

1. About Catch22

Catch22 is a charity and social business committed to building stronger, safer communities, supporting over 130,000 people across the justice, youth provision, education, social care, employability and skills sectors. Our vision is a strong society where everyone has a safe place to live, a purpose, and good people around them. To achieve this, we address the root causes of unemployment and support people to access and sustain good quality jobs.¹ Catch22 provides high-quality, tailored employability and skills programmes in partnership with the corporate sector that equip individuals facing barriers to work with the support they need for a path into sustainable employment or training. We also deliver employability support as part of the Liverpool Youth Guarantee Trailblazer.²

Over the past year, we worked with over 3,200 individuals across the UK aged 18-24 who are furthest from the job market and facing barriers to work. Furthermore, we have equipped young people with the skills and experiences to transition into entry-level roles in the digital and energy transition industries, addressing the increasing number of vacancies in such growth sectors.

We understand the barriers young people face and have designed programmes that achieve results for those often left behind: 48% of the young people supported last year secured employment or education after taking part in one of our short-term programmes, and we saw a 114% increase in confidence that they had the job skills to enter the market amongst 18–21-year-old participants.

While we acknowledge the wide range of structural drivers and solutions to youth unemployment and inactivity, the Catch22 submission to the *Young People and Work Report: Call for Evidence* will focus on the learning from our employability programmes.

2. Summary of response

Working with over 3,200 individuals aged 18–24 across 2024-25, many of whom are young men, from ethnic minority backgrounds, neurodivergent, or care leavers, Catch22 delivers tailored employability and skills programmes that build confidence, provide industry-relevant training, and connect young people to real job opportunities in sectors such as the digital and the green economy. Our programmes demonstrate strong outcomes: 48% of participants progress into work or education, and confidence levels in job skills more than double.

Evidence from Catch22's services shows that low confidence, poor mental health, lack of industry experience, and insufficient qualifications are the most common barriers keeping young people NEET (not in education, employment or training), especially for care-experienced and neurodivergent cohorts. Their work also highlights the importance

¹<https://www.catch-22.org.uk/>.

² <https://liverpool.gov.uk/youthtrailblazer>.

of localised support, accessible delivery models, mental health interventions, and strong partnerships between Jobcentres Plus (JCP), employers and community organisations. Catch22 recommends embedding wellbeing outcomes into employability measures, improving collaboration with local employers, funding training aligned to local growth sectors, adapting provision for neurodivergent young people, tailored support around transition points, and prioritising support for those from low-income households.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Investment in community-based mental health prevention and treatment for children and young people should be prioritised as an essential part of addressing the growing number of young people at risk of becoming NEET.
2. Investment and incentivisation is needed to help Jobcentre Plus work together better with young people, employment programmes, and local employers.
3. Develop local strategies that draw upon the strengths of local authorities, local employers, JCPs and delivery partners to create robust employability support structures that match young people with the right next opportunity.
4. Design employability programmes to help improve both employability skills and sector-specific skill development.
5. Employability programme adaptation should be made for neurodivergent young people in line with learnings and recommendations developed through the ongoing SEND reform carried out by the Department of Education and its pending Schools White Paper.
6. SEND and inclusive education reform policies should align with national Youth Guarantee objectives and targets.
7. Invest in training, skills development and awareness of how to engage with growth industry employers including clean energy and technology.
8. Create outreach programmes that include existing local authority partnerships such as care leaving teams to target young people not currently or likely to engage with Youth Guarantee and other DWP employability initiatives.
9. Government should invest in local organisations who provide community-level support to young people transitioning from school to post-secondary education, training or employment.
10. Fund tailored, small-cohort programmes with one-to-one career coaching, work experience opportunities, and 6 months of in-work mentoring, especially targeted for care experienced young people, prison leavers, and those facing mental health challenges.

4. General findings and overview

Catch22 provides expertise and insight from our delivery programmes that run across England with 18–30-year-olds. Our data presented in this submission focuses on two age ranges: 18–24-year-olds and in alignment with the Youth Guarantee age range, 18–

21 when relevant. These insights are supplemented by evidence and best practice from our wider children and young people services in mental health, youth justice, and alternative provision where appropriate.

4.1. Programme lengths and types

Supported by our corporate partners, Catch22 primarily delivers short-term employability programmes of, generally, 4-to-6 weeks, often supplemented by 3-6 months' pre-employment and 3-6 months' in-employment career coaching support. Programmes are tailored to specific cohorts, such as care leavers, or growth industries. They are delivered online or in-person, and pay attention to the importance of soft skills, CVs and cover letters and preparing for interviews.

The short-term nature and intensive career coaching support, together with the mix of delivery format, ensures accessible, low-threshold programmes with good attendance and completion rates, and positive outcomes by building connectivity gaps and building trust and confidence.

Our practitioners shared that lack of skills is compounded by a lack of confidence. 34% of the 18–24-year-olds we worked with in 2024–2025, said at the start of their participation that they had sufficient job skills and experience to confidently enter the job market. Crucially, within 6 weeks, this jumps up proportionally 97% to a total of 68% of all participants, which speaks to the potential growth in confidence amongst young people who receive one to one support and training on what steps they can take to pursue the right next action in their career journey with a trusted adult.

