No Young Person Left Behind:

Unlocking Opportunities for Young People Facing the Greatest Barriers to Education and Employment

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BARNARDO'S

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Foreword

by Lynn Perry MBE, CEO Barnardo's

> **"If I can work, if I do what I need to do, I can be anyone I want, even that kind of concept is liberating."**
>
> Young person supported by Barnardo's

Nearly one million young people across the UK are currently not in education, employment or training - that's around one in eight 16 to 24-year-olds.

This is more than a statistic. Behind every number is a young person with their own hopes, ambitions and talents, looking for a chance to build the future they dream of. Yet too many face barriers that make it hard to access opportunities and take the next step in life.

And the consequences can be far-reaching. Spending time out of education, employment or training when you're young can increase the risk of poverty, poorer health and unemployment later in life. It can undermine confidence and lead to a cycle of disadvantage.

At Barnardo's, creating opportunities for children and young people has been part of our mission from the very beginning. When Thomas Barnardo opened his first homes, helping children learn a trade and develop the skills to build an independent future was at the heart of his approach. Now, 160 years later, that commitment remains unchanged.

Today we support thousands of young people who are struggling to take the first step on the career ladder. We provide tailored support that responds to individual needs, helping young people gain qualifications, secure apprenticeships and move into work, often in partnership with employers including Amazon and IKEA amongst other valued partners. Through this work, we see first-hand both the challenges young people face and the incredible potential they have when given the right support.

The government recently asked the Rt Hon Alan Milburn to lead an independent review into the rising number of young people who are not engaged in education, employment or training. His interim findings provide a sobering reminder of the scale of the challenge and the urgent need for action. While we welcome measures already announced, including the Youth Guarantee, the Jobs Guarantee and support with some of the costs associated with employment, the review makes it clear that more needs to be done to ensure every young person can access the opportunities they need to thrive.

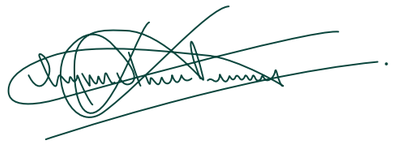
As the government considers the next steps, it is vital that young people's experiences remain at the centre of the conversation.

Combining a nationally representative survey of 1,000 young people with focus groups involving young people supported by Barnardo's, discussions with frontline colleagues and interviews with employers, *No Young Person Left Behind* provides a rich picture of the experiences of those navigating the transition from school into further education, training and employment. Importantly, it shines a light on the experiences of young people facing multiple and complex barriers to engagement, including poor mental health, special educational needs and disabilities, care experience and poverty. By understanding why some young people face greater barriers than others, and what makes the greatest difference in helping them achieve their goals, we can build a system that reaches those who need support most. We know that a system that works for those furthest from employment will work for everyone else as well.

What we heard was clear. Young people want to work. They want independence, security and the chance to build the futures they imagine for themselves. Yet many feel locked out of opportunities because of poor mental health, financial pressures, a lack of work experience or difficulties accessing the right support at the right time.

The recommendations in this report are informed by lived experience and shaped by what young people working with Barnardo's told us would make the greatest difference. We must listen to them.

Together, we can create a system that is truly on young people's side, one that recognises their strengths, responds to the challenges they face and gives every young person the chance to thrive.



Lynn Perry, MBE
Chief Executive, Barnardo's

Barnardo's Recommendations for Change

Based on what young people have told us, Barnardo's is calling on the government to ensure support is available for all children and young people, including those facing the greatest challenges to participation. This requires targeted, joined-up approaches that addresses barriers early, provides tailored interventions, and prevents any children and young people from being left behind.

The following recommendations set out the key actions needed to achieve this. Together, these recommendations reflect a journey through key transition points in a child or young person's life, from careers support in school, through post-16 participation, to accessing and sustaining employment in adulthood.

Ensure Every Child Can Access High-Quality Careers Support. The government should strengthen the careers framework and invest in careers provision so that all children can access high-quality careers guidance, employer engagement and work experience. Those facing the greatest barriers should receive targeted support, such as personalised careers coaching, mentoring and additional work-based and transition support, to help level the playing field and ensure they can build the networks, experiences and confidence needed to access future opportunities.

No Child Should Fall Through the Cracks at 16. The government should review and strengthen the post-16 participation framework established by the Education and Skills Act 2008. The aim should be to ensure it creates clear, shared responsibilities across local authorities, schools, academy trusts, colleges and specialist providers both for identifying young people at risk of not participating in education or training, and for supporting those who are not currently participating to reconnect with appropriate support and opportunities. This should be backed by dedicated funding for targeted transition, participation and re-engagement support

Reduce Financial Barriers to Participation: The government should take further action to ensure financial hardship is never a barrier to education, training or employment. This should include strengthening the 16-19 Bursary Fund to better support participation in post-16 education and training, and introducing a Youth Opportunity Grant for young people aged 18 and over, helping with essential costs such as travel, work clothing, tools and equipment to move towards, or enter, employment.

Invest in Programmes that Both Address Barriers and Unlock Employment: The government should ensure that all young people who are struggling to access or sustain employment can access a tailored programme of integrated, employment-focused support. Support should be based on need rather than benefit status, helping young people develop the confidence, resilience and transferable skills needed to navigate a changing world of work. Programmes should combine personalised support with strong employer engagement, address practical barriers to employment, and focus on helping young people move into and remain in sustainable work. The government must ensure that any changes to the benefit system for young people do not put them at risk of poverty

A note on terminology

Throughout this report, we have sought to use language that reflects the experiences and perspectives of the children and young people Barnardo's supports. While we recognise that 'NEET' has become firmly established within policy and research discussions and provides a useful statistical measure, it can also oversimplify a diverse range of experiences.

Many of the young people we spoke to told us that they do not identify with the term 'NEET' and feel it reduces them to a label. They emphasised that young people in this position are not all the same: their experiences, circumstances, aspirations and support needs vary enormously. We heard concerns that the term focuses on what children and young people are not doing, rather than recognising them as individuals with their own strengths, experiences and potential.

For this reason, Barnardo's does not generally use the term 'NEET' to describe children and young people. Instead, we seek to use language that reflects the specific circumstances being discussed and recognises children and young people as individuals. Where the term 'NEET' appears in this report, it is generally because we are referring to official statistics, existing research, government policy, or the language used in quotations and source material.

Chapter One: The Scale of the Youth Unemployment Challenge

Nearly one million children and young people[1] in the UK - around one in eight 16- to 24-year-olds - are not in education, employment or training (NEET)[2]. After rising steadily since 2021, this number has remained stubbornly high, reaching a 12-year peak in early 2026[3]. The impact is significant both for young people and for wider society, with the annual cost to the UK estimated at £125 billion[4].

Research from the 1970 British Cohort Study highlights the lasting consequences that can arise when children and young people are unable to access education or employment opportunities at a critical stage in their lives. The study found links with lower earnings, poorer health and wellbeing, greater social disadvantage, and an increased likelihood of being out of work later in life[5].

In 2025, the government commissioned the Rt. Hon Alan Milburn to lead an independent review into the growing number of young people who are not in education, employment or training. The review was tasked with understanding the factors driving this rise, particularly among young people with health conditions and disabilities, and identifying how government can better support young people to access opportunities and fulfil their potential. Its interim Young People and Work report, published in spring 2026, delivered an assessment of the challenge, warning that without urgent action the number of young people outside education, employment and training could reach 1.25 million by 2031, risking a "lost generation"[6]. A second and final report, focused on solutions, is expected in Autumn 2026. Prime Minister Andy Burnham has also identified reducing the number of young people who are outside education, training and employment as a key priority for his government, stressing the need to ensure that every young person has access to the opportunities and support they need to build a successful future.

1.1 Disadvantage and Access to Education, Training and Employment

The challenges that can leave young people outside education, training or employment are not experienced equally. Research shows that some children and young people face greater barriers than others, many of which emerge during childhood and adolescence and reflect wider inequalities in education, health, family circumstances and access to opportunity.[7][8] These include:

- Poor educational attainment, persistent school absence and exclusions;
- Having special educational needs (SEND);
- Having a limiting disability, physical health condition or Hental health condition;
- Care experience;
- Caring responsibilities;
- Parental factors such as educational attainment, employment status and income;
- Becoming a parent at a young age;
- Family adversity during childhood including persistent poverty and poor parental mental health;
- Migration status;
- Contact with police and the criminal justice system;
- Living in areas of deprivation;
- Ethnic background, with higher risks reported among some groups, including young people from White Gypsy or Irish Traveller communities, Black, African and Caribbean, White and Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds.[9][10]

40% of care leavers aged 19 - 21 were not in education, employment or training compared to an estimated 15% of all 19-21 year olds.*

These risk factors rarely occur in isolation. Research by the National Centre for Social Research for the Youth Futures Foundation found substantial overlap between different forms of disadvantage, with most young people experiencing multiple risk factors rather than a single barrier[11]. Crucially, the likelihood of a child or young person struggling to engage in education or employment increases as risk factors accumulate. In other words, young people facing several forms of disadvantage at the same time are at significantly greater risk than those experiencing a single challenge in isolation. The findings in this report reflect this; across Barnardo's services, young people and practitioners describe experiencing several challenges at the same time, often in ways that reinforce one another.

While some children and young people spend only a short period outside education, training or employment before re-engaging, others face barriers that make it much harder to access these opportunities over a longer period. Recent analysis by the Youth Futures Foundation found that poor health, disability and lower qualification levels are among the factors associated with an increased likelihood of spending prolonged periods outside education, training or employment, with these challenges often overlapping. The Young People and Work interim report also highlighted poor health, particularly mental ill-health, as one of the most significant barriers preventing many young people from participating in education, training and work[12]. At the same time, spending prolonged periods without access to these opportunities can itself have lasting consequences. Research shows that extended periods outside education, training or employment between the ages of 16 and 24 are associated with poorer employment prospects, greater financial hardship, and worse physical and mental health later in life.

An effective approach to tackling the crisis therefore needs to both reduce the unequal barriers to participation in the first place, while preventing short periods of disconnection from becoming prolonged. This means addressing the wider barriers that shape young people's opportunities, alongside timely, flexible and sustained support.

