

Opening up opportunity for the 'lost generation'

The role of Young Futures in
boosting youth employment

**catch
22**



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Introduction

More than one million young people in the UK are not in education, employment, or training (NEET), a testament to the decline in young people’s mental health, the lack of early help, and the absence of opportunities for many. The Milburn Review on young people and work is focusing on preventing young people from becoming trapped out of work, education or training - and on re-engaging those who have already become NEET. Its interim report rightly made clear that this crisis is not a symptom of a ‘snowflake generation’, but a ‘lost generation’, let down by systemic failures in the employment market, employment support, and education.

“The challenge is not a lack of aspiration, but the barriers that stand in their way and the shortage of opportunities they experience, particularly as they navigate the system that is supposed to help their transition from the world of education into the world of work.” [Alan Milburn, interim report]

All young people are facing systemic barriers, including a lack of opportunities to gain work experience, receive careers support, or access vocational training and apprenticeships.¹ Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds – using Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility as a proxy indicator – are 66% more likely than average to be NEET. There is a strong evidence base for other risk factors, including low attainment, care-

¹ Department for Work & Pensions (2026) [Young people and work: interim report](#)

leavers, young parents, adverse childhood experiences, and unmet mental health needs.²

Young people's life chances also remain closely tied to where they grow up. Opportunity, or the lack of it, is not distributed evenly. The 20 constituencies in England with the highest rates of opportunity, and 42 of the top 50, are all in London.³ Eight of the top ten local authority areas with the highest NEET rates are in the North of England or the Midlands, including both coastal and urban areas.⁴

The Government has started to make some welcome commitments to tackle this crisis, such as reforms to the apprenticeship system, extending the Youth Guarantee - £820 million over three years from 2026/27 to 2028/29, to support every 16-24-year-old into learning, jobs, or apprenticeships - and expanding DWP Youth Hubs – spaces which provide employment support, careers advice, and access to skills and training opportunities, alongside wider services such as wellbeing support.

But as the Milburn interim report found, given the scale and complexity of the challenges, a radically new approach is needed to identify the young people who are at-risk of becoming NEET early ensures that the employment policy offer integrates meaningfully with the direction of education and youth policy; young people need a system that identifies who needs help early, meets them where they are, and provides the right support for individuals at the right time. Complementing this with access to work schemes, placements, and real-life opportunities could bring a significant reduction in young people who are NEET – especially if it is led by and delivered across a local place.

This is also what we have heard from young people, who told us they need earlier, more personalised and joined-up support that recognises their individual strengths, needs and aspirations. They want better preparation for work and life through education, stronger mental health support, and clear, consistent guidance at key transition points to help them successfully move into education, employment or training.⁵

In this context, the Government's commitment to establishing a network of Young Futures Hubs to tackle youth crime, unemployment, and poor mental health, represents a significant opportunity to rethink how support for young people at risk of being NEET is delivered. It is an opportunity to work more through the voluntary and community sector, with the grassroots organisations who have the trust of young people. This is particularly important given a persistent challenge is the lack of an effective approach to identifying, reaching, and engaging 'hidden' young people who are

² Impetus (2025) [Youth Jobs Gap: Exploring compound disadvantage](#)

³ The Sutton Trust (2025) [The Opportunity Index: The geography of opportunity and social mobility in England](#)

⁴ Impetus (2025) [Youth Jobs Gap: Exploring compound disadvantage](#)

⁵ Centre for Young Lives (2026) [Turning the tide on rising NEETs](#)

not in contact with statutory services.⁶ Trusted, relationship-based models of support that proactively outreach to young people in their communities should therefore be a core part of the Young Futures approach, helping to connect those furthest from education, employment, and training to the support they need.

“Labour will intervene earlier to stop young people being drawn into crime, creating a new Young Futures programme with a network of hubs reaching every community. These hubs will have youth workers, mental health support workers, and careers advisers on hand to support young people’s mental health and avoid them being drawn into crime.” [Labour Party Manifesto, 2024]

By bringing together and brokering mental health provision, youth work, careers advice, and employment support within accessible, community-based settings, Young Futures Hubs have the potential to act as a single front door to a system that provides the right support at the right time for young people likely to be disengaged and possibly mistrusting of the Jobcentre Plus entry route.

This briefing sets out how Young Futures Hubs can strengthen pathways into employment, particularly for those young people most at risk of becoming or remaining NEET, and how they can help shift the system from crisis response towards early intervention and prevention. It also explores how Young Futures Hubs can strengthen the existing system of DWP Youth Employment Hubs, Careers Hubs (regional partnerships between The Careers & Enterprise Company and Combined and Local Authorities⁷), and the education system.

Young Futures

Background

Government has committed to a major new Young Futures programme, to include 50 open-access Young Futures Hubs in this parliament. As of 1st April 2026, eight early adopter Young Futures Hubs have been operational in Birmingham, Brighton and Hove, Bristol, County Durham, Leeds, Manchester, Nottingham, and Tower Hamlets, with services expanding over the coming months.⁸

A further 42 Hubs will be established and in operation by the end of this parliament. Funding for the Hubs is part of a wider £70 million commitment to improve local youth service offers by March 2029.⁹

⁶ Youth Futures Foundation (2025) [The Missing Link](#)

⁷ The Careers & Enterprise Company. [Careers Hubs](#).

⁸ DCMS. [Young Futures Hubs](#).