Our programmes have helped secure significant outcomes for hundreds of young people. Focusing specifically on 18–21-year-olds, our John Lewis Career Hive in Manchester helped 60% of young people find education, training and employment (ETE). Our Care Leavers Into Careers (CLIC) programme helped 49% of young people find employment, often in less than a year. This holds true across some of our larger programmes like Energise (50%) and Social Switch (58%) and the TikTok Creative Academy in collaboration with the Lennox Partnership helping as many as 77% of young people into ETE.

These outcomes demonstrate that short-term employability programmes combining training with several months of tailored coaching can have a significant impact on employment outcomes for young people and have an important role to play in local and national youth employment strategies.

4.2. Geographical reach

Young people are acutely impacted by regional disadvantages, with the North East of England having a higher proportion of NEET young people as well as many rural communities which are often less well resourced.³ The Youth Jobs Gap⁴ Midlands, an average youth unemployment rates such as the North East, West and East Midlands, coastal rural regions of East Anglia and urban areas in Greater London.

³ <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-024-19537-z#ref-CR8>.

⁴ https://impetus-org.files.svcdn.com/production/assets/publications/Report/Impetus_YouthJobsGap_ExploringCompoundDisadvantage.pdf?dm=1747140359, 7.

4.3. Response to questions

This submission aims to provide evidence to answer the two core questions of this inquiry.

1. What is stopping more young people from participating in employment, education or training?

2. What would make the biggest difference to support more young people to participate?

5. What is stopping more young people from participating in employment, education or training?

Young people who participate in Catch22 employability programmes tell us that there are a few key barriers that prevent them from accessing employment and training.

5.1. What they told us is holding them back

Catch22 captures the training and employment challenges young people identify when starting to engage with our employability programmes and then measure their improvement against these.

- 56% of participants in our programme listed lack of industry experience or industry specific qualifications as their primary barrier to work. This increases to 60% for Black and ethnic minority (BAME) participants.
- At 13%, the second most common primary barrier participants identified was “lacking the professional qualification/certification needed for primary outcome goal”
- 77% of care leavers stated that being care experienced was the primary barrier keeping them out of employment, education and training.

Our learning from such insights ensures that we develop impactful ways to adapt to address those barriers to help young people succeed.

5.2. Cohort overview in Catch22 employability programmes

In delivering our services, Catch22 has seen the importance of strategic relationships with local authorities who work with particular groups of young people and can have important insight on who is most at risk of becoming NEET. “Hidden NEETS”, which will be discussed later on in this submission may in fact be known by local authority departments who engage with that young person through specific service delivery, even when the young person may not be engaging with their local Jobcentre or claiming Universal Credit (UC). Commissioned and collaborative services like that which Catch22 provides offers a golden opportunity for joined up employability support at the local level which achieves set outcomes.

The particular needs and opportunities for cohorts in which Catch22 specialises are outlined below.

RECOMMENDATION: Fund tailored, small-cohort programmes with one-to-one career coaching, work experience opportunities, and 6 months of in-work mentoring, especially targeted for care experienced young people, prison leavers, and those facing mental health challenges.

5.2.1 Care Leavers

Being care experienced can cause particular risks and challenges which young people have to navigate as they transition both out of care and into the adult world. Regarding care-experienced young people and barriers they face, the evidence is clear. About 39–41% of care leavers aged 19–21 in England are NEET.⁵ By comparison, around 10–13% of all young people of the same age are NEET, meaning care-experienced young people are around 3–4 times more likely to be NEET.

Catch22 runs the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum (NLCBF), whose membership includes Leaving Care Teams from most English local authorities, and which co-produces policy and best practice work via its Young People Benchmarking Forum. The NLCBF submission to the Child Poverty Taskforce emphasised the increased risks of poverty that care experienced young adults face. The Young People's Benchmarking Forum's *In Their Own Words* report, which gathered evidence from over 200 care experienced young people, found that 77% were struggling to buy food at least some of the time.⁶ The report also showed that many found it difficult to take up employment because of the costs associated with the first month of work.⁷ Others cited the financial disincentives associated with housing benefit.⁸ While there are welcome reforms to housing benefit expected, the lack of work experience, financial insecurity, and financial cliff edge when accessing employment remain pertinent employability challenges to young people with care leaving status.

Breaking down the some of the intersections of challenges, when focusing on care leavers, Catch22 participants in our employability programmes repeatedly listed it as a primary barrier despite other challenges:

- 40% of young people with an offending history listed being a care leaver as their primary barrier to employment
- 34% of neurodivergent participants had care leaver status
- 41% of asylum seekers and refugees were care experienced.

Being care experienced or lacking industry experience or qualifications were the two most common reasons young people told us that they had become NEET. Addressing these challenges together requires outreach and specialist programmes which meet young people where they are at, helps them develop a deeper understanding of the options available to them and the support they are entitled to receive, and can address specific issues care leavers face.

