



LADDERS OF OPPORTUNITY

How top UK businesses create new routes into work

by Georgiana Bristol & Nick Tyrone

Foreword by Matthew Elliott



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 businesses leaders through our 1,100-strong Business Council. In 2026, we will be launching our Accreditation Scheme 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.



Georgiana Bristol is the CEO of the Jobs Foundation. She started her career working at Open Europe, moving on to lead the development for a range of public policy and referendum campaigns. She has also worked with various charities, including Venice in Peril, Project Trust and the Imperial War Museum.



Nick Tyrone is a journalist, author, researcher and Research Director at the Jobs Foundation. He has written for most mainstream news outlets in the UK, most frequently and prominently in *The Spectator*. He was also the Executive Director of CentreForum, the liberal think tank most noted for publishing the Orange Book, as well as Director General of the Red Tape Initiative.



Rahil Ahmad is a photographer who is much in demand amongst politicians, members of the royal family, business people, authors and public intellectuals. He has photographed King Charles, the Dalai Lama, Rishi Sunak and Jordan Peterson, amongst many others. He is also a former barrister and radio journalist.



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The making of *Ladders of Opportunity*

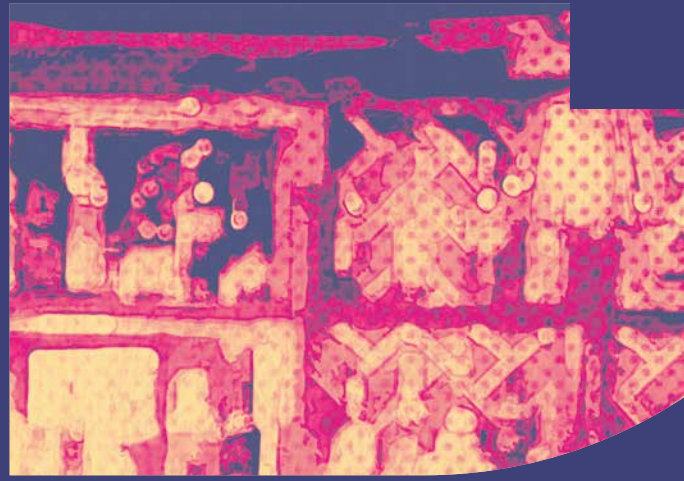
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Foreword & Executive Summary

“Peter F. Drucker once said: ‘Whenever you see a successful business, someone once made a courageous decision.’ We exist to applaud the courageous and recognise their vital contribution to society, our well-being and our prosperity.”

Lord Elliott of Mickle Fell

President of the Jobs Foundation



Foreword



Matthew Elliott

The Jobs Foundation is on a mission to champion the role of business as a force for good. Having published our *Two Million Jobs* report in October 2024, we have pushed ahead in 2025 with this report, *Ladders of Opportunity*, looking at best practice around hiring, training and retaining staff. We have spoken to businesses large and small, across all sectors of the economy, to discover what companies are doing to successfully create jobs and keep people in work.

The Government published their Get Britain Working white paper in December 2024, reaffirming their commitment to raising the employment rate to 80 per cent, which would mean creating two million more jobs across the country. Keir Starmer said at the time that “getting Britain back to work is at the heart of the mission to grow the economy”. We want to support that national mission.

Sir Charlie Mayfield is also undertaking a Keep Britain Working review, something the Jobs Foundation will be monitoring closely. Creating the jobs we need is being taken seriously by officials, ministers and policymakers alike, a hugely positive sign.

This paper was created by a motivated and talented Jobs Foundation team, travelling across the country, speaking to business owners, jobseekers and charities working in this area. I want to extend a huge thank you to Georgiana

Bristol, the Jobs Foundation’s CEO, and Nick Tyrone, our Research Director, for leading this project. Also, a massive thank you to Rahil Ahmad, the photographer whose work brightens almost every page of this report. Catherine Frost has been invaluable in aiding our research, as have Flora MacKinnon, Jamie Booth and Kellen Hadfield, all of whom contributed to the visits we made. Finally, a big thank you to Rob Halfon, who was instrumental in the early stages of this report, helping introduce us to several of the larger named brands that populate the pages to follow.

In early 2026, the Jobs Foundation will be launching an accreditation scheme for companies and other organisations who are examples of best practice in the realm of hiring, training and retaining staff. This report will form the basis of that scheme. We want to use the accreditation scheme to help inspire even more businesses – over and above our 1,100-strong Business Council – to join us in our mission to create two million jobs. The Jobs Foundation is a charity that has brought together people from across the political spectrum, from all parties and none. This is another call to arms: Join us to help make the Government’s goal of 80 per cent employment a reality.

The Jobs Foundation exists to champion business as a societal good. As Peter F. Drucker, whose writings contributed to the philosophical and practical foundations of modern management theory, once said: “Whenever you see a successful business, someone once made a courageous decision.” We exist to applaud the courageous and recognise their vital contribution to society, our well-being and our prosperity.

Lord Elliott of Mickle Fell
President of the Jobs Foundation



Andrew Lynas from Lynas Foodservice, Page 52



Dan from Dagenham, Page 80



Owen from Dagenham, Page 80



Georgiana Bristol and Nick Tyrone at Barnardo's, Swansea, Page 70

Executive Summary

“Obviously, I need to provide for her. I mean, she’s alright now, we’re on Universal Credit, but I don’t want her looking up to me and being like, ‘Oh, my dad’s on Universal Credit. He doesn’t do nothing for work.’ I want to give her a reason to work herself (when she’s old enough). You know what I mean? I’m just trying to do it right by her.”

The quote above was given to us by Josh, a young man in Ashton-under-Lyne who just wants to get a job and escape from the cycle of welfare dependency. Over the past nine months, we have conducted research across a large portion of the UK, visiting England, Wales and Northern Ireland in the process. We have heard dozens of stories like the one Josh gave us – from people who want to work, but find the system works against them.

This will include many people who are currently deemed ‘long-term sick’. Between 2019 and 2023,

the number of people who were economically inactive for most physical disabilities rose a little. This was due to Covid and was to be expected. However, we see the most dramatic upturn in people claiming sickness benefit in the category ‘Depression, bad nerves or anxiety’. In this category we see a jump from around 965,000 across the country in 2019, to 1.35 million in 2023.¹

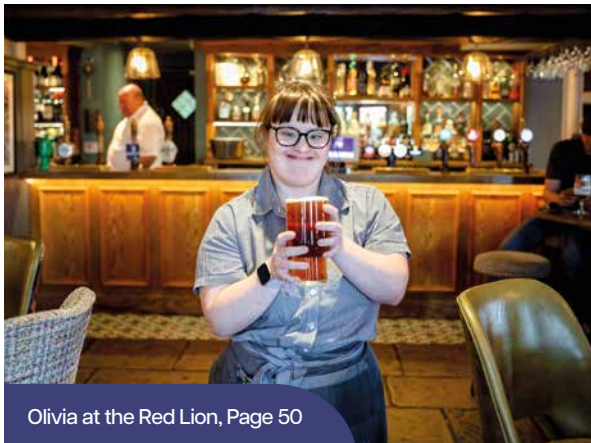
Ladders of Opportunity is a report which is about the journey people make within their vocational lives and the rungs along the way. Each new skill learned, each new position or job that is acquired, is another step on their own personal ladder of opportunity. Even for older workers, the ladder never stops going up – everyone benefits from lifelong learning. Opportunity never goes out of anyone’s life, it just requires some adjusting at times to see where the ladder takes us.

1. **ONS economic activity data sets** (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/economicinactivity/datasets/risingillhealthandeconomicinactivitybecauseoflongtermsicknessuk2019to2023> - accessed April 6, 2025)

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The Government’s Get Britain Working white paper is a big step in the right direction towards helping to create the two million jobs our economy needs to keep these ladders open to everyone. But since there are only roughly 800,000 job vacancies, the Government can’t create 1.2 million jobs on its own. That’s how many need to be created to get the employment rate up to 80 per cent. We need businesses to create and continually provide those jobs. It is the mission of the Jobs Foundation to help support those businesses.

Over the past nine months, we have conducted research across a large portion of the UK, visiting England, Wales and Northern Ireland in the process. Within England, we have spoken to companies, charities and trade organisations in the North East (both Tyneside and Teesside), the North West, the Midlands, the South West, and the South East. We have spoken to organisations large and small, taking in some of the largest employers and the most recognised brands in Britain, while also making sure the voice of small and medium-sized businesses is heard, in terms of the ladders of opportunity they offer.



Olivia at the Red Lion, Page 50



Girls in Tech, Gateshead, Page 30



Nick Tyrone in Swansea

Through our research, we were able to discover some of the principles of best practice that apply to hiring, training and retaining staff. We have boiled down the commonalities – the ideas around best practice that cross all boundaries, across every cohort covered in the report – into eleven guiding principles, detailed below. The principles form an acronym: **OPPORTUNITY**.

Oppportunity for all

Poverty hotspots

Partnerships

Older workers

Return to the office

Technology (AI)

Unique groups

Novel ways of hiring

Internships and apprenticeships

Training for soft skills

Young people

Oppportunity for all

There has been a huge increase in people in the UK being economically inactive due to long-term sickness since the Covid pandemic. This is not only unsustainable from a government spending perspective, given the overwhelming majority of these economically inactive people will be on benefits (and often a high level of benefits), it almost certainly isn't the best thing for those involved. People who want to work should be supported into employment. We need to make it easier for people with mental health issues to be in work, whenever that is possible.

There are many options for doing this effectively, as our research has uncovered. We saw how pastoral care works at Lynas Foodservice in Northern Ireland (see page 52) as one example. The Government's Get Britain Working white paper has some good ideas around this, trying to focus as much as possible on getting those who can work into employment. Solving this issue is vital to the country's economic future.



Georgiana Bristol in Swansea

Poverty hotspots

Economic factors weigh heavily when it comes to how talent is distributed across the country – and it's understandable that many employers feel like there isn't enough talent in their local area to fill the gaps in their staffing. Yet hiring local talent pays dividends for decades to come, as we discovered at Sage (see page 27) and Accenture (see page 26). Local employees will often stay with you for their whole career.

In all sectors and all sizes, from tiny SMEs to the largest corporations, businesses are the most important players in getting people into work. What we've found in our research is that not only are companies leading the charge in terms of competing for the most obvious young talent, but they are also searching deep to hire the unobvious talent. Programmes like the ones Barnardo's (see page 72), The King's Trust and Marks & Spencer (see page 76) run for the bottom quintile of the socio-economic spectrum aren't simply a matter of social good, but rather are about discovering talent in hard-to-find places for business reasons. These are people who companies know will make valuable, loyal employees.

Partnerships

As we initially discovered when researching our foundational report, *Two Million Jobs*, colleges and other post-secondary educational institutions can be a great way to train present and future employees. Many large employers work directly with colleges to design the ideal courses to ensure there is a crop of people ready-made for their business. A local college that is looking to help local employers with their skills needs, such as Gateshead College (see page 29), can be one of the best sources of talent from the local area.

We also discovered that partnerships with charities and other non-profit organisations can be remarkably valuable in terms of getting people into work. Organisations working on the ground to help increase employability, like Shaw Trust (see page 62), play a vital role.

Older workers

A false assumption is sometimes made that people over 50 are financially secure and, therefore, if they find themselves suddenly out of work, they do not particularly need to work ever again. Yet there are scores of people in their 50s and older who lose jobs they require for their basic survival. Combine this with the fact that as we are consistently raising the retirement age, there is a logic being created that with people living longer, we need people to work longer.

However, we haven't taken these considerations on board, in terms of how society thinks about employment for people over 50. If we expect people to work to a greater age, then we need to tackle the ageism that is rampant in society, as well as put more thought into how we get unemployed over-50s into meaningful employment. Aviva (see page 129) does great work in this area, but we need more large employers to take the situation seriously.

Return to the office

An innovation borne of necessity in the Covid era, allowing employees to work from home when necessary and feasible, has been a good innovation for plenty of businesses. But it is also worth talking about the downsides of working from home. Young people often require an office environment to learn their profession, as well as create a professional network. On top of this, a lot of jobs, particularly blue-collar roles, cannot be done from home, which means this can become a middle-class-only domain. David Nieper has made being present at the primary place of work a key component of working at the company (see page 18) to positive effect.

A company thrives on its culture – and it is difficult to create that or keep it going when everyone works remotely. Having your employees in the same room at the same time allows ideas to be sparked that might otherwise not be.



T echnology

Our use of tech is progressing to a place where, in the very near future, we should have AI applications which can make it easier to both hire and efficiently train people with most readily diagnosed neurodivergences and mental health issues. In terms of training people with a wide range of neurodivergent conditions, AI could be the key that unlocks employment for so many people currently unable to find a job. The work of Meganexus in the Career Transition Partnership (CTP), done in conjunction with the Ministry of Defence and Reed in Partnerships, is a great example of this (See page 110).

Of course, AI and other technological advances will come with downsides. They may make certain jobs, even whole sectors, redundant, resulting in fewer jobs in some places. A balance needs to be struck here, and the Jobs Foundation is interested in companies doing work that aims to achieve that balance.

U nique groups

Ex-offenders can make a valuable contribution to a company and are often cited as being model employees. Hiring them is also a chance to do something good for the community, to add social value to a company, as employment is key to keeping recidivism rates down. The work of Timpson and Tempus Novo are great examples of this (See pages 104-107).

Veterans are often highly skilled individuals with an amazing amount to offer any business – as Northumbrian Water discovered (see page 112). Encouraging veterans to become entrepreneurs is something we should be doing more of as well.

Homeless people are often simply those whose lives took an unlucky turn – as we discovered at Hair at the Academy (see page 116). With a bit of support, they can turn into valuable employees who just might be long-term fixtures at the organisation that takes a chance on them.



Celebration Day at Marks & Spencer, Page 76

Novel ways of hiring

Organisations need to engage in fresh ways of finding talent, particularly amongst young people and those with mental health issues. Moving away from a CV-based model of recruitment, with a focus on finding a more agile match between employer and employee, is one idea that seems to work for many of the companies profiled in this report. Another is tailoring the interview process to better fit Gen Z candidates. We found that recruitment agencies such as Pollen Careers (see page 56) are leading the charge on this.

“A big issue these days is trying to discover new talent and finding the old ways of doing it inadequate.”

Internships and apprenticeships

While post-secondary institutions can help businesses find and utilise interns and apprentices, a company creating its own scheme can also be a great way to find new employees. South West Water is a great example of a company we researched that has built its own scheme that has worked brilliantly to fit the organisation's needs (see page 22).

Creating your own internship or apprenticeship can be time-consuming to begin with, but it will also deliver employees tailor-made for the organisation's needs. Ultimately, it is up to any employer to decide between an external or internal internship and apprenticeship programme, but both can be very effective.



Workers at Pret A Manger, Page 120

T raining for soft skills

A big issue for employers these days is trying to discover new talent and finding the old ways of doing it are inadequate. Many businesses we have spoken to over the last 18 months have told us that discovering the right talent amongst the 16- to 25-year-old age group can be tricky.

A lot of this comes down to 'soft skills': knowing how to create a CV that will stand out; understanding what is expected in an interview and how to respond to certain key questions; knowing how to dress for an interview. Some people, particularly from more deprived backgrounds, will lack these basic skills. Getting them up to speed on this is often the key to helping them find and retain employment. What the Pret Foundation does in this area is a good example (see page 120).



Y oung people

Youth unemployment is the worst of all age groups from a societal perspective, given the way it echoes through the years to come. A person who can't find a job by the time they reach 24 will very likely struggle throughout the rest of their working life. If a young person has fallen into the trap set for them by generational joblessness, then it will be even more difficult for them to pull themselves out of it later. Ensuring as many young people as possible get into meaningful employment is one of the most vital things for society to accomplish. Thankfully, large companies like the MAG Group (see page 84) and smaller organisations like 20/20 Levels (see page 88) are doing great work on this.

"They see you as a dinosaur that is irrelevant in today's workplace. But I've still got plenty of energy and on the good days, when I manage to get through the fog of not having a purpose, I still have the drive and tenacity to strive for a better future for myself, and through my business idea, a brighter future for others. So, I'm not giving up."

That quote was from Will, working with Shaw Trust to get a job, but finding it a massive challenge. Employers across the UK are doing so much to create and provide the jobs we need to keep this country moving forward – but they can do more. We hope this report on the best practices for hiring, training and retaining staff is used by businesses of all sizes, across all sectors of the economy.

The Jobs Foundation is looking to do further work on best practice in the coming years, working with as many businesses that employ elements of best practice as we can. Creating the two million jobs the economy needs won't be easy – but doing so begins with understanding what best practice looks like and then spreading the word. We invite you to join us in our mission.

This report is the next phase in our mission to champion the role of business as a force for good. By travelling across the country,

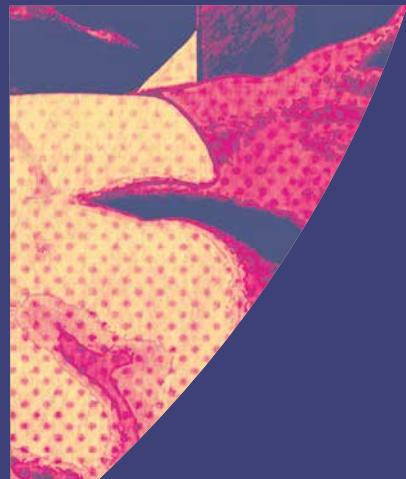
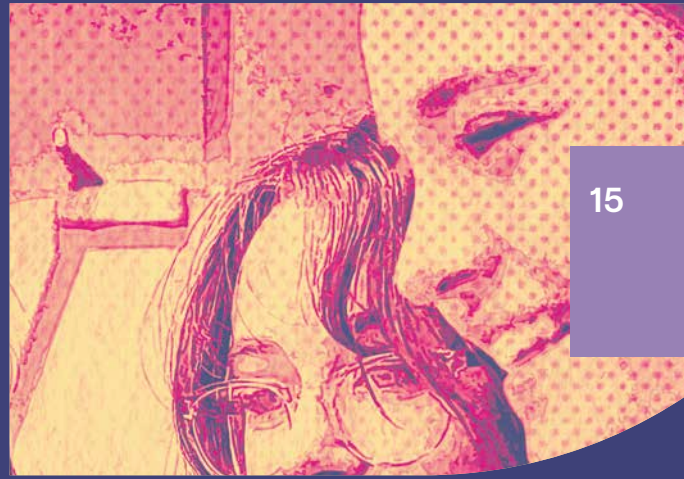
speaking to businesses large and small, from a wide range of sectors, the Jobs Foundation has understood directly from employers themselves how meaningful jobs are created. While there are many challenges ahead in generating two million jobs across the UK, this report is filled with organisations which are doing tremendous things on the ground already. We will continue to talk about the companies that excel in terms of hiring, training and retaining staff. They are the future.

Chapter One

Hiring locally

“Where there’s less travel, people don’t have to sit in their car for ages, wearing out the tarmac and burning through petrol. They can walk to work, which is good for the planet.”

Chirstopher Nieper OBE
CEO of David Nieper



Hiring locally

- The move towards hiring employees from a business's local area is gaining speed, particularly since the Covid pandemic. There are numerous benefits to doing so: increased employee retention, building a lasting culture, a reduced environmental impact (although this is difficult to quantify), and improvement to the local economy – positively affecting the economy of the entire country.²
- According to the ONS, care work tends to be the most advertised job for those working locally. Salespeople and bookkeepers are two and three in terms of job ads posted.³
- The average commute time in Britain is 27 minutes – although this varies greatly by mode of travel. 15 minutes is the average time for people who walk to work, 63 minutes the average time for those who use national rail services.⁴
- The most common mode of transport used by UK commuters is via car – 68 per cent of people get to work this way.⁵
- The rise of working from home is a risk to the hiring locally agenda. If people can work from home – i.e., if they are not required to be physically present in an office – they can work anywhere, even abroad. A certain amount of presenteeism is important to keeping jobs in local areas.
- Working from home greatly expanded as an employment model during the Covid pandemic. At the peak of the crisis, almost half of workers across the UK worked from home either all the time (38 per cent at its highest level in June, 2020) or in a hybrid situation, working sometimes from home, sometimes from the office (11 per cent).⁶ Working from home has continued to be popular, with around 40 per cent of employees still doing so in Britain, albeit with many more working in a hybrid situation now (at the close of 2024, 26 per cent of employees were working partly from home, partly in the office, with only 14 per cent working solely from home) than was the case during the pandemic.⁷



2. This was widely confirmed by the vast majority of the businesses we spoke to during the course of our research in 2025.

3. ONS, 'Which skills are employers seeking in your area?', 5 November, 2024 (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/whichskillsareemployersseekinginyourarea/2024-11-05>) Accessed 18 March, 2025

4. Gov.uk, 'Transport Statistics Great Britain: 2022 Domestic Travel' (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/transport-statistics-great-britain-2023/transport-statistics-great-britain-2022-domestic-travel>) Accessed 19 March, 2025

5. Ibid.

6. Statista, 'Share of people working remotely, hybrid working, or at work in the United Kingdom from May 2020 to April 2025' (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1207746/coronavirus-working-location-trends-britain>) Accessed 23 March, 2025

7. Ibid.



Nick Tyrone

Overview

Hiring close to home makes sense – but is trickier than it seems

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Chapter One
Hiring locally

At first glance, the idea of companies hiring employees close to what will be their place of work would seem to be a straightforward one. Logic appears to dictate that when searching for new members of staff, organisations of all shapes and sizes would choose as a default to hire people who live close by. Yet there are several complicating factors at play here, making hiring locally a much less obvious choice for employers than seems intuitive at first glance.

Since Covid, we've seen a sharp rise in remote working that has made it easier for employees nowhere near their office to work online – and of course, that has made it easier to offshore those jobs. You also have the immigration issue from the perspective of finding it theoretically easier to find talent abroad rather than close by, if organisations view the local talent pool to be insufficient. It takes time and money to upskill a community, much less to simply hire from the rest of the world.

Yet there are other, less obvious reasons why hiring locally might be difficult. During the data gathering for *Two Million Jobs*, the Jobs Foundation's foundational research project, many SME founders told of how they set up a business location with the explicit idea of hiring as locally as possible, only to find that almost all the applicants

lived elsewhere, intent on commuting in for the job. Lack of talent can form a negative feedback loop in a region, where paucity of skills leads to fewer jobs, and the employment that does exist is then taken up by people outside the area – leading to even fewer people with employable skills in the same region over time.

Hiring locally, therefore, is not as straightforward as it sounds. Yet it is one of the most important things an employer can do in terms of ethical business practices.

If we are going to create two million more jobs in Britain, companies hiring as locally as possible is essential. This chapter looks at companies that are doing great work in terms of recruiting in their communities, then examines how we can make it easier for companies of all sizes to hire locally.

We will see throughout this chapter that correcting the current problems surrounding this issue involves looking at it systemically, moving right back to how we are preparing secondary school kids for the world of work. Best practice in terms of recruiting from as local a base as possible involves planning and foresight. But it pays off massively when done right: for the community, the private sector, and the UK as a whole.

The David Nieper company and academy trust – Localism in action in Derbyshire

The town of Alfreton, Derbyshire sits around 14 miles slightly northeast of Derby itself. It was here, in 1961, that David Nieper decided to start his own brand of womenswear. The company is still going strong, ever expanding. Almost uniquely in the British fashion industry, the company does everything at home in Alfreton, from design to cutting and sewing. 90 per cent of clothing sold in the UK is manufactured abroad, which makes what David Nieper is doing so special.⁸

The company is now run by David's son, Christopher. He took us around the clothing factory in Alfreton and explained how he manages to keep those manufacturing jobs in Britain.

"We've had to develop our own apprenticeships," Christopher told us. "We had to create standards for our sector, so I led the National Trailblazer. With a put together representative group of employers, we had John Lewis, we had Tesco, we had Burberry, we had ourselves, and we had another one from London."

8. **Make it British, '4 Common Myths About UK Garment Manufacturing'** (<https://makeitbritish.co.uk/know-how/4-common-myths-about-uk-garment-manufacturing>) Accessed 30 March, 2025

“We wrote the standards for Level 2, Level 3 sewing machine pattern and pattern maker, etc., so that there were then standards, so it would be possible,” Christopher continued. “Then I discovered that there is no college anywhere who could deliver that because this sector is almost extinct in the UK. Right, so we still couldn’t use our apprenticeship levy pot. So, then we made this company itself into an employer provider of apprenticeships. We had to be approved by the Department for Education and we’re now monitored by Ofsted. Only finally now can we use our own money to train our own people with our own skills in our own building, and what a long roundabout way that is of making it work. But here we are.”



Lydia and Josh



Workers at David Nieper



Christopher laid out his 10-point plan for maintaining a business based on local talent:

1. Recruit the best. “The success of a business is all about its people and the most successful organisations, including political parties, are the ones with the best people.”
2. Recruit for attitude. “Someone who’s got qualifications as long as your arm has no use if they can’t work with other people, if they can’t fit into a team, if they can’t turn up on time, and if they can’t communicate their ideas.”
3. Working from home should be used sparingly. “You don’t know what people are thinking or doing and you lose those, what we call water cooler ideas.” Beyond the power of having everyone in the same building at the same time, it’s worth adding that if people can work from home, they can work from anywhere – including abroad. Working from home as a trend has made it easier to outsource jobs. Localism requires presenteeism to some extent.
4. Training is expensive, so it’s best to focus on the group of people who are most likely to stick around for the long term – those who live close by. “If you have local people, they’re more likely to stay, and that’s the main thing. You can recruit people who appear to have the right skills, but if they have a long commute, you then have to pay over the odds to get them to come on that long commute every day. As soon as they find a more convenient job closer to home, you’ve lost them.”
5. Culture within a company is key. “We are a family business. We’re on first name terms, we have a social committee, it’s a homely feel, you work with your friends. We have a mother and daughter who work together here, sisters, a husband and wife who work in the company. That culture of trust is very important because in the normal cycle of the economy, there are ups and downs, aren’t there? And you need the company to pull together during the downs.”
6. “Water cooler” ideas are extremely valuable and should be listened to. Not just in terms of business ideas, but also for HR to nip problems in the bud.
7. Hiring locally means you get more committed and engaged staff. Average length of service at David Nieper is almost 11 years, compared to the national average of three to five years.⁹
8. Become the employer of choice – build a great reputation for yourself and then people will flock to work for you. “Once you’ve become the employer of choice, then the recruitment problem becomes significantly lessened.”
9. Be a responsible employer – look after your people. “If you don’t treat your staff well, then the word on the street is: ‘Don’t go and work there.’ You’re then not the employer of choice, and then you can’t recruit people, and then you must presumably go out of the area and try and get people who won’t stick around. All of this is a sort of virtuous circle.”
10. If you hire locally, you’re helping the environment – you’re being a greener employer. “Where there’s less travel, people don’t have to sit in their car for ages, wearing out the tarmac and burning through petrol. They can walk to work, which is good for the planet.”



9. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, ‘Benchmarking employee turnover: What are the latest trends and insights?’ (<https://www.cipd.org/uk/views-and-insights/thought-leadership/cipd-voice/benchmarking-employee-turnover>) Accessed 5 April, 2025

It is for the tenth point that the David Nieper company was awarded the King's Award for Sustainable Development – a noteworthy accolade for a clothing company, a sector not generally known for being particularly sustainable.

As amazing as all the above is – a company in a left-behind-area of Britain creating loads of jobs locally that would otherwise go abroad – the David Nieper Academy, right down the road from the factory, adds a whole other dimension to this story.

The David Nieper Trust set up the academy out of the grounds of an old, failing secondary school, the Mortimer Wilson School. It was mostly rebuilt, greatly expanded upon and, more importantly, the school focused on helping the kids develop a set of skills and attitudes that would make them as employable as possible after graduation.