⁹ DCMS (2025) [Youth Matters: Your National Youth Strategy](#)

Young Futures Hubs have three core aims: to reduce violence, improve mental health, and widen access to opportunities, including employment and careers support.¹⁰ These Hubs are designed to be open-access, youth-friendly spaces where young people can take part in activities and build positive relationships with peers and trusted adults, while also acting as a single front door to a wider range of targeted services.

Operating like a SureStart for teenagers, they will provide early help without the need for formal referral or diagnosis, bringing together a core package of support - including mental health provision, mentoring, counselling, employment support, and advice and information, all integrated under one roof.

“Young Futures Hubs will bring together services to improve access to opportunities and support for young people at community level, promoting positive outcomes and enabling them to thrive.”

A crisis of opportunity

Young people are facing what the Milburn Review has described as a “national crisis of opportunity”: a generation that is trying and failing to gain entry to the labour market.

“The aspiration is there, but the opportunity is not.” [Milburn Review]¹¹

The Milburn Review’s interim report highlighted evidence that vocational training, apprenticeships, and other forms of work-based learning all improve employment outcomes - particularly for young people facing additional barriers - yet opportunities in these pathways have narrowed.¹² Apprenticeship starts have declined, while young people in the UK are less likely to be in vocational education than their peers in other OECD countries.¹³ OECD data also shows that students in the UK are less likely to be enrolled in work-based learning programmes, such as apprenticeships, compared to other countries.¹⁴

One of the three core aims of the Hubs is to widen access to opportunities,¹⁵ and they will be central to addressing the challenges identified by Alan Milburn. The aim will be achieved via the provision of open-access activities:

“Activities will be designed to be youth-led where possible and will offer enriching opportunities such as arts, sports, volunteering, and skills-based projects, all aimed at fostering confidence, resilience, and a sense of belonging.”¹⁶

¹⁰ DCMS. [Young Futures Hubs](#).

¹¹ DWP (2026) [Independent Report – Young people and work: interim report](#)

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Resolution Foundation. [Poor health, weak vocational education and a hands-off benefit system have all left the UK with the third highest NEET rate in Europe](#).

¹⁴ DWP (2026) [Independent Report – Young people and work: interim report](#)

¹⁵ DCMS. [Young Futures Hubs](#).

¹⁶ Ibid.

But it will also happen through the provision of more specialist services, including elements of employment support. The Labour Party Manifesto in 2024 committed to placing a careers adviser in every Young Futures Hub:

“These hubs will have youth workers, mental health support workers, and careers advisers on hand to support young people’s mental health and avoid them being drawn into crime”.¹⁷

Young Futures Hubs present a significant opportunity to shape how employment support is accessed and experienced by young people. Beyond simply increasing the availability of provision, Young Futures Hubs can play a role in ensuring that support is targeted towards those young people who face the greatest barriers to opportunity and employment.

Young Futures Hubs also provide a platform for testing more integrated, place-based approaches to employment support by joining-up with local DWP Youth Hubs and offering a more welcoming front door for young people. This place-based approach can bring together out-of-school careers advice, skills development, and wider support for issues which we know act as barriers to employment, including mental health, housing, or financial barriers. In doing so, Young Futures Hubs should build on and strengthen the existing careers infrastructure - including DWP Youth Hubs, Careers Hubs, and schools and colleges - helping more young people access coordinated support rather than creating a parallel system of careers provision.

Fixing the architecture of support

“Responsibility is dispersed across many organisations. But there is no shared accountability and no clear governing philosophy. Confusion reigns between what happens nationally and what is owned locally. Data is not shared. No amount of reform to individual policy areas or institutions alone will fix this. The architecture itself is the problem.” [Milburn Review, interim report]¹⁸

The Milburn Review has identified systemic failures in employment support for young people, highlighting how fragmentation, unclear accountability, and poor coordination contribute to so many young people not being in education, employment or training. This reflects findings from the Commission on Young Lives and the National Audit Office in 2022, which pointed to a broader lack of coordinated support and the absence of an overarching strategy across services for vulnerable young people.^{19,20}

¹⁷ Labour Party (2024) [Change: Labour Party Manifesto 2024](#)

¹⁸ DWP (2026) [Independent Report – Young people and work: interim report](#)

¹⁹ Commission on Young Lives (2022) [Hidden in Plain Sight](#)

²⁰ National Audit Office (2022) [Support for vulnerable adolescents](#)

Young Futures Hubs can play a central role alongside DWP Youth Hubs and Careers Hubs in bringing together national policy and local provision into a coherent system, and a focus onto young people who are at a particular risk of being NEET, including care-experienced children and children with SEND. This will build on the growing use of Risk of NEET indicators among local authorities, which in turn requires established relationships between LAs and schools, skilled staff, and close collaboration between services.²¹

Hubs bring together services and opportunities and will be most effective if they sit at the heart of a genuinely joined-up system, which requires a shared vision for change, collaborative leadership across sectors, meaningful involvement of young people and frontline practitioners in service design, and flexible funding and governance arrangements that align partners around common outcomes.²²

Hubs can also drive a shift towards early intervention and prevention. By bringing services together and creating more visible, trusted entry points for support, they can enable earlier identification of need and more timely responses. This is critical to addressing challenges before they escalate, improving long-term opportunities for young people and reducing the need for costly support services later.

