



Jobs and Education: Building the Bridge to Opportunity

By Tim Clark and Catherine Frost

Forewords by Georgiana Bristol, Ruth Kelly and Sir Dan Moynihan



The Jobs Foundation is a registered charity (1202928) which champions the role of business as a force for good, particularly the crucial role companies play giving people a step up in life by providing jobs and training opportunities.

We want to have a practical impact on the ground, by helping business leaders do even more for their local communities, by providing them with the tools, knowledge, and best practice on employing and training people from less privileged backgrounds.

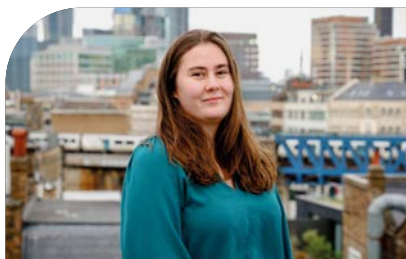
In parallel, we want to have a policy impact by creating a business environment which allows companies to thrive. We hope our advocacy programme will bring about a real change in the way policy makers view business and the crucial social and economic value businesses contribute to society.

We have built a coalition of business leaders through our 1,500-strong Business Council. In Autumn 2026, we will be launching our Jobs Foundation Pledge to properly recognise the great work businesses do in terms of helping people from welfare into work.

As with all Jobs Foundation publications, the views expressed are those of the authors and not those of the Foundation (which has no corporate view), its Trustees, Advisory Council, Business Council or staff.



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Georgiana Bristol

Foreword by Georgiana Bristol, Jobs Foundation

Over one million young people in Britain today are not in education, employment or training (NEET). Behind that number are young people, brimming with potential, whose path from school to work has been blocked, delayed or never properly built. Understanding why and what to do about it is one of the defining political and economic challenges of our time and, as such, one of the most important aspects of our work at the Jobs Foundation.

This report is the latest in our series examining the core factors influencing businesses and their ability to generate jobs, following our previous analysis of topics like energy costs, investment and taxation. With this report, Tim Clark and Catherine Frost set out to discover what employers actually want from teenagers leaving school and where schools can fill the gaps in creating productive and characterful young people. Our thanks go to both of them for their ethnographic study that took them to businesses and schools up and down the country, and produced research that is rigorous, human and compelling.

We have been here before, in a sense. The second volume of our foundational research, *Ladders of Opportunity*, examined the brilliant work businesses are doing to bring young people into employment, and showed clearly that too many are arriving wholly unprepared for it. Along the way, they discovered that the NEETs crisis is not only a supply issue but also a demand issue. Businesses are increasingly facing financial and regulatory barriers that stop them lowering the ladder of opportunity to the young.

1,012,000 NEETs is just a statistic, but each young person facing barriers to crossing the bridge between education and work is a personal tragedy. We spoke to many pupils at schools across the country for this report. They were brimming with potential and the

optimism of what their futures could be. Some wanted to be nurses, to be builders, to go into IT or into law. But for many young people leaving school this year, their dreams will be hard won.

“Failure to provide and receive a good education has consequences for our economy and our communities. It presents challenges in relation to unemployment and mental health issues, and can also be a contributing factor in young people getting involved with criminality. The current education system of one size fits all, however, is not serving young people: full stop.”

Martin McKervey, Non-Executive Director at AESSEAL

Young people who have not entered the workforce by their mid-20s face significantly higher barriers to employment and are at greater risk of long-term economic inactivity. Leaving school without structure and support for the first time can be disorienting and terrifying. Without purpose and clear goals, young people can become rudderless, stumbling into perpetual NEETHood, with all the mental health consequences that brings.

The rise of AI adds another layer of complexity. Young people currently in school are growing up as AI natives and will enter organisations still adapting to rapid technological change. For some, AI will narrow traditional pathways into work. For others, particularly those who are adaptable and engaged with the opportunities of new technology, it may open new ones. What is certain is that character, attitude and the willingness to learn matter more than ever. And character is not wholly separate from skill. The willingness to turn up, to persevere when work is hard, to take responsibility for a task and see it through are competences in their own right. They are teachable, at both school and in employment.

The evidence in this report is clear and the solutions are within reach. What is needed now is the political will to act.



Georgiana Bristol
Chief Executive, Jobs Foundation



Ruth Kelly

Foreword by Ruth Kelly, Former Secretary of State for Education and Skills

Youth unemployment is an issue that is fast becoming the crisis of our time. 60 per cent of today's NEETs have never had a job, up from 40 per cent in 2005 when I was Education Secretary. The UK has diverged sharply from comparable economies, and where a decade ago our NEET rate sat broadly in line with European peers, today only Romania records a higher figure.

I have known Alan Milburn for many years, serving together in Cabinet, and his interim report on young people and work earlier this year was a thorough and alarming analysis of the factors shaping this crisis. The diagnosis he has set out – that the numbers are worsening relative to comparable economies, that the welfare system is absorbing young people rather than activating them, and that too many of the interventions on offer do not reach the young people most in need – is accurate.

Labour governments only succeed when they are the party of work. Right now, a generation isn't working.

In search of a solution, the current government has reached, understandably, for tools that have worked before. The Youth Guarantee echoes the New Deal for Young People that we introduced in 1998, which met its target of moving 250,000 young people off benefits and into work, and remains one of the most effective labour market interventions this country has delivered. The Connexions service, built to provide every young person with a personal adviser and a route back into education or employment, is a frontrunner to the AI employment advisers of today.

But the challenges we face now are not the same as then, and the tools that worked then will not be sufficient on their own now. When young people are out of work because the labour market seems to have closed its doors, guaranteed jobs and personalised advice can bridge the gap. When young people have never worked at all, when their inactivity is rooted in poor mental health, when they have been disengaged from the world of work since long before they left school, we must do more. That is what this report is about.

The answers to fixing this focus on both getting our young people work-ready, and on opening our labour market to young people. On one side stands the school system, which is not consistently supplying young people with the attitudes, behaviours and workplace readiness that employers are looking for. On the other stands the world of work, where rising employment costs and regulatory pressure are making employers, particularly smaller ones, increasingly reluctant to take a chance on someone without experience.

On the supply side, employers in this report from across the country detail how attitude and character are vital, yet the education system isn't always producing or accounting for this. Employers consistently struggle to assess the value of non-academic qualifications, and young people who have struggled in traditional academic routes are too often invisible to hiring managers who have no framework for understanding what other achievements represent.

Better careers education can help young people understand what employers want and give young people the tools to project themselves beyond just GCSE grades. Evidence shows that careers education can reduce the likelihood of young people becoming NEET by up to 20 per cent in the best-performing schools, and schools need stronger incentives to put this at the heart of what they do, with Ofsted treating it accordingly.

On the demand side, the picture is equally uncomfortable. The cost of hiring a young person has risen dramatically in recent years. Employer National Insurance contributions have gone up, the minimum wage differential between young and adult workers has narrowed, and the Employment Rights Act has made employers more cautious about the flexible, entry-level roles that have historically been the first rung on the ladder for young people. You cannot put up the cost of hiring young people and then wonder why fewer of them are being hired, and the Government cannot present itself as serious about getting young people into work while the structural conditions push in the opposite direction.

The Youth Guarantee and the Connexions model that inspired it worked because they connected willing young people with willing employers in a labour market that was fundamentally open to them. That openness cannot be assumed today and restoring it will require making it genuinely viable for employers, particularly smaller ones, to take a chance on someone without experience. That means addressing the cost of employment directly, not recycling it through hiring incentives that reach only a fraction of those who need them.

Alan Milburn has given this government a clear account of what is happening. This report gives a valuable contribution on what needs to change.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading 'Ruth Kelly', with a long diagonal stroke extending from the end of the signature.

Rt Hon Ruth Kelly

Secretary of State for Education and Skills, 2004-2006



Sir Dan Moynihan

Foreword by Sir Dan Moynihan, The Harris Federation

Schools do not exist in isolation from the economy. The number of young people who are NEET is, in large part, a function of the economic conditions in which they leave education. When growth is weak, entry-level opportunities are scarce, employers are cautious, and the public finances that pay for services that could help – such as high-quality, face-to-face careers guidance – are stretched. A serious strategy for reducing the number of NEETs has to begin, therefore, with a serious strategy for economic growth.

This report sets out clearly how the rising cost of employing young people is deterring businesses from hiring them. An economy that makes it harder and more expensive to employ people will produce more NEETs, whatever schools do at our end.

But schools also play a vital role. This report is right to identify careers education as one of the most powerful levers available, highlighting that high-quality careers provision reduces the likelihood of young people becoming NEET by up to 20 per cent in the most disadvantaged communities. Our experience at the Harris Federation, which is borne out by the findings in this report, is that it changes the conversations young people have about their futures, and is especially crucial for students who are not getting this at home.

Leaders in schools already understand the importance of careers education perfectly well, and what is too often lacking is not will but resource. There is a national shortage of well-trained careers advisers and, as government seeks to address this, it should also make sure that they become more representative of the students they serve with more male role models needed in particular.

Schools, even those operating in the most disadvantaged areas, have shown that they can achieve extraordinary outcomes for students. To make this universal, government must treat the supply of well-qualified, full-time careers advisers – and the ring-fenced budgets to employ them – as an investment rather than a cost. Resourcing schools to address these challenges is a far higher priority than changing accountability mechanisms.

The return on investment in this is measurable, in the £150 million of annual Treasury savings that better transitions generate, and immeasurable, in the lives of young people who find the career that works for them.

If we are to be successful in driving down the number of NEETs, we also need to intervene much earlier. The disadvantage gap opens young and, with a coherent and properly-resourced strategy from government, it is likely we could identify those most at risk of becoming NEETs from an early age – even before they start school – and stop the gap opening in the first place.

By the time a poorly-served young person is approaching the end of their schooling, we are managing a problem that could have been addressed years earlier and at far lower cost. That is not an argument for doing less in secondary schools, but for recognising that the foundations of this crisis are laid much earlier.

Everyone agrees that action needs to be taken to address the crisis of NEETs – but doing so will land best in an economy that is growing, and in a system that is prepared to fund the people and the early support that make the difference.



Sir Dan Moynihan

Chief Executive, Harris Federation



Pupils making the most of lunchtime at Harris Greenwich School

Executive Summary

Young people should be able to cross seamlessly from education into employment, yet too many find that bridge riddled with obstacles. Trapped in the middle, unable to move forward into work or back into learning, they stall. And that stalling has a name: NEET. Over one million young people, 1,012,000, between the ages of 16 and 24 are not in education, employment or training, and this number has continued to grow over the past four years. As another cohort leaves education this summer, it is likely to grow further still.

“We’re laying to waste a whole generation. I call it a lost generation.”

Alan Milburn, launch of *Young People and Work: Interim Report*, May 2026

The Government knows there is a problem. The Youth Guarantee, announced in September 2025, pledged paid work to young people who have been out of work for 18 months; the Youth Jobs Grant, announced in March 2026, offered employers £3,000 to take on young people; and the landmark interim report from Alan Milburn into *Young People and Work* was published earlier this year. These are welcome steps, but they do not address the structural weaknesses on either side of the bridge, the conditions that make crossing it so difficult in the first place.

On one side stands the world of work. Many employers value work experience above formal qualifications, yet the barriers to providing it are significant. Businesses report that many young people arrive without the basic workplace and social skills they need, while safeguarding requirements, staffing constraints and coordination difficulties mean fewer than half of firms offer work placements at all.

Additionally, rising employer National Insurance contributions and National Minimum Wage rates have further increased the cost of hiring younger workers. The labour market is becoming progressively harder for young people to enter and the experience they need



Mace apprentices at the Salisbury Square development in London

to compete is itself becoming harder to obtain. **We call this the demand problem – facing increasing cost pressures, businesses are less incentivised to hire young people.**

On the other side of the bridge stands the school system. Careers education has improved significantly in recent years, with statutory guidance, the Gatsby Benchmarks and the Careers and Enterprise Company all helping to raise standards. Evidence suggests that strong careers provision can reduce the likelihood of young people becoming NEET by up to 20 per cent. Yet teacher shortages, funding pressures and uneven access to local employers mean that many schools cannot fully deliver on this promise. The curriculum debate continues, with growing calls for earlier vocational pathways and genuine parity of esteem between academic and technical routes. And underlying everything is a deeper truth: by the time young people reach secondary school, many of the attitudes and behaviours that will shape their future are already formed. **We call this the supply problem – too many young people are being supplied to businesses who are ‘non-work-ready’.**

Over the past six months, we have travelled across the country speaking with businesses, educators and careers organisations to understand what is working, what is not, and where the bridge between education and employment is most in need of repair. Employers told us they are looking for character and work ethic above all else including qualifications, but the rising costs of employment and barriers to careers outreach are deterring them from engaging with young people. Teachers and careers professionals described the value of employer partnerships and meaningful work experience, but also the frustration of trying to deliver these within stretched and overstretched systems.

Behind every one of the 1,012,000 NEET statistics is a real young person without opportunity, income, prospects or hope. The human cost is immeasurable; the economic cost, unacceptable. What this report makes clear is that the crisis is resolvable but only if both sides of the bridge are addressed simultaneously. Employers, schools and the third sector are already doing impressive work. With active central government involvement, that work can become nationwide and genuinely transform the life chances of young people, wherever they live and whatever their background. The evidence is there. The solutions are within reach. What is needed now is the political will to act.



Michael Lorimer, CEO of DCS Group

From our visits to businesses across the country, we found:

Businesses are disincentivised from hiring young people

Many employers expressed a clear reluctance to recruit directly from education. Early-stage hires require significant investment in training, supervision and onboarding while contributing less value than more experienced employees in the short term. The cost of employing someone aged 18 to 20 rose by £4,095 between 2024 and 2026. As a result, businesses consistently favour candidates with prior workplace experience.

Businesses face barriers to providing work experience

Regulatory demands, managerial workload, limited capacity and the complexity of facilitating short-term work placements all discourage businesses from providing work experience, particularly among SMEs, leading to a work experience shortage. Nonetheless, there is widespread agreement amongst businesses of the benefits of work experience, and for many employers, providing exposure to the workplace is seen as a cornerstone of social mobility.

Tom Kerridge captures the paradox well: “I always think it’s so hard to get into those kinds of first jobs when you’re very young, and I think they’re very beneficial... people come in, do a couple of hours a week, and then they get the bug.”

Businesses look for character in new recruits

Every employer we interviewed gave the same answer when asked what they look for in new recruits: attitude and character. Qualifications matter far less than the willingness to learn and work as part of a team. As Tom Kerridge put it: “Attitude. That’s solely it.” Most businesses felt they could teach sector-specific knowledge. What they cannot teach is the willingness to engage and learn, and by the time a young person starts their first job, it is often too late.

Based on this we recommend:

1. Financial incentives to encourage hiring younger workers

Businesses providing jobs to young people should be encouraged through targeted incentives. A Skills Tax Relief scheme would allow employers to offset the equivalent of two days' pay per week of wages against their tax bill, helping businesses recoup the costs of accredited training such as apprenticeships and vocational courses.

National Insurance exemptions for all first jobbers during their first two years of employment would extend NICs relief beyond under-21s, supporting young people entering work after further education or training. Such measures would incentivise employers to recruit, train and take risks on less experienced workers.

2. Removing unnecessary barriers to labour-market entry

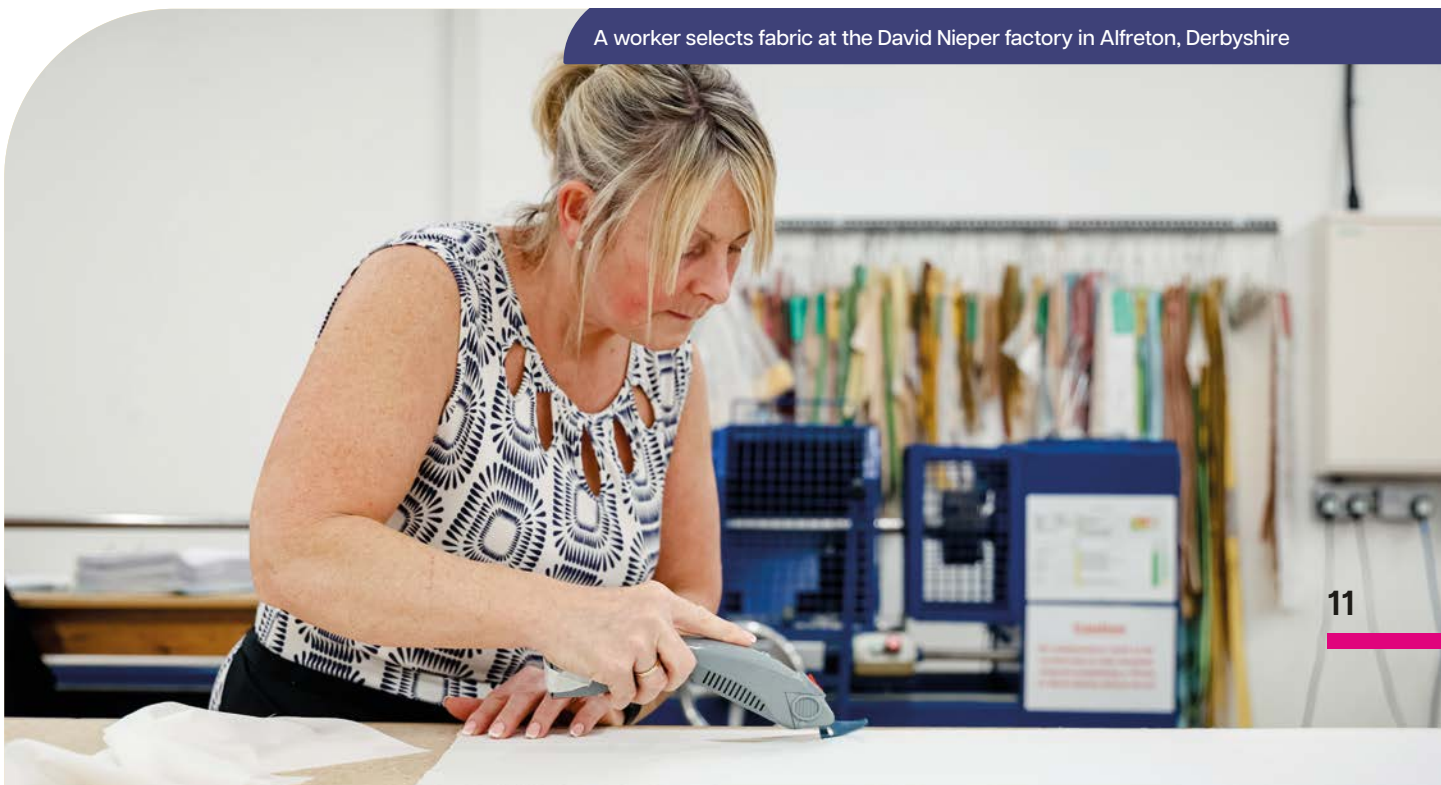
The gap between youth and adult minimum wage rates has narrowed in real terms while productivity differences at entry level remain. This makes inexperienced young workers poor value, particularly for SMEs and sectors with narrow margins. We advocate a temporary training wage for first-jobbers, linked to skills development, with a set time limit and clear progression to a standard wage to avoid exploitation.