Bernie Brankin, Assistant Headteacher and Personal Development and Designated Safeguarding Lead at the school, has been working at the academy and its predecessor

school for around 26 years – so he's in a perfect position to describe the changes there over the last decade.

"The school is as good as it's ever been," Bernie told us. "What we try to ensure is that when they leave this Academy, they've got something else to go on to."

Two Year 10 students, Lydia and Josh, gave us a guided tour of the school.

"We were introduced to the world of work from career interviews, which being in year 10, we've both just experienced," Josh told us. "And like, knowing what jobs are out there in Derbyshire and further afield to see how the world of work works was really valuable."

Seeing the clothing factory and the secondary school in Alfreton was a valuable lesson in how left-behind communities throughout the country can rebuild, as well as demonstrating the value of hiring locally. More success stories like this one would be heartening to see in communities across the UK.



Jamie Booth, Communications Director of the Jobs Foundation, with students at the Academy

South West Water / Pennon Group – Hiring locally in Devon

SW Water is the water and wastewater service provider for approximately 1.8 million customers in Cornwall, Devon, parts of Somerset and Dorset, and the Isles of Scilly. It is one of the largest employers in that region, with around 2,500 members of staff. As a result of their recruitment needs, SW Water takes hiring, training and retaining employees very seriously. Their apprenticeship scheme can be considered a gold standard – a great example of best practice in effect.

We visited their main plant, just outside Exeter.

“What we set out to do was create something standardised across the region, and that’s been challenging,” said Emily Pearson, Apprenticeship Manager at the Pennon Group, the company

that owns SW Water. “The partnership with the colleges was essential – the most vital part of developing the programme.”

SW Water currently has 366 apprentices on their scheme. The company works with three local colleges to deliver this – Cornwall College, South Devon College, and Bridgewater-Taunton College. The incoming apprentices go full-time at one of these post-secondary institutions for a year, then split their time between days at the college and being on-site. The apprentices are from all levels, but the majority are Level 3 (advanced apprentices, at a two A-level equivalence) or Level 5 (a higher apprenticeship, degree level).¹⁰ It is a great example of a large employer working with local post-secondary institutions to the benefit of everyone.

10. Apprenticeship levels range from Level 2 (Intermediate) to Level 7 (Master's Degree), each representing a specific stage of skill development and educational attainment. Here's a breakdown of the apprenticeship levels: **Level 2 (Intermediate):** Equivalent to GCSEs, providing basic knowledge and skills for specific jobs. **Level 3 (Advanced):** Equivalent to A-levels, offering more specialized knowledge and skills. **Levels 4 & 5 (Higher):** Equivalent to the first stages of higher education, such as a foundation degree, HNC, or HND. **Level 6 (Degree):** Equivalent to a Bachelor's degree. **Level 7 (Master's Degree):** Equivalent to a Master's degree.

“Five years ago, we set ourselves an initial five-year target that, a couple of years later, we then extended to a ten-year target,” said Nigel Fenn MBE, Head of People Projects & Planning at the Pennon Group. “We set out on a commitment to support 1,000 apprentices, 200 new graduates on a graduate programme, and then a year or so after that, we set up a new work experience target. So, we’ve now got 1,000 apprentices, 200 graduates, and then 5,000 work experience placements, just as we planned to by this stage.”

While a lot of the incoming apprentices are young people, there are a range of ages entering the SW Water apprenticeship scheme. A lot of support is provided to managers within the organisation so that they, in turn, can best support new apprentices. “When it works, it’s such a strong relationship between a manager and an apprentice,” Nigel said. “The mentoring that happens is of great value to both.”

The apprentices come from a wide range of socio-economic circumstances – but being one of the largest employers in South West England means that SW Water takes on a lot of apprentices from disadvantaged backgrounds. This is a great example of how companies with large payrolls act as a great route for people in poverty to get the job that vastly improves their lives.



“We had a case where we’ve had one of our apprentices – literally a 19, 20-year-old lad – at home with a single parent,” Emily told us. “He’s got two younger sisters. And then the mother’s diagnosed with a terminal illness. Given less than a year to live. And suddenly, this apprentice who’s joined, he’s now going to be thrust into the position of the breadwinner, taking on responsibility to bring up his two younger sisters while caring for his mum.”

“The support that we provide in those instances, as he’s also trying to deal with the challenges around his mum being diagnosed with a terminal illness, is as strong as we can make it. He’s only going to get through that if he’s given help and support and flexibility, which is what we’ve given him.”

The SW Water apprenticeship scheme demonstrates that where there is a will there is a way when it comes to integrating apprentices into an organisation. Their scheme began in 2010, with a mere eight apprentices. 15 years later, thousands have come through the programme successfully. It is now the cornerstone for how the organisation recruits and retains staff.

Take Adam Rousell, a Control Room Project Manager. He took us on a tour of SW Water's control room, where the fresh and waste water needs of almost two million people are provided for. He's been with the organisation for over 19 years now.

"When I started, I thought it would be a job for a little while, something to tide me over. But I really found myself here. I love working in this place."

Adam is a great example of how when an organisation takes on people at a young age from the local area, they have a chance of ending up with a valuable employee for decades.

And of course, hiring local people has huge PR advantages for the companies that do it well. If people in the area view SW Water as an organisation embedded in the community – as a place where their sons and daughters could someday work – then it becomes much more straightforward for the company to be seen as a vital part of that community.

"We had to go ahead with the idea of 'developing our own'. There isn't a ready-made market for the people we require, and we knew we needed to be proactive," said Nigel. "We had to go out and build our own system. The success of it already has been inspiring."



The control room of SW Water

The CyberNorth meeting

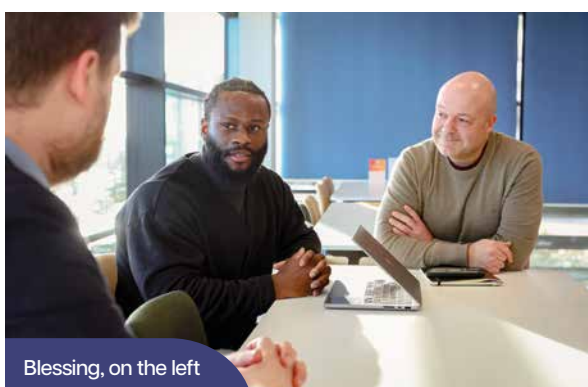
Newcastle and Gateshead – The North East England community acting as a nexus of local employment

CyberNorth is the cyber security cluster for North East England, an umbrella association for tech organisations to come together as a community. They share insights, encourage progressive collaboration, and work to help establish the region as a centre of excellence for the cyber security sector. In February, we attended a CyberNorth meeting, right in the heart of Newcastle, at an office just down the road from St James' Park, home of Newcastle United FC. Discussed that evening were key regulatory matters pertaining to the sector, important regional news, as well as the possibility of group trips to Dubai to help the North East make even more headway in the global tech market.





Nicola Japp and Paul Matthewson



Blessing, on the left



The following day we visited Accenture, a global professional services company that specialises in IT and management consulting. Headquartered in Dublin, in 2024 the company turned over almost \$65 billion worldwide, with over 750,000 employees across the globe. Their office in Newcastle boasts a successful apprenticeship scheme that has now been rolled out to other parts of the country.

“It’s open to all ages,” said Nicola Japp, Security Delivery Manager at Accenture. “There will be people without a degree coming in, so we put them through our software engineering programme. They work at Accenture four days a week and are at Newcastle College one day a week.”

Accenture does a huge amount of outreach to the local community in Newcastle, looking to ensure the next wave of kids graduating from both secondary and post-secondary education keep Accenture in mind as a possible employer. More generally, it’s about getting kids interested in jobs in the tech sector or indeed, other sectors across the wide range of businesses that Accenture comes into contact with.

“We do an absolute tonne of outreach and engagement, often directly with schools,” said Paul Matthewson, Security Consulting Manager at Accenture in Newcastle. “We’ve got a great relationship with both Newcastle and Gateshead colleges, as well as the university. They’ll reach out to us and say ‘Can you do a talk on this? Can you speak with our teachers? Can you do some mentoring for students that are interested in security?’ Or whatever it may be.”

“What we also offer is opportunities for people to come here,” Paul continued. “For a couple of weeks of the year, we’ll take a big cohort of NEETs (people who are Not in Employment, Education or Training). They will come here and do like a mini bootcamp for two weeks, where they’ll come in every single day. We’ll cover pretty much everything that we do at Accenture with them. So, one day they’ll do Python development. One day, they’ll do security. One day they’ll do project management or design thinking and innovation.”

This range of activities gives young people coming in from the local secondary schools the ability to figure out what they want to do, which

jobs are really for them. Getting this gift at the right age can be invaluable for young people in Newcastle – the chance to figure themselves out in an employment setting which is local to them.

We met and spoke to one recent graduate from Accenture's apprenticeship scheme, Blessing.

"I think I found out about it just searching online," Blessing told us. "It was about 20 of us in there on my first day here. They were basically going through anything in terms of development, testing, so like, what coding interests you have, what language you want to code into, what the programme is about. And it was more like a boot camp. It's like a fast-track boot camp."

Blessing is now working full-time at Accenture. Would he recommend the Accenture apprenticeship scheme to other local people in Newcastle?

"100%. I'll say to my – I've got two younger brothers – I said to them that they should check it out. To anyone else that was interested, I would say to do the apprenticeship because you learn on the job. You work on the industry standards. Like, leading edge tech with Accenture. You're at the forefront of technology. So, I feel like you learn a lot."

Not far away from Accenture is one of the largest tech companies in the UK, Sage. The company was created in Newcastle and is heavily

embedded in the community. Sage runs a great apprenticeship programme (and graduate scheme) themselves, and does a great deal beyond that in terms of building STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) skills locally.

"We run an event in St James' Park every November for 1,200 Year 8 girls – specifically girls," said Mads Howard MBE, Manager of the Chief Information Security Office at Sage. "It is targeted towards girls wanting to study cyber security or technology more broadly. It involves employers from across the region – it's the biggest STEM event focused on girls in the North East."

The yearly event at St James' Park is one of the most impressive such ceremonies in England and is attended by girls from across the region. Sage also offers intensive training programmes for people to come into the organisation, focused on recruiting local talent.

"We have an apprenticeship programme and a graduate scheme," Mads told us. "That's a two-year graduate programme in which roles are available to those graduates at the end of the scheme. That programme doesn't just include those grads doing their roles. They also have a two-year professional development element, including upskilling and mentoring opportunities, as they go through. It's not just like you join the scheme and then you're sort of left to your own devices. It's on site three



The Sage building in Newcastle



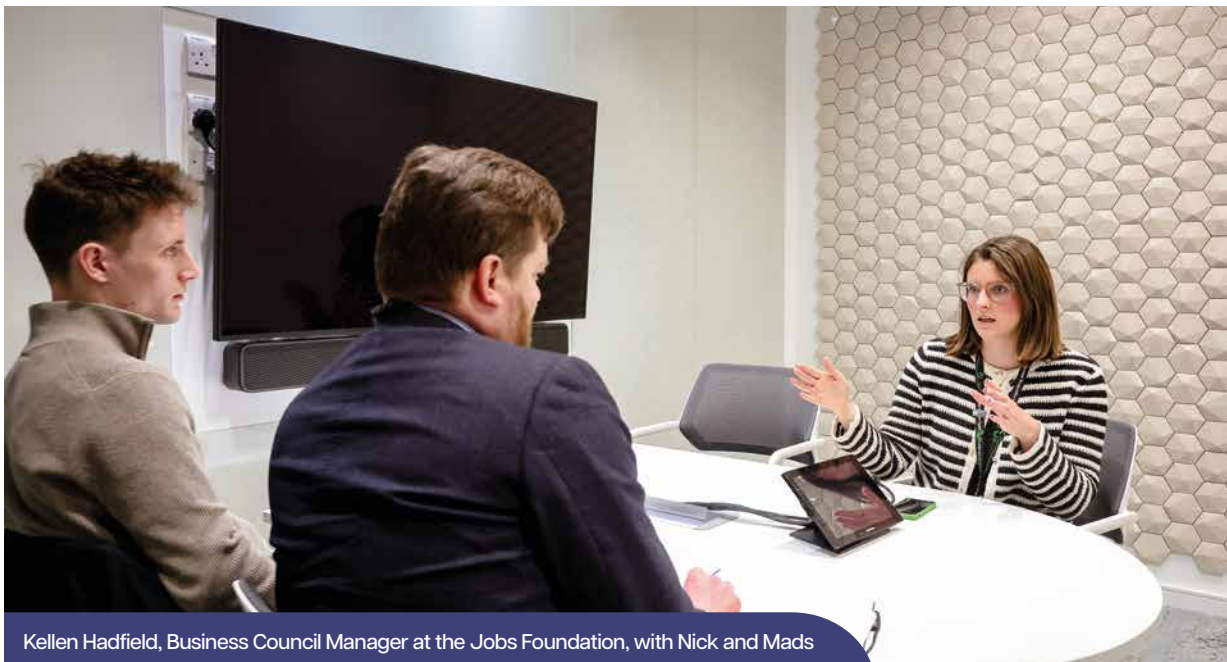
Mads Howard MBE

days a week. Also, from a recruitment perspective for those graduates, we also do the graduate interviews in person – because for a lot of these young people, they might not have engaged with the business world in person.”

The issue of ‘soft skills’ came up again and again during our research around best practice (and features heavily in one of the chapters of this report). The need for young people to get an understanding of how to operate in the world of work: from how to design a CV, to how to navigate an interview, to the manner in which

one needs to behave in order to succeed in a professional environment.

This relates back to the localism issue in such an important way. When organisations like Sage engage with the local community, particularly with the poorest people in the region, they will inevitably encounter these problems. But best practice shows that if they stay with it, the rewards for the companies are substantial. Having the private sector train and take on individuals who might otherwise have struggled to find a job is one of the best examples of business as a societal good.



Kellen Hadfield, Business Council Manager at the Jobs Foundation, with Nick and Mads



Bridging the Gap event



On a return visit to Tyneside, we visited Gateshead College, speaking with Phil O'Neill, Head of Digital Technology and Games. He told us about how the college is focused on “education with an employment edge”, meaning they try and tailor the curriculum to fit the needs of local employers. There is also a focus on those very same ‘soft skills’ – making sure the students have the competence and confidence to progress (how to navigate the interview process, for example) and more importantly, keep their jobs through interpersonal prowess.

The college is a lynchpin in the area, with all the employers we spoke to across the two visits to the region working with the institution in some respect. Gateshead College is at the forefront of making sure Tyneside has the talent it needs – with most of that talent having grown up in the area. The college is strongly attuned to the needs of local employers.

“Twice a year, we’ll have employers come in and we go through the curriculum with them,” Phil said. “We go through the needs of the students and the needs of the employer. What do they look

at in early talent? What are the barriers? What are the things that are stopping people from progressing through interviews or applications? What are the red flags? What are the green flags? And we take all that on board and we put that into our planning.”

We were lucky enough to get to see all this in action ourselves, as on this same trip we got to witness their Bridging the Gap event down the road, at the college’s Academy for Sport. Here we saw a panel discussion about the future of tech and the world of employment and how that would affect the Gateshead students. This was followed by a ‘speed matching’ session, where students from the college were put face-to-face with local employers to test their interview skills. There were also group activities at the event, where the students were put together with teachers and admin staff to think about things like: “What will the future workspace look like?” We even got to take part in a group activity ourselves, with Nick Tyrone, the Jobs Foundation’s Research Director, presenting the findings to the 100+ employers, students and educators in attendance.



Phil O'Neill

Back at the college, we visited an event for girls in secondary school designed to get them interested in tech careers. Girls in Tech is a collaboration between several secondary schools, Durham University, and Gateshead College, hosted by the latter.

“We’re ferrying the girls in today from four different local schools”, Phil said. “Eight kids altogether. There’s still a massive male-female divide in digital, with such an overwhelming number of the cohorts being male, that events like these are just so important.”

It was another great example of how important post-secondary institutions can be to not only creating employment locally today, but to paving the way for the future as well.



Girls in tech event



Our next stop in the North East was to speak to David Dunn, CEO of Sunderland Software City. It’s a non-profit that is dedicated to helping grow the North East tech sector. It does this through many avenues, including events, but it also creates jobs in the tech sector directly, taking on a host of junior developers who tend to split their time between working on internal projects and tech builds for other local employers in the region, including start-ups and scaling businesses.

“We decided to hire 10 junior developers with the idea that on day one, we would say: ‘We hope you get another job.’ They’ll have that experience, that thing on their CV,” David told us. “This is the problem: HR functions in tech teams, well, I think they’re still slightly antiquated. There is a huge assumption that you put a job advert out, and you go through an HR process, and you look at a CV, and if there’s no academic experience on it, crumple it up, put it in the bin. Or if it’s got no work experience on it, crumple it up and put it in the bin. And our hypothesis was not every CV in the bin can be bad. There will be good people out there. But some people have come through non-traditional routes. They’ve taught themselves. Some people have gone through the very formal route, they’ve got MScs in computer science – but they’ve got no experience. So how do you pick some of those CVs out of the bin and give people a chance?”



David Dunn

David told us that hiring those 10 junior developers, giving some local people who needed it a chance, has paid off for them. We asked what happened to those developers, a few years after Sunderland Software City first took them on.

“Two are still with us. Seven of the other eight have got jobs in the sector, whereas there was one who went back to university to study an MSc, which is entirely her prerogative to do that. That’s just what she wanted to do. So, we’re going again. Two weeks ago, we did another assessment centre, 280 applications this time, 50 people on the assessment centre. And we’ve offered eight jobs. And within about 12 hours, all of those jobs were accepted. We’re about to start again on the 1st April. But if we’ve got two hypotheses in this whole thing, one is there are good people, dare I say it, in the bin. And the other is that we’ve definitely proven – by the calibre of people we’ve had through – and the fact that they’ve then gone into the industry, that the talent is the area, here on Tyneside.”

Danielle Phillips, the CEO of CyberNorth, summarised the situation in the region for us.

“The North East is growing as a place to run a tech company. As the regional cyber community, CyberNorth works to showcase the cyber opportunities available across our 100+ members. By working as a sector, rather than individual companies, we can create a connected regional cyber industry that offers exciting career opportunities throughout an employee’s lifetime. And by having a close network, our talent can find their next opportunities in the region rather than having to go to London or elsewhere for a promotion or senior role. This keeps our talent close to home and supports our businesses to grow and thrive with passionate North Easterners leading them.”

“Our people are our best kept secret,” Danielle continued. “We’ve got amazing talent right here in the North East, and we need to come together to show our young people, graduates, and people coming into the region that there are great jobs here.”



Nick and Kellen with David Dunn

Case study

Valero and the Pembroke refinery

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Chapter One
Hiring locally

The Pembroke refinery opened in 1964 and has been a pillar of the local community ever since. One of the largest employers in Pembrokeshire, Valero supports the employment over 1,000 people, both directly and through the wider supply chain. As such, they are required to be serious about hiring and training – and have made a point of employing locally whenever possible.

They have an in-depth relationship with Pembrokeshire College (see our last report, *Two Million Jobs*, for more details on this institution), with a lot of the college's courses tailor-made to meet the demands of the refinery. It's a relationship that works in favour of both the employer and the post-secondary institution – and, of course, the local community.

Will James, Manager of Public and Government Affairs at Valero, laid out the course for new recruits into the company, most of them coming in from Pembrokeshire secondary schools.

"In year one, they go to Pembrokeshire College, we're partnered with them. So, they'll spend full-time in education, five days a week, and we pay them to be there. They're on a bursary in year one, so they get three instalments of £4,000. So, roughly about

£12,000 for the year to be in college, which for some of them at 16 years old is fantastic money. Fantastic money. We also have some more mature learners as well, people who have decided they want a life change. And that's absolutely fine. We support that."

Valero knows they need a range of skills and personalities to make their business run efficiently. That's why they take accommodating different people's strengths and challenges seriously.

"Everything is based around Valero's core values and we also use some really innovative profiling tools," Will continued. "I have had it done myself, and whilst I was a bit sceptical at first, it's absolutely incredible how it gives you an understanding of your strengths and your preferences during normal day-to-day work and how you adapt to different problems and challenges. You can sort of better understand yourself," said Will. "Self-awareness is a foundational piece featuring not only in our leadership development, but utilised within teams across the refinery."

By working with the local college and considering the whole range of individuals who apply for jobs, Valero is a great example of an employer taking creating local jobs seriously.



The Pembroke refinery

Middlesbrough FC Foundation – A club close to its community

For 27 years now, the MFC Foundation has worked in some of the most disadvantaged areas of Teesside, engaging with those who are hard to reach – through the delivery of inspiring sport, education, health and inclusion projects. It utilises the power of the football club to change people's lives throughout the region.

“Middlesbrough Football Club is the centre, the heart of this community,” said Adam Gaunt, one of the trustees of the MFC Foundation. “It’s what unites Teesside. That’s why what the foundation can do is so powerful.”

Between 2019 and 2024, the MFC Foundation delivered over £20 million of social investment, with 38,000 participants engaged in over 25,000 sessions. 51 per cent of the participants were living in the top 40 per cent most deprived wards in the region. The foundation plans to do even more in the next five years.

“We are incredibly proud of the work the foundation has done to support the communities we serve across Tees Valley over the last 27 years, and continue to drive forward, to deliver on our new four-year Together strategy,” Charlotte Dinsdale, Head of Foundation, said. “We are proud of working together with the club, using our years of experience to raise aspirations – and help realise potential and improve the life chances of people across Tees Valley.”

The Jobs Foundation held the launch of our North East Business Council in May 2025 at Middlesbrough FC's Riverside Stadium, where we could see for ourselves the club's centrality to the community. It was a great example of the important role that sport can inhabit in terms of helping give chances for a better life to those in the most deprived areas.



Adam Gaunt with Matthew Elliott



Kiran Fothergill, the Jobs Foundation's North East Regional Chairman, is pictured third from the right



AESSEAL – Dedicated to hiring in South Yorkshire

AESSEAL is a top UK apprentice employer in the manufacturing sector according to the Department for Education Annual Rankings. The company was recognised in the inaugural *Financial Times* and Statista ranking of the UK's Best Employers 2025. AESSEAL is a global business proudly headquartered in Rotherham, South Yorkshire, a great example of an employer that is deeply dedicated to its local community. The company manufactures sealing solutions, with a focus on sustainability.

"If it were a purely bottom line decision, we'd probably have located this place in the Czech Republic," said Martin McKervey, the company's director, while we chatted with him at AESSEAL's headquarters in Rotherham. "But we made the strategic decision to support British manufacturing and British jobs."



Nick Tyrone with Martin McKervey



Martin and Darren

We also spoke with Darren Jones, the UK Learning and Development Manager for the company. Darren is ex-armed services, having served in the British Army for 24 years prior to coming to AESSEAL.

“A big part of my role is managing the early careers pathway,” Darren told us. “We look at giving opportunities to young people, local people, to join an engineering manufacturing company that is pushing the boundaries of innovation. What makes us unique is: One, we don’t offer an apprenticeship unless there’s a permanent position available. Two, there’s a mentor all the way through the process. And three, you have an apprentice buddy, from beginning to end, as well. What we are offering is a job for life. If you pass your apprenticeship, you can be here for 40 years, if not longer. There are people here who have done their entire working life with us.”

The company recruits heavily in Rotherham, conducting outreach with all the town’s secondary schools. Through selection days and other events, AESSEAL looks beyond people’s CVs to try and recruit the best local talent, people from the area who have the right attitude. Out of the hundreds of people who will come through these pathways, the company will hire around twenty of them as apprentices every year.

“Since 2024, every apprentice prospect that applies to AESSEAL must go through our apprentice selection process to check their suitability for the role,” Darren explained about their hiring process. “This consists of an icebreaker introduction, which



Lucia

is a chance for the hopeful apprentice to make an introduction to the hiring team. It’s a group exercise around cultures and values, and an individual problem-solving exercise to test mental aptitude under pressure. Finally, the selection event then ends with an interview, and in some cases a placement day to further check suitability.”

“What we’re trying to do is find out if the apprentice can relate to our values and culture and will they be able to adapt their behaviour to our values and culture to be successful?” Martin said. “Equally, are we a fit for them? What does excellence mean to a 16-year-old? How are they going to show excellence to us? We have to be able to trust our workers. That’s why trying to find the right attitude is so important, and why we value it so highly in the recruitment process.”

We also spoke to Lucia, a current apprentice, while we were at the AESSEAL HQ. She is looking to become an engineer within the company. She had been studying at college in Sheffield when she came onto the programme about three years ago.

“I’ve loved it, really loved it here,” Lucia told us. “I like that you get to move around different departments and learn a range of skills.”

AESSEAL combines all the elements we’ve learned through this chapter that work: Hiring for attitude; reaching out to local secondary schools to discover talent; and offering local people the chance of a job for life.

Principles identified in hiring locally

1. Employing local people can be a challenge – but getting it right can yield massive upsides, particularly over the long-term

It's understandable that many employers feel like there isn't enough talent in their local area to fill the gaps in their staffing. Yet what the examples in this chapter demonstrate is that putting in that time and effort to help find and encourage the best local talent pays dividends for decades to come. Local people might stay with you for their whole career. Being embedded in the community is a huge PR win. In terms of being ethical as a company, nurturing local talent is one of the best things an organisation can do.

2. Employing locally means tailoring your approach to the needs of individuals and the community

One of the challenges that comes with hiring locally is getting out into the local community on a regular basis. Visits to local secondary schools are a good way of doing this – as well as tailoring your hiring method to suit both local and individual needs. As David Dunn of Sunderland Software City said, not all the CVs that go in the bin can be bad. Often people fall between the cracks – despite having the desire to work and the necessary skill set. Small adjustments to the hiring process, followed by taking the time to really care for your employees, can make a huge difference in terms of a company having a solid workforce that maximises efficiency for the medium and long-term.

3. Partnering with local post-secondary institutions is often the best way to train – but there are other solutions

Our research for this chapter has built on what we initially learnt when putting together our foundational research *Two Million Jobs*: Colleges and other post-secondary educational institutions can be a great way to train local employees. Many large employers work directly with colleges to design the ideal courses, ensuring there is a crop of people ready-made for their business. Yet as David Nieper Limited demonstrates, sometimes you have to make your own apprentice scheme and this can work out for the best, when done well. The important thing is to focus on what training path is going to work best for your organisation and see it through to the end.

4. Use working from home sparingly at most

Providing employees with the ability to work from home when necessary has been a good innovation for plenty of businesses. But it is worth talking about the downsides of working from home. Young people often require the office environment to learn their profession, as well as create a professional network. On top of this, a lot of jobs, particularly blue collar roles, cannot be done from home. So working from home can become a middle-class-only domain.

Another substantial downside is that once jobs are made to be done at home, they can then be done anywhere in the world. Local jobs need to be held onto and too much working from home is to this goal's detriment. Again, if we want to create two million jobs in the UK – and every indicator suggests we need to – focusing on how organisations employ best practice in hiring locally whenever possible, across the country, is vital.

Chapter Two

The long-term sick

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“It’s really hard out there. And it’s almost become the norm that everybody has mental health issues because of it. We talk to young people and they feel very low – for example, when I was applying for jobs, I came to such a low place myself. You’re sat in your dressing gown, or you’re sat in your pyjamas, and just applying for jobs over and over again. You’re thinking, what’s wrong with me? I’m the problem.”

