust for engaging with us in the writing of this report and for their ongoing commitment to improving the lives of young people.

Author: Anna Heuschkel, Centre for Young Lives

Methodology.

In the writing of this report, the Centre for Young Lives engaged with a range of young people, practitioners and employers to guide our research and develop our recommendations. We spoke to 28 young people in total, through several roundtables including

- Four in-person focus groups with 15 young people in total aged 16-24 who were NEET or had experience of being NEET. Two of these were conducted in a city in the Midlands, two were conducted in a town in the North West.
- One online focus group with five young women aged 16-24 from across the country.
- An online survey of eight young NEET people in the North West area.
- An online focus group with employment coaches from the Young Women's Trust.
- An online focus group with organisations working with young people who are NEET.

Executive Summary

The Government has rightly recognised the rising number of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) – standing today at almost one million - as one of the defining challenges of our time. Without action, we risk losing a generation of young people to unemployment and inactivity – with devastating consequences not only for each young person, but for society as a whole and the economy. Responding to the challenge requires buy-in from across government, employers, local authorities, the education system and the policy sector to turn the tide on rising NEETs, unlock opportunities for young people and create the conditions for them to thrive.

Who are the almost one million young NEETs?

As of the end of 2025, there were almost one million young NEETs – 957,000, or 12.8% of the population of 16–24-year-olds. The cohort of young NEETs is increasingly defined by economic inactivity rather than unemployment. A majority (57%) are inactive, with around 547,000 young people not seeking work, while a smaller but still significant group (411,000) are unemployed.

Driving this trend in economic inactivity is young people out of work due to long term sickness or poor health, with 28% of all NEETs in this category. Mental health is a major driver, affecting around one in five. While young men are more likely to NEET overall, and more likely to be unemployed – in recent months increasing numbers of young women unemployed or inactive have been continuing to close the gender gap. Young women also make up the majority of the economically inactive cohort.

The final two groups within the overall cohort addressed throughout this report are the 16-17-year-olds who are NEET, and those young NEETs who are not claiming benefits – or ‘hidden NEETs’ as we refer to them in this report. Despite legislation raising the participation age to 18, the proportion of 16-17-year-olds who are NEET has continued to fluctuate between 4-5% in recent years, while nearly half of all NEETs (44%) are “hidden” from the system and do not claim benefits – making them much harder to reach with support.

The evidence is also clear that some children - such as those with SEND, from disadvantaged backgrounds or other vulnerabilities such as care experience – face additional barriers that put them at greater risk of becoming NEET.



How is the system failing young people?

Through engaging with young people, this report identifies barriers and system failures that are holding young people back and preventing them from entering into education, employment and training.

The labour market is becoming increasingly inaccessible to young people. A squeeze on entry level roles due to wider market pressures – such as automation, additional challenges for employers hiring young people, and AI – means competition for jobs has intensified, with employers often expecting prior experience that young people do not yet have, and young people feeling as though there is no right job out there for them.

The statutory employment support system delivered through Jobcentres is not designed to meet young people's needs. Support is frequently short-term and target-driven, prioritising getting a job over long-term progression and skills building for the young person. Young people report that services can feel transactional and compliance-focused, rather than personalised and tailored to their individual needs and abilities, which is particularly failing those with complex or multiple barriers.

The education system is not adequately preparing young people for transitions into work. While attainment is prioritised, there are persistent gaps in careers education, life skills, and equipping young people with the foundational building blocks they need to thrive after education. Support during key transition points – such as leaving school or college – is often insufficient, leaving many young people without clear pathways or guidance.

Early intervention is too limited and inconsistent. The current system is characterised by late intervention, rather than early identification and help. Risk factors for becoming NEET – such as low attainment, poor attendance, or additional needs – are often identifiable early in a child's life, but systems do not intervene effectively or early enough. Opportunities to prevent disengagement are frequently missed, allowing challenges to compound over time.

Support for mental health and wellbeing is not sufficiently integrated with employment and education systems. Given the strong link between mental health and economic inactivity, the lack of joined-up provision is a critical gap. Young people often face long waits or thresholds for support, and services are not designed to address the interaction between health and employment readiness.

The wider support system is fragmented and uneven. The current landscape of support for young people, particularly around key transition milestones at 11, 16 and 18 is fragmented and inconsistent – leaving too many young people to fall through the gaps and out of the system. For the almost half a million young people not accessing benefits, and therefore little incentive to interact with services and support, the challenge lies in how to reach these young people and re-engage them with education or employment.

What's the solution?

At present, we stand at a crucial turning point. Recent Government commitments signal hope in turning the tide on rising NEETs and being more ambitious about their future prospects. This moment must be seized upon, and requires buy-in from cross-government, from local partners, employers and the education system. This report makes several recommendations to set out a vision for a comprehensive system of joined-up support that works for young people, not against them.

Government should establish a cross-departmental strategy to integrate support for young people at risk of being NEET. The strategy should bring together the Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Education, Department for Culture, Media and Sport and Department of Health and Social Care to align Government initiatives (Young Futures Hubs, DWP Youth Hubs, Best Start Family Hubs and Neighbourhood Health Centres) to provide a comprehensive, joined-up approach to identifying and supporting young people at risk of becoming NEET.

Government should fund pilots in three local authority areas to develop a system-wide model to prevent young people becoming NEET. Targeted in areas of high number of young NEETs, the pilots should adopt a test and learn approach, and bring together the full range of partners – education (primary and secondary), local authorities, health, voluntary sector, local business and employers – to establish a model of support for young people that starts long before 16.

Government should support local authorities and their partners to strengthen the identification of young people at risk of becoming NEET from age 5, to target support and stem the flow of young people becoming NEET for the long term. This should include strengthening and expanding guidance on Risk of NEET Indicators to support earlier identification and need and explore innovative ways to extend destination tracking to age 25.

Government should support local authorities to strengthen their role in convening partners to deliver a place-based, coordinated response to supporting young people at risk, or who are already, NEET including stronger enforcement of the requirement on local authorities to track young NEET destinations, effective oversight and monitoring mechanisms. This should be underpinned by sustained investment to allow local authorities to meet these duties and act as a local systems leader in their area in bringing together partners.

The implementation of the Schools White Paper should ensure the potential of mainstream inclusion is maximised for reducing NEETs. The White Paper's ambitions are welcome, and tackling NEETs early through inclusive education and reducing lost learning should be a priority for the implementation of these reforms. As part of this, the Department for Education should support schools, in partnership with local authorities, to strengthen the role of schools in the collection of pupils' outcomes data at 25 to identify young people who are NEET and target them with support.

Government should build on the ambitions in the Schools White Paper to strengthen access to specialist employment support pathways for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities including through dedicated Destinations and Progression Service in every local area to coordinate smooth transitions and expanding eligibility of supported internship programmes to young people with SEND without an EHCP.

Government should support schools and colleges to embed a whole-school approach to careers guidance and support, underpinned by sustainable additional funding. This should include support for schools to strengthen identification of at-risk NEETs to establish clear pathways for support; a curriculum that prepares young people for the world of work, delivering consistent and high-quality careers advice and supporting young people through transitions.

Government should work with employers to open up young people's access to opportunities, including through establishing National Standards and a quality Kitemark for best practice in employing and supporting young people. Support for employers to deliver best practice should include delivering meaningful work experience opportunities and building and maintaining strong local partnerships with schools and wider services for young people.

Government should work jointly to tackle the link between poor mental health and unemployment among young people through expanding pathways to mental health support for young people not in education, employment and training with a wide range of mental health support, through a dedicated joint funding pot, including new youth Talking Therapy Teams for 16-25 year olds, new national guidance on social prescribing and funding to pilot Individual Placement and Support in DWP Youth Hubs.

Government should also increase investment into early support for young people's mental health to reverse the trend of inactivity due to poor mental health. This should include an ambitious target to reduce the treatment gap for young people struggling with their mental health and expand access to community-based mental health support including through strengthening the offer of mental health support through Young Futures Hubs, including NHS clinical oversight within Hubs.

Introduction

The rise - and changing nature - of young people classified as not in education, employment or training (NEET) has become one of the clearest warning signs for the unprecedented challenges facing young people in the UK. The nature both of childhood and of work have been undergoing significant shifts in recent years, the effects of which are likely to influence social and economic trajectories for years to come. Left unaddressed, these trends risk entrenching disadvantage across generations and limiting the UK's future prosperity.

In preparing this report, the Centre for Young Lives sought to understand five key issues which sit at the heart of the rising NEET crisis, each addressed in turn in the report's chapters:

- The perspectives of young NEETs themselves on the challenges they are facing and the support that might help them. Their views are shared throughout this report, from the problems through to the solutions.
- The different experiences of NEETs, beyond the headline one million, including unemployed young people, economically inactive young people, 16–17-year-old NEETs, and the “hidden NEETs” who are not claiming benefits, as well as what the evidence tells us about the early risk factors associated with becoming NEET.
- The policy landscape, and the system failings, across employment, education, and the wider system of support for young people - which have led us to the position we are in today.
- The solutions, green shoots, and good practice, which the government can use to transform the response and turn the tide on rising NEETs.

Historically, youth unemployment was the primary driver of NEET status. Today, the picture is more complex. Economic inactivity now makes up the majority of the NEET cohort, with a growing proportion of young people out of work due to long-term sickness, disability and, in particular, poor mental health. This shift reflects wider societal changes, including rising mental health needs which now impact one in four young people.

But we also heard how too many young people are leaving education without the skills, confidence or guidance they need to navigate the world. For those already facing disadvantage - whether due to poverty, SEND, poor mental health or unstable home environments - these gaps are even more pronounced. Early warning signs, including low attainment, poor attendance and emerging wellbeing needs, are often missed or insufficiently addressed, allowing challenges to escalate and become entrenched.

Many of the young people described feeling unprepared for life after school, unsupported in navigating career pathways, and disillusioned with employment support that prioritises compliance over meaningful progression. Their experiences point to a system that is fragmented, inconsistent and too often reactive rather than preventative.

The current trend of youth unemployment and inactivity has long-term and wide-reaching consequences – both for the individual young people and their futures, but also the economy.

There is considerable evidence of the long-term negative impacts of being out of work in early adulthood. Each month of unemployment between ages 18 and 20 causes a permanent income loss of just over 1% per year.¹ This scarring effect is smaller when unemployment occurs between ages 21 and 23, indicating that

periods of unemployment straight out of school are more damaging for future life prospects. Longer periods of unemployment also have a more damaging impact on future wages.

Youth unemployment and inactivity is also linked to poorer health outcomes – increased likelihood of ill-health, premature death, deterioration of mental health and an increased risk of suicide.² Given poor mental health now impacts one in four young people, it is welcome to see the Milburn review focusing on the role of mental health in driving the trend in rising NEETs and how this link can be broken. Many of these factors hold a cyclical relationship with NEET status in that they can be both cause and effect of being unemployed at a young age.

Against this backdrop, the Government's renewed focus on tackling youth unemployment and inactivity is both timely and welcome. The scale and complexity of the challenge demand a fundamental rethink of how the system supports young people, moving beyond isolated interventions towards a coherent, system-wide response.

This report sets out a vision for such a response – one centred on early, sustained and tailored support for young people throughout their journey to adulthood. Preventing young people from becoming NEET requires earlier identification of risk, with indicators often emerging as early as primary school, alongside an inclusive education system that prioritises engagement and wellbeing. It calls for a transformation in how young people

are prepared for work in school: through a whole-school approach to careers education which builds young people's lifelong skills, their knowledge and confidence, and opens up doors to accessing opportunity through work experience and local partnerships with employers.

The urgent need to address the link between poor mental health and economic inactivity requires more integrated support that brings together employment and health services, along with sustained investment in early intervention and prevention.

This report emphasises the need for a more joined-up system overall. Fragmentation in current provision means too many young people fall through gaps, particularly at key transition points. A coordinated, place-based approach – led by empowered local authorities and underpinned by robust tracking, accountability, and sustainable funding – is essential to ensure young people remain visible and supported.



Chapter 1

What do young people say?

In early 2026, the Centre for Young Lives spoke to 28 young people who were NEET, or who had recent experience of being NEET. We asked them about their hopes and aspirations for the future, what they saw as the key barriers holding them back and what support would have been helpful for them.

Many young people we spoke to were frustrated about their experience and highlighted a lack of support – through school and since – highlighting a disconnect between what young people want and need, and the realities they were faced with. This disconnect was particularly apparent in how schools were preparing young people for the transition at 16.

“

They should set more realistic expectations – it sounds cruel but you’re expecting to get your perfect job out of education but it’s not always the case – I struggled for eight months when no one wanted to give me a chance.

Young Person

Young people were clear that while setting high ambitions and aspirations are important, they thought schools should prepare young people for the challenges they are likely to face once they leave full-time education, especially given the context of the current labour market.

Across CFYL engagement with young people, they were clear about the type of support they found helpful and would have benefited from throughout their journey. Many of the young people we spoke to were engaging with employability schemes delivered by youth organisations like the King’s Trust and Onside Youth Zones. They described this as “practical” support delivered by friendly staff who understood young people and the challenges they face as being important in their journey.

Young people felt as though they were being treated as an individual, and unlike the support they described receiving in the job centre, this support was tailored to their strengths, interests and ambitions.

Young people we spoke to highlighted that the increased attention on ‘young NEETs’ from politicians and the media has come with entrenched stereotypes around young people being lazy or lacking work-ethic, or a burden on society.



“

I really really do want to work. I know a lot of people think we're lazy or we don't want to do anything – but that's all I really want.

Young person, early 20s, who is currently applying for jobs but struggles with their confidence and mental health

“

Its hard to ignore when it's such a loud voice – people saying you're a burden to society and it's easy to get a job. Even though I know that I am trying my hardest, and doing my utmost, [we are labelled as] scroungers.

Young person, 24, with additional needs who was made homeless as a result of unemployment

Engaging with young people who are NEET has reaffirmed how far those stereotypes are from the truth. We spoke to young people about what their hopes and ambitions are for their lives, both in their careers and beyond. Some of the key recurring responses from young people were a desire to be financially free and independent, to have some stability and routine

in their lives, and to meet new people and be part of a community. Young people also stressed the importance of having a purpose, contributing to society and how having a job builds confidence and supports overall wellbeing.

Why do young people think having a job is important?

“

Having a job is a confidence boost, helps you build community and a routine – gives you something to do every day.

“

A stable job that I enjoy.

“

Being able to stay busy [is important] ...otherwise I'm just sat there thinking the worst. A job would help greatly because I'm able to stay busy and keep track of the positive things instead of the negative.

“

Not to be a financial burden on society.

“

Having a job gives you better mental health, and you can meet new people.



Chapter 2

What has the policy response been?

Making Connexions: Support for young NEETs under the last Labour government

The blueprint for supporting young NEETs, set out throughout this report, draws on the work of the Social Exclusion Unit under the last Labour government which set a clear ambition, backed by investment that defined the problem of youth unemployment and inactivity as a moral obligation. There was a recognition from senior levels of government of the need to understand the drivers of youth unemployment and the impact of failing to address them.