The Employment Rights Act 2025 has created further barriers by requiring employers to guarantee hours for regular work, making them less likely to hire young people into the flexible roles that have historically served as mutually beneficial access points to employment experience. The government should fix the loopholes in flexible contracts, not remove a tool that has encouraged greater workforce participation.

3. Introducing an Employability Passport

Every employer we interviewed valued personal attributes, such as teamwork and resilience, far above qualifications. A non-academic employability certificate would give employers and admissions officers the information they need, while teaching students a lesson that matters beyond school: that they, and nobody else, are accountable for their behaviour, attendance, work ethic and contribution to wider society (see Appendix 1).

A worker selects fabric at the David Nieper factory in Alfreton, Derbyshire



From our visits to schools across the country, we found:

Schools must provide effective careers education

Effective careers education, including meaningful work experience and employer engagement, is vital. Many teenagers lack awareness of the range of careers available to them. High-quality provision does three things: it broadens horizons and aspirations, gives young people a flavour of employment, and motivates them to achieve the qualifications they need. Careers and Enterprise Company research found that young people in schools with the highest-quality careers provision are 8 per cent less likely to become NEET.

As Jack Docherty, Principal at Harris Academy Greenwich, put it, good careers education means that “by the time you ask for a conversation about what they want to do next, it’s a different conversation you’re having.” That is especially true for young people from economically inactive households, or those who receive no encouragement at home.

Schools face difficulties arranging work experience placements

Every school we visited understood the importance of employer engagement, but there was equal unanimity about the difficulty of finding enough placements. Rising costs, logistical pressures and growing statutory requirements all add to the burden. In rural and coastal areas, where the number and variety of employers is limited, the problem is even greater. As Jim Bailey, Principal at the JCB Academy, told us: “Finding enough good placements is difficult, especially with SMEs, in what is largely a rural area.”

Schools are limited by standardised education

Since the introduction of the National Curriculum in the late 1980s and the EBacc in 2010, the emphasis has been firmly on traditional academic subjects. Yet only around 40 per cent of pupils follow the EBacc specification, and of those, roughly a third fail in each subject. That is evidence enough that one size does not fit all. Post-16, a wide range of vocational options exists, but many students only reach them after being seen to have failed the academic route.

Principal Jack Docherty with a student at Harris Academy Greenwich, Eltham





Helen Stansfield, Tim Clark and Catherine Frost at The Grammar School at Leeds

Based on this we recommend:

4. A greater emphasis to be placed on careers education

Schools need stronger incentives and support to put careers education at the heart of what they do. We welcome the increased focus in the 2025 revised Ofsted framework, but the priority now should be capacity, not further inspection. Careers education, work experience and preparation for steps beyond school must be properly resourced, with enough trained careers advisers, dedicated time and strong employer links to meet demand. Government should focus on equipping schools to deliver high-quality provision, rather than adding to the accountability burdens they already carry. Careers education touches every element of school life, and the goal should be to help schools do it well.

5. A standardised framework to enable employers to engage with schools

The barriers to quality work experience aren't just logistical. Employers face real costs of time and resource in making placements meaningful. We advocate a national work experience framework with standardised documentation, safeguarding and liability cover to reduce uncertainty. Pre-planned programmes that signal what students should be doing would also give time back to managers and raise the quality of the encounter.

6. A broader curriculum from age 14 to 16

A broader curriculum from 14 would have a tangible impact on attendance, behaviour and work ethic, without pigeonholing young people too early. When students engage with subjects that speak to their abilities and interests, they show up. Skilled tradespeople, creative practitioners and technical specialists need space to discover those abilities before 16, not after a system has already written them off.

T Levels show that high standards and vocational relevance are not mutually exclusive, but their impact is limited when students arrive at 16 already disengaged or lost. Earlier exposure to applied, employer-connected learning gives T Levels something to build on. Rigour need not be sacrificed. High standards applied across a wider range of valued disciplines ensures every student has a pathway that stretches them.

1. Overview

1.1 Key Statistics

The scale of the problem

- 1,012,000 young people aged 16 to 24 are currently NEET – 13.5 per cent of the entire age group.¹
- The number has grown consistently over four years and is likely to rise further as another cohort leaves education this summer.
- Of the 1,012,000: 400,000 are unemployed and actively seeking work; 613,000 are economically inactive and have stopped looking altogether.

The labour market

- In 2022 there was one job vacancy for every unemployed person; by December 2025 there were two unemployed people for every vacancy.
- Overall unemployment has risen to 5 per cent, having fallen slightly from its recent post-pandemic high of 5.2 per cent in November to January 2025.²
- The number of roles explicitly advertised as “graduate” positions has fallen to a record low – with fewer than 10,000 such vacancies listed at any one point in early 2026, down from around 15,000 at the post-pandemic peak in 2022.³

Tim Clark and Catherine Frost with Ruth Coyle, Careers Lead at La Retraite Roman Catholic Girls' School, London



1. Office for National Statistics, “Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK: May 2026” (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneet/may2026>) Accessed June 2026
2. Office for National Statistics, “Vacancies and Jobs in the UK: March 2026” (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/jobsandvacanciesintheuk/march2026>) Accessed June 2026
3. Adzuna, “UK Job Market Report”, March 2026 (<https://www.adzuna.co.uk/job-market-report/>) Accessed June 2026; Institute of Student Employers, “Student Recruitment Survey 2025” (https://ise.org.uk/knowledge/research/491/ise_student_recruitment_survey_2025/) October 2025. Accessed June 2026



Tim Clark and Catherine Frost with two apprentices at the Mace Salisbury Square construction site

The skills gap

- Significant vacancies remain unfilled: 52 per cent in construction, 34 per cent in manufacturing, 31 per cent in business services and 22 per cent in hospitality.⁴
- The skills gap costs the economy up to £39 billion annually, projected to rise to £120 billion by 2030 without intervention.⁵

Health and inactivity

- One in five NEETs cites poor mental health or long-term sickness as the primary reason they cannot work.⁶
- 76 per cent more 16- to 34-year-olds are economically inactive due to mental health conditions than in 2019.⁷
- Among young people aged 16 to 24, disability prevalence has more than doubled over the past decade from 8 per cent to 18 per cent.⁸

The cost

- Young people who leave the workforce in their twenties can lose over £1 million in lifetime earnings, with the state incurring a comparable cost.⁹
- 60 per cent of the UK's NEETs have never had a job.¹⁰
- There are over 9 million pupils currently in England's 24,479 schools – the pipeline into this crisis is vast.¹¹

4. Department for Education, "Employer Skills Survey 2022" via Recruitonomics, "Is the Skills Gap Getting Worse in the UK?" (<https://recruitonomics.com/is-the-skills-gap-getting-worse-in-the-uk/>) Accessed June 2026

5. Learning and Work Institute, cited in Aptem, "Skills gap to cost the UK £120 billion by 2030, says report" (<https://www.aptem.co.uk/articles/skills-gap-to-cost-the-uk-120-billion-by-2030-says-report/>) Accessed June 2026

6. Department for Education, "NEET Statistics Annual Brief: 2025" (<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/neet-statistics-annual-brief/2025>) March 2026. Accessed June 2026

7. Sir Charlie Mayfield, "Keep Britain Working Review: Final Report" (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keep-britain-working-review-final-report/keep-britain-working-final-report>) March 2026. Accessed June 2026

8. Department for Work and Pensions, "Family Resources Survey: financial year 2023 to 2024" (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2023-to-2024/family-resources-survey-financial-year-2023-to-2024>) January 2026. Accessed June 2026

9. Sir Charlie Mayfield, "Keep Britain Working Review: Final Report" (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keep-britain-working-review-final-report/keep-britain-working-final-report>) March 2026. Accessed June 2026

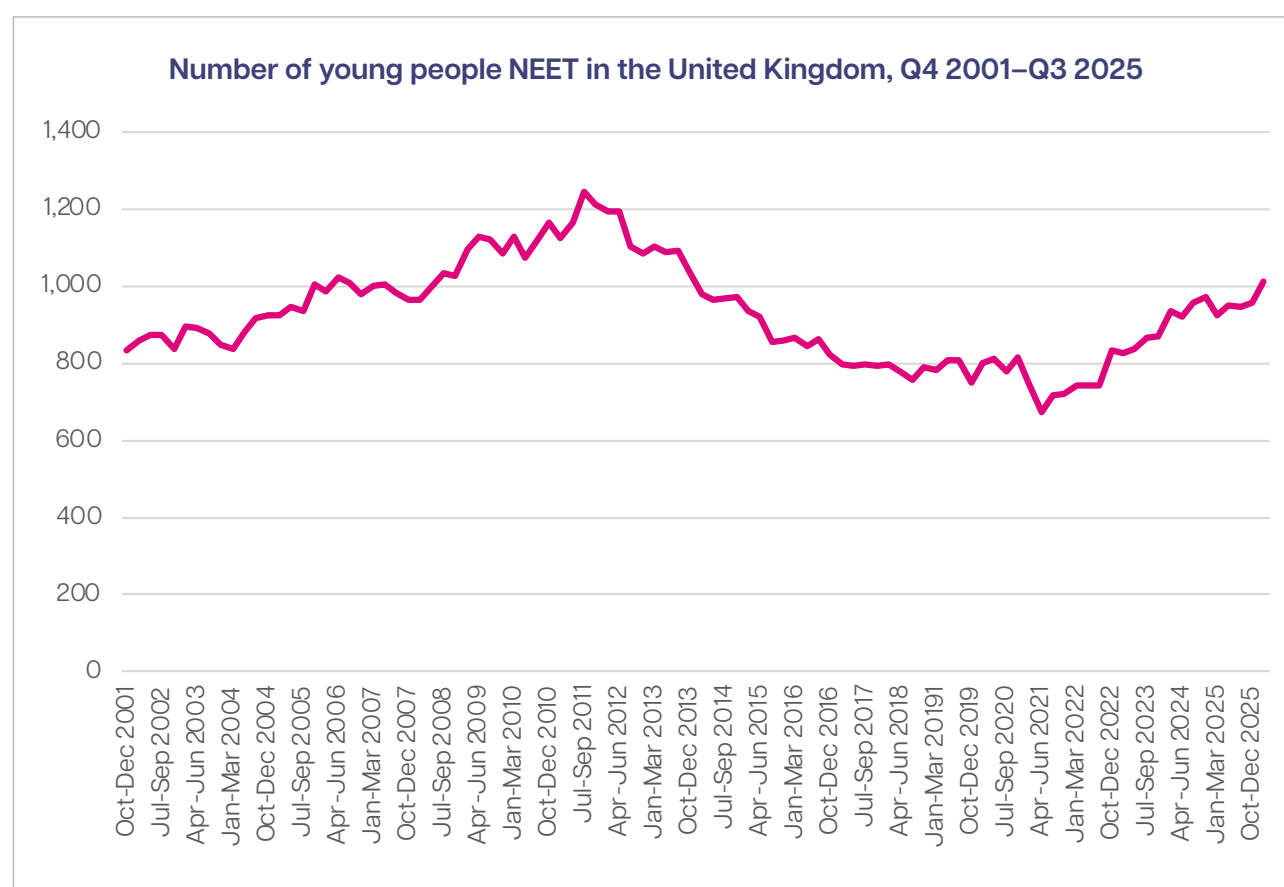
10. Alan Milburn, "Young People and Work: Interim Report" (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/young-people-and-work-interim-report/young-people-and-work-interim-report>) May 2026. Accessed June 2026

11. Department for Education, "Schools, Pupils and Their Characteristics: January 2025" (<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2024-25>) June 2025. Accessed

1.2 Why are young people Not in Education, Employment, or Training

The last time the UK faced a NEET crisis of this scale was 2011, when 1,246,000 young people between 16 and 24 were out of education, employment and training; a direct consequence of the 2008 financial crisis and the recession that followed, which froze entry-level and graduate hiring across the economy.¹² The then Coalition Government combatted this crisis by expanding Connexions, a careers advice service created in the Learning and Skills Act 2000, and by increasing the Education Maintenance Allowance which paid 16- to 19-year-olds from deprived socio-economic backgrounds £30 a week to remain at school or to undertake other vocational training. By 2014, the NEET rate had fallen below the pre-recession figures.

Figure 1. Number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) in the United Kingdom from 4th quarter 2001 to 3rd quarter 2025¹³



Source: ONS

¹² ONS figures (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/unemployment/datasets/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneettable1>) Accessed 26 May 2026

¹³ Statista, "Number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) in the United Kingdom from the 4th quarter 2001 to 3rd quarter 2025" (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/282058/number-of-people-who-are-neet-uk/>) Accessed 15 April 2025



Tim Clark and Helen Stansfield, Head of Senior School at The Grammar School at Leeds

Today, we are facing a similar problem: over a million young people, 1,012,000, are not in education, employment or training.¹⁴ This has been caused by a mixture of issues including economic factors, the skills gap, the welfare system and rising ill health among young people. 57 per cent of those who were NEET between October and December 2025 were not looking for work at all.¹⁵

One in five NEETs currently cites their poor mental health or long-term sickness as the reasons why they are unable to work.¹⁶ Recent analysis has also shown that 21 per cent of the UK's total young adult population reported having health problems that affect their daily lives; that is 6 per cent ahead of the next closest peer country, Norway.¹⁷ Although only half of NEETs claim benefits, this is not the sole issue: 60 per cent of the UK's NEETs have never had a job.¹⁸ As was said in Sir Charlie Mayfield's *Keep Britain Working* review, if a young person does not enter the workplace by the time they are 24, then they are unlikely to ever do so, and this will cause a long-term drain on state resources as well as creating poor mental health in the young person.¹⁹

In December 2025, it was announced that former Health Secretary, Alan Milburn, would be conducting a review into the causes of youth inactivity. Part of this review is to bring together "a coalition of the concerned"²⁰ in the form of the DWP's Youth Guarantee Advisory panel including the likes of Sir Charlie Mayfield, fresh from his own review into *Keeping Britain Working*. In May 2026, Milburn published his interim report laying out the scale and impact of the problem on society, the government and the young people – as he called them the "bedroom generation".