Holly Saunders

Business Development and Brand Manager, Pollen Careers



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The Facts

Long-term sickness

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Chapter Two
The long-term sick

- At the end of 2023, the number of people in the UK who were economically inactive due to long-term sickness hit an all-time high of 2.84 million people. This has subsequently fallen slightly, but not by much (it was 2.78 million at the end of 2024).¹¹
- Since the third quarter of 2021, long-term and temporary sickness has been the main reason that people were economically inactive, accounting for 32 per cent of economic inactivity in the fourth quarter of 2024.¹²
- As of 2022, some of the most common health conditions cited as the reason for long-term sickness were to do with mental health issues, with 313,000 suffering from some form of non-depression related mental illness, and a further 282,000 afflicted by depression-related issues.¹³
- The Covid pandemic caused long-term sickness numbers to vastly increase, from around two million in 2019, compared to 2.79 million now. Around 1.8 million people in April 2022 were reporting an experience of Long Covid as a contributing factor. The numbers have stayed high ever since.¹⁴
- While the majority of people on long-term sick leave are over the age of 50, there has been a noticeable increase in those aged under-35 being on long-term sickness benefit. Between 2019 and 2022, the number of people aged between 16 and 34 on long-term sick leave increased by 140,000, compared with an increase of just 32,000 for those aged between 35 and 49.¹⁵
- The OBR estimates that each person out of work due to long-term illness costs the Treasury £5,200 in lost tax revenue, which is over and above any benefit costs.¹⁶
- The OBR estimates that the combined cost of disability and incapacity benefits was £64.7 billion in 2023-24. It is projected to reach £100.7 billion by 2029-30.¹⁷



Ben from Lynas Foodservice, Page 52

11. Statista, Sick leave figures for 2024 (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1388245/uk-sick-leave-figures>) Accessed on 20 March, 2025

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. ITV, 'Number of long-term sick blows £3bn black hole in Hunt's budget', 3 March, 2025 (<https://inews.co.uk/news/politics/long-term-sick-black-hole-hunt-budget-2937819>) Accessed 10 March, 2025

17. The Times, 'UK benefits bill: Half of claims will be for sickness by 2029', 31 October, 2024 (<https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/uk-benefits-bill-half-of-claims-will-be-for-sickness-by-2029>) Accessed on 31 March, 2025



Nick Tyrone and Ian Crewe, Page 46



Meeting at Shaw Trust, Page 62

The long-term sickness issue in the UK

As Fraser Nelson recently said, “If an attempt to fix benefits goes wrong (as it always does), you will be greeted with the worst headlines. You’ll be accused of taking money away from the poorest, most desperate people in society. The safest option is to sound angry and promise reform – just not yet.”¹⁸

While there have long been many people on long-term sickness benefits in the UK, it spiked greatly during the Covid pandemic and has never returned to ‘normal’. The chart below illustrates this trend starkly.¹⁹



Number of economically inactive people due to long-term sickness in the United Kingdom from 1st quarter 2000 to 1st quarter 2025 (in 1,000s)



Source:
Office for National Statistics (UK)
© Statista 2025

Additional Information:
United Kingdom; Q1 2000 to Q1 2025; 16–64 years

¹⁸. Spectator article, Fraser Nelson, 30 November 2024 (<https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-sickness-benefit-trap>) Accessed on 10 July, 2025

¹⁹. Statista, Long-term sick leave numbers since the turn of the century (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1388245/uk-sick-leave-figures>) Accessed 5 April, 2025

The illnesses people are now claiming for are illustrative of the drivers of this increase. In terms of changes from 2019 through 2023, the number of people who were economically inactive for most physical disabilities rises a little over that four-year period, but where we see the most dramatic upturn is in the category ‘Depression, bad nerves or anxiety’. We see a jump from around 965,000 across the country in this category in 2019 to 1.35 million in 2023.²⁰

Of course, there will be people in that category who simply cannot work. Mental health issues are real and when serious enough, can make it impossible for an individual to remain in any sort of meaningful employment. However, it is worth considering how many of those people who are economically inactive in this category would be much better off in employment, even part-time – particularly from a mental health point of view. A job can often be incredibly helpful for people suffering from certain mental health issues. It can bolster confidence and feelings of self-sufficiency. Again, to stress, some people are too sick to work, whether that be a mental or physical disability. But we should aim to have as many of those who can work in some form of employment. Not just for the sake of the Treasury, but also because of the long-term health prospects of many of those out of employment. Many people in the UK on long-term sickness benefits would be much healthier if they had a job to go to. The bulk of this chapter is dedicated to cases on the ground demonstrating this assertion.

The current government agrees with this idea. In February, the Department for Work and Pensions published a study revealing that around 200,000 people currently on disability benefits say they want to work and would take a job, so long as they were offered the right amount of support for re-entering the workforce.²¹ This is a welcome step in the right direction – acknowledging that there are a lot of people currently on sickness benefits who would prefer to work, if only that could be done in a supported way.

Unfortunately, that’s where it begins to get tricky. While many of the steps outlined in the Government’s white paper are welcome, such as a stated aim to have ‘a health and disability benefits system that encourages people to engage with support and try work’, the concern is whether this will be enough to get those who want to work back into employment. Time will tell.

In the meantime, thankfully there are businesses who are doing their part to ameliorate this problem as much as possible, within the constraints of the current system. The rest of this chapter will look at examples of best practice engagement with this cohort from businesses. After which we will outline some possible ways forward in terms of solving this problem.

One thing to mention here is that when we first began approaching businesses about being part of this chapter of the report, we encountered some reticence. Many companies were fearful of being seen in any way to be ‘forcing sick people into work’. What we have seen over the course of the last six months is a slight relaxation on this front, mostly due to the way the government has approached the issue. Having a Labour government being vocal about getting people off long-term sickness benefit and into employment has already had a positive effect on the way that the private sector is viewing this issue.

But first, we will address the issue of Jobcentres and how they function, given this is a key part of this issue. So many people who end up on long-term sickness benefit had some form of interaction with their local Jobcentre at an earlier point.

20. **ONS, Economic activity data sets** (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/economicinactivity/datasets/risingillhealthandeconomicinactivitybecauseoflongtermsicknessuk2019to2023>) Accessed 6 April, 2025

21. **HM Government, Survey on benefits system letting down people with mental health conditions, 6 February, 2025** (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-survey-suggests-benefits-system-is-letting-down-people-with-mental-health-conditions-who-want-to-work>) Accessed 14 April, 2025

Ian Crewe and Direct Special Metals Group

— a lesson in how to approach Jobcentres as an employer



Direct Special Metals is located just north of Sheffield city centre, in Brightside. Their business involves taking rubbish, separating it into plastics, paper, cardboard, and metal, and then recycling those elements to sell on. The company recycles hundreds of thousands of tonnes of material each year, stuff that would otherwise sit in a tip. There is an obvious environmental upside to this, in addition to the plant employing 172 people.

Yet despite being a thriving medium-sized enterprise in a city needing unskilled jobs, Ian Crewe, the co-founder of the business, found dealing with the Jobcentre to find employees a huge challenge. Until he found a proactive way of using them.

"I wanted to employ a lot of people. So, we offered Karen a job to work for us full-time to run our staff internally because she's very good at mothering them all, I suppose," Ian told us. "So, she's been advertising on LinkedIn. She's been advertising on Facebook. She has a sign on the wall outside. And I said to her, 'How many people have we employed from the Jobcentre?' And she said, 'I haven't.' I said, 'Why?' She said, 'Are you sure you want me to go there?' I couldn't believe they could be that bad."

Karen tried to hire people through the local Jobcentre after this conversation. And it did not go well.

"First of all, they got the volume of people wrong," Ian recalled. "Karen talks quite clearly, so that was strange. Allegedly, they thought we weren't after 100 people, we were only after a handful."

Ian shook his head recalling the rest of the story.

"Then, they got the job description wrong. They weren't too sure what we really wanted, still. But Karen stuck at them and was eventually offered 25 people. Of the 25 people, 10 of them couldn't hold a conversation. So, this is just a quick name, contact details over the phone. Sometimes, that was due to a language barrier. Sometimes, it was just confidence. You know, people who just couldn't hold a conversation. And Karen's very easy to talk to, mind. Then, there were 15 that were asked for an interview to come down here. Of that 15, only five turned up. The others just weren't heard of at all. Of the five that turned up, four of them weren't a fit at all. And so, we employed one person. You just couldn't believe it. After all that, we got one employee."

Ian still seemed stunned by the experience.

"And I thought, local jobs," Ian continued. "Well paid, and we do pay well. Solid hours. Not flexy hours. None of that. You thought they'd be queuing at the door. But we got just the one person. I just couldn't believe it."



A lot of employers would have taken this on the chin and moved on. But Ian felt it was worth getting more involved and trying to deal with the Jobcentre in a more proactive manner. He contacted the council and told them of his plight. And Sheffield City Council, to their credit, got involved. Soon, Ian was dealing with a whole other side of the Jobcentre, one that had previously been invisible to him and his employees.

“Eventually, two people came here from the Jobcentre. I had them in the boardroom here, made them a cup of tea. And I said to them, right, let’s start again. I said, this is how many people we need. This is the job,” Ian told us. “And I said, this is the rate of pay. And this is when we want them. I said, but what I don’t want is it just to go on a board with a pin. I told them that I’ve learned from the people that they had sent me. ‘You’re not prepping them’, I said.”

Things improved dramatically after this conversation. The quality of the candidates got better immediately. Soon, Direct Special Metals was

getting most of its staff from the Jobcentre. Sorting out the right people to speak to was all it took.

“The Jobcentres should be more proactive,” Ian said, summarising his experience. “We desperately need to get more people into work, so the Jobcentre should be thinking, ‘Who are the big employers in our area?’ I mean, colleges do this all the time, so why can’t the Jobcentre do that sort of thing as well?”

Ian’s experience demonstrates several things. One is that most people working at the Jobcentre have their hearts in the right place. Faced with a proactive employer in Sheffield who wanted to hire hundreds of people, they managed to pivot and help fill those openings. Yet another aspect of Ian’s story is the revelation that this was required in the first place. The way the Jobcentres work, day-to-day, on a sort of autopilot, isn’t doing the job well enough. As a result, too few people who go to their local Jobcentre because they want to work are ending up in work.



The issue with Jobcentres, **in focus**

“Despite the strong levels of commitment and daily dedication of work coaches and careers advisers, there are several fundamental problems with how both Jobcentre Plus and the National Careers Service currently operate and align services.”

This is a quote from the government’s Get Britain Working white paper, the plan for how to get millions more out of poverty and into work.²² The white paper sets out how they plan to fix these problems.

It starts from the idea that the way the Jobcentres approach things is ‘too centralised, has too little scope to tailor to local labour markets, and too often does not value enough collaboration with local partners.’²³ It seeks to have the Jobcentres work much more closely with businesses to help them ‘increase the recruitment and retention of disabled people and those with a health condition, including via the new jobs and careers service.’²⁴

As Ian Crewe discovered in Sheffield, employers can get their local Jobcentre to work for them in a functional way. Jobcentres can be a valuable resource to get what you need in terms of employment - but it clearly takes time and effort and it is worth noting that perhaps Direct Special Metals is the perfect size of company to have done this effectively. The business is big enough to have been able to convince the Jobcentre to bend to their needs, given the number of jobs at stake; yet small enough to have cared and tried in the first place. This presents a huge problem:

So many businesses across Britain are either too large or too small to achieve the same relationship with their local Jobcentre.

Of employers surveyed in 2022 who had either recruited or tried to recruit in the last 12 months, only 14 per cent had used a Jobcentre to recruit.²⁵ This is a shockingly low figure. Something must be done to increase this number, particularly given the huge number of people currently on long-term sickness benefit, who would gladly work if they could be supported to get back into employment. This is something the Jobcentres should be doing a lot better than they are currently. Indirectly, the Ian Crewe example illustrates the issue – larger companies avoid the Jobcentres, finding it quicker and easier to recruit elsewhere, while smaller companies do not have the capacity to try and personalise their relationship with their Jobcentre.

This feeds into the challenge of getting people with health conditions – who could and want to work – off benefits and into employment. Jobcentres should be natural places where this cohort should be noticed and paid attention to. Instead, the system is so overworked and dysfunctional that people with health conditions get lost in it. If Jobcentres ran better, more people with long-term sickness could find meaningful employment.

Thankfully, even in the current conditions, there are scores of great businesses doing amazing work in this area. More prime examples follow.

22. HM Government, ‘Get Britain Working White Paper’, November 2024 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/get-britain-working-white-paper/get-britain-working-white-paper>)

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

Greene King – flexible working offers great opportunities

Supported Internships is a brilliant training and recruitment programme run by Greene King in association with Landmarks Specialist College (an independent college for young adults aged 16-25 with learning difficulties and disabilities) and Mencap (a charity in the UK that supports people with learning disabilities).

“From our initial pilot, we achieved 100% recruitment success, with all eight learners securing a job,” said Robert, who runs the programme for Greene King. “The following year, we partnered with Mencap, and for over four years have worked successfully with these two key partners.”

There is a support worker on site when the interns start work at Greene King, helping them

to adjust to working life. While the *Supported Internship* programme is currently active in different regions of the country – South Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire, London, and Northamptonshire – the company plans to expand the programme and form new partnerships.

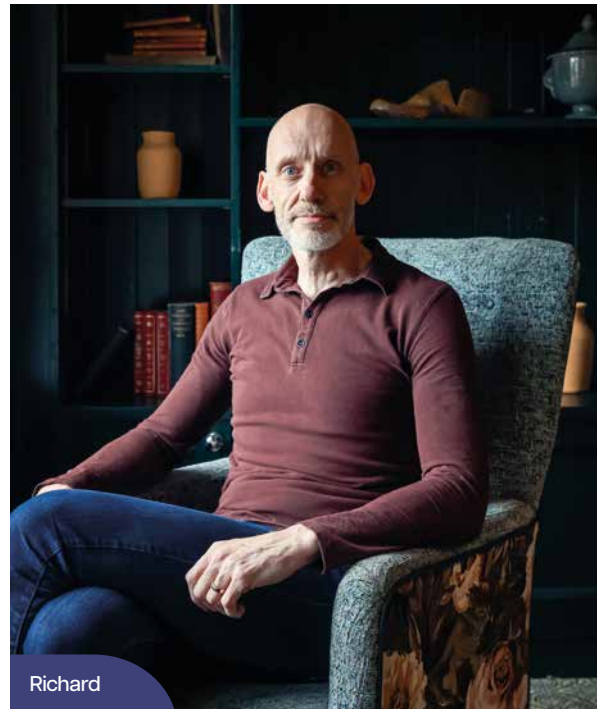
We visited the Red Lion, a Greene King pub on the outskirts of Todwick, a South Yorkshire village near Sheffield. There, we met Olivia, who joined the pub through the *Supported Internships* programme almost a year ago.

“I take orders on the iPad, serve food and drinks and, in the afternoons, I load and unload the dishwasher,” Olivia explained. Craig, the manager of the Red Lion, shared his perspective on Olivia’s experience working in the pub.





Craig



Richard

“To begin with Olivia came with a support worker from the college. During that initial period, we supported her as she learned the various skills needed for the job. The change in Olivia, from day one, coming in quite apprehensive to how she is now is remarkable. She knows every skill required for the job and uses her own initiative. It has been a significant journey from where she started.”

Olivia’s mother, Heather, commented on the impact of her work at the Red Lion.

“The improvement in her confidence and communication skills has been brilliant. She feels

valued and is really proud of herself, which is great. Everyone at the pub has been amazing with her and very supportive, and she loves coming to work, which is wonderful to see.”

Programmes like *Supported Internships* play an important role, and it is great to see a nationwide business taking the initiative in this area. Having a job can provide a significant boost to a person’s self-esteem and confidence, especially for those who might face challenges in finding work. Many people may only be able to work part-time, which is beneficial as it allows them to gain valuable experience and self-worth.



Olivia and her mum, with Craig



Lynas Foodservice – a business in Northern Ireland taking mental health seriously





Nick Tyrone and Matthew Elliott at Lynas Foodservice

A family business that stretches across 74 years and three generations, Lynas Foodservice employs around 700 people, providing over 5,000 different food products to over 5,000 customers across Northern Ireland, Ireland and Scotland. Their head office is located just outside Coleraine, a lovely town near the northern coast of Northern Ireland. It is near Giant's Causeway and has a host of world class golf courses. Lynas Foodservice also takes the mental health of their employees very seriously, putting time and effort into holding onto staff by investing time and money into pastoral care.

Ben is the Head of Provision of Pastoral Care for Lynas employees. "We went through Covid and I knew Ben and he'd been doing different stuff in this area," said Andrew Lynas, the grandson of the company's founder and current CEO. "And I was like, 'Look, Ben, I think we need to get better at counselling.' I wanted to make how we deal with the employees' mental health more prescriptive and proper. So, I asked Ben if he could counsel those within our organisation who need it and we'll pay. Twelve and a half per cent of our net profits as a business go to our charitable trust every single year. We pay for Ben and Dave (who works with Ben on the counselling) out of the charitable trust for the business."



Andrew Lynas



Part of the impetus for initially providing the counselling came from Andrew's Christian faith and his desire to help others. But he quickly realised the value of providing the counselling to the business as a whole, beyond just the community value of the idea.

confidential, so the guys and gals can talk to Ben about absolutely anything – and none of it gets back to me or any other senior staff. The point is for people to have a place to turn to when they are having problems and be able to know that only Ben and Dave are in on that.”

“We just want the workers to know that we care about them, and that we know HR can't cover all of this, and in fact, we want a real clear line,” Andrew continued. “We wanted everything to be

If we want more people with mental health issues to remain in work or indeed, to find work in the first place, businesses taking mental health challenges much more





seriously will be key. Seeing a business like Lynas Foodservices tackling this the way they do, with a confidential service for all their employees to utilise when needed, is a great example of best practice in this area.

“I think business in a wider sense has to accept some of the burden of this and go ‘How do we help our employees with this stuff?’ Rather than always thinking the state should do it. We can’t rely on the state for everything and then complain about state overreach,” Andrew surmised.

Lynas Foodservice also helps tackle deprivation and help people who might otherwise be on benefits into work through working with other charities in the local area. “As a charity, our primary thing is tackling poverty and social need,” said Ricky, who runs a charity called Vineyard Compassion. “We do that through three main strands. One is provision of crisis need, whether that’s food, fuel, clothes, those

sort of basic practicalities. Housing as well. The second strand is empowerment, where we tackle the crisis issue, but we also deal with the underlying root issue, training and empowering people with either skills or life skills to be able to break that cycle of poverty. And the third step is that journey towards employment and purpose. One of the projects that we run is called *The Link*, and it’s really a vehicle that helps men who are unemployed for various reasons but helps them on that journey towards employment and purpose.”

As Andrew Lynas said to us, relying on the state to fix all the problems of society is not a good idea. Businesses can do so much on their own to help people who want to work to do so, either through their hiring programme or in helping in the community. And by actively supporting their employees’ mental health, they can aid in keeping people who might otherwise fall out of the workforce and onto benefits to stay employed.

Pollen Careers –

A fairer pathway to employment sheds light on mental health issues

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Chapter Two
The long-term sick

Sophie O'Brien set up Pollen Careers in 2023 to try and help break down the many barriers that people face when looking for an entry-level job.

"I had a 14-year career in media before I set up a business," Sophie told us. "Then, in 2022, I was in a position where I was looking for a job myself. And it's brutal out there. It was a really, really horrific experience. Being so experienced, I was like, 'watch out world. Here I come. Who's going to snap me up first?' But the reality was very different. Most of the time you're ghosted or rejected without reason. Recruitment has just become so cold, so inhuman. And that experience gave me the motivation to go and fix these problems, especially for young people, who typically don't have any experience at all. Who perhaps don't have the financial or emotional support at home that I was fortunate enough to have. And who are also in groups of people who are still marginalised in the recruitment process despite having an amazing academic record or doing all of the things that our education system is expecting of them."

The idea behind Pollen Careers is potentially revolutionary – a move away from CV-based hiring towards using a combination of hands-on recruitment and technology, to better match employers and potential employees. It works to make the choices better for everyone, with people finding a job they are happy with (and then staying with), while organisations can find the people ideally suited to work for them.

"The first thing that I did when I set up the business was community building. Just trying to help people however I could, trying to understand the issues along the way," Sophie told us. "But it had been a long time since I had actually gone out and looked for employment for the first time, and what became apparent very quickly is that everything that you see in the media and from government is all focused around skills – the idea that there are all these skills shortages. So, at that point, I thought that the business I might be setting up was maybe an employability scheme, helping people get access to the skills that they need and plugging these skills shortages."

"What became apparent was that there was a huge group of very, very skilled people who have tonnes of potential, yet who are locked out of our employment system because maybe they don't have experience. However, there are other factors at play. The more amazing people that I met, the more that I realised that they don't need more skills, they just need access and equal opportunities."

Holly, who works for Sophie finding new recruits, gave us a stark indication of the state of the job market for young people – and the toll that often takes on their mental health.

"It's really hard out there. And it's almost become the norm that everybody has mental health issues because of it. We talk to young people and they feel very low – for example, when I was applying for jobs, I came to such a low place myself. You're sat in your dressing gown, or you're sat in your pyjamas, and

just applying for jobs over and over again. You're thinking, what's wrong with me? I'm the problem. I don't know what I'm doing wrong. And suddenly, you get to an application looked at and, it's like 'please record a video of yourself'. And you're like, I'm not going to record a video of myself! I'm sat here and I've probably just finished crying my eyes out. I'm not going to just start filming myself."

When one looks at the outbreak of mental health issues amongst young people – and particularly that cohort often checking out of the jobs market due to those issues – one has to look at this problem in depth. If we're making it so difficult for young people to get into the workforce that we've unconsciously made signing off on benefits a much, much easier choice, is it any wonder that many people take that route?

We met with Awais, one of the young people who had found a job with the advertising company, Mobsta, through Pollen Careers. He told us his story.

"I think after a while, all the rejection from getting rejected from jobs does take a toll on you, especially if you are from maybe a Caribbean background or a Middle Eastern or an Asian background where families expect you, if you do well in your studies, to basically pick up a job, straight away. Questions are asked. 'Why haven't you found something yet? What's going on? Is it a you problem? Is it a something else problem?' You know, there was always questions around that for me, every time."

"Have you guys ever watched that movie *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*?", Awais continued. "There's that scene where he gets the golden ticket and then there's just that shock on his face of joy. That's what getting the job at Mobsta was for me, it's the golden ticket. I think just to be able to be in a welcoming environment where

there is that feeling of being able to, you know, not be afraid of expressing myself, has been so important. Especially if you come from an immigrant background, just being able to just be welcomed in and having that trust between myself and my employers, even when I make mistakes or ask silly questions when I'm learning new stuff. It's just a really relieving process and I'm so glad that I am with Mobsta and personally, I wouldn't change that for the world."

Sophie gave us a neat summary of the Pollen Careers process and why it works.

"What's happening is that you've got people applying for hundreds of jobs, like hundreds of jobs, and this is creating problems on the employer side because they can't possibly sift through thousands of applications for one position. So, what they'll probably do is just choose the top of the pile – just pick the first 50 that apply and look at those applications. They can't, they don't have time to sift through the other 900 or so applications. But there's no evidence in that pool of the first 50 that they'd be compatible with your organisation or have the right skills that you need. What we're doing is avoiding all that time suck of sifting through and doing loads of interviews to try and get narrowed down to the right person and saying, well, we've already gone through a process. We've already assessed that they would be compatible, both from a skills perspective and a behavioural perspective, so that you can just focus on completing the process your side."

Using technology better to ensure that people are better able to get a job – and not suffer from the mental health issues that come with constant rejection – is vital. In the next section, we will examine further applications of technology in ensuring that anyone who wants to work is able to do so.

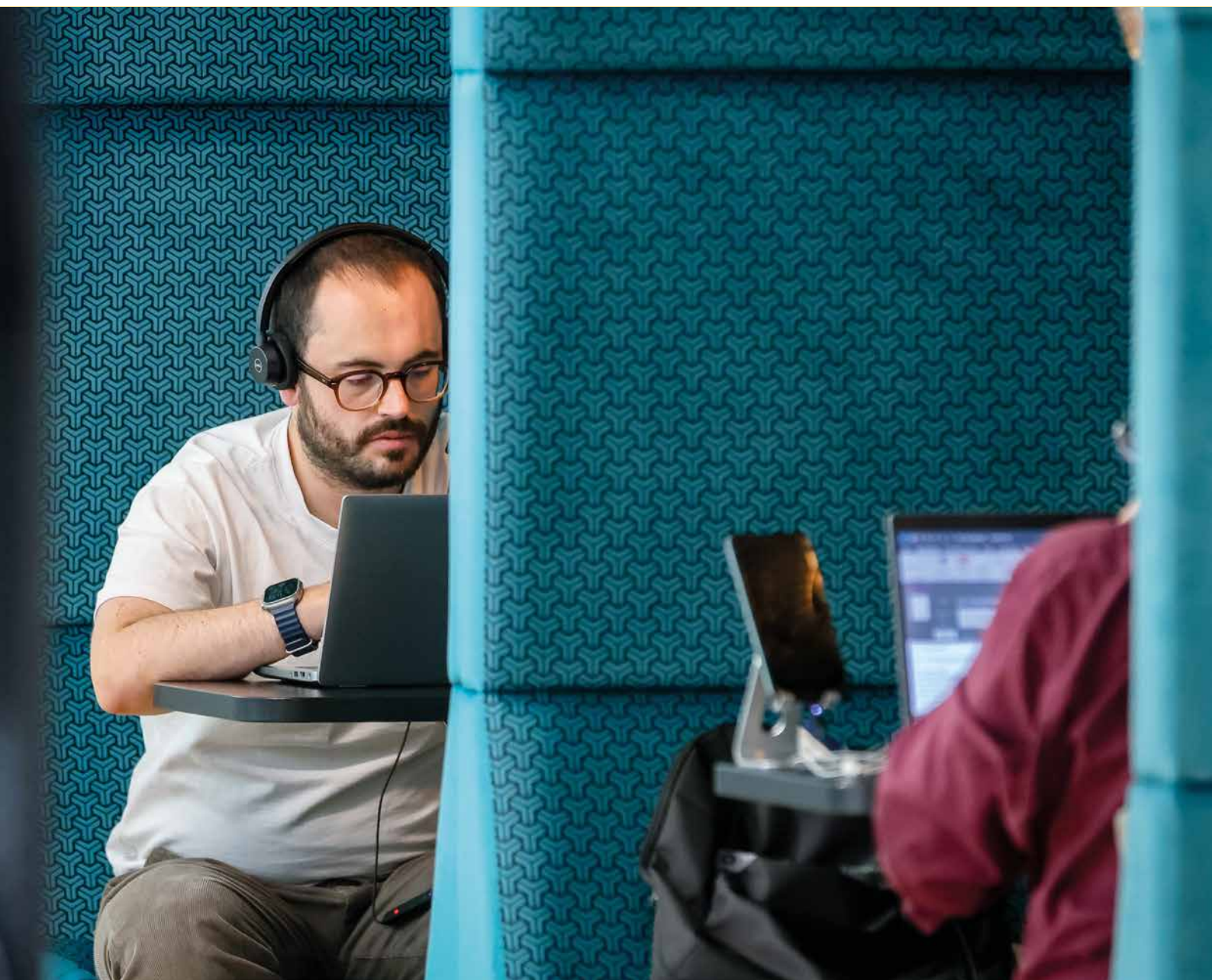


Pollen Careers team with Nick Tyrone

EdCortex —

how cognitive neuroscience could play a positive role in the future of hiring

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One of the crucial challenges in trying to create neuro-inclusive hiring and training programmes is that a high percentage of people with neurodivergent conditions are undiagnosed. Even if they are aware of their neurodivergence, many people often choose to not declare their condition to potential or current employers for fear of raising concerns, scared that there is a negative connotation around neurodivergence which would lead to them either not being hired or sacked.