⁵ <https://ayph-youthhealthdata.org.uk/health-inequalities/drivers-of-inequalities/young-people-not-in-education-employment-or-training-neet/>;

<https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/138968/pdf/>.

⁶ <https://leavingcare.org/in-their-own-words-2024-cost-of-living-report/>.

⁷ <https://leavingcare.org/in-their-own-words-2024-cost-of-living-report/>

⁸ <https://leavingcare.org/in-their-own-words-2024-cost-of-living-report/>.

Best practice example: Care Leavers Into Careers (CLIC)

Our award-winning Care Leavers Into Careers (CLIC) programme (with Barclays life Skills) and Career Hive (with John Lewis Partnership Foundation) provide holistic career guidance for care experienced young people.⁹

Young people on this programme receive both soft skill training and one to one mentorship. In recognition that care experienced young people often lack the social capital and support that family members might provide, Catch22 staff support young people to navigate the ups and downs of the transition into full time work, training or post-secondary education and provide that combination of practical and emotional support that every young person needs. They do this by helping young people access interview and work clothes, support with transportation costs or cycling and a listening ear.

After just 8 weeks of participating in these programmes their confidence that they have sufficient job skills and experience to enter the job market increase from 40% to 61%.

Crucially, these programmes also connect young care leavers with employers, such as Travel Lodge who arrange site visits, CV reviews by staff and mock interviews. When positions become vacant, CLIC participants are given guaranteed interviews if they apply. Catch22 programmes connect young care leavers with national employers like Travelodge, Nando's, Asda and others to connect ambition with opportunity.

5.2.2 Ethnicity

According to data from the Social Mobility Commission, between 2014-2024 the national average rate for young people aged 16-24 who become NEET is 14%, while the risk is significantly higher for some minoritised ethnicity groups. Looking at young people from lower working-class backgrounds, White British young people had a 23% risk of being NEET, whereas this was 25% for mixed ethnicity or a Black Caribbean young people.¹⁰ Our employability programme evidence indicates that BAME young people are also more likely to be so-called “Hidden NEETs” or young people who are unemployed or inactive but not in receipt of welfare benefits or engaging with Job Centre Plus (JCP). Youth Futures Foundation argues that NEET rates that map across different ethnic groups are caused by different factors and barriers.¹¹ In a survey they ran, YFF found that 26% of all respondents said that the main barrier to their careers was ethnicity-based discrimination.¹²

⁹ https://www.linkedin.com/posts/clic-programme-42a25a2a8_clic-team-are-delighted-to-have-been-awarded-activity-7303795216933634048-nXbk/.

¹⁰ [https://social-mobility.data.gov.uk/intermediate_outcomes/routes_into_work_\(16_to_29_years\)/destinations_following_the_end_of_compulsory_full-time_education/latest#by-ethnicity](https://social-mobility.data.gov.uk/intermediate_outcomes/routes_into_work_(16_to_29_years)/destinations_following_the_end_of_compulsory_full-time_education/latest#by-ethnicity).

¹¹ <https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/NEETS-TRENDS-ANALYSIS-Q2-2025.pdf>, 60.

¹² <https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Discrimination-and-work-report.pdf>, 8.

To address this, Catch22 offers tailored outreach and specific coaching so young people's personal and intersecting barriers can be addressed. Across 2024-25, approx. 73% of the 18-21-year-old young people enrolled in our employability programmes mapped onto these minoritised ethnicity groups. Catch22 supports young people to help them navigate situations where they might face discrimination through one-to-one coaching and guidance.

5.2.3. Neurodivergence and SEND

RECOMMENDATION: SEND and inclusive education reform policies should align with national Youth Guarantee objectives and targets.

RECOMMENDATION: Employability programme adaptation should be made for neurodivergent young people in line with learnings and recommendations developed through the ongoing SEND reform carried out by the Department of Education and its pending Schools White Paper.

Research has also shown that neurodivergent children, including those with autism and ADHD are more likely to be absent or excluded from school.¹³ This situation puts them at risk of finishing school without qualifications or having a difficult time adjusting and transitioning into work or training. While this underlines the importance of better SEND provision in general as well as in education, which the recent government investment in SEND training of teachers aim to address, ¹⁴¹⁵ This should include a change of practice at JCPs because, as specified in section 6.4 of our evidence submission, our data shows that JCPs are far less likely to refer young people with neurodiversity to our programmes than other cohorts. are far less likely to refer young people with neurodiversity to our programmes than other cohorts.

This situation puts them at risk of finishing school without qualifications or having a difficult time adjusting and transitioning into work or training.

Catch22 has targeted programmes in collaboration with charity leaders on SEND and neurodivergence, such as Ambitious about Autism, and employers, like Salesforce, to help break down barriers for neurodivergent young people who are currently NEET in the UK.