The Government has recognised that action is needed. The Youth Guarantee, announced in September 2025, offered guaranteed paid work to every eligible young person who has been on Universal Credit for 18 months or more without earning or

14. **ONS figures** (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/unemployment/datasets/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneettable1>) Accessed 26 February 2026

15. **House of Commons Library, "NEET: Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training", February 2026** (<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06705/>) Accessed 15 April, 2026

16. **Department of Education and Department for Work and Pensions, "NEET age 16 to 24 – Explore education statistics", March 2026** (<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/neet-statistics-annual-brief/2025>) Accessed 15 April, 2026

17. **John Burn-Murdoch, Financial Times, February 28, 2026** (<https://www.ft.com/content/a9d8cbdc-fe26-4a83-b6b5-ee9820ce7f0c>) Accessed 15 April 2026

18. **Learning and Work Institute, "Young people who are not in education, employment or training: what does the data tell us?", April 4, 2025** (<https://learningandwork.org.uk/young-people-who-are-not-in-education-employment-or-training-what-does-the-data-tell-us/>) Accessed 16 April 2026

19. **Sir Charles Mayfield, "Keep Britain Working: Final report", March 2026** (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keep-britain-working-review-final-report/keep-britain-working-final-report>) Accessed 15 April 2025

20. **Press release on gov.uk website, "Alan Milburn calls for a 'movement' to address lost generation of young people not earning or learning as investigation opens", December 2025** (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/alan-milburn-calls-for-a-movement-to-address-lost-generation-of-young-people-not-earning-or-learning-as-investigation-opens>) Accessed 15 April, 2026

learning.²¹ The Youth Jobs Grant, announced in March 2026, offered employers £3,000 to take on young people aged 18 to 24 who have been seeking work for six months or more.²² These measures are welcome as far as they go. But they do not go far enough, and in some respects, they obscure a contradiction at the heart of government policy. Fewer than half of all NEETs are on Universal Credit, meaning the Youth Guarantee's reach is structurally limited from the outset.²³ And the Government has simultaneously increased the cost of employment through higher employer National Insurance contributions, only to redirect some of that revenue back to businesses through hiring incentives; an attempt to remedy, in part, a problem of its own making. As Lancaster University's Work Foundation observed, the approach is too blunt an instrument to support young people into secure and sustained employment, and the evidence is clear that forcing individuals into any job can do more harm than good for their long-term employment prospects.²⁴

Of course, it goes without saying that underpinning all of this is economic growth. Incentives and guarantees can help redistribute jobs that exist and make job creation at the margins easier, but they cannot conjure the jobs that don't exist. Sustained employment for young people is dependent on a growing economy with growing demand for labour, which gives employers the confidence to expand their workforces and create the openings through which young people build careers. A stagnant economy shrinks opportunity, and pushes the youngest and least experienced to the back of the queue.

What is needed is not another short-term incentive layered onto a system that remains structurally broken. The NEETs crisis is caused by both a supply problem and a demand problem, and both require serious attention. There is a need to produce young people who are genuinely work-ready; equipped with the attitudes, behaviours and skills that employers value. And there is an equal need to ensure that employers are incentivised, supported and able to hire them. The sections that follow address both sides of that equation.

Kellen Hadfield and Tim Clark with Soron Glynn at the JCB Academy, Rocester, Staffordshire



21. HM Treasury, "New youth guarantee for eligible young people", September 29, 2025 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-youth-guarantee-for-eligible-young-people-and-funding-for-libraries-in-all-primary-schools>) Accessed 16 April 2026.
22. Department for Work and Pensions, "Major employment drive to help unlock 200,000 new jobs and apprenticeships for next generation", 16 March 2026 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/major-employment-drive-to-help-unlock-200000-new-jobs-and-apprenticeships-for-next-generation>) Accessed 24 June 2026.
23. London School of Economics and Political Science, "Three myths about NEETs in the UK", December 10, 2025 (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/inequalities/2025/12/10/three-myths-about-neets-in-the-uk/>) Accessed 16 April 2026
24. Sam Francis, BBC, November 26, 2025 (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c997xyg1r3eo>) Accessed 15 April 2026

1.3 State of Play in Business

For young people, the world of work is not simply a destination; it is the other side of the bridge. Yet for many, that bridge is becoming harder to cross, and the conditions on the far side are shifting faster than ever before. Businesses are under pressure from rising employment costs, changing technology and growing administrative demands, while simultaneously being asked to play a greater role in preparing young people for work. Understanding the state of play in business is therefore essential: not only because employers hold the keys to the opportunities young people need, but because the barriers they face directly determine how many young people can cross from education into employment and how many are left stranded in between.

The single most consistent theme to emerge from our conversations with employers was cost. Research by the Centre for Policy Studies shows that between 2024 and 2026, the cost of employing a young person aged 18 to 20 rose by £4,095, significantly more than the £3,414 increase for a full-time adult worker over the same period.²⁵ This differential matters because young people, by definition, arrive with limited experience and require greater investment in training, supervision and onboarding before they contribute meaningfully. When the cost of hiring them rises faster than the cost of hiring someone who is already work-ready, the rational response for many businesses is to hire the latter.

The 2024 Autumn Budget saw employer National Insurance contributions rise from 13.8 per cent to 15 per cent, while the threshold at which employers begin paying the tax was lowered from £9,100 to £5,000 per year, a change that hit part-time and entry-level roles particularly hard. The April 2026 minimum wage increases added further cost: the rate for 18- to 20-year-olds rose from £10 to £10.85 per hour, and from £7.55 to £8 for those aged 16 to 17 and apprentices. As Graham Briggs, Social Lead at Greene King, told us: “We want to continue providing jobs for young people in hospitality, but ongoing cost pressures – including last year’s unexpected rise in employer National Insurance contributions – impact what businesses can deliver. With true collaboration, government and employers can break down barriers for everyone involved and help more young people into work.” The cumulative effect is an employment landscape in which those already in work find it harder to progress, and those not yet employed find it increasingly difficult to get started.

In December 2025, the Employment Rights Act 2025 passed into law. This was part of the Government’s “Plan to Make Work Pay”, which is aimed at growing the economy, boosting wages and reducing insecure work.²⁶ The requirement for employers to guarantee hours for regular workers, while well-intentioned, has made businesses more cautious about offering the kind of flexible, entry-level roles that have historically provided young people with their first experience of work. These jobs: kitchen porter, Saturday retail assistant and part-time hospitality worker, are often the first rung on the ladder. Closing them off in the name of worker protection risks leaving young people

25. Centre for Policy Studies, “Cost of hiring young workers rises by over £4,000, CPS analysis shows”, November 2025, (<https://cps.org.uk/media/post/2025/cost-of-hiring-young-workers-rises-by-over-4000-cps-analysis-shows/>) Accessed 15 April 2025

26. Department for Business and Trade, “Employment Rights Act 2025: overview factsheet”, (<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/696fabb3c0f4afaa9536a0f2/employment-rights-act-2025-overview-factsheet.pdf>) Accessed 15 April 2026

with no ladder at all. The Government should address the loopholes that allowed such contracts to be exploited, rather than removing a tool that has opened the door to employment for countless young people.

When we asked employers what they look for in new recruits, the answer was immediate and unanimous: attitude and character. Not qualifications or grades, but the willingness to learn, to work as part of a team, to show up and engage – these were the qualities every employer cited, without exception or hesitation. As Tom Kerridge put it simply: “Attitude. That’s solely it. It’s attitude and enthusiasm.”

This finding is striking not just in itself but in what it reveals about the mismatch between what the education system produces and what employers actually need. Most employers told us they could teach new recruits the specific knowledge and technical skills their sector requires. What they cannot teach is the willingness to work, resilience under pressure, the ability to take direction and contribute to a team. By the time a young person enters their first job, these qualities are largely already formed, or they are not. That is the uncomfortable truth that sits at the heart of this report, and it points squarely back to the education system and to the experiences young people have long before they ever apply for a job.

The findings are not uniformly negative. Employers readily acknowledge that young people bring fresh thinking, digital fluency and adaptability that older workers often lack. Some organisations have embedded partnerships with schools and colleges as a core part of their values, viewing themselves as active participants in their local communities and as agents of social mobility. These employers are the exception, however. The structural and financial pressures described above mean that for most businesses, particularly smaller ones, meaningful engagement with young people remains an aspiration rather than a reality.

Beyond the cost of employment itself, businesses face a separate set of barriers when it comes to providing the work placements and early exposure that young people need. Evidence from the Careers and Enterprise Company shows that while approximately 52 per cent of businesses do offer work experience, the remaining half are deterred by a combination of factors that are rarely addressed in isolation but together create a formidable obstacle. 41 per cent cite time constraints as the primary barrier; 33 per cent report insufficient staff capacity to supervise students; and 34 per cent highlight difficulties in identifying appropriate tasks for young people to undertake.²⁷ Safeguarding obligations add a further administrative burden, requiring risk assessments, supervision arrangements and compliance procedures that many smaller businesses simply do not have the resources to manage. Data from the Institute of Student Employers shows that 74 per cent of schools report difficulties in organising placements, a figure that reflects not a lack of goodwill on either side but a system that has never been properly designed to make this easy.²⁸

27. Careers & Enterprise Company, “Work experience requires modernising, say employers”, November 25, 2025 (<https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/work-experience-requires-modernising-say-employers>) Accessed 15 April 2026

28. Institute of Student Employers, “How to overcome the challenges of organising work experience”, April 12, 2024 (https://ise.org.uk/knowledge/insights/265/how_to_overcome_the_challenges_of_organising_work_experience/) Accessed 15 April 2026



Catherine Frost and Jamie Booth speaking with Caroline Rigby and Daniel Ballinger at Britten-Norman, Bembridge

The problem is most acute for SMEs and for businesses in rural or coastal areas, where the pool of local employers is limited and the logistical challenges of hosting students are greater. Yet it is precisely these businesses - the local manufacturer, the independent hospitality operator, the regional construction firm - that offer some of the most valuable and grounding early work experiences available to young people. Tom Kerridge captured something important when he described how young people find their vocation through early workplace exposure: "I always think it's so hard to get into those first jobs when you're very young, and I think they're very beneficial. You find that energy. And we do see that often people come in just do a couple of hours a week, and then they get the bug." That moment of discovery of realising what you are good at and what you enjoy is precisely what the current system makes so difficult to access.

AI is rapidly transforming the world of work, with particularly significant implications for young people entering the labour market. In one respect, AI is creating new opportunities by generating roles in fields such as data science, machine learning and digital product development, many of which did not exist a decade ago.²⁹ This shift rewards those with strong digital literacy, adaptability and problem-solving skills, encouraging young people to pursue education and training in technology-related areas. At the same time, AI is reshaping traditional entry-level jobs, especially in sectors like retail, administration and customer service, where automation is increasingly able to perform routine tasks.³⁰ The result is a growing experience gap. The pathways that once allowed young people to learn on the job, build confidence and develop workplace skills are narrowing. Roles that rely on human judgement, creativity and interpersonal connection, like healthcare, teaching, the skilled trades and hospitality, are likely to remain resilient, and as James Reed has noted, those who work with their hands consistently report high levels of job satisfaction. But accessing those roles still requires experience, and experience requires opportunity.³¹ If AI continues to close off the entry points without new ones being created in their place, the experience gap will widen further, and with it, the number of young people left stranded on the wrong side of the bridge.

29. **Financial Times**, "Will AI make it harder for non-graduates to climb the jobs ladder?" April 2, 2026 (<https://www.ft.com/content/becb8ed5-ffaa-4c08-ba56-c4d3e468de09>) Accessed 16 April 2026.

30. **Financial Times**, "Will AI make it harder for non-graduates to climb the jobs ladder?" April 2, 2026 (<https://www.ft.com/content/becb8ed5-ffaa-4c08-ba56-c4d3e468de09>) Accessed 16 April 2026.

31. **The Standard**, "James Reed: 'The lack of jobs is part of a catastrophic and permanent change to the market'", November 24, 2025 (<https://www.standard.co.uk/comment/unemployment-figures-london-job-market-ai-james-reed-b1258797.html>) Accessed 16 April 2026



Students at Harris Academy Greenwich, Eltham

1.4 State of Play in Schools

Young people in schools with strong careers provision are 8 per cent less likely to become NEET, with reductions of up to 20 per cent in the most disadvantaged schools. This improved transition into employment or training is estimated to generate £150 million in annual savings to the Treasury.³² Effective careers education does three things: it broadens horizons and raises aspirations; it gives young people a genuine flavour of the world of work; and it motivates them to attain the qualifications they need to get there. As Jack Docherty, Principal at Harris Academy Greenwich, put it, good careers education means that “by the time you ask for a conversation about what they want to do next, it’s a different conversation you’re having.” Nowhere is this more important than for young people from economically inactive households, or those who receive no encouragement at home.

The infrastructure supporting careers education has improved significantly. The Education Act 2011 established a statutory duty to ensure that all young people under the age of 19 have access to independent careers guidance.³³ Since 2015, schools have been required to follow statutory guidance, and the Careers and Enterprise Company now coordinates Careers Hubs covering more than 90 per cent of secondary schools, bringing together schools, employers and training providers.³⁴ Central to careers education in England are the Gatsby Benchmarks, first published by the Gatsby Foundation in 2014 and updated in 2025. These eight benchmarks provide a framework for high-quality careers guidance within schools and colleges. This includes requirements for a stable careers programme, access to labour market information, encounters with employers,

32. The Careers & Enterprise Company, “Written evidence to the Education Committee: Solving the SEND Crisis Inquiry”, September 29, 2024 (<https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/130750/pdf/>)

33. Education Act 2011, s.29 (<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/21/section/29>) Accessed 16 March 2026

34. Careers and Enterprise Company, “Value for Money Report 2024/25”, September 2025 (https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/sites/cweb/files/fznlxq4l/cec-value-for-money-2024_2025.pdf) Accessed 16 April 2026

workplace experiences and personal guidance from qualified advisors. The benchmarks emphasise that careers education should be embedded across the curriculum and should be tailored to the needs of individual pupils.³⁵ In 2024/25, the Careers and Enterprise Company reported that schools and colleges in England achieved an average of 5.8³⁶ out of the eight benchmarks, an improvement on the previous year's figure of 5.5.³⁷ The most successfully implemented benchmark has been Benchmark 5 - encounters with employers - highlighting the growing involvement of businesses in careers education.

In 2025, the Department for Education updated its statutory careers guidance, reiterating that all schools should align with the Gatsby Benchmarks and recommending that they should also work towards the Quality in Careers Standard, which provides independent assessment of the quality and impact of careers programmes.³⁸ One key element is the requirement for pupils to have multiple first-hand experiences of workplaces before the age of 16, and at least one further experience before the age of 18. The vision is for students to complete the equivalent of two weeks of work experience, divided between earlier career-related activities in Years 7–9 and more formal placements in Years 10–11. Activities for younger pupils may include employer-led projects, workplace visits or job-shadowing opportunities, and work experience. These experiences are



Tim Clark with Soron Glynn at the JCB Academy, Staffordshire

35. Gatsby, "Understanding the Gatsby Benchmarks" (<https://www.gatsbybenchmarks.org.uk/understanding-the-gatsby-benchmarks/>) Accessed 16 April 2026
36. The Careers and Enterprise Company, "Value for Money Report 2024/25", September 2025 (https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/sites/cweb/files/tznixq4l/cec-value-for-money-2024_2025.pdf) 16 April 2026
37. The Careers and Enterprise Company, "Value for Money Report 2023/24", March 2024 (<https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/sites/cweb/files/vyop3kcb/cec-value-for-money-2023-2024.pdf>) Accessed 16 April 2026
38. Department for Education, "Careers guidance and access for education and training providers", May 8, 2025 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/careers-guidance-provision-for-young-people-in-schools/careers-guidance-and-access-for-education-and-training-providers>) Accessed 16 April 2026

intended to broaden pupils' understanding of different occupations and help them make informed decisions about their future. When pupils understand how education connects to future opportunities, they are more likely to engage with their studies. Exposure to a wide range of careers also helps to challenge stereotypes and broaden aspirations. Many young people are unfamiliar with professions such as quantity surveyor, a full-stack developer or an actuary. Despite schools' key role in preparing young people for work, practical challenges remain which prevent many schools from offering a broad and effective careers education and from preparing young people to be *work ready*. Three barriers immediately spring to mind.

The first is teacher shortages. Teacher recruitment and retention are major issues, with especially severe shortages in subjects such as physics and computing. Around 25 per cent of schools lack a physics specialist³⁹ and more than a half of headteachers report staff shortages.⁴⁰ With many teachers leaving the profession before retirement age as a result of high workload and stress, the capacity for additional careers activities and work experience requirements may be limited.

The second is funding. "The state of school funding [is] worsening, with many school leaders reporting having to cut down on staff, as well as spending on a range of other activities."⁴¹ Expanding out-of-hours activities and careers provision may, therefore, prove difficult.

The third is geography. Schools in rural or coastal areas may struggle to find enough local employers able to offer placements, while some businesses lack the capacity to support students. As Jim Bailey, Principal at the JCB Academy, told us: "Finding enough good placements is difficult, especially with SMEs, in what is largely a rural area." These disparities mean that access to high-quality careers experience is too often determined by postcode rather than potential.

Beyond these practical barriers lies a deeper structural problem with the curriculum itself. England's National Curriculum has historically prioritised traditional academic subjects and school performance measures such as Progress 8 and Attainment 8 reinforce this emphasis. Although the previous government aimed for 90 per cent of pupils to study the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) by 2025,⁴² only around 40 per cent currently do so,⁴³ suggesting that one size does not fit all. International comparisons highlight that other countries provide more vocational pathways earlier in secondary education. In Singapore at the age of 12, pupils take a Primary School Leaving Examination which leads to one of three secondary routes, one of

39. Institute of Physics and Engineering in Medicine, "Without Physics teachers in Schools, There will be no Medical Physicists" (<https://www.ipem.ac.uk/news/without-physics-teachers-in-schools-there-will-be-no-medical-physicists/>) Accessed 15 April 2026

40. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "PISA 2022 Results (Volume I and II) Country Notes: United Kingdom", December 2023 (https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2022-results-volume-i-and-ii-country-notes_ed6fbcc5-en/united-kingdom_9c15db47-en.html) Accessed 15 April 2026

41. The Sutton Trust Report on Smart Thinking, April 10, 2025 "School Funding and Pupil Premium 2025" (<https://smarthinking.org.uk/report/school-funding-and-pupil-premium-2025/>) Accessed 16 April 2026

42. HL Select Committee on Education, UK Parliament, "School Performance Measures" (<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld5804/ldselect/ldedu1116/17/1708.htm>) Accessed 16 April 2026

43. Department for Education, "Key Stage 4 Performance", February 5, 2026 (<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-4-performance>) Accessed 16 April 2026

which is “technical”.⁴⁴ In Germany, only a minority of pupils attend the academically focused Gymnasium, while others pursue vocational routes through different types of schools.⁴⁵ The lesson is not that England should replicate these models wholesale, but that earlier access to applied and employer-connected learning consistently produces better outcomes.