This is a huge issue and will only increase with time. Around 50 per cent of the individuals with an Autism Spectrum Disorder and around 90 per cent of individuals with ADHD (Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) remain undiagnosed.²⁶ Additionally, a 2024 UK study found that 70 per cent of neurodivergent employees do not disclose their diagnosis at work, often due to fear of stigma, limiting their ability to access support.²⁷ This inevitably means that even if a company has no policies encouraging recruitment of neurodiverse employees, it is very likely that their workforce already includes them anyhow.

If there are no neuro-aware policies within the company, unidentified neuro-divergent employees are more likely to become isolated, lose confidence, or be labelled as incompetent, all leading to underperformance and eventually, that employee leaving or having their employment terminated (and very possibly ending up on long-term sickness benefit as a result). A neuro-aware workforce would transform the current situation into a positive one for both employees and the company. Again, with awareness of neurodivergence on the rise, this will only become more critical in future.

EdCortex, a member of the UNESCO Global Education Coalition, is a provider of a personalised

learning platform that uses insights from cognitive science and behavioural economics to adapt training content to each learner. By analysing individual data – such as learning behaviours, cognitive profiles, and background factors – the system applies evidence-based guidelines and nudges to recommend the most effective sequence and format for the training material. This adaptive approach ensures learners receive content in a way that matches how they learn best, improving engagement, comprehension, and retention.

EdCortex's Recommender Engine, providing personalisation services to existing learning platforms, uses machine learning to automate this process, enabling organisations to deliver more efficient and impactful training experiences tailored to each user.

Given certain employees might be diagnosed and self-identify as neurodivergent, and others might be undiagnosed or prefer not to disclose their neuro-psychological disorder, EdCortex's solution works discreetly. As employee privacy remains their topmost priority, the system keeps confidential any neurodiversity identified, unless the employee requests them to share it with their employer.

Neuroscience-driven solutions like EdCortex will hopefully be one of the major ways to help people struggling with their job search to find permanent, meaningful employment. Using cognitive modelling to identify neurodivergence and tailor training to meet individual needs, all while maintaining employee privacy, seems like the outline of best practice in this important area. The more we can make the world of work neurodivergence-friendly, the more we can get people currently on benefits into a rewarding career.

26. **ADHD UK, ADHD Diagnosis Rate in the UK** (<https://adhduk.co.uk/adhd-diagnosis-rate-uk>) Accessed 11 May, 2025

27. **CIPD, Good Work Index 2024** (<https://www.cipd.org/globalassets/media/knowledge/knowledge-hub/reports/2024-pdfs/8625-good-work-index-2024-survey-report-1-web.pdf>) Accessed 20 May, 2025

Sir Charlie Mayfield's review – why the Danes might have the answer

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Chapter Two
The long-term sick

The Department for Work and Pensions is working with the Department of Business and Trade to support an independent review, looking at, firstly, what more employers can do to tackle economic inactivity due to ill-health and disability, and secondly, what the government would need to do to encourage and support people living with ill-health and disabilities in work. It is being led by Sir Charlie Mayfield, former chairman of the John Lewis Partnership.

One of Sir Charlie's ideas is to see what can be learnt from how Denmark gets people on long-term sickness benefits into work. Denmark has succeeded in having 75 per cent of people with work-limiting conditions in employment, compared with just 47 per cent in the UK²⁸ – utilising a system called 'Flex Security'.

"The concept of Flex Security is that in Denmark, it is actually relatively easy to hire and to fire people. I would say easier than it is in the UK," said Sir Charlie to the BBC in May 2025. "However, there is also then a safety net, which is more generously available to the people who lose their jobs, basically paying them up to 90 per cent of their wages for two years, if they

lose their jobs and they're unemployed. But then it gets tougher again, because if you then get to the end of that two-year period, actually the provision at that point is pretty tight, and it's means tested. So, unless you really have very, very, very little money, you don't get any further support from the state. And what's interesting about that is it creates an incentive for the individual who's lost their job to find another one and to use that two-year period to do so as quickly as they can."

The essence of the Danish system is that it provides greater incentives and support for people on sickness benefits to get back into work than we have in the UK currently – whilst also pushing people who can work to do so.

Sir Charlie Mayfield's independent review recommendations and details will report to government near the end of 2025. We anticipate it coming up with great ideas for how to employ more people with long-term sickness issues – with some ideas coming from abroad to help us understand how this issue has been successfully ameliorated elsewhere.

"The essence of the Danish system is that it provides greater incentives and support for people on sickness benefits to get back into work than we have in the UK currently – whilst also pushing people who can work to do so."





Paul and Michelle

Shaw Trust – supporting people with mental health needs back into employment

A large charity that operates across the country, employing just under 3,000 people, Shaw Trust offers a form of support called *Individual Placement and Support* (IPS). Often commissioned by local authorities or the NHS, IPS has enabled Shaw Trust to help over 19,000 people across the UK over the last two years to either find a job or to stay in work. IPS is special because it provides support to people who are employed but having mental health issues – enabling them to get the help they need so that they can remain in work, as well as helping people with a variety of mental health issues get a job.

“IPS is evidence based,” said Anthony Dandrea, Head of Operational Excellence and Implementation, who is supporting the roll out of the trust’s newest IPS programme, *Connect to Work*, from Shaw Trust’s Shepherd’s Bush hub. “If you just follow the model to the T, people get into jobs, and they get into jobs at these percentages, and then they stay

in the jobs at these percentages: 40 per cent of people get into work, 70 per cent stay past 13 weeks, and 60 per cent stay there past 26 weeks.”

“When I started in IPS, I didn’t believe it at first,” Anthony continued. “But after a year I discovered that not only can you make those numbers, you can exceed them. You just have to stay faithful to the model. If you follow the road map, you’ll get to the destination. And the destination is a lot more people in work than a traditional programme, and a lot more people staying in those jobs.”

The essence of IPS is to support the client (the jobseeker or the person having mental health conditions that are affecting their work) with regular visits, as well as providing them with an employment specialist who both supports them in their mental health journey while also trying to find them suitable work (if they are unemployed).

New clients can come to Shaw Trust themselves, but the most common routes are through the local Jobcentre or via referral from the NHS, when someone is looking for mental health support.

We visited the trust's Kent office, located in Gillingham, where we spoke to Paul Bastin, the IPS team leader there, Roseanne, one of the Senior Employment Specialists, and Michelle, a client. Michelle is a care worker who has struggled with mental health issues over the last few years. When asked about what IPS had done for her, Michelle was effusive.

"Honestly, these two are gold dust (Paul and Roseanne). Roseanne has been my rock. And it's almost like, if I'm in crisis now, she's actually a part of my lifeline. She's one of the people I call when I'm struggling. I can be in tears down the phone and Roseanne doesn't even have to say anything sometimes, she's just there for me. Other times, she goes, 'What's wrong? How can I help?' She's not judging me."

"I can't wait for the day that I can call Roseanne up and tell her 'I've got a job'. Can't wait for that day."

In the Shepherd's Bush community hub, we spoke to Amir Malik, one of the team leaders for the West London Works team. We asked him what he thought made IPS so special.

"It's an outreach programme. It's very much about meeting participants, local to the area. We don't meet them in the office here – we

go somewhere they find comfortable. The two key things are that it's client-led and it's a rapid response programme. And what we mean by that is, we introduce them to employers within the first 30 days of entering the programme. Whereas with other programmes, it can take a couple of months, depending on the mindset approach."

"It's very much boots on the ground. This is where collaboration is key. We work with a lot of local service providers, within our boroughs. We particularly work with primary care services. We are especially looking for people in work who are struggling with mental health issues, or people out of work who are saying to their health care provider, 'I really want to work, but this is what's stopping me'. We want to help whoever wants to work to work."



Anthony



Principles identified in the long-term sick

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Chapter Two
The long-term sick

1. A lot of people who are currently on long-term sickness benefit would prefer to work – we need to make it easier for them to do so

There has been a huge increase in people in the UK being economically inactive due to long-term sickness since the Covid pandemic. The numbers spiked during the crisis and never returned to where they had been before. While there is some rise in every category, 'Depression, bad nerves or anxiety' has seen the largest increase by far, going up by almost 50 per cent when compared to pre-Covid levels. This is not only unsustainable from a government spending perspective, given the overwhelming majority of these economically inactive people will be on benefits (and often a high level of benefits), it almost certainly isn't the best thing for those involved. People who want to work should be supported into employment. We need to make it easier for people with mental health issues to be in work, whenever that is possible. There are many businesses profiled in this chapter that are doing their share – we need to encourage more companies to do more in this area.

2. There are better ways to make it easier for the private sector to hire people on long-term sickness benefit

What we discovered over the course of our research is that Jobcentres are a great resource for finding hidden away talent – but only if organisations are willing to be very proactive in the way that they deal with them. Ian Crewe in Sheffield is a great example of how to make a Jobcentre work for your company – and in fact, there are many examples littered throughout this report. The charity Barnardo's uses Jobcentres to find people to enter their programmes for Amazon and IKEA – but again, only by being very upfront and demanding with the centres about their requirements.²⁹

We believe this level of proactive behaviour should not be required of organisations looking to hire through a Jobcentre. It should be much easier than that – and has to be, if we want to make creating two million jobs a reality. The fault is not with the staff, particularly the work coaches, at the Jobcentres. It is systematic.

Some steps in the right direction are described in the Get Britain Working white paper – decentralising the Jobcentre mission and making it more responsive to local needs, bringing together Jobcentre Plus and the National Careers Service, and putting an emphasis on engaging with employers' needs. We hope that will be a good start.

²⁹. For more on the Barnardo's programme, see Chapter Three 'Employing Young People'.



3. We need new and novel ways of hiring people

Pollen Careers is a great example of how we need to engage in fresh ways of finding talent, particularly amongst both young people and those with mental health issues or neurodivergence. Moving away from a CV-based model of recruitment, as Pollen does, is one idea. The Jobs Foundation will be active in searching for others, and a big part of this equation is using the resources at hand to better connect employers with the right people to fill their vacancies, and for people to land that job which is just right for them.

“There has been a huge increase in people in the UK being economically inactive due to long-term sickness since the Covid pandemic. The numbers spiked during the crisis and never returned to where they had been before. While there is some rise in every category, ‘Depression, bad nerves or anxiety’ has seen the largest increase by far, going up by almost 50 per cent when compared to pre-Covid levels.”

4. AI is – hopefully – a big part of the future of solving this problem

Technology is moving to a place where in the very near future, we should have AI applications which can make it easier to both hire and then efficiently train people with the most readily diagnosed neurodivergences and mental health issues. In terms of training people with a wide range of neurodivergent conditions, AI could be the key that unlocks employment for so many people currently unable to find employment.

We can't, of course, simply leave it to AI to solve all our problems in this area. Far and away, the long-term sick are the most difficult cohort to think about in terms of employment, compared to every other cohort covered by this report. Unemployment via long-term sickness is a problem that is politically contentious, rife with possible missteps, and difficult to fix. But it is crucial to get this right if we want to create two million jobs. We cannot simply turn away from the long-term sick and think that leaving them on benefits is the automatic solution (or even the most humane one). We must make as many people as possible economically active. This is for many reasons, but top of the list amongst them is to give people the freedom and dignity that can only come from meaningful employment.

It is also worth noting that AI could bring with it some downsides. We don't yet know how many human jobs will be replaced by robots in the future. That should obviously be set against any potential upside of new technologies.

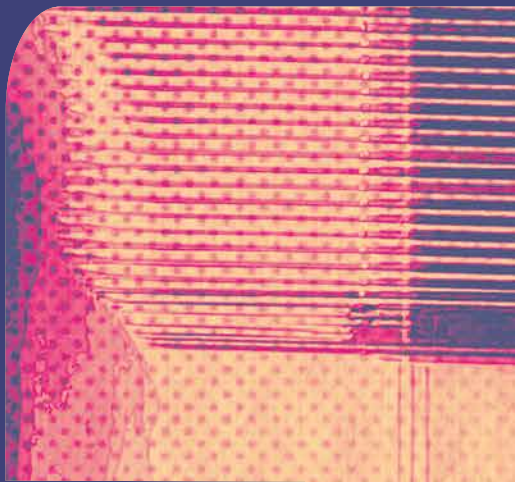
Chapter Three

Employing young people

“You have to be broad-minded about what experiences are available. Basically, you can’t look for something that isn’t there. I would say to other people my age: take up an unpaid internship. Just do whatever you need to do to get the experience you need in the field you want to work in. Don’t be picky. You have to start somewhere.”

Owen Ogbemudia

Associate Board Member, Future Youth Zone in Barking and Dagenham



Employing young people

- As of the end of Q1 2025, there were 3.77 million young people aged 16 to 24 in employment, 117,000 more than the previous year. The employment rate for young people was 51.1 per cent, up from 50.4 per cent the year before.³⁰ This means that 92,000 more young people gained employment over that period.³¹
- On the other hand, there were still 2.97 million young people aged 16 to 24 who were economically inactive as of the end of Q1 2025, a number which is clearly too high. Having almost three million young people across Britain being economically inactive is a worrying statistic. That is almost one in seven people in that age range.³²
- Young men are more likely than young women to be classified as Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), according to the latest ONS estimates. At the end of December 2024, an estimated 14 per cent of all male 16-24-year-olds were considered NEET, compared with 12 per cent of females.³³
- Analysis from the Learning and Work Institute and the King's Trust forecast that the economic cost of youth unemployment in terms of lost national output increased to £6.9 billion by the end of 2022. The report also suggested that the cost to the Treasury of lower tax revenues and higher benefits spending would amount to another £2.9 billion in 2025, while over the next seven years, young people themselves will miss out on £14.4 billion through lost earnings and lower employment prospects.³⁴
- The true cost of youth economic inactivity is in fact immeasurable because its effects echo across multiple generations. Each young person who gets lost in the shuffle and ends up on benefits could be starting a new chain of generational joblessness. While finding employment for everyone of working age is key, the young are particularly crucial given that their economic disadvantage could have multiple, unknowable effects, spread across the future.

30. House of Commons Library, *Youth unemployment statistics*, 10 June, 2025 (<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn05871/>)

31. *Ibid.*

32. BBC, 'Number of young people not in work or education hits 11-year high', 27 February, 2025 (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c5ymvnnr0deo>)

33. *Ibid.*

34. Local Government Association, 'Understanding the cost of economic inactivity for young people', 7 January, 2022 (<https://www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/understanding-cost-economic-inactivity-young-people>)



Josh, from the Jobs Project, Page 70



The Ascend Programme, Page 78



Celebration Day at Marks & Spencer, Page 76



Mia is second from the left

Overview

Finding young talent — the big issues around employing 16- to 25-year-olds

It's clear that getting young people into meaningful employment is of critical importance to any country, any society. If a person does not make their way into the world of work at a relatively young age, it will become increasingly difficult for them to ever find their way in. This transforms into a systemic problem for everyone when too many young people don't find their way into any sort of work – this is how we end up with 'generational joblessness', a situation in which children have parents, grandparents

and great-grandparents who have never been in work. While this is a terrible problem in so many respects – and we are facing the cruel results of it in Britain right now – the good news is that each and every new generation gives us a chance to correct the problem. If we employ this current group of 16 to 25-year-olds to their full capacity, the systemic problem vanishes. Easier said than done, of course, but the prize is there if we get this right.

Yet it is worth pointing out that the statistics on this, looked at via a long-term lens, are going the wrong way. Almost a million people aged 16 to 24 were classified as NEET at the end of 2024, representing 13 per cent of this cohort in Britain³⁵. The unemployment rate for this same age range is almost 15 per cent, up from 12 per cent at the end of 2023³⁶. To put that into easy-to-understand figures, that's over 100,000 more young people who are unemployed in one year, between the end of 2022 and 2023³⁷. Q1 2025 offers some hope, as the numbers improved – but there is no way to know whether this is simply a blip. It is safer to assume that the problem of youth unemployment and disengagement from the world of work and training is getting worse.

The good news is that there are businesses across the UK who understand the size and scale of this problem and have come up with interesting ways to try and tackle the issue. While every company needs to consider how they recruit young talent, since that is the only way companies stay relevant and build their workforce of the future, it is a relief that the private sector is doing so much to alleviate the problems as they exist on the ground.

There are a wide range of training and hiring programmes run by companies – large, medium and small ones. Many are not only putting a great deal of time and effort into their youth recruitment policies, they are also targeting the most deprived groups, making sure that cohort gets all the support they need. This is vital in terms of creating the volume of jobs Britain requires.

Youth unemployment is a national problem that affects every one of us. Thankfully, there are many businesses and other organisations working hard at the coalface of the issue, looking to make things better.



Andrew at Barnardo's in Swansea

35. ONS, LFS: Unemployment rate: UK: All: Aged 16-24: %: SA, 10 June, 2025 (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/unemployment/timeseries/mgwylms>)

36. House of Commons Library, Youth unemployment statistics, 10 June, 2025 (<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn05871/>)

37. Ibid.

The Barnardo's JOBS Project – employing disadvantaged kids in areas of deprivation

The Barnardo's programme, Ashton-under-Lyne. Angela is third from the left

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Early in 2025, the Jobs Foundation travelled to Swansea and Ashton-under-Lyne, looking at two of the training schemes run by the charity, Barnardo's. This programme is called the *JOBS Project*. The site in Wales is a way into employment at Amazon; whilst in a similar vein, the scheme run just outside Manchester is a route towards working at the local IKEA.

Although they lead to different employers, the programmes in each location operate along the same premise: That people from particularly difficult circumstances and backgrounds need some basic life and work skills before they can begin full-time employment. In cohorts of 10-12, young people come in every weekday for eight weeks, in order to learn skills like: the importance of arriving on time; how to work with others in a team; what attitudes are required when in employment; and how to navigate a job interview. Everyone who goes through the programme and stays with it until the end will be interviewed by the prospective employer, be it Amazon or IKEA.

It is important to note that those participating in the *JOBS Project* do not train for the jobs they will be doing at Amazon or IKEA. That will follow if they come through the programme successfully. Instead, they are simply taught the basics of how to be an employee. What so many companies have discovered is that this stage is

often incredibly important for young people to go through – particularly those who have had disruptive childhoods or come from households steeped in generational joblessness.

The Barnardo's programme is also trying to build up a trust in authority figures that has usually been missing in the lives of the young people joining the programme. Often, those providing the training for Barnardo's come from similar backgrounds to the kids they are helping, which helps bridge this gap.

"My first job was an apprenticeship," said Angela, one of those who run the programme in Ashton. "I was given a choice of a few things I could do - I chose the catering one because it was in my old school, so I was familiar with the building. And I'd been volunteering in the cooking classes in youth club, helping the teachers."

What she told us next was striking.

"That was the thing that changed my life. I loved it. I always loved learning, but I hated school because I had a rough time there. But that job really changed my life."

Angela has worked in many sectors during her career, but ultimately wanted to give people in the same situation as she had been the chance of that life-changing opportunity.



Nick Tyrone and Georgiana Bristol in Swansea

The programme in Ashton is run by Angela and Emma. When we visited the site – a modest low-rise building on the outskirts of town – Emma was in first, greeting the recruits as they entered. It was the last week of the programme, with everyone off to work at the IKEA nearby, starting the following Monday.

We interviewed several of those who had just been through the programme. One who particularly stood out was a young man named Josh. He has a young daughter (18-months-old at the time of the interview) and it was clear what getting off benefits and making a living meant to him.

“Obviously, I need to provide for her. I mean, she’s alright now, we’re on Universal Credit and that, but I don’t want her looking up to me and being like, oh: ‘My Dad’s on Universal Credit. He doesn’t do nothing for work.’ I want to give her a reason to work herself (when she’s old enough). You know what I mean? I’m just trying to do it right by her.”

This is particularly important to Josh because he grew up without a dad, his father having left the family when he was very young. Josh’s father hasn’t been a part of his life since.

“I never even met my dad, so that’s why it means a lot to me to do well for my daughter. Because I

know how it feels. I know how it feels to not have a dad and not have that father figure to look up to. That’s why I’m just going to give her everything.”

Josh has realised, through experience, that most people can’t have a proper life on benefits. And if you stay on them too long, you get stuck there.

“You can live off it, but, like, you can’t do the extra things you want to do. Such as going on holiday, doing all that sort of thing. You can’t do any of them. I want to get a car and do all this normal family stuff, like going on holiday with my daughter. I want to do all that.”

Andrew Hopkins, the man who was running the programme in Swansea when we visited, told us of the amazing transformation almost every young person who comes onto the Barnardo’s programme experiences during the eight-week course.

“It’s confidence that’s the main thing with people when they first come in. Lack of understanding, of questioning things around them. We get them to always question ‘why’, when it comes to difficulties they face in their lives. Then they can start to look for solutions. But after eight weeks here, the group is almost totally unrecognisable. The growth in that time is always astounding.”





A girl named Mia, who was 18 at the time of speaking to us, was made the unofficial voice for her cohort in Swansea. She's a care leaver – with a difficult history of bouncing between foster homes. When she first arrived, she was incredibly shy. We asked her about her first day on the programme.

"I remember just sitting down, and it was, well, it was awkward. On your first day, it's going to be awkward, I suppose, because we didn't know each other. And we were probably in here about 30 minutes, just on our phones, just in this awkward silence. Then Andrew came in and encouraged us to start to speak. And surprisingly, looking back, it did not take long before it felt like we were in a professional environment. In a good way, I mean."

Mia had experienced a lot of difficulty trying to get a job before joining the *JOBS Project*.

"I was unemployed for about four or five months. My CV wasn't that good. If I was to have got

interviewed, I wouldn't have been able to answer the questions as I could now."

We asked if it was the programme that had given her the confidence that improved her interview technique.

"100 per cent. I guess it's confidence, but also the practical knowledge of what the interviewer, or what the interviewer's question is all about."

The importance of programmes like the ones Barnardo's run for Amazon and IKEA can't be understated. If we want to get two million more people into work, it is exactly the kids that enter such a programme – who take a first big step that might end up changing their lives – who are the ones we need to ensure get into meaningful employment. In Swansea and Ashton-under-Lyne we saw more amazing examples of business as a societal good, creating the jobs that lift people out of poverty.



Marks & Start – the King’s Trust and one of Britain’s most trusted brands, building careers of the future together

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Chapter Three
Employing young people

Marks & Start, the scheme run for Marks & Spencer in conjunction with The King’s Trust, is one of the most impressive employability programmes the Jobs Foundation has seen in its travels across the country over the past year. The programme has been running for over 20 years and has taken thousands upon thousands of young people out of poverty and into a job.

We visited what is known as ‘Celebration Day’ – an event for those who have made it successfully through the programme (which in any cohort, will be around 90 per cent of those who walked in on day one, a phenomenal retention rate). It’s held at one of Marks & Spencer’s flagship locations, the Pantheon on Oxford Street, London. This celebration occurs at the end of an intensive four-week employability programme, where recruits are put into the job (supported all the way by ‘buddies’) to see how they get on.

It was an emotional event for a lot of the young people who had come through the past few weeks on the programme. It was clear that friendships had been made quickly, scattered across the room. One young woman was so overcome, she began crying as she got up to speak. A young man told of how he was “close to giving up” before he found his way onto the programme. He told the room about how a long period of rejection from every possible place of employment had left him wondering what life held for him. *Marks & Start* seems to have given him a new lease on his own future.



Yacoub is a young man who had struggled with unemployment for some time, as well as mental health issues, before finding himself on the *Marks & Start* programme. We asked him about his experience of the programme.

“I’ve enjoyed the programme. It’s been very educational for me. It’s been helping me build relationships with new people and encouraged my confidence to speak to new people and new customers. I did struggle with my anxiety a lot, so I think with this course it helped me a lot, to feel like myself and talk to people.”

Yacoub had gone through an immensely tough time a couple of years prior – he had fallen into a deep depression after a close friend his age had died. He said that for a while, he didn’t really enjoy anything. He told us that the programme had done wonders for his confidence and outlook. Participants receive substantial wrap-around care to build their confidence, protect their wellbeing and develop their skill set. This is something that makes *Marks & Start* so unique.

As it happens, Yacoub wasn’t going to be starting work at Marks & Spencer the following week like the friends he had made on the programme would be. He had gone for an interview at London Zoo and been hired. This is what is special about courses like *Marks & Start* – they don’t just feed the company that the programme is built to provide for, it helps the whole ecosystem of young people trying to find meaningful employment.

Tyrel is a great example of someone who joined the programme and not only stayed at Marks & Spencer but is still with the company now in an executive position. He’s an Academy Customer Assistant for the London region, helping co-ordinate between programmes to ensure everything runs smoothly. He’s been with M&S for

ten years now and acts as an ambassador for the scheme, helping to inspire the next generation of young participants.

He told us about his experience of finding and joining the programme.

“At the time I was doing nothing. I worked in the Co-op for a little while. The Jobcentre gave me a couple of opportunities. But *Marks & Start* really did change my life. I can’t imagine having not gone on the course.”

The programme that was coming to an end when we visited was run by Eleanor, who is an Academy Manager at Marks & Spencer, and Aioibh, who is a Youth Development Lead at the King’s Trust. The way it works is that the King’s Trust will have a group of young people (between 16 and 30) who they will select as being good candidates for *Marks & Start*.

The first day is an induction day. From there, the young people will either go straight onto the retail floor or into the hospitality section. *Marks & Start* allows candidates to thrive in the store setting – they don’t use an online assessment or a formal interview process, something which trips many young people up. Candidates just need to show drive, enthusiasm and a willingness to learn. If they do, then they’re likely to secure a space on the work experience programme.

During our research for the best practice report, we have seen many ways of recruiting young people, particularly from the most socio-economically deprived backgrounds. The important thing is that they understand that hiring people in the 16- to 25-year-old range often requires creative solutions. The key is that young people, particularly from socio-economically deprived backgrounds, are being hired – and most of them retained as colleagues.



Yacoub holds his certificate



Case study

The Ascend programme in Sheffield

Based in Sheffield, Ascend is a charity that dedicates itself to teaching those at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder the soft skills that are needed to be employable. It was created a few years ago by Ben Woollard, a businessman, charity director and community advocate, and Josh Cutting, a leading trainer in the area. They came together with the idea that many of the people who had been branded by the system as unemployable could not only find work, but become valued employees.

“Ben and I dreamed of Ascend together,” Josh told us. “We saw the need and have created this training scheme for young adults built around things like leadership, teamwork, communication.”

We asked Josh about the specifics of the programme.

“It works in a group setting. They work together in teams to develop those soft skills and get mentored as they go. We’re seeing that the high social engagement together is a real valuable piece. We always eat together. We have rhythms of things like learning to be thankful, learning to share when we have a need.”

Ascend has been running for over three years and has taken more than 200 people out of extreme poverty and into a job in Sheffield. Some of the people who enter the programme come from a background of generational joblessness, with parents and grandparents who did not work. Some are kids who simply fell through the cracks.

Ben is optimistic about the further good that the Ascend programme can do in Sheffield, continuing to take some of the trickiest-to-employ people in the city and proving that every individual, from whatever background, has intrinsic worth. They just need to be placed in the right set of circumstances. Ascend demonstrates that a job is the proven best route of escape for those trapped in poverty.

“We’re exploring how to rescue stranded young adults from unemployment,” Ben told us. “This rescue is a modern-day Dunkirk – not as urgent but just as important. The rescue needs three things: boats with brave and willing captains, i.e., businesses; a map, in other words, a peer group where the young adult finds belonging; and a motor, a mentor providing energy and focus over choppy waters.”

His last words to us were an entreaty for other businesses and charities to join his cause.

“Will you be part of the rescue?”