Best practice example: Digital Skills Academy (Autism cohort)

Delivered with Ambitious about Autism and Salesforce, Catch22 tailored its digital employability curriculum to autistic learners by:

- Reducing cognitive load, breaking tasks into smaller steps.
- Using visual aids and concrete examples.
- Providing sensory-friendly environments and advance materials.
- Allowing flexible participation (e.g. one-to-one, written, asynchronous).
- Building on strengths such as coding, gaming, and design.

¹³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2215036621003679>.

¹⁴ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2215036621003679>.

¹⁵ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/POST-PN-0733/POST-PN-0733.pdf>.

Furthermore, working with a well-known organisation with a key specialism increased referrals onto the pathway: many autistic young people felt more able to sign up to the employability programme through a trusted organisation that advocates for their futures. In return, Catch22 was able to support the Ambitious about Autism service users find good quality, sustainable employment.

5. 2.4. Experience with the criminal justice system

Young people leaving prison encounter a wide range of barriers — from unmet basic needs and persistent employer stigma to a lack of continuity between support in custody and in the community. These challenges contribute to stark disparities in employment outcomes: six weeks after release, individuals leaving open prisons achieve a 43% employment rate, more than double the national average.¹⁶ However, tailored employability support can significantly improve their employability outcomes.

Best Practice Example: Youth To Adult Hub

Commissioned by MOPAC, Catch22's Youth To Adult (Y2A) Hub in the London Borough of Newham supports young adults on probation with wrap around support.¹⁷ To promote reintegration and pathways into employment, Y2A partners with specialist providers and regularly hosts events to provide education, training or employment (ETE) and networking opportunities. Young adults are supported through practical workshops focused on CV writing and disclosing convictions, helping them gain the skills and confidence to pursue work opportunities. Within the Y2A Hub, we actively support building social capital by connecting young people to networks within their communities. This includes peer mentoring and access to practical development opportunities such as first aid courses, which not only increase employability but also foster a sense of agency and belonging.

Between November 2024 and April 2025, 82% with an ETE need were supported into an opportunity. Success factors include:

- Multi-agency delivery - services work together under one roof, reducing duplication and confusion, and making problem solving quick and easy.
- Sequenced support - e.g., housing and health needs addressed before ETE, avoiding setting people up to fail.
- Assertive linkage - mentors work with service users throughout their whole journey, including rejections and setbacks, to keep them on track - do not just signpost/refer them.

¹⁶ <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/performance-tracker-local/england-and-wales-prisons/how-performance-changed>.

¹⁷ <https://www.catch-22.org.uk/find-services/y2a-mentoring/>.

5.3. Confidence as barrier and opportunity

Confidence is a significant barrier to young people actively pursuing opportunities through work, education or training: nearly half of all young people report low confidence when starting out on our employability and training programmes. A key impact of our programmes is helping to boost confidence to move them out of inactivity and start feeling capable of beginning their job search.

All 18–24-year-olds who enrolled in our employability programmes in 2024–2025 reported significant percentage increases in confidence across several key areas:

- 97% increase in belief that they have sufficient job skills and experience
- 73% increase in belief they can identify appropriate job and apply for them effectively
- 29% increase in motivation to enter the job market (increasing from 69% to 89%)
- 59% increase in confidence to enter the job market
- 98% increase in confidence that they would be successful in a job interview (increasing from 34% to 69%)

5.4. Lack of mental health support is holding young people back

RECOMMENDATION: Investment in community-based mental health prevention and treatment for children and young people should be prioritised as an essential part of addressing the growing number of young people at risk of becoming NEET.

As the *Keep Britain Working Final Report* showed, young people with mental health conditions who are economically inactive due to a long-term health condition has risen 76% between 2019–2024.¹⁸ Policy Connect's *Skills Commission Interim Report: Earning or Learning: A New Agenda for Youth NEET Reduction* highlights that the mental health crisis has a direct impact on youth employment: “1 in 6 of those NEET currently report having a mental health condition, a rate that has nearly tripled since 2012”.¹⁹

Poor mental health does not occur in isolation. Intersecting experience and circumstances often contribute compound low confidence, self-esteem, and feelings that existing opportunities are not the right fit. According to the Centre for Mental Health, additional risk factors for mental health conditions can include experience in care and children who grow up in poverty, abuse, neglect and experience with the criminal justice system.²⁰ The Youth Futures Foundation in their *Understanding drivers of recent trends in young people's mental health* report highlights robust evidence that economic insecurity exacerbates low mood and anxiety symptoms.²¹

¹⁸ <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6909fac488a98da87e292282/keep-britain-working-review-final-report.pdf>. 13.

¹⁹ <https://policyconnect.org.uk/news/policy-connect-publishes-interim-report-on-earning-or-learning-inquiry-reviewing-evidence-on-how-to-support-young-people-into-work-education-and-training/>, 23.

²⁰ <https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/factors-that-impact-mental-health/vulnerable-children/looked-after-children/>; CentreforMH_MappingTheMentalHealthOfUKYoungPeople.pdf.

²¹ <https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Understanding-drivers-of-recent-trends-in-young-peoples-mental-health-July-2025-final.pdf>, 42.