In 1999, the 'Bridging the Gap' report from Number 10's Social Exclusion Unit kickstarted a landmark set of reforms and initiatives targeted at the proportion of 16–18-year-olds who were not in education, employment or training – which at that point was around 9%.³ The report identified a strong link between educational underachievement and family poverty to NEET status and highlighted the long-term 'scarring' effects such as lower pay over a lifetime, depression and increased likelihood of involvement in the criminal justice system.⁴ There were considerable government efforts to reverse the trend, including a national target to reduce the proportion of 16–18-year-olds NEETs by 2% to 7.6% by 2010.⁵

The New Deal for Young People, launched in 1998 as part of a wider drive to increase participation in EET, received £3.15bn from government over three years and targeted youth unemployment (18–24) for those out of

work for six months or longer. By 2000, it had achieved its target of placing 250,000 young people into work, rising to over 300,000 in later years.⁶

Across the 2000s, several initiatives were implemented to support 16–18-year-olds into education, employment or training. Connexions – a universal support service for 13–19-year-olds to support smooth transition from school to the world of work – was rolled out, using a network of personal advisors to provide one-stop shop holistic support for young people, with a specific focus on those at risk of becoming NEET. Alongside this were several pilots, including a national program targeting the most vulnerable NEETs through providing a weekly allowance in exchange for re-engaging, and pilots aimed to bridge the gap between informal re-engagement activities and formal education and training. In 2008, new legislation raised the participation age, mandating young people remained in formal education, or employment and training until a set age. While the target of 7.6% by 2010 was missed, it was significant in driving action and directing policy focus across Government.

The 2010s: Changes in the landscape of support for young people

In 2011, the Coalition Government announced a £1 billion ‘Youth Contract’ to provide just over 400,000 new work places for 18–24-year-olds.⁷ The offer included extra funding for apprenticeships, £50m in targeted support for persistent NEET 16–17-year-olds, and subsidised wages handed to employers to take on over 150,000 young people.

In 2012, Connexions became the National Careers Service, shifting the responsibility of careers guidance to individual schools and colleges and reducing Connexions-style support provided by local authorities to targeted youth support service only. This was not accompanied however by the transfer of local authority Connexions funding to schools to deliver their new responsibilities. As a result, after 2012 – the same year that NEETs reached a record high after the financial crash – what was once central government funded and local government delivered, transformed into a fragmented system which relied on local school funding and ambitions.⁸ These changes took place in the context of severe cuts to public services during the 2010s which further diminished the wider offer support for young people.

This change, in the long term, resulted in what we see now – a patchwork of support that varies across each local authority, creating a postcode lottery for young people in accessing key support – particularly for those at crucial transition milestones, or young people who have already disengaged from services.

In the immediate aftermath of the pandemic, schemes were introduced to support young people back into work, such as the Restart and KickStart Schemes and Sector-based work academy programmes (SWAPs).⁹ The Youth Offer was launched in 2020, providing targeted support for Universal Credit claimants aged 16–24 through Youth Hubs offering co-located employment support, specialist Youth Employability Coaches for those with complex barriers, and a 13-week Youth Employment Programme focused on skills reviews and job search assistance.¹⁰ Government also expanded vocational and skills pathways, including the introduction of T Levels.

At a crossroads: real change to tackle the NEET crisis for young people

There has been a welcome policy focus from the current Government on tackling the NEET crisis facing young people which is seen

as crucial to unlocking the Government’s Opportunity mission and wider growth agenda.

“

I am determined to build a system that supports young people, not just in finding a job, but to build a better future – because when young people succeed, Britain succeeds.

Pat McFadden, Secretary State for Work and Pensions

The direction of policy in part indicates a focus on the drivers of the trend of rising young NEETs, which we hope to see result in a focus on early intervention and preventative approaches to reverse the trend – as we set out throughout this report. The recently announced Milburn Review has an explicit focus on the causes of record youth unemployment and inactivity, its scope including the impact of wider trends in poor mental health and neurodiversity.¹¹ Simultaneously, the Health Secretary has announced a review into mental health, ADHD and autism services to better understand the sharp rise in demand in recent years.¹² The Centre for Young Lives has long called for

increased focus, ambition and investment into tackling the crisis in poor mental health, highlighting both the long-term individual cost of poor mental health in childhood, but also the accrued cost to the wider economy if Government fails to act.¹³

Recent government announcements signal a significant and welcome shift in support for young people’s education and employment pathways. The Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper introduce major reforms, including the Growth and Skills Levy to fund flexible training, new Foundation Apprenticeships to boost youth employment, and qualification

reforms such as V levels to expand vocational options. Commitments to guaranteed college places for 16–17-year-olds without a plan, alongside pilots exploring more joined-up and wraparound support, aim to keep more young people engaged in education.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the Youth Guarantee and Get Britain Working White Paper set out a more ambitious system of support, including expanded Youth Hubs, a six-month Jobs Guarantee, increased training opportunities, and plans for a more integrated Jobs and Careers Service – together representing a more coordinated and proactive approach to supporting young people into work.^{15 16}

The recent Schools White Paper has set several national ambitions to improve attainment and reduce absence – both indicators of NEET risk – including halving the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers and new frameworks for enrichment and pupil engagement.¹⁷

The ten-year Youth Matters strategy focuses on youth development and wellbeing through investments in youth spaces, new Young Futures Hubs, funding for youth work in underserved areas, and expanding access to trusted adults and enrichment activities.¹⁸ The framework emphasises prevention through earlier identification of at-risk young people and a stronger multi-agency approach during key transition points in a young person's life.

With NEET figures among young people nearing one million, the challenge facing this Government to reverse the trend cannot be understated. While recent commitments and policy direction have been promising, there remains gaps in policy that seek to reach and support young people who face the most significant barriers to participating in education, employment or training, and those who have already disengaged with support and are 'invisible' to services.



Chapter 3

Who are the young NEETs?

Who are the young NEETs?

This chapter draws on the most up to date published statistics to paint a snapshot of the current cohort of young NEETs in 2025 and how size and nature of the cohort has evolved over the past decade.

957,000

young people who are NEET - an estimated 12.6% of all people aged 16-24 were NEET

15.2% of all those aged 18-24 are NEET

4% of all those aged 16-17 year olds are NEET – 56,800 young people



Young men are more likely to be NEET



12.2% of young women are NEET

448,000



13.3% of young men are NEET

510,000

The rise in economic inactivity due to ill health is mostly seen among 18-24-year-olds – accounting for 12% of this age group in 2005, rising to 30% in 2025.

More than a quarter (28%) of NEETs in 2025 are inactive due to sickness or disability. This has doubled since 2005.



Economically inactive young people make up the majority of NEET young people

43% of NEETs are unemployed
411,000

57% of NEETs are economically inactive
547,000

1 in 5

NEETs have a mental health condition



Young men make up two thirds of young people who are unemployed



65%

of unemployed young people are young men



35%

of unemployed young people are young women

56%

of young out-of-work benefit claimants received an inactivity-related benefit, 44% received an unemployment related benefit



Young women make up the majority of economically inactive young people

44%

of all NEETs – were not in receipt of an out of work benefit.

82,000

16-24-year olds have been unemployed for more than 12 months.

55%

of economically inactive young people are young women

45%

of economically inactive young people are young men

How have NEET rates changed over time?

The term NEETs came into popular policy use in the late 1990s. At the time, the landmark report of the Social Exclusion Unit **Bridging the Gap**, identified 160,000 – or 9% – of 16–18-year-olds were NEET in England.¹⁹ Since then however, the size and composition of the cohort of young people not in education, employment and training has shifted. Two major economic shocks – the financial crash in 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic – fundamentally impacted the labour market and workforce, with young people, as is often the case, faring the worst in times of economic hardship or recession.²⁰

Following the 2008 financial crisis, young NEETs rose to a record high in 2012 of 1.2 million young people – or 16.9% of 16–24-year-olds.²¹ By 2014, the number of young NEETs had returned to pre-recession levels, but the scarring effect on the economy and young people in particular was such that it took an estimated average of seven years for the potential earnings of those who graduated between 2008 and 2011 to recover, and those who left school after their GCSEs faced a 20% higher unemployment rate.²²

Between 2012 and 2020, NEET levels declined steadily, however progress slowed from around 2016. During this time, the number of unemployed young people – those who are not in work but are able and actively seeking

employment – fell faster, with the economically inactive – those not in work who are either not able to work or otherwise not actively seeking employment – overtaking to make up the majority of the overall NEET cohort.

Since 2021, following the pandemic, both economic inactivity and unemployment have contributed to a sharp rise in overall NEET levels in the past five years. Long-term sickness has been the primary driver of the rise in youth economic inactivity in recent years, accounting for nearly three-quarters (73%) of the total increase.²³ This is a marked departure from the pattern in the immediate aftermath of 2008, where rising NEET levels following economic shock were primarily attributed to unemployment.

The latest release from the Office of National Statistics shows NEET figures creeping closer to one million.²⁴ In October to December 2025, 957,000 people aged between 16 and 24 were estimated to be NEET – 12.8% of the age group, down from 987,000 on the previous year.²⁵

Is Britain falling behind?

Traditionally, NEET rates in the UK have remained close to the OECD average. However, when we compare the UK to our close European neighbours, the UK is consistently falling behind.

The Netherlands has one of the lowest rates of young people who are NEET in Europe, at around 3.6%, compared with around 12.5% in the UK.²⁶

Critically, the UK is one of the few countries set apart from the overall trend among OECD countries of reducing their NEET rate among young people, with its NEET rate instead increasing in recent years. By contrast, between 2015 and 2023, Ireland achieved the largest reduction in NEET rates.²⁷

Unemployed young people

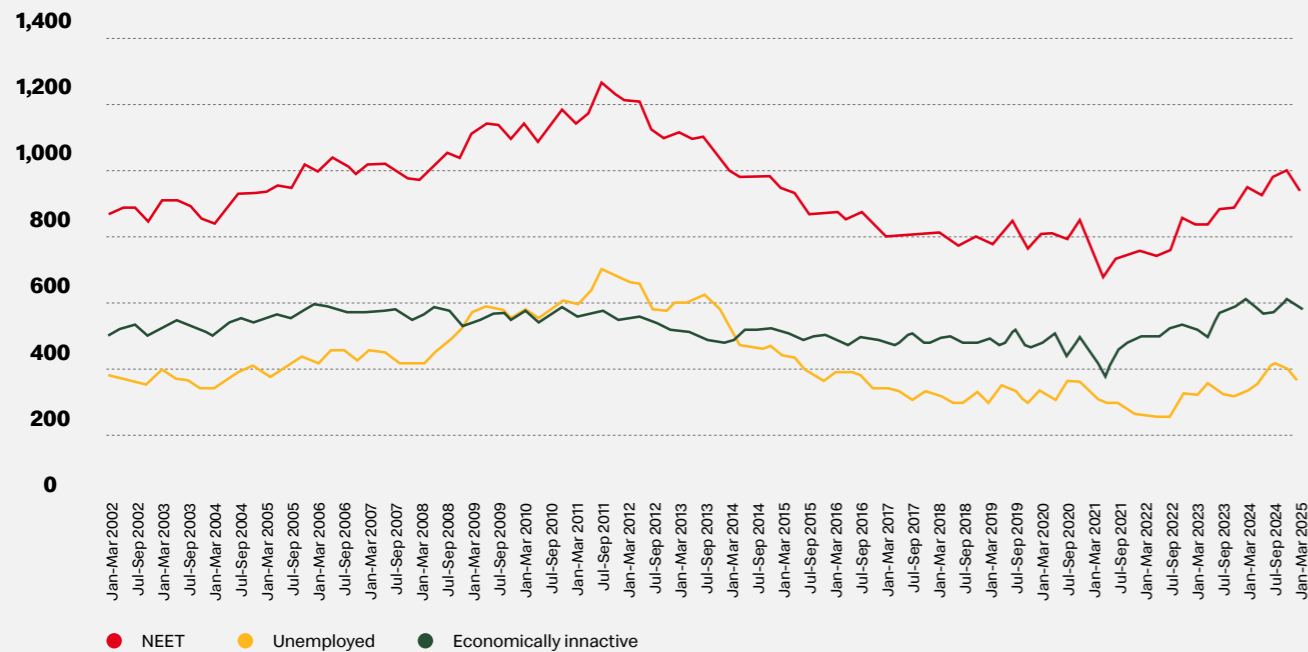
Unemployed young people are classified as those without a job who have been actively seeking work within the last four weeks and are available to start work within the next two weeks or have found a job and are waiting to start in the next two weeks.

Although the proportion of young people who are unemployed has declined since 2011, most of this reduction occurred in the early to mid-2010s, with progress slowing in the following years. A similar trend is seen among those who are NEET. The share of young NEETs who

were unemployed fell from 56% in 2011 to 44% in 2017, before stabilising, and has remained relatively stable in this age group over the past decade.²⁸

The most recent data estimates that there were 411,000 unemployed 16–24-year-olds in October to December 2025, up 45,000 from the previous quarter and up 19,000 from the previous year.²⁹ Of the NEET cohort, young men are more likely to be unemployed than young women, while young women are more likely to be economically inactive.

Trends in NEET, unemployment and economic inactivity levels from 2002 to 2025



Trends in NEET, unemployment and economic inactivity levels from 2002 to 2025 (16-24), UK Source: Youth Futures Foundation (2025), Labour Force Survey from the Office of National Statistics

In 2025, 2.2% of 16-24-year-olds were long term unemployed (more than six months), and 1.3%, or 82,000, were unemployed for longer than a year.³⁰

Unsurprisingly, rising NEET levels have been reflected in an increasing uptake of out of work benefits among young people. In 2024, 530,000

16-24-year-olds were claiming an out of work benefit, up from 460,000 in 2022: 44% of these young people received an unemployment related benefit (compared to 56% claiming an inactivity-related benefit).³¹



Economic Inactivity

Economically inactive young people – those not in employment but have not been seeking work with last four weeks and are unable to start work in the next two weeks – has been rising steadily in recent years and now makes up the majority of the total 16-24 NEET cohort. In 2025, 57% of young NEETs were economically inactive.

There were 547,000 economically inactive 16-24-year-olds who were NEET in October to December 2025 – down 34,000 on the quarter from July to September 2025, down 33,000 on the year.³²

Economic inactivity due to long-term sickness and disability

While there has been a gradual shift among NEETs from unemployment to inactivity, the more dramatic change has been in the types of economic inactivity.

The proportion of young NEETs who are inactive due to sickness or disability has more than doubled in two decades, between 2005 and 2025, and now accounts for over a quarter (28%) of all NEETs aged 16-24 in 2025.³³ As of the first quarter of 2025, economic inactivity due to health-related and ‘other’ reasons – which includes a wide range of circumstances, feeling discourage about job prospects to those choosing not to work – has risen substantially, accounting for 50% of young people who are NEET.³⁴

The rise in economic inactivity due to ill health is mostly seen among 18-24-year-olds (rising from 12% of all NEETs in this age group in 2005, to 30 per cent in 2025), while there has been only a moderate change among 16-17-year-olds.³⁵ While the same trend in economic activity has been seen for age groups above 25, this has occurred to a lesser extent.