Fixing the architecture of employment support

“Britain does not lack organisations with a role in supporting young people. It lacks a coherent participation system designed to ensure they make a supported and sustained transition into adulthood. Understandably, responsibility is dispersed across many organisations. But shared accountability is missing. Incentives are misaligned. [Milburn Review, interim report]”

In 2024, the Institute for Employment Studies and the Youth Futures Foundation carried out a review of the landscape of policy, support mechanisms and engagement points for specific groups of young people less likely to transition successfully from education and training into good work. It found a “complex support landscape”, with 80 government-funded support mechanisms available, such as Access to Work or Jobcentre Plus, a figure which does not include support provided by charities and community organisations without government funding.²³

This illustrates the complexity of the landscape, both for young people to navigate but also for other services or agencies to direct young people towards, depending on their needs.

²¹ Youth Futures Foundation. [Research into the use and effectiveness of Risk of NEET Indicators \(RONIs\)](#)

²² Youth Futures Foundation (2024) [What works in systems change interventions: A review of national and international evidence](#)

²³ Institute for Employment Studies & Youth Futures Foundation (2024) [Education to employment transitions: support in 2024](#)

Unsurprisingly, government-funded programmes are spread across different departments, policy objectives, and age thresholds, with little overarching coordination - support is often tied to specific settings like schools, colleges, training providers, Jobcentre Plus, or local authorities, rather than following the lives of young people. As a result meaning assistance can be inconsistent and feel out of reach or fall away precisely at the time it is most needed, such as leaving education.

“Support ends at arbitrary boundaries rather than following a young person’s needs. As a result, hundreds of thousands of young people receive inconsistent or no support.” [Milburn Review, interim report]

What exists is also commonly time-limited or short-term, tied to short or one-off initiatives. This just doesn’t work for those young people who need long term help – who if they do find other places where they are eligible for support will have to chop and change, tell their story again, build relationships and more than likely, fit in with a different approach.

The reality is that where help is available, it differs widely between areas, creating a ‘postcode lottery’ dependent heavily on where a young person lives rather than on their level of need.

Transition points represent a key challenge for many young people, who say they “feel like a cliff edge not a springboard”.²⁴ The education system does not adequately prepare young people for the move into work: young people and employers consistently report persistent gaps in careers education, life skills, and the foundational skills needed to thrive beyond the classroom.²⁵

Support at critical moments - primarily the ages of 11, 16, and 18 - is fragmented and inconsistent, increasing the risk that young people fall through the gaps and disengage from education, employment, or training altogether.

Building skills, confidence, and resilience

As well as providing a single front door to a more cohesive system of support, Young Future Hubs can increase access to opportunities by offering inclusive activities – such as sports, creative arts, and volunteering - which build confidence, skills, and relationships.

Giving young people access to meaningful activities helps foster resilience and encourages positive behaviours. Enrichment is proven to support mental and physical health, strengthen social and emotional skills, and create opportunities to explore interests and talents. Importantly, it also helps to build “soft skills” such as

²⁴ Gamote, S. & Hyman, P. (2026) Inside the Minds of a Young NEET.

²⁵ Centre for Young Lives (2026) [Turning the tide on rising NEETS](#)

communication, teamwork, and negotiation, which are closely associated with improved life chances and upward mobility.²⁶ Ultimately, participation in positive activities is associated with a lower likelihood of becoming NEET, with participants more likely to gain qualifications and be in paid employment in the near future.²⁷

“Extra-curricular activities boost young people’s confidence to interact socially with others; extend their social networks; and provide them with new skills and abilities” [Social Mobility Commission]

While the practical benefits of these activities are wide-ranging, from employability to health, an often-overlooked advantage is their intrinsic value: they give young people a chance to enjoy themselves, interact with others, and feel a sense of belonging. These are all vital steps for young people struggling to find their feet in the world.

In the last 15 years, the widespread closure of youth clubs has meant fewer opportunities to take part in positive activities near to home. Recent research shows the impact for those young people who lost these opportunities, with school attainment reducing and crime increasing in areas where clubs closed.²⁸ The fact is that fewer young people growing up in households with less money are now able to enjoy music, arts and sports than their more affluent peers. 11% of the lowest income-households participate in musical activities, compared to 32% of the highest-income households, and this gap extends to other activities such as sport, for which the proportion of young people participating from low-income households is 46%, while 64% from high-income households take part in sport.²⁹

Young people eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) are more likely to experience being NEET, with risk increasing the longer the period of eligibility for free school meals lasts. Approximately 8% of those never eligible for FSM experience being NEET, compared with 21% of those eligible for 1–2 years and 29% of those eligible for 3 or more years, indicating a strong link between prolonged disadvantage and higher risk.³⁰ this shows again how important Young Futures Hubs are in supporting young people from lower-income backgrounds in particular those who may be at a greater risk of being NEET.

Detached youth work, targeted outreach, and digital support are all important ways to identify and reach out to the most vulnerable young people – especially those who are marginalised or feeling excluded. The Youth Futures Foundation estimate that 500,000-600,000 ‘hidden’ NEETS require different approaches to engagement that traditional

²⁶ Centre for Young Lives, Leeds Beckett University & YMCA George Williams College (2025) [Beyond the Classroom: The role of enrichment in tackling the school absence crisis](#)

²⁷ SQW & DCMS (2024) [Youth provision and life outcomes: A study of longitudinal research](#)

²⁸ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2024) [The effects of youth clubs on education and crime](#)

²⁹ Social Mobility Commission (2019) [An Unequal Playing Field: Extra-Curricular Activities, Soft Skills and Social Mobility](#)

³⁰ Youth Future Foundation & National Centre for Social Research. [NEET Prevention through Early Risk Identification.](#)

services don't offer, which both Young Futures Hubs and DWP Youth Hubs can offer through co-located multi-agency support, with trusted adults leading detached and targeted engagement to bring young people in.³¹

By providing consistent, community-based spaces to go, meet friends and trusted adults and take part in activities on a regular basis, Young Futures Hubs can help more young people rebuild their confidence, expand social networks, and develop essential interpersonal skills.