*Department for Education (2026) Release home - Children looked after in England including adoptions

1 When we refer to children as 'NEET', we are referring to 16- and 17-year-olds. Young people classified as 'NEET' are those who are aged 18-24. Mostly, we will refer in this report to children and young people, although we appreciate that this can read oddly at times.
2 Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), Office for National Statistics, August 2026.
3 Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), Office for National Statistics, May 2026.
4 Young people and work: interim report, table 7.
5 *'Long-term consequences of being NEET in early adulthood: initial findings from the 1970 British Cohort Study at Age 51',*
6 Young people and work: interim report
7 Risk factors for being NEET among young people, National Centre for Social Research
8 Unravelling the NEET phenomenon: a systematic literature review and meta-analysis of risk factors for youth not in education, employment, or training
9 Trends in young people not in education, employment or training January – March 2025
10 Children looked after in England including adoptions Reporting year 2025
11 Risk factors for being NEET among young people, National Centre for Social Research
12 Local action on health inequalities: Reducing the number of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET), Public Health England and UCL Institute of Health Equity

1.2 Barnardo's Employment, Training and Skills services

Barnardo's delivers Employment, Skills and Training (ETS) programmes for young people across England, Scotland and Wales. This includes many young people who face multiple and complex barriers to participation in education, employment and training, including those with disabilities, care experience, poor mental health, low educational attainment and/or caring responsibilities.

This experience gives us valuable insight into both the barriers that can lead young people to become NEET and the support that can help them move successfully into education, training and employment.

A key part of this work is Barnardo's JOBS programme, a bespoke 10-week programme for young people aged 16 to 28, delivered through Barnardo's partnerships with employers. Operating across nine locations in the UK, the programme has supported nearly 800 young people between 2021 and 2026, with 649 progressing into a positive destination, including employment, further education, training or an apprenticeship. Through partnerships with employers including Amazon, IKEA and Addleshaw Goddard, JOBS combines tailored employability support with direct routes into work.

In 2025/26 our Employment, Training and Skills services supported

More than 2,200 children and young people

25% of whom had experience of care and 35% of whom disclosed mental health and wellbeing needs

Across our provision in 2025/26

70% gained accredited outcomes

This includes vocational, Maths and/or English qualifications. 69% progressed to a positive destination, defined as employment, further education, training or an apprenticeship

1.3 About this Research

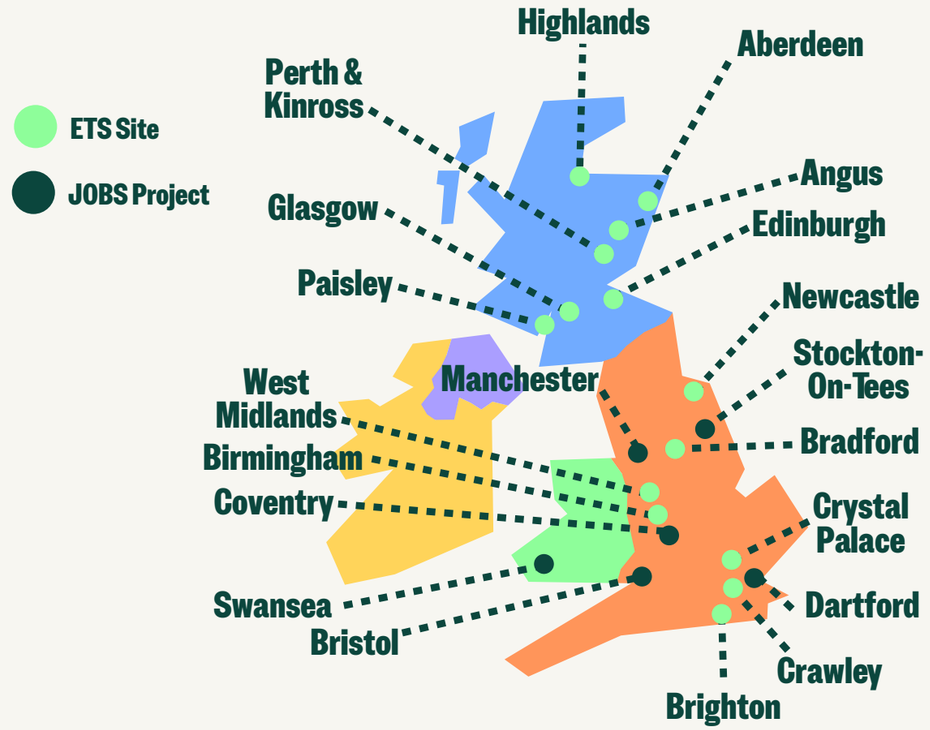
This research was undertaken to develop evidence-informed recommendations for policy and practice. Drawing on primary research with young people, Barnardo's frontline colleagues and employers, alongside wider evidence and Barnardo's experience of young people who have experienced multiple and complex barriers to participation in education, employment and training, the research explores the barriers that shape their pathways into and through education, employment and training and identifies opportunities to improve support and outcomes. At the heart of the report are the voices of children and young people supported through Barnardo's services.

This report is informed by:

- CensusWide polling of 1,000 young people (aged 16-25)
- Three focus groups with young people (aged 18-25) who have accessed Barnardo's services;
- Members of the Barnardo's team who work across our service base delivering Employment, Training and Skills and job readiness support;
- Interviews with two employers involved in delivering employment programmes with Barnardo's; and

Further detail on the methodology used in this research can be found in Annex A.

Where does Barnardo's deliver Employment, Training and Skills services across the UK?



1.4 What our Polling Found[13]

For this report, alongside focus groups with young people and interviews with frontline workers, Barnardo's commissioned a population representative survey of 1,000 children and young people aged 16-24 in England about their experiences of education, employment and support services.

Our polling found that many young people face significant barriers to opportunity:

- More than half of those surveyed (56%) said they had turned down, not applied for, or left an opportunity because they could not afford the costs involved.
- Nearly half (48%) identified a lack of work experience as a barrier to finding work
- 42% felt that their school or college had not prepared them well for choosing a career and entering the world of work.

Our polling also shows that existing support and opportunities are not always reaching or meeting the needs of young people:

- Almost half (45%) of respondents said that after leaving education they did not know where to go for advice or support to help you find work, education or training
- Among those who had accessed work experience or employer engagement opportunities while at school or college, only 30% described these opportunities as helpful.

These findings together suggest that too many young people face significant barriers to accessing opportunities, while the support available to help them navigate the transition into employment is not always reaching or meeting their needs.

13 *Findings from the Censuswide survey should be interpreted as reflecting the views and experiences of young people aged 16 to 25 overall. While they provide important context for understanding the wider challenges facing young people, they are not necessarily representative of the experiences of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), who may face additional or distinct barriers.*

Chapter Two: The Role of Schools in Supporting Successful Transitions into Employment

Schools play an important role in shaping aspirations and supporting young people's understanding of future education, training and employment opportunities. Alongside academic learning, government has set an expectation that schools should help children to explore career options, develop employability skills and gain meaningful exposure to the world of work through careers education, employer engagement and work experience. These experiences can help young people make informed decisions about their futures, build confidence and workplace skills, and better understand the pathways available to them. For some young people, particularly those with limited access to professional networks or workplace opportunities outside school, school-based careers support may provide their main opportunity to develop these experiences and connections. Careers support and work experience can play an important role in reducing the risk of young people becoming disengaged from education, training or employment and supporting successful transitions into adult life.

2.1 What the Evidence Tells us about Careers Education and Work Experience

Research consistently demonstrates the value of effective careers education, employer engagement and work experience in supporting successful transitions into employment. Meaningful encounters with employers can help young people develop a better understanding of the labour market, build confidence, broaden their aspirations and increase awareness of future opportunities[14]. These benefits may be particularly important for disadvantaged young people, who often have fewer opportunities to build relationships with employers and access workplace experiences outside school. Recent evidence found that 41% of young people from more advantaged backgrounds reported opportunities to build relationships with employers, compared with just 29% of disadvantaged young people, highlighting the role schools can play in addressing unequal access to employer networks and career-related opportunities[15].

The importance of careers education has increasingly been recognised in public policy. In recent years, statutory careers guidance has been strengthened through the introduction of the Gatsby Benchmarks[16], a framework of eight benchmarks that set expectations for careers education in schools and colleges, including employer engagement, work experience and access to personalised careers guidance. The framework has helped establish a more consistent approach to careers provision and increased the focus on preparing young people for life beyond school. There is evidence that these reforms have had a positive impact. Recent analysis estimates that current levels of careers provision contribute to around 6,000 additional young people entering sustained education, employment or training (EET) after age 18 each year, highlighting the important role that high-quality careers provision can play in supporting positive post-school destinations[17].

However, evidence suggests that these improvements have not yet translated into consistently high-quality careers support for all young people. Workforce shortages, resource pressures and unequal access to employer networks continue to limit the effectiveness of careers provision, particularly for disadvantaged young people. The Career Development Policy Group has highlighted significant workforce pressures, including shortages of qualified careers professionals, with 29% of careers practitioners reporting that they intend to leave the profession due to retirement or dissatisfaction with pay and conditions[18]. As a result many children still leave school at 16 without the information, skills and experiences needed to successfully navigate the transition into further education or employment.

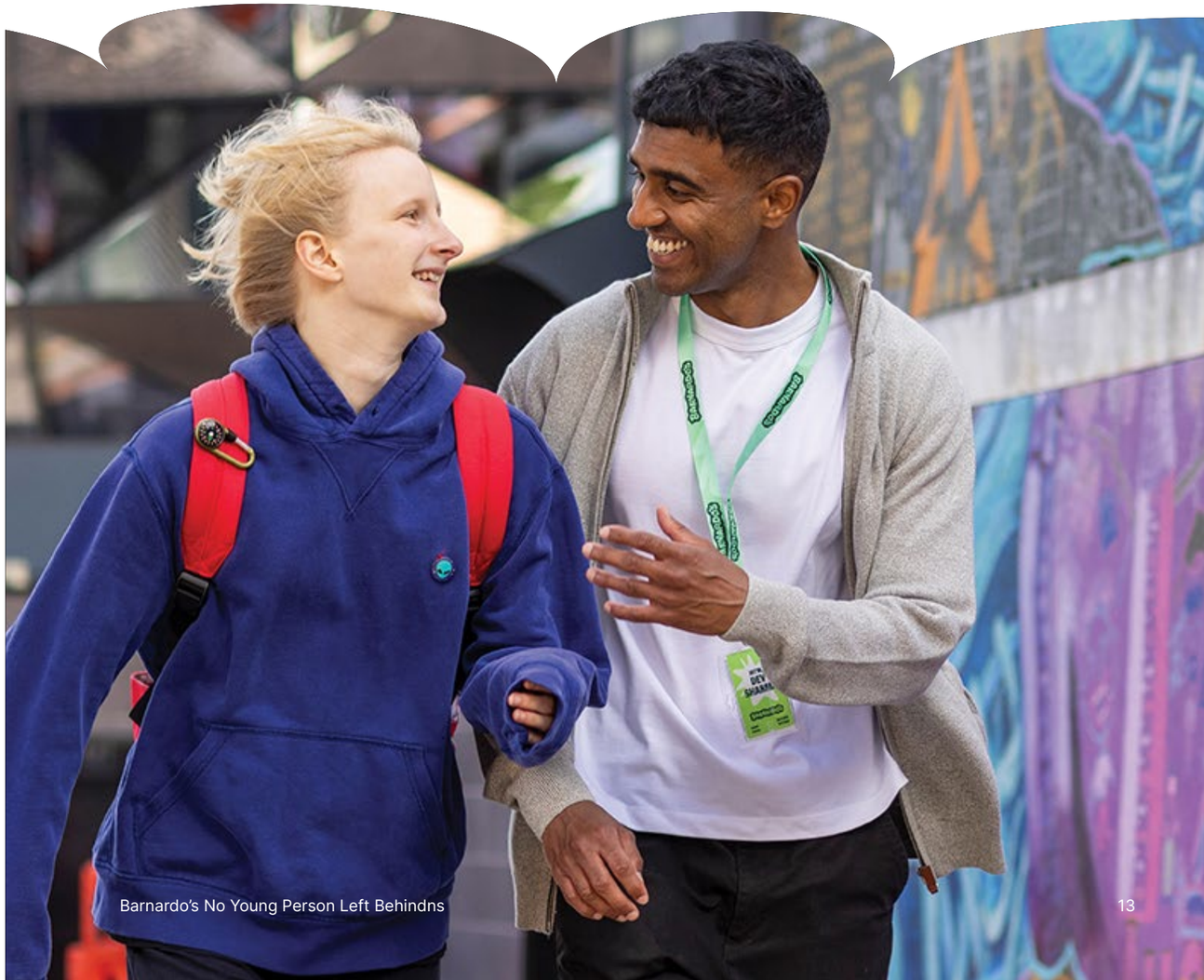
14 Education and Employers (2026), *Work Experience: Past, Present and Future* available at educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/WorkEx-report_June2026_FINAL.pdf
15 BDO (2026), *Young people still face unequal access to careers advice and work experience.* Available at: Young people still face unequal access to careers advice and work experience - BDO
16 The Gatsby Charitable Foundation (2024). Available at Gatsby Good Career Guidance: The Next 10 Years
17 Percy, C. (2025). Available at Design Accesiblity Report Review
18 Career Development Policy Group (2025) available at Schools policy brief July 2025 FINAL.pdf