Poor mental health

The leading cause of the rise in work-limiting health conditions among young people is the rise in poor mental health, alongside neurodevelopmental conditions like ADHD and autism.³⁶ Recent data estimates that one in five NEETs have a mental health condition, over two and a half times the rate in 2012 (20% compared to 8%).³⁷

Labour Force Data shows that in 2025, around 68% of NEET young people and 55% of all 16–24-year-olds reporting a work-limiting health condition, identified either a mental health condition or autism as their primary condition.³⁸ For both groups, mental health conditions were the biggest reported driver of increased work-limiting ill health between 2015 and 2020 – with an additional 139,000 16–24-year-olds reported a work-limiting mental health condition in 2020 compared with 2015, including an additional 45,000 NEET young people.

While this might be in part a result of improved identification and diagnosis, it reflects broader health trends impacting young people. Poor mental health is one of the biggest challenges facing our young people today, with one in five 8-16-year-olds having a probable mental health condition in 2023.³⁹ Recent data suggests that this figure now stands at one in four among 16–24-year-olds, rising by a third in a decade.⁴⁰ This alarming trend is not unique to the UK, although the UK has the lowest overall life satisfaction among 15-year-olds out of 27 European countries, and the largest gap for disadvantaged young people.⁴¹ A recent survey of workers found one in five (20%) took time off due to poor mental health caused by stress, rising to two in five (39%) among young adults (aged 18-24).⁴²

There is evidence of a vicious cycle between poor mental health and unemployment. While poor mental health and low wellbeing and confidence is a key barrier to entering or progressing in employment – in turn being unemployed contributes to worsening mental health.

More than one fifth of NEET young people cited low confidence as a key factor stopping them from securing work.⁴³ A further survey found that of young people with a mental health condition, nearly nine in ten (85%) believe that their condition affects their ability to either find work, or to function in a professional environment and of those already in the workplace, 44% perceive that their mental health is a barrier to their progression.⁴⁴ Poor mental health is also closely linked to school absence, with young people struggling more likely to miss school – with knock on consequences for their learning outcomes which can indirectly shape their NEET status.⁴⁵

Without the right support for these young people, these health trends will continue to shape the NEET cohort and the number of people who are economically inactive.

Gendered trends

Young women have historically had higher rates of NEET than young men, however from 2021, NEET rates for young men rose substantially and overtook young women.⁴⁶ While rates for both men and women have risen since 2021, for young men the rise has been driven by higher unemployment, while for women the rising NEET rate has been closely linked to rising economic inactivity. However, in the last two years the gender NEET gap has been narrowing. In the last quarter of 2025, the total increase in young NEETs of 11,000 was driven primarily by young women, with female NEETs rising by 13,000, while the number of young men NEET fell slightly by 2,000.⁴⁷

Young women make up the majority of the cohort of young NEETs who are economically inactive, at 303,000 compared to 244,000 young men.⁴⁸ While there are likely several overlapping factors behind this, the higher rates

of poor mental health among girls and young women can in part explain this distribution. Young women with health problems are four times more likely to be NEET than women without health problems.⁴⁹ Evidence indicates that girls and young women are experiencing worsening mental health, with rising anxiety, poor wellbeing, and common mental disorders emerging early and intensifying through adolescence and early adulthood - young women are twice as likely than young men to have a common mental health disorder between 17-25, and the rate of poor mental health has risen faster among girls and young women than among boys and young men in recent years.⁵⁰

The latest Women in Work Index from PwC warned that a surge in the numbers of young women out of work are holding back the jobs market, risking the potential of an equal workforce and costing the economy billions.⁵¹

Wider contextual factors that are shaping women's experience with work in different ways to boys – particularly poor mental health and school attendance, both risk factors for becoming NEET – is key to understanding the drivers of this trend. Girls and young women are experiencing worsening mental health, with rising anxiety, poor wellbeing, and common mental disorders emerging early and intensifying through adolescence and early adulthood – for 17–25-year-olds, girls were twice as likely to have a probable mental health condition compared to young men.⁵²

Similarly, rates of school absence have risen drastically for girls in recent years – with girls having slightly higher rates of overall, severe and persistent absence compared to boys.⁵³ There was a 257% increase in the number of girls registered as persistently absent (missing more than 50% of school) between 2017 and 2024.

16–17-Year-old NEETs

Despite the Rising Participation Age (RPA) legislation introduced in 2013 and amended in the years following – which mandates that all young people remain in formal education or training until they turn 18 – the NEET rate has fluctuated between 4-5% in the years to 2025 and currently stands at 4% in 2025.⁵⁴

16-17-year-old NEETs make up only a small proportion of the overall NEET cohort, standing at an estimated 57,000 in 2025.⁵⁵ Young men were more likely to be NEET in this cohort, at 4.9% compared to 3.1% of young women – driven by a higher proportion in employment, rather than in education or training.⁵⁶

In this age bracket, the cohort composition has shifted away from unemployment towards less clear cut forms of inactivity. Between 2005 and 2025, unemployment among 16–17-year-olds fell by around half, however was offset by a sharp rise in inactivity for ‘other’ reasons – accounting for 56% of the economically inactive group in 2025.⁵⁷

Hidden NEETs

Analysis of the young NEET cohort also reveal that a significant proportion are not accessing out of work benefits, meaning there is little incentive for these young people to engage with services or support, and therefore may be ‘hidden’ or ‘invisible’ to services making them much harder to reach with support.

Despite making up only a small minority of the overall NEET cohort, the concern remains that these young people – whether inactive or in employment – are more likely to face significant barriers to participation in the future. As set out in this report, qualifications can act as a considerable protective factor against being NEET, with lower-qualified young people having the highest NEET rates: NEET rates for 22-24-year-olds who hold a highest qualification that is at GCSE level or below, are three times more likely to be NEET than graduates⁵⁸ as a result, those leaving school at 16 are more likely to be NEET, or otherwise trapped in lower paying, often short term or unstable employment.

Since 2019, the number of young NEETs not claiming an out of work benefit has risen by 13%, while young NEETs claiming an out of work benefit has risen by 24%. Despite this however, 410,000 young people not in education, employment or training claim any out-of-work benefits – making up nearly half (44%) of the overall young NEET cohort.⁵⁹



These young people may not be claiming an out-of-work benefit for many reasons. In recent years, there has been a rise in the number of younger generations living with their parents for longer. While the increase has largely been driven by young people in their late 20s with the share of 25- to 29-year-olds living at a parental home increasing from 20% to 28% between 2006 and 2024, there has also been a rise in the younger age groups.⁶⁰ In 2024, approximately 61% of 20-year-olds were living with their parents (c.742,000): 71% of males and 51% of females, compared to 57% of 20-year-olds living with their parents in 2014.⁶¹ At age 24, 49% were living with their parents (c.851,000) in 2024, compared to 36% of 24-year-olds in 2014.⁶²

This trend reflects several wider contextual changes including rising house prices and rent – particularly in cities – where wages for full-time workers have not kept up rising costs making it harder for young people to be financially independent. The rise in the number of young people not in education, employment

or training – without a stable income – is most likely also having an impact on the broader trend of more young adults living with their parents.

CFYL heard from several young people who are NEET that without the support of their parents or extended family, they would likely be homeless – or had otherwise faced homelessness as a result of unemployment. Young people not receiving support from their parents are at much greater risk of experiencing homelessness as a result or are pushed to find an income through alternative means like cash-in-hand jobs or in the most severe circumstances, through criminal activity.

Many of Government's recent initiatives to reduce youth unemployment and inactivity rely on young people engaging with employment services. For these young people, the challenge will be how to identify them and connect them with opportunities.

“

If I didn't have the support of my parents, I would be homeless.

Young Person, 24

“

I've had a couple of jobs. [then I became] unemployed. During that time I became homeless and had to navigate that.

Young Person, 24, with additional needs

Who are the young people at greater risk of becoming NEET

Beyond the snapshot of young NEETs, understanding the drivers and reversing the trend requires recognition of risk factors associated with increased likelihood of becoming NEET and how this shapes young people's future life chances.

The likelihood of a young person becoming NEET is determined by a complex intersection of individual, familial, and structural factors that range across education, health, wider contextual or demographic factors, and wider life circumstances and vulnerabilities such as care experience or young parenthood. These factors are often interlinked and overlapping, which can entrench disadvantages and increase the likelihood of young people becoming NEET.

Educational attainment is a key predictor of a young person becoming NEET

Children facing additional barriers, set out below, are more likely to have poorer educational attainment and engagement which makes them more likely to become NEET.

Young people with low qualifications - defined as achieving fewer than five Grade 4 passes at GCSE – were 75% more likely to be NEET compared to the average.⁶³ The disadvantage gap between attainment of children and their more affluent peers is evident from as early as age five and has widened considerably compared to five years prior to the pandemic.⁶⁴ At primary school age, children from disadvantaged backgrounds were 10 months behind their more affluent peers, widening to 19.1 months by the end of secondary school.⁶⁵

Likewise, children with SEND are more likely to have poorer educational outcomes and are approximately 80% more likely to be NEET than the average.⁶⁶ The disadvantage attainment gap between children with SEND and their peers

is present from the start and only widens as they age. In 2024, the attainment gap between students receiving SEN support and those with no identified SEND was 16.8 months in primary, rising to 21.8 months in secondary.⁶⁷ Students aged 16-19 with SEND support were 3.5 grades behind students with no identified SEND. While qualifications can still act as a protective factor against a young person with SEND becoming NEET, young people with SEND who have mid-level qualifications are still 9% more likely to be NEET than the average.

Children who attended Alternative Provision (AP) and Pupil Referral Units are at particularly high risk of becoming NEET.⁶⁸ Around one-third of children in AP in England do not sustain a positive destination across education, employment or training after leaving school at Year 11. This is significantly higher than the 5.2% of children from mainstream schools who fail to sustain a positive destination.⁶⁹

Young people facing additional vulnerabilities

A young person's home and family environment can play a critical role in the risk of a young person becoming NEET. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds – using Free School Meal eligibility as a proxy indicator – are 66% more likely to be NEET than the average.⁷⁰

Young people facing additional vulnerabilities such as those with care experience, involvement with the criminal justice system or those who are young parents are at increased risk of becoming NEET. These are young people who are more likely to disengage with statutory services as a result of negative past experiences or perceived stigma, therefore making them less likely to have poorer outcomes and access support.

Care leavers are ten times more likely to not be working or studying at the age of 20 compared to their non-care experienced peers, with nearly one third found to be NEET compared to just 2.4% of their age group in England.⁷¹ The majority of those were defined as 'economically inactive' due to disability – including mental health issues – or caring responsibilities, and among those who were working, over two-thirds were in precarious roles that were short-term, part-time or poorly paid.

Young parenthood is another key predictor of increased risk of becoming NEET. 57% of those who had a child before 21 had experienced NEET status compared with 20% of those who had not, with women three times more likely than men to become young parents.⁷²

Many of the risk factors that increase the likelihood of young people's involvement in the criminal justice system – school exclusion, low attainment, poverty, unstable home lives, adverse childhood experiences and unmet mental health needs – overlap with those that increase the likelihood of a young person being NEET. Contact with the justice system can then compound these vulnerabilities such as through interrupting schooling or training, while stigma and criminal records can limit access to jobs and apprenticeships, and young people may lose access to supportive networks that facilitate participation in education or work. As a result, the same structural and personal disadvantages that heighten the risk of offending also overlap with barriers to sustained engagement in education and the labour market, creating a reinforcing cycle that increases the probability of young people becoming NEET.

Youth homelessness is a strong indicator of young person's risk of becoming NEET. Housing instability can disrupt a young person's ability to secure or maintain consistent education, employment or training. Like young people engaged with the criminal justice system, young people experiencing homelessness often face overlapping disadvantages including family breakdown, domestic abuse, poverty, mental health difficulties, and care system

involvement, that are also known risk factors for disengagement from education and employment. Youth homelessness has been rising in recent years, with an estimated 124,000 16–24-year-olds experiencing or at risk of homelessness across the UK between 2024 and 2025 – a 6% increase on the previous year.⁷³

Compound disadvantage

Overlapping risk factors are highly prevalent among young people, with many young people facing multiple dimensions of disadvantage which increases their risk of becoming NEET. Compound disadvantage is the cumulative effect on a young person's likelihood of being NEET when demographic characteristics intersect.⁷⁴ For example, young people eligible for free school meals, who achieved low qualifications and have SEND are 180% more likely to be NEET than the average. The probability of a NEET period increases dramatically as these factors accumulate; for instance, while only 5% of young people with zero or one risk factor are NEET, this figure rises to 74% for those experiencing ten or more.

As these barriers are deeply interconnected and complex, it is crucial that Government's approach to the NEET crisis understands and responds to the nuances of these trends and how they have evolved over time. These trends reflect the realities of the challenges that young people are facing today, requiring an urgent need for tailored support and multi-layered interventions to meet these needs to better support young people into education, employment or training – both those at greater risk of becoming NEET, and those who are already NEET.

Similarly, certain ethnic minority groups that face deep-seated structural barriers have higher rates of young NEETs. For example, young people from Black Caribbean backgrounds are 15% more likely to be NEET than the average, while young people from White Irish Traveller and White Roma communities are 2.5 and 3 times more likely to be NEET than the average, respectively.⁷⁵



Regional disparities in accessing opportunity

Beyond background and circumstance, a young person's likelihood of becoming NEET can also be dictated by where in the country they grow up. While poverty and educational outcomes are universal risk factors, their impact is felt most acutely in certain areas of the country highlighting a regional disparity in the risk of young people becoming NEET. By international standards, regional inequalities across the UK are significant and persistent, spanning multiple dimensions such as earning outcomes, productivity and education and skills.⁷⁶ Disparities in access to opportunity are attributed to local labour and financial markets, childhood conditions, and educational inequality.

The Sutton Trust's Opportunity Index has highlighted how young people's life chances remain closely tied not just to their socioeconomic background, but also where they grow up. The Index found that at a national level, around 8 in 10 of all pupils were in sustained education or employment after Key Stage 4, but only 66% for students eligible for Free School Meals.⁷⁷ However underneath those headline statistics there was significant regional variation. For example, in Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West, the constituency in England

that ranked lowest across social mobility indicators, the percentage of disadvantaged pupils in sustained education, apprenticeships or employment following KS4 is just 38%. This compares to 83% in East Ham which was ranked the highest across social mobility indicators.⁷⁸ The Index found that of the top 50 ranked local authorities for opportunity, all but eight were concentrated across London.

