



TOWARDS UNIVERSAL OPPORTUNITY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

**Jenna Norman, Efua Poku-Amanfo
and Avnee Morjaria**

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IPPR
8 Storey's Gate
London
SW1P 3AY
E: info@ippr.org
www.ippr.org
Registered charity no: 800065 (England and Wales),
SC046557 (Scotland)

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CONTENTS

Foreword	5
Summary.....	6
1. Introduction	9
Aims and objectives.....	9
Methodology.....	10
2. Exploring universal opportunity	11
Social mobility in 2025	11
Intergenerational income persistence	11
Mental health and universal opportunity	13
Principles for universal opportunity.....	14
3. Enrichment and trusted adult relationships	16
Access to enrichment	16
The importance of trusted adult relationships	17
A national youth strategy to unlock universal opportunity	18
Recommendations	18
4. Readiness and opportunities for good work	21
Careers education	22
Employment support	24
Recommendations	25
5. High-quality apprenticeships for skills and growth	27
Recommendations	29
6. Conclusion	30
References.....	31

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jenna Norman was an associate fellow at IPPR.

Efua Poku-Amanfo is a research fellow at IPPR.

Avnee Morjaria is associate director of public services at IPPR.

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FOREWORD

Young people are our greatest asset and the greatest indicator of a thriving society. But young people today are at a crossroads. They have lived through extraordinary challenges and sacrificed formative parts of their childhood or adolescence to keep the nation safe. Many have been at the sharp end of cumulative real term cuts to education and youth spending, leaving them with less support and fewer offline spaces to call their own. This, combined with a high cost of living, housing crisis and a rapidly changing labour market demanding new skills and worsening conditions, is testing the limits of what we can expect young people to handle. And for many young people, their safety is not adequately protected – whether it is from the risk of gang grooming and criminal exploitation or digital harms. This challenge is worsened by inadequate mental health provision which is chipping away at the fulfilment, self-esteem, and capability of a generation.

Times are tough if you are growing up today. It is hardly a surprise then, that young people are experiencing unprecedented levels of unhappiness and worklessness with wide-reaching socio-economic consequences. This is especially true for those at the sharp end of persistent or compounding disadvantage, whether of geography, class, race, disability, gender or a combination of the above. Struggling to get on and outline a path for yourself is not easy for anyone – and this is not an entirely new phenomenon – but we are witnessing it becoming worse. This is far from a done deal however. As the Covid-19 generation begins to transition from education to employment, there is huge potential to level the playing field with concerted government action on opportunity and ambition. And the new government is certainly responding to this challenge with a new opportunity mission, youth guarantee and national youth strategy being designed or delivered in the year since their election.

This report pushes these initiatives to go further and faster to deliver universal opportunity for young people aged 14 to 24. It offers both modern principles for social mobility and opportunity and practical steps which could be taken to improve young people's lives here and now. There is no simple fix but tilting resources towards those most at risk when it comes to non-formal education, work and training is a good place to start. With high economic inactivity, skyrocketing mental ill-health and some young people showing interest in the far right, delivering and investing in universal opportunity is a social, economic and political imperative. The fate of young people is the test of a nation. This report offers some ideas on how to get full marks.



Baroness Anne Longfield CBE

Baroness Anne Longfield is the founder and executive chair of the Centre of Young Lives, and previously served as children's commissioner.

SUMMARY

Britain is not a socially mobile country. Upward of 40 per cent of our variation in earnings can be explained by the circumstances in which individuals grew up (Macmillan and Outhwaite 2025). This is higher than in most other developed countries and appears to be stagnating or even getting worse. In recent years, there has been a severing of a social contract which assumes a) each generation should be better off than the last, and b) effort and merit should be rewarded equally, regardless of background.

Young people growing up today are paying a high price for this failure. These beliefs, once at least partially assumed by their parents and grandparents, are straining under the weight of persistent and compounding inequalities of class, geography, ethnicity and disability which make it harder for many young people to set out a path for themselves. They are also facing a unique set of challenges caused by spending their formative years in lockdowns and cost-of-living crises. They are now inheriting a tricky labour market and a society in flux.

This report aims to support government delivery to respond to these challenges by developing:

1. a series of principles for renewing and reclaiming ideas about social mobility and opportunity to meet the challenges of the day
2. three examples of how these principles could be applied to key areas of a young person's life during the transition from education to employment – non-formal education, work, and skills.

Our principles for exploring a more universal application of social mobility are as follows.

- **Equity:** tilting resources to those who need it most to level the playing field for every young person.
- **Place:** recognising regional inequality as a major barrier to universal opportunity and giving local people and places more power to generate opportunity.
- **Lifelong opportunity:** ensuring that if interventions fail in the early years, there remain opportunities for them to succeed throughout adulthood and adolescence.
- **Interventions which go beyond the school gates:** understanding that the education system cannot act alone to move towards opportunity for all; it will take cross-government effort.

We call this approach universal opportunity. We have asked young people and the public about their perceptions of social mobility and opportunity – as well as their experiences of the transition from education to employment in a 3,603-strong representative poll, and in youth focus groups. We found that disadvantaged young people, who were or are eligible for free school meals, and marginalised young people, who face disadvantage because of structural, persistent or compounded inequalities like ethnicity, class and geography, often had less support from public services during this key decade – and beyond it. This was especially the case for young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) where we found major cause for concern.

In response to these findings, this report encourages the government to lean on the principles of universal opportunity to expand and invest in: the ambitious goal of reducing the gap between parental income and children's life chances set out in the **opportunity mission**; the series of measures aimed at increasing the number of young people who are earning and learning in the **youth guarantee**; and the commitment to break down the barriers to opportunity in the forthcoming **national youth strategy**. In every initiative, improving young people's mental health should be the overall goal. Specifically, we recommend the following interventions in three key areas.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Enrichment, extracurricular activities and trusted adult relationships are associated with better education and employment prospects. **Our polling found that 29 per cent of young people aged 18–24 did not participate in extra curricular activities while at school. This was even lower among NEET young people.** Two-thirds of everyone we asked (65 per cent) believed that undertaking enrichment supports young people's employment opportunities. This may be because of the proven link between enrichment and the opportunity to develop a trusted adult or mentoring relationship – which has been shown to improve opportunities, especially for disadvantaged young people. However, 800,000 secondary school-aged children in the UK are currently without a trusted adult relationship or mentor. Bringing this figure down should be central to a **successful national youth strategy** that unlocks universal opportunity.

We recommend the national youth strategy includes:

- an enrichment entitlement at a minimum of 80 hours per year for every young person in every school in the country
- a trial of after school clubs in secondary schools in areas of high deprivation, mirroring breakfast clubs in primary schools – possibly paid for with dormant assets funding
- investing in a pilot of Young Futures hubs in areas of high deprivation with a focus on enrichment and trusted adult relationships, working with existing partners and providers.

2. Readiness and opportunities for good work are essential to delivering universal opportunity, especially given the rising numbers of NEET young people in the UK. Official statistics show that one in eight people aged 16 to 24 in the UK are neither earning nor learning, with major socio-economic consequences (ONS 2025). Addressing this challenge requires both ensuring young people are equipped for work and increasing the availability of high-quality jobs that offer the pay, security and prospects that young people need to build independent lives. Concerningly, we found that **fewer than half of young people aged 18–24 felt ready for work when they left education**, and this figure appeared to be lower among NEET young people. NEET young people were also less likely to say they had access to work experience and careers education at school.