2.2 What We Heard: Experiences of School Careers Support

We asked young people using Barnardo's Employment, Training and Skills services, many of whom face multiple and complex barriers to participation, about their experiences of careers education while they were at school. Through these conversations, several clear themes emerged. Overall, young people and frontline workers consistently described a system that focused heavily on academic progression, but often provided limited support to explore careers, develop employability skills, gain meaningful work experience, or understand the realities of the labour market. While there were examples of good practice, many young people reported leaving school without a clear sense of the opportunities available to them or the pathways needed to achieve their goals.

Our polling of 1,000 young people found that more than four in 10 felt their school or college had not prepared them well to choose a career or enter the world of work.

This gap was particularly stark for disadvantaged young people, with only 24% of those from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds feeling well prepared compared with 65% of those from higher managerial and professional backgrounds.



- **Careers guidance was often limited, generic and focused on educational progression rather than preparing young people for employment**

Many participants emphasised that while schools were often successful in supporting progression to further education, many young people felt less well prepared for a longer-term transition into employment. Participants highlighted a need for careers support that combines advice on future pathways with practical guidance on navigating recruitment processes, understanding workplace expectations and developing the skills needed to access employment.

> ***"They leave school and they've got no idea how to apply for a job, how to complete an application form."***
>
> (frontline worker)

Careers discussions were often described as focusing on existing interests or available courses rather than helping young people identify their strengths:

> ***"It wasn't really a 'we're going to sit down and what are your skills?'... it was more: 'Do you have an interest in something? Okay, here's a course."***
>
> (young person)

> ***"The teachers just didn't know... if it's not like you want to be a doctor or a lawyer... my interests are very niche... I didn't know how to get into that."***
>
> (young person)

Many young people described careers support in school as brief, generic and heavily focused on progression into further education rather than helping them understand longer-term career pathways:

> ***"It was more preparing you for furthering your education rather than anything else... do you not want to continue into education? Okay, maybe look at [employment]."***
>
> (young person)

Participants spoke about leaving school without a clear understanding of recruitment processes, application forms, interviews and workplace expectations.

> ***"I needed help understanding how the job process works... all the unwritten rules that everyone seems to know... I need them to be spoken. Otherwise I'm not going to get it."***
>
> (young person)

- **Work experience was highly valued, but access to meaningful opportunities was inconsistent**

Young people consistently identified work experience as one of the most valuable forms of preparation for employment. It provided opportunities to develop practical skills, build confidence and gain a better understanding of workplace expectations. However, many reported receiving little support to access placements and described opportunities as limited.

Frontline workers emphasised that work experience plays a critical role in helping young people develop the skills, confidence and behaviours needed to enter employment.

> ***"Work experience is absolutely critical... the reason you can't get a job without experience, you can't get experience without a job. Work experience is the obvious solution to that."***
>
> (frontline worker)

> ***"...they need to build the skills of getting there on time, looking engaged, carrying out the tasks, surviving until five o'clock"***
>
> (frontline worker)

Many participants described having limited exposure to the world of work beyond their immediate family or community networks.

> ***"If you don't know someone... it's almost impossible."***
>
> (young person)

> ***"I did two weeks of work experience in my Year 10... in a charity shop... that's the only work experience I've done in school... I found it myself."***
>
> (young person)

2.3 Improving Access to Careers Advice and Workplace Opportunities

Access to high-quality careers education, careers guidance and workplace opportunities should not depend on a child's family background, social networks or personal circumstances. However, both the wider evidence and our findings suggest that many young people continue to leave school without a clear understanding of career pathways, the practical skills needed to access employment, or meaningful exposure to the world of work. While the current statutory framework for careers education has improved access to careers activities, our findings suggest that these benefits have not been experienced consistently by all young people, and those who need help the most may be the ones most likely to miss out. Young people and frontline workers alike highlighted the value of practical employability skills, workplace confidence, access to professional networks and meaningful work experience alongside careers information and guidance.

The need for targeted support is particularly evident given the evidence that disadvantaged children are less likely to have access to employer contacts, informal careers advice and wider networks outside school. For many children, school-based careers provision may therefore represent their primary, or even only, source of careers information and opportunities. This places a particular responsibility on the statutory careers system to ensure that the needs of those facing the greatest barriers to employment are being met.

The Gatsby Benchmarks have played an important role in strengthening careers education and establishing clearer expectations of what high-quality careers provision should look like. The framework has helped improve access to careers activities and increased the focus on preparing children for life beyond school. However, implementation has been constrained by workforce shortages, resource pressures and unequal access to employer partnerships, meaning that the ambition of the framework is not yet being fully realised. As a result, too many children still lack the support, experiences and connections needed to make successful transitions into employment.

While the framework recognises the importance of inclusion, Benchmark 3, "Addressing the needs of each young person", emphasises tailoring careers programmes to individual learners and supporting social mobility. However, it does not require schools to provide additional support for those at greater risk of poorer outcomes. Strengthening the framework's focus on inclusion, alongside expanding the resources available to schools, would help ensure careers provision reaches all children. It would also enable schools to provide targeted support to those facing the greatest barriers to accessing and sustaining employment.

- Recommendation 1. The government should strengthen the careers framework and invest in careers provision so that all children can access high-quality careers guidance, employer engagement and work experience. Those facing the greatest barriers should receive targeted support, such as personalised careers coaching, mentoring and additional work-based and transition support, to help level the playing field and ensure they can build the networks, experiences and confidence needed to access future opportunities.

How would the Department for Education achieve this?

- Invest in careers capacity and inclusive work experience opportunities. The government should increase careers adviser capacity and support schools and employers to provide high-quality work experience and employer engagement opportunities, particularly in disadvantaged communities.
- Introduce a targeted careers intervention for children at greater risk of becoming NEET. This should include enhanced access to one-to-one careers guidance, mentoring, transition support, employer engagement and work experience for young people with SEND, care experience, mental health needs, persistent absence or other indicators of disadvantage.

Chapter Three: Keeping Children Engaged After the Age of 16

The current framework for post-16 participation in England was established by the Education and Skills Act 2008[19], which raised the age of participation in education or training from 16 to 18. Importantly, the legislation did not raise the school leaving age; instead, it created a requirement for young people to continue in education or training until their 18th birthday. Young people can meet this requirement by:

- Remaining in full-time education
- Undertaking an apprenticeship
- Combining employment, self-employment or volunteering with part-time accredited education or training.

Unlike compulsory school attendance below the age of 16, the system for monitoring and enforcing participation in education and training after the age of 16 sits primarily with local authorities. The Act places statutory duties on local authorities to promote participation, identify and track young people who are not engaged in education, employment or training, and support them to re-engage. Local authority performance is monitored through national participation and NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) data published by the Department for Education, including comparative scorecards that benchmark local authorities against one another.

There is evidence that some local authorities are not effectively fulfilling their statutory obligations. In 2026, the government reported that more than 32,000 16 and 17-year-olds had an "activity not known" status, meaning their participation could not be reliably tracked[20]. In response, the Department for Education and Department for Work and Pensions announced a package of measures in July 2026 designed to strengthen local identification and support for young people at risk of becoming "NEET"[21]. These measures include requiring the 26 local authorities with the highest levels of unknown activity to agree improvement plans with the Department for Education over the following six months, alongside the rollout of a new Risk of NEET Indicator (RONI) tool and updated guidance for schools, colleges and local authorities to help identify and support young people at risk of becoming NEET at an earlier stage.

3.1 What the Data Tells us about Post-16 Participation

More than 15 years after the participation age was raised to 18, most 16 and 17-year-olds remain engaged in education or training. However, a significant minority continue to miss out on these opportunities. Department for Education statistics show that, at the end of 2025, around 56,800 young people, equivalent to 4.0% of all 16 and 17-year-olds, were outside education, employment and training . Participation rates also vary considerably between local areas (although some of this may be due to the quality of local authority tracking data) suggesting that there are significant differences in access to opportunities and support.

19 UK Government (2008). Available at: Education and Skills Act 2008
20 Department for Education and Department for Work and Pensions (2026). Available at: Councils supported to identify and support vulnerable teenagers - GOV.UK
21 Department for Education (2024), Available at: Councils supported to identify and support vulnerable teenagers - GOV.UK
22 Department for Education (2026). Available at Release home - Participation in education, training and NEET age 16 to 17 by local authority - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK
23 Department for Education (2026). Available at Release home - Participation in education, training and NEET age 16 to 17 by local authority - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK

Recent research suggests that participation statistics may not always capture the extent to which some young people are struggling to engage with education. In a recent report, the Children's Commissioner found that 19% of 16 and 17-year-olds in further education colleges were severely absent, defined as missing more than half of their sessions[24]. While these young people are still formally recorded as participating in education, high levels of absence may indicate that some are already becoming disconnected from learning and are at greater risk of losing access to opportunities in the future. The Children's Commissioner therefore highlights the importance of identifying and supporting young people at the earliest signs of disengagement, rather than waiting until they have left education altogether.