Youth unemployment or inactivity and poor mental wellbeing can therefore reinforce each other and should be addressed in tandem, both operationally and in local and national government policies, to ensure better mental health, employment, and social mobility outcomes for young people.

It is essential that mental health and wellbeing support is linked up with employment so that young people better understand that much of the challenges they face are surmountable. When young people increase their resilience and confidence with appropriate support, they can feel better equipped to navigate a challenging job market and competitive educational system. Equally, mental health care should be seen as a preventative measure for many children at risk of becoming NEET.

At Catch22, we see many young people who state they have a mental health condition or wellbeing concern that is posing a challenge to them, but that engagement with employability and skills development supports addressing these concerns. After only a few weeks of engagement on our employability programmes, they show improvement. The 18–21-year-olds participants saw a 33% reduction in their mental health and wellbeing challenges. This increased to 35% for neurodivergent young people with SEND and 61% for BAME young people.

Reversely, addressing mental health issues can lead to improving employability outcomes. In North London, Catch22 runs a youth wellbeing hub which provides holistic support for young people aged 16–24 and is designed to cater to varied mental health and wellbeing challenges young people face. While reducing youth unemployment is not the primary aim of the centre, it has emerged as achieving significant positive outcomes of not only improved mental health but also of increasing employability and reducing inactivity. Crucially, the young people accessing The Hive include those most likely to be left out or left behind of other services and systems. The Hive has a social prescribing budget to help with travel costs for young people from low-income households, a lifeline for some trying to access care.

Best practice example: The Hive

The Hive is a youth wellbeing hub based in Camden. The service acts as the local authority's main early support hub for 16–24-year-olds facing mental health challenges and was established as a strategic response to a critical shortfall in mental health provision for young people transitioning from adolescent to adult services thereby facing a 'cliff edge' at age 18 within statutory mental health pathways.

The Hive offers early intervention and wraparound support for young people experiencing, or at risk of, poor mental health. It uses a holistic model, seeking to address emotional wellbeing alongside social, physical, and practical needs. The team at The Hive deliver this through:

- A drop-in social hub with table tennis, games, and "food-drop" donations
- One-to-one emotional, therapeutic and practical support
- Programme of scheduled creative and sporting activities and events
- Employability services

- Sexual health clinic
- Substance misuse advice

Early indicative findings of a current independent evaluation of The Hive seem to show that wellbeing interventions manifest in feelings about employment and other opportunities:²²

- 84.9% reported improved social and other soft skills
- 91.3% reported feeling more optimistic about what they can achieve
- 84.4% reported help *towards other future goals*
- 72.8% reported help in *moving towards employment*
- 71.8% reported help in *starting education or training*
- 65.4% reported help in *staying in education or training*

The Hive offers an example of how holistic care works. If the Youth Hubs set out in the national Youth Guarantee and government strategies or programmes, such as the Young Futures Hubs, do not align properly, then a crucial opportunity to improve both mental wellbeing and youth employment might be missed.

The recently released Future Minds Roadmap, which Catch22 contributed to, encourages the Government to “[s]cale Young Futures Hubs to deliver the Government’s manifesto commitment to open access mental health support in every community – integrating therapeutic interventions, GPs, family support, employment advice, and youth programmes under one roof”.²³ Having the right mental health support in place, at community level, is vital in preventing the next wave of NEET young people facing many barriers that they could potentially overcome.

5. 5. Employability skills and sector specific skills development

RECOMMENDATION: Design employability programmes to help improve both employability skills and sector-specific skill development.

Young people are, naturally, at the start of their career. They have limited experience. Engaging with employment services and entering the job market requires a set of skills itself.²⁴ NEET young people are not only not work-ready but also need support to engage well with employability programmes.²⁵ This is why one to one coaching is so important to help young people gain a better understanding of the processes they must go through to secure ETE opportunities, not in the least with AI presenting new challenges and opportunities.

²² Unfinished programme evaluation due to be published in 2026.

²³ <https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Future-Minds-Report-2026-D4.pdf>, 4, 14 and 23.

<https://learningandwork.org.uk/news-and-policy/off-the-grid-just-one-in-four-young-people-who-are-neet-get-help-from-the-employment-support-system-to-find-work/>, 56.

²⁵ <https://ippr-org.files.svcdn.com/production/Downloads/Towards-universal-opportunity-July-25.pdf?dm=1751912952>, 21.

Best practice example: A.I.R.S.

With Microsoft and Salesforce, Catch22 co-designed employability programmes reflecting evolving digital needs. The Artificial Intelligence: Real Skills (A.I.R.S.) module, for example, equips young people with AI-related employability skills.

The A.I.R.S module includes the following content:

- Overview of AI tools
- How AI can assist in different jobs
- Communication and collaboration skills
- Risks of AI – such as data protection and environmental impact
- How to write effective prompts
- Digital employability skills such as Microsoft 365 suite and managing data in tables and graphs

Thus, Catch22 is addressing a gap highlighted in the King's Trust report in regard to young people having much to gain if they understand AI as a tool for both securing and performing in a paid role.²⁶

It is however also crucial that general knowledge is strategically paired with industry specific insight and knowledge to tailor support to opportunity, not in the least in growth sectors with skills gaps such as AI, digital, and energy transition.