This must not come at the expense of rigour or breadth. The humanities, languages and sciences and the performing arts all have a crucial role to play – there must be a “parity of esteem” between subjects. Knowledge is essential, but the ability to use, manipulate and apply knowledge is equally crucial.

AI presents both an opportunity and a risk that schools cannot afford to ignore. For teachers, it can help reduce workload by taking on admin and repetitive bureaucratic tasks. Teacher support and training is essential but research by the Sutton Trust in July 2025 highlighted an inequality gap between state and independent schools in their approach to AI.⁴⁶ For pupils, there are enormous benefits to be gained from schools using AI. Stimulating and interactive tasks can engage pupils and make learning real and enjoyable; it can provide instant feedback to work; it can also explain problems differently to different students to support needs and ability. We do not yet fully understand the drawbacks and long-term impact on education from the over-reliance on AI, and that in itself is worrying. Does it reduce pupils’ capacity to learn and to work things out for themselves?⁴⁷ The key attributes that all employers look for are resilience, teamwork and the ability to think critically: AI must be a tool to support these attributes and not to diminish them. The Department for Education must take a clear lead, equipping all teachers with the training and frameworks they need to use AI as a tool that strengthens these attributes, not one that quietly diminishes them.

Important as it is, focusing on secondary school level education can be argued to be merely miss much of the picture. Kindred2 argues that by the age of 22 months, the future trajectory of most young people’s lives has already been determined. Furthermore, almost half the attainment gap at GCSE is evident by the age of five, before children even start formal schooling.⁴⁸ It is essential, therefore, that from the cradle onwards, children are supported to develop the right attitudes and behaviours: leaving this until primary school, let alone until secondary school or post-16, is simply too late. The recommendations in this report are designed to make the bridge between education and employment as strong as possible, but building a strong bridge requires attention to the foundations; attention from the very beginning of a child’s life, not just the final years of their schooling.

44. UNESCO-UNEVOC, “TVET Country Profile: Singapore”, May 2020 (https://unevoc.unesco.org/pub/tvet_country_profile_-_singapore_revised_may_2020_final.pdf) Accessed 16 April 2026

45. GIS Reports Online, “Vocational lessons from Germany and France”, December 11 (<https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/germany-vocational-education-system/>) Accessed 16 April 2026.

46. The Sutton Trust, “Artificial advantage?”, July 16, 2025 (<https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/artificial-advantage/>) Accessed 16 April 2026

47. The Sutton Trust, “Artificial advantage?”, July 16, 2025 (<https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/artificial-advantage/>) Accessed 16 April 2026

48. Kindred2, “School Readiness Survey”, February 2024 (<https://kindredsquared.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Kindred-Squared-School-Readiness-Report-February-2024.pdf>) Accessed 16 April 2026

2. Businesses

2.1 Introduction

Over the course of the last few months, we have been travelling up and down the country visiting and talking to businesses to get their perspective on the young people entering the workforce for the very first time and on the challenges they face. We aimed to speak to a wide variety of businesses, both national names and SMEs, to get the perspectives of a diverse range of employers. For the purpose of this report, we focused on four main industries: manufacturing, hospitality, construction and business services.

At the outset, our aim was to understand businesses' perspective on young people crossing the bridge from education to employment. Over the course of our research, however, this shifted to consider the work these businesses are doing to give young people the opportunity to experience the world of work. We have also explored third sector organisations that strive to solve the NEETs crisis. The conversations that follow in this chapter explore both the gap between education and the workplace from a business perspective, and some of the ways that these businesses and third sector organisations are trying to bridge that gap.

The business and organisations we spoke to on our travels:

- Allica Bank
- Tom Kerridge
- Britten-Norman
- DCS
- Greene King
- Mace
- EY
- Youth Construction Trust
- AESSEAL
- David Nieper
- See It Be It





Conrad Ford, Chief Strategy Officer, and Oscar Brown, Software Engineer, speaking to the authors of the report at Allica Bank

2.2 Allica Bank

Even businesses actively hungry for talent are defaulting to second jobbers. The economics of early-stage hiring mean that entry-level candidates, however strong, are increasingly shut out of the very companies that need them most.

Allica Bank is the kind of business you would expect to be a natural entry point for young talent: a fast-growing fintech, named the fastest growing company in the UK by the Sunday Times in 2024, with an active need for people across customer service and technical roles. What we found when we visited was the opposite. Even here, the economics of early-stage hiring were pushing the business towards experience over potential.

Conrad Ford, Chief Strategy Officer, described their attitude to early-stage talent. “On one hand, we are sort of vacuuming up people, desperately trying to find and hunt talent. But the other side of being a high-growth business is there is a period when any new hire will be getting up to productivity. That basically means that there is an inherently higher cost for hiring early-stage talent due to their longer ramp-up. You’ll find most of us, in high-growth, highly funded segments, won’t be taking that much entry-level talent. We’ll more typically go for second jobbers.”

The experience of Oscar Brown, a Software Engineer seven months into his role, sharpens the point. Oscar had an Electronic Engineering degree from Bristol, a year of postgraduate research in machine learning and still could not get through the door through conventional routes. “I got no interviews when applying post-graduation. Even after I’d done the year at the research job, I found it really difficult to get any attention anywhere. The only way I got in here is through a kind of non-conventional process. I was basically a LinkedIn hire from the CEO.” If candidates of Oscar’s calibre are finding conventional routes closed, the picture for less-credentialed young people is considerably bleaker.



Conrad Ford, Chief Strategy Officer at Allica Bank

When asked what he looks for in new hires, Conrad's answer was immediate: ambition and attitude above all else, with high intelligence required for some but not all roles. The emphasis on character over credentials was the first time we heard a theme that would recur without exception across every employer we spoke to.

Conrad also offered an important observation on AI and the jobs market. The current threat to entry-level employment is not necessarily, he argued, AI directly replacing roles; it is that employers are currently holding fire on recruitment while they wait to see where AI takes them. The effect on young people trying to enter the workforce is the same fewer vacancies, higher competition and greater pressure to arrive with experience already in hand, but the cause is uncertainty rather than automation, and the implications are different.

Allica crystallises the demand-side problem at the heart of this report. The barrier here is not indifference to young talent; Conrad is actively seeking it. It is the economics of early-stage hiring in a market where employment costs have risen sharply and the premium on immediate productivity has never been higher. When even a fast-growing company with an explicit hunger for new talent defaults to second jobbers, it signals something that the financial and operational logic of the modern labour market is working against young people at the precise moment they most need a way in. That is not a problem any individual employer can solve alone, and it points directly to the case for the demand-side interventions this report recommends.



Oscar Brown, Software Engineer at Allica Bank

2.3 Britten-Norman

Skills gaps in specialist industries are forcing employers to look past formal qualifications entirely. But the infrastructure for bringing young people into technical careers remains fragile, piecemeal and dependent on individual initiative rather than systemic support.

Aerospace is not an obvious entry point for young people without strong academic credentials, but that assumption was challenged when we visited Britten-Norman on the Isle of Wight. The sole independent commercial aircraft manufacturer in the UK, founded in 1954 and with over 1,250 aircraft exported to more than 120 countries, Britten-Norman brought production back to the UK in 2024, sharpening its need for a domestic pipeline of skilled young workers.

Daniel Ballinger, Senior Talent Acquisition Specialist, was direct about what the company looks for: passion for the industry and the dedication to learn, rather than formal qualifications. “What Britten-Norman are very good at is, if they see someone that’s got a bit of passion for the aerospace industry, we will invest heavily into those individuals.” Daniel was equally candid about GCSE requirements: “I don’t think they need to have a C and above in English and Maths to be able to do what our fitters do. And I would say that some of them probably never got that but they’re some of the best fitters around.” The message was consistent with every other employer we visited: character and willingness are the entry criteria, not grades.

Daniel also raised a point worth noting about how schools currently treat vocational provision. In his experience, practical and vocational courses are too often reserved for pupils who have been badly behaved, making them feel like a punishment rather than a genuine pathway. The signal this sends, that hands-on learning is a consolation prize for those who cannot manage academic work, is damaging both to the young people channelled into it and to the industries, like aerospace, that need them.



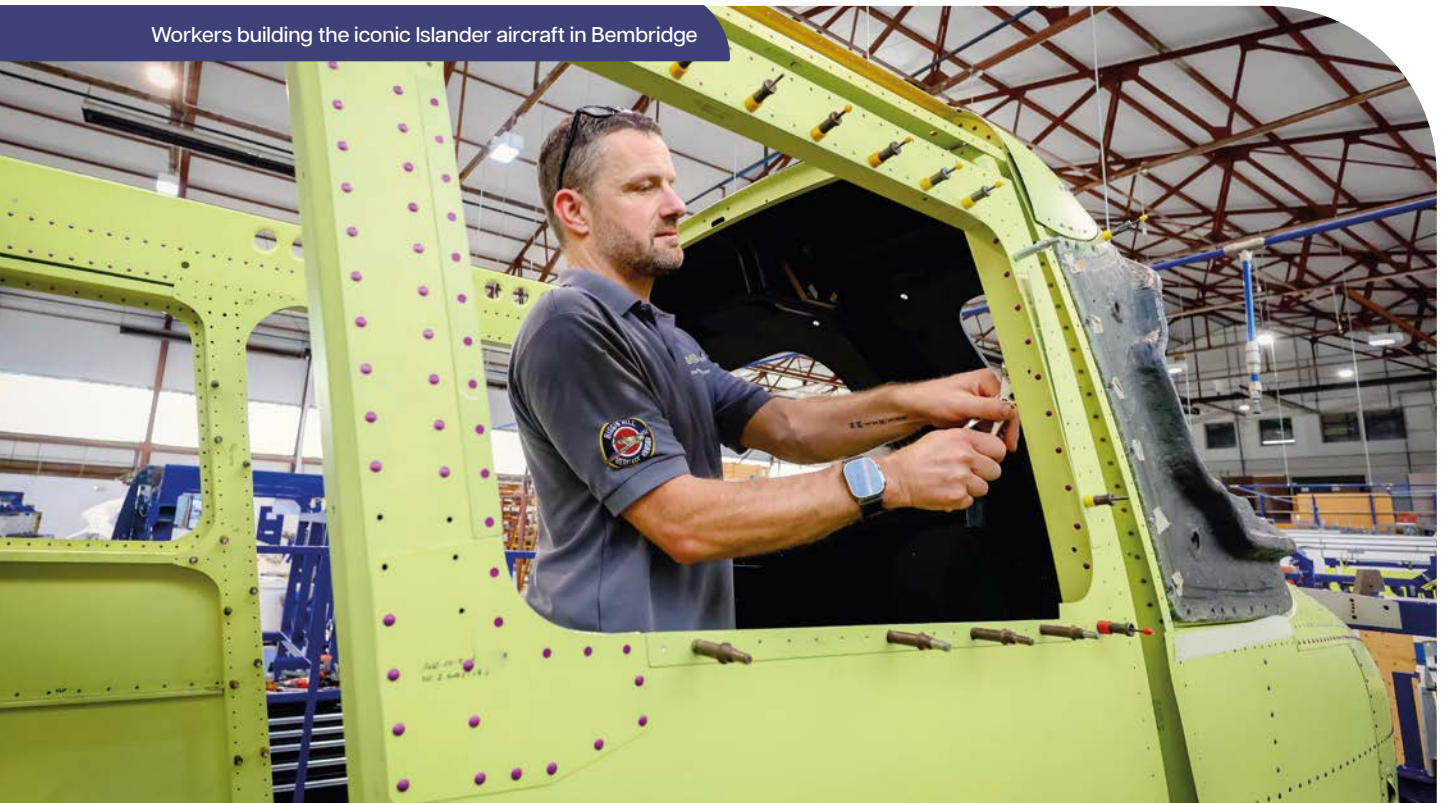
Tim Clark talking to Caroline Rigby and Daniel Ballinger at Britten-Norman, Bembridge

The skills gap driving recruitment pressure is industry-wide. Britten-Norman's response has been to align its apprenticeship programme with that of GKN, the island's largest aerospace employer, so that apprentices develop transferable skills across companies. The demand for these routes is striking: the company received 105 applications for 10 apprenticeships and 179 applications for internships. The aim is a shared standard, young people who can move between employers and take their training with them, making the pool of skilled labour larger for everyone. This kind of cross-employer collaboration is rare, and the fact that it is happening at all reflects the severity of the skills shortage rather than any systemic incentive to cooperate.

The barriers to engaging young people earlier remain significant. Despite recognising the importance of work experience in building that pipeline, Caroline Rigby, HR Team Lead, acknowledged it was still something being discussed rather than an established programme. Daniel also noted the basic preparedness gap in young people coming through: candidates who arrive for interview without having spent five minutes researching the company beforehand signal, in his view, a fundamental lack of work readiness that the education system is not addressing.

Britten-Norman understands exactly what the supply side requires: earlier exposure, employer-connected training and character over credentials, but translating that understanding into structured provision is hard without a national framework to make it easier. The experience gap AI is widening in entry-level roles makes the urgency of building that framework greater still: technical roles like those at Britten-Norman will remain resilient, but only if young people can actually reach them.

Workers building the iconic Islander aircraft in Bembridge





Graham Briggs, Social Lead at Greene King

2.4 Greene King

Hospitality has historically been one of the most accessible entry points into work for young people, but rising employment costs and regulatory changes are making it harder for employers to sustain that role at the scale they would like.

Hospitality has always been one of the most important training grounds for young people entering the labour market. It is accessible for people from all walks of life, offering individuals the opportunity to build confidence and develop key skills such as communication, customer service and teamwork. It also recognises that the right attitude and willingness to learn can matter just as much as formal qualifications. Greene King, with around 38,000 employees across 1,500 managed pubs, is one of the sector's largest employers and offered us a clear picture of the importance of maintaining that role while responding to current pressures.

Graham Briggs, Social Lead at Greene King, noted that part of the challenge is that there is strong emphasis on STEM subjects in both the curriculum and in government policy, which may not be suitable options for many young people. He said: "Those that don't thrive in a traditional classroom environment or in these subjects are then potentially at a disadvantage when it comes to finding employment. This is where hospitality can play an important role alongside this approach by offering practical, people-focused pathways into work and careers for individuals from a wide range of backgrounds."

Greene King has a strong track record of supporting young people into work, through first-job opportunities which can lead to longer-term careers in hospitality. The business currently employs around 14,000 young people across the UK and Graham says many of those it employs, particularly through apprenticeships, thrive in hospitality even if they have previously struggled in formal education or had yet to sustain employment.

That commitment is reflected in Greene King's investment in skills and development. Since 2011, the company has supported 19,000 apprentices and helped 11,000 people gain functional skills qualifications in Maths and English. It says 97 per cent of its pubs have supported an apprentice, underlining the scale at which these opportunities are embedded across the business.



Last year the Jobs Foundation met Olivia, a supported intern working for Greene King in South Yorkshire

Graham continued: “The current cost environment is making it harder for businesses to continue delivering social mobility and apprenticeship programmes at the level they want to. Rising employment costs, including National Insurance increases, have added pressure in a sector where margins can be tight and labour costs form a significant share of expenditure.”

These pressures are being compounded by changes to the wider skills agenda and Graham says there is a need for a more collaborative approach between employers and government if hospitality is to keep creating meaningful opportunities for young people and disadvantaged groups. He points to Greene King’s programmes such as its apprenticeships, Sector-based Work Academy Programmes (SWAPs) and supported internships as examples of what can be achieved to support young people when investment and flexibility are in place.

There is a huge opportunity for the hospitality sector to continue to serve as the labour market’s training ground for young people from all backgrounds. But there are practical challenges businesses face in sustaining that contribution, both from a government focus on where it is investing in skills development and the increased cost pressures facing the sector.

Greene King’s experience suggests there is significant potential for the sector to support young people into work, but that doing so consistently will depend on a policy and cost environment that makes long-term investment more viable.

2.5 EY

EY was ahead of the pack in dropping its degree classification requirement nearly ten years ago. What it wants instead is attitude, communication and the drive to seek out opportunity - skills that too many young people are leaving school without.

Professional services used to be the preserve of high academic achievers, but firms are waking up to the value of soft skills and casting their net much wider. Nearly a decade ago, EY removed degree classification from its eligibility criteria, the first of the Big Four professional services firms to do so. The strengths EY now recruits for at entry level are communication, teamwork, self-motivation and numerical ability. The apprenticeship and graduate programmes are designed to provide the technical skills; what EY cannot provide is the underlying character and drive. Maeve Parkinson, Early Careers Recruitment Manager for EY Northern Ireland, put it plainly: “Coming into a business like EY, it’s up to you as an individual to really grow and learn and just take every opportunity that comes your way or, if it doesn’t come your way, go and seek them out. And those are the people that really do excel.”