These headline figures also mask significant inequalities between different groups of pupils. Statistics based on participation at the end of 2024 show that disadvantaged young people, defined as those who have been eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) in the previous six years, are looked after by a local authority, or are care-experienced, are significantly less likely to participate in education or apprenticeships than their peers. Participation amongst disadvantaged 16 to 17-year-olds was 78.7%, compared with 90.3% among non-disadvantaged young people, while participation among FSM-eligible 16/17-year-olds specifically was 78.8%, compared with 89.8% for non-FSM pupils. Patterns of progression also differ by background: the most common destination for disadvantaged pupils is a further education college (45.6% of destinations), whereas non-disadvantaged pupils are most likely to progress to a school sixth form (39.7%)[25].

Children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) experience lower rates of post-16 participation. In 2024, 79.7% of 16 to 17-year-olds with identified SEND were participating in education or apprenticeships, compared with 88.8% of those without identified SEND[26]. The participation gap persists beyond age 17 and is indicative of the additional barriers that some young people with SEND face when transitioning from compulsory schooling into further education, training and employment.

Participation at age 16 does not necessarily mean that young people remain engaged. Department for Education destination data shows not only that young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to be engaged in education or training post 16, but that even when they do start these programmes they are more likely to drop out before they complete them. In 2023/24, 11.3% of disadvantaged pupils failed to sustain a destination in education, employment or an apprenticeship, compared with 3.6% of their non-disadvantaged peers .

3.2 What We Heard: Children's Transition to Post-16 Education

Barnardo's delivers a range of Employment, Training and Skills (ETS) services that support young people as they transition from school at age 16. This includes delivering the Department for Education Study Programme in England, with a particular focus on young people who are not yet ready to progress independently into employment, apprenticeships or further learning. Many of the children and young people we support have experiences and circumstances that can make the move into adulthood more complex, including care experience, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), mental health challenges and experiences of disadvantage.

Through conversations with young people and frontline workers, several clear themes emerged. The transition from school into further education, training or employment was consistently described as a challenging period, bringing new responsibilities, important decisions and unfamiliar environments. For some young people, this can coincide with other significant changes, including leaving care, moving from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to adult mental health services, or losing access to other forms of support they previously relied upon.

Participants described both the challenges that can make successful transitions more difficult and the support that helps young people overcome them. Common barriers included poor mental health, unmet SEND needs, low confidence, financial pressures and limited understanding of the education, training and employment options available to them. To support with these challenges, young people and frontline workers consistently highlighted the importance of trusted relationships, personalised support, opportunities to explore different pathways.

24 Hidden NEETs and Where to Find Them September 2026 CCo Available at: Councils supported to identify and support vulnerable teenagers - GOV.UK
25 Department for Education (2026), *Participation in education, training and NEET age 16 to 17 by local authority, England, 2025/26*. Explore Education Statistics. Available at Release home - Participation in education, training and NEET age 16 to 17 by local authority - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK
26 Release home - Participation in education, training and employment age 16 to 21 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK
27 Release home - Key stage 4 destination measures - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK

- **Many young people reported needing trusted adult relationships and personalised support to help them navigate the move from school into further education, training or employment.**

Our polling of 1,000 young people found that almost half of those who had left education were not accessing support to help them find work, education or training, either because they did not know where to go or did not seek help despite knowing support was available.

A key finding from both our conversations with young people and with frontline workers was that successful post-16 transitions depend on more than simply securing a place in education, training or employment. Many children require support to understand their options, build confidence and access pathways that are right for them. Frontline workers reported that the current system often focuses on ensuring a child has a destination at age 16, rather than ensuring it is the right destination for their interests, aspirations and support needs.

Frontline workers highlighted that these challenges can be particularly acute for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who may have fewer opportunities to access professional networks, workplace exposure or other forms of support that help them understand the range of pathways available to them. Several argued that at the age of 16 learners should be given more opportunities to explore different options and develop a better understanding of the realities of different careers before making decisions about their future.

Alongside challenges navigating options, front line workers consistently reported that many children face additional barriers that can make participation difficult. These included low confidence, poor mental health, limited belief in their own abilities and limited exposure to positive opportunities that could help them imagine a different future. Frontline workers described a cohort who require intensive support to build confidence, routine and resilience before they are ready to successfully progress into education, training or employment.

Poor mental health was one of the most frequently cited barriers to engagement. Frontline workers described increasing levels of anxiety, with some requiring significant support simply to access provision.

Frontline workers also highlighted growing numbers of young people with additional needs, particularly autism, ADHD and other SEND, whose needs had either been identified late or remained unsupported. Lengthy waiting times for assessment and specialist support often meant that needs had become more complex by the time children reached post-16 services.

> ***"often a real focus on getting [child]into an initial destination, but not necessarily the right destination"***
>
> (frontline worker)

Young people described entering courses without fully understanding where they might lead or whether they reflected their interests and ambitions.

> ***"I first did an electrician course. Then I felt maybe it wasn't for me... Then I attended college again and tried accounting. Then I felt again it was not for me"***
>
> (young person)

> ***"We're having to meet them in the car park because they won't walk through the door"***
>
> (frontline worker)

> ***"anxiety was one of the toughest things for me ... some people can get anxiety too by seeing a lot of people around them... they really want to work, but they prefer sitting at home"***
>
> (young person)

> ***"One learner waited three years for an autism diagnosis... that's a big chunk of a 16-year-old's life"***
>
> (frontline worker)

Many working on the frontline felt that larger post-16 environments were not always well suited to young people experiencing anxiety, low confidence or additional needs.

In contrast, frontline workers highlighted the benefits of smaller, relationship-based provision that enables children to build confidence and develop trusted relationships.

Frontline workers also emphasised the importance of support during the transition period itself. Several highlighted the value of programmes that allow children to become familiar with those who will be supporting them, as well as the setting and their peers, before starting a course.

> ***"a lot are not ready for college... they're not ready for that massive environment"***
>
> (frontline worker)

> ***"10 per class is amazing because as a one person tutor, that's how many learners you should be able to deal with.....it's quite important that we have time to support people where they are at and move all the way through"***
>
> (frontline worker)

> ***"network, make friends, get used to the tutors in a much more relaxed informal environment than going straight into a classroom"***
>
> (frontline worker)

- **Financial disadvantage continues to shape post-16 participation and progression.**

Financial pressures can act as a barrier at multiple points in a child or young person's journey, whether they are continuing in education, starting an apprenticeship or taking their first steps into work. Children and young people, and their families, should not be financially worse off because they choose to pursue opportunities that support their future ambitions.

The government's recent decision to introduce financial support for families whose children enter apprenticeships is a welcome recognition of the challenges some families face. While parents can often continue to receive support when a child remains in education, moving into an apprenticeship has historically resulted in the loss of some benefits because apprentices are classified as being in employment. The new bursary should help ensure that family finances cannot become a barrier to choosing an apprenticeship.

However, financial barriers remain a reality for many children and young people, particularly those from low-income families. While recent action to reduce the cost of bus travel for young people is also welcome, transport is only one of a range of costs associated with participation. Everyday expenses such as meals, books, equipment, digital access and travel can still make it harder for children and young people to engage fully in education and training. For families already facing financial hardship, these costs can become a significant barrier.

> ***"I felt like I needed income. So I decided to look for work"***
>
> (young person)

> ***"The more you don't eat, you don't have the strength to go to work. So the only thing you do is just stay on bed"***
>
> (young person)

For children continuing in post-16 education and training, support is primarily provided through the 16-19 Bursary Fund[28]. The scheme includes a guaranteed bursary of up to £1,200 a year for certain vulnerable groups, alongside discretionary support for children and young people facing financial hardship. Bursaries are intended to help with the costs of participation, including transport, meals, books and equipment. However, because discretionary support is administered locally, eligibility criteria, award amounts and payment arrangements vary significantly between institutions, meaning access to support can depend as much on where a child studies as on their level of need[29].

Young people frequently described being forced to balance education with the need for income. One participant explained that after leaving care and attending college, immediate financial pressures often outweighed longer-term educational ambitions:

Frontline workers described how this can contribute to early disengagement from education, particularly for children already experiencing financial hardship or anxiety about starting a new course with young people thinking "*I've missed the first couple of weeks... I couldn't afford to get in... everyone's made friends and I'm a stranger and I don't know anybody.*"

Young people emphasised the importance of practical financial support with participation costs.

> ***"It's very helpful. it's about an hour's walk... I can't keep doing that every single day ...taking the bus and it's really helpful to me. So it makes a big difference"***
>
> (young person)

Transport costs were repeatedly identified as one of the most immediate barriers to participation.

> ***"Free bus passes for our vulnerable [young people]... that would increase [participation] absolutely"***
>
> (frontline worker)

Although bursary funding is intended to help young people meet the costs of participation, support is often not available immediately when a course begins.

> ***"It's a bursary, but you only get that once you're on programme and in education... It would take probably up to six to eight weeks to get it from them as well. So you've got that period of time where they haven't got that income, they haven't got that bus fare, they haven't got that lunch money"***
>
> (frontline worker)

28 Department for Education (2024) Available at 16 to 19 Bursary Fund: Overview - GOV.UK
29 Department for Education (2025) Available at 16 to 19 Bursary Fund: Eligibility - GOV.UK

3.3 Supporting Post-16 Engagement in Education

The current framework for post-16 participation was established by the Education and Skills Act 2008[30], which raised the participation age to 18 and placed responsibility on local authorities to promote participation, identify young people who are not engaged in education or training, and support them to re-engage. However, the education system has changed significantly since then. More than four in five secondary schools in England are now academies or free schools, and post-16 provision is delivered through a diverse range of schools, colleges, academy trusts, training providers and specialist services[31]. While local authorities remain important, they are now only one part of a much broader system that influences whether young people successfully participate in education and training.

Recent reforms, including the introduction of the Risk of NEET Indicator (RONI), are welcome steps towards strengthening the early identification of young people who may require additional support. However, identifying risk is only the first step. Preventing disengagement requires effective collaboration between the organisations that work with children before they leave school, during key transition points and when early signs of disengagement emerge[32].

The Government should therefore review and strengthen the post-16 participation framework established by the Education and Skills Act 2008 to ensure it reflects the realities of today's education system. In particular, it should establish clearer shared responsibilities across local authorities, schools, academy trusts, colleges and specialist providers for identifying young people at risk of becoming disengaged from education or training and supporting those who are not currently participating to reconnect with appropriate support and opportunities.