Josh



Ben Woollard and Lauren





Owen

Future Youth Zone in Barking and Dagenham – helping kids in poverty find a way forward

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Chapter Three
Employing young people

Future Youth Zone in Barking and Dagenham was opened in April 2019. It's a youth centre for anyone in the area aged eight to 19 years of age (or up to 25 if they have an additional need). Every session offers members more than 20 activities to enjoy, from boxing to beatboxing, cooking to climbing, and nail art to fine art. The Jobs Foundation was turned on to the great work of the Youth Zone by Barry Hearn, a sports promoter who grew up in Dagenham himself.

Since it opened its doors, the Youth Zone has had over 16,000 members, past and present, and had a staggering 170,000+ visits from young people in the area. The question from our perspective was: Has the Youth Zone helped young people in Dagenham, an area that is one of the most socio-economically deprived in South East England, find meaningful employment after they've spent time there?

We were taken on a tour of the Youth Zone by Dan, one of the centre's youth workers. The building has a rock-climbing area, a gym, a music studio, and a boxing gym, amongst many other amenities. There is also a canteen and a training kitchen where young people can learn to cook and then eat together. The young people who drop by can eat for £1 a day, and for six months of the year members can eat there for free. Food is donated from local shops.

"I'd look at a loaf of bread and be like 'ah, there's only five or six slices left and it's best before today. I'll probably grab something else'. But some of these kids, they're like 'oh, no, this is breakfast or something for me and my mum and my two siblings.' It's humbling," Dan said to us in the kitchen. "We have the young people who drop in come up here and cook with the youth workers as well. We then put all the tables together and have a massive feast with absolutely everyone involved."

The music room was full when we were taken on our tour, with several young people who are regulars coming in to play an instrument or lay down a track. The boxing room was empty – but has regulars who attend.

“We have a member of staff who is here Mondays, Fridays and Saturdays, a fully qualified boxing coach,” Dan said. “He’s done amazing work with this set of about 8 to 10 young people. They come every single session, I swear. He does anything conditioning related with them as well. We haven’t got a licence to do sparring yet, but that’s possibly something for the future.”

Out the back of the centre, there is a football pitch, where a group of lads were practising taking shots when we were there. Back inside, we met with Lilly, a local girl who is 14 years of age, who Dan told us has made great strides since first coming into the Youth Zone. We asked Lilly about what she thinks she has got out of coming to the Youth Zone.

“I’ve learned how to talk, to speak up for myself,” she said confidently.

While there, we interviewed Owen Ogbemudia, a 22-year-old man who grew up in Dagenham and





Dan with Nick Tyrone and Matthew Elliott in the kitchen



now works as a trainee solicitor at Paul Robinson Solicitors in the City. Owen feels that his time at the Future Youth Zone helped him get there.

"I'm one of the lucky ones in that I just happened to live a 45-second walk from here. This is where I spent most of my days after school and on the weekends," Owen told us during our visit. "I learned a lot of valuable skills here. Gavin [the CEO] and Gersh [who works at the facility] had me in the kitchen learning cooking skills, which turned out to be vital when I went off to uni. I didn't have the money to order take away every day, so the fact that I had learned how to cook meals, learn how to bake in the kitchen, turned out to be invaluable."

Owen also talked at length about how having the sanctuary of the Youth Zone broadened his horizons, making him feel like the idea of having a career in law was possible.

"I learned discipline here, as well as how to communicate with a broad range of people," Owen told us. "I got to meet Prince Harry and Meghan Markle at the Royal Albert Hall. I got to interview

Priti Patel myself, in our studio, just across the room from here. I got to meet very influential people that I would never have met if it wasn't for the Youth Zone. I was also taken on football tours in and around London, which helped me meet people from different backgrounds across the city."

Owen is now an associate trustee of the Youth Zone, doing volunteer work when he can. We asked him what advice he could give to others of his generation, the current crop of young people in Britain, around finding the right job. How can the new generation of young adults find satisfying employment that can change their lives?

"I've got two opinions on this," Owen answered. "The first is that a lot of young people are a bit entitled in terms of work. Where jobs are so limited, as they are at the moment, beggars can't be choosers. You should get your hands on everything and anything if it's in the area in which you want to work. Everything's a transferable skill nowadays, so just make sure you get the experience where you can. I think too many young people are scared to leave their comfort zone."

“But you have to step out of that comfort zone to get what you want,” Owen continued. “It’s very limiting if you only stay in your comfort zone every time. For instance, public speaking wasn’t something that I was naturally gifted at. But as I stepped out of my fear and just did it, I got progressively better at speaking in front of people. Now it’s something I do quite often and is obviously going to help me in terms of being a lawyer. But I had to take that first step out of my comfort zone, which was the hardest part.”

“My second opinion on this is that jobs are very limited, so you have to be broad-minded about what experiences are available. Basically, you can’t look for something that isn’t there. I would say to other people my age: take up an unpaid internship. Just do whatever you need to do to get the experience you need in the field you want to work in. Don’t be picky. You have to start somewhere.”

“The final thing I’d say on this is that I know a lot of younger people are getting into politics a bit more

and they’re doing it from an aggressive standpoint of hatred and aggression towards the government, instead of something where it should be love and peace. I think young people sometimes want to look for who to blame, instead of taking it on themselves to make their own lives better.”

Places like Future Youth Zone in Barking and Dagenham act as an oasis for kids living in socio-economic deprivation. They provide a place to go, a cheap or even free meal that is vital, as well as a group of people facing the same challenges to bond with. More than any of that, the Youth Zone and places like it provide skills training and an ability to look beyond the immediate and plan for a brighter future, hopefully for a rewarding career that can change their lives.

Barking and Dagenham is amongst the 25 most deprived areas in all of England.³⁸ Having places where young people can go to help them realise that a brighter future could be theirs is invaluable.



Owen and Matthew, playing pool

³⁸ Barking & Dagenham, ‘Deprivation in Barking and Dagenham’ (<https://www.lbbd.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/statistics-and-data/deprivation-barking-and-dagenham>)

Case study

Manchester Airports Group – College, Aerozones, and Skills Academies build for the future

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Manchester Airports Group (MAG) owns Manchester Airport, East Midlands Airport, and London Stansted. The company is committed to expanding opportunity and for its airports to serve as drivers of progress

for their local areas. To help them do this, all three MAG airports operate Aerozones (education centres for school children), and Skills Academies (helping adult jobseekers into work at the airport).





Stansted Airport College

London Stansted is special because, in addition to having a Skills Academy and Aerozone, it also has its own unique on-site further education establishment offering high-level vocational training to hundreds of young people – the Stansted Airport College. The college is very unusual in being the only further education college co-located at an airport in the UK. It is operated in partnership with Harlow College and specialises in providing pathways into the aviation sector, with courses in aeronautical engineering, aircraft maintenance, aviation operations, hospitality and events management.

This year, the college has 535 students and apprentices, with a remarkable 85 per cent going on to find employment at Stansted Airport upon completing their studies, and a further 10 per cent going into higher education. When the Jobs Foundation toured

the college, we saw firsthand how it achieves such impressive outcomes. We also saw how hard the college works to break down barriers within the aviation industry, for example, by helping girls and students from under-represented backgrounds get into careers like engineering, which tend to be male dominated.

“We’ve got 13 girls studying engineering, up from four last year,” Victoria, the college’s Head of Centre, said with pride.

For the second year MAG has also provided funding for 15 young people to complete the first ground-based modules of initial pilot training – the cost of which is usually prohibitive. Before we left, we heard that there are exciting plans to double the size of the college in the years ahead as part of Stansted’s new Sustainable Development Plan.

MAG Employment and Skills Academies

The Stansted, Manchester and East Midlands Airports, also each run an Employment and Skills Academy. These centres help adult jobseekers from the local area access employment opportunities at each MAG airport. The academies offer a free two-week course to help jobseekers understand the many different job opportunities at the airports; match their skills and experience to roles; build confidence through CV workshops and mock interviews; and successfully apply for jobs. The courses are delivered in partnership with local education providers – Nottingham College at East Midlands Airport, Harlow College at Stansted, and Trafford and Stockport College Group at Manchester Airport.

Throughout the programme the Academies offer free travel by public transport to the airports, so that learners can easily access the course, as well as providing additional support for jobseekers with language difficulties, physical and non-physical disabilities, and other challenges.

The Jobs Foundation visited the Stansted Skills Academy and heard how the academy works closely with Jobcentres in Essex and London to enrol jobseekers, several of whom we spoke to. All were enthusiastic about both the chance to learn interesting things in a challenging but supportive environment, and the notion that their effort is leading to something, namely a job.

“The difference between the students from day one to day 10 is extraordinary,” Jennie, the Senior Education and Employment Manager at Stansted, told us.

The Stansted Academy has recently expanded and has exciting plans to double the number of jobseekers it supports. Roughly 53 per cent of those who currently complete the course get jobs at the airport – testament to the targeted support provided.





MAG Aerozones

MAG also have Aerozones at each of their airports. These are education centres for school children, offering a first glimpse into life in the aviation sector and trying to enthuse young people about the opportunities the sector may one day offer them. The centres are free to visit for schools and colleges and offer a range of tailored interactive experiences and activities, linked to the curriculum. Manchester Airport opened its Aerozone in 2020; East Midlands relocated to a brand-new facility

in 2024; and the Aerozone at Stansted has just celebrated its 10-year anniversary and 25,000th visitor.

As one of the UK's largest businesses, and the UK's largest private investor in transport infrastructure outside London, MAG clearly recognise their responsibility to make sure that their airports operate sustainably and act as positive forces in their local communities.



20/20 Levels – a plan for Gen Z workers

The Jobs Foundation sat down with Duro Oye, CEO & Founder of 20/20 Levels, a charity based in London, to discuss their young people employability programme: I Am Change. 20/20 Levels was set up in 2012 to focus on young people and give them the soft skills and support they need while navigating the sometimes over-complicated world of finding a job.

“The age range and demographic that we work with, it’s young, black, racially underrepresented, and low social economic backgrounds,” Duro told us. “So, anyone that comes from a background where their household income is less than 20,000 per annum can access our programmes. It just so happens, because we are London-based – inner city London and surrounding counties – the majority of the young people that we support are black and racially underrepresented.”

20/20 Levels supports a lot of first-generation university graduates.

“It might come as a surprise that you’ve been to university, you come out with a first class or

a 2:1, but you still struggle to access meaningful employment,” Duro said. In 2024, the programme supported 350 young people with 63 alumni placed into employment with 58 employers.

“The programme that we take them on, teaching all the things that aren’t taught as part of the national curriculum, but really should be – if you think financial literacy, money management, digital skills, corporate social etiquette, mindfulness, breath work exercises to deal with social anxiety, are important,” Duro continued. “And we cover all that with employability skills. CV writing, cover letter writing, assessment day prep, interview day prep, all that good stuff. And at the end of each cohort, we host a jobs and careers fair.”

20/20 Levels places importance on working with businesses in industries that young people want to work in. Duro stressed this as a big reason their programme succeeds.

“We are largely funded by major corporates. They fund us, covering all of our operating costs, so that

we can help them find that top tier, diverse talent to bring into their businesses,” Duro said. “So, at the end of each cohort, at the job fair, they come with live vacancies. Most of them trust us so much that a lot of their vacancies that they bring to us are exclusive to our group.”

We spoke to Amex Global Business Travel, who have been working with 20/20 Levels for the past two years, taking around 10 of 20/20’s candidates into their business each year.

“The relationship we have with 20/20 Levels is initially a three-year contract. We’re in the last year of that now, but we’ll obviously renew that for a number of years again, because there’s a real belief in the partnership,” said John Lyons, the Vice President of the Global Client Group International at American Express Global Business Travel. “The kids that come in are fantastic. They’ve got an incredible mindset. They’ve got great get up and go. But they often come from a place where their work hours are theirs to choose; they hustle to get things done on their own terms. They come into a corporate environment and it’s very different. It’s a bit more restricted. You turn up at a certain time, you leave at a certain time; you’re expected to join calls and to show up in a certain way. That is often the challenge. But it’s one we’re finding the kids we bring in here can meet.”

We were interested to hear about 20/20 Levels’ management training. They go into companies and teach the managers how to manage Gen Z employees. Duro explained this to us.

“We get plugged into their line manager. We understand how long they’ve been in management for, whether they’ve managed Gen Z, some of the challenges that they face in managing Gen Z, and then we propose some of the challenges that they should pre-empt happening when it comes to dealing with Gen Z.”

“And those conversations are so crucial, because they’re able to be open and share with us things that they don’t know,” Duro continued. “Then we can help them decipher exactly why and also give them language that they can use that will be relevant to that young individual. And then the best parts are, when issues come up, they’re very comfortable coming and sharing those with us.”

20/20 Levels exists to bridge generational and socio-economic divides by equipping young people with the soft skills needed to thrive in professional environments. Through close partnerships with companies like Amex Global Business Travel, they not only open doors to industries and career opportunities for youth, but also provide businesses with access to a previously untapped pool of talented, driven individuals.



Employees at the American Express GBT office in London



Resurgo – the Spear Programme and transforming employment

Resurgo is a UK-based charity whose award-winning initiative, the *Spear Programme*, uses executive coaching techniques to get young people aged 16–24 facing serious barriers to employment ready for work or further education. The programme focuses primarily on the attitudinal and behavioural patterns that are holding young people back, while also equipping them with the hard skills they need to find a job. It also provides up to a year of support to ensure Spear trainees not only get into work, but thrive.

“We’ve been running as a charity for just over 20 years,” said Iona Ledwidge, Resurgo’s Chief Executive. “We focus on the barriers to employment, for young people from all sorts of different backgrounds. We speak to young people who’ve grown up in varying levels of poverty, maybe got

involved in crime, maybe just had a hard time at school. With the pandemic, there was a rise in mental health issues for young people in particular.”

Resurgo has worked with more than 11,000 young people across 17 Spear Centres in the UK, with 75 per cent of young people who complete the programme getting into work and remaining there a year later. The coaches are still in touch with 90 per cent of young people at the 12-month mark, demonstrating the accuracy and quality of their Employment, Education or Training reporting. Resurgo was the first employment initiative in the country to be evaluated by the UK Department for Work and Pensions’ (DWP) Data Lab and the *Spear Programme* is now one of the best-evidenced employment programmes in the UK.

“We see part of our role,” Iona continues, “as bringing the community and different parts of society together.”

Resurgo partners with businesses who are looking for young talent, and coordinates interviews and applications for ring-fenced roles. Once in work, the coaches continue to provide support tailored to the young people’s needs, to ensure they sustain their role and thrive.

We spoke to Lydia, the Employer Partnerships Manager at Resurgo. Lydia acts as the go-between for the businesses looking to employ people from the *Spear Programme*, and the young people on the programme itself.

“We make around 1,000 placements a year,” Lydia told us. “Only 175 come out of the partnerships – the rest are found by the young people themselves. We are really proud of that. It shows how much confidence and ability to job search they get from Spear.”

We asked Lydia what the young people on the programme feel most nervous about ahead of a job interview.

“It’s the lack of experience in doing interviews, definitely,” Lydia said. “For many of them, it will be their first ever job interview. That’s why we do mock interviews here, to get them ready for the real thing as much as possible.”





Coach Core – providing a leg up through sport

Coach Core is an award-winning education and employment charity that provides under-represented young people a chance to engage in a career pathway that not only changes their lives but also positively impacts the community around them. It started in 2012, as a programme for 20 young people in London – today they operate in 19 cities around the UK, work with over 250 employers from across the sport sector, and the organisation has taken on its 1,000th apprentice.

“Back in 2011, we were working every day with the most at risk young people trying to use

sports programmes to give them positive exit routes, but sadly accepting that – due to the short nature of these programmes versus the barriers they were facing – their life chances might be limited,” said Gary Laybourne, the CEO of Coach Core, about the organisation’s genesis. “And yet, at the same time, we would be bemoaning the fact that the transient nature of sport and coaching means it’s very hard to keep a consistent assistant coach workforce. That’s when the idea of using apprenticeships came up: they’re a longer-term intervention that’s got massive benefits for the employer too.”



Through the vehicle of apprenticeships, Coach Core has created a ‘triple threat’ model:

1. The young people gain meaningful qualifications and experience as they ‘earn while they learn’, but Coach Core also gets to shape and mould a programme of mentoring and support around them to keep them on the right path.
2. The employer gains new, diverse talent from the local community in which Coach Core are trying to effect the change they want to see. Those organisations also get to connect, collaborate and learn from other employers and build powerful networks that benefit all parties.
3. The community gains relatable young role models who are bringing much needed sport and physical activity to areas that typically have multiple barriers to access high quality, regular coaching in this way.

Coach Core’s 2024-27 strategy is about offering even more apprenticeships, getting more employers interested in working with them, while also continuing to provide support, advice and guidance to anyone who wants it.

We spoke to Gabrielle, someone who came through the Coach Core programme as an apprentice. We asked her how she first came across Coach Core.

“I was 18 and I had just left college,” Gabrielle told us. “I had been doing a Level Three Diploma in Sport. And I was at that stage of wondering whether I wanted to go to uni or do something else. I’ve always been into boxing and I was following England Boxing on social media. It was there that I saw that England Boxing was recruiting for apprentices. That was a Coach Core apprenticeship, as it turned out.”

We asked Gabrielle what she feels is so special about Coach Core.

“They were really supportive,” she said. “It was my first time in employment. I think going straight from a school or college setting into work can come with some challenges, but they were very supportive of that – they knew it was quite a big transition.”

“There were eight of us in the cohort and we all had a mentor,” Gabrielle continued. “I also think being on a programme where there were eight others doing the same thing, all of us a similar age, all similar experiences in the same situations so we could relate to each other, that was really helpful. Mostly because there were certain things that, it being our first employment, we might not have felt comfortable talking to our line manager about. Like, I remember one of my colleagues was worried about how you book your holiday. It’s just those little things that people don’t maybe realise are hard for young people if they’ve never been employed before.”

Three years later, Gabrielle now works for Coach Core as an intern.

“My apprenticeship ended with England Boxing and I was looking for the next step,” she told us. “Conveniently at the time, Coach Core were hiring for interns. I just applied and luckily got the job. The role that I do at the moment is around transitioning people through their apprenticeships, which basically means I support apprentices through their journey – from starting to when they graduate. I thought that that would be a role that I would enjoy because I’ve just finished an apprenticeship myself, so I’ll be able to relate to the young people and use my experience to support them.”



The WPBSA – a life after sport for snooker players

The World Professional Billiards and Snooker Association (WPBSA) is the World Governing Body of snooker. WPBSA Players is the organisation set up to act on behalf of professional snooker players, including those competing on the World Snooker Tour. We spoke to Neil Tomkins, Player Relations Manager for the WPBSA, about the challenges facing his members.

“We’ve got a current situation where three of the top five players in the world are in their 50th year; two have just turned 50, and one will be 50 at the end of the year. They’re three of the best players in the world. So, you’ve got all these players who are in their 20s looking at them going ‘I’ve got 30 years left of this’. Which is great, but these three are not normal. They are exceptional. They are the three greatest players ever to play. A lot of the players are going to find they eventually need to do something else with their lives. That career transition is certainly something that I would say as a sport we struggle with in terms of players accepting that it will come to an end at some point and that they will need to plan to do something then.”

Players get so caught up in making it to the top, that if their careers stall or come to an end, particularly when they are still young, they find that they haven’t done enough planning about what comes next. WPBSA works with other organisations to make sure

their young players are thinking about the road ahead.

“There’s another organisation we work with called Life After Professional Sport (LAPS),” Neil told us. “They do a piece to the guys qualifying on tour about thinking about life after professional sport. We tell the guys, look, if you never have to use the plan or implement the plan, then great, things have gone really well for you. But if things turn out a certain way and you’ve got education or training or something in the background that you’re doing, when this bit comes to an end, that bit takes over.”

We asked Neil about the response of their young members to this type of forward planning.

“Sometimes the feedback can be tricky,” he said. “One of the younger guys who sat in on a session, their dad joined, and their dad’s view was: ‘How dare you talk to my son about anything other than being successful?’ And I was like, we’re not talking about not being successful. We’re not saying this will apply. We’re saying that having a backup will potentially enhance your son’s performance. Basically, our message is, don’t put all your eggs in one basket, because then this has to work, which is just going to potentially create anxiety and stress that could be removed by having a backup.”



Owen with Matthew Elliott



Principles identified for employing young people

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1. Training for soft skills is essential

A big issue for employers these days is trying to discover new talent and finding the old ways of going about it are inadequate. Many businesses we have spoken to over the last 18 months have told us that discovering the right mix of skills and attitude amongst the 16 to 25-year-old age group can be tricky. Sometimes, candidates can perform poorly at the interview stage, only for the company to take a chance and find one of their best employees.

A lot of this comes down to ‘soft skills’: knowing how to create a CV that will stand out; understanding what is expected in an interview and how to respond to certain key questions; knowing how to dress for an interview. Some younger people, particularly from more deprived backgrounds, will lack these basic skills. The training programmes featured throughout this chapter – from huge ones that run across the country, like Barnardo’s programme for Amazon and IKEA, to small-but-vital charities, like the Ascend programme in Sheffield and the local SMEs they work with – these are great examples of organisations recognising the need to train for soft skills and then going ahead and actioning that on the ground.

2. A job is important for all age groups – but particularly for young people

Youth unemployment is the worst of all age groups from a societal perspective, given the way it echoes through the years to come. A person who can’t find a job by the time they reach 24 will very likely struggle throughout the rest of their working life. If a young person has fallen into the trap set for them by generational joblessness, then it will be even more difficult for them to pull themselves out of it later. Therefore, ensuring as many young people as possible get into meaningful employment is one of the most vital things for society to accomplish.



3. Businesses need to adjust to find the best young talent

It is getting more and more difficult as each year passes to recruit from the 16 to 25-year-old age bracket, for numerous reasons. Having a very 'online generation' to choose from comes with upsides – such as candidates having a huge number of skills which are timely – and downsides, such as many lacking the traditional interpersonal abilities that were expected of previous generations. Large companies in particular, since they require a huge, non-stop influx of young talent, need to constantly adjust over the next two decades, staying on top of the latest ways to hire, train and retain the best up and coming people.

4. Businesses play a crucial role in getting young people born into poverty a job that will transform their lives

In all sectors and all sizes, from SMEs to the largest corporations, businesses are the most important players in getting young people into work. What we've found in our research is that not only are companies leading the charge in terms of competing for the most obvious young talent, but they are also searching deep to hire the less obvious prospects. Programmes like the ones Barnardo's, The King's Trust and Marks & Spencer run for the bottom quintile of the socio-economic spectrum isn't simply a matter of public relations. They are about discovering talent in hard-to-find places. Long-term, that is something large organisations feel will pay off.

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Chapter Four

Unique groups

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“If someone had told me this when we first started, I would have told them to get their head examined. But we now have companies paying us to place ex-offenders in their organisations. It’s because they have seen how we can find them great people who will stay with them for the long-term.”

Steve Freer

Co-founder of Tempus Novo



The Facts

Getting specific cohorts into work

- This chapter looks at programmes and employers who hire ex-offenders, veterans and the homeless.
- In England and Wales, approximately 45,000 **ex-offenders** return to society each year. Around 17 per cent are unemployed after six months, a significant number when compared to general employment statistics.
- Between 23 and 31 per cent of prisoners who are released in the UK reoffend within two years. However, statistics also show increasing success in boosting employment for prison leavers, with more ex-offenders finding jobs within six months than ever before.³⁹
- There is a strong correlation between finding a job and not reoffending. In a large study carried out by the Ministry of Justice, it was found that those who were still unemployed six months after release were almost two-and-a-half times more likely to reoffend.⁴⁰
- Across the UK, 46 per cent of **veterans** said they were employed or self-employed, while 46 per cent said they were retired. Just over 2 per cent said they were not economically active because they were long-term sick or disabled. Just over one per cent said they were unemployed but seeking work.⁴¹
- The rate of self-employment among veterans is slightly higher than the general population.⁴²
- Veterans are a fascinating cohort because their needs are so niche. They tend to be highly skilled – but some can find adjustment to civilian life difficult for several reasons, which are explored in this chapter.
- In 2024, Shelter estimated that 354,000 people in England were experiencing **homelessness**, including those in temporary accommodation. This figure includes both those living on the streets (rough sleepers) and those in emergency or temporary accommodation.⁴³ Crisis estimates that around 12,300 people are sleeping rough in the UK, with another 12,000 sleeping in various places like sheds, bins, or cars.⁴⁴

39. HM Government, 'Thousands more ex-prisoners in work following major drive to boost employment', 24 May, 2023 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/thousands-more-ex-prisoners-in-work-following-major-drive-to-boost-employment>) Accessed 3 May, 2025

40. Ministry of Justice, 'Analysis of the impact of employment on re-offending following release from custody, using Propensity Score Matching', March, 2013 (<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7c4f9740f0b6321db3855b/impact-employment-reoffending.pdf>) Accessed 4 May, 2025

41. ONS, 'Veterans' Survey 2022, demographic overview and coverage analysis, UK: December 2023' 15 December, 2023 (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/armedforcescommunity/articles/veteranssurvey2022demographicoverviewandcoverageanalysisuk/december2023>) Accessed 6 May, 2025

42. There is a strong correlation between finding a job and not re-offending.

43. Big Issue, Homelessness facts and statistics: The numbers you need to know in 2025, 28 February, 2025 (<https://www.bigissue.com/news/housing/britains-homelessness-shame-cold-hard-facts>) Accessed 10 May, 2025

44. ONS, 'People experiencing homelessness, England and Wales: Census 2021', 6 December, 2023 (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/housing/articles/peopleexperiencinghomelessnessenglandandwales/census2021>) Accessed 12 May, 2025



Max Tobias from the Dusty Knuckle, Page 108



The Hair at the Academy crew, Page 118



Workers at The Dusty Knuckle



Employment challenges for particular sections of the population

The issues facing the different groups covered in this chapter – ex-offenders, veterans, the homeless – are very different. What unites them is that they each represent a cohort with its own set of issues around getting and keeping work. Employers are required to take a unique approach when dealing with each of these groups, one that differs from the other groups and, indeed, every other cohort covered by this report.

Only 31 per cent of ex-offenders are employed six months after their release.⁴⁵ There is regional disparity at work here too, with only 22 per cent of ex-offenders in the North East of England being employed six months after their release.⁴⁶

Veterans also face a unique set of challenges in adjusting to the civilian life. In particular, they have generally become used to very regimented and structured lives. Adjusting to a work situation that is more casual – particularly getting used to the

comparative lack of discipline of some co-workers – can make the transition painful for many. Some veterans find the challenge overwhelming and fall into depression or substance abuse.

Homelessness is one of the biggest barriers to getting a job. Even if you can manage to make yourself presentable enough for an interview, just the fact of being homeless – with no address, which is very difficult to hide – can be off-putting to potential employers.

People within each of the groups covered in this chapter face wildly different challenges in terms of finding and keeping meaningful employment. What unites them all is that employers need to adjust both their hiring and training techniques in order to discover these potentially great employees and get the best of out of them. In doing so, employers regularly discover they are making a great investment into the future of their business.

45. Gov.uk, 'Offender Employment Outcomes - Statistical Summary', updated 17 February, 2025 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-employment-outcomes-update-to-march-2024/offender-employment-outcomes-statistical-summary>) Accessed 12 May, 2025

46. Ibid.



Georgiana Bristol at the Dusty Knuckle

Unique groups: Ex-offenders

The Jobs Foundation webinar on getting ex-offenders into work

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Chapter Four
Unique groups: Ex-offenders

On March 25th 2025, the Jobs Foundation hosted a webinar on how best to get ex-offenders into meaningful employment. Entitled 'Building Bridges: Supporting Ex-Offenders in the Job Market', it brought together an expert panel on the subject: Steve Freer, co-founder of Tempus Novo, a charity which has been placing ex-offenders into jobs for over a decade; Darren Burns, Director of Diversity and Inclusion for the Timpson Group, possibly the most notable company in the UK employing ex-offenders at scale; and Colin Crooks MBE, a social enterprise entrepreneur who has employed hundreds of disadvantaged people over the years.