Strengthening connections between Young Futures Hubs and DWP services

The Youth Guarantee and Get Britain Working White Paper set out a more ambitious system of employment support, including a six-month Jobs Guarantee, increased training opportunities, and plans for a more integrated Jobs and Careers Service.

To deliver the expanded Youth Guarantee, the Government committed £820 million over three years from 2026/27 to 2028/29, to support every 16-24-year-old into learning, jobs, or apprenticeships with tailored help, expanded opportunities, and a guaranteed paid work for 18-24-year-olds on Universal Credit and looking for work for 18 months. This funding will also support the expansion of the network of DWP Youth Employment Hubs to over 360 across the country.

“Youth Employment Hubs are shared spaces, separate from Jobcentres, with DWP Youth Hub Work Coaches working alongside partners such as Local Authorities, charities, training providers and colleges, providing access to a range of employment-related services for young people in one location” [Demos]³²

DWP Youth Hubs provide employment support, careers advice and access to skills and training opportunities, alongside wider services such as wellbeing support.

Given that the number of DWP Youth Employment Hubs will significantly exceed the number of Young Futures Hubs, many areas will only have a DWP Youth Hub, and some may have both. This makes it particularly important that, in areas where the two models overlap, local partners receive guidance about how the two services align in practice - ensuring clarity of roles, avoiding duplication, and developing coherent pathways between early intervention and employment support offers.

Young people should also be at the heart of designing these pathways and referral processes. Embedding youth voice in how Young Futures Hubs and DWP Youth Hubs

³¹ Youth Futures Foundation. [Trends in young people not in education, employment, or training: July-September 2025](#)

³² Demos (2024) [Launch Pads: The Future of Youth Employment Hubs](#)

interact can help ensure transitions between services are accessible and responsive to young people's needs, reducing the risk that they disengage when moving between different forms of support.

While Young Futures Hubs focus primarily on prevention, early intervention, and engagement for those aged 10–18 (up to 25 for those with SEND), DWP Youth Hubs provide more intensive employment and benefits support for young people aged 16–24. However, both serve overlapping age groups between ages 16-18 and have overlapping offers and intended outcomes. Clear alignment and understanding of the role of the respective Hubs and their staff can therefore help ensure continuity of support, particularly at the age of 18 when young people often approach a 'cliff edge' in support. As well as clear alignment and pathway between hubs, this cliff edge could also be mitigated by extending the age limit for Young Futures Hubs to 25, allowing young people to move seamlessly between the two based on their level of need.

In practice, this alignment can be delivered through clear referral and transition pathways. As young people approach the end of compulsory education, Young Futures Hubs can identify those at risk of becoming NEET and provide warm handovers into DWP Youth Hubs, ensuring they do not fall through gaps in provision. Equally, DWP services can refer younger individuals back into Young Futures provision where more holistic or youth work-led support is needed. For young people with SEND, joint transition planning is particularly important to ensure consistent support across systems up to age 25.

Co-location and outreach also offer practical opportunities for integration. DWP work coaches or youth advisers can deliver sessions within Young Futures Hubs, making employment support more accessible in informal, youth-friendly environments. There are already examples of DWP work coaches offering support in community settings, which can help address some of the stigma and apprehension that young people associate with formal employment services. In environments where young people are already accessing activities, advice and wider support, work coaches can build relationships more organically and engage those who might be reluctant to visit a Jobcentre.

However, clear communication about the role of work coaches, alongside a strong emphasis on voluntary, supportive engagement, is essential to maintain the hub as a safe and welcoming space and prevent DWP staff from inadvertently stigmatising the hub and deterring wider engagement.

Sunderland Youth Hub

Sunderland's Youth Hub, located at its pioneering Beacon of Light community facility, was launched in June 2025. Two full-time DWP staff work alongside two full-time employability coaches from the Club's Football Club Charity, the Foundation of

Light, at the Hub. Since it opened its doors, the Hub has worked with 180 young people aged between 18 and 24, with DWP's annual target set at 200. Of those 180, by the most up-to-date information available, 40 have progressed into work, 63 have earned qualifications, 41 have had work experience and 11 are volunteering. A total of 173 have taken part in 'added value' opportunities, such as Kings Trust 12-week courses, Money Matters sessions or National Careers Service work preparation modules.

A young person, one of nearly 200 individuals supported by Foundation of Light and DWP personnel at Sunderland's Beacon of Light Youth Hub, faced a significant loss of confidence after several unsuccessful interviews and non-responses from prospective employers, despite prior experience at a SEND school and in retail. With support from DWP employability coaches, the young person developed a clear and structured plan of action, improving their interview technique and refining their CV. This support helped rebuild confidence and led to securing a role at the Beacon of Light's Yard Nine Café just three months after joining the Youth Hub. Their confidence and motivation have continued to grow, and they have since begun a finance course. This case highlights how Premier League Clubs, as trusted community assets, can work in partnership with Government to support young people and deliver meaningful, long-term outcomes.

Employment support and work experience

The manifesto commitment to place a qualified careers adviser within every Young Futures Hub is an important and welcome step towards strengthening support for young people's transitions into employment.