EY’s experience also surfaces a supply-side gap that schools are not filling. Young people arrive with some skills but without the ability to apply them in a professional context, what EY calls “business readiness.” Maeve estimated she could count on two hands the number of schools in Northern Ireland with a dedicated careers teacher and noted that there is no system-wide careers programme. EY works with schools pro-actively as a result, consciously targeting those outside major urban areas and in areas of high social deprivation. The fact that employers are having to compensate for the absence of careers infrastructure shows clearly how the system is failing.

Two observations from Maeve are particularly worth noting. First, the benefits system is now appearing in recruitment conversations in ways it did not previously: some candidates state during interview that they will only work for a salary above a certain threshold because they could earn more on benefits. Second, Maeve noted that she consistently learns more about a candidate in the informal debrief after an interview than in the formal session itself. Young people who play sport or music, for example, often fail to convey in an interview setting what those activities say about their character and commitment. The implication is that formal recruitment processes can systematically fail to properly measure young people who have the qualities employers are looking for but lack the confidence or preparation to display them in a structured setting.

The broader implication of EY’s approach is one the whole system should take seriously. Dropping degree classification did not lower EY’s standards, it instead improved the quality and diversity of its intake. If one of the most demanding professional environments in the country has concluded that formal credentials aren’t always the best poor proxy for potential, the case for an employability framework that captures character, attitude and work ethic alongside academic results is a more accurate picture of what actually matters.



Darren Jones, Learning and Development Head at AESSEAL in Rotherham

2.6 AESSEAL

The businesses making the biggest difference on creating a supply of work-ready young people are doing it despite the system, not because of it. But this comes with a warning about the demand side now being priced out of hiring the young people they have spent years preparing.

For some businesses, community investment and school engagement are core to how the business understands itself. AESSEAL, one of the world's largest suppliers of mechanical seals, headquartered in Rotherham, is the clearest example we encountered of a business that has taken genuine ownership of the supply side of the NEETs problem in its area. Since 2017 it has employed over 320 apprentices and holds the top ranking for apprenticeship employment in UK manufacturing.

Martin McKervey, Non-Executive Director, explained what sits behind that figure: "We didn't get there by just advertising jobs or attracting people to apply to us. We go into schools, we talk to them about what we do, and we then bring the school, if we can, to our factory so the young people can see what the world of manufacturing looks like through the lens of AESSEAL." That last detail matters. Bringing schools to the factory rather than sending representatives into assemblies gives young people direct exposure to work rather than a presentation about it.

The hiring process was redesigned to reflect this philosophy. Darren Jones, Head of Learning and Development, explained that replacing the traditional stand-alone interview with a phased selection-day approach has created a fairer starting point for candidates from all backgrounds, while also improving apprentice retention and reducing the need for HR intervention. Furthermore, when AESSEAL works with colleges and schools, it takes a similarly direct approach. Instead of attending careers fairs, where the impact on

apprentice applications has been difficult to measure, Darren now runs apprentice open evenings that showcase available roles while helping candidates and key influencers prepare for selection activities. The aim is to turn genuine interest into genuine readiness, rather than simply meeting a Gatsby Benchmark.

Darren also described how the net zero business engages children aged 5–15 through its Tree Walk initiative, which features one square kilometre of woodland, open meadows, educational resources and wildlife projects that support local biodiversity while promoting harmony between industry and the environment. Darren also added that employer engagement at primary level is valuable, as it broadens children's career horizons and builds a foundation for deeper understanding in the future.

Martin's warning is about demand: well-meaning employers are being quietly priced out of hiring young people. "The National Living Wage has gone up 52 per cent in three years for a 16-year-old," he said. "It's pushed a lot of businesses to gradually turn against hiring young people." Companies invest in making young people work-ready, then find they can't afford to hire them. Fix the supply side all you want – if demand keeps shrinking, the problem doesn't go away. That's exactly why AESSEAL is doubling down, more committed to young people than ever.

AESSEAL's model works because the business has made it a strategic priority and invested accordingly. Most employers, particularly SMEs without the resource or leadership commitment to sustain these relationships, will not. The national employer engagement framework this report recommends is designed to make what AESSEAL has built in South Yorkshire replicable elsewhere, but only if the demand-side barriers that are now deterring even AESSEAL from hiring young people are addressed at the same time.

Martin McKervey showing the Jobs Foundation the tree walk at AESSEAL's Rotherham facility on a previous visit



2.7 See It Be It

The most effective school-employer engagement doesn't always happen through individual businesses knocking on school doors. It can come through an intermediary that manages the relationship on both sides, and the model that works here can work anywhere.

Ask any business why it does not do more to engage with local schools and the answer is usually the same: it tried, and the coordination was too difficult. Ask any school the same question about local employers and you hear the mirror image. See It Be It, a Sheffield City Council programme first piloted in 2018, exists to solve that problem, and the scale of what it has achieved shows how much is possible when the intermediary infrastructure is in place.

Cheryl Plant, Pathways and Progression Manager at Sheffield City Council, explained the core model: schools are asked what they want from businesses, and See It Be It brokers the encounter. The approach solves a coordination problem that neither schools nor employers can resolve independently. See It Be It sits between schools and businesses, facilitating careers talks, mock interviews, careers fairs, workplace visits, mentoring and work experience placements. In 2025, 184 businesses provided 638 volunteers who gave 2,080 hours of support to 25,793 students. The support from business has grown to the point where businesses are now encouraging each other to get involved, which Cheryl noted has proved more effective than the council asking.

The programme starts in primary school, which matters. Between the ages of 6 and 8, the focus is on challenging stereotypes and pushing against the limits that social environment places on aspiration. This reflects the evidence that by the time careers education begins in earnest at secondary school, many of the attitudes and assumptions that will shape a young person's future are already formed. Starting earlier is therefore a precondition for the later interventions to work.

The results put the value of structured employer engagement beyond reasonable doubt. Evidence cited by See It Be It shows that four or more employer encounters can make young people six to eight times less likely to become NEET. Cheryl also flagged the challenges ahead: the new two-week work experience requirement and the demands of T and V Level placements will test capacity, and influencing parents, particularly at primary level, remains a significant challenge. But the model itself is proven and portable. Business in the Community, one of the early partners in Sheffield, is rolling out the model in Newport, Coventry, Bradford and Rochdale. The national framework this report recommends draws directly on that lesson: the infrastructure connecting schools and employers matters as much as what happens at either end.



Tom Kerridge at his two Michelin-starred pub, the Hand & Flowers, Marlow

2.8 Tom Kerridge

Hospitality gives young people something no classroom can: the experience of being in a working environment, talking to strangers, taking direction and finding out what they are good at. The tragedy is that the economics of the sector are making that first experience harder to access than at any point in a generation.

Few employers we spoke to have watched more young people cross the threshold into work for the first time than Tom Kerridge. His restaurants and pubs, including the Hand and Flowers in Marlow, one of only a handful of pubs in the world to hold two Michelin stars, have been a first employer for many, and his perspective on what that moment requires is shaped by years of seeing what happens when it goes well and when it does not.

He is clear about what he looks for: attitude and enthusiasm above all else. Like every employer we spoke to, Tom can teach sector knowledge. He is also clear-eyed about the confidence gap many young people bring with them, and the responsibility that places on employers. Many 15- and 16-year-olds are intimidated by a professional environment and afraid of asking questions. The Hand and Flowers tries to remove that fear from the outset. The environment Tom has cultivated has resulted in staff who have been with Tom for decades, showing how to take people who arrived uncertain and allow them to grow central to the business.

The entry-level role - kitchen porter, Saturday shift, a few hours a week - is where that development begins. "Kitchen porters are in the kitchen. That's where most chefs start. You find that energy. And we do see that often people come in, do a couple of hours a week, and then they get the bug." These roles are, for many young people, the



Tom Kerridge and Sara Robinson talking to Tim, Catherine and Jamie

bridge between education and employment. Sara Robinson, HR Manager, described having around 13 or 14 work experience placements lined up over a two-to-three-month period, a genuine commitment to providing that first experience of work, and an acknowledgement of how important it is.

Tom was direct about where the drive to work actually comes from in his experience: parents, not schools. Marlow, he noted, has many aspirational and successful families who push their children to do well. The school environment, he felt, has moved towards inclusion and a culture in which everyone wins, which does not reflect or prepare young people for the competitive reality of working life. That observation is consistent with what Martin McKervey told us at AESSEAL, and with what we heard from employers across the report: the attitudes young people arrive with are formed at home and in the community long before they reach a careers lesson.

The demand-side problem is that access to these formative first roles is closing. Tom was direct about the change: the business used to work with far more 16-year-olds, but rising costs have forced a move towards full-time staff, which squeezes out the part-time and casual roles that have historically provided young people with their entry point. Zero-hours contracts, whatever their flaws, served a genuine function for young people picking up a few hours a week. The Saturday job and the few-hours-a-week kitchen shift are becoming unviable as labour costs rise, and the young people who would once have found their way into work through those roles have fewer options as a result.

Tom's longer-term view is more optimistic. He believes attitudes will shift as young people recognise that hard work is rewarded, and that trades and practical skills will grow in value as AI reshapes the economy. Hospitality, he argued, is a sector that AI cannot displace, and one that offers genuine career trajectories, including international opportunities, that are not widely understood.



2.9 DCS Group

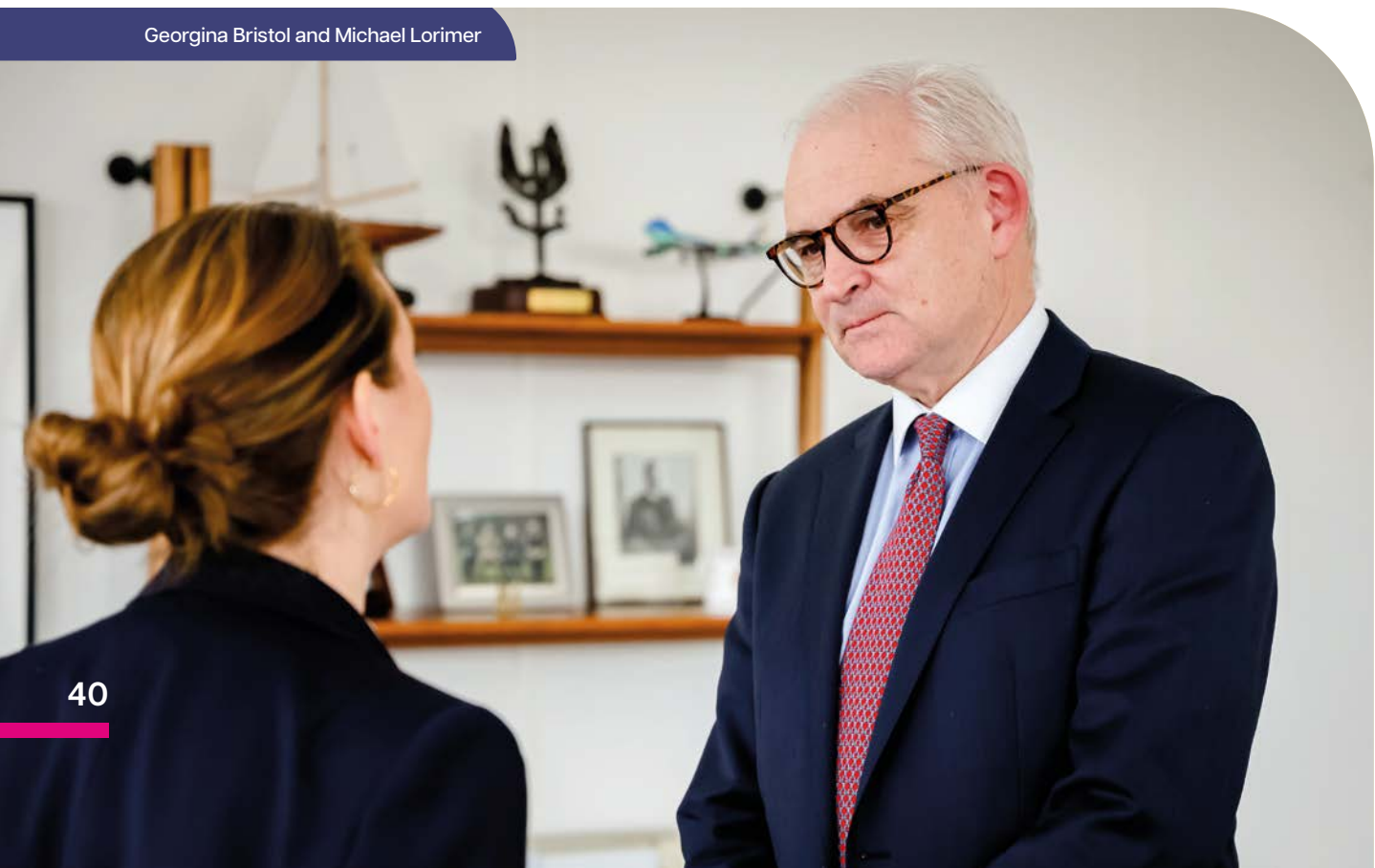
Rising and unpredictable employment costs are making employers risk-averse about young hires. At the same time, young people are arriving in the workplace without the social resilience to function in it. Both problems are solvable, but not without intervention on both sides.

Two themes emerged from our visit to DCS Group, a manufacturer and distributor of consumer goods employing more than 500 people across sites in Banbury and Redditch, that between them capture the core tension this report is trying to resolve.

On the supply side, the issue is social readiness. Sarah, Chief People Officer, identified resilience as a recurring concern: younger employees increasingly want to keep work and life separate in a way that has grown more pronounced, and many struggle with pressure. Annabelle, Head of HR, described a young employee whose parents both worked from home, who had made no friends at work and was eating lunch alone every day. DCS's response, connection circles to help young employees build relationships at work, is an answer as to how to foster a culture that truly welcomes young people and builds their social resilience. This highlights the importance of building social confidence and resilience to function in a workplace at all.

Michael Lorimer, CEO, raised a structural argument about the labour market that cuts across the NEET debate that has been little discussed to date. The abolition of a mandatory retirement age has, unintentionally, reduced the number of entry-level opportunities available to young people. Rightfully so, removing older workers from the workforce to create space for those just starting out would now be considered ageist and contrary to equality legislation. But the result is a labour market in which the top is less permeable than it once was, and in which young people are competing not just against each other but against an increasingly large cohort of experienced workers who are not leaving.

Georgina Bristol and Michael Lorimer





Annabelle Mullard, Head of HR, at DCS Group in Banbury

Michael also spoke at length about benefits culture and its effect on the work ethic he needs from new recruits. His argument is not that welfare support is wrong. He is a clear advocate for the state supporting those in genuine need. But he argues that the current system has, in his view, destroyed the traditional employment life cycle for a significant number of young people. Some, living at home, have turned down work because taking a job would affect their parents' benefits entitlement. For Annabelle, attending a school careers day where virtually every student said they wanted to work in marketing reflected a similar lack of awareness of the variety of jobs available: young people with limited exposure to what work actually involves, and limited incentive, in some cases, to find out.

On the demand side, unpredictability is as damaging as the cost itself. Referencing the 2024 hike to employer National Insurance contributions, Sarah was candid about the difficulty of planning around a wage bill that can spike by nine or ten per cent in a given year depending on government decisions. When the cost of employment is both high and unpredictable, the rational response is to minimise risk, and young people represent the greatest risk of any hire. The result is that employers who might otherwise take a chance on an inexperienced candidate increasingly opt for someone already work-ready.

DCS is also trying to solve the work experience problem locally. Michael introduced us to a neighbouring business owner developing a Banbury work experience week: a coalition of local employers committing to a minimum of 750 hours annually. One young person on the programme asked to apply for a business apprenticeship. That outcome, a young person converting work experience into a genuine pathway, is precisely what the national framework this report recommends is designed to make routine.



Sarah Broughton, Chief People Officer



Tim, Catherine and Georgiana Bristol, CEO of the Jobs Foundation, on a site visit to the Salisbury Square development

2.10 Mace Construct

Construction is one of the sectors most committed to bringing young people in through structured pathways. But the routes in remain too narrow, too dependent on personal networks and too demanding for young people who arrive without adequate preparation.

Construction needs 47,860 additional workers every year. The sector cannot afford to be selective about how it recruits young talent, and Mace Construct, working on large projects across the UK including the new City of London Law Courts at Salisbury Square, is among the employers taking that imperative seriously. Taking between 35 and 40 apprentices each year, with around 75 per cent at degree level, Mace looks for the same things every employer in this report identified. As Katie Pinder, Emerging Talent Lead at Mace Construct, put it: “It’s about how individuals think, how they work in a team, how they collaborate. And we’re interested in people who have got a level of curiosity as well.” Potential, teamwork, curiosity and the capacity to think through problems are the qualities Mace screens for, and Katie was clear that the selection process is designed to surface precisely those attributes rather than academic credentials alone.

The experience of two apprentices we spoke to illustrates the supply-side point about early work experience. Aubrey, a degree-level apprentice, credited a Saturday job with teaching her the basics of punctuality, accountability and showing up – skills she had carried into her apprenticeship. Mariah, who came to Mace through the Construction Youth Trust, spent two weeks doing work experience in a charity shop and she was direct with us: “It’s not enough.” Both accounts point to the same conclusion, that the formal work experience the curriculum currently provides is insufficient preparation for a structured pathway like Mace’s. Young people who arrive with informal work experience are better prepared, and those without it are at a significant disadvantage.