We recommend the government expand the youth guarantee to respond to this by:

- increasing the age group to 21- to 24-year-olds and expanding the guarantee to include a new wage subsidy programme to generate 200,000 to 300,000 short-term, high-quality work placements with guaranteed training hours and progression opportunities. As this would be an upstream prevention programme, eligibility would be based on NEET risk
- implementing a risk of NEET indicator (RONI) database using the latest guidance developed nationally and used locally to identify young people eligible for short-term high-quality work placements subsidised by government

- exploring ringfencing a very small amount of the growth and skills levy funding to allocate to career hubs in high deprivation areas for the specific purpose of brokering equal access to work experience.

3. High-quality apprenticeships for skills and growth have been shown to support disadvantaged young people in work, and can enable universal opportunity. But the numbers of entry level apprenticeships, especially for disadvantaged young people, has plummeted in the last decade as the UK's training landscape shrinks into disrepair. Despite being an essential tool to enable universal opportunity and create the workers of the future, young people are not being prioritised for apprenticeships. Half of people think young people under the age of 21 should have highest priority, while a further one-quarter think that young people under 25 should have the highest priority access to apprenticeships.

To move towards universal opportunity in the apprenticeship system we recommend the following.

- Government should set a target for apprenticeship starts by 2035, along with investment and an action plan that includes breaking down barriers to apprenticeships for disadvantaged young people and SMEs alike.
- This could include further exploring pre-apprenticeship pathways and programmes, and help to move towards an apprenticeship guarantee in the next parliament.
- 50 per cent of the growth and skills levy should be ringfenced for young people under the age of 25 and an apprenticeship maintenance loan should be introduced to break down financial barriers to access.

These are three examples of how government could use the opportunity mission, youth guarantee and national youth strategy to move towards universal opportunity for every young person. It is not an exhaustive approach but aims to build on extensive existing work on both social mobility and young people. It offers a vision for young people which could increase social mobility while also reducing inequality and disadvantage so that every young person has the opportunity to build a decent life.

1. INTRODUCTION

Labour's opportunity mission sets its sights on breaking down the barriers to opportunity and reducing what academics call intergenerational income persistence. This is the extent to which parental income dictates children's future earnings, and is one measure of social mobility. This report is concerned with supporting government delivery to make progress towards this goal – with a focus on young people aged 14 to 24 – by developing a vision for universal opportunity and policy recommendations addressing the transition from education to employment.

WHY 14 TO 24?

We have chosen the age range 14 to 24 because this is a time when young people begin navigating their transition from education to employment and from childhood to adulthood. If interventions in childhood or education settings have failed, there are serious pitfalls and cliff edges facing the most marginalised young people. It is therefore a crucial decade to intervene and level the playing field before inequalities and disadvantages become harder to address in adulthood.

Delivering for young people must be an urgent priority for a government interested in opportunity and growth. While early years and school reform are essential, they will naturally take longer to embed and do not address the employment, economic and wellbeing problems facing those aged 14 to 24. This thread might be golden in more ways than one, given research from the Co-operative Group (2024) finding that improving social mobility could be worth up to £19 billion per year to the British economy, and Youth Futures Foundation (YFF 2023) research showing that increasing the number of young people who are earning or learning by 500,000 could add up to £69 billion lifetime boost to our GDP (YFF 2025d).

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

To support government delivery to improve the lives of young people aged 14 to 24, we believe we need two things.

1. Firstly, we need a **progressive definition and vision for social mobility** that can provide universal opportunities and ambition for all young people, not just a fortunate few. We call this universal opportunity and explore it in chapter 2.
2. Secondly, we need a **roadmap for the government to deliver** universal opportunity throughout the transition from education to employment. We have chosen to focus on three examples during this transition in chapters 3 to 5.

This report aims to move us closer to both objectives, recognising that these are major topics suitable for decades of inquiry. We do not have decades; we have a handful of years in which a generation who has experienced huge challenges must see tangible improvements in their life chances. Given this urgency and not claiming to have all the answers, we have chosen to focus on three key areas where the government could take immediate action to bring us towards a more universal model for opportunity. These are: enrichment and trusted adult relationships;

readiness and opportunities for good work; and high-quality apprenticeships for skills and growth.

It has been impossible to ignore the other major headwinds changing the lives of young people for the worse including the housing and climate crises, wealth inequality (Clark 2024; IFS 2023), problems in the further and higher education systems and the negative effects of automation. However, we have chosen to focus on the transition from education to employment as it relates to non-formal learning, employment readiness, and skills.

METHODOLOGY

Our work is informed and illustrated by consultation and polling which puts young people at its centre. Throughout this report there are findings from nationally representative polling of public attitudes where we asked 3,603 16- to 75-year-olds varied questions about their opinions and experiences. We boosted our sample for young people aged 16 to 25 and ethnicity, as well as asking people about their experiences of not being in education, employment or training (NEET) when relevant.¹ The 10-minute-long survey was conducted online with respondents drawn from Savanta's research panel. The final survey data was weighted to be nationally representative of 16- to 75-year-olds in Great Britain by age, gender, region, ethnicity, and socio-economic group. Additionally, throughout this report there are quotations directly from young people from a series of focus groups run in partnership with the Youth Futures Foundation in April 2025.

TERMINOLOGY

Throughout this report, we use terms including disadvantaged young people, marginalised young people or young people experiencing persistent or compounded inequality or disadvantage.

- By **disadvantaged** we mean those young people who were eligible for free school meals at age 11. This denotes low household income.
- By **marginalised** we mean those who experience disadvantage or inequality due to structural barriers on account of their ethnicity, geography, disability or SEND status.
- **Persistent** inequalities refer to inequalities that are very slow to shift over time.
- **Compounded** inequalities are those faced by young people experiencing intersecting or more than one inequality.

These groups will often overlap, but we aim to be specific wherever possible.

Whether it's income related barriers or race related barriers, discrimination and prejudice or class related barriers, it definitely impacts a lot of opportunities and how they are divided up. When it all intersects that can place an even larger barrier that can be hard to overcome.

Youth focus group participant

¹ Note that some of the data presented in this report including for NEET young people aged 16 to 25 are based on sample sizes of fewer than 75 respondents (denoted by an asterisk (*)). These results should be considered as indicative only and interpreted with caution, and may not fully represent the wider population in this group.

2. EXPLORING UNIVERSAL OPPORTUNITY

SOCIAL MOBILITY IN 2025

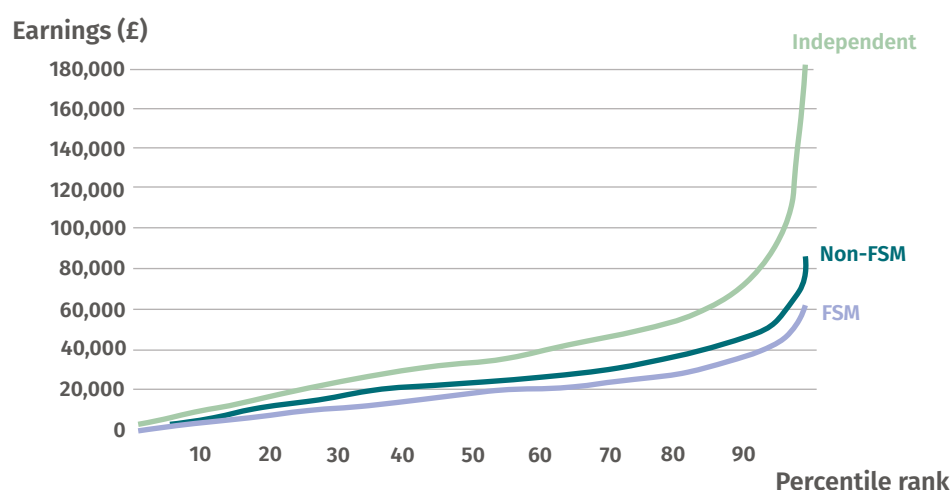
Universal opportunity is an evolution of ideas about social mobility in response to some critics who say the goal of social mobility – the movement up the socio-economic ladder – bakes in a hierarchy by default, plucking out individual success stories but leaving in place structures of inequality. They argue effort and merit are not equally rewarded in the UK due to structural inequalities and it is no longer true that each generation is better off than the last (Shaheen 2023; Todd 2021; Major and Machin 2018; Kibasi and Roberts 2018). These criticisms reflect the reality for many young people in the UK today, where what your parents earned continues to dictate your earnings (Corak 2013; Jerrim and Macmillan 2015).