Locating careers expertise within Young Futures Hubs has the potential to extend access beyond schools and colleges, reaching those who are already disengaged or at risk of becoming NEET. It also makes Young Futures Hubs well-placed to receive referrals from children identified as at-risk of becoming NEET by the Risk of NEET Indicator (RONI) tools increasingly being used by local authorities.³³ This is especially important for young people who may have fallen through the gaps of traditional systems, ensuring that professional guidance is available in more accessible, community-based settings.

While professionally qualified careers advisers should play an important role, many young people who are furthest from education and employment also require more intensive, relationship-based support. Careers advisers should therefore be one part of a team which also has the expertise to address wider barriers to participation, including

³³ Department for Education & Department for Work and Pensions. [Councils supported to identify and support vulnerable teenagers.](#)

housing instability, financial insecurity, poor mental health, low confidence, and a lack of foundational skills.

Careers advisers within Young Futures Hubs should provide a targeted, high-quality offer of support, particularly focused on young people who have low levels of school attendance, are homeschooled, and who are at risk of poor post-16 outcomes. Advisers should be professionally qualified and work consistently across schools to ensure comprehensive coverage. Young Futures Hubs should act as an extension of the school careers system, providing an additional setting in which careers advisers can deliver support. This would help ensure continuity of provision and enable advisers to engage young people who are not regularly attending or engaged in education and who might otherwise miss out on careers guidance.

This universal presence also enables early identification of need, while maintaining access for all young people through participation in key school touchpoints such as options evenings, parents' evenings, and results days.

A central part of the careers adviser role is the early identification of young people at risk of becoming NEET. Careers advisers should work closely with school staff - including SENCOs and pastoral teams - within formal partnership arrangements that establish shared risk indicators, building on the Risk of NEET approaches which the Department of Education is supporting to schools to adopt. Targeted caseloads should be developed, with one-to-one guidance offered to those identified as highest risk. This should result in personalised action plans and sustained support through key transition points, particularly at the end of Year 11 and into post-16 education, employment or training.

Finally, careers advisers should operate as part of a wider, integrated system of tracking and outreach. This involves providing practical employability support - such as CV writing, interview preparation and brokerage of opportunities - alongside proactive re-engagement of young people who are NEET or 'not known'. Outreach should be persistent and flexible, including regular check-ins, community-based support, and, where appropriate, home visits. Co-location with wider services (such as youth provision, mental health support, Careers Hubs, and employment services) should enable careers advisers to connect young people to the full range of support available, strengthening pathways into sustained education and employment.

It is important to recognise that a careers adviser alone does not constitute a high-quality careers system. Evidence from the Gatsby Benchmarks shows that effective careers support depends on a combination of factors, including sustained engagement with employers, access to timely labour market information, opportunities for workplace experience, and personalised guidance delivered over time. Embedding a

careers adviser within a Hub should therefore be seen as one component of a broader offer, rather than a standalone solution.

DWP Youth Hubs are delivering this approach,³⁴ and Young Futures Hubs are also well-placed to deliver this more comprehensive approach for younger teenagers. By acting as convening spaces, they can bring together employers, training providers, further and higher education institutions, and local services to create a richer set of experiences for young people. They can also provide a setting in which careers support is ongoing and relational, rather than one-off or transactional, enabling young people to build confidence, explore options, and make informed transitions over time.

Work experience

High-quality, meaningful work experience – as defined by the Gatsby Benchmark 6³⁵ – should be a core component of the offer in and around Young Futures Hubs. This includes structured, meaningful opportunities that go beyond one-off placements, combining skills development, employer interaction, and clear progression routes into employment or further training. This should include both sector-specific programmes and more general employability support, with a focus on building confidence, work-readiness, and real-world experience – particularly for young people who may lack access to professional networks or prior exposure to the workplace.

Spotlight: Speciality Barista Traineeship with a Guaranteed Job

At Spotlight, a community hub in East London, young people aged 16–25 can access a work experience programme delivered by specialist training provider Well Grounded.

Throughout the course, participants build technical barista skills, learning how to operate equipment, prepare high-quality coffee, and maintain professional standards in a fast-paced setting. Alongside this, they develop essential customer service skills, including communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, all of which are critical for success in hospitality roles.

Through the programme, young people gain an inside look at customer service, develop barista skills, and take part in work experience components. The training is geared towards helping participants move into part-time employment or take their first step into roles within the hospitality sector.

Involving employers

³⁴ Demos (2024) [Launch Pads: The Future of Youth Employment Hubs](#)

³⁵ Gatsby Benchmarks. [A guide to Gatsby Benchmark 6.](#)

Partnership with employers will help to create meaningful pathways into work experience, training, and employment. This needs to be sustained and with high-quality interactions to stick with young people as they go on their journey.

For example, this can include project-based learning, mentoring, workplace visits, and co-designed activities that allow young people to develop practical skills, build confidence, and gain insight into different career pathways.

OnSide Youth Zones - Michaela's journey into digital marketing

Michaela joined Wigan Youth Zone's Pathway to Employment programme in January 2025. She wanted to work in marketing but felt unsure where to start. She lacked experience and confidence. Michaela had applied for roles but received no replies. This knocked her confidence and led her to seek support through the Job Centre who put her in touch with Wigan Youth Zone.

Over eight months, the Youth Zone's staff worked closely with Michaela through one-to-one sessions. She took part in mock interviews, CV development for marketing and general roles, sessions exploring university courses and creative career pathways, and conversations about volunteering and work experience opportunities.