- Recommendation 2: The government should review and strengthen the post-16 participation framework established by the Education and Skills Act 2008. The aim should be to ensure it creates clear, shared responsibilities across local authorities, schools, academy trusts, colleges and specialist providers both for identifying young people at risk of not participating in education or training, and for supporting those who are not currently participating to reconnect with appropriate support and opportunities. This should be backed by dedicated funding for targeted transition, participation and re-engagement support.

How would the Department for Education achieve this?

- **Review and modernise the post-16 participation framework.** Review the operation of the Education and Skills Act 2008 participation framework to ensure responsibilities, accountability arrangements and data-sharing mechanisms reflect today's education system and create effective collaboration between local authorities, schools, academy trusts, colleges and specialist providers. This should clarify shared responsibilities for identifying young people at risk of non-participation and supporting those who are not currently engaging.

- **Ensure access to ongoing, relationship-based support.** Young people at risk of non-participation should be able to access flexible, relationship-based support before, during and after the transition to post-16 education and training. This should include trusted adult relationships, pastoral and mental health support, and flexible provision for young people who are not yet ready for larger post-16 settings. Provision should be nationally funded but planned and coordinated locally to ensure support reflects local needs while remaining available across England.

30 HM Government (2008) Available at Education and Skills Act 2008
31 Department for Education (2026). In January 2026, 83.9% of state-funded secondary schools were academies or free schools, educating 83.6% of secondary pupils. Available at Release home - Schools, pupils and their characteristics - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK
32 Department for Education (2024) Available at Participation of young people in education, employment or training

- Recommendation three: Reduce Financial Barriers to Participation: The Government should take further action to ensure financial hardship is never a barrier to education, training or employment. This should include strengthening the 16-19 Bursary Fund to better support participation in post-16 education and training, and introducing a Youth Opportunity Fund for young people aged 18 and over entering employment or apprenticeships, helping with essential upfront costs such as travel, work clothing, tools and equipment.

How would the Department for Education achieve this?

- Increase the value of the vulnerable student bursary, to restore the real-terms value lost since its introduction, and introduce regular uprating in line with inflation. This would help ensure that support keeps pace with the actual costs faced by young people participating in education and training.

- Improve consistency and transparency in post-16 financial support. The government should introduce clearer national expectations for discretionary bursaries and require local authorities to coordinate a consistent local offer across post-16 providers. This should include agreed expectations on eligibility, award levels, payment schedules and the forms of support available, alongside the publication of a local financial support offer. This would help ensure that children and young people with similar levels of need receive comparable support regardless of which provider they attend.

Young people consistently identified financial pressures as a barrier to participation. Transport costs, food insecurity and the costs associated with learning, including equipment, books and digital access, were all cited as challenges that could make it harder for children and young people to take up and sustain opportunities in post-16 education and training. Similar concerns were raised by young people moving into employment, apprenticeships and training after the age of 18.

Taken together, these findings highlight the need for a more comprehensive approach to financial support across the education, skills and employment system. No child or young person should miss out on opportunities because they cannot afford the practical costs of participation. The Government should review the support available at different stages of a young person's journey, including the 16-19 Bursary Fund and the support available through Jobcentres and employment programmes, with the aim of creating a more coherent and accessible financial support offer. In Chapter 4, we set out proposals for a new Youth Opportunity Grant to help young people meet essential costs such as transport, work clothing, equipment, digital access, food and childcare as they move into employment, training and apprenticeships.

For children and young people making the transition into post-16 education and training, financial support is primarily provided through the 16-19 Bursary Fund. While the bursary provides an important safety net for many, frontline practitioners highlighted concerns about the adequacy, consistency and timing of support. The real value of the vulnerable student bursary has fallen over time despite rising living and participation costs. Frontline workers also described significant variation in how discretionary support is administered and reported that support is not always available when costs are first incurred, leaving some young people unable to afford transport, meals and other essentials during the critical first weeks of a course.

These findings suggest that strengthening the 16-19 Bursary Fund should form part of a wider effort to ensure financial hardship is never a barrier to education, training or employment, and that children and young people can access the support they need at every stage of their journey.

Chapter Four: Post-18 Support: Helping Young People Gain, Sustain and Progress in Employment

The transition into adulthood represents a critical point in young people's journeys. While many move successfully from education into employment, others experience a sharp decline in support once compulsory participation requirements end. For young people facing disadvantage, including care experience, SEND, poor mental health, housing insecurity and financial hardship, this transition can be particularly challenging. Understanding who becomes NEET after 18, the barriers they face, and the support currently available is essential to designing a more effective system for helping young people move into and sustain employment.

4.1 What the Evidence Tells Us About Young People Aged 18-25 Who Are Not in Work or Learning

The number of young people who are outside education, employment and training rises sharply after 18. In England, the 'NEET' rate increases from 5% among 16- and 17-year-olds to 13% at 18 and 20% at 21, with nearly 44% of 'NEET' young people aged 22 to 24[33]. Age 18 marks a critical transition point; formal participation requirements end and many of the systems that have supported and tracked young people through education fall away. This transition is already unequal, with young people with SEND, lower attainment and disadvantaged backgrounds less likely to move into sustained education, employment or training[34].

The *Young People and Work* interim report highlights that some groups of young people face a greater risk of becoming disconnected from education, employment and training, and that the 'NEET phenomenon' is 'grounded in social disadvantage.' Analysis by the Resolution Foundation found that the vast majority of NEET's aged 18 to 24 face at least one barrier[35] to work or study, while half face multiple disadvantages[36]. The interim report also points to a significant number of young people spending increasingly long periods outside work or learning. Evidence from the Young Futures Foundation links poorer health, disability, lower qualifications and economic inactivity with longer periods out of employment and education[37].

The Young People and Work interim report identifies health-related economic inactivity as an increasingly important part of this picture. Between 2019 and 2025, economic inactivity among 18–24-year-olds increased from 7.8% to 9.1%, alongside worsening health, particularly mental health, and an increase in the number of 18–24-year-olds receiving health-related incapacity benefits[38]. While these relationships are not simply causal, the interaction between health, disability, economic inactivity and other forms of disadvantage is relevant to understanding why some young people experience prolonged periods outside work and learning.

These challenges are compounded by a system that is not well configured to support young people who become disconnected after the age of 18. The *Young People and Work* interim report argues that Britain has 'institutions for young people' but lacks a coherent participation system capable of supporting transitions into sustainable employment[39]. Responsibility is fragmented across education, health, welfare, employment services and local government, with no single organisation accountable for outcomes. For young people facing multiple disadvantages, the absence of coordinated support can allow existing barriers to deepen and become harder to overcome over time.

33 'Department for Education (2026) available at: NEET and NET Estimates from the LFS' from 'NEET age 16 to 24', GOV.UK.
34 Department for Education (2025) Academic year 2023/24 16-18 destination measures, Department for Education
35 The analysis uses barriers that range from well-known barriers to work (low qualification levels, lack of any labour market experience, disability) to other vulnerabilities that suggest the transition may be more challenging (such as being NEET for more than two years or living without family support). Section 1.1. outlines the Barnardo's we have commonly identified across the literature.
36 Resolution Foundation (2026) Lost in transition An examination of why the UK NEET rate is high and rising, Resolution Foundation
37 Youth Futures Foundation (2026) available at Trends in young people not in education, employment or training October – December 2025, Young Futures Foundation
38 175,000 young people had been assessed as having Limited Capability for Work and Work Related Activity. For this group there are no regular meetings with work coaches at all and no expectations or requirements for activity or engagement. For this group, around one in 100 move into work each month.
39 Youth Futures Foundation (2025) Available at Young people and work: interim report, chapter 7

4.2 What Employment Support is Currently Available to Young People?

Employment support for young people is delivered through a complex landscape of national welfare programmes, skills provision, local authority services, mayoral initiatives and voluntary sector organisations. Access to support varies significantly depending on whether a young person remains connected to education, is engaged with the welfare system, or has become disconnected from both.

For young people who remain in education, support is primarily delivered through schools, colleges, apprenticeship providers and careers services. This includes careers education, information, advice and guidance, work experience opportunities, employer engagement activities, apprenticeship pathways, supported internships for young people with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), and transition support into further and higher education.

For unemployed young people claiming Universal Credit, employment support is largely delivered through Jobcentre Plus. Around 210,000 young people who are not in work are currently in the Intensive Work Search group and can access support from work coaches, the Youth Offer, the Restart Scheme, Sector-based Work Academy Programmes and other employment programmes. Participation in work-related activity and active job-search is a condition of benefit entitlement for this group.[40] The picture is very different for young people awaiting a Work Capability Assessment, or who have been assessed as having Limited Capability for Work and/or Work-Related Activity. Historically, this group has received limited employment support alongside reduced work-related requirements[41].

Alongside formal employment programmes, work coaches can draw on the Flexible Support Fund, which provides discretionary funding to help overcome practical barriers to employment. Support can include travel costs, interview clothing, work equipment, training costs and other expenses that might otherwise prevent a young person from accessing or sustaining work[42]. Access to the fund, however, depends on a young person's engagement with the welfare system and on adviser discretion.

Additional support is available through Access to Work, which funds workplace adjustments, specialist equipment and support for disabled people in employment. However, the scheme is demand-led, relies on individuals being aware of and applying for support, and generally requires a job or job offer before assistance can be provided. In 2024/25, only 7,400 young people aged 16 to 24 received an Access to Work payment[43].

The government has recently announced a range of additional measures through the Youth Guarantee. These include the creation of 360 Youth Hubs, designed to bring together Jobcentre Plus provision and wider local services; a new Youth Guarantee Gateway offering structured support after 13 weeks of unemployment; a £3,000 Youth Jobs Grant for employers recruiting someone who has been unemployed for six months; and a Jobs Guarantee providing paid employment opportunities for young people who have been unemployed for at least 18 months.[44]

Alongside statutory provision, the voluntary and community sector plays a significant role in supporting young people into education, employment and training. Organisations including Barnardo's and many local charities provide employability support, mentoring, confidence-building activities, outreach and specialist support for young people facing additional barriers to participation.

40 Youth Futures Foundation (2025) Available at Young people and work interim report, Annex – the employment landscape
41 Youth Futures Foundation (2025) Available at Young people and work interim report, Annex – the employment landscape
42 Flexible Support Fund: What It Covers and How to Apply in 2026
43 Department for Work and Pensions (2025) available at Access to Work statistics: April 2007 to March 2025
44 House of Commons Library (2025) available at Youth Guarantee, Research Briefing CBP-10827, House of Commons Library

4.3 Support for Young People with Multiple and Complex Barriers

Support for young people furthest from the labour market remains particularly uneven. For young people who are in contact with the benefit system, those waiting for a Work Capability Assessment, or assessed as having Limited Capability for Work or Limited Capability for Work and Work-Related Activity, typically receive much lower levels of employment support than young people in the Intensive Work Search group. Meanwhile, those who are neither claiming benefits nor connected to work or education may receive no support at all. The Young People and Work interim report estimates that approximately 314,000 18 to 24-year-olds in England fall into this category[45].