Darren started the conversation by mentioning that only around a third of the prison population

will be work-ready from their point of view. He also stressed that Timpson is a private business which needs to turn a profit. "We're not a soft touch. First and foremost, we are a commercial business, and without this being a kind of commercial arrangement for us which works, we wouldn't be able to sustain it."

Darren continued: "Prison leavers, people with convictions, they've got to come out, they've got to pull their weight, they've got to deliver first-class customer service. They've got to put money in our tills, and if that can't happen, despite us giving people chances to improve – including giving people support, guidance and help – ultimately, we will part company with those people."

Steve from Tempus Novo stressed that getting this work-ready third of the ex-prison population into work is vital for the country. “It’s costing the taxpayer £18.1 billion a year on reoffending alone. This is not a good business model. People going out and reoffending is not an acceptable state of affairs. We need to be looking at different options, and the best one by far is a job.”

“If we can put a thousand people per year into employment, where arguably half of them – at least – would be reoffending otherwise, the savings to the economy are staggering,” Steve continued. “It’s £51,000 to keep somebody in prison for 12 months. Then there’s the benefits, particularly the housing benefits. It’s a staggering, staggering cost to the taxpayer.”

Colin gave us his insights into the unique challenges of employing ex-offenders.

“My experience of employing ex-offenders as opposed to other people from disadvantaged backgrounds – say for long-term unemployment or drug addiction or something like that – is that the prison environment had institutionalised them.”

“We were taking on people who were serving in excess of five years, so they had been inside for a good chunk of time. Some of them had offended previously, so they had a cumulative amount of years in prison. To get them to trust or to really believe that this was different – an opportunity, as opposed to another place where they’ve got to go in order to game the system – that was the first hurdle.”

Colin noted the huge challenges that were particular to people trying to go on work release while still serving their sentence.

“They were going back to the cell after a very long day, then being strip-searched. Another problem was that they were undernourished. We were based in London and it was over an hour-and-a-half from the prison to where we were operating. So, they were being released at six o’clock in the morning, having been strip-searched, so that’s getting up at half past four, five o’clock, no breakfast.”

“They were excited it was out of the prison and that they had an opportunity. But there was a number of these issues around the institutionalisation. These were initially something we had to try and overcome with them, so we had breakfast ready for the prisoners when they came in. That sort of stuff really matters, getting the basic mechanics right.”

Steve from Tempus Novo came back in to agree with Colin on his point about the ex-offenders and people working while still in prison – which is a vital element of getting as many ex-offenders into a job as possible, given the work experience they can gain while still in prison may be invaluable. But he also pointed out the massive challenges the justice system faces right now.

“We know that the prisons are bursting at the seams at the moment. I heard last week that they may be putting people into police cells, something which hasn’t happened for 25 years to my knowledge. So, they’re not in a good place. And until people are serious about the level of funding and training and standards that are required across the board, you’re not going to see a lot of change, unfortunately. It’s not positive.”

Darren from Timpson, however, returned with an upbeat appraisal of where things are.

“I can honestly say it’s probably the best time now to be released from custody if you’re trying to find employment. With the inception of the Employment Advisory Board, the work that’s being done with the New Futures Network, people like Steve, people like Colin, there’s lots of opportunities out there now, so much so that we’ve made it quite difficult for ourselves. When I started my job in Timpson, it was like shooting fish in a barrel. I could pretty much go to any prison and have the pick of all the best candidates. Now when we turn up, often people have been made other offers by other employers. We find people who have been connected to people like Colin, people like Steve through Tempus Novo, so they’ve quite frankly got more opportunity now, which is bad for us – but it’s good for society overall.”



Steve and Val

Tempus Novo

— a unique yet straightforward approach to rehabilitation

The Tempus Novo team

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Steve Freer and Val Wawrosz were both prison guards for decades. That experience gave them unique insight into the issue of ex-offenders and in particular, ex-offenders finding a job. Too often, they saw people re-offending and returning to prison many times, because the opportunities to 'go straight' simply weren't there. 11 years ago, Steve and Val decided to do something about this problem, establishing Tempus Novo.

The Jobs Foundation visited their headquarters in Pudsey, a small town between Leeds and Bradford in West Yorkshire. It is here that Tempus Novo's small team, which ranges at any given time between 11 and 17 people, do incredible work.

"When we meet a new guy, we start off by saying 'I'm not from probation, I'm not from prison, I'm not from the police'. And then we explain what Tempus Novo is and how we can help that person," Val told us. "Because a lot of them will think coming in, 'How can this help me? What's the angle here?' We want to communicate that we're all really genuine about what we do. That we can help them if they are willing to help themselves."

The system that Tempus Novo operates on is relatively simple. They work within the prison system to find people they feel they can work with. The Tempus Novo team then interviews that person to make sure they are a fit, then they try and place him within one of the companies that they partner with.

"If someone had told me this when we first started, I would have told them to get their head examined. But we now have companies paying us to place ex-

offenders in their organisations. It's because they have seen how we can find them great people who will stay with them for the long-term," Steve said.

Once they have made a placement, Tempus Novo works with the employer, to provide any support they need; and the ex-offender, to ensure they stay on the right path. This support is offered in both directions for a year after the placement is made.

The benefits of the Tempus Novo method of rehabilitation are obvious to see. Out of the almost 1,300 ex-offenders the organisation has placed in employment over the 11 years they have existed, only 39 have gone on to reoffend. That's a recidivism rate of around three per cent. Compared to the national recidivism rate of 28 per cent, you can see how effective the model can be.⁴⁷

Of course, Tempus Novo works with the ex-offenders who are most willing to be reformed so, by nature, they will be in the top group of people available to be rehabilitated. Yet given the cost to the Treasury of recidivism, it would be worth the Ministry of Justice looking deeply at the Tempus Novo model.

"As an organisation, it costs us around £2,500 to £3,000 to get a person exit ready, to make sure he's job-ready," Steve told us. "We give a little bit of advice on interview, then take him for the interview, develop him in his job, support him in the culture of his employer. All that costs us between £2,500 and £3,000. Bear in mind, the alternative is for him to go back to prison and cost the Treasury £51,500. This should be a no-brainer."



47. Gov.uk, 'Criminal Justice System Statistics: Reoffending' (<https://data.justice.gov.uk/cjs-statistics/cjs-reoffending>) Accessed 14 May, 2025

Case study

The Dusty Knuckle bakery

Max Tobias, Rebecca Oliver and Daisy Terry started The Dusty Knuckle Bakery in 2014, inside a shipping container. Today, they operate at multiple sites in London, with over 120 employees across the company. But there is more to The Dusty Knuckle than simply another entrepreneurial project come good (although that in and of itself is never to be underestimated). It is also a social enterprise, a shining example of business as a societal good.

Many of the employees who keep The Dusty Knuckle's supply of delicious pastries and coffees running are ex-offenders or young people at risk of falling into a destructive lifestyle. Working with over 20 referral agencies across London, The Dusty Knuckle provides a wrap-around scheme to help ensure that these at-risk individuals are supported to turn their lives around through successful employment.

The scheme starts with an internship before employees are taken on as paid staff. Working 12 to 15 hours to start with, they build from there. It's a lifeline, a way for people from difficult backgrounds or who have made a wrong turn in their lives to get a new start. As well as providing paid work experience, The Dusty Knuckle gives those on its scheme a mentor to guide them, with all this taking place in an environment especially designed to help young people find the best of themselves among supportive professional peers.

The structure and routine of a happy workplace helps ensure that The Dusty Knuckle is successful at transitioning people away from undesirable lifestyles and towards happier futures built





Max Tobias with Nick and Georgiana at The Dusty Knuckle

around stable employment. In one example, Max highlighted to us how life-changing it can be for someone who was previously in prison to be greeted by over 600 happy customers every day.

Max also talked about the unique challenges that an enterprise like The Dusty Knuckle faces, managing employees from complex backgrounds. Without the support from relevant authorities that would make this a much simpler process, they are often taking on much of the risk

themselves. The company doesn't receive any support from the government that recognises the additional costs that come with providing such a beneficial scheme – paying the same business rates and VAT as competitor coffee shops and bakeries that have much lower costs.

The Dusty Knuckle bakery is a great example of how a business with a larger social purpose can still thrive as a business.



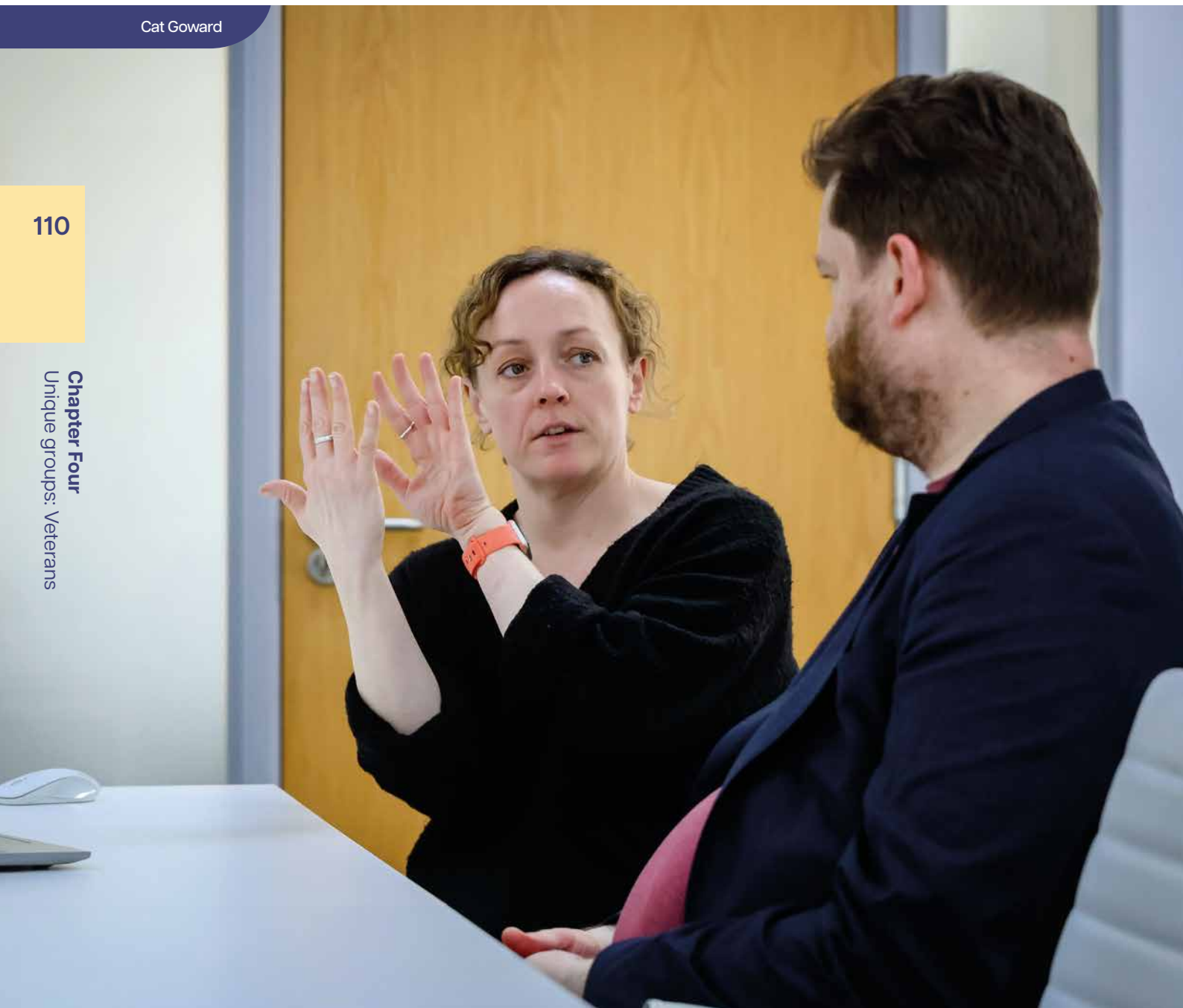
Unique groups: Veterans

Meganexus – the IT company helping veterans transition into civilian life

Cat Goward

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Unique groups: Veterans



The Career Transition Partnership (CTP) is a huge programme aimed at helping people coming out of the armed forces find meaningful employment in the civilian world. It's funded by the Ministry of Defence and then executed by Reed in Partnerships who, in turn, work with several other organisations to deliver the programme. This includes the Forces Employment Charity and Meganexus, the latter being the company that is delivering on the tech side of the programme.

We visited Meganexus at their headquarters in central London, just down the road from Euston station. There we spoke to Cat Goward, Business Development Manager at the company, responsible for working with AI for education and training. Cat demonstrated the application that will be used to aid veterans in navigating job interviews.

The platform is straightforward in many senses – but could also turn out to be transformational.

Veterans have a range of skills but will often not know how to translate those skills into civilian life. The AI adapts to the strengths and weaknesses of the interviewee, allowing them to learn from their mistakes and to play to their best sides during the interview process. A lot of people coming out of the armed forces are used to very formal communication with people in a position of authority. They can struggle, at least at first, with the more informal manner of non-military job interviews. This came up repeatedly when we spoke to ex-armed forces personnel during the course of the research. The AI software created by Meganexus for the CTP allows them to finesse their interview technique, pointing them in the right direction over time.

Having been put through the process itself was enlightening, as we discovered during our visit. As we found with the AI used in working with neurodivergence⁴⁸, so too it seemed that AI could be of help in finding veterans the right jobs.



⁴⁸ See Chapter Two for the long-term sick for more details.



Northumbrian Water – a guiding light for veterans

Providing water and waste water services for millions of people across the North East of England, as well as Essex and Suffolk, Northumbrian Water has over 3,000 employees. It's a company that works hard on recruiting veterans.

The Jobs Foundation met with Anthony Smith, Head of Cyber Security at the company. We

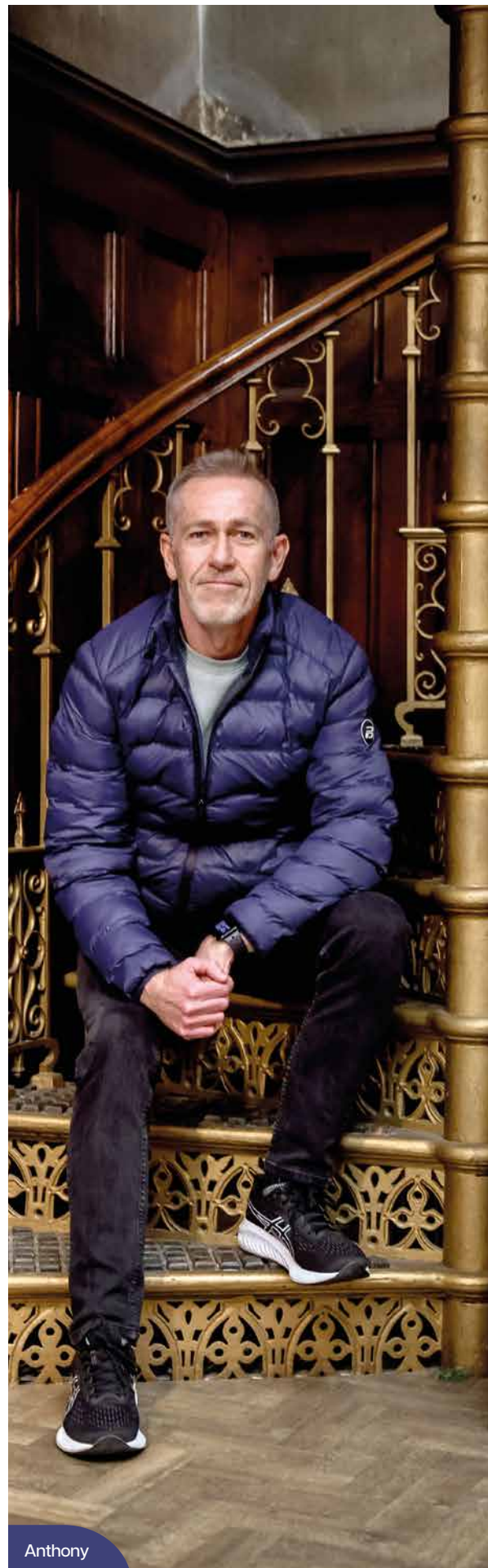
spoke with Anthony about many aspects of Northumbrian Water's work during our visit, but one was of specific interest – the organisation's approach to hiring veterans. The skills that some ex-armed forces personnel can bring to the area of cyber security, for example, are extremely valuable to a company like Northumbrian Water.

“I’m ex-military myself,” Anthony told us. “We’ve got quite a few ex-military in the business now. We have a group of us who get together once in a while, just for a bacon butty and a cuppa. The whole idea is when people come into the company from the forces, you know they’ve got a community around them and maybe it’s helping them if they’re struggling. It doesn’t happen in all cases, but sometimes people might struggle assimilating to civilian life. They need that support group around them – luckily, there’s loads of us now.”

The company has an initiative called *Joining Forces With Water*, which formalises the system of support Anthony described to us. Through what they call their ‘buddy system’, a veteran coming into the company gets paired with someone who is just ahead of them in understanding the challenges and rewards of transitioning from the armed forces into civilian life. The aim is to make that journey as smooth and supported as possible. The programme also offers things like paid leave for reservists, so that people who are still involved with the military part-time can meet their commitments.

Northumbrian Water also offers flexible working options, allowing veterans to ease into civilian life at a reasonable pace if they need to. Again, it’s in the company’s long-term interests to hold onto these employees, given the specialised knowledge they can bring to something like the cyber security of a vast water network.

“We’ve got everything here from paras (paratroopers) to quite high-ranking officers, and most of them have got very, very transferable skills,” Anthony continued. “Ultimately, we’re an engineering organisation. And with minimal training, some of these guys come in and hit the ground running. As ex-military, you’ve got the skillset. You know you can work with people, you can work alone, you’re resilient. There’s an awful lot that ex-military people can bring to the business. And I think we’re starting to realise that now we’re building up that community within the organisation. This is an area in which I feel Northumbrian Water is actually leading.”



Anthony



Veterans in Dorset becoming entrepreneurs

Paul

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Chapter Four
Unique groups: Veterans

The Dorset Armed Forces Community Business Support Network is an organisation that brings together veterans across the county who have decided to start their own businesses. It is supported by BCP Council (Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole) and aims to provide a chance to network with like-minded people in a safe environment while supporting economic growth and employment opportunities. It is both a support group and a business network, helping veteran entrepreneurs along their journey.

The organisation holds networking events every month. The Jobs Foundation attended one in Parkstone, a neighbourhood between Poole and Bournemouth. This is where Paul Buttolph runs his photography business, in a building called the Old Bakery.

Paul shared his story with a group of assembled Dorset veterans, each of whom has also started their own business.

"I was born in London in 1967," Paul told everyone in the Old Bakery. "Within six weeks of being born, social services said, no, we need to take that child

away and put him somewhere else, because 15-year-old girls who are single should not have babies. So, on the auspices of it would be best for me, I was taken away and put into care. I was fostered and then adopted. And for the next few years, I had what would be called a troubled childhood. I just sat in a corner being quiet most of the time. But I moved around quite a lot and had quite a lot of pairings. I spent quite a lot of time in the care of social services."

"Eventually, I was moved into a social services observation and assessment centre. I was moved in there because I got home from school one day as a nine-year-old and found that mum wasn't there. Mum wasn't there because she'd taken my baby sister and gone. She left me and my stepbrother with her boyfriend, who wanted nothing to do with me. Social services are on their way to collect you, he told me. You might want to go and pack some stuff."

"In 1985, I joined the Royal Air Force," Paul continued. "I had six weeks basic training at RAF Swinderby, back when it was still Swinderby. Six weeks training and I qualified with distinction as an assistant air traffic controller – then out into



the real RAF. I served all over the UK. They posted me to opposite corners of the country as often as they could. In 1998, I got a promotion to sergeant – dizzy heights. I went on my controller's course and they say that the air traffic control course is the most intensive course in the RAF. Because it takes you about eight years to become a pilot and in 16 weeks you've got to become an air traffic controller who keeps pilots from bumping into each other."

"Eventually, I was posted abroad. I went to North Carolina for seven weeks, which was great. I went to Germany on exercise. I did a four-month stay in the Falkland Islands. Oh, that was brilliant. I went down there as a fit, young, enthusiastic chap and came back an alcoholic. Nothing to do, 12-hour shifts, and nothing to do in your off-shift time except drink. And that's what we did. I've done four deployments to sunny Cyprus, the last one of which they delayed the start of it by a week because I was on honeymoon. And I told my boss that I wasn't telling my wife I had to come back from honeymoon early."

"Like just about everybody else in the British forces, I did a stint out in Afghanistan. That was in 2011. That was the fourth busiest UK airfield or bastion."

After he got back to Britain from Afghanistan, Paul decided he wanted to pursue a passion that had followed him all his life – photography. He decided to set up his own studio.

"You can do all sorts of taking pictures with people," Paul said. "You can get all kinds of expressions. You can learn a lot about people by taking their picture. On my 21st birthday, I got my first proper camera. A Libretto M10. Now I have a digital camera. That was a game-changer

because now I can take 300 pictures instead of 24 and I don't have to pay to develop them. And you can also see on the back of the camera what you've just taken. If it's not any good, you make some adjustments and you take another one."

"Starting the business was hard at first. Some of the time, it was a bit rubbish. And I didn't know how to make it better, because I didn't know what it was that I didn't know. That's why I needed an expert. So, somebody pointed me in the direction of a chap called Richard Stevens, an ex-submariner."

Paul is now an active member and contributor to the Dorset Veterans Network – and feels like he's starting to thrive as a businessman. It's taken a few years – and the support of his fellow veterans – but he's getting there now.

Being an entrepreneur is something particularly suited to veterans. They can bring the self-discipline learned and honed during their time in the armed forces to be their own boss. Networks such as the one in Dorset can be of great help in making more veterans discover this path when they begin civilian life.



The Last Post Memorial Pub – the importance of community to veterans



Julie

Julie moved away from Stockton-on-Tees to Italy for 32 years. She returned to her hometown fifteen years ago to open an Italian restaurant.

Julie built a small remembrance wall to fallen veterans in one part of the pub and ex-military personnel began flocking to the place.

“I opened this posh restaurant, brought two chefs with me [from Italy]. I sent them back after six months and changed it into a pub because we wouldn’t get people in. They looked through the window, saw the tablecloths, thought it was too posh. So, I changed it into a pub.”

“It just grew from there,” Julie told us. “It’s grown its own arms and legs. It really has. People bring memorabilia in every day. It can be a button, it can be anything, but it’s sacred. They trust me with so many precious items.”

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Mike with Julie and Nick Tyrone



The Jobs Foundation team at the museum

The transition from the restaurant to the pub was difficult at first for Julie.

“I was going through a hard time because I didn’t know whether I’d survive it or whether I would have been out on the streets on my ass – because I had sold everything that I had in Italy to put into that business.”

Attached to the pub is a veterans’ museum called the Don War Memorial Museum (sometimes referred to as the ‘Don Bar’), which has a wide range of memorabilia from the various wars British soldiers have been involved in over the last two centuries.

“It sort of organically became a veteran’s pub,” Julie said. “They started coming in, I’d sit with them, and we’d laugh, we’d cry, they’d tell me the stories. The more they’d done that, the more they trusted themselves with me. It’s given me a mission.”

Julie employs veterans behind the bar, sometimes on a volunteer basis. One person who has been working at the pub for years is Mike.

“In terms of staffing the pub at the moment, I’ve got two volunteers, plus Mike,” Julie told us. “Mike is one of the veterans. He came across to me when I was in the Don Bar one day. He came over to the Don Bar to me and I clocked him straight away. I

can pick up on people who’ve got problems. And he told me that he was not in a good way.”

Mike told us himself how he first came to work at the Last Post.

“I’d heard about the Don Bar at a time when I was either going to go off the bridge in Stockton, into the water, or go in the Don Bar,” Mike told us. “Don’t know what made me do it, but I ended up going in the Don Bar. And I sat on my own in the corner, minding my own business and Julie says ‘are you alright?’ and I said ‘not really’. And we sat there for about two or three hours. And I had to promise her that I would come in every Wednesday. From there on, I came in every Wednesday.”

Looking towards Julie, Mike added something important.

“She always kept her eye on me. If it wasn’t for her, I wouldn’t be here. I physically wouldn’t be here.”

The Last Post and the Don War Memorial Museum are special places to the veterans – and many others – in the area. Julie’s mission is to support veterans in need, going above and beyond any call of duty. She often lets veterans without accommodation sleep in the museum. Her story is a brilliant example of business as a force for good.

Hair at the Academy – a salon in Exeter taking people off the street

Mary Pugsley MBE is the driving force behind both Hair at the Academy, a salon in Exeter, and Hair in the Community, a non-profit organisation dedicated to changing the lives of the most vulnerable members of her community through hairdressing, barbering and beauty services.

These organisations work together to give some of the most disadvantaged people in Exeter and the surrounding parts of Devon the chance to get a job that will transform their lives. They are increasingly working with homeless people in the community as well, getting them shelter and a chance to work at the salon.

We visited the academy and spoke to both the new recruits and the staff that keep the place running, as well as those who find new people to come in and be trained. They told us the amazing story of Hair at the Academy / Hair in the Community.

“I started studying with Hair at the Academy as part of an adult cohort,” said Rhi, who now works as the Community Barbering Lead. She’s on the frontline of helping to find new kids from disadvantaged backgrounds to train at the salon. “I decided to retrain with a different skill. I’d been in the beauty industry for ten years on makeup counters – department store-based – and I just thought I’d like to do something else. Do something that was still within the beauty sector, but something that I could have more charge over and finesse my skills. And I found Hair at the Academy, which was great. It fit in really well with my home life, being a single parent.”

Eventually, Mary asked Rhi to do her present role, being active in the community in terms of discovering fresh faces. She works with a charity called St Petrock’s – which offers shelter, amongst other services, to homeless people – from the back of Exeter Cathedral.

“One day, I was told we had a chance to work with St Petrock’s,” Rhi continued. “That we’d been offered a room to work with there. We had this plan to take on students there from the homeless community. I was just like, oh my God, yes! We took on two students about this time last year – Abi and Anna – they’re sisters from the homeless community. They’re housed by St Petrock’s in some flats that St Petrock’s owns. And we’ve got this lovely little room. It’s kind of nestled up in the rafters of this old, converted church. That’s where we train them.”

Rhi is clearly someone who loves what she does for a living.

“I’ve absolutely loved it. It’s felt like you were really giving something back to a community that you don’t have that much to do with, unless you volunteer. The homeless community is completely separated from the rest of the population and part of it is us pushing it away – also, it’s a little bit of them hiding away for a multitude of reasons.”

Kat is the administrator at the salon, keeping everything ticking along day-to-day. She took us on a tour around the salon, amidst the trainees working. “We teach all our students on an individual basis. So, it always looks really busy in here! All of our students have their own time.”



“But everyone’s on different levels, aren’t they? Different skill levels,” piped in one of the trainees, working on a false head of hair. “So, I started in September. And I’ve only got like three or four months left of training to do.”

“All of our students have an individual learning plan,” said Kat, to a lot of nodding heads from the students. “They all have an individual timetable. Our students are free to take breaks whenever they need, as long as they don’t take the mick with it. So that they can have sensory breaks when they need, like if it’s getting too hot or if you’re getting stressed and they just need five minutes to refocus and put themselves back down again.”

One of the other trainees came in with a comment at this point.