INTERGENERATIONAL INCOME PERSISTENCE

ONS analysis of Longitudinal Education Outcomes data from 2022 shows that 16 per cent of children who were eligible for free school meals (FSM) at age 11 (ie from low-income homes) had an annual income of at least £30,000 at age 30. This was compared with nearly one-third (31 per cent) of those who were not eligible for FSM and 57 per cent of those at independent school.

FIGURE 2.1: CHILDREN IN RECEIPT OF FREE SCHOOL MEALS (FSM) EARN LESS AS ADULTS THAN NON-FSM CHILDREN

PAYE earnings distribution at age 30 by FSM eligibility, tax years ending 2017–19



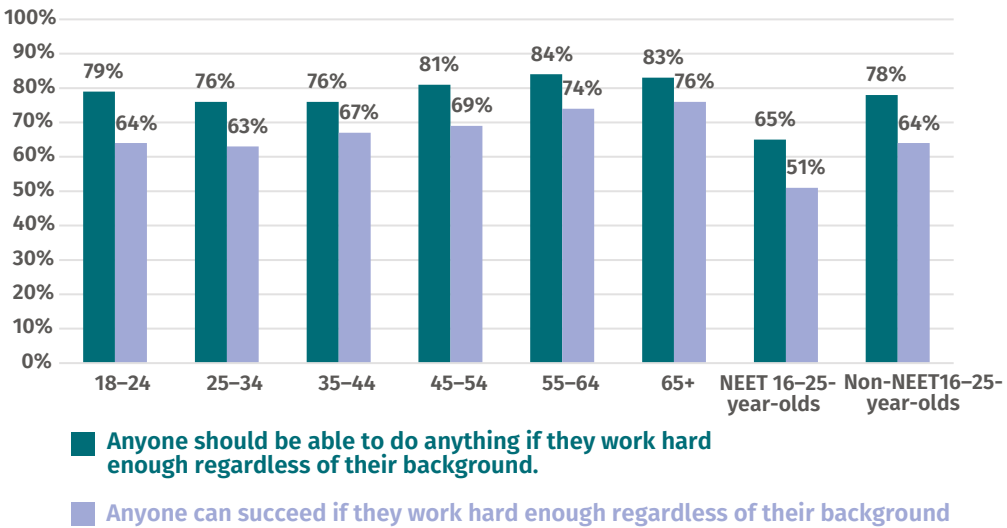
Source: ONS (2022)

Our research also found a straining of these ideas. For example, 80 per cent of respondents agree that anyone should be able to do anything if they work hard enough, yet only 69 per cent say they believe anyone can succeed through hard

work, regardless of background. This belief was less common among younger generations, with some indication that it may also be lower among NEET young people. Belief in both sentiments was lower among younger generations as well as those who are currently not earning or learning or NEET – and the perceptions gap bigger.

FIGURE 2.2: THERE IS A BIG PERCEPTIONS GAP BETWEEN PEOPLE’S IDEALS ABOUT HARD WORK AND REWARD, COMPARED TO THE REALITY, ESPECIALLY FOR YOUNGER PEOPLE AND NEET PEOPLE

Perceptions of merit and reward by age and NEET status*



Source: IPPR analysis of Savanta polling (2025)

I do believe young people can achieve incredible things if they work hard enough. But hard work alone isn’t enough when the system still puts up barriers. With the right support, fair access to opportunities, and a system that believes in us too, there is no limit to what young people can achieve.

Youth focus group participant

To solve the challenges facing young people, we need a modern conception of social mobility like those developed by the Social Market Foundation (2023), the Social Mobility Commission (2024b), and the Sutton Trust (2025b). We aim to build on this to make a small contribution to how we might think about social mobility in 2025. We propose a reframing in pursuit of ‘universal opportunity’ to focus not just on increasing social mobility for a chosen few, but also on reducing inequality and providing opportunities for every young person. This has also been called deep opportunity (Fairness Foundation 2024) and is concerned with making society fairer, not just more socially mobile – though the two can be linked in what is known as the Great Gatsby Curve (LSE Inequalities 2024).

MENTAL HEALTH AND UNIVERSAL OPPORTUNITY

Young people are experiencing a mental health crisis and this is stunting their prospects. In 2023, about one in five children and young people aged eight to 25 had a probable mental disorder, a significant increase since 2017 when the figure was one in nine (NHS 2023). The UK consistently scores poorly in international measures of wellbeing for young people when compared to other developed nations (UNICEF 2025).

It will be impossible to deliver universal opportunity on this backdrop of plummeting mental health. There are also wider societal costs. For example, a study which analysed 50 years of child development data from 1958 to 2008 found that the long-term impact of mental health problems in childhood costs the UK a total of £550 billion in lost earnings across their lifespan. The study found that 4.3 million people had been impacted by mental health problems in childhood and at 23 they earn 20 per cent less than those who have not experienced childhood psychological problems (UCL IFS and RAND Corporation 2015). Tackling the youth mental health crisis is paramount to unlocking the benefits of this approach for both young people's health and the economy.

Firstly, mental health problems act as a barrier to opportunity. For example, over 100,000 young people are NEET due to a mental health condition (UCL IFS and RAND Corporation 2015).² Secondly, poor mental health can be exacerbated when young people cannot access opportunities and employment (LGA 2023). The pandemic clearly showed this trend, as young people were the hardest hit economically and had the worst consequences for mental health (Resolution Foundation 2022).

Tackling the youth mental health crisis is a moral imperative and would bring significant economic benefits. Prompt action could mitigate the long-term consequences that poor mental health has on young people's labour market participation, such as 'opting out' of work due to struggles with their mental health (PwC 2024b). In this way, improving mental health outcomes could facilitate what the government has been labelling 'inclusive growth' – being concerned with both the size of the economy and the distribution of wealth in the economy (World Bank 2009).

Half of all mental health problems start by age 14 (Kessler et al 2005) – a pivotal age for a young person's development and transition. Non-clinical interventions with young people with mental health issues have highlighted the importance of early intervention to prevent long-term negative outcomes such as poor employment and increased NEET risk (Crowley et al 2023).

Ensuring mental health support is at the centre of opportunity is the common thread that ties together our vision, principles and our policies for a better future for young people. Every recommendation and idea in this report is aimed at achieving the first principle of universal opportunity: that young people are empowered to be happy and well.

² This estimate is from 2015 but has likely risen since given the recorded rise of mental health conditions amongst young people.

PRINCIPLES FOR UNIVERSAL OPPORTUNITY

To move towards a more universal application of social mobility, we have established a series of principles for universal opportunity. These are cross-cutting ideas which we then apply to three specific policy areas in chapters 3 to 5.