Catch22 are addressing some of these challenges through our corporate partnership employability programmes, such as our Digital Edge programme funded by Microsoft. Our Salesforce funded Digital Skills Academy focuses on digital skills development to help connect students to opportunities in early career tech support and coding related jobs. Each of these two programmes include 4 weeks of training on both practical skills and soft, social skills to help lay a foundation for what young people need to be successful in the digital sector. They then are assigned a personal work coach who supports them in one-to-one sessions for 6 months to help them transition into employment. In-work support is also offered for 6 months which ensures young people are supported as they manage in-work confidence building to better ensure long-term employment. In 2025, of all 18–21-year-olds who completed our programmes 57% went on to access ETE and 43% of those in Digital Edge found employment or training as a result.

5.6. General knowledge about the job market

A lack of knowledge about relevant industries and job opportunities is another important barrier for young people struggling to get work or become active. While this also points towards the importance of e.g. career advice in education settings, already part of the national Youth Guarantee plans, our service delivery evidence shows that some of this particular challenge can also be addressed through short-term employability programmes.

²⁶ [https://www.kingstrust.org.uk/about-us/news-views/gen\(eration\)-AI-report](https://www.kingstrust.org.uk/about-us/news-views/gen(eration)-AI-report), 15.

The Catch22 partnerships with leading businesses such as Salesforce, Microsoft, Shell UK, and Barclays aim to not only increase young people's awareness and knowledge about their local job market in general, but also craft targeted programmes to provide training and information on growth industries. As also specified in section 6.3 of our evidence submission, this enables young people to understand the potential opportunities in sectors where long-term career development is possible.

Social value partnerships like these align closely with the government's economic growth plans, including the Modern Industrial Strategy that emphasises investment, innovation, and skills to help the UK economy thrive.²⁷ Catch22 believes that supporting young people into good jobs with room to grow and be part of growing sectors that make the UK an international competitor is an important priority. We understand that getting a job can sometimes be about who you know as much as what you know and our corporate partnerships help to address this.

We would also urge the government to consider how its current review of public procurement and social value requirements, conducted by the Cabinet Office, can better support both the funding for and opportunities in addressing youth unemployment.

5.7. Geographies

Geographical differences in, for instance, educational attainment, socio-economic inequalities, youth provision, job markets, and economic investment all play significant roles in the levels of youth employment and inactivity. Responses to address these will therefore need to be tailored to local needs and opportunities.

The geographical disparities between our employability programme outcomes indicate both some of the areas with specific challenges as well.

On programme completion, 18–21-year-old participants were:

- Significantly less likely to enter employment in the East of England, North East England, and South West England than our average outcome.
- Young people in Greater London were just below the average
- Participants in North West England (especially Greater Manchester and Liverpool) were much more likely to secure a job after our programme than in any other region.

While there are no conclusive causes of these disparities, they seem to suggest the importance for youth employment strategies and to consider:

- The job market challenges in rural and coastal regions as well as the North East of England
- The maturity of local growth, skills, and employability strategies, employer partnerships, and leadership of Mayoral Authorities, compared to areas where these are still being established.

²⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/the-uks-modern-industrial-strategy-2025>.

- The maturity, presence, and reach of VCS providers, such as Catch22, in local employment and employability networks.

Such differences also show the importance of closely aligning youth employment strategies with the government's drive to local growth and skills strategies, also as part of its devolution plans, and for these to be reviewed in light of closing geographical disparities.

6. What would make the biggest difference to support more young people to participate?

6.1. Jobcentre Plus and opportunities to better collaborate

RECOMMENDATION: Investment and incentivisation is needed to help Jobcentre Plus work together better with young people, employment programmes, and local employers.

The national Youth Guarantee rightly places JCPs at the heart of wider partnership work in improving youth employment levels. However, our evidence indicates that for this to succeed, JCP will need to strengthen both their collaboration with local employability support provision and their awareness of the needs and capabilities of specific cohorts of young people.

Catch22 works closely with many JCPs to support young welfare benefit claimants into work through our programmes: JCPs accounted for 31% of the referrals we received for our employability programmes for 18-21-year-olds in 2024-2025. However, JCP referrals for care leavers and SEND young people were significantly lower, with 16% and 14% respectively, despite also our specialist programmes targeting these cohorts.

This may require a combination of culture change in the Jobcentres as well as increase in capacity at Jobcentres to take a more holistic approach to support.

JCPs will also need to overcome the breakdowns in relationships or pre-existing lack of trust of young people in the advice and support offered by JCPs. As such Catch22 would also like to warn against strong conditionality setting in the national Youth Guarantee, as sanctions not only erode confidence in the JCP as a support structure but also risks the deterioration of potential mental health problem due to financial hardship.