Mace is actively pushing T Levels as a route in, recognising that the qualification bridges academic rigour and vocational relevance in a way previous vocational routes did not. The minimum entry requirement of 96 UCAS points, however, means Mace's pathways remain relatively inaccessible to less academically strong young people, although this is largely because the degree-level apprenticeship demands it. The Construction Youth Trust's work, which we explore in the next section, addresses precisely the gap of getting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to the point where they can access pathways like Mace's at all.



Katie Pinder, Group Emerging Talent Lead



Tim and Georgiana talking to Aubrey and Mariah

WE ARE
COLLABORATORS

WE ARE
CONTRIBUTORS



Mariah, an apprentice at Mace, who came through the Construction Youth Trust

2.11 Construction Youth Trust

Charities like the Construction Youth Trust exist because the system has failed to build the connections that should already be there. Without them, access to well-paid, fulfilling careers in construction would remain determined by who you know rather than what you can do.

Mace's apprenticeship programme is among the most structured and well-resourced routes into construction available to young people. The Construction Youth Trust (CYT) exists because most young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, will never find their way to it without help. Founded in 1961 and working across London, CYT supported 13,744 young people in 2024 and works with over 250 employer partners.

Emma Barnes, Head of Impact, was direct about what the organisation is addressing: well-paid professional roles in construction have historically gone to people with the right connections, not the right skills. CYT manages the school relationship on behalf of employers, solving the same coordination problem that See It Be It addresses in Sheffield, so that schools are not inundated with individual employer requests and employers are not frustrated by a lack of meaningful engagement. The Section 106 requirements on major construction developments to engage with local communities have created a formal obligation that CYT is well placed to fulfil, turning a planning requirement into a genuine social mobility mechanism.

The structural weaknesses CYT navigates are significant. Emma described the further education system's credibility problem with construction employers: qualifications gained at college are not respected by the industry, meaning young people who follow the expected post-16 vocational route arrive at employers who do not value what they have done. T Levels are an improvement, but Emma noted they remain inaccessible to young people who struggle with Maths and English. The gap between what the system produces and what the industry will accept is, for many young people, unbridgeable without an organisation like CYT in the middle.

The financial pressures are also intensifying. Rising employment costs have made the pastoral investment required to bring in inexperienced young people feel like a cost many firms cannot justify. Taking on an 18-year-old requires time, supervision and a degree of pastoral care that investing in an existing employee does not. CYT's continued effectiveness depends on employers remaining willing to engage, and that willingness is being tested by the same demand-side pressures that are constraining every employer in this report. The national framework for employer engagement this report recommends must account for these pressures directly, or the charities filling the gap will find themselves working harder for diminishing returns.



Mariah showing Catherine the site

2.12 Christopher Nieper Education Trust and David Nieper Ltd

One business has built a school, embedded employability across the curriculum and achieved zero NEETs from its sixth form two years running. It is also turning against hiring young people because of wage costs. That is not a contradiction; it is the supply/demand crisis in a single case study.

Christopher Nieper OBE holds a position unique among everyone we spoke to for this report: he is both the CEO of a manufacturing business and the founder of an education trust now running four schools in Derbyshire. That dual vantage point gives him an unusually clear view of both sides of the bridge, and he gave a candid account of where it is breaking down.

On the supply side, the Christopher Nieper Education Trust has developed what is arguably the most comprehensive employability curriculum in the country. It is a culture embedded through every subject, every year group, mapped to real-world examples that pupils and their parents can relate to. Employers are engaged, parents are engaged, and the curriculum is put into context from the start. The results are measurable: the Trust's schools have recorded zero NEETs from the sixth form in each of the last two years, and the original academy tripled its intake within three years of opening.

Jamie on a previous visit to the David Nieper Academy





Christopher Nieper OBE

The philosophy behind it is straightforward: “We recruit for attitude and train for skills. You can’t recruit for skills and train for attitude.” Christopher observes that the whole country currently recruits the wrong way around. His employability benchmarks, a framework the Jobs Foundation has previously covered in *Ladders of Opportunity*, offer a replicable model for embedding this approach in any school. Christopher has also been candid about what data tells him about the young people coming through. Half of employers believe younger workers are harder to manage, arrive unprepared, lack social skills and have unrealistic expectations of working life. These are not comfortable findings, but they are consistent with what employers in this report have told us.

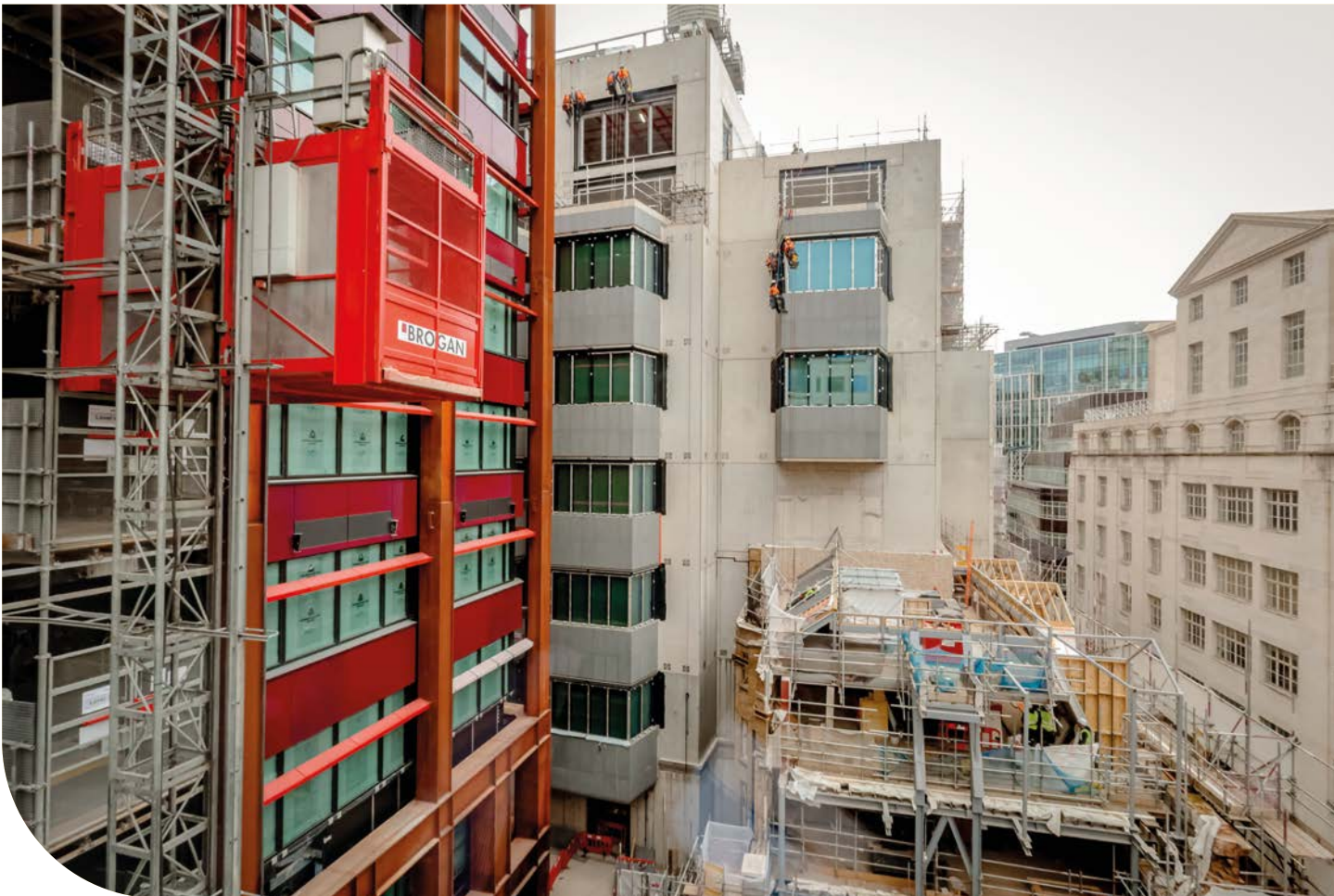
Yet David Nieper the business has gradually, over the last few years, turned against hiring young people. The National Living Wage has risen 52 per cent in three years for a 16-year-old. The apprenticeship levy functions as a tax on jobs. The business that built four schools to produce work-ready young people cannot afford to hire them. This is the supply/demand tension at its most acute and its most instructive. No amount of investment in the supply side resolves the crisis if the demand side makes young people too expensive to employ. Christopher Nieper has proved that the supply problem is solvable, but if demand for young people continues to fall due to cost pressures, then no amount of employer readiness will prevent young people from becoming NEET.

What we learned from businesses

- The credential barriers that once defined professional hiring have quietly been dismantled by the employers best placed to judge. Dropping degree classification requirements did not lower standards, it improved the quality and diversity of intake. Character, attitude and willingness to learn are now the universal entry criteria, but the wider labour market has not followed that lesson.
- The attitudes young people bring to work are formed at home and in the community, not just in the classroom. Where parental ambition is absent or actively suppressed, schools and employers are working against a tide they cannot turn alone. Earlier intervention, at primary level and with families, is vital for later supply-side work to have effect.
- Skills gaps in specialist industries are forcing employers to look past formal qualifications entirely. The demand for structured pathways is substantial; in some sectors, applications for apprenticeships run at ten to one. But without a national framework to support employer-school engagement, translating that appetite into provision remains dependent on individual initiative.
- The most effective school-employer engagement requires intermediary infrastructure, not individual businesses knocking on school doors. Where that infrastructure exists, the results are striking: four or more employer encounters make young people up to eight times less likely to become NEET.
- The businesses doing the most to prepare young people for work are doing it despite the system, not because of it. Even the most committed employers are now being priced out of hiring the people they have spent years preparing.
- The entry-level roles that have historically served as the first rung of the employment ladder are becoming unviable as labour costs rise. The erosion of these informal pathways is both a labour market problem and a social one.
- Even employers actively hungry for young talent are not hiring first jobbers. Training costs and initial productivity, combined with rising employment costs and employers holding fire on recruitment while they assess the impact of AI, means the financial logic of the modern labour market is working against young people just when they most need a way in.
- The benefits system is now appearing as a structural constraint on both supply and demand. Employees capping hours to protect entitlements, candidates pricing themselves out of work and young people declining jobs to avoid affecting household benefits all point to an interaction between the welfare system and the labour market that this report's recommendations cannot ignore.
- The supply/demand tension is not theoretical. No amount of investment in supply resolves the crisis if the demand side remains broken.



Mace apprentices Aubrey and Mariah



3. Schools

3.1 Introduction

On our travels, we visited schools all over England, from Leeds to London and Staffordshire to Sheffield, which have gained enviable reputations for their careers education programmes, in order to see some of the great and diverse work that various types of schools in different parts of the country are undertaking. It was important for us to see a range of providers including Local Authority schools, academies, university technical colleges and private schools, as they each play an important role in our diverse and complicated educational ecosystem. It is hoped that the best practice witnessed in these specific schools will provide a template for improved careers and work-related education in all schools across the country.

For this report, we focused on young people in schools from 14 to 18 and their careers education. Some perceive the growing graduate unemployment problem as a major cause of the NEETs crisis, but young people aged 22 to 24 whose highest qualification is at GCSE level or below are three times more likely to be NEET than graduates. We recognise that although the causes that lead to young people becoming NEET can start at a young age, the vast majority of careers education only takes place between the ages of 14 and 18.

The schools we visited on our travels:

- Meadowhead School
- The JCB Academy
- La Retraite Roman Catholic Girls' School
- Harris Academy Greenwich
- Career Ready
- Harris Westminster Sixth Form
- The Grammar School at Leeds
- DFN Project Search
- Kindred2

Catherine talking to student at Meadowhead





Leighton Collins, Head of Careers, and Martin McKervey, Chair of Jobs Foundation Yorkshire

3.2 Meadowhead School

For schools serving communities where generations have not worked, careers education is not a programme; it is a relentless, school-wide effort to counter a culture of low expectation. The results show it is possible but the system does not make it easy.

Meadowhead is Sheffield's largest school, with almost 2,000 pupils on roll from age 11 to 18. Its intake is strikingly diverse: almost 40 per cent of pupils are identified as disadvantaged, but the school serves both two of the most deprived wards in Sheffield and two of the most affluent. That range matters, because it means Meadowhead cannot teach to a single assumed background or set of expectations.

For Kam Grewal-Joy, the Headteacher, everything the school does is about "closing the gap" between pupils. Many families the school serves do not have access to the networks, connections and role models that their peers in the same school do. As such, messaging, preparation and support for events such as work experience and mock interviews has to be comprehensive and conscious of economic disadvantage. It cannot be assumed that families will have the capacity to secure opportunities for their child and this leads to the school providing significant intervention and additional support as part of its careers education. This approach is adopted in other areas of school life where messaging and extra support in areas such as attendance, punctuality and behaviour have a relentlessness and a consciousness of the barriers some young people experience.

What Meadowhead does within an area of significant disadvantage is impressive. The careers programme is run by Leighton Collins, Head of Careers - a fully qualified careers adviser, a rarity in state schools. He runs an annual careers fair for the whole school, speed networking events enabling pupils to meet up to five different employers, mock interviews in Years 10 and 12 conducted by external employers, and targeted group sessions throughout the year for pupils interested in specific sectors. Work experience takes place in Years 10 and 12, arranged by pupils with school support; for those who cannot attend, a drop-down week with guest speakers and workshops runs as an alternative.

What sets Leighton apart is not the programme architecture but the relational depth he brings to it. “I regularly meet with parents of the most disengaged pupils and invite them to visit businesses with me,” he told us. “I undertake home visits to the hardest to reach pupils with the attendance team and, not being a teacher and permitting the pupils to call me by my Christian name, I am often able to build a rapport. I try to contact vulnerable pupils who leave at the end of Year 11 to ensure that they do actually take up their college place or planned destination.”

The School is supported by the Meadowhead Together charity, formally known as The Meadowhead Community Learning Trust. The charity was established to improve the life chances and opportunities of the young people who attend Meadowhead and feeder primary schools by encouraging collaboration. Meadowhead Together provides small grants to relevant projects as well as funding for annual projects such as Everyone a Writer; the Trust Choir; employer engagement events such as work experience, mock interviews, talks and visits focused on career aspirations; careers in the curriculum links; and the Year 9 Big Challenge, competing against teams across the country. This work is supported by an annual Business Forum, where external businesses and partners are invited to hear from keynote speakers, Meadowhead staff and students and network around the area of supporting young people.

Last year, despite a year group of over 300, only seven pupils were recorded as officially NEET at the end of Year 11, and of those, Leighton had only failed to engage with one. That figure is not an accident, but the product of sustained, personalised effort that no programme document can capture.

The wider curriculum at Meadowhead reinforces this. All staff run at least one after-school activity per week; two-thirds of pupils participate in at least one. An unusual feature at Key Stage 3 is two hours per week of “ethics”, a specialist-delivered subject covering PSHE, careers and RE, which ensures careers thinking is not confined to occasional events. Leighton described three practical examples of Gatsby Benchmark 4 in action that go well beyond the lip service many schools pay to it: displays and teacher input that can show how skills and knowledge in that subject can relate to future careers; legal workshops with lawyers talking to students to explore ethics and debating technique around real-life cases; and an incredibly strong partnership with Sheffield Theatres that has led to students being introduced to a range of careers in the arts.

Meadowhead demonstrates what is possible when careers education is taken seriously and resourced properly. It also illustrates the limits of what schools alone can do. Leighton’s work compensates for the absence of parental engagement, community networks and the kind of informal career exposure that more advantaged young people take for granted. The system should not require this level of individual heroism to produce these outcomes. That it does is a structural failure, not a tribute to the model.





3.3 La Retraite Roman Catholic Girls' School

La Retraite proves that outstanding careers education and T Levels can thrive in a school where 40 per cent of pupils are on free school meals. The limiting factor is not the students or the school; it is the availability of placements and the funding to sustain provision that most schools cannot replicate.

La Retraite Roman Catholic Girls' School in Clapham is an 11-18 Voluntary Aided school with 1,200 on roll, including a sixth form of 400 that admits boys. Roughly 40 per cent of pupils are on free school meals and 60 per cent have English as an additional language. It has been rated Outstanding by Ofsted since 2007. It is, in other words, a school that disproves the assumption that high-quality, employer-connected provision is the preserve of advantaged intakes.

Careers education at La Retraite starts in Year 7 and is embedded throughout. Every Friday, girls receive careers education through Personal Development lessons; topics are covered in weekly assemblies; each pupil holds a Unifrog account to record relevant activities. In Year 8 all girls complete a construction project. In Year 9 there is a careers fair run by sixth form students. All pupils will complete ten days of work experience between Years 7 and 11. Every academic department is expected to run at least one work-related activity per term. The ambition is not occasional provision but a school culture in which careers thinking is continuous.

The most distinctive aspect of La Retraite is its T Level programme, which it has been running since 2020 as one of the original pilot schools. Ruth Coyle OBE, Director of Admissions, Careers and Technical Education and a DfE T Level Ambassador, guided us through the offer: Construction; Health and Science; Legal Services; Craft and Design; Media, Broadcast and Production; and Childcare and Education. The construction T Level involves architectural drawings using Revit software, surveying equipment and on-site placements with Berkeley Construction. The health T Level requires students to take blood pressure and administer medication during hospital placements at St Guy's and St Thomas'. The legal services T Level is taught as the application of law rather than academic theory, and exempts students from four of the five foundation stage certificate exams, saving a future employer around £3,000 in training costs.