This is reflected in the finding that eight out of the top ten local authority areas with the highest NEET rates for disadvantaged youth are in the North of England or the Midlands, and NEET rates are consistently higher in the North of England and the Midlands.⁷⁹ Similarly, children who are excluded from school - a large proportion of which are children with SEND - have poorer educational outcomes: only 1% of excluded pupils go on to achieve five good GCSE grades and are at much greater risk of becoming NEET.⁸⁰

Chapter 4

Where is the system failing?

Where is the system failing?

Through understanding the journey of a young person, this report identifies barriers a young person might face that push them to become NEET. Some barriers identified by young people present universal challenges to all young people – such as an education system that is not adequately preparing young people to transition at 16, and wider pressures of the current jobs market.

However, young people with additional needs, poor mental health and those at greater risk of being NEET are likely to face more entrenched barriers that present long before 16. These include wider support systems – notably mental health and SEND support – under strain, and a lack of joined-up support, particularly around key transition milestones, that can result in some young people falling through the gaps.

The Labour Market

Young people face a complex set of structural barriers that make entering and progressing in the labour market increasingly difficult. Limited job availability, rising competition, and an “experience catch-22” restrict access to even entry-level roles to give young people their first step up into the world of work. These challenges are compounded by regional disparities in access to opportunity and recruitment practices that can undermine young people’s resilience and confidence.

Throughout CFYL youth engagement for this report, there was a message from young people that there simply aren’t enough entry level jobs. Emerging trends shaping the labour market coupled with recent decisions around pay, contributions and employment rights mean some of the jobs that once served as vital stepping stones for young people to enter the world of work are disappearing.

A squeeze on ‘entry-level’ roles is creating an experience gap for young people

For decades, entry-level roles allowed young people the chance to ‘learn on the job’, gain experience and move up within a company or

sector. Yet today around 35% of jobs labelled ‘entry-level’ now require at least three years’ experience, redefining entry-level roles and shutting out young people from opportunities who have just left education.⁸¹

Rapid adoption of AI also continues to put a downwards pressure on the availability of entry-level jobs, a trend that is occurring globally as companies opt to use AI tools to perform tasks previously undertaken by entry-level employees at a much more reduced cost.⁸²

As a result, young people are finding themselves passed over for entry-level roles in favour of more qualified, often older applicants, making it hard to get onto the career ladder in the first place. Many young people find themselves in an ‘experience Catch 22’ where most jobs are asking for a certain amount of experience or qualifications which young people just out of education often won’t have, making it harder to enter the workforce in the first place.⁸³

“

The woman who got the job had over 10 years’ experience, a former manager. It’s not just uni graduates I’m competing with; I’m competing with people who have so much more experience.

There is a similar problem facing graduates, as the rise in young people continuing to further education has also not been matched by a similar rise in skilled job availability, meaning a growing number of graduates are struggling to find a job.⁸⁴ One estimate suggests that there are 110,000 university graduates under the age of 30 claiming a benefit and not in work.⁸⁵

Students and young people are therefore increasingly seeking internships – often during further or higher education – to build experience and help them stand out when applying for jobs, with a recent poll estimating half of graduates undertook an internship in 2025, 61% of whom were unpaid or underpaid.⁸⁶ As additional experience becomes more crucial to getting a job as a young person, young people from working-class backgrounds are at a disadvantage as they are less likely to receive support from parents or be able to support themselves through unpaid internships. Graduates from working-class backgrounds were 20 percentage points less likely to undertake an internship compared to their more affluent peers in 2025, with the gap widening from 12 percentage points in 2018.⁸⁷

“

It’s the jobs that are the most replaceable that are asking for experience – I don’t know what more qualifications I could get.

‘Work readiness’ and the decline of the Saturday job

At the same time, access to jobs in sectors that have typically given young people their first experience of the working world – like retail and hospitality – is shrinking. As a result, young people’s first experience of employment is coming later and is contributing to the ‘experience gap’ young people are facing. This is reflected in the data: at the end of 2024, only one-in-five 16–17-year-olds were in work, compared to nearly half at the start of the century.⁸⁸

Traditionally, young people are more dependent on retail and hospitality jobs: 16–24-year-olds make up around 10% of the total workforce but are over-represented in hospitality roles like wait staff (50%), and bar staff (48%), and account for one in eight people working in retail.⁸⁹ However, these sectors have been hit hard in recent years. Recent analysis by UKHospitality estimates that over half (53%) of all job losses in the UK since Government’s 2025 Budget have been in the hospitality sector.⁹⁰

Recent reforms to National Insurance Contributions, the National Minimum Wage, and the extension of employment rights, in

the context of uncertain economic contexts in recent years, also play a part in shaping young people's access to the jobs market. One estimate suggests that recent policy decisions around National Insurance Contributions and National Minimum Wage alongside reforms to employment rights have raised the cost of hiring entry-level workers by around 7% in real terms.⁹¹ These added pressures were also highlighted as barriers to hiring young people among the survey of franchisees carried out by McDonald's.

For generations, these jobs in hospitality have been young people's stepping stone into the world of work – either as Saturday jobs or as a full-time position. As a result, they offer much more to young people than earning money. They help to build young people's soft skills

– confidence, responsibility, communication and belief in themselves. The decline in these opportunities is removing the crucial stepping stone they bring in bridging the transition from education to employment for young people.

Regional inequalities in access to opportunity

For some areas in the country, wider economic conditions often dictate the opportunities available to young people. If young people are looking for work in lower socioeconomic areas which may offer fewer or less varied employment opportunities, it becomes harder to find work. As a result, young people might be forced to move for work which can come at both a financial and personal cost or look for alternative work in their local area that may not align with their skills or aspirations.

While local factors do play a role, ONS statistics put London as the UK region with the second highest rate of youth unemployment (22.5%) behind the North East (24.6%), suggesting that the problem of youth unemployment is increasingly shaped by factors beyond regional disparities in opportunities.^{92 93}

A statutory employment support system that is holding young people back

The UK's welfare system has long been one of the most conditional among OECD countries.⁹⁴ While the current system may increase the number of people getting a job, the combination of short duration, non-personalised support, and conditionality and sanctions is not conducive to supporting young people into long-term, meaningful work and is often associated with poor job quality, instability, financial hardship, and worsening mental health.

The majority of young people had experience of accessing support through the jobcentre, with an overwhelming majority describing the support as inconsistent and unhelpful. There was a common feeling that the jobcentre was largely focused on making sure they had applied for enough jobs in a regular ten-minute meeting, rather than supporting them to think about their strengths, skills, and long-term aspirations for a career. Only 2% of young people viewed the jobcentre as responsible for supporting the development of employability skills in 2025.⁹⁵

“

It's 10 minutes and all they do is ask you how many jobs you've applied for – there's no support with actually finding [opportunities] and applying for them.

One young person described some positive experiences but attributed these to individual work coaches rather than the system as a whole.

“

There is a lack of opportunities around [here], all the jobs [I'm interested in] will be in big cities. I don't mind travelling too much, but it would be nice to stay around here.

Young person, 23 from a town in the North West

“

We're in such a small area – getting into something that I want to, you'd need to move. They want you to move to London. I'm not financially able...not in the position to move away from everything I'm comfortable with, especially since I've got anxiety – it puts pressure on you.

Young person, 23 from a town in the North West

“

The job centre is very inconsistent – this is my fourth time. I’ve had some coaches that are really nice. One said not to apply to any jobs unless it’s to do with what you’ve studied, and then the second time they said apply for as many jobs as you can, pushing me towards jobs that I didn’t think I was suited for. I was worried I would be sanctioned if I kept saying no so I did.

Many young people recalled anxiety around a fear of being sanctioned if they didn’t accept the opportunities that were offered to them and found that it pushed them into roles not suited to their interests or their needs. This anxiety is well-founded: young people aged 20-24 are twice as likely to experience a benefit sanction as those aged 30-34.⁸⁶

The Government’s Get Britain Working white paper announced a package of reforms to change how Jobcentres work. Proposals reflected a need to shift the focus of work coaches away from simply monitoring benefit conditions towards meaningful employment support – including through more personalised supports and longer appointments.⁹⁷ Commitments to merge jobcentres and the National Careers Service could also help to focus jobcentre support more on careers and opportunities.

However, while the Government recognises the concerns around the over-emphasis on compliance and sanctions – including a lack

of evidence to show it supports people into meaningful work, and a wealth of evidence to show its impacts on mental health and wellbeing – these aspects of the system still present significant challenges for young people’s progression.

These barriers are often more acute for young people with additional needs

For young people with additional needs, such as poor mental health or other work-limiting conditions, these challenges are often more acute. The short appointments, lack of personalised support, and primary focus on getting a job rather than wider skills development all overlooked the additional challenges facing these young people. While schemes like Restart have received more positive feedback, employment support through the Jobcentre in general was largely seen as lacking the type of support young people found helpful, particularly those with additional needs.

“

I was trying to explain my situation – I have anxiety and struggle [talking to] people. Th[e Jobcentre] just told me that a job would train me to do that.

Young Person, 24, with additional needs

“

I asked to be put on Restart because I thought it would help – but I’m finding it no different to the jobcentre. They just say you need to apply for as many jobs as you can, with no extra support.



An education system that isn't preparing young people for the world of work

Most young people spend the majority of their childhood in education, offering a crucial window to build skills and offer support which will help shape the rest of their lives. Yet many young people are leaving education without essential skills, knowledge, and the fundamental building blocks they need to succeed – particularly as they enter the modern-day world of work which is fast-changing and presents new challenges. The recent Schools White paper outlining Government plans for SEND reform is welcome, but the challenge is now in its implementation and ensuring that children are able to access the support they need as early as possible. The delivery of SEND reforms should have a firm focus on longer-term outcomes for children with SEND including their post-16 destinations to prevent them becoming NEET.

Young people highlighted gaps and inconsistencies in support and access to opportunities throughout school which often left young people feeling unprepared and lost when it came to leaving school at 16.

Absence has sky-rocketed and is disproportionately impacting disadvantaged young people

Poor school attendance is directly linked to increased rates of being NEET in that it leads to early disengagement with school and the services and support that may be accessed as a result. It also has a knock-on effect on attainment – a key protective factor mitigating the risk of becoming NEET.

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My attendance was 40%... but they didn't give me any support.

Young person, 21, NEET with additional needs

School absence has sky-rocketed since the pandemic and is yet to fully recover. In 2024/25, just under one in five pupils were persistently absent – missing at least 10% of school – equating to 1.3 million children.⁹⁸ Persistent absence was associated with 3.9 times greater risk of being NEET and 6.3 times greater risk of being persistently NEET.⁹⁹ While overall and persistent absence has slightly reduced over the past year, severe absence – missing 50% or more of school – increased to 2.4%, a record high in recent years.¹⁰⁰ Regularly missing out on education not only means that young people are missing out on vital qualifications, careers advice, or work-experience, but are also unable to retain a basic routine necessary to enter the world of work. The continuation of this trend will widen the gap between young people facing additional barriers to education and their peers, with lifelong consequences.

Children eligible for FSM are more than 2.5 times more likely to be persistently absent compared to those not eligible.¹⁰¹ Likewise,

children with SEND are disproportionately impacted by rising absence. The overall absence gap continues to increase, with children with SEND over one 1.5 times more likely to be absent than children with no identified SEND.¹⁰² Children with an EHCP accounted for the majority of the record high in persistent absence in 2024/25.

Addressing these gaps in educational outcomes and experience should be a key focus of Government's efforts to reverse the trend in young NEETs. It is a key protective factor that sets young people up to thrive and mitigates the impact of additional barriers for young people at greater risk of becoming NEET due to their background and circumstance.

Young people aren't adequately prepared for life after school

The transition from the structured, more supportive environment of school to the world of work can be destabilising for young people as they face big life decisions – made worse by

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It's always the confidence thing – something I've struggled with my whole life. I know I can do certain things but trying to put that across to someone else that I'm confident is so hard.

Young Person, 19, who has not engaged with services or support since leaving school, a 'Hidden' NEET

the often-gruelling process of applications and interviews and the lack of consistent, joined-up support available for young people once they leave school.

Many young NEETs identified a lack of confidence in their ability to present themselves and their capabilities in a high-pressured recruitment process as a major barrier to entering into employment. Young NEETs – particularly those citing low confidence or wellbeing as a barrier – identified a gap in school support that would have helped them to develop their communication skills and confidently present themselves in a professional setting.

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The interview process is brutal. Trying to land a job is difficult but even in the process, if you don't have the confidence then you're done for.

Young Person, 19

Young people also highlighted gaps in their education around other key 'life skills' that are essential to not just the world of work, but for general life. Financial literacy was regularly cited as a significant gap in young people's learning, and something that would have helped to learn in school and apply both to work but life more widely. Employers surveyed also identified it as a beneficial skill for young people that would support in bridging the gap between education and employment.¹⁰³

This knowledge and skills gap can contribute to negative perceptions of the world of work for young people, with one in four reporting a negative experience at work because of their age, that made them not want to work again.¹⁰⁴ Likewise, it can lead to negative perceptions among employers of hiring young people. Access to work experience and specific workplace education in school is key to bridging this gap.

Employability coaches working with young women through the Young Women's Trust were consistent in identifying a lack of confidence affecting the young women they worked with, creating a gendered 'confidence gap'.¹⁰⁵ Practitioners identified a lack of confidence in young women's ability to articulate their strengths and skills which was seen as a key

foundational skill needed in entering the world of work, and a fundamental gap in how education prepares young women for the labour market. However, recent evidence shows that this gap is smaller than often perceived, which may point instead to the wider contextual factors that are shaping young women's experience and recent trends in young female NEETs. On average, men apply when they meet approximately 52% of requirements, while women apply when they meet around 56%.¹⁰⁶ Men and women with the same qualifications also differ in how they perceived their suitability, with men more likely to believe they meet the requirements.¹⁰⁷

A lack of work experience

Young people and employers both identified a lack of preparedness or 'work readiness' among young people entering their first job. The Youth Voice Census found that 50% of young people reported they didn't even know what employers were looking for, while employers highlighted young people entering work without an understanding of the basic requirements and expectations in a professional setting such as communication, accountability and punctuation.^{108 109}

“

There were basic life skills training an hour a week. It taught us some things but not anything useful.

Young person, 21

There was broad consensus that work experience or work placements, particularly during school, were crucial opportunities to prepare young people for the world of work, while supporting them to choose their post-education pathway.

However, access to work experience for young people has been steadily declining in recent years. Only 19% of secondary school students had done a work placement, rising to 26% among students in college or sixth form.¹¹⁰

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I didn't have any work experience in secondary school – how are you supposed to know what you like? All you know is maths and science.

Young person, 21, recent graduate struggling to find a job.

Inconsistent or low-quality careers advice

High-quality careers advice during school can reduce the risk of a young person becoming NEET, particularly for those who may face additional barriers as a result of their circumstances.

However, national policy changes over the past fifteen years have created a patchwork of careers advice which is inconsistent in quality and accessibility across local authorities, creating a postcode lottery of support for young people. The transition from Connexions to the National Careers Services shifted the responsibility to schools and colleges without

Many of the young NEET people we spoke to had not had access to work experience during school, and since leaving education had resorted to taking up unpaid volunteering to build experience and skills. However, for those who are required to be financially independent, unpaid opportunities are inaccessible. Missing out on these crucial opportunities to develop their skills, confidence, and readiness for work remains a significant barrier to supporting young people into employment.