Evidence on what works for young people furthest from the labour market remains relatively limited. A review commissioned by the Youth Futures Foundation concluded that there is insufficient high-quality evidence to draw robust conclusions about the effectiveness of employment support for young people facing the most complex barriers. Much of the available causal evidence comes from large-scale government programmes, while comparatively little robust evidence exists on the impact of voluntary and community sector provision[46].

Despite these limitations, the review identifies several common features associated with positive outcomes. These include engaging young people early, undertaking comprehensive assessments of individual needs, providing support through a consistent and trusted adviser, and delivering personalised programmes that combine employability support, skills development and assistance to address practical barriers. The review also highlights the importance of meaningful employer engagement and support that continues beyond job entry. Some evidence was identified for targeted wage subsidies and intermediate labour market programmes, particularly where they formed part of broader packages of support. It also identifies programmes that combine intensive advisory support, personalised interventions, employer engagement and transitional in-work support as important priorities for future evaluation and evidence building[47].

Recent reforms announced by the government aim to strengthen pathways into employment, education and training for young people.

However, the evidence presented in this chapter suggests that the current system is not consistently identifying, engaging or supporting young people at greatest risk of becoming disconnected from work and learning, nor addressing the risk of prolonged detachment. A more effective approach will therefore require not only sufficient provision, but a system that is easier to navigate, better coordinated across services, and capable of providing personalised and sustained support.

4.4 What We Heard: The Experiences of Young People Excluded from Work

For this report, Barnardo's gathered evidence from young people participating in the JOBS Project (see page 3) and front-line workers working across our relevant services to better understand the experiences of young people who have experience of being disconnected from work and learning. We explored the barriers that leave some young people disconnected from work and the types of support that make the greatest difference in helping them access opportunity. These key findings reflect what we heard.

45 Youth Futures Foundation (2025) available at Young people and work: interim report, Figure 13: Hidden NEET people aged 18 to 24 by reason for being NEET, England, 2023-2025
46 Institute for Employment Studies and Youth Futures Foundation (2020) available at Supporting disadvantaged young people into meaningful work: An initial evidence review to identify what works and inform good practice among practitioners and employers, Institute for Employment Studies, Youth Futures Foundation
47 Institute for Employment Studies and Youth Futures Foundation (2020) available at Supporting disadvantaged young people into meaningful work: An initial evidence review to identify what works and inform good practice among practitioners and employers, Institute for Employment Studies, Youth Futures Foundation

- **Young people who are furthest from the labour market face multiple and overlapping barriers in their lives, which can impact on their ability to participate in the labour market**

A consistent finding was that young people rarely face a single obstacle to employment. Those working on the frontline repeatedly described combinations of poor mental health, poverty, SEND needs, housing insecurity, caring responsibilities, family difficulties and social isolation. These challenges can interact in ways that make participation in education, training or employment difficult to sustain. As a result, frontline workers often find themselves helping young people stabilise other areas of their lives before employment can become a realistic goal.

Young people themselves described how challenges in one area of their lives can quickly affect everything else. Anxiety, financial pressures, housing insecurity and family circumstances can make it harder to attend education, apply for jobs and maintain routines, creating a cycle that becomes increasingly difficult to break.

Similar to the findings on participation in education, young people identified both mental health challenges and neurodivergence as barriers to accessing and sustaining employment. Participants described how neurodivergent conditions, including ADHD, can make it difficult to navigate recruitment and application processes, even when they feel confident in their ability to perform well once in a role.

> ***"It's not as easy as just saying, 'I'm going to have loads of destinations or a job'. You've got to sort out all of the other stuff as well."***
>
> (frontline worker)

> ***"I was homeless. The homeless period was a bit tough as well. Even if I was ready to work, it was always that constraint where I always have to be worried about where am I going to go. I was in supported accommodation"***
>
> (young person)

> ***"I have autism and ADHD and I struggle with basically getting into a job. So once I'm in the job, it's fine, but just that entry is the barrier for me"***
>
> (young person)

Frontline workers highlighted the impact that mental health can have on young people's ability to prepare for and sustain employment.

> ***"I have someone from Mental Health UK who does sessions on money and mental health, so the relationship between the two and how that can affect [young people]."***
>
> (frontline worker)

Financial hardship was a barrier highlighted by both young people and frontline workers. The costs associated with seeking and sustaining employment, including transport, clothing, footwear and food, can be difficult to meet for young people with limited or no income.

> ***"[it's about] Not having the money, not having the right clothes, you know, it's all the barriers to work, not having the footwear..., or not having the bus fare, not having any money for food"***
>
> (frontline worker)

Difficulties were often compounded by challenges young people experienced in accessing financial support us to help overcome them. One worker told us:

> ***"It's hard to get it from the job centre... they have to go through a lot of hoops ... we can fill in the gaps."***
>
> (frontline worker)

Over half of the 1,000 young people we polled said they had to turn down, not apply for, or leave a job, education, training, apprenticeship or work experience opportunity because they could not afford the costs involved including travel, clothing, equipment, course materials or childcare

For some young people, these challenges are compounded by circumstances that can leave them with fewer sources of stability and support than their peers. Care-experienced young people, refugees and young people with unresolved migration status may be navigating education, employment and adulthood alongside experiences of care, migration, displacement or homelessness, often without the family networks and informal support that many young people rely on.

For care-experienced young people in particular, the transition into adulthood can coincide with a significant reduction in formal support.

Across these experiences, the issue was not a lack of aspiration. Rather, young people facing greater disadvantage often had more obstacles to overcome before they could make use of the opportunities available to them. An employment opportunity that may be relatively accessible to a young person with stable housing, financial security, good health and supportive networks can be considerably harder to access for someone managing multiple challenges simultaneously.

The barriers identified through our research do not simply increase the likelihood of a young person becoming disconnected from education, employment or training; they can also make it harder to access these opportunities again. Challenges such as homelessness, poor mental health and disability may require significant time, support and stability to address. Where multiple barriers are present, they can reinforce one another. This helps explain why some young people spend longer periods outside work and learning than others.

> ***"When I had my social worker, it was much better because I was in care. But once I crossed that age barrier, it really changed."***
>
> (young person)

Young people with refugee status described additional barriers linked to language, unfamiliarity with systems and limited awareness of available opportunities.

> ***"I didn't know where to start. I didn't know who to talk to. I didn't know how to tap into those resources which the government had in place"***
>
> (young person)

> ***"The biggest thing is exposure. Experiences, work experience, opportunities and talking to people."***
>
> (frontline worker)

- **Young people feel locked out of the labour market, despite wanting to work**

Alongside the personal barriers many young people face, participants described a labour market that can be difficult to enter even when they are motivated and actively looking for work. A recurring theme was a lack of information, guidance, networks and exposure to workplaces. Young people frequently described uncertainty about where to find opportunities, how to access support and which pathways were available to them.

For some, this was about more than access to careers advice. Young people spoke about having limited opportunities to meet employers, learn about different careers or draw on people who could help them understand how to get into work. Frontline workers similarly highlighted the importance of young people having opportunities to see different workplaces and understand what employment could look like in practice.

For young people who are already unsure about how to navigate the labour market, repeated rejection without feedback can be particularly difficult. It can make it harder to learn from unsuccessful applications and, over time, affect how young people view their own ability to secure work. This may be especially significant for young people who have already experienced rejection or exclusion in other areas of their lives. While many employers notify candidates when an application has been unsuccessful, meaningful feedback is often lacking. There is an opportunity for government to work with employers to encourage voluntary commitments to provide clear and constructive feedback where possible, helping young people understand how they can strengthen future applications and remain engaged in the labour market.

- **Existing employment support is not working and does not always reflect the barriers young people face**

Young people described a gap between the employment support they had received and what they felt they needed from it. While many had engaged with employment programmes, some felt provision focused heavily on the practicalities of looking for work, such as searching for vacancies and submitting applications, without offering help beyond what they could do themselves.

For some young people, this made employment support feel repetitive and transactional. Attending appointments and completing job-search activities did not necessarily give them a better understanding of why they were struggling to secure work or what they could do differently. This was particularly difficult where young people were making repeated applications but receiving little or no feedback from employers.

Young people also reported that support was not always sufficiently tailored to their individual needs. Some felt that Jobcentre staff wanted to help but lacked the knowledge, time or flexibility to provide meaningful support.

Our polling of 1,000 young people found that a lack of work experience was the most commonly cited barrier to finding a job, identified by 48% of respondents.

> ***"They've just not had the experience and employers are asking for it. How do they get the job that they want if they've had no experience."***
>
> (frontline worker)

> ***"You don't get a response back sometimes. So you're like, okay, what did I do wrong?"***
>
> (young worker)

Several young people raised concerns about the increasing use of automated recruitment systems.

> ***"A lot of places now are basically filtering applications through AI."***
>
> (young person)

Limited exposure to the workplace can make it harder for young people to gain the experience many employers expect.

> ***"I feel like I'm capable of working. It's more the vacancies. I'll apply and then they'll say no. It's not like I can't do it. It's just getting into it. Employers want people with experience, but the opportunities to get that experience are barred. How are you supposed to get experience if you can't get experience?"***
>
> (young person)

> ***"...programmes haven't necessarily felt that useful. It was basically, you turn up, the advisor turns the laptop on and you apply for jobs. I don't have to come to a building and do it. When you're put onto programmes like [that], you'd expect something better, something that you could not do yourself, but that wasn't the case."***
>
> (young person)

> ***"I feel like some of them have wanted to help me. But they don't know how to help me.."***
>
> (young person)

Several also described feeling pressure to apply for any available vacancy, even when they did not feel it was appropriate for them. This left some feeling that advisers did not fully understand their circumstances or recognise the barriers that could make certain roles unsuitable. As one young person commented

The experiences shared with us suggest that the support available does not always reflect the different circumstances or levels of need among young people who are not in work or learning. A standard focus on job-search activity may be of limited value for a young person who needs more support to understand the labour market, navigate recruitment, build confidence or address wider barriers preventing them from accessing work.