They then introduced Michaela to Vanliners, one of their Youth Zone Patrons, who agreed to offer her work experience with their marketing team. She worked with them on set days until Christmas. She also visited Evolve, another Youth Zone patron, to learn about international business and the role marketing plays in global organisations.

Michaela completed her work experience with Vanliners' marketing team and quickly made an impression. She used her photography skills and designed vehicle wraps. Michaela brought fresh ideas and showed real commitment. By the end of her placement, Vanliners offered her a Level 6 Degree Apprenticeship in Digital Marketing at Manchester Metropolitan University. They also offered her a five-year contract with the marketing team. Michaela will complete her degree by 2030 while gaining hands-on experience in a professional setting.

Breaking the link between mental health and being NEET

Approximately one in five young people aged 8 to 25 report a diagnosable common mental health problem, such as anxiety and depression.³⁶ While this is a global issue, the UK lags behind comparable countries on key wellbeing measures, including life

³⁶ NHS Digital (2023) [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 – wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey](#)

satisfaction,³⁷ and the UK is a notable international outlier in experiencing parallel sharp rises in both mental health needs and the number of young people not in education, employment or training.³⁸

The proportion of young NEETs who are inactive due to sickness or disability has more than doubled in two decades, between 2005 and 2025, and now accounts for over a quarter (28%) of all NEETs aged 16-24 in 2025.³⁹ The rise in poor mental health - alongside neurodevelopmental conditions like ADHD and autism - is the primary driver of the rise in work-limiting health conditions among young people.⁴⁰ One in five young people who are NEET have a health condition, over two and half times the rate in 2012.⁴¹

The rising prevalence of mental ill health and the failure of mental health services to match the scale of the challenge is a significant factor contributing to the growing number of young people who are NEET. Many children and young people face long waits for specialist services or are turned away altogether, while spending on crisis care has been prioritised over early intervention.

In addition, community-based services which could provide accessible, preventative support are often sporadic, leaving too many young people without help until their needs become acute. Evidence now shows how cuts to children's and young people's services have been a significant driver of the decline in young people's mental health.⁴²

This issue is exacerbated by significant long-term underfunding: mental health accounts for 20% of the overall disease burden in the NHS, yet receives only around 9% of total NHS funding,⁴³ with less than 1% of spending dedicated to children and young people's mental health.⁴⁴

“Labour’s new Young Futures hubs will provide open access mental health services for children and young people in every community.” [Labour Manifesto]

The manifesto commitment to deliver mental health support through Young Futures Hubs provides a major opportunity, which can complement the wellbeing offer already being developed in DWP Youth Hubs.

It is important that these new opportunities deliver the kind of mental health support needed. The National Youth Strategy set out plans for Young Futures Hubs to deliver

³⁷ UNICEF (2025) [Innocenti Report Card 19: Child Well-Being in an Unpredictable World](#)

³⁸ PwC (2024) [PwC comments on the latest UK NEET rates among young people](#)

³⁹ Resolution Foundation (2025) [False Starts: What the UK’s growing NEETs problem really looks like, and how to fix it](#)

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Department for Education (2026) [NEET age 16 to 24: Calendar year 2025](#)

⁴² Youth Futures Foundation (2025) [Understanding drivers of recent trends in young people’s mental health](#)

⁴³ Department for Health and Social Care (2024) [Independent investigation of the NHS in England](#)

⁴⁴ Duggan, S. (2024) [Children’s mental health needs more](#)

“wellbeing support”,⁴⁵ which is distinctly different from mental health provision and could risk diluting what is on offer and with it the impact and support offered to young people. If provision is limited to signposting, this may simply transfer additional pressure onto already overstretched Children and Young People’s Mental Health Services (CYPMHS), particularly for young people with more complex needs - rather than providing the support needed.

A comprehensive mental health offer is therefore needed within Hubs themselves. Last year a paper from the Future Minds and Fund the Hubs campaigns called for an open-access wellbeing offer alongside mental health support in Young Future Hubs. This should include NHS involvement and clinical oversight, alongside interventions delivered in non-clinical, community-based settings. The model also requires strong, embedded working relationships with specialist and youth services.⁴⁶

Crucially, this support must be designed to meet the needs of marginalised and at-risk young people, ensuring it does not exacerbate existing health inequalities.

This would ensure that children and young people can access psychologically informed assessment and triage, robust safeguarding, and evidence-based interventions - enabling hubs to both hold and respond to need, rather than simply referring it elsewhere.⁴⁷

Given the close relationship between poor mental health and job and training prospects, mental health support cannot be treated as an added extra or nice to have. Young people will simply not get the help they need to thrive if this is not in place.

Catch22 The Hive, Camden: Integrating Mental Health and Employment Support

Run by Catch22, The Hive is a youth wellbeing hub in the London Borough of Camden that provides early intervention and wraparound support for young people aged 16–24 experiencing, or at risk of, poor mental health. Established in 2015 through Camden’s *Minding the Gap* partnership between the local authority, NHS, and voluntary sector, it was created to address the ‘cliff edge’ between Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and adult mental health provision.

The Hive operates as a one-stop shop, combining one-to-one emotional and therapeutic support with a non-clinical social hub environment. Alongside informal and clinical mental health support, young people can access careers guidance, financial advice, sexual health services, structured activities and referrals to specialist support. The service is embedded in the local community and is known for its flexible, relationship-based approach, which enables support to be tailored to young people’s individual needs.