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Work experience at school just disappeared.

Young person.

the transfer of additional funding to deliver new responsibilities, meaning access to support often depends on whether their school or college met their new statutory duty to 'secure access to independent careers guidance' and had funding in their existing budgets.¹¹¹

The Gatsby benchmarks are a framework that establish best practice for careers provision in secondary schools and colleges, with schools meeting the benchmark more likely to perform better at supporting students into post-16 pathways. Each benchmark that is met by a school reduces the likelihood of a young person being NEET by 1.1%.¹¹² The relationship was twice as strong in the quarter of schools with the most economically disadvantaged intake.

However, a significant shortfall in funding for education settings to fully implement the benchmarks limits schools in delivering these impactful interventions.¹¹³

In 2025, only 32% of students received face to face careers advice, a 40% drop from the previous year, and just 23% had an employer visit.¹¹⁴ In some schools, careers advice is delivered through weekly PSHE classes with little other support provided.

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There was no preparation for life outside of education except for every once in a blue moon they would help you build a CV, but that was only in year 11 when you're about to your exams – everything was packed together so you got no time.

Young Person, 19, who has been NEET since leaving school.

An information gap on alternative pathways to university

Young people, both those who went on to higher education and those who didn't, pointed to a lack of clear, consistent information on what options were available to them at 16. The Youth Voice Census highlighted that alternative routes such as apprenticeships and vocational routes are still rarely discussed.

Many young people reflected on their experience of further education and highlighted how, given the option, they would have preferred to do an apprenticeship or internship which allowed them to learn, gain experience and get paid at the same time – there was a feeling among many young people who went to university of 'what was the point?'. Analysis suggests that half of all university graduates – around 240,000 students who started their

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People should be able to make a more informed decision about going to uni. We should know what opportunities are available to us – it feels like an afterthought when they talk about apprenticeships. It's not mentioned seriously.

Young person, 21, recent graduate struggling to find a job.

“

The teachers only ever discussed uni, especially in college. I wasn't sure if I wanted to go to uni, but no one was helping me with that.

Young person, early 20s, did not attend university and is currently NEET.

course in 2025, could have been better off taking a higher-level apprenticeship when looking at take-home earnings of some degrees, with 37% of graduates deemed 'over-qualified' for their jobs – the highest in the OECD.¹¹⁵

At the same time, degree apprenticeships – which integrate earning and on-the-job learning – are showing impressive outcomes for young people, with strong completion rates, high earnings, and benefits for employers.¹¹⁶ However, analysis suggests that access to these opportunities is unequal, with only one in ten degree apprentices coming from disadvantaged backgrounds – a lower share than among Russell Group universities.¹¹⁷ To make the most of these pathways and opportunities, focus should be on widening participation and targeting outreach and funding incentives to encourage more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate.

Inequalities in access to high-quality careers education

Socioeconomic background and parental employment and education history can be powerful predictors of young person's outcomes, including their post-16 destination. Considering disadvantage alone (rather than compound disadvantage), young people were 66% more likely to be NEET than the average.¹¹⁸

However, for children from disadvantaged or deprived backgrounds, access to high quality careers advice has been found to be even more

limited. An Ofsted report found that it was rare for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to receive careers guidance tailored to their needs.¹¹⁹ Where schools or colleges were delivering targeted careers support, the report highlights how young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were not always considered a priority for targeted support and instead prioritised for groups of students considered disadvantaged by other parameters such as SEND, persistent absentees or care-experienced young people.¹²⁰ Almost one-third of state school teachers report inadequate funding to deliver high quality Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) – compared to 6% of independent school teachers, while more than half of state school teachers say there is insufficient time to do so, compared to just over a third in independent schools.¹²¹

Young people from lower-income households or more deprived areas are more likely to feel they don't have much of a chance in life. They also feel less in control of their future and are more likely to say they'll be in full-time work in two years' time compared their more affluent peers.¹²² While the gap has been narrowing in recent years, young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are still less likely to go on to higher education – disadvantaged pupils are still more than a third less likely to go to university compared to their peers.¹²³ As higher qualifications can act as a protective factor in mitigating the risk of a young person becoming NEET, the gap in access to higher education for disadvantaged young people can act as an additional barrier.

While these trends reflect wider contextual factors and their impact on the educational and labour outcomes of young people – the disadvantage attainment gap as discussed above, and the

associated costs of going to university – it highlights the importance of access to good careers guidance for young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in particular, as an essential tool for opening doors to meaningful opportunities.

Careers education is coming too late

While inconsistent and low-quality careers education was seen as a key barrier for young people, so too was the concentration of careers education in the final years of school – a time where young people are already preoccupied by exams and revision.

Many young people highlighted that what careers advice they did have often came too late in their education – typically year 11 - after they had selected their GCSEs, A Levels, or university degree. Many felt that they had stumbled into their university or college courses, even GCSE choices, with little time or opportunity to think about what that might mean for their future in work.

“

If you have the help while you're still learning you're going to get a closer idea of what is going on [rather] than later realising half way through your course at college that this is the wrong thing...and it's too late to change and go back.

This is supported by reports from college leaders that more students than ever are enrolling “without any idea” of courses or careers they wanted to pursue, placing more pressure on staff to provide advice.¹²⁴



The role of Employers

Employers play a key role in unlocking the potential of young people and there is widespread recognition among employers of the importance of young people for the future of the workforce. However, employers are increasingly faced with navigating new policy contexts, emerging trends in the labour market, and new challenges facing younger generations that shape their engagement with young people entering the workforce.

'Ghost jobs'

A lack of feedback or acknowledgement from employers on applications – and in some cases after interviews – was a strong theme across

our focus groups, reinforcing a feeling among young people that there aren't enough jobs out there, and often negatively impacting their view of entering into employment.

This reflects the current challenges in the labour market outlined above. A recent survey from the Institute for Student Employers reported that they had received 1.2 million applications for just 17,000 graduate vacancies.¹²⁵ The average employer reported receiving 140 applications per graduate job in 2024, a 59% increase on the previous year.¹²⁶

“

I can't tell you how many jobs I've applied for – over 20 interviews, but they always ghost you. I even did a whole design for one and they ghosted me.

Young person, 22

“

I've had six interviews and heard nothing back – I'm frustrated. I've put the effort in, and I don't even get an automated response or generic feedback.

Young person, early 20s

“

I applied for fifty jobs in three weeks. I heard back from six.

Young person, 24, who struggles with their mental health and confidence

While this was understood as a byproduct of the number of applicants competing for the same job, young people shared that not hearing back,

or having feedback that helped to improve, impacted their confidence, wellbeing, and resilience to keep on applying.

“

Job hunting is draining for me – my depression and self-confidence have gotten worse because it's rejection after rejection, so you just think what the hell is wrong with me that you don't want me?

Young person, 24

Lack of support for additional needs in the workplace

Securing a job is only part of the challenge for young people - many young people had been in employment at some point since leaving

education. A lack of support, particularly for those with additional needs, was identified as a barrier in supporting young people to maintain employment, with a lack of inclusive practice from employers often forcing young people to leave their job.

“

I'm dyslexic and they didn't support me that well and that ended up with [me having] some mental health issues. It ended because they would have rather got rid of me than put the support in.

Young Person, 24

A McDonald's survey highlighted a similar challenge facing employers in recruiting and retaining young people. The most frequently raised concern was the scale and complexity of young people's mental health. Some franchise owners highlighted that managers and their staff are increasingly required to shoulder the responsibility of these additional challenges facing young people, such as poor mental health or anxiety, without the necessary training or support to do so effectively.¹²⁷

duty to make reasonable adjustments – are creating additional barriers to young people with additional needs maintaining employment. Recent figures show that the average wait-time for new Access to Work applications to be processed has almost doubled in just twelve months.¹²⁸ The Government's Pathways to Work green paper set out plans to consult on the future of Access to Work and will be a feature on the ongoing Timms Review of the welfare system.

Rising delays in Access to Work claims – which provide support for people's needs within the workplace over and above an employer's legal



A lack of early intervention is creating strain on wider services for young people

For those seeking and able to work, the barriers identified by young people were largely related to increasing access to opportunity. Recent Government initiatives like the Youth Guarantee, Jobs Guarantee, and commitments in the Post-16 Education and Skills white paper go a long way in removing these barriers.

However, young people highlighted a persistent failure of services to get the right support to young people to allow them to thrive, which was having a knock-on effect on their outcomes – increasing the barriers they face to successfully transition out of school at 16, as problems and challenges are left to escalate.

This is reflected in the recent rise in economic inactivity among young people – which now makes up the majority of the overall cohort of young NEETs. The proportion of young NEETs who are inactive due to sickness or disability has doubled since 2005, now making up over a quarter of the NEET cohort.¹²⁹ While this reflects broader trends in rising levels of young people with poor mental health and special educational needs and disabilities, it also indicates a failure of services to adequately meet the scale of the challenges facing young people.

Support is often needs-led, and is coming too late

Gaps in early support for young people with additional needs create lasting barriers to employment. As we set out in previous chapters, children with SEND are much more likely to have poorer educational outcomes in terms of attainment and attendance which increase the likelihood of becoming NEET.

The current SEND system is characterised by an often adversarial, diagnosis-led system of support, with parents feeling as though they have to fight the system to get the right support for their child in school. A lack of early intervention is creating system wide pressures, with increasing delays in EHCPs, spiralling costs for local authorities, and schools with limited access to specialist SEND support staff such as educational psychologists leaving them unequipped to meet rising need.¹³⁰ Between 2015/16 and 2024/25, there was a 104% increase in pupils with EHCPs, and a 20% increase in pupils without a Plan but receiving SEN support.¹³¹ Since 2018, high-needs funding has risen by over £4bn, more than 50%, in real terms, absorbing more than half of the total increase in school funding.¹³²

There was a mix of experiences among the young NEETs who had additional needs, in terms of the support they were offered during school. For many of them, their experience of school – both primary and secondary – was characterised by a lack of sufficient support to meet their additional needs and support their overall wellbeing. Where there was support, the young people highlighted that it had primarily been focused on supporting their learning to help them achieve better attainment rather than more support.

“

I don't remember there being any kind of support in my school. For me, being in school was horrible...[it] was just so bad that I felt like it was my fault in a way because whatever I was struggling with was so bad.

Young person, 24

“

I thought I had some of those traits [of autism/ADHD]. During primary school, during secondary school, it was never something that was brought up or noticed. Nothing happened. It's their job to notice stuff like that. I feel like if they had done things would have been a bit different.

Young person, 24

“

I had really good support in secondary school...I dread to think what would have happened if my secondary school wouldn't have been good at the support.

Young person, 24, was diagnosed with autism in school

Young people's experience was broadly more positive as they moved into secondary school in terms of the support, they had access to. Similarly, there was widespread recognition of

how having support had a significant impact on their experience and engagement with school and their future outcomes.



Early identification of need is crucial to putting in place early support to prevent needs escalating. However, schools often lack the funding, capacity and specialist training to meet the increasing demand and complex needs of young people. Identification of need should be happening at the earliest possible stage – even before a young person starts reception – to build the foundations a young person needs to thrive throughout school and beyond.

As set out in the following chapter, the Schools White Paper outlining Government's plans for SEND reform set out ambitious plans to put inclusion at the heart of education and boost early support for young people with additional needs, which is a welcome step towards re-imagining an education system that prioritises early identification and intervention.

A lack of early intervention mental health support

A similar failure to provide early intervention support for young people struggling with their mental health has led to overloaded statutory services, and many young people going without the support they need which leaves problems to escalate.

Despite over half of all mental health problems presenting before the age of 14, and three-quarters by the age of 24, a historic lack of investment in children and young people's mental sees too many young people going without support, allowing problems to escalate into adulthood.¹³³ A lack of investment in early, preventative, community-based support is adding to the pressure on services, leaving many young people without help and with their problems growing more severe. While the voluntary sector has expanded to fill these gaps in support, it is underfunded and overstretched, struggling to meet the rising and complex needs of young people. Early Support Hubs and Mental Health Support Teams have been

welcome first steps in alleviating this pressure, but there are still significant gaps in access to early support, thereby increasing strain on the health system and meaning too many young people go without the support they need to prevent mental health problems escalating.

Since January 2020, the number of children and young people in contact with secondary NHS mental health services at the end of each month has more than doubled, with over one million people under the age of 18 in contact with services in 2024/25.¹³⁴ As of January 2026, there were almost 120,000 children and young people waiting more than 52 weeks waiting for a first contact with services, and almost 90,000 waiting more than 78 weeks.¹³⁵ Beyond that, an estimated two million children and young people with mental health needs are not accessing NHS treatment, either through a closed referral, waiting for treatment, while those with lower level needs don't (yet) meet the threshold for specialist treatment but would likely benefit from some early support.¹³⁶

The Government's Independent review into mental health conditions, ADHD and autism recently published their interim report, seeking to understand the rising demand on services and what is driving it. The interim report identifies both the strong link between poor mental health and neurodevelopmental conditions and being NEET, but recognises that the current patterns are shaped by system design as well as need, including 'the increasing tendency to medicalise forms of distress that may have broader social or developmental roots'.¹³⁷ We hope to see the next phase of the review underscore the importance of non-clinical, community-based early intervention and preventative support as key to reducing levels of poor mental health.

A lack of joined up transition support

With just under half of young NEETs not engaging with the welfare system, the challenge becomes how to reach these young people with support – with many of them becoming ‘hidden’ to services.

Identifying ‘hidden’ young people

Currently, support for education-to-employment transitions in England is complex and fragmented, making it difficult for young people to navigate and benefit from in a sustained way. Despite a large number of government-funded programmes and initiatives that exist to support young people, they are spread across different departments, policy objectives, age thresholds, and delivery systems, with little overarching coordination. Support is often tied to specific settings like schools,

colleges, training providers, Jobcentre Plus, or local authorities, rather than following the young person across transitions, meaning assistance can fall away precisely at the time it is most needed, such as leaving education or moving between services.

With little incentive to engage with services – either due to previous negative experience, or because they are supported by family, the challenge for local authorities and wider support is to identify them and therefore make support available to them. While there is a legal duty on local authorities to track 16-17-year-olds, there is no similar requirement of local authorities to track the status of young people beyond 18, meaning young people in this group who leave education, training, and employment and don’t engage with the benefit system are often invisible to local services.

“

The only reason I’m here is because my parents told me about it and signed me up for it. I wouldn’t have signed up for it myself to be honest, I would have been too scared to apply and come in. They were trying to help me and telling me to meet them half way.

Young Person, 19, has not engaged with support services since leaving school.

Some young people described a stigma which deters them from engaging with Jobcentre Plus. There is a widespread perception of

the Jobcentre as a hostile or unwelcoming environment, often due to their focus on compliance and sanctions for benefit claimants.