“It’s a big family feel here, isn’t it? It’s not like it’s teacher and students, more like friendship and like family. And like family, we don’t always necessarily get on. Everyone has their little moments, but it’s all fixable, everything’s workable, and everyone wants to be here for a reason.”

The family feel in the salon is unmistakable, and clearly part of the formula which makes Hair at the Academy and its non-profit cousin work. As always during our research, it was inspiring to see young people who had been left behind and given no chance to have a decent life, being given just such a chance.

The Pret Foundation – tackling homelessness through employment





Rising Stars is a programme run by The Pret Foundation (the charitable arm of the food and coffee retailer, Pret a Manger). It supports people facing homelessness (or getting out of homelessness) with jobs at Pret shops across the UK. The Foundation was set up by Pret a Manger's founders in 1995, when they recognised that people experiencing or at risk of homelessness can find it hard to make a new start. The Rising Stars programme has now been running for almost 20 years. It's supported hundreds of people experiencing or facing homelessness and given them a chance of a new life via the best route available: a new job.

We spoke with Tanja Mrnjaus, the Training and Employment manager for the programme.

"The founders of Pret identified very early on that they wanted to do something around supporting the homeless sector," Tanja told us. "They had their first shop in Victoria and sadly, not much has changed around that space in terms of street homelessness. They wanted to provide support through donating food, which we still do today, but they wanted to do more. They decided to look at employment and supporting people into work. Originally, it was only one person per year

that they were supporting into work. They found supporting people who are homeless, are rough sleeping, getting them into work straight away from there doesn't work. So, they knew they needed some kind of a referral system to make a bigger impact."

"We place predominantly in the shops, because that's where we have most vacancies and we know it can be an easier transition, as they don't need to have any experience. We don't ask for CVs. It's just a sheer desire to want to work. Everything else, we can teach you."

Since it started, Rising Stars has welcomed over 900 people onto the programme. Many have progressed into more senior roles within the company. The key to it is that the people come first – applicants are accepted through personalised referrals from charity partners – as Tanja mentioned, without the applicant needing a CV. Everyone on the programme gets a chance to learn a range of skills, from customer service to coffee making and sandwich preparation. Once they have graduated, the experience can lead to a host of opportunities within Pret and beyond, given the skills they will be picking up will be transferable.



Principles identified in unique groups

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Chapter Four
Unique groups

1. Businesses need to tailor their approach to hiring and training to work with these specific cohorts – but this can pay large dividends for the companies that put in the effort

A company like Timpson is first and foremost, a business. It exists to turn a profit. The organisation hires ex-offenders because they have discovered that they often make great employees. Other organisations like Tempus Novo and many more besides are realising the same thing – that ex-offenders can make a valuable contribution. There is a chance to do something good for the community, to add social value to the company, and to gain some fantastic workers, all at the same time.

Veterans are often highly skilled individuals with an amazing amount to offer any business. What they can give to a company like Northumbrian Water in terms of cyber security skills is just one great example. Encouraging veterans to become entrepreneurs is something we should be doing more of as well, as we discovered in Dorset.

Homeless people are often simply those whose lives took an unlucky turn. With a little bit of support, they can turn into valuable employees who just might be long-term fixtures at the organisation that takes a chance on them. Amongst all these groups will be prize candidates who would be an asset to any organisation. These are sometimes difficult to reach communities, but they are also a valuable resource, waiting to be unlocked.



2. The government could do more to support businesses employing these targeted cohorts

Programmes like the MOD-funded CTP are great. But without wishing to get into detailed policy recommendations – which are outside the scope of this report – it would be great if the government could focus on these cohorts a little more. A good example would be eliminating Employer's NI on the salaries of veterans. Designing employment initiatives around these groups specifically needs further development.

Having said this, the Get Britain Working white paper is a most welcome step in the right direction. Clearly, it has become recognised within the corridors of Whitehall that getting groups with specific needs into employment, such as ex-offenders, veterans and the homeless, will be vital if two million jobs are going to be created. The next question is how to deliver on that in policy terms.

3. We need to encourage more businesses to employ targeted support in their hiring practices

One of the things we hope to achieve with this report is to demonstrate how hiring out of these cohorts – utilising targeted support, in other words – can be hugely beneficial to companies. This isn't just a matter of social enterprise – although, if companies are looking to do that, working with these cohorts is a great way to achieve those goals. If time and effort is put into hiring out of these groups, organisations can find a host of great employees. More and more, as we head into the future, hiring is going to become increasingly specialised in terms of how we find and nurture great talent. The Jobs Foundation wants to recognise companies that are doing great work in terms of hiring, training and retaining people from the cohorts covered by this chapter.

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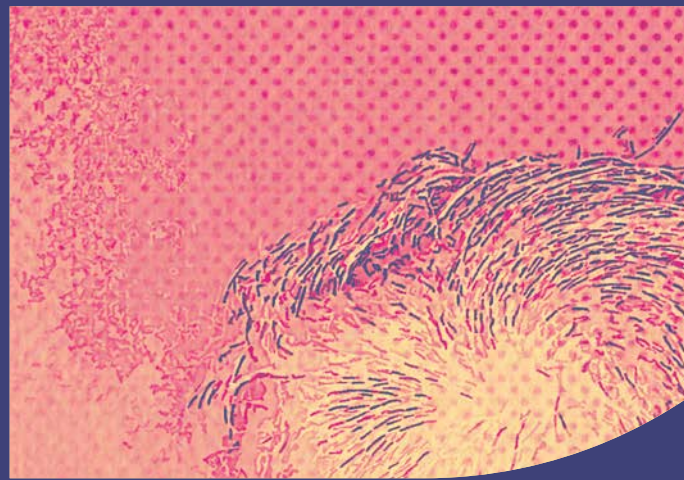
Chapter Five

Employing older workers

“It’s a societal problem, because society says, as you get older, you should be, one, earning more, and two, you should have a better title. If you don’t tick either of those boxes, the questions arise in the minds of employers. Why didn’t somebody want you? Is there something wrong with what you do? And, of course, if you want to work part-time, then you must not be serious about work.”

Marcus Lamont

Workshop Leader, Brave Starts



The Facts

The over-50s in employment



- As of 2023, over 27 per cent of the UK population aged between 50 and 65 were economically inactive.⁵³
- This number increased after Covid, up from 25 per cent in 2019.⁵⁴
- Overall, 18 per cent of pensioners are in relative poverty.⁵⁵ Around 1 in 5 people in the UK live in relative poverty, so the percentage of pensioners in this category is on par with the rest of the population.⁵⁶ This is set against the presumption that pensioners are notably better off than the rest of the population, which is statistically not the case.
- The State Pension age is currently 66 for both men and women. However, that age is gradually increasing. It becomes 67 in April 2028 and 68 at some point in the 2040s. If you were born after 5 April 1960, your State Pension age will be affected by these rises.⁵⁷
- There are justified fears about how the next 20 years of technological advancement could intersect with an ageing workforce. While it is currently too early to say exactly how AI, for instance, will affect the jobs market, there is a worry that older workers who are struggling to adjust to a new technological landscape could be impacted.
- In less than 30 years' time, 25 per cent of people in the UK will be over 65.⁴⁹
- This compares to 19 per cent of people in the UK being over 65 now, which is around 12.7 million people.⁵⁰ Only 15 per cent of the population was over 65 in 1981.⁵¹
- Around 38 per cent of the UK population is over 50.⁵²

49. Centre for Ageing Better, 'Everyone has the right to a good later life' strategy document for 2022-25 (<https://ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Ageing-Better-new-Strategy-2022-2025.pdf>) Accessed 9 June, 2025

50. House of Commons Library, 'The UK's changing population', 16 July, 2024 (<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/the-uks-changing-population/>) Accessed 9 June, 2025

51. ONS, 'Overview of the UK population: March 2017', 3 March, 2017 (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/articles/overviewoftheukpopulation/mar2017>) Accessed 9 June, 2025

52. Centre for Ageing Better, 'Our Ageing Population | The State of Ageing 2023-24' (<https://ageing-better.org.uk/our-ageing-population-state-ageing-2023-4/>) Accessed 9 June, 2025

53. Gov.uk, 'Economic labour market status of individuals aged 50 and over, trends over time: September 2024', 26 September, 2024 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/economic-labour-market-status-of-individuals-aged-50-and-over-trends-over-time-september-2024/economic-labour-market-status-of-individuals-aged-50-and-over-trends-over-time-september-2024>) Accessed 9 June, 2025

54. Ibid.

55. General health by age, sex and deprivation, England and Wales: Census 2021

56. House of Commons Library, 'Poverty in the UK: statistics', 4 April, 2025 (<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn07096/>) Accessed 10 June, 2025

57. Gov.uk, Check your State Pension age (<https://www.gov.uk/state-pension-age>) Accessed 10 June, 2025



Observation

Out of all the cohorts covered by this report, older workers were by far and away the most difficult for us to research. Two things should stand out about this chapter when compared to the previous chapters: One will be the lack of pictures; the other will be its shorter length. Both of these issues exist for the same reason: There are just not enough programmes out there for getting the over-50s into work.

A false assumption is sometimes made that people over 50 are financially secure and therefore, if they find themselves suddenly out of work, they do not particularly need to work ever again. But every year there are scores of people in their 50s who lose a

job they required for their basic survival. Combine this with the fact that we are consistently raising the retirement age, with the assumption being that as people live longer, we need people to work longer. If we expect people to work to a greater age, then we need to tackle the ageism that is rampant in society, as well as put more thought into how we get more unemployed over-50s into meaningful employment.

That's before we discuss how much the nature of work is going to evolve over the next two decades and beyond. Taking the over-50s along on that journey will become ever more vital as the population grows older. As it stands, we aren't doing enough, at any level.

Overview

The hardest cohort to employ – the challenge of an ageing workforce

Keeping people over 50 in work will be one of the great challenges of the early 21st century. With an ageing population, we will need to keep people employed longer for several reasons. One is simple economics: we cannot lose a huge chunk of the adult population to economic inactivity. That would result in less output, less growth and less tax revenue. The taxation issue will be particularly acute in an ageing society – we will need enough money in the public realm to take on the problems an ageing population presents to us, such as greater pressure on the NHS and the need for more care workers. There will also be financial pressure created by many more people requiring pensions for longer, as they live proportionately longer as pensioners than as workers and taxpayers.

What's particularly scary about this issue is that very little is being done to address it, either in the private or public sphere. There is a problem with ageism, with many employers stuck in a mindset that says everyone retires around the age of 60, all while the pensionable age creeps up (it is 66 now, set to rise to 67 in 2028, and then 68 at some point in the 2040s not yet specifically set)⁵⁸.

There is also a problem with older workers struggling to adapt to a workplace changing so rapidly that people much younger than them

are having problems keeping up. While we don't exactly know yet how the technological advancements of the near future, including AI, will affect the workplace, there are justified fears that older workers could be badly impacted.

All of this adds up to an issue that is only going to get worse as the years go on. If older people make up a larger and larger slice of the population, they must either form a larger and larger slice of the workforce, or we are going to face an existential crisis at some point.



Aviva – where flexible working leads to amazing results

At Aviva, flexibility isn't just a policy - it's a mindset that supports colleagues at every stage of their careers. Aviva has an interesting approach to this that goes far beyond running a specific hiring programme for a particular cohort. There isn't a dedicated programme specifically for hiring individuals over 50 because the company aims for an inclusive and adaptable environment where everyone can thrive, regardless of age.

"We don't run a specific programme for employing the over-50s," said Vanessa, Co-Chair of the Generations Community (ERG), told us. We weren't prepared for this answer, having used the time spent researching this chapter asking people about the programmes they run for the over-50s.

"Whatever you do for a certain demographic should fit everybody, you know?" Vanessa continued. "Everything is on offer for anybody here, whatever their age."

The idea is to make Aviva the kind of place with a flexible enough work approach that it suits everyone, including the over-50s. That's what makes them such a great employer of older workers – not by tailoring something to that age range specifically, but by making their working

environment a comfortable place for anyone of any age.

"We can't specifically just work on one demographic. We try and make the hiring process and the workspace inclusive for everyone," said Stuart, Co-Chair of ERG at Aviva.

"In terms of things a little more age-specific that we've done recently," Stuart continued, "we've shared some articles internally about people that have had success later in their career, trying to show that people can progress and change at any point. So, for example, people whose kids are sort of grown up, moved out and they've launched themselves back into their career. Perhaps they've done an apprenticeship or a degree later in their career. We want to stress that if you're an older worker, that doesn't mean that your career is over. You can still switch industries, change your skill set, upskill and promote yourself."

Aviva see age not as a barrier, but as a strength. By championing flexibility and inclusivity, the company tries to make sure that all colleagues, including those over 50, feel empowered to shape their careers in ways that work best for them.



Lucy Standing

Brave Starts – helping older workers cope with the job market

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Chapter Five
Employing older workers

Brave Starts is a non-profit organisation that helps people over the age of 45 who are struggling to find work. They hold online sessions for members so that those looking for work can share their struggles and the barriers they have faced, while trained ambassadors can offer advice on how to overcome the difficulties involved in finding a job.

We spoke with Marcus, one of Brave Start's ambassadors.

"It's a societal problem, because society says, as you get older, you should be, one, earning more, and two, you should have a better title," Marcus

told us. "If you don't tick either of those boxes, the questions arise in the minds of employers. Why didn't somebody want you? Is there something wrong with what you do? And, of course, if you want to work part-time, then you must not be serious about work."

"There are so many things like that – and it's not just employers," Marcus continued. "It's everybody that's got these ideas. We find that even individuals we meet within the programme think the same things because we've all sort of been conditioned in the same way. So, I think it feels larger than just an employer thing. It's a societal

issue. All of us think the same way about these things and we need to start to think differently.”

It was Marcus’ own experience in trying to hire over-50s that led him to Brave Starts. He was able to see the need for a model like the one they employ.

“I’m in the legal sector and we tried as hard as we could to hire older people,” Marcus said. “We specifically tried to target older people. We tried job boards that we thought were set up for 50+ individuals. We didn’t get a lot of people from that. So, then we had to go out to regular job boards or newspaper advertisements, to try and get in front of these people. We tried so many things, but concluded that there’s no pathway to get yourself in front of older workers. It’s like every single thing that we tried to do, except for meeting all these people and looking at maturity as one of the requirements, didn’t work. That’s why I think the Brave Starts model is so effective – you have to get in front of over-50s, really talk to them.”

The Jobs Foundation attended a Brave Starts online course. It was a difficult experience to hear people’s stories – those who had worked hard through their whole lives, often becoming

reasonably successful, only to find they lost their job at the wrong time and suddenly found themselves undervalued in the marketplace.

Lucy Standing, the co-founder of Brave Starts, held a conference in the House of Lords bringing together key stakeholders and policymakers. Its purpose was to explore the issues faced by older workers and what could be done by both businesses and the government. The Jobs Foundation’s CEO, Georgiana Bristol, spoke about the need for more direction by the government on how to tackle the growing number of older workers who face barriers to entering employment and about incentives that the government could put in place to encourage this, such as relief from Employer’s NI contributions. It was exciting to see so many businesses gather and express their intent to do more to help this demographic.

Under-employment of the over-50s is clearly a societal problem. Seeing what non-profits like Brave Starts are doing is inspiring, but we need to see more than that. What follows is what we’ve learned from companies, in terms of what they are doing to hire more older workers.



Georgiana Bristol speaking at an event on older workers

ReStart – what A&O Shearman is doing to empower the over-50s workforce

Allen & Overy – now part of the newly established global elite law firm A&O Shearman - launched the *ReStart* programme in 2017 to empower the over-50s workforce. Recognising that experienced professionals are too often overlooked, *ReStart* was created to break down barriers and open doors for those seeking to re-enter or thrive in today's job market.

Now in its ninth cohort, *ReStart* has already supported hundreds of individuals aged 50-64 across the UK, providing them with the knowledge, practical tools, and renewed confidence to secure meaningful employment. Through a unique blend of accredited coaching, inclusive networking, and tailored support, the programme is redefining what it means to build a second career – proving that experience is not just valuable, but vital.

"I set the programme up in 2017," said Sue Wisbey, founder and co-ordinator of the *ReStart* programme. "It came off the back of a work experience scheme I run for year 12s, where I noticed that there were lots of programmes for young people. That's as it should be, but on the other hand, nobody was thinking about people of my age, who may have worked for an organisation for 20-plus years and then suddenly get made redundant or become sick and have to leave work."

"From working with *ReStart* participants, I've noticed there's a perception that employers are reluctant to hire older people. Ageism is still a real issue. Sometimes, when older candidates are

interviewed by much younger people, there can be a sense of unease or even threat due to the difference in experience. Over time, I saw a clear pattern emerging."

ReStart stands out for its inclusivity – welcoming anyone over 50, regardless of their professional background or previous experience. "We accept applications from anyone over 50. You don't need to have worked in professional services. It really is a community project and our priority is supporting the local community. This open approach ensures that the programme reaches a diverse group of participants, each with unique stories and challenges," Sue told us.

"Every year, we probably receive around 100-150 applications, but we can only accept about 30 people."

Importantly, *ReStart* is not a recruitment pipeline for lawyers or for A&O Shearman. The programme is cross-sectoral, designed to support people from all professional backgrounds, and is carefully tailored to meet the participants' needs.

ReStart's hybrid model – offering both in-person and online sessions – has become a hallmark of its success. "Within the programme, participants typically work with us once a week, either in person or online. We adopted a hybrid approach during Covid, and it proved so successful that we've kept it. People appreciate the flexibility."

“Once on the programme, each participant is introduced to an accredited coach from The Executive Coaching Consultancy,” Sue continued. “The coaches provide three hours of one-to-one coaching, free of charge. The coaches do a deep dive into that individual’s background, their story, and alert us to anything that might be relevant to help get them back into the workforce. I also run a speed networking session where the participants and my volunteer colleagues, who are the mentors, meet each other for around six or seven minutes. Both sides then let me know who they think they can work well with. Then I try and match them all up. Over the three-month programme, mentors support those individuals they were matched with.”

We spoke with Rodney, someone who had been on the *ReStart* programme in 2020, an experience which helped him land his current role at Superdrug.

“I discovered the programme during Covid through one of my sister’s friends,” Rodney told us. “I applied and that was it. At the time, I was applying for loads and loads of jobs every single week and looking every single day. But after six months I thought why not give the programme a go? Let me try, see what happens.”

Rodney has now been in his current role for almost five years. When asked what he felt he got out of *ReStart*, he said: “For a lot of people over 50, they’ve been doing the same job for many years. So getting back out into the job market can be tricky. I found it much harder than the last time I was looking. *ReStart* breaks things down to the basics – showing you how to use tools, like LinkedIn, and how to network effectively. It really helps get you into the mindset, because looking for a job has changed so much since we were younger.”

“Even things like what to put on your CV,” Rodney continued. “I was brought up in a culture where you put everything on, dating back to the start of your career. When you have 30 plus years’ experience, you have to tailor your CV a lot more.”

Every year, *ReStart* follows up with participants three months after the programme finishes, and between 40 per cent and 50 per cent have found work. “This tangible impact demonstrates the programme’s effectiveness in helping older workers secure meaningful employment,” Sue says. *ReStart* continues to challenge perceptions, break down barriers, and prove that experience is not just valuable, it’s vital. As the programme grows, it remains committed to empowering the over-50s workforce and building a more inclusive future for all.





Will



Case study

Will, a Shaw Trust client

We were introduced to Will by Shaw Trust. He was kind enough to tell us his story.

“My background is in the advertising industry. Without blowing my own trumpet, I was pretty successful within my profession. I’m 67 years old now. I went into advertising when I was about 21 – so that’s more than 45 years ago now.”

“I went to Australia for ten years. I hated it. I hated everything about it. So I came back. And of course, when I came back, my career prospects had disappeared. I tried to use my professional experience to branch out into other areas of the communications industry, like social media. But I found out the hard way that employers are pretty ruthless with the older generation. I just couldn’t find a job. I became increasingly desperate. I was plagued by anxiety. It made my depression worse.”

“I have always needed a focus. At this stage in my life, when my confidence is at a low ebb, I feel that I need help to find that focus. If I try to do it on my own, then my depression and anxiety creeps in again. My conscience feeds me a string of negative messages. It leaves me feeling listless and totally useless. It feels like an inner voice taunting me and telling me that I am not good at anything anymore. I am tormented by thoughts that I am too old, too fat, too this, too that.”

“Coming here, to Shaw Trust, is a breath of fresh air. The case workers have helped to give me some direction, and above all, hope. They take

all that other stuff away. So I do feel very lucky. Blessed! If you’re rudderless in life, like me, you are going to go round and round in circles and just get nowhere.”

“I had an idea for a business, which Shaw Trust are helping me develop. They are helping me to help myself to get this venture off the ground. It would seriously be a dream come true. It would make me feel whole again and give me a great sense of achievement and ultimately, a sense of purpose.”

“In the meantime, it would be great to have a regular job again. Shaw Trust are also helping on this front. The sticking point is always my age: you know, you went to college, you finished college in the 80’s. They see you as a dinosaur that is irrelevant in today’s workplace. But I’ve still got plenty of energy and on the good days, when I manage to get through the fog of not having a purpose, I still have the drive and tenacity to strive for a better future for myself, and through my business idea, a brighter future for others. So I’m not giving up. This rudderless ship has still got some life and uncharted territory to explore. Thank God for Shaw Trust, because they’re not giving up on me either. It makes me well up when I think of someone being on my side and wanting to help me, when others have cast me aside and put me out to pasture. Well, I ain’t going down without a fight! I have my case workers to thank for that. So, thank you!”

Will is a client with Shaw Trust and was looking for work when we interviewed him.



Centre for Ageing Better — a view from the NGO sector

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Chapter Five
Employing older workers

Working to make workplaces, homes and communities much more inclusive of older people, as well as building an 'age-friendly movement', aimed at making society see ageing in a more positive and realistic way, the Centre for Ageing Better has been on its mission for the last ten years. They have a free-to-use library of older workers, something that was of great aid to the Jobs Foundation in the formation of this chapter.

"As part of our work, we try to make ageing better for everyone," said Emily Andrews, the Deputy Director of Work at the charity. "Our team is trying to create fair access to work for people in their 50s and 60s. And there are two sides to that."

"Firstly, we look at employment support and skills and active labour market policies. This is the 'supply side' of the labour market, the Jobcentre,

etc. For the most part, people over 50 don't engage with those services. And when they do, they get the worst outcomes."

"And then we also do work on the demand side," Emily continued. "Workplaces and jobs need to be accessible for people in their 50s and 60s. That's a big thing we've been working on. What does it look like to create a workplace that we can all sustainably work in during our 50s and 60s?"

We asked Emily if they had found an answer to that question.

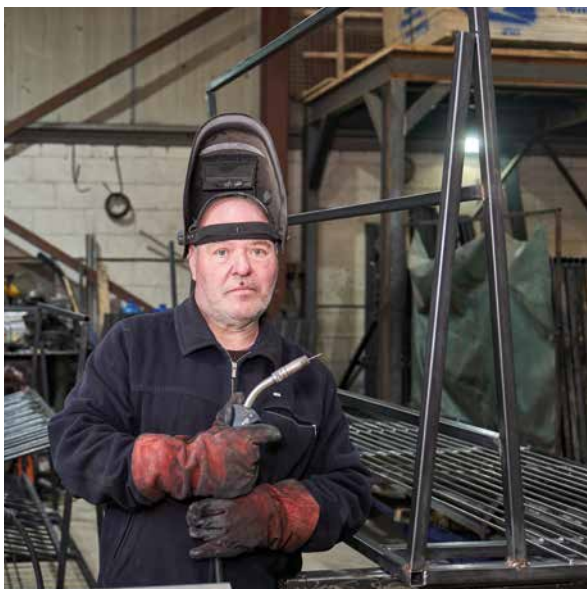
"We created the Age-Friendly Employer Pledge, which we launched in November 2022, for employers who are committed to improving the recruitment, retention and development of workers in their 50s, 60s and beyond," Emily said.

“It involves light-touch accountability. You commit to taking one action every 12 months and tell us what it is. The pledge is not an accreditation; it’s like a journey. The first action that someone can take in the first year of the Pledge is – for example – just to have a look at their data. They could ask questions like: ‘Well, okay, do we have any workers over 50? Where are they? Are they doing any training? What do they say in their staff surveys? What’s happening with our recruitment pipeline?’ In a sense, it’s people having a conversation with their staff about age.”

Flexible working is one of the things the Centre for Ageing Better advocates for, to make the vocational space easier for over-50s to thrive in. By making working hours easier to manage, a company can pick up someone with half a lifetime of experience.

“The thing that kind of underpins all of this is what we call ‘age-friendly culture’,” Emily told us. “Because essentially, age-friendly employment is good employment, plus don’t be ageist. And that’s the bit that people find hardest.”

“There was some research done by Total Jobs last year where they found that the average age that a recruiter thinks is too old to hire someone is 57,” Emily continued. “One in four people think it doesn’t make business sense for someone to hire someone in their 50s and 60s. So, there’s sort of two sets of barriers. One is the practical barriers that we are more likely to face in our 50s and 60s, like having a caring responsibility or a long-term health condition. And the second, which makes all of that harder to navigate, is blatant ageism.”





Principles identified in employing older workers

1. The hiring, training and retaining of the over-50s is not good enough as it stands

As mentioned already, this was the most difficult chapter for us to research. The reason being that there aren't nearly enough programmes built around getting the over-50s into employment. It is seen as a low priority issue, both in the public and private sphere. The idea seems to be that most people who reach this age will either work because they want to keep working or will be well-off enough to retire. This avoids the painful reality that there are many over-50s who need to work just to survive.

The retirement age is going up. The only logical assumption that goes with that is that people will work later into life. Yet, as a society, we have not adjusted to make this a reality. We need to make it easier for people over 50 to get employment if we want people to work until they are 67 or 68. This is just pure logic at work.

2. Ageism is an issue – but the only way to effectively combat it is to get more over-50s back into the workforce

Ageism is one of the driving forces behind this issue. The Centre for Ageing Better told us that the average age a recruiter thinks is too old to hire is 57. As soon as you realise that is about a decade short of the retirement age, you can see how big a problem this is.

One of the ways this issue should be overcome is via a positive feedback loop. If we can get more over-50s into work, then having more older workers around will become normalised, which should lead to more older workers getting hired, leading to further comfort levels with having employees over 50 in the workplace.



3. Offering flexible working hours is the key to hiring and retaining workers over 50

Every organisation we spoke to while researching this chapter told us that flexible working hours and conditions are vital to retaining older workers. Many people with decades of experience to offer to businesses will need to work part-time or at odd times in order to fit their needs. At the very least, much more flexibility in terms of conditions of work will make it easier to employ over-50s. Given we face an ageing population – and by definition, an ageing workforce – this will start to become less of an option and more of a necessity.