The results are tangible. Pointing to a student portrait on the wall, Ruth told us: "This is Shayhanna. She's one of our first cohort of digital T Level students. She did her placement at the Gatsby Foundation, and now she works at Amazon. We were the first school to work with Amazon on T Level placements, and now they've rolled them out nationally. And Shayhanna actually runs the T Level programme at Amazon now." A SEND student on the T Level foundation pathway is now completing a degree apprenticeship with a construction firm. These outcomes demonstrate something the broader system has been slow to accept: high standards and vocational relevance are not in tension.

The challenge La Retraite faces, and that every school offering T Levels faces, is the 45-day placement requirement. Finding placements of that length is hard, particularly in sectors like law where employer engagement is still developing. Ruth's proposed solution is straightforward and worth repeating: "For me personally, if they said to employers, especially to SMEs, you can use the apprenticeship levy for placements, that would, I think, solve a lot." At present, the cost of supervision and lost productivity falls entirely on the employer, with no mechanism for offset. That is a solvable problem that government has yet to solve.

In addition, Ruth commented on how some employers don't realise that they can actually give students real work to do and underestimate the capabilities of young people. She told us how "a group of our students who went to Amazon actually created an app for Amazon, which the company now uses, and it's saved them hundreds of thousands of pounds!"

Ruth was candid that La Retraite's ability to sustain this provision depends on resources that most schools do not have. The school employs Business Engagement Officers and an independent careers adviser. It raises an additional £500,000 from lettings that supplements the core budget. Without that, the T Level infrastructure, the employer partnerships and the depth of the careers programme would be unaffordable. La Retraite is a model worth replicating. The question the system has not answered is how.



Tim and Catherine speaking to Hibatollah, T Level Ambassador



Ruth Coyle OBE



3.4 Career Ready

Career Ready demonstrates that structured mentoring and paid internships can transform outcomes for young people facing the highest barriers. The model works. The constraint is scale, and scale requires more employers, not more charity.

Career Ready is a social mobility charity that has spent over 20 years connecting young people aged 15 to 18 in England and Scotland to workplace opportunities. It focuses specifically on those from under-represented backgrounds or facing barriers to future success: those eligible for free school meals, without parental experience of higher education, from under-represented ethnic backgrounds, who have been in local authority care, or who carry family caring responsibilities.

The programme has four components: a structured mentoring programme of 12 monthly one-hour sessions; a paid internship at the mentor's workplace; masterclasses; and workplace visits. The combination of mentoring and internship is most powerful when both are provided by the same employer, the holistic relationship between mentor and intern creating continuity and trust that a one-off placement cannot replicate. In 2025, the charity supported 3,319 young people. Of the 2024 cohort, 98 per cent progressed to higher education, work or apprenticeships and 96 per cent said their self-confidence grew during the programme.

Jerry Crosby-Bennin, Trusts and Foundations Manager, was direct about the selection philosophy: "Life outcomes are often decided not by potential or ability but from where someone comes and the barriers they face. If we can develop skills and social capital as early as possible, they can have a platform to succeed." The programme's job is to provide what young people lack, not to select for those who already have it.

The barriers to expansion are telling. The charity is not limited by demand from young people or schools; it is limited by the availability of quality employers willing to engage and by funding. Career Ready works with between 250 and 300 organisations including BP, SEGRO and Aviva, and adopts a two-way brokerage approach, supporting schools that do not know how to engage with employers and employers that do not know how to engage with schools. That intermediary function, familiar from See It Be It in Sheffield, is what the system consistently fails to build at scale. The organisations filling that gap are doing so despite the system, not because of it.



Tim Clark, Catherine Frost and Helen Stansfield, Head of Senior School

3.5 The Grammar School at Leeds

An independent school with serious careers provision offers a useful mirror: the gap between what the best-resourced schools can do and what the state system provides is not primarily about academic ability. It is about time, networks and the willingness to treat careers education as central rather than peripheral.

The Grammar School at Leeds (GSAL) is an academically selective independent school with 2,051 pupils from nursery to sixth form. Fees are around £19,000 a year, with roughly 5 per cent of pupils on bursaries and an ambition to raise the bursary share to one third over time. We include it here not as a model to be directly replicated; the resources available to GSAL are categorically different from those of a state comprehensive. But the quality of its careers provision and the honesty of its practitioners illuminate what good looks like and where the gaps are even at the best-resourced end of the system.

Helen Clapham, Director of External Relations, framed GSAL's educational purpose in terms that echo what the best state schools also aspire to: preparing young people for interesting, fulfilled lives, not just employable ones. The annual Futures Conference brings 50 alumni back to speak to Years 10 and 12, and the message they consistently deliver is that the path from school to career is rarely linear. Andrea Walker, Head of Careers, provides individual guidance interviews of at least 45 minutes to every Year 10 and 11 pupil, with a standing offer for further meetings whenever needed.

What is notable about GSAL's approach to work experience is the emphasis on quality over compliance. Andrea draws a deliberate distinction between shadowing and genuine work experience: "What will help you secure a place in medicine is being able to demonstrate and reflect on real experiences of working with people. I often tell students about my first job, which was shampooing hair in a salon. It involved meeting new people every day, putting them at ease, communicating effectively and providing a service. Those kinds of interpersonal skills and experiences are often far more valuable than students realise." The most formative early work experiences are often unglamorous, and that is precisely what makes them effective. Getting a job in a nursery, dealing with colleagues, small children and parents, develops communication skills that no amount of doctor shadowing replicates.

The parental influence dynamic at GSAL is instructive and applies well beyond independent education. Andrea described the ongoing work required to help students make A Level choices that are well aligned with their strengths, interests and long-term aspirations. In some cases, students and their families are understandably drawn towards highly competitive pathways such as medicine, law or Oxbridge. “What we’re trying to avoid is, in two years’ time, finding themselves in clearing with limited options available. That can be really difficult. So we’ve spent a lot of time working with Year 11 students and their parents to discuss future plans: yes, you may be aiming for medicine, but it’s important to have a plan A, a plan B and a plan C.

Apprenticeships are gaining ground even here. Around 12 pupils a year are now choosing degree apprenticeships, driven partly by growing awareness of the cost of university and partly by more honest conversations about return on investment. Bev Ashby, a GSAL Governor, noted that some parents can find it difficult to accept that an apprenticeship might be the right choice for a child educated at GSAL. That resistance, and the slow work required to shift it, is a microcosm of a national conversation the education system has not yet won.

Emma Cox, Deputy Head of the Primary School, offered the most transferable insight of our visit. From nursery onwards, GSAL builds habits of independence and self-reliance: children self-register from day one; play that encourages children to assess their own risk is actively encouraged; critical thinking is developed through enquiry questions that promote depth of thought from Year 1 onwards. These are not expensive interventions. They are a philosophy of what education is for, and one the state primary system could adopt without additional funding. The question is whether it has the curriculum space and institutional confidence to do so.

Emma Cox, Deputy Head of Primary School



Bev Ashby, Governor and Andrea Walker, Head of Careers





Pupils in Education and Early Years T Level at La Retraite

3.6 Kindred2

The most important determinant of a child’s educational outcomes is set before they enter a classroom. Any serious response to the NEETs crisis has to confront that fact, even if the policy levers to address it sit outside the education system entirely.

Kindred2 is a charitable foundation focused on early education and child development. Felicity Gillespie, its Chief Executive, makes an argument that is simultaneously obvious and systematically ignored: a child’s developmental score at 22 months is an accurate predictor of their educational attainment at 26 years old. Almost half the attainment gap visible at GCSE is already present before children start school. Investing at the early years stage saves, on current estimates, £13 for every £1 spent on later intervention.

“Foundation skills are about being a human being, not to do with reading, writing or numbers,” Felicity told us, “rather about feeding, playing, socialisation, communicating, self-esteem, taking turns, boundaries, coping with being told no.” These are precisely the attributes that employers told us are missing in young people entering the workforce. The roots of the work readiness problem, in other words, are not in secondary school. They are in the first two years of life. As Felicity put it: “Start early, run deep.”

The policy implication is uncomfortable. Much of the investment in careers education, employer engagement and apprenticeship provision in this report targets young people at 14, 16 or 18. That investment is necessary and worth making. But Kindred2’s evidence suggests it is, in part, treating a symptom rather than a cause. The Government currently treats zero to two as a health issue rather than an education issue, as childcare rather than child development. Until that framing changes, and until public funding follows, the foundations on which all later intervention depends will remain, for too many children, unbuilt.



Soron Glynn, Jim Bailey, Tim Clark and Kellen Hadfield

3.7 The JCB Academy

The JCB Academy proves that a school built around technical excellence, employer partnership and behavioural expectations can produce young people who are genuinely work-ready. It also reveals a system that still does not know what to do with schools that do not look like every other school.

The JCB Academy is a University Technical College specialising in engineering and business, sponsored by JCB and academically supported by Harper Adams University, with additional backing from the Royal Academy of Engineering and major employers including Bentley Motors, Rolls-Royce and Network Rail. It opened in 2010, was rated Good by Ofsted in January 2024, and currently has 515 pre-16 students, 230 in the sixth form, and 240 on apprenticeships with JCB and other local companies. Students join at 13 from surrounding schools, with a fully comprehensive intake balanced across four ability bands.

When asked how the Academy prepares young people for the world of work, Jim Bailey, the Principal, answered without hesitation: “The culture.” The students were immaculately dressed, the atmosphere orderly and purposeful, and there was not a scrap of litter anywhere, including on the playground at the end of break. These reflect a deliberate philosophy that the habits of professional life, punctuality, presentation, application and respect for environment, are not naturally acquired and must be explicitly taught and consistently enforced.

Jim’s framing of the educational purpose of the Academy goes beyond skills. He prioritises what he calls behaviours over qualifications: inquisitiveness, initiative, application, reliability, leadership. “Even employers in the engineering world,” he told us, “will often prioritise professional behaviours of applicants over the fact that my students have specifically studied engineering.” The Academy has identified fifteen specific behaviours it wants to develop and measure, and is developing an employability certificate to recognise them formally.

On the curriculum, Jim was deliberate about language. “I hate the word ‘vocational’,” he told us. “I far prefer the word ‘technical’. Or rather, I hate what vocational stood for in the past, which was that we’re going to offer a vocational course to weak kids.” The Academy’s offer is rigorous and demanding in a different register from the traditional academic curriculum, not a lesser version of it. Soron Glynn, Director of Apprenticeships, described the active challenges embedded across the curriculum: the Harper Adams Challenge in Year 9, requiring students to design and build a remote-controlled vehicle; the British Army Challenge in the same year; the JCB Challenge in Year 10; and the Toyota Lean Manufacturing Challenge in Year 11. These are core to the curriculum itself, delivered in partnership with the employers who will one day hire these students.

The enrichment programme reinforces this. A 30-hour fortnightly timetable includes two hours per week of compulsory enrichment. Jim’s argument on its value is consistent with what employers told us throughout this report: “Students gain so much from a broad range of trips, visits, sports and other activities, teamwork, collaboration, confidence, leadership, coping with failure, decision-making, managing others, communication, resilience, problem-solving, being outside their comfort zone on a ski slope or on a D of E expedition. They are equally or more powerful than what goes on in a classroom.”

Jim was candid about the barriers the Academy faces. Employers are often reluctant to take on 16- and 17-year-olds, citing immaturity and health and safety, even when those concerns are, in Jim’s view, more habitual than evidenced. Ofsted inspectors have at times struggled to assess a school that does not offer humanities, performing arts or modern languages, applying frameworks designed for conventional comprehensives to an institution with a deliberately different purpose. And the work of attracting girls into engineering runs into stereotypes embedded not just in culture but in the attitudes of primary school teachers and parents, the very people who most need to be persuaded.

The Academy also receives no funding uplift for running engineering and other practical subjects pre-16, despite their higher delivery costs, while similar post-16 courses do attract additional funding. That asymmetry is a policy inconsistency with direct consequences for the sustainability of the model. If the Government is serious about vocational and technical education as a genuine alternative to the academic route, the funding framework needs to reflect that seriousness.



3.8 Harris Academy Greenwich

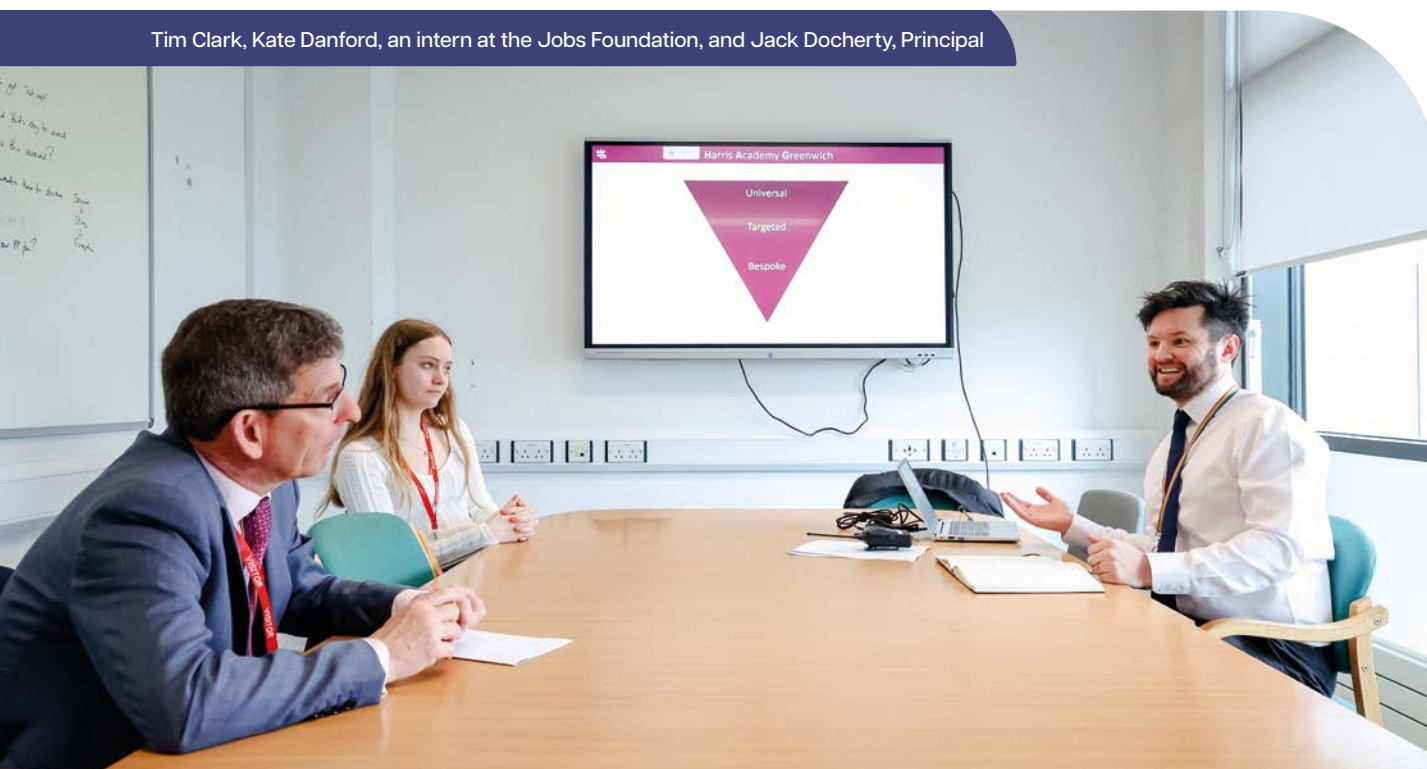
Outstanding careers education is achievable in a highly deprived school with a stretched budget; but it requires a headteacher who treats it as non-negotiable, a curriculum-wide approach that every teacher owns, and the willingness to measure success by destinations rather than just grades.

Harris Academy Greenwich opened in 2012 and was graded Outstanding by Ofsted in 2022. Seventy-six per cent of pupils come from the most deprived postcodes, roughly 30 per cent are on free school meals and 36 per cent have English as an additional language. Academic attainment at both GCSE and A Level is above the national average. The school is, by any measure, doing something right.

Jack Docherty, the Principal, has built careers thinking into the fabric of the school in a way many other schools have not. Every half term, every teacher across the school shares three slides with their class about a career relevant to their subject: general information about the role, what a pupil would need to do to get there, the practical realities of the job, pay and a day in the life. The slides are standardised across the school so the exposure is systematic rather than dependent on individual teacher enthusiasm. A maths teacher describes what an actuary does; a science teacher explains the path to becoming a clinical researcher.

As Jack put it: “Every teacher is a teacher of careers, just as all are teachers of literacy.” The message embedded in the curriculum is that every subject has a destination beyond the exam.

Tim Clark, Kate Danford, an intern at the Jobs Foundation, and Jack Docherty, Principal





Jack Docherty, Principal, and students at Harris Academy Greenwich

The impact is measurable. In 2025, only 2.5 per cent of Year 11 pupils were recorded as NEET at the end of the year, equating to five pupils out of a year group of 189, compared to 6.9 per cent the previous year. The careers fair involves 20 to 30 employers, runs during the school day rather than after school, and uses a structured sheet to guide pupils' thinking. Work experience runs for two weeks at the end of Year 10 and again in Year 12.