“

I’m not claiming job seekers allowance, I have really gone to the job centre at the moment. I’ve thought about it. The only people I’ve asked about it is family but they say they’ll call you in the day and ask how many jobs you’ve applied for and that’s what scared me off.

Young person.

Government wants to reduce the number of young people who are NEET, targeting these ‘hidden’ NEETs will require placing accountability on local services to identify and support them to re-engage with services. Without that, recent government efforts under the Youth Guarantee to open up opportunities for young people will be limited, as these young people aren’t engaging with the welfare system.

Provision is also commonly time-limited or short-term, reflecting funding cycles rather than the realities of young people’s journeys, particularly for those facing multiple or intersecting barriers to employment who may take longer to engage.

An accountability gap for 16–17-year-olds NEETs

Under the Raising Participation Age (RPA), local authorities have a statutory duty to ‘encourage, enable and assist young people to participate in education or training’ until they turn 18, or 25 for those with an EHCP. This includes a requirement to collect information on young people’s destinations to determine NEET status, or NEET risk status, and target resources at supporting

them. However, qualitative evidence on the impact of the policy suggested that while most young people do make a post-16 transition, large numbers drop out and fail to re-engage in learning or work or connect with local authority support services until they access the benefit system at 18.¹³⁸

In their publication of local authority participation rates, the Department for Education highlights the considerable variation in how well 16- and 17-year-olds are tracked at local authority level.¹³⁹ The number of young people who are ‘unknown’ should also be of concern, as without that information, support can’t be provided to the young person who may have fallen out of the system. The proportion of 16–17-year-olds classified as NEET in 2025 ranged from below 1% to just below 7%, while the proportion of that age group classified as ‘activity not known’ ranged from below 1% to just under 10%.¹⁴⁰

Weak enforcement of the mandatory participation age is likely contributing to inconsistent support available to young people across the country. Removal of the support system since 2010, such as the Education Maintenance Allowance and the

Connexions service which provided wraparound support for young people transitioning at 16, limited the impact of the RPA. Local authorities are expected to meet the costs of delivering these duties from their overall budgets, further contributing to the inconsistencies in enforcement with local authorities facing considerable budget cuts in recent years. Without sufficient funding for staff and support services, local authorities often struggle to meet their duties.

Youth services have been stripped back

Even when local authorities can identify young people who are 'hidden' or 'hard to reach', cuts to public services during the 2010s has stripped away the network of wraparound support available to young people, which often prevents them falling through the gaps and out of the system altogether. Cuts to youth services undermines local authorities' ability not only to meet requirements to support

16-17-year-olds, but also to re-engage young NEETs with services and support that are seen as vital stepping stones to entering into employment.

While the voluntary sector has expanded into these roles to plug gaps in support, they are limited by a lack of sustainable funding to meet demand and train staff to address more complex needs. In 2024, two-thirds of youth sector organisations reported an increased demand in services addressing employment, training, and skills for work.¹⁴¹

As a result, services offering the types of support preferable to young people are now much harder to access.

Young people repeatedly tell us about the impact of alternative types of support delivered by community organisations like Onside Youth Zones and the King's Trust, set in stark contrast to their experience of the job centre.

Support from these organisations was characterised by individualised support, either one-to-one or in group work; delivered by youth workers who know how to engage with young people. They provide practical, hands-on support as a young person looks for a job, encouraging them to think about their aspirations, strengths and interests to develop longer-term ambitions for their future and find the right job for them. There is also an embedded element across these organisations about supporting the young person as a whole, supporting them with their confidence, wellbeing and wider barriers a young person might be facing. They play a critical role in supporting young people's transitions from education into employment, providing trusted adults, safe out-of-school spaces, and structured activities through which young people can build confidence, skills and social capital.

Youth services help to support young people who are NEET by acting as a first step in re-engaging with support and giving them the building blocks to think about their next steps. They also play a key role in supporting young people through transition at 16 with wrap around support to prevent them falling through the gaps. However, cuts to funding have hollowed out the offer for young people, and only long-term, sustained investment will rebuild the network of support that young people need. The Government recently announced an £88m package of support – Building Creative Futures – to boost youth services, including youth clubs, youth workers and activities outside of school to 're-connect young people with the world around them'.¹⁴⁵ While welcome, Government funding for youth services has not made up for decade of cuts that have hollowed out support for young people.

Between 2010 and 2023, more than two-thirds of council-run youth centres across England and Wales were closed, and local authorities have faced a real-terms cut of £1.3 billion since 2010 – a 76% decrease in youth services spending.¹⁴² In England in 2024-25, local authorities spent £46.32 per child aged 5 to 17 on youth services – a 10% reduction year-on-year. Some areas were hit harder than others, as a fundamental shift occurred from what was once universal, early intervention support to crisis-driven interventions.¹⁴³ Research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies reveals the impact that the closures of youth centres had on young people's attainment. Young people who lost access to a youth club in London, where 30% of youth clubs closed between 2010 and 2019, were found to have performed worse in their GCSE exams. Test scores fell by approximately half a grade, with the impact on pupils eligible for FSM significantly higher.¹⁴⁴

“

The best thing the jobcentre ever did was refer me here.

Young Person, 24, NEET and accessing Onside Employability schemes

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I don't think I would be mentally in the right space if I hadn't come [here].

Young person, accessing voluntary Employability schemes

Chapter 5

What can we do about it?

What can we do about it?

The Government's Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper and the Youth Guarantee both offer real potential to transform young people's access to education, employment and training opportunities. Delivered well, together these policies could work to address some of the key barriers we set out above – particularly for those who face more structural barriers like a lack of access to jobs and opportunities.

However, the Government's current approach to reducing youth inactivity overlooks the problem of 'hidden' NEETs – those who aren't accessing benefits and therefore have little incentive to engage with the support offered under the Youth Guarantee. Addressing this group will require rebuilding the network of wider support

for young people in their communities - to prevent them falling through the gaps in the first place - and if they do, offer them the support to begin re-engaging with services.

To stem the flow of young people becoming NEET, now and in the long term, Government must adopt a preventative approach to supporting young people and remove the barriers they face throughout childhood. This chapter sets out a vision for a system of support that starts early, reimagines the role of schools in setting young people up for life, and an integrated model of support in communities to prevent young people falling through the gaps.



Strengthening tracking and accountability for young NEETs

Knowing which young people are NEET and where they are, through effective identification and tracking, is crucial to supporting young people through earlier, coordinated and targeted support. Failing to identify risks at an early stage, and provide the necessary support to reduce them, risks disadvantage becoming entrenched with long-term and wide-ranging impacts on a young person's ability to thrive across their lifetime.

Central to this approach is strengthening early identification of risk - starting in the early years - alongside improved data sharing and multi-agency working across education, health and employment, and wider local services. Stronger local authority accountability and ownership, expanded tracking of young people's outcomes beyond age 18, and increased investment in youth and support services are necessary conditions to support this approach.

Early identification should begin at age 5

As part of its 'Get Britain Working' campaign, the Government introduced new guidance for local authorities on using Risk of NEET indicators (RONI) to identify and support individuals at risk of becoming NEET.¹⁴⁶ The guidance recommends local authorities, and educational institutions collaborate through structured data sharing practices to enable identification and targeted interventions. While the guidance provides a strong foundation, the impact of these responsibilities across local authorities will be dependent on effective delivery. The guidance has not been accompanied by additional resources for strengthening collection of data or additional specialist training for staff, which will likely hinder local authorities - particularly those who have been hardest hit by cuts to their budgets in recent years.

The Government's RONI guidance only applies to secondary schools and colleges, missing a crucial opportunity to intervene early. The Netherlands, which historically has the lowest NEET rates among OECD countries, begins assigning students to different educational pathways at age 12, while still allowing students to choose their pathway based on choice and attainment.¹⁴⁷

Research shows that school readiness - measured by Good Level of Development assessed at age five at the end of Reception year - was significantly associated with NEET status. 11% of children who were not school ready became NEET, compared to 4% of those who were school ready.¹⁴⁸ While most of this was explained by the relationship to academic attainment throughout education, there was also a direct impact on risk of becoming NEET.¹⁴⁹ Similarly, research from Connected Bradford linking school absence from the age of 6 to 16 and later risk of becoming NEET at 16-18, demonstrates how linked school data can be used to identify young people at risk of becoming NEET from the earliest moment.¹⁵⁰

Earlier identification of young people at risk of becoming NEET should result in pathways throughout education to ensure young people are getting the support they need to thrive in school and beyond. The Government's proposed Single Unique Identifier (SUI), set out in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools bill, offers a key opportunity to improve data sharing between key agencies across health, education and local authorities. The SUI could be utilised to identify young people at risk of being NEET from the early years.

Strengthen the role of local authorities to track and support 16-17-year-olds

Local authorities have broad duties to 'encourage, enable and assist young people to participate in education to training' until a young person turns 18, which includes the tracking and supporting of 16- and 17-year-olds.¹⁵¹ Statutory guidance requires local authorities to maintain a tracking system to identify 16 and 17-year-olds who are not participating and put in place 'robust arrangements' to identify those young people and support them. However, as set out previously, these duties are weakly enforced and limited by historic cuts to local authority budgets and wider youth provision.

The Government's Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper set out a range of welcome measures to strengthen identification and tracking of young people who are, or who are at risk of, becoming NEET.¹⁵² This includes strengthening sharing of data between local partners to track and monitor young people more effectively, strengthen the role of schools in transition to post-16 education with automatic enrolment in further education for those without a place, and update the RPA Guidance to clarify expectations for the role of schools in post-16 transition preparation. Government will also work with all 16-19 providers to track attendance by students and intervene when attendance starts to decline.

These requirements should be underpinned by additional funding for local authorities to effectively meet these requirements and support young people.

The box below sets out a model of local authority support. Aspects of the service, specifically strong join up with local schools and targeted outreach, offers a blueprint for what an effective system-wide model to support young people looks like. It is worth noting, however, that this authority has a substantial youth offer, backed by senior political prioritisation and substantial investment.

Cuts to youth provision over the past decade have left many local authorities with hollowed out services and a lack of infrastructure, making

it difficult to establish a similar model for supporting their young people.

The Netherlands's low NEET rate is largely attributed to a coordinated, system-wide approach to supporting young people's transitions from education into employment. Youth employment policy is more decentralised than in the UK. The system integrates career guidance, vocational education and training, and employment services alongside financial incentives for employers to hire young people. Employers are also closely involved in designing vocational pathways and apprenticeships, helping ensure training reflects labour market demand.¹⁵³ This coordinated and employer-engaged approach provides wraparound support and smoother pathways into work or education, contributing to significantly lower NEET rates among young people in the Netherlands.

In their response to the Milburn review, the Local Government Association called for the creation of a dedicated Youth Pathways Service across England to improve the local employment and skills offer, connecting 16-24-year-olds at risk of, or who are NEET, with jobs, learning and the support they need locally. This model places local government at the heart of a coordinated response to addressing the NEET crisis, as trusted conveners with access to schools, further and higher education, independent training providers, employment support, health partners, employers and the voluntary sector. Supported by a 'duty to cooperate', this would bring together a more coherent and joined up, locally led, place-based and integrated offer of support for young people across the whole 16-24 age range.

Building on this, and learning from the Youth Guarantee Trailblazers, Government should fund pilots in three local authorities across the country to deliver a test and learn approach to developing a system-wide model of support for young people to prevent them becoming NEET. This should include bringing together strategic partners across education (primary and secondary), the local authority, the voluntary sector, local business and employers, and health

partners to focus on delivering a preventative and early intervention approach – one that begins before 16. These pilots should be rolled out in areas of the country with the highest

rates of young NEETs, and Government should draw insights from the pilots to support scaling the model nationally.

A Local authority's statutory careers service, London

The borough's statutory careers service provides a strong model for how local areas can support young people aged 13 to 19 and up to 25 years if the young person has SEND and an EHCP to reduce the risk of becoming NEET. In 2024/25, the borough recorded its lowest ever NEET rate for 16–17-year-olds.

Targeted offer of support to young people

Every secondary school in the borough, including special schools, is allocated a dedicated careers adviser. All advisers hold a Level 6 professional qualification and are members of the Career Development Institute, which is considered a core strength of the service. Targeted coverage across all schools was identified as a key factor in ensuring early identification and preventing young people from falling through the gaps.

The statutory careers service attends Year 9 and Year 11 options evenings, parents' evenings, and GCSE and A-level results days across participating schools, providing universal careers advice.

Early identification and intervention for young people with SEND

The statutory careers service includes two lead SEND careers advisers who focus on young people with more complex needs, primarily within SEND schools and alternative provision settings. Advisers attend Year 9 transition reviews for children with SEND, and annual EHCP reviews wherever capacity allows. Generic careers advisers in mainstream schools also attend Year 9 transition reviews and annual reviews.

Identification of at risk young people

Careers advisers work closely with each school's Careers Leader, Careers Coordinator, SENCO and wider staff. Formal partnership agreements between schools and the local authority set out shared risk indicators for identifying young people at risk of becoming NEET.

Once a year, the Brokerage and Tracking team requests each school's list of seven to ten highest risk Year 11 students. These young people are allocated to brokerage advisers who begin working with them after GCSEs to support their transition.

All young people identified as at risk receive a one-to-one careers interview in Year 11 with their linked adviser, resulting in a personalised careers action plan and the service also target vulnerable post-16 pupils too.

Tracking and outreach

The Brokerage and Tracking team provides practical employability support, including CV writing, interview preparation, signposting opportunities and mentoring. A regular appointment service offers in person, phone and video appointments.

The service also operates a proactive outreach model. Client support assistants contact young people every four- six week to reengage those identified as NEET or 'not known'. Where outreach is unsuccessful, specialist advisers may conduct home visits, particularly for SEND

learners. A new door knocking initiative for the 'not known' cohort has recently been introduced, supported by the local youth service. The borough's statutory careers service will also be working closely with youth services and will be based in the council's new youth centre one day per week. This will be alongside services such as mental health support, substance misuse services, domestic abuse support, and other services for young people. The service is also working with DWP and the Adult Employment & Skills service to expand access to work experience and training and employer engagement for young people.

Long term destination tracking

Beyond the duty on local authorities to track and monitor the 16–17-year-olds who are NEET in their area (25 for young people with EHCPs), there are no other formal and standardised processes to track the journey of young people through education, employment or training after they turn 18. What results is a cliff-edge in support for young people, and a knowledge gap for local authorities in identifying young people 18 to 24 who are NEET and in need of support. Identifying young NEETs at the older end will be key to the success of the Youth Guarantee offer for the full 16-24 age range.

For 'hidden NEETS', young people who have already disengaged entirely with services, including those not engaging with the benefits system and therefore lacking incentive to engage with support, extending the tracking of young people's NEET status would support local authorities to identify those young people and target them with support and signposting.