⁴⁵ DCMS (2025) [Youth Matters: Your National Youth Strategy](#)

⁴⁶ Future Minds & Fund the Hubs (2025) [Embedding Young Future Hubs as part of a neighbourhood health vision for young people: A briefing paper](#)

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Recognising the close relationship between wellbeing and participation in education and work, the service helps young people address practical barriers to progression while building confidence and resilience. It supports young people to identify and work through mental health barriers to work and help them gain social skills, experience and confidence that can enable young people to move into paid employment.

Evidence suggests the model works. Around 74.2% of young people reported reduced anxiety, while 90.4% reported feeling happier and 90.3% reported greater confidence. In addition, 70.8% reported an increased ability to manage stress, anxiety or anger. These improvements in wellbeing are accompanied by positive employment and education outcomes: around one in five young people who were NEET when they entered the service moved into education, employment or training during their engagement with The Hive.⁴⁸

The Hive demonstrates how putting mental health support at the heart of open access hubs, and combine this with employability and practical assistance, can help young people improve their wellbeing while also strengthening their pathways into education, training and work.

Alongside improving access to mental health support, there is a strong case for expanding integrated approaches that combine employment and mental health support, particularly for young people facing barriers to work. One promising example is Individual Placement and Support (IPS), which embeds employment support within mental health provision and helps young people move into and sustain work while addressing underlying wellbeing needs.

Individual Placement and Support

The Individual Placement and Support programme (IPS) shows how integrated, community-based approaches can address both youth unemployment and underlying risk factors such as poor mental health.

IPS is an evidence-based model that supports people with mental health needs to move into employment quickly, alongside ongoing support to sustain work. It has a well-established evidence base, with approximately 45% of participants moving into employment, demonstrating its effectiveness in supporting labour market participation.⁴⁹

One programme, funded by the People's Health Trust, is testing the Individual Placement and Support Youth (IPS-Y) model across early support hubs in Manchester, Norwich and Southampton. This approach embeds employment support directly

⁴⁸ Catch-22 (2026) The Hive: Evaluation Report

⁴⁹ Lockett, H. et. al. (2016) [Predictive validity of evidence-based practices in supported employment: a systematic review and meta-analysis](#)

within open-access, community-based mental health services, rather than requiring young people to engage separately with Jobcentres or clinical provision.⁵⁰ It also demonstrates wider benefits beyond employment, including improvements in mental health and wellbeing. With delivery costs of around £2,000 per person, the potential savings across benefits, housing, health and education systems could be substantial.⁵¹

Early indications suggest this model is particularly effective because it operates in community-based, non-stigmatised spaces. Further evidence of its impact on 16-18-year-olds will be gathered by the Youth Futures Foundation's ongoing randomised control trial of IPS-Y.⁵²

Many young people are reluctant to engage with statutory or clinical services, but are more comfortable accessing support through trusted, locally rooted voluntary and community organisations. By placing IPS workers within these settings, the model creates a more accessible and less stigmatising route into employment support, especially for those with mild to moderate mental health needs who might otherwise fall through the gaps.

While the IPS-Y pilot is currently being independently evaluated, its early promise - combined with the strong existing evidence base for IPS - suggests significant potential. Expanding this approach across Youth Employment Hubs and future Young Futures Hubs, with joint leadership from the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Work and Pensions, could help create more effective, locally accessible pathways into work for young people facing mental health challenges.

Information, advice, and guidance

Alongside mental health and employment support, Young Futures Hubs will need to offer a more holistic approach that recognises barriers to employment are rarely isolated. This requires the provision of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) defined by Youth Access as:

“Information, Advice, & Guidance (IAG) is accessible, accurate, youth-centred, and empowering, often serving as a gateway to wider services. High-quality IAG may be delivered in-person, digitally, or both, with equal attention to effectiveness, accessibility, and relational care across all formats.”⁵³

Effective programmes which offer IAG within hubs recognise that barriers to employment are rarely isolated. Young people may present with questions about jobs or

⁵⁰ People's Health Trust. [Pioneering approach to support young people five times more likely to be out of work.](#)

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Youth Futures Foundation. [IPS-Y impact evaluation.](#)

⁵³ Youth Access. [Quality Framework.](#)

training, but these are often intertwined with challenges relating to housing, financial insecurity, mental health and education.

Drop-in provision is essential because it removes barriers to access, particularly for those least likely to engage with formal services. However, it also creates operational pressures. Staff must manage high demand while responding to complex and sometimes urgent needs reaching those less likely to engage with formal services, but it also creates operational pressures. Staff must manage high demand while responding to complex and sometimes urgent needs.⁵⁴ Young Futures Hubs therefore require staff teams who combine technical knowledge of education, employment, and benefits systems with strong relational skills. This relational approach is critical to helping young people navigate systems and make informed decisions about their futures.

Strong integration between services offering IAG and wider hub services is equally important. Clear referral pathways and close working relationships with youth workers, mental health practitioners, and external partners help ensure coordinated rather than fragmented support - particularly at key transition points, such as moving from education into work.

Tackling the risk factors of low attainment and school absence

Some young people will slip into being NEET after being absent from school and many others will be at higher risk if they have not been attending school regularly.

School absence remains above pre-pandemic levels, severe absence continues to rise, and many children never fully returned to regular attendance following the pandemic.⁵⁵ These figures are even higher for children in Alternative Provision (AP), where 83.6% of pupils were persistently absent in 2024/25, and 40.4% were severely absent. This is deeply concerning: there is a strong link between educational disengagement from education and later risk of becoming NEET.⁵⁶ School absence is strongly linked to lower attainment,⁵⁷ which in turn is the strongest predictor of a young person becoming NEET.⁵⁸

Supporting young people with Special Educational Needs

Young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN) show varied patterns of NEET risk depending on the type of need. However, generally, students aged 16-19 who

⁵⁴ Youth Access. [Quality Framework](#).