DWP's delivery of the Youth Guarantee through provision of Jobcentres Plus branches and reforms on conditionality must include a consideration of young person's barriers to work and education before conditionality is enforced. The commitments and investment outlined in new policies must be given time to have impact before strict sanctions erode trust. In our programmes, 75% of care leavers were claiming UC and about 70% of neurodivergent participants were as well. This is higher than the overall figure for all participants, which is 57%.

6.2. Local employer relationships

RECOMMENDATION: Develop local strategies that draw upon the strengths of local authorities, local employers, JCPs and delivery partners to create robust employability support structures that match young people with the right next opportunity.

Youth Futures Foundation argues that employer's collaboration and engagement with the Youth Guarantee is vital and the chance to invest in young people as long-term employees and future leaders is a golden opportunity.²⁸ While we touch on employer engagement in terms of our social value partnerships as well as the growth industries in this evidence submission, we choose not to expand on the wider policy challenges and opportunities in employer collaboration. Instead, we would like to emphasise the importance of improving the JCP role in local partnerships in this respect.

Catch22 employability staff broker positive relationship between local employers, JCPs, and Catch22 teams in which each works together to help support a young person into an appropriate and secure job. A key element of this is our offer of personalised pre-employment and, crucially, in-employment support; the latter also directly and indirectly supporting the employer. However, we are also finding that some of the DWP targets and KPIs for JCPs disincentivise some of this relationship building by prioritising numbers over long term outcomes.

Success comes when JCPs work with service providers like Catch22 to help upskill young people and then local employers have been included in the process to help recruit young people into early career roles through JCP recruitment drives. This long-term, strategic approach closes gaps and helps guide young people through to the ultimate goal of secure employment. Catch22 is keen to deepen these relationships and needs JCPs to prioritise this approach as well.²⁹

6.3. Growth industries

RECOMMENDATION: Invest in training, skills development and awareness of how to engage with growth industry employers including clean energy and technology.

The government's Modern Industry Strategy sets out bold plans for economic renewal, with a focus on growth industries such as AI, tech, and energy transition. It also acknowledges the importance of addressing significant skill gaps to this end. Catch22 believes that the national Youth Guarantee currently does not match this ambition in its focus on industries such as retail and hospitality.

Engaging employers in growth industries in the design of a national employment support offer ensures key industry skills gaps are addressed in Youth Guarantee initiatives. This contributes to the aims of Skills England who hope to form a coherent national picture of where skills gaps exist and how they can be addressed, alongside unifying the skills landscape to ensure that the workforce is equipped with the skills needed to power economic growth.³⁰

²⁸ <https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/news/new-directive-for-employers-to-empower-neet-young-people/>; <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/almost-a-million-young-people-to-benefit-from-expanded-support-new-training-and-work-experience-opportunities>.

²⁹ <https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/news/new-directive-for-employers-to-empower-neet-young-people/>; <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/almost-a-million-young-people-to-benefit-from-expanded-support-new-training-and-work-experience-opportunities>.

Catch22's social value partnerships demonstrate how industry collaboration can plug sector-specific gaps. In 2024-25, jobs in tech, digital and energy accounted for 6.6% of all job starts by the completion of our employability programmes. This is particularly impressive given how competitive these fields are and that the young people on our programmes often are not work-ready and lack confidence, but within a few months were able to secure potentially quite lucrative, sustainable employment.

Best practice example: Energise

Energise is a pre-employability programme delivered by Catch22 in partnership with Shell UK. It is designed to support people aged 18+ who face barriers to work to secure entry-level energy transition jobs and apprenticeships, e.g. in EV installation, offshore wind.

The Energise programme reached over 800 young 18–24-year-olds in 2024-2025.

The programme is currently focusing on engaging young people in the North West of England (especially Greater Manchester and Liverpool City Region), Greater London, and Norfolk.

Through 4-week workshops Catch22 delivers:

- A strong and balanced mix of industry insight and general employability skills.
- A more in-depth understanding of the Green/Energy Transition sector, beyond the narrow 'default' solar panels and wind turbines.
- A balance between education, insight and empowerment.
- Empowerment of people by reminding them of how many skills they already have and how much they already know.

The short-term programme achieves impressive outcomes for young people: 50% of 18-21-year-olds who completed the programme in 2024-25 secured ETE. Participant confidence in being successful in a job interview increased from 33% to 80%.

6.4. Hidden NEETS and opportunities to tailor support to specific cohorts

RECOMMENDATION: Create outreach programmes that include existing local authority partnerships such as care leaving teams to target young people not currently or likely to engage with Youth Guarantee and other DWP employability initiatives.

In 2025, 40% of our employability programme participants aged 18-21 were not known to JCPs despite being unemployed or inactive. This increased to 43% for 18–24-year-olds. Crucially, 22% of 18–24-year-old participants enrolled in a Catch22 employability programmes were inactive at the point of enrolment, meaning they were not actively seeking out employment or training.

We are therefore pleased to note that the DWP acknowledges that high number of so-called "hidden NEETs"; 18-21-year-olds who are unemployed or inactive but not

claiming Universal Credit or other benefits. and aims to ensure that the national Youth Guarantee will not overlook this significant cohort.