The Longitudinal Education Outcomes data from the Department for Education offers a strong blueprint for innovative long-term data tracking, connecting individuals' education data with their employment, benefits and earnings.¹⁵⁴

Recommendations

Government should fund pilots in three local authority areas to develop a system-wide model to prevent young people becoming NEET. Targeted in areas of high number of young NEETs, the pilots should adopt a test and learn approach, and bring together the full range of partners – education (primary and secondary), local authorities, health, voluntary sector, local business and employers – to establish a model of support for young people that starts long before 16.

Government should support local authorities and their partners to strengthen the identification of young people at risk of becoming NEET from age 5, to target support and stem the flow of young people become NEET in the long term.

- The Department for Education should update and strengthen guidance on Risk of NEET Indicator (RONI) approach for local authorities and local partners to identify young people at risk of becoming NEET. This should include:
 - Extending RONI guidance to apply to primary schools, secondary schools and colleges to support identification of at-risk young people from the earliest stage.
 - Explore ways to ensure effective multi-agency data sharing between local partners with a particular focus around key transition points such as primary-secondary transition at 11 and post-16 transition, particularly for children at additional risk of becoming NEET.
- Government should explore options to extend tracking of destination data to 25 to prevent the cliff-edge in access to support and enable local authorities to better identify young 18–24-year-old NEETs, particularly those who have disengaged from services altogether.

Government should support local authorities to strengthen their role in convening partners to deliver a place-based, coordinated response to supporting young people at risk, or who are already, NEET.

- The Department for Education should reassess the duties and responsibilities under the Raising Participation Age to close the gaps in support for 16- and 17-year-olds. This should include:
 - Stronger enforcement of the requirement on local authorities to monitor and track 16-17-year-olds who are NEET, with an additional emphasis on reducing the number of young people classified as ‘activity not known’.
 - Effective oversight and accountability mechanisms to ensure local authorities are meeting their requirements to support 16-17-year-olds.
 - Additional investment to local authorities to meet these requirements and act as local leaders to join up the system of support for young people around transitions.

Strengthening early intervention for at-risk NEETs

Beyond supporting young people who are currently NEET to access support and opportunities, Government’s approach to reversing the trend in the long term must focus on stemming the flow of young people currently in early years settings or school, who are at risk of becoming NEET. Key to this is identifying those children at the earliest possible moment and putting in place early support to mitigate the risk of them becoming NEET further down the line.

Strengthening early intervention for at risk NEETs

The recent Schools White Paper on SEND reform, backed by considerable funding, offers an ambitious plan to put inclusion at the heart of education. Universal support, coupled with Individual Support Plans for all children with SEND on a statutory footing and further funding for ‘Experts at Hand’ will work to reduce strain of the current system and prevent an over-reliance on EHCPs with long wait times.¹⁵⁵ Funding for an Inclusive Early Years Fund and SEND support in Best Start Family Hubs also reflects welcome recognition about the need for a system-wide response to tackling the SEND crisis, with responsibility shared wider than school settings alone.

To maximise the ambition set out in the Schools White Paper to achieve the Government’s ambition to reverse the trend in the rising numbers of young NEETs, stronger and earlier identification of SEND should trigger specialist pathways for children with SEND to access bespoke careers education and guidance.

Supported internships, structured, work-based study programmes for 16–24-year-olds for young people with EHCPs, offer welcome support for young people to

access opportunities and build their skills and confidence in a workplace setting. With reforms in the Schools White Paper set to reduce the number of children with SEND with EHCPs, Government should consider how this will impact young people’s access to these supported pathways and consider widening the programme’s eligibility and extending funding to include young people with identified SEND need who don’t have an EHCP.

Inclusive schools should be at the heart of tackling the NEET trend

Preventing early disengagement from school is fundamental to preventing young people, especially those facing additional barriers, from becoming NEET. Children who experience poorer educational outcomes, particularly those with SEND and from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds, are the same children who are more likely to end up NEET.

New research has shown that secondary schools considered more inclusive, defined by fewer suspensions, support for lower-achieving pupils to make good progress (progress 8 scores) and those which have their own post-16 provision, see fewer young people dropping out of education or training after Year 11.¹⁵⁶

The Schools White Paper is a significant step forward in driving transformation across the education system, tackling lost learning, providing better early support for children with SEND and unidentified needs, and encouraging system-wide integration and collaboration to ensure every child achieves and thrives in education. The White Paper reflects many of the recommendations in the Centre for Young Lives’s vision for inclusion defined by high standards and aspirations for every child to thrive.¹⁵⁷

The challenge facing the government will now be to ensure the implementation of these ambitious reforms is effective and consistent, and that early support to reduce NEETs sits at the heart of the reformed education system.

We also recommended for the Department for Education to extend the live Pupil Attendance dashboard to include the school roll to reflect which schools are serving their communities, and which aren't, including further steps to monitor the school roll including statutory guidance on managed moves. We call on

Government to support schools to play a greater roll in tracking long term pupil outcomes data.

An education system that has true inclusion at its heart is key to reversing the trend of rising NEETs, by driving down barriers to learning for young people, particularly those who are at a greater risk of becoming NEET. In their response to the NEET challenge, Government must recognise the transformative role of education in setting young people up to progress into the world of work.

Recommendations

The implementation of the Schools White Paper should ensure the potential of mainstream inclusion is maximised for reducing NEETs.

- The White Paper's ambitions are welcome, and tackling NEETs early through inclusive education and reducing lost learning should be a priority for the implementation of these reforms.
- As part of this, the Department for Education should support schools, in partnership with local authorities, to strengthen their role in the collection of pupils' outcomes data at 25 to identify young people who are NEET and target them with support.

Government should build on the ambitions in the Schools White Paper to strengthen access to specialist employment support pathways for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

- Government should support local authorities to establish a dedicated Destinations and Progression Service in every local area to coordinate support for smooth transitions for young people with identified SEND. This should include support around primary-secondary school and post-16 transition.
- The Department for Education should expand the eligibility of supported internships programmes to include young people with special educational needs without an ECHP.

A whole-school approach to careers education

Key to reversing the trend of rising young people not in education, employment or training, now and for the long term, is transforming the way in which the system sets young people up to leave education and enter the world of work. While recent government announcements on driving down youth unemployment have been positive, Government's approach is still overlooking the transformative role education can play in determining a young person's outcomes.

A more proactive, education-led and skills-first approach can better prepare young people for the transition into work and reduce the risk of becoming NEET. Young people need one that embeds consistent, high-quality careers education much earlier in their school journey, supported by stronger partnerships between schools, families, employers and local services. A whole-school approach that supports wellbeing, confidence-building and essential life skills is key to improving work readiness and broadening aspirations.

Equal access to consistent, high-quality careers education

Efforts to boost access to apprenticeships through incentive schemes and new Foundation Apprenticeships will expand the availability of these opportunities. However, failing to properly inform young people of the benefits of alternative pathways may limit the success of these new opportunities. Guidance on informing young people about the full range of post-16 options, and places apprenticeships and other routes on par with university, should be standardised across schools to allow young people to make fully informed decisions about their future.

In 2025, the Government published updated guidance confirming that all secondary schools, colleges and independent training

providers are expected to adopt the updated Gatsby Benchmarks. Government should also support schools and colleges to target young people facing additional barriers such as lower economic background and SEND with specialist careers guidance to ensure there is equal access to support and opportunities.

Likewise, access to employers and work experience opportunities are essential in supporting young people to shape their aspirations, gain crucial experience of a professional environment, and in some cases build connections with mentors or strong role models. The Government has committed to giving all school and college students entitlement to two weeks of work experience as part of the Youth Guarantee. However, only 36% of young people had access to work experience in secondary school in 2025, and only 38% of those had work experience in jobs they were interested in.¹⁵⁸ Ensuring this entitlement delivers high-quality experience for young people will require strong partnerships between schools and local employers to open up pathways to opportunities for young people.

Despite these positive developments, significant challenges remain for schools to deliver guidance, support and access to work experience. Schools are overstretched, underfunded and increasingly tasked with additional responsibilities beyond the classroom and curriculum. Without additional and sustained investment into secondary schools, including additional training for teachers and senior staff to embed a whole-school approach to careers that encompasses wider factors such as attendance, wellbeing, behaviour and attainment, the new guidance for schools will fall flat in delivering high quality support for young people.

Better careers education that starts at Year 7

A common experience we heard from young people was that the only the careers advice or support they received was in year 11. By this point, they had already selected their GCSE subjects which narrowed their opportunities, and their time was taken up with exams leaving them with little capacity to really think about what they wanted to do after school.

Embedding a whole-school approach to careers advice and the choices facing young people at 16 would reinforce an idea that schools are there to support young people to thrive and achieve throughout their life, not just to get a young person to their next destination.

The Future Skills Questionnaire (FSQ) is a digital tool by the Careers and Enterprise Company to evaluate student's career readiness at key points of transition in secondary education – capturing a holistic image of career-related knowledge, skills and attitudes to provide insights that support targeted interventions.¹⁵⁹ The FSQ can be delivered as early as Year 7, and then at regular intervals across education, including later transition points. Combined with wider feedback around pupil wellbeing, the FSQ is an effective tool to identify at risk young people as early as possible.

A Coherent System to Prevent young NEETs, Three Spires Trust

Early Identification of at-risk young people

The Trust employs a model to ensure early identification of risk underpinned by robust data and a relational approach where staff are supported to interpret and act on early indicators of disengagement to prevent

“

That would be really helpful – before you're selecting your GCSEs, that you could have a talk about what you think you want to do.

Young Person

A whole-school approach to careers advice and support should include a role for parents and carers, particularly those of young people at increased risk of becoming NEET. We heard from schools and local authority NEET practitioners that often parents and carers were under-informed about the support that exists for their child as they transition out of school and were poorly supported to help their child. Proactive engagement with parents and carers should be an essential element of a school and local authority approach to support a young person at risk of becoming NEET.

NEETs. A trust-wide NEET risk register spans Years 8 to 11, providing a framework for identifying vulnerability, including indicators such as low school attendance, behavioural concerns or suspensions, low levels of classroom engagement, children with SEND or SEMH needs, low attainment, or persistent disadvantage. These indicators

are reviewed regularly within multi-disciplinary forums to ensure a holistic view is taken of the data. Staff engage with the NEET risk register as a dynamic tool to inform meetings around whole-year groups, safeguarding or cross-disciplinary reviews.

To deliver a relational approach, a deliberate and sustained programme of professional development boosts the capacity and ability of all staff to identify children at risk and intervene early. Training focuses on developing a shared, evidence-informed understanding of disengagement trajectories that draw on widely used principles in early intervention to support staff to interpret a range of indicators beyond headline data. Particular emphasis is placed on identifying 'quiet disengagement' with staff trained to notice patterns of withdrawal or lack of aspiration and treat those as potential indicators of vulnerability.

An inclusive curriculum

A key aspect of the Trust's approach is its NextGEN curriculum, one that is explicitly designed to address a significant driver of disengagement: the perception that education can lack relevance. The NextGEN curriculum embeds strands across all phases of learning including AI and digital literacy, Oracy, Careers Education and Financial literacy, to equip young people with the life skills they need, relevant to the modern world they will transition to after 16. These strands are woven through school subjects and pastoral programmes.

A whole-school approach to careers education

Three Spires engages an approach to careers education through the Equalex framework, developed in partnership with the Careers and Enterprise Company and Inspire Learning Group. Rather than episodic interventions, Equalex establishes

a structured, progressive approach that begins in Year 7, and is increasingly being extended into primary provision, to support students to develop awareness of future pathways from the earliest possible moment – as part of a universal offer.

From Key Stage 4 onwards, Three Spires Trust adopt an expansive and deliberately structured approach to progression through its post-14 pathways offer. Central to the approach is the 'My Future' programme which provides a coherent framework for linked education and careers from an early stage. The Trust introduces students from Year 7 to a broad range of industries, roles and future possibilities, through carefully sequenced exposure that allows younger children to explore widely in Key Stage 3 (years 3-6) before choosing their subjects in Year 9. The pathways throughout education are strengthened through sustained partnerships with employers, training providers and community organisations to broaden access to opportunity and experience – allowing pupils to engage with real-world contexts through workplace visits, employer-led projects, mentoring and exposure to authentic industry practices.

Three Spires also offer a range of experiential and interest-driven programmes such as Sports Academies, e-gaming, outdoor education, music provision and hospitality experience. Crucially these opportunities are positioned not as alternative to academic success, but instead, complementary and equally valid routes through which students can achieve and progress.

Strong Transitions

A defining feature of the Three Spires model is the post-16 Foundation Year, designed for students at the end of Year 11 who are not yet ready to access traditional college courses, apprenticeships or employment. Rather than allowing these young people to fall into

NEET status, the Foundation Year offers a structured, high-support environment that extends the educational journey. It includes intensive teaching and support in core subjects, a blended curriculum that integrating employability skills, vocational

exploration with academic learning, strong pastoral and mentoring support, and a focus on building confidence, independence and readiness for progression.

Building confidence and supporting wellbeing

A whole-school approach to careers advice and support should include building up the wider skills necessary to thrive in adulthood. Beyond passing exams and career specific advice and support, school is where young people develop the foundational skills to carry them through

their lives. Confidence, resilience and wellbeing are critical attributes that set young people up to face the challenges in adulthood – more specifically, the challenges they will likely face entering employment. The ability to confidently communicate in a professional environment or present yourself and your strengths are essential skills when applying for jobs.



Start building young people's confidence really early on – being able to talk about yourself confidently and in a professional way...when you get to the later years, other things get in the way.

Young Person, 19

Embedding these skills into the curriculum – confidence in public speaking, building resilience and the 'soft skills' required in the professional world – is an effective preventative tool for setting young people up to leave school and mitigate the impact of the challenges of the current job market on their mental health. Some young people highlighted the benefit of extra-curricular enrichment activities like Duke of Edinburgh in helping them to build confidence and skills.

As part of the Department for Education's ambition to make schools more inclusive, young people – especially those at greater risk of becoming NEET – should have access to low-level mental health support in schools, with schools supported to develop a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing.

Recommendations

Government should support schools and colleges to embed a whole-school approach to careers guidance and support, underpinned by sustainable additional funding.

The Department for Education and Department for Work and Pensions should build on commitments in the Post-16 Education and Skills White paper and establish a cross-departmental taskforce to ensure high quality and consistent careers education in schools and colleges.

- The Department for Education and Department for Work and Pensions should publish comprehensive joint guidance for secondary schools and colleges to develop a whole-school approach to careers. This should build on Government's drive towards inclusion and should have guidance on:
 - Supporting identification of at-risk young people, drawing on the Risk of NEET Indicators. This should include work with local authority attendance teams.
 - Establish clear pathways to wraparound support for children at risk of becoming NEET, such as Best Start Family Hubs, Young Futures Hubs and wider local support.
 - Embedding professional and life skills education into the curriculum to support young people's understanding of the world of work and to develop 'soft skills' to improve work readiness.