Equity

Sometimes it doesn't matter how hard you work; there are systematic barriers that prevent young people from marginalised demographics from achieving certain goals and careers that are otherwise easier to access for those who have the support and resources.

Youth focus group participant

Equity is distinguished from equality as it applies resources proportionately, recognising where need is highest, rather than evenly. Equity can often help to deliver equality of opportunity and close gaps in outcomes too. When it comes to equality of opportunity, background and identity matter even if we wish they didn't. One of the major failings of some historic definitions of social mobility is their blindness to structural inequality which dictates so many people's life chances so that effort is not equally rewarded. Interventions will therefore need to be targeted at those who need it most in order to genuinely level the playing field.

Place

I live in a small little town. There's not much to do here. If you have big ambitions, you can't stay here ... If anyone has any high ambitions, they have to get out of here.

Youth focus group participant

Regional inequality is a major barrier to social mobility in the UK. IPPR North's 2025 *State of the North* report systematically outlines how opportunity is poorly spread across different regions. Similarly, recent research by the Sutton Trust (2025c) and Social Mobility Commission (2024a) found that opportunity hotspots are mostly all in London or the surrounding areas.

Some frames of social mobility deal with these inequalities by suggesting young people should get 'up and out' of where they are from to succeed, thereby separating 'gifted' individuals from 'deprived' communities. Many young people may want to leave to seek opportunity elsewhere, but they should not be forced to. Any attempt to kickstart social mobility and reduce inequality must start with a comprehensive analysis of place-based inequality and hyper-local solutions. Taking place seriously when thinking about universal opportunity also means looking at delivering opportunity to communities and collectives, not simply individuals.

Lifelong opportunity

Having the opportunities to try different things and say this is for me and this isn't is really important.

Youth focus group participant

Our vision for social mobility is not limited to interventions in the early years of life. Opportunities must be continuous and iterative throughout young people's lives. If interventions in early years or childhood fail, public services must step in time and again throughout adolescence to allow all children the privilege that only some currently have: to fail and try again. Those at the sharp end of structural inequalities may not always be ready to jump when an opportunity says, "how high?" They may not be able to afford to take the risks more well-off children can (ONS 2023), often because they have a familial safety net that the social security system no longer provides to everyone.

Beyond the school gates

Social mobility is sometimes framed as something that education policy can fix alongside the hard work of young people. Education absolutely remains a key driver of social mobility and opportunity, but it should not act alone in a world where what happens outside school can dictate young people's ability to progress in education and work just as much as what happens in school.

The challenges young people face and the world around them has changed in recent years. Now more than ever, a new whole-government approach to social mobility is needed. This will require a systematic shift in the way that government acts for young people to make work more joined up. It will require looking well beyond just education policy for solutions and across themes as diverse as transport, housing, healthcare and social security.

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

In our focus on the transition from education to employment, we are interested in three example areas of a young person's life that can bolster their opportunities beyond the school gates – often via an increase in what is known as social and cultural capital. Defined by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and illustrated in recent works by Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison (2019), social capital refers to the benefits accrued through someone's social network and relationships. Cultural capital refers to the knowledge, skills or behaviours that can impact someone's class positioning and access to opportunities. Moving towards universal opportunity will mean finding ways to equalise access to social and cultural capital, as recommended in chapters 3 to 5.

3.

ENRICHMENT AND TRUSTED ADULT RELATIONSHIPS

Moving towards a universal model of social mobility for young people aged 14 to 24 will require looking in depth at both formal and non-formal education. In this chapter, we start with those aged 14 to 18 and the significant value of non-formal education. Using evidence from polling and focus groups, we outline how these can be enablers for universal opportunity.

ACCESS TO ENRICHMENT

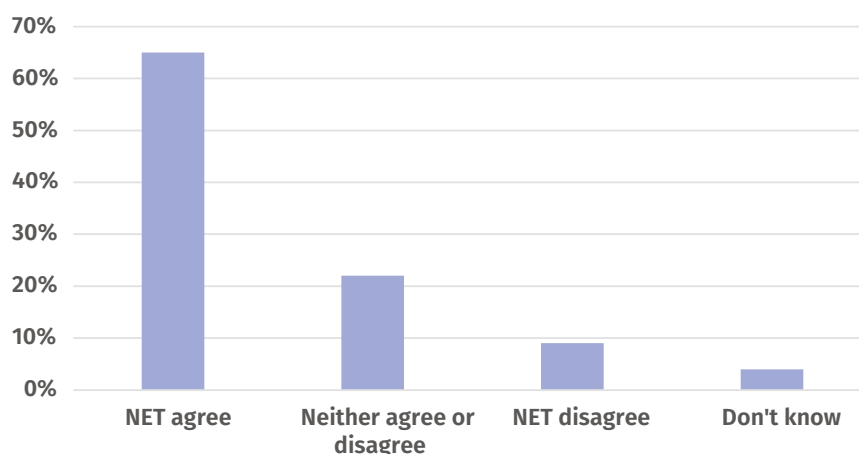
I think [there needs to be] something out there, separate to school, like a hub, to bring awareness of these opportunities. Like having the confidence to go out there. Being young and going for your first job can be very scary so we need support with these things.

Youth focus group participant

Defined as “a wide variety of structured activities and clubs, such as sports, music, art, drama, dance, outdoor/adventure, debating, volunteering, business/enterprise, tech/digital, and cooking” (Centre for Social Justice 2021) and occasionally known as “extra-curricular activities” enrichment is a key part of non-formal education for young people which can improve their social and cultural capital – thereby enabling universal opportunity. The benefits of participation in enrichment activities are substantial and include an increased probability of progressing into higher education and employability (Education Policy Institute 2024). Our polling reiterates this value: approximately two thirds of people agree that undertaking enrichment activities supports young people’s school performance (62 per cent) and future employment prospects (65 per cent).

FIGURE 3.1: TWO-THIRDS OF PEOPLE AGREE THAT ENRICHMENT ACTIVITIES SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE’S FUTURE EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS

Perceptions of the benefits of enrichment



Source: IPPR analysis

Enrichment can happen at school, as part of the curriculum or through extra-curricular activities delivered by teachers and other school staff, and in the community through specialist youth services like youth centres and hubs run by youth workers and specialist mentors. Both have seen funding challenges in recent years (Villa 2024). Whether in or out of school, the benefits of enrichment go beyond the individual: it can offer a form of childcare for parents (CPAG 2022), reduce the likelihood of child exploitation (Youth Endowment Fund 2021), and has been linked to better attendance (Centre for Young Lives 2025). Enrichment has also been found to improve young people's overall wellbeing and mental health by increasing levels of optimism, peer belonging, self-esteem and confidence (CFEY 2021). Research has also shown that there are lower odds of a child being diagnosed with anxiety and depression after engaging with extra-curricular activities (Charite et al 2023).

However, participation in enrichment varies. Our research found that only 40 per cent of those on FSM who did three or more hours of enrichment activities while at school, college or sixth-form. There is some evidence to suggest that NEET young people may have been less likely to participate in school enrichment activities. At the same time, 37 per cent of NEET young people did not participate in extra-curricular/enrichment activities (such as sports, dance, drama, or youth clubs) offered by their school, college, or sixth form. Meanwhile, people in the North East were 16 percentage points less likely to have undertaken at least an hour of activity per week than those living in London. Given these vast inequalities based on parental income and region, prioritising our principles of place and beyond the school gates will be needed to level the playing field on enrichment.