While we acknowledge the importance of the planned Youth Hubs and, based also on the Youth Trailblazer learning, outreach activity as part of the national Youth Guarantee to this end, our evidence shows the importance of integrating other local agencies into the strategic and operational partnership networks. Across all our employability programmes, 14% of the referrals come from local authority services such as leaving care teams, housing and homelessness teams, and young offending teams. In addition to our own proactive outreach activities, it is our local authority engagement that ensures that “hidden NEETs” access our tailored provision.

Success in the implementation of the Youth Guarantee will therefore only come when local authorities are included in local strategic and operational partnerships, and that this will be reflected in national DWP and DfE policy making. Similarly, other government programmes such as the crime prevention and diversion Young Futures Prevention Partnerships, should also come into play. This becomes particularly important to ensure that the Job Guarantee element, which is for those 18-21-year-olds in receipt of Universal Credit for more than 18 months, would not push “hidden NEETs” even further away from support and opportunity.

In delivering on the Youth Guarantee, Government must consider young people not currently taking up Universal Credit or not engaging with JCP and prioritise outreach that targets them and builds their trust. These are often young people who have felt let down and suspicious or generally feel disenfranchised from traditional pathways.³⁰ Therefore, opportunities that are linked to claiming Universal Credit may be avoided as rumours of antagonistic work coaches and sanctions disincentivise participation.

6.5. Transitions

RECOMMENDATION: Government should invest in local organisations who provide community-level support to young people transitioning from school to post-secondary education, training or employment.

Schools, youth clubs, hubs, alternative provision, and social groups are the foundation of young people’s social lives. The Youth Hubs that form an important part of the Youth Guarantee can therefore also function as a vital stepping stone for young people.

Catch22 knows that prevention is a crucial part of this challenge, which is why in addition to being an active Youth Trailblazer partner in Liverpool, we also deliver our Digital Skills Academy to 16–18-year-olds still in education to prepare them for the workforce. This programme equips young people with digital and AI skills aligned to tech sector skills demand. Participants in Digital Skills Academy engage in both individual and team-based projects to build their digital and AI skills and knowledge. This is key for the digital growth sector as Skills England published its analysis of future employment needs showing that occupations in Digital, Adult Social Care, Construction and

³⁰ <https://learningandwork.org.uk/news-and-policy/off-the-grid-just-one-in-four-young-people-who-are-neet-get-help-from-the-employment-support-system-to-find-work/>, 56.

Engineering will have the greatest additional employment demand between 2025 and 2030.³¹

Service design needs to consider the cliff edges that young people face during crucial and precarious transition stages: from secondary to post-secondary life, transition from care, young offenders leaving prison or other facilities, young people with a mental health condition transitioning from children and young people mental health services to adult mental health services and those with SEND navigating new systems of support in college, university and the workplace.

Our experience delivering, for instance, The Hive mental health hub, referenced in section 5.1.4, and our Y2A best practice example in 5.2.4 tell us that these transition points should be seen as moments of heightened vulnerability for young people.

We therefore strongly support the approach outlined in the Future Minds Report, which provides community-based, holistic support that integrates “clinical and non-clinical support, recognising that a secure base, safe relationships, and practical stability (such as in education, housing and employment) are foundations of good mental health” and the best approach to supporting young people in the varied waves of transitions from childhood to adulthood.³²

Catch22 already models a collaborative approach in referrals coming from schools, colleges, and internal referrals from Catch22’s own employability programmes. Similarly, our Include Schools delivering Alternative Provision runs specialist programmes to prepare pupils in their transition to further education or work. This is a proactive approach to linking up support with young people. This wrap-around support about employability helps to close gaps and reduce the risk of young people becoming NEET.

A well-designed Youth Guarantee must include support around transition stages, not in the least for mental health and wellbeing at its core, in which the voluntary sector has an important role to play, enabling the best possible integrated local strategies that connect young people with suitable opportunities.

7. Concluding summary

Support must be tailored, both to the specific needs of local labour markets and to particular cohorts including neurodivergent and care experienced young people, ensuring alignment with ongoing SEND and Children’s Social Care reforms and Youth Guarantee goals.³³ Investment is also needed to build young people’s skills for engaging with growth industries such as clean energy and technology, while targeted outreach through care leaver services, youth clubs and other trusted local networks will be essential to reach those disengaged from formal provision. Finally, funding should prioritise small-cohort, relationship-based programmes offering one-to-one coaching, work experience and in-work mentoring, with a particular focus on young people facing

³¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/assessment-of-priority-skills-to-2030/assessment-of-priority-skills-to-2030>.

³² <https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/Future-Minds-Report-2026-D4.pdf>, 14.

³³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-launches-national-conversation-on-send>.

the greatest barriers including care-experienced young people, prison leavers and those struggling with mental health challenges. As such, tackling the youth unemployment and inactivity crisis require a genuine cross-departmental effort in which not only the DWP and DfE drive the work, but DHSC, MoJ, DCMS, DBT, and Cabinet Office each have a crucial role to play.

8. Contact details

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