> ***"Sometimes they'll ask 'oh you should just take any sort of job' and it's like, no, because I need to know that I can actually do the job otherwise what's the point in me applying? It was a waste of time for everybody."***
>
> (young person)

- **Experiencing periods without access to work or learning can undermine confidence, routine and a sense of belonging**

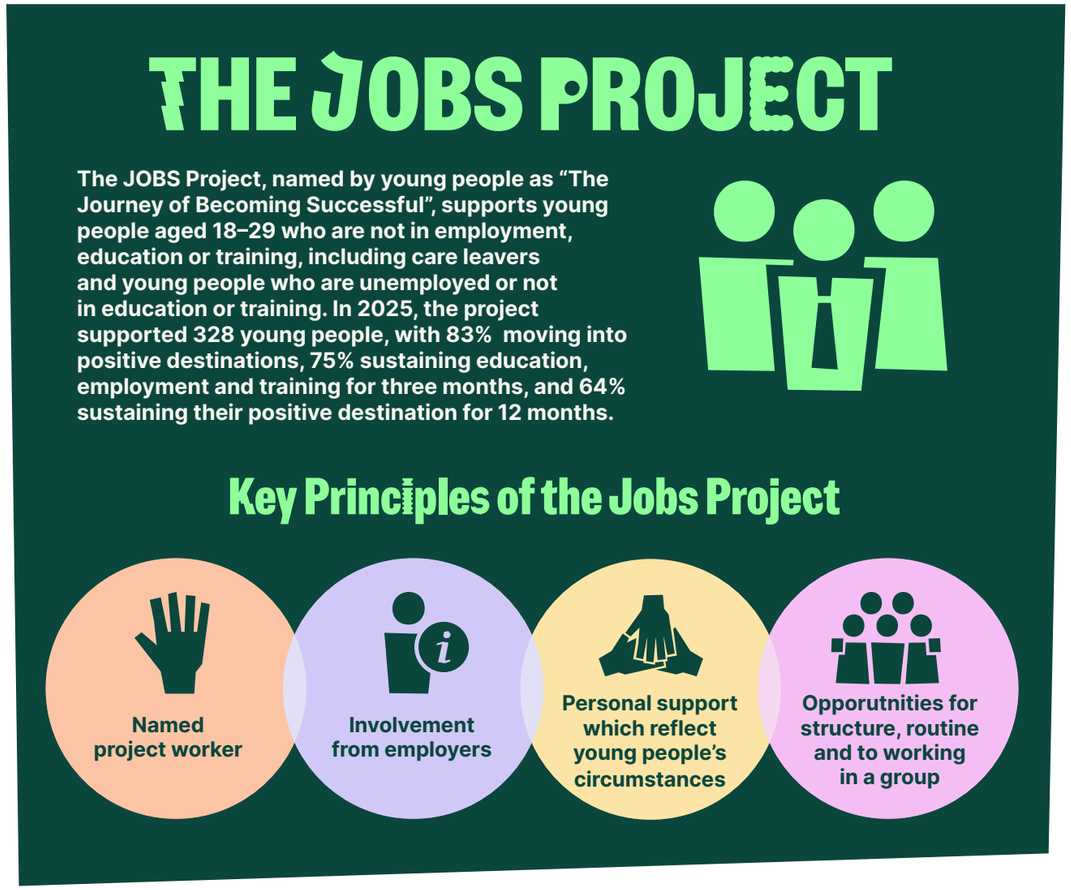
30% of the 1,000 young people we polled said a lack of confidence makes it difficult to find a job

Young people described being outside work and learning as more than an economic experience – it can affect daily routines, social connections, confidence and a young person's sense of purpose and progress. One participant described this experience:

> ***"Every day I wake up...but if there's nothing, you don't plan anything. You stay at home. You sleep late, wake up late, and the whole day is gone."***
>
> (young person)

Frontline workers similarly described how longer periods of unemployment or inactivity could erode confidence and increase anxiety. Being at home for extended periods can mean losing the routine and structure that education or employment provides, as well as opportunities to spend time with peers and adults outside the home. Over time, this can affect how young people feel about themselves and their ability to move forward.

4.5 What works: Barnardo's experience of supporting young people into and through employment



- **Trusted relationships are at the heart of effective support**

The strongest finding across our research was the importance of support that is built around trusted relationships and shaped around individual needs. Across conversations with young people, frontline workers and employers, young people repeatedly highlighted the value of having someone who understood their circumstances, believed in their potential and remained alongside them as they worked towards employment.

For many young people, success was linked not to a particular programme or intervention, but to having a trusted adult who could provide encouragement, practical support and continuity during periods of change.

> ***"He's the only person outside of my community and maybe my few family members that put himself forward to be available if I have any issues."***
>
> (young person)

> ***"What makes the difference is often one trusted adult who believes in a young person and helps them navigate decisions and setbacks ."***
>
> (frontline worker)

These relationships were valued for more than emotional support alone. Young people and frontline workers described trusted adults helping young people understand opportunities, navigate recruitment processes, access support and build confidence. Just as importantly, these relationships created the trust needed to have honest conversations about expectations, challenge unhelpful behaviours and support young people to manage setbacks. Frontline workers described the importance of helping young people develop the confidence and resilience needed not only to access opportunities, but to sustain them when challenges arise

The importance of this approach reflects the realities of young people's lives. Many of the young people involved in this research were navigating multiple and overlapping barriers and young people consistently emphasised that no two experiences were the same. As a result, support was most effective when it could respond to individual circumstances, strengths and aspirations.

These findings suggest that young people furthest from the labour market often need more than practical help to find work. They need support that combines trusted relationships, personalised interventions and the flexibility to respond to changing circumstances. Across the research, these features were consistently identified as helping young people overcome barriers, build resilience and make sustained progress towards employment.

- **Young people want pathways into employment, not just employability support**

A consistent message from young people was that there is a difference between support that helps them look and prepare for work and support that helps them secure and sustain it. While participants recognised the importance of CV writing, applications and interview preparation, these activities were rarely viewed as sufficient on their own. Young people consistently described the biggest challenge as not applying for jobs, but securing a first opportunity.

Many participants described feeling caught in a cycle where employers expect experience, while opportunities to gain it are difficult to access. For young people at the start of their working lives, this can mean being expected to demonstrate they can succeed in a workplace before they have been given a meaningful opportunity to experience one. As a result, participants felt that employment support should do more than prepare young people to apply for jobs. It should help them access workplaces, gain practical experience and build direct connections with employers.

This points to an important role for employment programmes as a bridge between young people and the labour market. Effective support can help young people understand local opportunities, build relationships with employers and navigate recruitment processes that can often feel opaque and intimidating. Practical experiences such as workplace visits, employer-led workshops and guaranteed interviews can help demystify the world of work, giving young people first-hand insight into employer expectations and clearer routes into employment. This was reflected in Barnardo's JOBS Project in Birmingham. Employer contact is built into the programme from an early stage, including a visit to the Amazon site, giving young people the opportunity to see the workplace, understand more about the organisation and begin to build familiarity with an employer before they reach the point of applying. These opportunities can be particularly valuable in breaking down the psychological and practical barriers that prevent many young people from seeing work as accessible or achievable.

By contrast, programmes that combine preparation with real workplace experience, employer relationships and a clear opportunity to progress give young people a chance to demonstrate their potential rather than being judged only on the experience they already have.

> ***"Employers want people with experience, but the opportunities to get that experience are barred. How are you supposed to get experience if you can't get experience"***
>
> (young person)

> ***"If there was a scheme where 20 young people got a trial run, got work experience, and then got a guaranteed interview at the end, I think that could help."***
>
> (young person)

> ***"Current programmes tell you to apply for jobs. But here, if you attend every day and work hard, the interview is yours. If you pass the interview, the job is yours. That's in your hands."***
>
> (young person)

CASE STUDY: How one of the UK's largest property services companies is supporting young people in employment

As one of the UK's largest property services contractors, Bell Group recruits around 35 apprentices each year and currently supports almost 300 apprentices across the business. The company works with schools, colleges, local authorities, Youth Justice Services and organisations supporting care-experienced young people to create routes into employment for young people who might otherwise struggle to access opportunities.

Central to Bell's approach is the belief that recruiting a young person is only the starting point. The company places a strong emphasis on communication, mentoring and building a sense of belonging, recognising that many young people need support not only to enter employment, but to remain and progress within it. As one Bell manager explained:

"What the young people want is the communication and the support and feeling like that they belong."

Rather than viewing progression as solely the responsibility of the individual, Bell described creating structured pathways into work through apprenticeships, work experience, traineeships and employer-led academy programmes. Once in employment, young people have access to mentors, regular check-ins and tailored support where needed, including workplace adjustments and wellbeing support. The aim is to ensure young people feel part of the organisation from the outset:

"They need to feel like that they are part of Bell from day one. They need to feel like that they belong. They have got support. They have got people that they can talk to."

Bell's experience suggests that successful participation depends on more than creating vacancies. It requires employers to create pathways into work, recruit for potential, foster a sense of belonging and provide the support needed for young people to sustain and progress in employment.

CASE STUDY: What a North East family business has learned about helping young people succeed at work

For Shaun Matthias Ltd, a painting and decorating family-run company, apprenticeships are not simply a recruitment tool but a long-term investment in future skills. The company sees creating opportunities for young people as essential both to addressing skills shortages and to ensuring a pipeline of future workers.

The employer highlighted that many young people face barriers that extend beyond finding vacancies. In their experience, young people often need support to build confidence, navigate workplace expectations and sustain employment once they enter work. They emphasised the importance of personalised support, including one-to-one conversations, flexible working arrangements and adjustments to reflect individual needs.

"I definitely think the one-to-one way is the correct way to go about something like this. Really speaking to them and finding out what they need is the right way to get the best out of them."

A key theme from the conversation was the value of creating opportunities for young people to experience work before they formally enter employment. The employer described how a young person who was struggling in school was offered a placement while still in education, helping them gain practical experience and explore a different pathway. The placement ultimately led to an apprenticeship and long-term employment with the company.

The employer also highlighted the role that organisations such as Barnardo's can play in preparing young people for employment. They described Barnardo's support as helping young people build confidence, develop workplace readiness and engage with employers before placements begin, making the transition into work more successful for both young people and employers.

• Structure, routine and peer support help prepare young people for employment

The format of the JOBS Project itself appeared to play an important role in helping young people prepare for employment. Young people and frontline workers described how the programme provides structure, routine and a shared sense of purpose, helping participants develop habits and behaviours that support a successful transition into work.

Young people described the value of having somewhere to go each day, clear expectations and a sense of responsibility. Reflecting on his experience of the programme.

Young people commented that attending the programme regularly helped them build habits associated with employment, including punctuality, attendance and personal responsibility. Frontline workers echoed this view, noting that some young people enter services with limited experience of workplace expectations and benefit from opportunities to practise these behaviours before moving into employment.

The group-based nature of the programme also emerged as an important feature. Young people spoke positively about participating alongside peers working towards similar goals and facing similar challenges. Many referred to their cohort, the relationships they developed and the encouragement they received from one another.

Taken together, these findings suggest that effective employability programmes do more than provide skills training. The experience of the JOBS Project highlights the value of creating structured environments where young people can develop routines, build confidence, learn workplace expectations and participate alongside peers. These features appear to help young people prepare for employment by creating stability, accountability and a sense of purpose before they enter the labour market.