I found through my own experience that the people that get involved in opportunities are people who have already been involved and already aware as they hear through word of mouth. If people aren't already involved, then that's another barrier.

Youth focus group participant

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUSTED ADULT RELATIONSHIPS

Enrichment matters for the wellbeing and cultural development of every young person. It has also been proven to have another major benefit: its ability to build relationships with trusted adults. To allow for a non-formal and low pressure relationship, a trusted adult is ideally not a parent, family member, or teacher. Young Minds' definition of a trusted adult is someone who is "non-judgmental, has no expectations, is honest, reliable and a good listener" (Young Minds 2022).

Strong trusted adult relationships provided by qualified practitioners in a variety of settings can be an enabler of universal opportunity. This is partly through the support they can offer a young person in the transition from education to employment. Forty-one per cent of those we asked think having a trusted adult is one of the top three factors in helping a young person be ready for work. However, currently up to 800,000 secondary school-aged children or more are without a trusted adult relationship in the UK (Pro Bono Economics 2024).

CASE STUDY: FOOTBALL BEYOND BORDERS

Football Beyond Borders supports young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who are disengaged from school by building relationships through a shared passion for football. Their programme focusses on trusted adult relationships to improve school engagement, life skills, and transitions into adulthood.

An evaluation with Pro Bono Economics found these relationships delivered over £5.5 million in wellbeing benefits, and more than £100,000 per school. At-risk students saw wellbeing gains up to £8,700. The impact is clear: 97 per cent of young people at risk of exclusion completed the school year; they weren't permanently excluded or managed moved, and they are up to 10 times more likely to pass English and maths GCSEs than the available benchmark groups.

A NATIONAL YOUTH STRATEGY TO UNLOCK UNIVERSAL OPPORTUNITY

The government has committed to a new national youth strategy. This will be a chance to put the proven benefits of trusted adult relationships at the forefront of young people's lives. If done well and accompanied by the correct investment – alongside an expanded youth guarantee (see chapter 4) – interconnected youth provision can help enable universal opportunity.

- This will mean starting with those most in need in areas of highest deprivation or highest NEET levels, in line with our principles of equity and place.
- Services will need to be locally led, building on existing people and spaces with investment from central government.
- They will need to combine open access provision and targeted support to offer young people a diverse youth ecosystem.

To enable universal opportunity through the national youth strategy, we recommend: a) an in-school enrichment entitlement; b) piloted after-school clubs in secondary schools; and c) a clear delivery roadmap for the Young Futures hubs. These policies would help allow every young person – and especially disadvantaged young people – to develop a relationship with a trusted adult or mentor. This should be the focus of the national youth strategy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

All children should have the opportunity to do an extracurricular activity, and I think they should have a minimum option of a range [...] of arts, sports, emotional development – so they have a range of options

Youth focus group participant

Recommendation 1: Introduce an enrichment entitlement of a minimum of 80 hours per year in the most disadvantaged areas

Based on previous calls by the former National Citizens Service Trust, the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, and Centre for Young Lives, an 80-hour enrichment entitlement would ensure that young people who do not have access to enrichment via their parents or local community can access it as part of their timetabled school day.

- Many schools already offer enrichment both as part of the curriculum and through extra-curricular activities so many young people already participate in 80 hours or more over the school year. However, our research clearly finds there is more to do to equalise provision.
- Establishing 80 hours as an entitlement will raise the status of enrichment and standardise access. This will need to be accompanied by the enrichment framework currently under development (Department for Education 2025).
- School funding is extremely stretched, and an enrichment entitlement will not be possible without additional investment. The government should explore ring-fenced funding for schools to spend on high-quality enrichment, through an enrichment premium particularly targeting disadvantaged pupils.

Recommendation 2: Trial after school clubs in secondary schools in the highest deprivation areas

As part of delivering a new national youth strategy to unlock universal opportunity, we recommend the government mirror their commitment to breakfast clubs in primary schools with after school clubs in secondary schools. Reflecting the need for better longitudinal evidence on enrichment and non-formal education, these should be piloted in high-deprivation areas before expanding across the UK. This would also help link enrichment at school to the transition into employment by enabling better join-up of local pathways and opportunities to develop a trusted adult relationship.

A MODEL FOR AFTER SCHOOL CLUBS

This model was devised by Jonathan Hopkins and Citadel Policy and Communications in partnership with the Duke of Edinburgh's Award.

- After-school clubs in secondary schools could support an expanded range of enrichment activities, skills and experiences on the timetable.
- Building out from the enrichment framework and benchmarks co-designed with the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, after school clubs can keep young people in a safe environment, with learning outcomes which are planned and intended for their personal and social development.
- Provision could be led by local partners, opening school and academy trust buildings to youth and community groups, beyond lettings. They could be supported by a youth work coordinator and include 'taster' experiences and peer group activities, including with mental health teams, and could act as 'hubs' for meaningful work experience and careers guidance.
- This could be funded by an elective premium for schools. Youth and community organisations commissioned to run after-school clubs will benefit from stable funding that will help sustain and grow their wider provision of out-of-school activities.
- This has been costed at approximately £50 per annum** per secondary school student and up to £100 per annum for disadvantaged young people, assuming every secondary school is offered two hours a week to all students (with the option to pay for more) and eight hours a week (two hours a day, Monday to Thursday) for those on free school meals.
- A pilot could be paid for using the £132.5 million announced for children and young people as part of the dormant assets strategy (DCMS 2025).

****Based on Times Education Commission (TEC) estimates for an elective premium and multi-academy trusts known to run two hours a week of elective activities for £47 per annum per head.**

Recommendation 3: Pilot Young Futures hubs in areas of high deprivation

A lot of youth centres have shut down [...] they need to become more accessible again so that we have places for young people can go. People need almost like a careers advisor but someone who is going to be more relaxed about it.

Young person in the North

We recommend the national youth strategy prioritise high-quality community provision which can build the evidence base for both open access and targeted youth services.

- A youth hub might be a physical place or several places where young people can go, or a collection of services and staff designated to support young people in a local community. Some already exist, but the new government has committed a programme of Young Futures hubs to integrate local services together.
- We recommend Young Futures hubs are piloted in areas of highest deprivation in order to reach disadvantaged young people in the UK's poorest places and build the evidence base to iterate and implement them more widely over the next parliament – with a focus on building trusted adult relationships.
- The government should design a best practice model informed by consultations they have undertaken with young people and local authorities. The hubs should be the connective tissue for youth provision, bringing together the youth guarantee, violence reduction units and youth charities – becoming centres of excellence similar to the SureStart model for improving young lives.

4.

READINESS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR GOOD WORK

Good work and training enable young people to meet new people, learn new skills, travel and, crucially, become financially independent. Like education policy, work has a vital role to play in delivering universal opportunity. In this chapter, we look at how the transition from education to employment could be improved to move towards universal opportunity.

Parts of the labour market, education and employment support systems are failing young people. This is indicated by alarming statistics on the number of young people aged 16 to 24 who are neither earning nor learning – which is now 923,000 or one in eight young people (ONS 2025). This has serious social and economic consequences, with research finding that reducing the NEET rate by 500,000 could add £69 billion to our economy (YFF 2025d).