- Delivering well-informed, consistent, unbiased information on the full range of opportunities available to young people including apprenticeships, technical and vocational routes and other qualification pathways.
- Developing a whole-school strategy to careers education and support which includes strong partnerships with local authorities, parents and carers, local employers and wider local support services.
- Effective tracking and monitoring of post-16 destinations to ensure young people who drop out receive the necessary support

Government should match ambition with additional, sustainable joint funding for schools and colleges to deliver a whole-school approach to careers education.

The role of employers

The future of the workforce depends on young people, and there is a role for employers in recognising the potential of young people and supporting them to thrive. Bringing employers

more formally on board with Government efforts to support young people into work must be a core element of a society-wide approach to reversing the NEET trend.

As one of the largest private employers of young people in the UK – with over 100,000 staff under the age of 25 – McDonald's has delivered several initiatives over the years to unlock opportunities for young people. In 2018, McDonald's achieved the National Youth Friendly Employer Award from Youth Employment UK in recognition of its commitment to young people.

In partnership with Children In Need, McDonald's rolled out the 'Makin' It' initiative which funded 500 new youth work qualifications and created safe spaces in restaurants by connecting all 1,450 restaurants with youth services. The programme reflects a recognition of the challenges young people today are facing, embedding access to support through

trusted adults and wider youth services as a means of opening up pathways to opportunity for young people.

Last month, McDonald's UK and Ireland launched a national campaign aimed at celebrating the role of young people and their role in the business – focused on highlighting the opportunities on offer for young workers at a time when confidence in job prospects for young people is too often uncertain, and challenges the negative perception of young workers. The campaign shines a spotlight on the skills young people develop as an employee, including teamwork, leadership, communication and resilience.

Not all businesses are in the position to establish programmes like Makin' It at such a scale, and there is a recognition that recent policy decisions have added additional challenges for employers in hiring more young people. However, employers – particularly in sectors with high youth employment – should be supported to do what they can to encourage young people into employment and support them to thrive in the workplace.

Building on the financial incentives recently announced for employers to hire young people who have been out of work, Government should

deepen their engagement with employers to maximise these schemes and offer meaningful opportunities to young people. This should include working with employers to develop National Standards and a Kitemark for youth-friendly employers, supported by guidance on best practice for supporting young employees. The Youth Friendly Employer Award from Youth Employment UK is a quality kitemark that assesses organisations against a best practice framework, supporting organisations to embed a youth friendly employment culture and ensure best value from recruitment, training and development strategies.¹⁶⁰ The

Welsh Government's National Participation Standards (NPS) similarly works to embed good practice among organisations – particularly local authorities in this case - working with children and young people, supported by tools such the NPS Charter and Kitemark to support implementation of the Standards.¹⁶¹

Government should learn from these approaches to develop a National Charter and Kitemark for youth-friendly employment, underpinned by guidance and resources for employers who are looking to strengthen

and embed a youth-friendly approach to employment. This should include support for organisations to establish youth-friendly recruitment processes, meaningful work experience opportunities locally and supported pathways for young people into long-term, meaningful opportunities. Building and maintaining partnerships with local schools, colleges, local authorities and wider youth services should be a key element of a place-based approach to embedding youth-friendly practices for employers.

An employer response: McDonald's launches the largest ever work experience programme.

McDonald's, who funded this report, is launching the largest work experience programme in the UK to support young people and unlock opportunity. Launching in the Summer, the initiative will offer 2,500 placements between 2026 and 2027 with an ambition to scale the commitment year on year. The programme will be offered in local communities up and down the country, with a focus on NEET hotspots. Of the initial 2,500 positions in 2026, 625 will be dedicated specifically to young people at risk of becoming NEET.

Participants will develop a range of essential employability skills – from communication and teamwork to time management and resilience – providing

them with a vital platform for career progression. The programme continues a long line of work by McDonald's UK&I to support young people, ranging from Fun Football which provides free football coaching for 5-11 year-olds across 350+ centres in the UK, to Taste for Work which has helped over 144,000 young people develop essential employability skills. Locally, the business also supports the presence of youth workers in a number of restaurants, along with specific community initiatives such as CV clinics and working with local partners to support young people.

Recommendations

Government should work with employers to open up young people's access to opportunities. This should include:

- The Department for Work and Pensions should work with the Department for Education and employers to establish National Standards and a quality Kitemark for best practice in employing and supporting young people. Support for employers to deliver best practice should include:
 - Delivering meaningful work experience opportunities to young people, including through embedding youth workers into work experience opportunities.
 - Youth-friendly recruitment processes to encourage young people to enter the workforce
 - Building and maintaining place-based partnerships between employers, schools and colleges to create access to opportunities, mentoring opportunities, skills-sharing and locally led pathways into work – particularly for young people who are at risk of being NEET.

- Best practice for employers to support young people with additional needs, including poor mental health – through partnerships with local support services and access to specialist training and resources.

Employers should work to tackle the 'Experience Catch 22' for young people by providing more early opportunities for young people and unlocking pathways into sustained employment. Employers should seek to expand opportunities for high-quality work experience or work placements. This should be driven by place-based partnerships between schools, colleges and employers to deliver early exposure to industries and professional environments for young people, and work with schools and colleges to strengthen young people's work readiness.

Targeted support to break the link between poor mental health and unemployment

At the time of writing, both the Milburn Review into youth inactivity, the Timms Review on welfare and the prevalence review into rising demand on mental health, Autism and ADHD services are all ongoing. These reviews are likely to have joint implications in understanding how systems of support are currently working to support young people, particularly those with poor mental health.

To break the link between poor mental health and inactivity and unemployment, support must come earlier for young people to prevent problems escalating. Without that early intervention, young people instead are being signed off as too sick to work – often then becoming trapped in a welfare system that isn't equipped to support them to re-enter work.

Support should focus on creating the conditions that will support young people, focusing on what they can do with the right support, instead of what they can't. Investing in early intervention and preventative support for young people in their communities must be front and centre of Government efforts to reverse the trend of rising economic inactivity. Given three quarters of all mental health problems present before 24, supporting young people's mental health early will have long-term benefits to the overall health of the population, preventing mental health problems escalating into adulthood with lifelong consequences.

Joining up wider services to offer early mental health interventions

In 2025, the Department for Work and Pensions announced nine 'inactivity' trailblazers across England and Wales, established in areas of

highest economic inactivity to help people back into employment. In October, the Government announced an additional £80m to deliver mental health support and peer support groups to build confidence, skills and break down barriers to work like social isolation.¹⁶² Early successes from these trailblazers – targeted at all ages – highlight the benefit of integrating support to break down barriers to employment. Funding decisions have been devolved to local and regional authorities to reflect the unique challenges different areas face.

Some similar efforts have been made to integrate support for young people at-risk of becoming NEET. It is positive to see both DWP Youth Hubs and Young Futures Hubs have committed to providing wellbeing offers, but this risks only increasing the burden on already overstretched CAMHS if hubs are only acting as a signpost to the young people with higher levels of need, rather than holding and meeting some of this need within the hubs.

To avoid this, both DWP and DCMS should work with DHSC to establish a meaningful mental health offer within the hubs. Our recent paper, published with the Future Minds and Fund the Hubs campaigns, called for NHS clinical oversight within Young Futures Hubs to ensure that children and young people with a wide range of needs can be appropriately supported with effective psychologically informed assessment and triage, safeguarding, and evidence-based interventions.¹⁶³

Specialist pathways for young people with poor mental health

Given the cyclical relationship between poor mental health and being NEET, efforts to reverse these trends should be closely aligned.

Government should learn from the success of Individual Placement and Support in supporting people with poor mental health into meaningful opportunities, adopting the model

to specifically target young people who are NEET. Rolling out IPS in DWP Youth Hubs with a particular focus on those with more acute mental health problems would strengthen the mental health and wellbeing offer in Hubs and work to break the cyclical link between poor mental health and unemployment by ensuring young people at the sharper end of inactivity and poor mental health have access to the right specialist support.

Individual Placement and Support

Individual placement and support (IPS) is an evidence-based model of supported employment. It has been rigorously trialled and has consistently outperformed all other tested forms of support for job seekers with severe and enduring mental health problems, consistently increasing paid employment and job duration, particularly for young people.¹⁶⁴ Since 2023, the number of people supported through IPS in the UK has grown by 85% to just under 50,000 in August 2025.¹⁶⁵

IPS typically involves personalised, one-to-one support from a dedicated employment specialist, with rapid job search support

tailored to individual preference and need, alongside close integration with clinical mental health services.¹⁶⁶ The service also includes in-work support once employment is secured, for both the employer and the client.

There have been more recent moves to deliver this service to support young people, however this has been slow. The IPS-Y model is adapted is a tailored adaptation of the IPS model that focuses not only on employment, but also on education as a vital recovery outcome, offering intensive family involvement, creative use of social media and hands-on support.¹⁶⁷

Employment advisers embedded in NHS Talking Therapy sites is a prime example of how support can be joined up to break the link between mental health and unemployment. Funding for the programme was extended to 2025/26, however there remains a lack of clarity from Government around the future funding of the programme. Government should set out a long-term plan for funding Employment Advisers in Talking Therapy services, including expanding the service to bring down youth inactivity as a result of rising poor mental health. In a previous report from Centre for Young Lives, we called on Government to rollout new youth Talking Therapy Teams for 16–25-year-olds, with

a particular focus on young people who were NEET as a result of poor mental health.¹⁶⁸

The Centre for Young Lives has previously called for national guidance on social prescribing for children and young people, supported by a test and learn approach to identify what works best. Our engagement with young people and practitioners working with young NEETs both identified benefits to social prescribing as a crucial first step to re-engaging young people – in particular those with poor mental health, anxiety or low confidence – with services and support, before accessing employment support.

Recommendations

Government should work jointly to tackle the link between poor mental health and unemployment among young people.

- The Department for Work and Pensions and Department of Health and Social Care should expand pathways to mental health support targeted to young people not in education, employment and training with a wide range of mental health support, through a dedicated joint funding pot. Support should include:
 - New Youth Talking Therapy Teams for 16–25-year-olds, with a particular focus on targeting young people who are at risk, or currently not in education, employment or training.
 - Funding to pilot Individual Placement and Support in DWP Hubs to provide specialist support to young people with more acute mental health problems.
 - New national guidance on social prescribing for children and young people to connect young people with the right support who are at risk of becoming NEET or have disengaged with services altogether.

Government should increase investment into early support for young people's mental health to reverse the trend of inactivity due to poor mental health.

- The Department for Education should increase investment in children and young people's mental health services, with an ambitious target to reduce the treatment gap by the end of Parliament. Investment should be weighted towards early intervention and preventative support in community settings.
- The Department for Culture, Media and Sport and Department of Health and Social Care should fund strengthening the offer of mental health support through Young Futures Hubs, including NHS clinical oversight within Hubs.

The Department for Health and Social Care and Department for Education should strengthen the offer of mental health support for children and young people in schools, particularly those with SEND.

- This should include offering tailored support for groups of children and young people who are currently underserved by Mental Health Support Teams, such as neurodivergent young people. The model should also be further expanded to meet a wider range of needs, by integrating wider school-based provision, including school counselling and nursing services, and embed relational care approaches.

Joined-up support for young people at risk of becoming NEET

Effective support for young people at risk of becoming NEET requires a multi-agency, integrated approach that bridges gaps in support for young people – particularly around key transition points from primary school to post-16. Services should reflect what we know young people want and need from support, learning from models of best practice delivered across the country, and by voluntary organisations.

An integrated model of support for young people

An integrated, joined-up offer of support is fundamental to closing current gaps in the system and preventing young people falling through those gaps. Young people at risk of being NEET - more likely to get lost or left behind because of the additional barriers they face - would benefit most from effective, joined-up community-based support

Recent Government policy has been moving in the right direction, making positive inroads to strengthening wider wraparound support for young people, through Best Start Family Hubs, Young Futures and DWP Youth Hubs. The challenge will now be ensuring these initiatives work together to identify young people who are struggling and ensure they have access to the support they need.

Best Start Family Hubs are well placed to support early identification of at-risk young people as early as five. Hubs should be a core partner in local efforts to strengthen early identification of young people at risk of being NEET – including those from deprived backgrounds, families where parents may themselves be struggling with their mental health or have involvement with children's services, social care or the criminal justice system - as well as providing support to young parents who are at a much higher risk of becoming NEET. Strengthening this link should be a key priority for Best Start Family Hubs, with DWP as a core partner and Hubs investing in strong working relationships with local Jobcentres to deliver employment support through Hubs.¹⁶⁹

Joining up these initiatives to provide seamless transitions between services, prevent cliff-edges of support and increasing young people's access to support in their communities will serve to maximise and align the ambitions of these policies and deliver across a broad range of Government's missions. A key focus of Government in the rollout of the Youth Guarantee should be supporting local areas to join up the full offer of support and integrate mental health and employment support across services working to support young people.

Recommendations

To strengthen the network of support for young NEETs, or those at risk of becoming NEET, a key focus of the Government's rollout of the Youth Guarantee should be supporting local areas to integrate support for young people.

Government should adopt a cross-departmental approach to join up the support for young people at risk of becoming not in education, employment and training

- Government should establish a cross-departmental strategy to integrate support for young people at risk of being NEET. The strategy should bring together the Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Education, Department for Culture, Media and Sport and Department of Health and Social Care to:

- Align current and future Government initiatives that support young people at risk of becoming NEET, such as Young Futures Hubs, Early Support Hubs, Best Start Family Hubs, DWP Youth Hubs and new Neighbourhood Health Centres.
- Publish joint comprehensive guidance for relevant local partners to strengthen identification of young people at risk of being NEET and establish clear pathways for support. Guidance should seek support local areas to establish and maintain strong partnerships between the services listed above.



Conclusions

The trend of rising young NEETs is undoubtedly one of the most significant challenges facing young people. But it is not just a challenge for the younger generations. Left unaddressed, the consequences of rising youth unemployment and inactivity will be felt by everyone: government, employers, the wider workforce, the economy.

But this outcome is not inevitable. Young people we spoke to were loud and clear: they are hopeful and ambitious about their futures and they want to work. They want purpose, independence and the chance to build something for themselves. Yet, what too many of them have encountered instead is a system that has continuously let them down - one that identified their needs too late, prepared them inadequately for the world of work, and left them without the right support at the precise moments when it mattered most.

As it stands, we are at a crucial turning point, and there is much to be hopeful about. The current Government has placed young people's economic participation at the heart of its agenda, and the Milburn Review signals a serious attempt to understand the drivers of youth inactivity rather than simply managing its symptoms. Several commitments, including the Youth Guarantee, the Skills White Paper, the Schools White Paper and the Youth Matters strategy together represent a genuine shift in political will to support young people and realise their potential.

And yet, as we set out in this report, without a fundamental shift towards a system-wide approach to tackling the NEET challenge - with early intervention at the core and effective support that continues throughout a young person's journey to 16 - there is a risk that even in unlocking new opportunities through the Youth Guarantee, failure to engage in longer-term thinking will undermine efforts and limit their impact.

This report set out a series of ambitious recommendations which - if taken together - would enable the government to shift the dial for good, and for generations to come.

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