> ***"For me presently, I've just seen myself like I'm working. The only difference is money is not coming in my account."***
>
> (young person)

> ***"it's about changing behaviours and helping them understand what's acceptable in the workplace and what isn't."***
>
> (service frontline worker)

Barnardo's financial support for young people demonstrates how relatively small amounts of flexible financial support can remove practical barriers to employment

The Springboard Project

Since launching in 2023, the Springboard Fund, established by Barnardo's in partnership with Amazon and now supported by a wider range of employers, organisations and individual donors, has distributed more than £132,000 to support young people and care leavers. The fund has supported 129 young people from the JOBS Project, with around 43% of applications coming from care-experienced young people. Funding has been used to cover essential employment-related costs such as laptops, training courses, ID and DBS checks, work clothing and footwear, food, travel, digital equipment and training materials.

The JOBS Project

In 2025/26, Barnardo's Child Poverty Fund received 349 applications related to education, training and employment. The most common requests were for clothing and uniforms, travel and transport costs, course and training fees, and laptops or computers. Applications came from a range of children and young people experiencing disadvantage, including young carers, care-experienced young people, young people with SEND, and families experiencing homelessness or insecure housing.

Barnardo's experience demonstrates the impact that targeted financial support can have in removing these barriers. Through the Springboard Fund, young people participating in the JOBS Project have been able to access support for travel, work clothing, training costs, equipment and other practical expenses associated with entering employment. Similarly, applications to Barnardo's Child Poverty Fund show that many young people require assistance with transport, course fees, clothing and digital equipment in order to access education, training and employment opportunities.

Practical support should not be viewed as an additional element of employability provision, but as a core component of it. While employment programmes often focus on skills, confidence and job readiness, young people may struggle to benefit from these opportunities if practical barriers remain unaddressed. In many cases, removing relatively small financial obstacles can be what makes participation possible.

- **Helping young people sustain and progress in work, not just secure a job**

A particularly important lesson emerging from the JOBS Project is that success should not be measured solely by whether a young person enters employment. The programme combines pre-employment preparation with ongoing support after a young person starts work, recognising that securing a job is only one stage in a successful transition into employment.

Young people consistently valued the preparation they received before entering work. This included interview preparation, opportunities to engage directly with employers, and support to understand workplace expectations.

> ***"When I joined Amazon, it was straightforward. We had one month to prepare... Barnardo's showed me... and also prepared us for the interview as well."***

Young people described preparation as extending beyond interview skills, helping them understand the workplace, build confidence and develop realistic expectations.

> ***"The mental preparation that we had coming from Barnardo's prepared us"***
>
> (young person)

> ***"It made me more competent. It made me understand what to look for in the job in the first place"***
>
> (young person)

Participants described moving beyond entry-level roles and actively pursuing progression opportunities within Amazon.

> ***"I knew once I worked here for six months or a year, there will be an opportunity for me to progress because that's how life works and that's how careers start"***
>
> (young person)

One person went on to secure a place on Amazon's Supply Chain Management apprenticeship programme while also joining the associate pool for future team leader positions:

> ***"I started with Receive, but got trained as a jump master and then as a process guide, and then as a proxy, then I applied for problem solve training and now working as a problem solver and also applied for an apprenticeship"***
>
> (young person)

A distinctive feature of the JOBS Project is that support does not end when employment begins. Participants repeatedly emphasised the value of continued support as they adjusted to the workplace and navigated early challenges.

> ***"Our project worker didn't make it as like it's going to be always like rainbows and butterflies ... he was also telling us that Barnardo's support is not going to stop when we start the job, but it was rather a continuous thing until now. He was calling us and checking how we are doing"***
>
> (young person)

A young person described how their worker on the programme helped them build confidence in raising issues directly with managers and colleagues:

> ***"Because of that continuous support that we were getting from Barnardo's, we were able to tell our project worker some of the things that were bothering us until we got used to speaking with our managers and team leads"***
>
> (young person)

Participants described being actively encouraged to think beyond simply securing a job and to identify future development opportunities.

> ***"He was also pushing us to aim higher, to use this as a stepping stone for something great"***
>
> (young person)

4.5 What Needs to Be Done to Support Young People Aged 18-25 Who Are Out of Work?

Our research highlights the importance of employment support that goes beyond helping young people search for jobs. Across the evidence gathered for this report, young people consistently emphasised the value of tailored support, meaningful workplace experience and sustained engagement to help them successfully move into and remain in work.

This is consistent with wider evidence from the Resolution Foundation, which suggests that targeted employment support for young people facing the greatest challenges in accessing work delivers stronger outcomes and better value for money than broad labour market incentives alone . Their analysis argues that expanding targeted support could open up thousands of additional employment opportunities and that employment programmes are most effective when they form part of a wider, joined-up offer.

The government is already investing in new infrastructure through the Youth Guarantee, Youth Hubs, Jobcentre Plus, local employment and skills provision, and wider Get Britain Working reforms. The priority should now be to ensure that every young person who is struggling to access or sustain employment can access an integrated programme of support, regardless of how they enter the system. Access should be based on need rather than benefit status, and combining employment support with meaningful workplace experience and sustained engagement to help young people move into and remain in work.

- Recommendation 4: The government should ensure that all young people who are struggling to access or sustain employment can access a tailored programme of integrated, employment-focused support. Support should be based on need rather than benefit status, combine personalised support with strong employer engagement, and focus on helping young people move into and remain in sustainable employment.

How would the Department for Education achieve this?

- **Fund an integrated employment support programme for young people facing the greatest challenges in accessing work**, bringing together employment, skills and wider support around a dedicated key worker. Programmes should include meaningful engagement with employers, workplace experiences and clear routes into employment.

- **Fund employment support programmes to include in-work mentoring and sustained post-employment support**. Employment support should focus on helping young people sustain and progress in work, not simply enter it. Funded programmes should include follow-up support after job entry, enabling young people to overcome challenges, settle into the workplace and reduce the risk of early exits from employment.

- **Changing eligibility for and access to targeted and specialist employment support so that it is based on each young person's circumstance and potential rather than benefit status**, so that young people can access support regardless of whether they are claiming benefits, which benefits they are in receipt or which work-related activity groups for Universal Credit they are in, engaged in education, or connected to another service. This would help ensure that support reaches young people facing the greatest challenges, wherever they enter the system.

- Some young people have been assessed as having Limited Capability for Work or Limited Capability for Work Related Activity (LCWRA) because of a disability, health condition or poor mental health. Many would like to work in future with the right support or would benefit from increased access to more appropriate support to help them move towards this. Government should ensure that young people awaiting a Work Capability Assessment, or assessed as having Limited Capability for Work (LCW) or Limited Capability for Work-Related Activity (LCWRA), can access specialist health, employment and participation support that reflects their individual circumstances, aspirations and readiness for work while protecting those who cannot work, nor prepare for it, whether that be now or in the future. Any changes to the benefits system for young people must not put them at risk of poverty, nor harm their health, which we know has wider negative effects on their life chances.

- **Establish proactive identification, outreach and referral pathways into support**. The Department for Work and Pensions should work with local authorities, health services, schools and colleges, youth services, housing providers, social care and the voluntary sector to ensure that young people can be identified and referred into support through multiple trusted routes. This should include proactive outreach to young people who are not engaged with existing services, and stronger referral pathways for groups at greater risk of being excluded from employment and learning opportunities, including care leavers and young people who face barriers to engaging with support, such as poor mental health.

As discussed in Chapter 3, financial barriers can prevent children and young people from accessing opportunities throughout their journey from education into employment. We have already highlighted the challenges facing those in post-16 education and training, including concerns about the adequacy, consistency and accessibility of the 16-19 Bursary Fund. Our research shows that these challenges do not disappear when young people turn 18. For many young people trying to take their first steps into employment, apprenticeships or training, the costs of getting started can be difficult to meet, particularly where family finances are already stretched.

While financial support is available through a range of Jobcentre, employment and local schemes, it is often fragmented, inconsistent and difficult to navigate. As a result, support is not always available when it is needed most, particularly at the point when a young person is starting a job or training opportunity and upfront costs can be highest.

Barnardo's experience demonstrates the difference that timely financial support can make. Through the Springboard Fund, young people participating in the JOBS Project have been able to access support for transport, work clothing, training costs, equipment and other practical expenses associated with entering employment.

These findings point to the need for a more coherent and accessible system of financial support for young people. A dedicated Youth Opportunity Grant would help ensure that no young person misses out on an opportunity because they cannot afford the costs of taking part. By providing flexible support at key transition points, it would help young people overcome practical barriers, access opportunities and sustain their participation in employment, apprenticeships and training.

How would the Department for Work and Pensions achieve this?

- Introduce a nationally funded Youth Opportunity Grant for young people facing financial barriers to accessing or sustaining employment, education or training. Eligibility should include young people receiving Universal Credit, alongside referrals from employment support providers, local authorities, colleges, youth hubs and voluntary sector organisations for young people who are not claiming benefits but would otherwise face financial barriers to participation. The Fund should provide flexible support for costs such as transport, work clothing, equipment, digital access, food, childcare and other essential expenses that may otherwise prevent participation. It should provide flexible, timely support at key transition points and be designed around the realities of young people's lives.

- Deliver the Fund through trusted local services as part of wider employment and skills support. Funding should be administered through existing local infrastructure, including employment support providers, education providers, local authorities and voluntary organisations, enabling support to be tailored to individual circumstances and linked to progression into employment, education or training.

Annex A: Methodology

This report draws on a mixed-methods evidence base comprising:

- A nationally representative survey conducted by Censuswide with 1,000 young people aged 16 to 25 in England. Fieldwork was conducted between 2 and 9 September 2026. The sample was weighted to be nationally representative and included demographic splits by age, gender, region and socio-economic status. Censuswide is a member of the Market Research Society (MRS) and the British Polling Council (BPC), a signatory to the Global Data Quality Pledge, and adheres to the MRS Code of Conduct and ESOMAR principles.

- Four focus groups involving young people aged 18 to 25 who had accessed Barnardo's Employment, Training and Skills (ETS) services. Participants were recruited from services in Manchester, Birmingham and London. Focus groups were delivered through a combination of online and in-person sessions. Participants were recruited either through existing service cohorts or through direct contact from project workers and received a £10 voucher in recognition of their time and contribution.

- Three online focus groups involving 18 frontline workers delivering employment, training and skills support across Barnardo's services in England and Scotland. The groups explored worker perspectives on the barriers and enablers affecting young people's participation in education, training and employment.

- Two semi-structured interviews with employers involved in employment or training programmes with Barnardo's.

About Barnardo's

At Barnardo's, our purpose is clear – changing childhoods and changing lives, so that children, young people, and families are safe, happy, healthy, and hopeful. Last year, we provided essential support to over 350,000 children, young people, parents and carers through more than 650 services and partnerships across the UK. For over 150 years, we've been here for the children and young people who need us most – bringing love, care and hope into their lives and giving them a place where they feel they belong

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