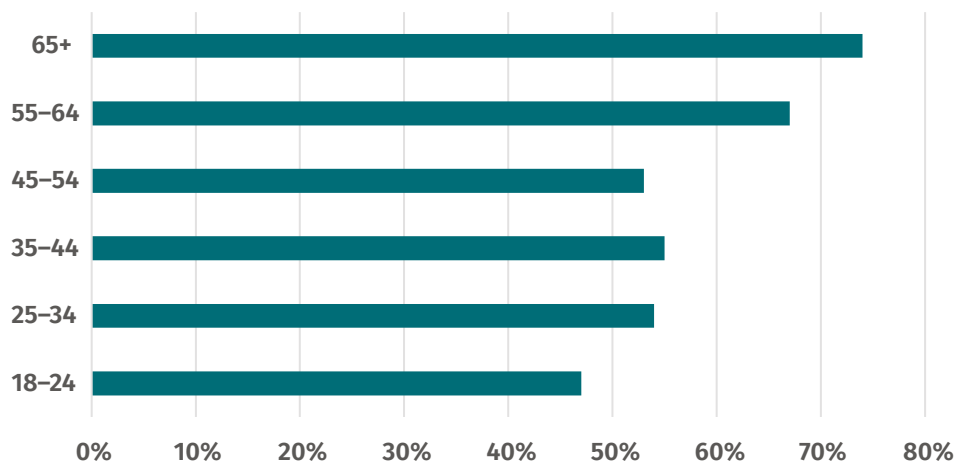
To solve this problem, we need to best understand which young people are NEET and why. Accounting for our principles of equity and place is a good place to start. For example, Impetus' recent analysis of longitudinal education outcomes (LEO) data shows that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are twice as likely to be NEET than their better-off peers, and this disadvantage is often compounded: young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and low qualifications who are eligible for free school meals are nearly three times more likely to be NEET than average. There are also major regional differences: eight of the top 10 local authority areas associated with the highest likelihood of being NEET are in the north of England and the Midlands. And ethnicity must be considered in detail: young people from Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Traveller communities, along with mixed white and Black Caribbean backgrounds, face the highest NEET rates (Baloch 2025).

Our research found similar cause for concern. We found that those aged 18 to 24 were less likely (47 per cent) to agree they felt ready for work when they left education, compared with 60 per cent of those over 26. There are some indications that NEET young people may also have felt less prepared (36 per cent agreeing*). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this was lower among NEET young people, with just over one-third (36 per cent*) of NEET young people agreeing.

But the tools young people are given to ready themselves for work are only part of the picture. There has also been a recent reduction in vacancies in sectors which employ proportionately more young people (YFF 2025b) and there are serious earning inequalities to consider. For example, more than one-third (37 per cent) of young people aged 18 to 24 were in low hourly pay in 2023, more than double the rate among workers aged 25 to 64 (15 per cent) (Resolution Foundation 2023b). Low wages and youth poverty put up further barriers to work for young people – especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds – including the cost of travel, uniform or public transport (Learning and Work Institute 2022).

FIGURE 4.1: OLDER PEOPLE ARE MORE LIKELY TO HAVE FELT READY FOR WORK AFTER EDUCATION THAN YOUNGER PEOPLE

Readiness for work after education by age



Source: IPPR analysis

Similarly, the quality of work and progression opportunities being offered to some young people today is a serious barrier to universal opportunity. Solving these problems will require a cross-government approach to lifelong opportunity, intervening both on the supply side (improving the readiness and skills of young people) and on the demand side (improving the quality of opportunities, pay and progression for young people). This starts with looking across three major areas: careers education, employment support, and labour market intervention.

CAREERS EDUCATION

At our school we have to do work experience in year 10. A lot of people got theirs through connections that they already had ... Quite a lot of people couldn't do work experience because they didn't have those connections ... especially if they had any other disadvantages like not having a car or not being able to afford public transport.

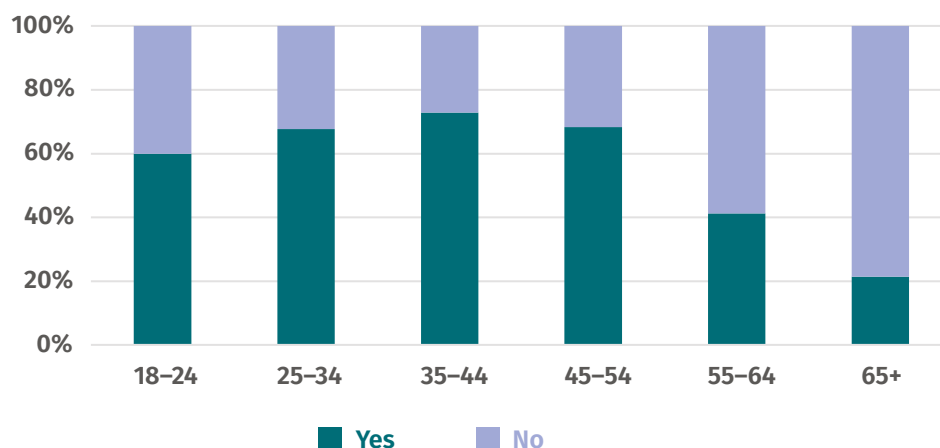
Youth focus group participant

Work experience

Work experience is one part of careers education. It is the government's intention to ensure every secondary school-aged student is entitled and has access to two weeks of work experience. This is an excellent ambition and data from the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) against the Gatsby benchmarks – standards for high-quality careers education in England – suggests considerable progress has been made on improving the quality and quantity of work experience (CEC 2024): in 2023/24, 72 per cent of schools and colleges reported they had fully achieved Gatsby benchmark 6, 'experiences of workplaces', up from 52 per cent in 2021/22 (ibid). However, our research found there is further to go to achieve this goal in practice: 44 per cent of non-NEET young people said that they did work experience in school, college or sixth form. There is some evidence that this might be lower for young-people who are NEET (40 per cent*)

FIGURE 4.2: RESPONDENTS NOW IN THEIR LATE 20S, 30S AND 40S WERE MORE LIKELY TO SAY THEY DID WORK EXPERIENCE AT SCHOOL, COLLEGE OR SIXTH FORM THAN YOUNGER AND OLDER PEOPLE

Work experience completion by age

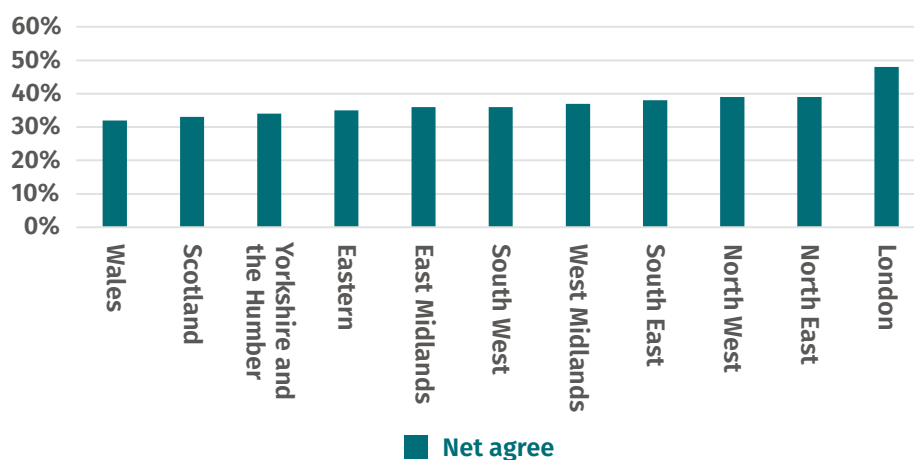


Source: IPPR analysis

At the same time, access to work experience is still overly reliant on social capital like personal or family networks (see chapter 2). Over half of people (57 per cent) agreed that work experience opportunities usually rely on who you know, not what you know. Thirty-eight per cent of people aged 16 to 25 found out about the work experience they did or are planning to do via their parents or family friends. Worryingly, nearly a quarter (23 per cent) disagreed that there were good work experience opportunities for young people in their local area. This also varied substantially by region.