On character development, Jack was deliberate. Employers across this report told us they value attitude above qualifications. Harris Academy Greenwich has operationalised that priority through what it calls the Seven Pillars of personal development: own your character, own your relationships, own your health, own your future, awaken your mind, serve your community, have fun and make memories. "We want them to thrive on the other side of the door," Jack told us. "We don't leave character to chance."

The lesson of Harris Academy Greenwich is not that its specific interventions are universally replicable; the three-slides model works partly because Jack has the authority and conviction to make every teacher own it. The lesson is that careers education embedded across the curriculum, led with genuine commitment from the top, produces measurably better outcomes for young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. That is not a complicated finding. It is an argument for leadership and institutional will, not necessarily just additional resource.



James Johnson, Assistant Principal

3.9 Harris Westminster Sixth Form

Even a selective Sixth Form, with more Oxbridge offers than Eton, still faces the same fundamental challenges as every other school: narrow horizons, parental pressure towards a small number of prestigious destinations, and the difficulty of connecting academic excellence to the full range of opportunities that work can offer.

Harris Westminster Sixth Form is a selective, non-fee-paying sixth form that was graded Outstanding by Ofsted in both 2016 and 2024, and whose 57 Oxbridge offers in 2024 exceeded Eton's. Its curriculum is entirely academic, offering only A Levels, with mathematics, chemistry, biology, physics and further mathematics among the most popular choices. Over 90 per cent of students progress to university.

The careers provision is substantial. A weekly careers cafe during the extended Monday lunchtime brings in speakers across a range of sectors, followed by Q&A. An online careers fair uses the Harris Next Steps platform and draws on alumni. An in-person fair runs as an off-timetable drop-down day. Year 12 students undertake online practice interviews before moving to face-to-face practice with interviewers from outside the sixth form. The sixth form authorises absence at any time during the year for work experience rather than running a fixed week, on the basis that getting the right placement matters more than scheduling convenience. Last year, over 85 per cent of students completed work experience, including all disadvantaged students.

What is instructive about Harris Westminster is less what it does well than what it finds difficult. James Johnson, Assistant Principal, described the challenge of “Imperial or bust” thinking among some students: “Some students have very set ideas on being a doctor, a lawyer or going to Oxbridge. Everyone has heard of a doctor, but not, perhaps, of allied medical careers.” This is the same parental-expectation problem that Helen Clapham at GSAL identified, and it manifests even in a school that explicitly prides itself on intellectual breadth and scholarship. Narrow horizons are not a problem of disadvantage alone; they reflect a cultural tendency to define success in a small number of ways that the education system has not yet found a consistent way to counter.

The soft skills programme at Harris Westminster is genuinely impressive. Oracy and collaborative thinking are built into lessons and student-led societies. There are 60 to 70 student leadership slots, competed for formally. The cultural perspectives programme in Year 12, which offers short courses alongside A Levels in subjects as varied as beginner’s Polish and the poisons of Agatha Christie, reflects a deliberate attempt to produce intellectually curious rather than merely academically accomplished students. These are the qualities employers consistently identified across this report as what they are actually looking for.

The resource pressures are real even here. The sixth form has recently reduced from four to three A Levels, and departing staff are not being replaced. If a school with Harris Westminster’s reputation and profile is making these cuts, the picture in less well-resourced sixth forms is considerably harder to imagine.





Participants in the Project Search Programme at Northwick Park Hospital on Supported Apprenticeship Day

3.10 DFN Project Search

For young people with special educational needs and disabilities, the assumption that employment is the expected outcome is itself a radical act. DFN Project Search starts from that assumption and builds backwards. The results put the mainstream system to shame.

Young people with SEND are 80 per cent more likely to be NEET than their peers, yet provision for this group is consistently underdiscussed in policy conversations about youth employment. The number of pupils with Education, Health and Care plans has risen to 5.3 per cent of the total school population, up from 4.8 per cent in 2024. The scale of the challenge is growing; the system's response is not keeping pace.

DFN Project Search operates supported internship programmes across 200 sites in the UK, including Northwick Park Hospital in North London, which we visited in partnership with Harrow College, Kaleidoscope, Harrow Council and the West London Alliance. The model is structured and deliberate. Each morning, interns spend an hour in a classroom covering practical life and workplace skills: reading a payslip, booking annual leave, understanding what is and is not appropriate to ask a colleague, budgeting. From 10am to 3pm, they are in placement, rotating through different departments. Job coaches from Kaleidoscope provide in-work support, breaking down new roles and supporting the social navigation of a working environment.

Claire King, Head of Quality and Impact at DFN Project Search, was direct about the starting philosophy: "We think SEND aspiration is even worse than for a mainstream group. Quite often there is no expectation that young people are going to be working. And that, for me, is shocking. I think you need to flip that on its head. The assumption needs to be that somebody's working, and then you work backwards." The evidence from the programme supports her: interns at Northwick Park are working in the post office, pharmacy and on wards. While we were there, a group of interns persuaded a nurse that her ward would benefit from a supported intern placement.



Emma Price, Kaleidoscope Tutor



Claire King, Head of Quality and Impact at DFN Project Search



Project Search supported intern working in the pharmacy

The skills being developed at DFN Project Search are not specialist or niche. They are the same social confidence, workplace readiness and interpersonal competence that employers across this report identified as lacking in mainstream young people too. That overlap is worth noting: the structured, pastoral, context-specific approach to building employability that DFN Project Search has developed for young people with SEND is a more intensive version of what every school should be doing for every pupil.

The external constraint Claire identified is the same one facing every employer in this report: the number of available vacancies is at its lowest since before the pandemic, making the final step from supported internship to paid employment harder to take even where the young person is genuinely ready. Claire was clear that job coaches only put forward candidates they are confident can do the job; the obstacle is the labour market, not the young people. That distinction matters for policy: the barriers to employment for young people with SEND are not primarily about preparation. They are, increasingly, about demand.

What we learned from schools

- Careers education works. Schools with the highest-quality provision produce young people who are measurably less likely to become NEET, with reductions of up to 20 per cent in the most disadvantaged schools. The evidence is not disputed. The problem is that provision remains deeply uneven, too dependent on individual leadership and structurally underfunded in the schools that need it most.
- The most effective careers programmes are embedded across the curriculum and owned by every teacher, not confined to a careers office or an annual fair. As Jack Docherty at Harris Academy Greenwich put it, every teacher is a teacher of careers, just as all are teachers of literacy. Where headteachers treat careers as a whole-school priority, the outcomes follow.
- T Levels represent a genuine advance in vocational education, combining rigour with employer relevance in a way that previous vocational routes did not. But they are inaccessible to young people who struggle with Maths and English, they require 45-day placements that most employers cannot currently offer, and the funding model places the cost of supervision entirely on employers. Without structural support, the qualification will remain a niche option rather than the mainstream alternative it could be.
- Technical and vocational education receives no funding uplift pre-16 despite its higher delivery costs, creating a structural disincentive for schools to offer it. If the Government is serious about parity of esteem between academic and technical routes, the funding framework needs to reflect that seriousness.

Students at the JCB Academy



- The work experience system is broken in ways that go beyond logistics. The two-week requirement is insufficient preparation. Quality varies enormously. The burden of organisation falls on schools and pupils rather than on a system designed to make it work. Intermediary organisations like Career Ready demonstrate what is possible when the coordination function is properly resourced. The national framework this report recommends is designed to make that function universal.
- Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds face a compounding set of barriers that no single intervention can address. Parental influence, community expectation, limited exposure to what work looks like, and the absence of informal networks that more advantaged young people take for granted all shape outcomes before careers education begins. Schools serving these communities are compensating for structural disadvantage at scale, and the system should be honest about that rather than treating it as a school-level performance problem.
- The assumption that young people with SEND cannot be expected to work is wrong, harmful and self-fulfilling. DFN Project Search demonstrates that with the right support structure, even those facing significant barriers can and do move into employment. The constraint is not their capability. It is employer demand and the absence of sufficient supported internship provision.
- The problems identified in secondary school careers education have roots that begin long before secondary school. Kindred2's evidence that a child's developmental trajectory is largely set by the age of 22 months is not an argument for fatalism; it is an argument for earlier investment. The foundations of work readiness, socialisation, self-regulation, communication and resilience are built or not built in the first years of life. A strategy that addresses only the final years of schooling is addressing the symptom, not the cause.



Pupils in cheerleading class at La Retraite School

4. Conclusion

“When you lose your job, the unemployment rate isn’t four per cent, it’s 100 per cent.”

Thomas Friedman

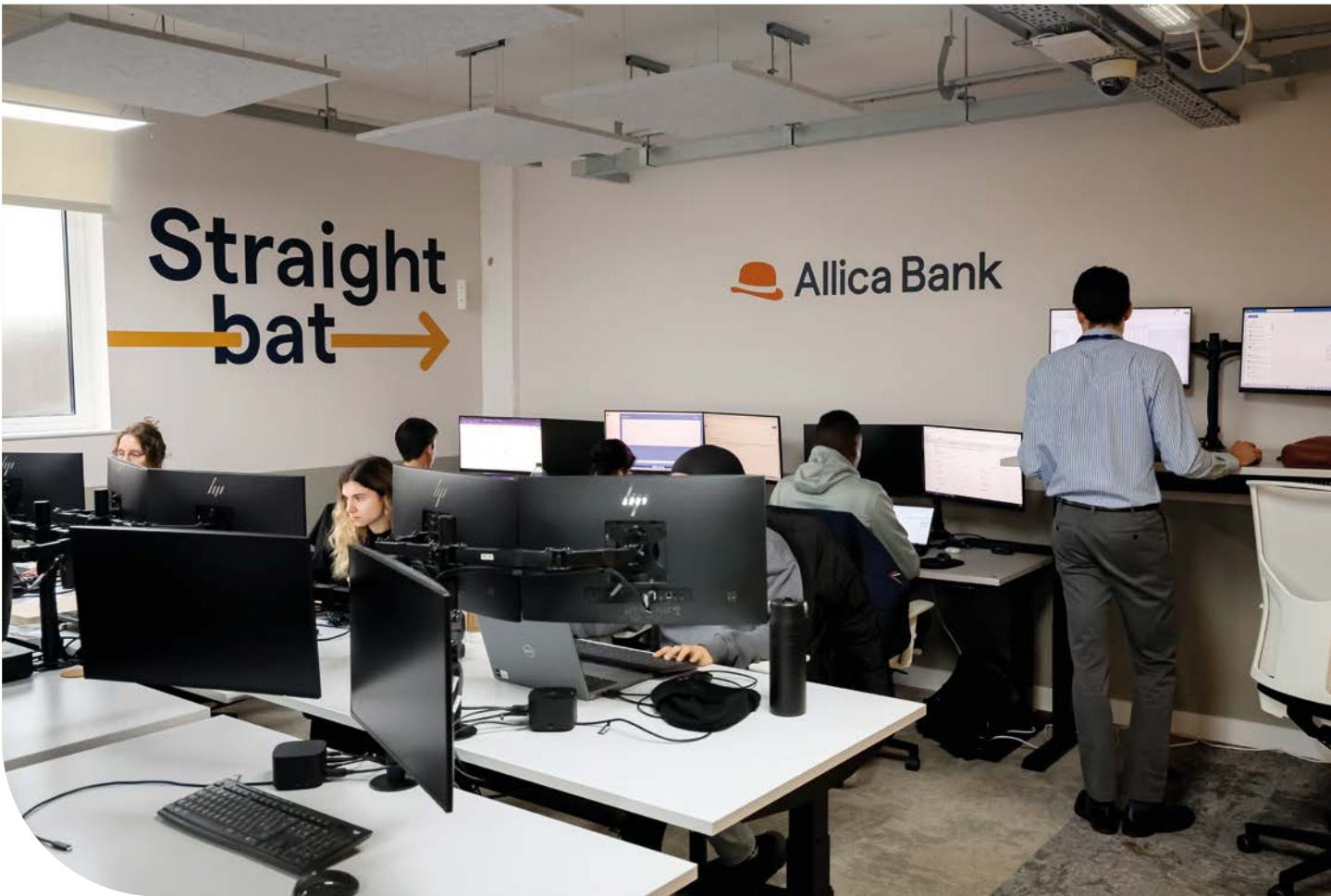
We can bemoan the ever-increasing number of young people not in employment, education or training, but it is so easy to forget that each and every individual statistic is a very real young person without opportunity, income, prospects or even hope. The damage done to each individual is unimaginable while the damage done to the economy and to society as a whole, is incalculable and unacceptable.

What is so clear from the research in this report is that the crisis is resolvable, but that there are two causes: a supply cause and a demand cause. Only when both are solved, shall we see significant economic growth and a return to all young people having genuine prospects, be it in employment, education or training. For this to happen, however, there has to be active involvement from central government.

We cannot expect employers to take on more and more young people, to train them and, as is so often the case in the current economic and technological climate, to retrain them in a few years’ time, if the employers’ sole reward is higher National Insurance and higher taxation.

Similarly, we cannot expect schools to deliver if they are hamstrung by appalling pupil behaviour, non-attendance, a lack of resources or facilities or if they are held back by the single biggest issue facing schools over the last ten or twenty years: the severe teacher recruitment and retention crisis. No school system can be better than the quality of its teachers and only if and when we have an adequate supply of highly trained, highly motivated and highly effective classroom teachers, will the system really deliver.

This report highlights the phenomenally impressive work being undertaken by individual schools, businesses and charities, and also the dedication of numerous teachers, employers, third sector workers and volunteers. But only with the active involvement of central government will the fantastic work showcased in this report become nationwide and genuinely improve the life chances of all young people, wherever they live and whatever their background or academic ability. The evidence and the solutions are clear: we just await the will to act.



Appendix: National Employability School Leaving Certificate

Employability Passport

Name:

Date of Birth: Pupil identification number:

All data is for Years 10 and 11 or for Years 12 and 13 only

	Very poor	Below average	Average	Good	Excellent
Resilience					
Communication					
Teamwork					
Leadership					

	%	School average %	National average %
Attendance			
Unauthorised absence			

		School average (days)	National average (days)
No. of days suspended			

		School average
No. of detentions		
No. of isolations/internal exclusions		

Positions of office/responsibility/leadership held	Positions of office/responsibility/leadership available
School teams/organisations attended regularly	School teams/organisations available
Awards, certificates and prizes attained – sport, music, drama, Duke of Edinburgh	Awards, certificates and prizes available – sport, music, drama, Duke of Edinburgh
Any additional positive or extenuating comments:	

School identification number: Authorising signature:



Join us

A message from our Co-Founders Matthew Elliot and Georgiana Bristol

We are building a coalition of business leaders and entrepreneurs from across the country; all uniting behind the message that a successful society requires successful businesses.

We want to help business leaders do even more to help their local communities, by sharing best practice about employing and training people from less privileged backgrounds and demonstrating that business is a force for good. We also want to hear evidence and practical examples from business about what policy changes they require in order to thrive and do even more good across society. To do this, we need your support by joining our Business Council.

Membership of our Business Council is free, voluntary and private, and comes with no formal obligations or requirements.

As a member, you'll be invited to our events where we host speakers from the worlds of business, politics, the third sector and the media. This gives members the opportunity to hear from exciting figures and meet with like-minded individuals working in business. You'll receive regular updates through our newsletter, and you'll also be able to feed into our research programme. Finally, we love to publicise success stories from our Business Council members across our networks and highlight examples of great work.

We'd love you to be part of our journey.

For any questions, please get in contact with Georgiana at 020 3475 1382 or georgiana@thejobsfoundation.com

To join, scan the QR code



“The current cost environment is making it harder for businesses to continue delivering social mobility and apprenticeship programmes at the level they want to. Rising employment costs, including National Insurance increases, have added pressure in a sector where margins can be tight and labour costs form a significant share of expenditure.”

Graham Briggs, Social Lead at Greene King

“Life outcomes are often decided not by potential or ability but from where someone comes and the barriers they face. If we can develop skills and social capital as early as possible, they can have a platform to succeed.”

Jerry Crosby-Bennin, Career Ready

“We want them to thrive on the other side of the door, we don’t leave character to chance.”

Jack Docherty, Principal of Harris Academy Greenwich

“You cannot put up the cost of hiring young people and then wonder why fewer of them are being hired, and the Government cannot present itself as serious about getting young people into work while the structural conditions push in the opposite direction.”

Ruth Kelly, Secretary of State for Education and Skills, 2004-06

“Attitude. That’s solely it. It’s attitude and enthusiasm.”

Tom Kerridge, Chef and restaurateur

“We think SEND aspiration is even worse than for a mainstream group. Quite often there is no expectation that young people are going to be working. And that, for me, is shocking. I think you need to flip that on its head. The assumption needs to be that somebody’s working, and then you work backwards.”

Claire King, Head of Quality and Impact at DFN Project Search

“Failure to provide and receive a good education has consequences for our economy and our communities. It presents challenges in relation to unemployment, mental health issues and, can also be a contributing factor in young people getting involved with criminality. The current education system of one size fits all, however, is not serving young people: full stop.”

Martin McKervey, Non-Executive Director of AESSEAL and Chair of Jobs Foundation Yorkshire

“Schools do not exist in isolation from the economy. Education is vital, but the number of young people who are NEET is, in large part, a function of the wider economic conditions in which they leave education. When growth is weak, entry-level opportunities are scarce.”

Sir Dan Moynihan, CEO of Harris Federation