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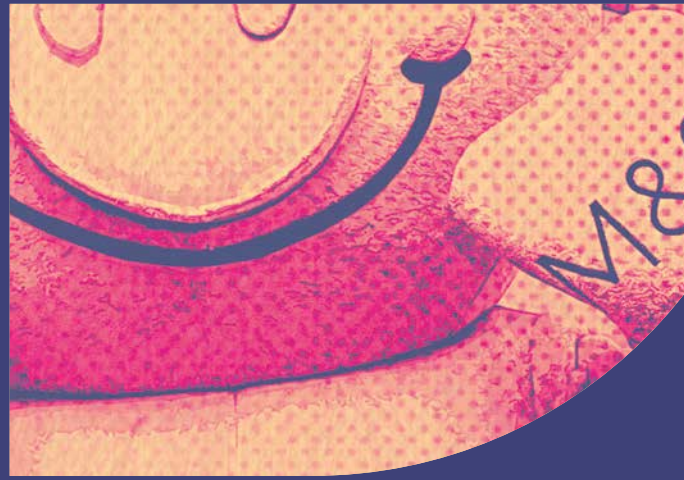
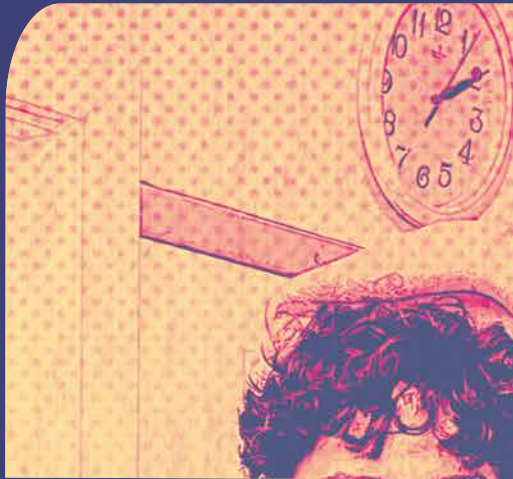
Chapter Six

Employment best practice

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“The vision of the Jobs Foundation is more important than ever championing business, and helping people from welfare into work.”

Michael Lorimer
CEO of DCS





Employment best practice

The gold standard of hiring, training and retaining staff

“Obviously, I need to provide for her. I mean, she’s alright now, we’re on Universal Credit and that, but I don’t want her looking up to me and being like, oh: ‘My dad’s on Universal Credit. He doesn’t do nothing for work.’ I want to give her a reason to work herself (when she’s old enough). You know what I mean? I’m just trying to do it right by her.”

The quote above was given to us by Josh, a young man in Ashton-under-Lyne who just wants to get a job and escape from the cycle of welfare dependency. Over the past nine months, we have conducted research across a large portion of the UK, visiting England, Wales and Northern Ireland in the process. We’ve heard dozens of stories like the one Josh gave

us – people who want to work but find the system works against them.

We want to be as positive as possible about the prospects for the future of British businesses. But it is undeniable that there are challenges and outright barriers to both companies looking to hire and jobseekers. Beyond the obvious challenges – such as last year’s hike in employers’ National Insurance (NI) contributions, which made it that much harder to take on additional staff – there are also long-term, structural issues to deal with.

Jobcentres are nowhere near as effective as they should be and, as a result, are used by a shockingly low number of businesses. Of employers surveyed in 2022 who had either recruited or tried to recruit in the last 12 months, only 14 per cent had used a Jobcentre to do so.⁵⁹ There are many people currently unemployed and on long-term sickness benefits who would gladly work, if only the system was easier to navigate. Certain cohorts, like ex-offenders and veterans, can struggle to find employment for reasons unique to their situation.

On the plus side, we have discovered that there are a lot of businesses doing great work in terms of hiring, training and retaining people – across the UK and in every sector we covered. What we have learned from them constitutes best practice in this all-important area.

To create two million jobs – the current government’s stated goal – we need companies who are both making those jobs happen and ensuring that people stay in post over the long-term. This report demonstrates that companies of all sizes can make their employee base more effective and varied – when you see the ladders of opportunity that some businesses already offer.

Our goal is to promote the cross-pollination of ideas – for companies to look at what other organisations are doing in terms of hiring, training and staff retention and apply that to their own work. That way, even companies that are already employing best practice can improve on what they are doing.

Through our research, we were able to discover some of the principles of employment best practice. We have boiled down the commonalities – the ideas around best practice that cross all boundaries, across every cohort covered in the report – into eleven guiding principles, detailed below. The principles form an acronym: **OPPORTUNITY**.

Opportunity for all

Poverty hotspots

Partnerships

Older workers

Return to the office

Technology (AI)

Unique groups

Novel ways of hiring

Internships and apprenticeships

Training for soft skills

Young people

⁵⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/get-britain-working-white-paper/get-britain-working-white-paper>

Opportunity for all

There has been a huge increase in people in the UK being economically inactive due to long-term sickness since the Covid pandemic. The numbers spiked during the crisis and never returned to where they had been before. While there is some increase in every category, 'Depression, bad nerves or anxiety' has seen the largest increase by far, going up by almost 50 per cent compared to pre-Covid levels. This is not only unsustainable from a government spending perspective, given the overwhelming majority of these economically inactive people will be on benefits (and often a high level of benefits), it almost certainly isn't the best thing for those involved. People who want to work should be supported into employment. We need to make it easier for people with mental health issues to be in work, whenever that is possible.

There are many options for doing this effectively. We saw how pastoral care works at Lynas Foodservice in Northern Ireland (see page 52) and how developing an effective working relationship with the local Jobcentre had positive results for Direct Special Metals in Sheffield (see page 46).

The Government's Get Britain Working white paper has some good ideas around this, trying to focus as much as possible on getting those who can work into employment. Solving this issue is vital to the country's economic future.



Poverty hotspots

Economic factors weigh heavily when it comes to how talent is distributed across the country – and it's understandable that many employers feel like there isn't enough talent in their local area to fill the gaps in their staffing. Yet hiring local talent pays dividends for decades to come, as we discovered at Sage (see page 27) and Accenture (see page 26).

For a start, local employees will often stay with you for their whole career. In terms of operating ethically, nurturing local talent is one of the best things a company can do. Meanwhile, hiring locally is an effective way to break the cycle of joblessness and poverty in areas blighted by these issues.

Some people can travel for work. For others, it is much more difficult for a variety of reasons. In general, people should have the choice of working reasonably close to where they live – and when most can do so it is a positive sign that the overall economy is working efficiently.

In all sectors and all sizes of business – from tiny SMEs to the largest corporations – companies are the most important players in getting people into work. Our research has revealed that not only are companies leading the charge in terms of competing for the most obvious young talent, but many are also searching to hire from less obvious sources of talent. Programmes like the ones Barnardo's (see page 72), The King's Trust and Marks & Spencer (see page 76) run for the bottom quintile of the socio-economic spectrum. These aren't simply a matter of creating social good, they are also about discovering talent in hard-to-find places for business reasons.

Smaller charities like the Ascend Programme play an important role as well (see page 78). This is because these organisations have discovered that long-term, their approach seems to pay off. We need more companies to open their minds to what people from poorer backgrounds have to offer to them. This is the way we can better distribute talent – and, as a result, economic opportunity – throughout the country.

Partnerships

As we initially discovered when researching our foundational report, *Two Million Jobs*, colleges and other post-secondary educational institutions can be a great way to train present and future employees. Many large employers work directly with colleges to design the ideal courses to ensure there is a crop of people ready-made for their business. A local college that is looking to help local employers with their skills needs, such as Gateshead College (see page 29), can be one of the best sources of talent from the local area.

What we also discovered is that partnerships with charities and other non-profit organisations can be remarkably valuable in terms of getting people into work. Organisations working on the ground to help increase employability, like Shaw Trust (see page 62), play a vital role.

Older workers

A false assumption is sometimes made that people over 50 are financially secure and therefore, if they find themselves suddenly out of work, they do not particularly need to work ever again. Yet there are scores of people in their 50s and older who lose a job they require for their basic survival. Combine this with the fact that as we are consistently raising the retirement age, there is a logic being created that with people living longer, we need people to work longer.

However, we haven't taken these considerations on board, in terms of how society thinks about employment for people over 50. If we expect people to work to a greater age, then we need to tackle the ageism that is rampant in society, as well as put more thought into how we get unemployed over-50s into meaningful employment.

At present, not enough is being done to tackle this issue, in either the public or private sphere. Unless we get more over-50s into work over the next decade, we face an existential crisis. Aviva (see page 129) does great work in this area, but we need more large employers to take the situation seriously.



Anthony from the Shaw Trust, Page 62, with Nick and Catherine Frost, a researcher at the Jobs Foundation

Return to the office

An innovation borne of necessity in the Covid era, allowing employees to work from home when necessary and feasible has been a good innovation for plenty of businesses. But it is also worth talking about the downsides of working from home. Young people often require an office environment to learn their profession, as well as create a professional network. On top of this, a lot of jobs, particularly blue-collar roles, cannot be done from home, which means this can become a middle-class-only domain. David Nieper has made being present at the primary place of work a key component of working at the company (see page 18) to positive effect.

It is also worth bearing in mind that once jobs are designed to be done from home, they can then be done from anywhere in the world. As already stressed, we need as many employees to be local to their employer as possible. Too much working from home is to this goal's detriment.

A company thrives on its culture – and it is difficult to create that or keep it going when everyone works remotely. Having your employees in the same room at the same time allows ideas to be sparked that might otherwise not be.

Technology

Our use of tech is progressing to a place where, in the very near future, we should have AI applications which can make it easier to both hire and efficiently train people with most readily diagnosed neurodivergences and mental health issues. In terms of training people with a wide range of neurodivergent conditions, AI could be the key that unlocks employment for so many people currently unable to find a job. The work of Meganexus in the Career Transition Partnership (CTP), done in conjunction with the Ministry of Defence and Reed in Partnerships, is a great example of this (see page 110).

Of course, AI and other technological advances will come with downsides. They may make certain jobs, even whole sectors, redundant, resulting in fewer jobs in some places. A balance needs to be struck here, and the Jobs Foundation is interested in companies doing work that aims to achieve that balance.



Christopher Neiper and Nick Tyrone, Page 18

Unique groups

Ex-offenders can make a valuable contribution to a company and are often cited as being model employees. Hiring them is also a chance to do something good for the community, to add social value to a company, as employment is so key to keeping recidivism rates down. The work of Timpson and Tempus Novo are great examples of this (see pages 104-107).

Veterans are often highly skilled individuals with an amazing amount to offer any business – as Northumbrian Water discovered (page 112). Encouraging veterans to become entrepreneurs is something we should be doing more of as well. Similarly, we should value the skills and experience that sport can bring people at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, with organisations in that space doing much to help former athletes and competitors.

Homeless people are often simply those whose lives took an unlucky turn - as we discovered at Hair at the Academy (see page 116). With a bit of support, they can turn into valuable employees who just might be long-term fixtures at the organisation that takes a chance on them.

There are prize candidates amongst all these groups, who would be an asset to any organisation. These communities are sometimes difficult to reach, but they are also a valuable resource, waiting to be unlocked.

One of the things we hope to achieve with this report is to demonstrate how hiring out of these cohorts can be hugely beneficial to companies. This isn't just a matter of social enterprise – although, if companies are looking to do that, working with these cohorts is a great way to achieve those goals – if time and effort is put into hiring out of these groups, then organisations can chance upon a host of great employees. More and more, as we head into the future, approaches to hiring are going to become increasingly specialised, in terms of how we find and nurture great talent.

Novel ways of hiring

Organisations need to engage in fresh ways of finding talent, particularly amongst young people and those with mental health issues. Moving away from a CV-based model of recruitment, with a focus on finding a more agile match between employer and employee, is one idea that seems to work for many of the companies profiled in this report. Another is tailoring the interview process to better fit Gen Z candidates. We found that recruitment agencies such as Pollen Careers (see page 56) are leading the charge on this.

To attract the best talent, employers will increasingly need to think outside the box. When a post is advertised and 800 CVs come in as a result, it can be tempting to take the first 50 off the top and then whittle that down to a short list. However, this is certainly not the best way to find your perfect employee. Companies we spoke to this past year are realising this more and more, which is positive.





Internships and apprenticeships

While post-secondary institutions can help businesses find and utilise interns and apprentices, a company creating its own scheme can also be a great way to find new employees. South West Water is a great example of a company we researched that has built its own scheme that has worked brilliantly to fit the organisation's needs (see page 22).

Creating your own internship or apprenticeship can be time consuming to begin with, but it will also deliver employees tailor-made for the organisation's needs. Ultimately, it is up to any organisation to decide between an external or internal internship and apprenticeship programme, but both can be very effective.

Training for soft skills

As already mentioned, a big issue for employers today is that when they try to source new talent, they discover that the old ways of doing it are inadequate. Many businesses we have spoken to have told us, for example, that finding the right talent in the 16 to 25-year-old age group can be tricky. Sometimes, candidates can perform poorly at the interview stage – only for the company to take a chance and find one of their best employees in the process. The Pret Foundation's work in this area is a good example (see page 120).

A lot of this comes down to 'soft skills' – knowing how to create a CV that will stand out; understanding what is expected in an interview and how to respond to certain key questions; knowing how to dress for an interview. Some people, particularly from more deprived backgrounds, will lack these basic skills. Getting them up to speed on this is often the key to helping them find and retain employment.

Thankfully, more and more training and hiring programmes aimed at young people are attuned to this need. Sometimes, soft skills will be all that is initially taught in a training programme (such as the one Barnardo's runs – see page 72).



Next step: The Jobs Foundation Accreditation Scheme

“They see you as a dinosaur that is irrelevant in today’s workplace. But I’ve still got plenty of energy and on the good days, when I manage to get through the fog of not having a purpose, I still have the drive and tenacity to strive for a better future for myself, and through my business idea, a brighter future for others. So, I’m not giving up.”

That quote was from Will. He’s working with Shaw Trust to find a job, but finding it a massive challenge. Employers across the UK are doing so much to create and provide the jobs we need to keep this country moving forward – but they can do more. We hope this report on employment best practice – identifying the gold standard approaches to hiring, training and retaining staff – will be used widely by businesses of all sizes, across all sectors of the economy.

The Jobs Foundation is looking to do further work on best practice in the coming years, working with as many businesses that employ elements of best practice as we can. Creating the two million jobs our economy needs won’t be easy – but doing so begins with understanding what best practice looks like and then spreading the word. We invite you to join us in our mission.

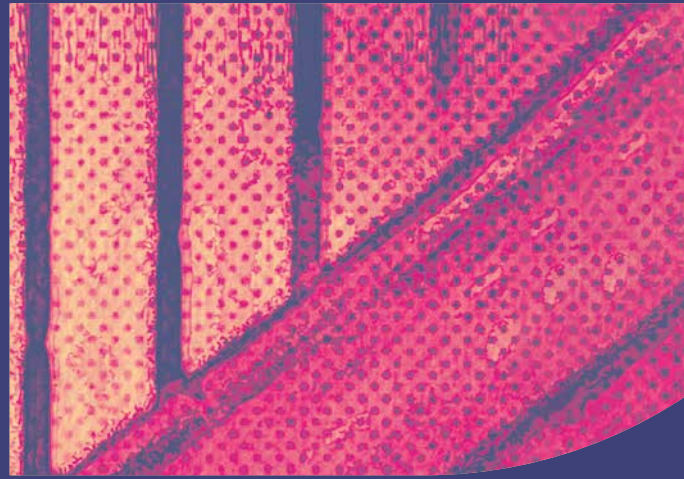
The Jobs Foundation exists to champion business as a societal good. Throughout this report, we have documented companies that are deploying best practice in their approach to employment. While charities and non-profit organisations play their part in generating employment, businesses remain the most important element of job creation.

In 2026, we plan to launch a Jobs Foundation Accreditation Scheme (final name to be revealed when it launches), to highlight the top UK companies utilising best practice in their approach to employment and welfare to work. Together, we can make the two million jobs our economy needs a reality, and give everyone the ladder of opportunity they need and deserve in life.

Y oung people

Youth unemployment is the worst of all age groups from a societal perspective, because of the way it echoes through the years to come. A person who can’t find a job by the time they reach 24 will very likely struggle throughout the rest of their working life. If a young person has fallen into the trap set for them by generational joblessness, then it will be even more difficult for them to pull themselves out of it later. Ensuring as many young people as possible get into meaningful employment is one of the most vital things for society to accomplish. Thankfully, large companies like the MAG Group (see page 84) and smaller organisations like 20/20 Levels (see page 88) are doing great work in this area.

The making of *Ladders of Opportunity*





The Jobs Foundation team at Riverside Stadium

The research for this report was conducted over six months, speaking to people at over 50 organisations, across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We learned a great deal from speaking to these employers – but we also had a great time along the way. Hearing people's stories was inspiring; their laughter, when it came, was infectious.

Looking for a job can be a difficult experience and one that we learned can take a heavy toll on a person's mental health. The flip side is that finding a job can be a remarkably cathartic event. The uptick in confidence and mental well-being that is experienced when a person finds a profession that suits them is hard to match.

All of us at the Jobs Foundation who visited the companies and other organisations featured in this report found the experience life changing. To get to travel around the UK and speak to both the people who are creating the jobs our economy needs, as well as those looking for that breakthrough vocational opportunity, taught us so much.

Great thanks goes out to our photographer, Rahil Ahmad, whose work adorns almost every page in this report. We look forward to more adventures soon, travelling across the country and listening to a new round of inspiring stories.



At Shaw Trust



Nick and Kellen



At the Future Youth Zone



Matthew with Amy, our Executive Assistant



At the Dusty Knuckle



At the Don War Memorial Museum



Lucy Standing and Nick



Matthew and Nick



Flora MacKinnon, Events Manager at the Jobs Foundation



Rob Halfon, our Apprenticeship and Skills Director

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of the organisations we spoke to for this report.

20/20 Levels		Coach Core	
A&O Shearman	A&O SHEARMAN	Colin Crooks MBE	
Accenture		CyberNorth	
AESSEAL		David Nieper	
Amazon		David Nieper Academy	
Ascend Programme		Direct Special Metals	
Aviva		Don War Memorial Museum	
Barnardo's		Dusty Knuckle	
BCP Council (Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole)		East Midlands Airport	
Brave Starts		EdCortex	
Centre for Ageing Better		Future Youth Zone	
Christopher Nieper Trust		Gateshead College	
		Greene King	

Hair at the Academy



Pret Foundation



IKEA



Reed in Partnership



King's Trust



Resurgo



Last Post Memorial Pub

Sage



Lynas Foodservice



Shaw Trust



Manchester Airport Group



Stansted Airport



Marks & Spencer



Sunderland
Software City



Meganexus



South West Water



Middlesbrough FC
Foundation



Tempus Novo



Northumbrian Water



The Dorset Armed Forces
Community Business
Support Network



Pennon Group



Timpson



Phoenix Group



Valero



Pollen Careers



World Professional
Billiards and
Snooker Association

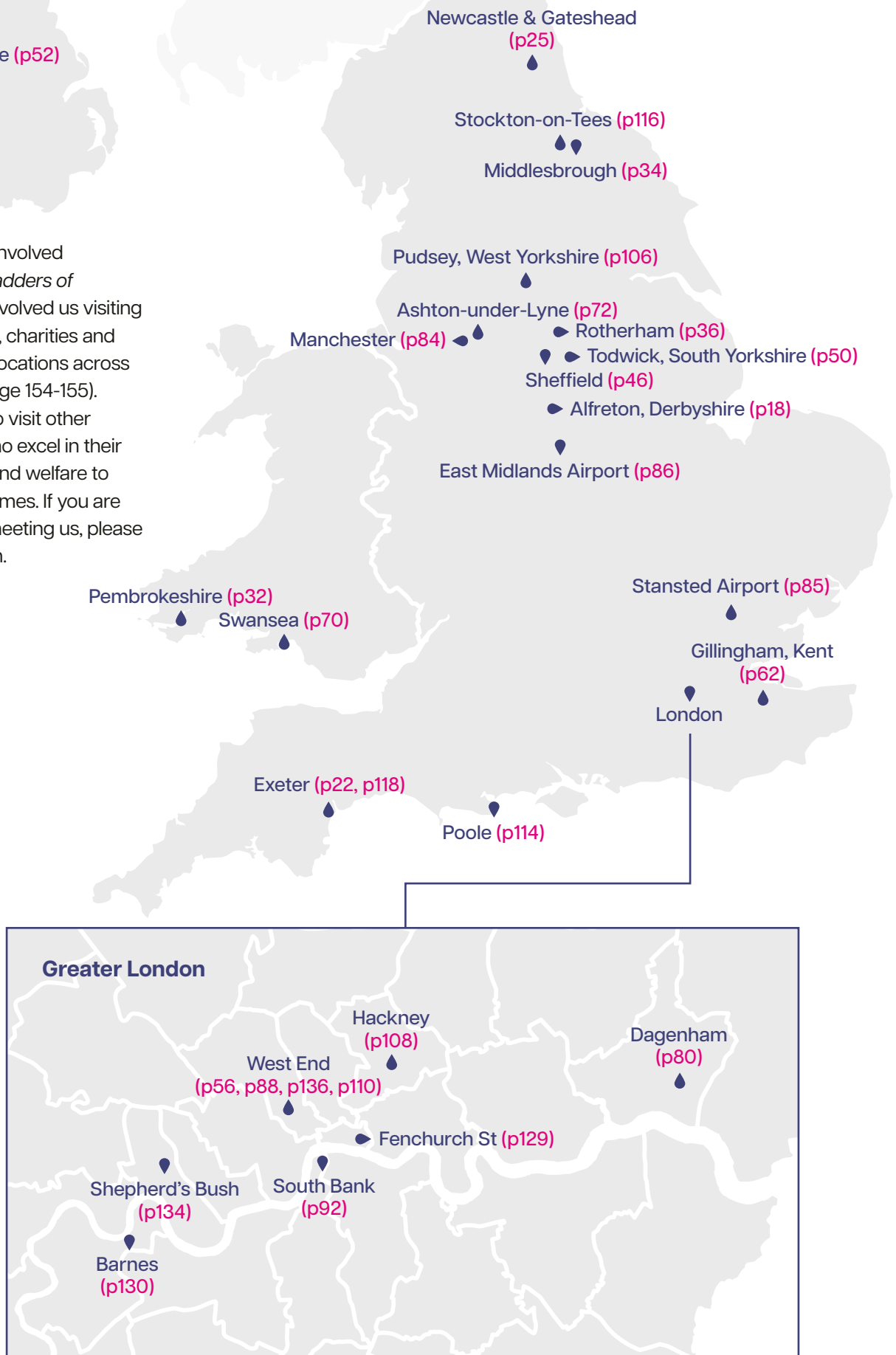


Pret a Manger



Where we visited

The research involved in compiling *Ladders of Opportunity* involved us visiting 50 companies, charities and non-profits in locations across the UK (see page 154-155). We are keen to visit other businesses who excel in their employment and welfare to work programmes. If you are interested in meeting us, please do get in touch.



Next Step - Help us build our Accreditation Scheme

The launch of *Ladders of Opportunity* marks a significant milestone for the Jobs Foundation, as we draw attention to the work of leading UK companies supporting people into work. Of course, this is only the beginning as we use the coming year to develop a Jobs Foundation Accreditation Scheme, set up to champion and support businesses in their efforts to enable people into work - helping many millions find a new life of pride and independence.

As you will have read, our report sets out the gold standard for hiring, training and retraining people who often struggle to enter the workforce, exploring employment initiatives that are successfully creating jobs for young workers, local workers, the over-50s, veterans, ex-offenders, and people on long-term sickness benefits.

Building on our first volume of research, *Two Million Jobs*, our new report identifies multiple examples of pioneering job-creation initiatives from household names like M&S, Pret a Manger and Timpson, as well as highlighting the incredible work of smaller businesses who are creating opportunities for those who need them most.

Throughout 2026, I invite you to join the Jobs Foundation in our work to build the Accreditation Scheme through a range of workshops, seminars and pilot schemes, where we will take an even more in-depth approach to how business can lift people out of poverty through best employment and training practices. Please do get in touch if you have been inspired by *Ladders of Opportunity* and would like to help us take this to the next level with our Accreditation Scheme.



Georgiana Bristol
CEO of the Jobs Foundation



"Businesses do so much for our society, yet there is little or no recognition of the vital role they play in job creation and social mobility. The Jobs Foundation's Accreditation Scheme recognises this. Not only will it celebrate the best of British business, it will also serve as a benchmark for others to follow."

Simon Boyd
Managing Director of REIDsteel

"The vision of The Jobs Foundation is more important than ever, championing business, and helping people from welfare into work."

Michael Lorimer
CEO of DCS Group



For more information on how to be involved or for any feedback on this, please contact me directly on georgiana@thejobsfoundation.com

To join, scan
the QR code





"This report from the Jobs Foundation is a timely reminder of the vital role businesses play in strengthening communities and expanding opportunity. At Greene King, we believe in the power of business to create real, lasting change. We're proud to support efforts that break down barriers to employment and look forward to continued collaboration with the Jobs Foundation and others to help more people access meaningful work."

Graham Briggs,
Social Lead at Greene King



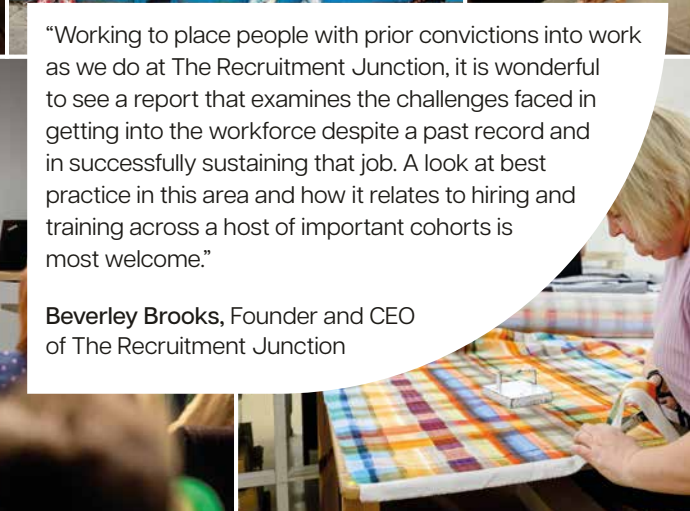
"For the past two decades our Marks & Start employability scheme, delivered in partnership with the Kings Trust, has made a difference to young people's lives. It's great to see the programme celebrated by the Jobs Foundation, and to see so many other companies committed to initiatives that build essential skills, boost confidence, and help people move into fulfilling careers."

Adam Hawksbee, Head of External Affairs at Marks & Spencer



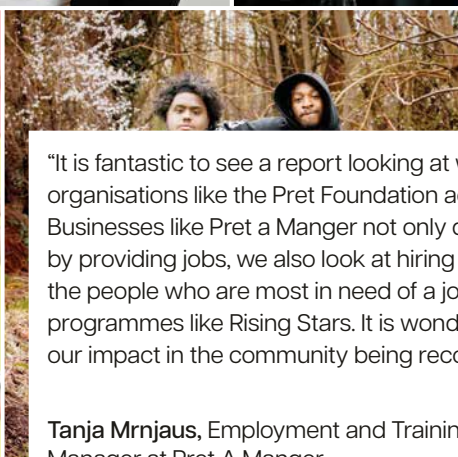
"Working to place people with prior convictions into work as we do at The Recruitment Junction, it is wonderful to see a report that examines the challenges faced in getting into the workforce despite a past record and in successfully sustaining that job. A look at best practice in this area and how it relates to hiring and training across a host of important cohorts is most welcome."

Beverley Brooks, Founder and CEO of The Recruitment Junction



"We take the mental health of our workers very seriously at Lynas Foodservice. Companies like ours do a great deal to ensure that people who are struggling with anything in their lives have a chance to get into work and to stay there. It was a pleasure to contribute to this Jobs Foundation report examining this important issue."

Andrew Lynas, Managing Director of Lynas Foodservice



"It is fantastic to see a report looking at what organisations like the Pret Foundation accomplish. Businesses like Pret a Manger not only do good by providing jobs, we also look at hiring some of the people who are most in need of a job through programmes like Rising Stars. It is wonderful to see our impact in the community being recognised."

Tanja Mrnjaus, Employment and Training Manager at Pret A Manger



"People are the lifeblood of all business and their most important asset. It's our task to develop leaders and achievers of the future, especially from young people in our local community to whom we owe so much. That's why Ladders of Opportunity, with its focus on hiring locally, is so important."

Christopher Nieper,
CEO of David Nieper