FIGURE 4.3: NEARLY ONE-QUARTER OF PEOPLE DO NOT FEEL THAT THERE ARE GOOD WORK EXPERIENCE OPPORTUNITIES IN THEIR AREA (THIS VARIES BY AREA)

Perceptions of good work experience opportunities for young people in local area by region of the UK



Source: IPPR analysis

'NEET young people appeared less likely to say there are opportunities for good work experience (with around 31 per cent agreeing*) and employment (around 26 per cent*) in their local area, compared to 48 and 43 per cent respectively among non-NEET young people. The government's ambition and new guidance on delivering two weeks of work experience for every secondary school-aged child is a step in the right direction, but we recommend targeted investment in careers hubs to improve the coordination and brokerage of work experience and ensure marginalised young people do not miss out.

Careers advice and guidance

Similarly, the government has pledged to recruit 1,000 new careers advisors in schools. Careers advice and guidance is another essential pillar of careers education. We find this is urgently necessary as a quarter of young people aged 16 to 25 (25 per cent) said they did not receive support and guidance around work or careers during their education. Again, this is cast against a backdrop of an overall improving picture, with the CEC reporting that 78 per cent of schools are achieving against Gatsby benchmark 8 on providing personal careers guidance (CEC 2024). Nonetheless, 25 per cent of non-NEET young people aged 16–25 said they didn't receive careers guidance while at school, sixth form or college, compared to what appears to be a slightly lower proportion (roughly 20 per cent*) among NEET young people we polled.

EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT

If you leave education there is no support for you. The very little support there has come from specific schools so if you leave education there is nothing.

Youth focus group participant

The transition from education to work is a crucial moment to support young people. At both aged 16 and 18 there are risks of cliff edges as they leave the formal support systems of education and enter the labour market. Even the social security system is not catching many of these young people. Youth Futures Foundation analysis of the labour force survey (October to December 2024) shows that 48.5 per cent of NEET 18- to 24-year-olds do not claim or receive social security (YFF 2025a). The government's current offer here – the youth guarantee – is limited by its ambition, budget and age restriction.

THE YOUTH GUARANTEE

In November 2024, the Department for Work and Pensions announced a 'youth guarantee' programme. This is a £45 million initiative aimed at ensuring all 18- to 21-year-olds in England are either employed, in education, or undergoing training. It begins with eight 'trailblazer' areas to test local delivery models and provide targeted support. Specific measures will be defined by individual trailblazers but could include matching young people to job or training opportunities, and offering free travel passes, mental health support, and financial advice. The scheme focuses on vulnerable groups, such as care leavers, and insights from these pilots will inform a national rollout, with the goal of ensuring every young person can earn or learn.

Where transition support is done well locally, there is proactive tracking, outreach and support for young people most at risk of being NEET. However, many local authorities do not have the resources or infrastructure to deliver this service, and many are facing a unique challenge in identifying those who are not claiming social

security. The messy map of careers hubs, youth hubs, job centres, local authorities, further education providers and voluntary sector organisations suffers from a debilitating lack of join up and regional inequality. The government's offer to join them up and provide employment and training support in eight areas is a step in the right direction, but employment itself should be offered to those at highest risk of being NEET. This should be done via a short-term wage subsidy programme like those implemented during recent youth unemployment crises. The youth guarantee is an opportunity to improve join up of these services, with the aim of guaranteeing access to a trusted adult relationship, as explored in chapter 3.

CASE STUDY: WAGE SUBSIDY PROGRAMMES

2020: Kickstart

The Kickstart scheme, launched in September 2020, aimed to provide six-month, subsidised job placements for 16- to 24-year-olds on universal credit at risk of long-term unemployment. By March 2022, 163,000 placements had started. Seven months after starting a Kickstart placement, approximately two-thirds of participants were in employment, education, or training. The evaluation indicated a reduction in universal credit claims among participants. Nonetheless, despite aiming to support those furthest from the labour market, nearly half (46 per cent) of Kickstart participants held level 3 qualifications or higher, and 31 per cent had over a year of prior work experience (DWP 2023).

1998: New Deal for Young People

Tony Blair's New Deal for Young People, introduced in 1998, aimed to reduce long-term youth unemployment through a mix of support and conditionality. A central feature was the wage subsidy programme, offering employers £60 per week for up to six months to hire 18- to 24-year-olds who had been unemployed for over six months. This incentive aimed to lower hiring risks and encouraged employers to take on young workers. The scheme achieved its target of placing 250,000 young people into work in September 2000, and by October 2001 had helped 339,000 into jobs (NAO 2002).

These are two examples of successful wage subsidy programmes which have been shown to have a positive impact on youth employment (YFF 2025c).

RECOMMENDATIONS

To move closer to universal opportunity in the labour market, we recommend the government work with local authorities to take the following steps.

1. **Expand the youth guarantee** as soon as possible to include young people aged 21 to 24, given that 61 per cent of NEET young people are this age (Learning and Work Institute 2025). The guarantee should also be expanded to other areas of highest need as soon as possible, with a focus on improving the number of participants who have a trusted adult relationship.
2. **Introduce a national risk of NEET indicator (RONI) database using the latest guidance** which is developed nationally and used locally to assess, track and actively support those at highest risk. This is already being trialled in several 'place-based trailblazer' areas but should be expanded to develop a national approach to RONIs that can be used locally.
3. **Offer employment placements, not just employment support, via a wage subsidy scheme.** The youth guarantee should include investment to provide short-term high-quality employment placements for young people aged 16 to 24.

- Accounting for our principles of equity and place, the RONI should be used to identify those eligible for the wage subsidy scheme to ensure it is delivered in line with our equity principle. The objective should be to deliver 200,000 to 300,000 placements, mirroring the growth in young people who are NEET since 2021/22.
 - In line with a lifelong opportunity approach, it is paramount that work placements are high quality and include substantial opportunities for training – including a guaranteed number of hours – not just filling labour market shortages. There should be opportunities for progression such as a guaranteed interview at the end, for example.
 - Eligibility of young people ought to be based on those who are deemed high risk according to RONI data in the government's place-based trailblazer areas initially – and then nationally as the RONI database develops.
 - Employers in growth sectors and mission-linked industries should be eligible to apply to provide these subsidised placements.
 - A wage subsidy programme should not be a last resort but a proactive intervention which offers young people high-quality employment and training, with opportunities for progression and long-term employment.
4. Consider ringfencing a very small percentage of the growth and skills levy to increase **investment in careers hubs** specifically for the purpose of funding coordinators to broker work experience placements and offer personal support for young people with high RONI status. Investment should be focused on careers hubs in areas of highest deprivation, reflecting the principles of place and equity.
 5. The Department for Education should work with the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Business and Trade to consult employers, educators and young people to **adopt a clear definition of high-quality work experience** – in order to deliver on their pledge to give every secondary aged pupil access to two weeks of high-quality work experience.

5. HIGH-QUALITY APPRENTICESHIPS FOR SKILLS AND GROWTH

The view on apprenticeships is definitely changing. It used to be seen as lesser than, but I think that is changing. A lot of people are taking alternative routes and doing what is right for them, not just A-levels because that's what their friends do.

Youth focus group participant

Both the Sutton Trust (2017) and Social Mobility Commission (Department for Education 2020) have historically demonstrated the link between better apprenticeship pathways and social mobility. They clearly have a role to play in enabling universal opportunity. Looking again at the transition from education to employment or training, we now consider how universal opportunity can be supported via the skills system.

Unfortunately, this is a major task as the UK falls behind our neighbours when it comes to vocational education, training and employment pathways (OECD 2023; Resolution Foundation 2023a). In recognition of the need to improve the UK's skills pathways, the apprenticeship levy was introduced in 2017 as a 0.5 per cent levy on employers who spend more than £3 million annually on staff pay. However, the levy has struggled to deliver more apprenticeship starts or more investment on skills. Experts identify some of the following problems with the levy.

- **Low budgets.** There is a discrepancy between the amount raised by the levy and the overall apprenticeships budget, and some employers are not spending their levy, writing it off as a tax without reinvesting it in training (IPPR 2022).
- **Young people are missing out.** In the last decade, the share of entry level apprenticeships has fallen from 60 per cent to 20 per cent (Workwhile 2025) while older or higher and degree level apprenticeships have increased (Resolution Foundation 2023a).
- **SMEs are off the pitch.** SMEs are major employers but they neither pay into, nor can spend, the apprenticeship levy directly. The number of apprentices starting in small and medium businesses has decreased since the introduction of the levy in 2017, with apprenticeship starts in England at 125,740 in 2022/23 (GOV 2025). This has consequences for regional inequality given that most young people outside of big cities are more likely to interact with SMEs (Workwhile 2025).
- **Demand may outstrip supply.** Attitudes towards apprenticeships, especially among young people, are changing. More young people want to do apprenticeships (Sutton Trust 2022), but their educators and parents are not always equipped to know how to support this ambition. At the same time, there is an overall lack of apprenticeships on offer (UCAS and Sutton Trust 2023), making them more competitive (Sutton Trust 2025a).
- **Financial barriers.** A report by UCAS and the Sutton Trust (2023) found that a quarter (24 per cent) of former apprenticeship applicants said that one of the top three reasons why they did not pursue an apprenticeship was because they felt they could not afford to do so.

I would have liked to have done an apprenticeship but there was nothing accessible for me.

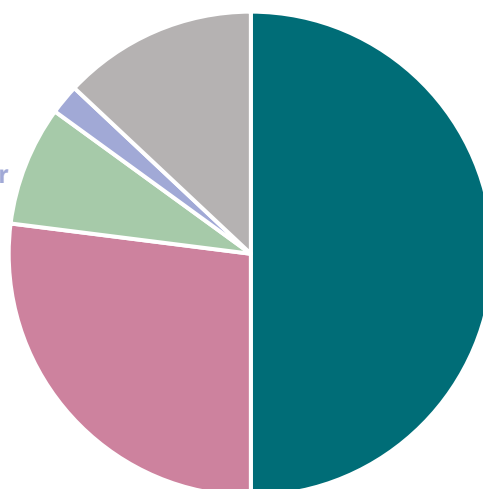
Youth focus group participant

The opportunity mission pledges to turn the page on this policy failure by reforming it into a growth and skills levy. Labour also promised the return of traineeships. Along with the CIPD and Youth Futures Foundation (2024), we urge the government to go further on this agenda to ensure young people are reaping the rewards the levy promises – by setting a target for apprenticeship starts as part of the opportunity mission, and ringfencing levy funding for those under the age of 25. Our survey results indicate public alignment here, with 77 per cent saying young people under the age of 25 should have the highest priority access to apprenticeship opportunities. This was highest in the North East (81 per cent), West Midlands (80 per cent), the East (81 per cent) and South West (80 per cent.) Our survey results indicate public alignment here, with half of people thinking young people under age of 21 should have highest priority whilst a further quarter think that young people under 25 should have the highest priority highest priority access to apprenticeships

FIGURE 5.1: MOST PEOPLE THINK YOUNG PEOPLE UNDER THE AGE OF 25 SHOULD HAVE THE HIGHEST PRIORITY ACCESS TO APPRENTICESHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Support for financing apprenticeships

- Young people under 21
- Young people under 25
- People over 25 looking to retrain / change career
- People over 25 looking to upskill in their existing career
- Don't know



Source: IPPR analysis

In the longer term, ringfencing funding should also be part of delivering an apprenticeship guarantee so that level 2 apprenticeships are available to everyone who wants and is qualified for one. The government have started to rebalance the apprenticeship system by reducing the eligibility for level 7 or graduate level apprenticeships to those under the age of 21, but there is further to go. This will likely require major changes to how apprenticeships are funded and incentivised, either via increasing the levy and creating disincentives for underspend and better partnerships with SMEs, and/or by creating a model like Ireland's National Training Fund (Parliamentary Budget Office 2023) where all employers pay in to the levy proportionally. Quality assurance will need to be a priority here to ensure that unscrupulous employers do not simply convert their entry-level jobs into apprenticeships where wages are lower and employment rights lessened.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Set a target for apprenticeship starts by 2035 as part of sharpening the focus on young people and skills. The target will need to be accompanied by an action plan including the recommendations below.

Recommendation 2: Ringfence 50 per cent of the growth and skills levy funding for those under the age of 25 and 25 per cent of that to those under the age of 21. This would mean that employers can use half their levy for apprenticeships and training of those over 25 and half for those under 25 to drive up apprenticeships for young people. We would also recommend that local authorities have more devolved powers to spend apprenticeship budgets.

Recommendation 3: Consult on how SMEs can best be incentivised and supported by government and large employers to deliver apprenticeships via the growth and skills levy. Explore the potential merits of a proportionate but universal levy system or lowering the threshold for payment. This should only be explored alongside improved support for SMEs to deliver apprenticeships.

Recommendation 4: Work to introduce an apprenticeships guarantee in the next parliament so that apprenticeships are available for anyone aged 16 to 24 who wants one. This will require a concerted systems change to make more entry-level roles and high-quality training opportunities. It will also mean exploring the pay and employment rights of apprentices to ensure it is not taken advantage of.

Recommendation 5: Introduce an interest free apprenticeship maintenance loan scheme. This would help break down financial barriers faced by apprentices and introduce greater parity between university education and apprenticeship training.

Recommendation 6: Consider levy funds use on pre-apprenticeship pathways and programmes. Given the high levels of economic inactivity described here, getting young people ready for level 2 apprenticeships is a priority. The return of traineeships is an example of what a 'stepping-stone' pathway could look like, and government has also introduced foundation apprenticeships – but we recommend government explore how further levy funds can be used to best effect here, without diluting the apprenticeship overall offer.

6. CONCLUSION

In this report we have chosen three example policy areas where government could look to apply a more universal approach to social mobility, with a focus on four principles: equity, place, lifelong opportunity, and intervention beyond the school gates. Designing and delivering policies for the opportunity mission, national youth strategy and youth guarantee through this lens has the potential to turn the tide on a very difficult decade for young people who have grown up through the pandemic and cost of living crisis. They are facing alarming levels of unhappiness and economic inactivity which demand major cross-government intervention. We have recommended where some of this attention and investment may be most efficiently and effectively allocated to tilt resource to where it is needed most and therefore ‘lift the floor’ on the experiences of disadvantaged and marginalised young people during their transition from education to employment. Taking this approach in the non-formal education sector, labour market and on apprenticeships has the potential to enable a new generation to benefit from an evolved way of thinking about social mobility and create a positive and aspirational vision for the government – as well as fulfilling its ambitions for economic growth.

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