⁵⁵ Department for Education. [Pupil absence in schools in England: Academic Year 2024/25](#)

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Department for Education (2025) [The link between attendance and attainment in an assessment year](#)

⁵⁸ Youth Future Foundation & National Centre for Social Research. [NEET Prevention through Early Risk Identification](#).

receive SEND support are 3.5 grades behind students with no identified SEND. While qualifications can still act as a protective factor against a young person with SEND becoming NEET, young people with SEND who have mid-level qualifications are still 9% more likely to be NEET than the average.⁵⁹

Young people with profound, multiple, or severe learning difficulties have the highest risk, followed by those with autistic spectrum disorder; these groups are around 2.6 and 2.2 times more likely to be NEET than those without SEN.⁶⁰

Careers advisers should also play a distinct role in supporting young people with SEND and other vulnerabilities. This includes earlier and more intensive intervention and active involvement in transition planning processes. Specialist SEND advisers within hubs can provide additional expertise, while all advisers should be equipped to build long-term, trust-based relationships with young people with more complex needs. It will also be important to ensure that ongoing SEND reforms support the full range of post-16 providers that play a key role in keeping young people with additional needs engaged in education and training.

it is therefore vital that Young Futures Hubs work in close partnership with schools and AP settings. By working alongside schools, attendance teams, and AP providers, Young Futures Hubs can help tackle the underlying causes of absence and disengagement, reduce suspensions and exclusions, improve attendance and attainment, and strengthen young people's connections to their communities. Partnerships with schools and school attendance teams help support identification of need, reduce suspensions and exclusions, tackle absenteeism, and improve educational attainment.

Where the infrastructure allows, schools can also be effective locations for some Young Futures Hubs in themselves because they are established, trusted community assets with strong relationships with children, families, and local statutory and voluntary services.

Locating support within or alongside schools can reduce barriers to access, create continuity between education and wider support services, and provide young people with a familiar environment where they feel safe, connected and supported. School-based models can also create opportunities for year-round, whole-family support, helping to strengthen engagement with parents and carers as well as young people themselves.

Oasis Community Hub Hadley – A School-Based Community Hub Model

⁵⁹ Impetus (2025) [Youth Jobs Gap: Exploring compound disadvantage](#)

⁶⁰ Youth Future Foundation & National Centre for Social Research. [NEET Prevention through Early Risk Identification.](#)

Oasis Academy Hadley school serves approximately 1,600 pupils aged 2–18, located in an area with high youth crime and low trust in authority. As part of the school, it has embedded the Oasis Community Hub Hadley as a core part of its offer.

The hub provides a wide range of joined-up services rooted in the school’s ethos, extending support beyond education to the wider community. It creates a safe, welcoming space where young people feel a sense of belonging, helping to build trust and sustained engagement.

Provision spans all age groups, from early years to older adults, with activities including Stay and Play, youth clubs, and community groups. Operating 350 days a year, the hub offers consistent wrap-around support, including a universal free breakfast club and holiday programmes. Parents are proactively engaged, recognising that those most in need may be least likely to participate without encouragement.

This community-focused approach complements high academic standards. The school continues to achieve strong outcomes, with around 90% of students progressing to university and 82% to Russell Group institutions.

This model demonstrates how integrating a community hub within a school can strengthen engagement, build trust, and improve outcomes for both young people and the wider community.

Place-based support around schools

By bringing employers into direct contact with young people through practical projects, mentoring, workplace experiences and enrichment activities, Young Futures Hubs can help bridge the gap between education and employment. These partnerships can build confidence, develop transferable skills, raise aspirations and provide access to networks and opportunities that young people may not otherwise encounter. They can be particularly valuable for young people in Alternative Provision, who often face additional barriers to making successful post-16 transitions. Place-based approaches also enable local employers to shape and contribute to solutions, ensuring that support is connected to local labour market opportunities and that young people can see realistic routes into jobs and careers within their own communities.

Place-based collaboration with SMEs

Practical Solutions is a place-based collaboration between the Devon, Plymouth & Torbay Careers Hub and Build Torbay - a network of local and national construction firms. The project was designed to support young people at risk of becoming NEET, whilst enabling local SMEs to participate meaningfully in careers engagement.

A group of Year 10 students from an Alternative Provision setting worked with multiple local construction SMEs to design and create a community café on their school site. Students took ownership of real design and build tasks, supported by employers, designers and site managers. During the workplace experience learners developed practical construction skills, alongside essential employment skills such as teamwork, communication and confidence. Importantly, along with the pride involved in creating something tangible, they also gained a clearer understanding of construction career pathways.

The experience resulted in: improved confidence, teamwork and employability skills; increased understanding of construction careers; and positive shift in school and community perceptions of construction.

The Practical Solutions Project demonstrates how collaborative, place-based approaches can help fix the challenge of conversion, supporting young people who need it most while enabling SMEs to contribute without a disproportionate burden.

Recommendations

The recommendations aim to ensure Hubs provide early intervention, sustained engagement, and effective routes into education, employment and training, especially for those most at risk of being NEET.

To ensure Young Futures Hubs deliver and broker consistently high-quality, integrated support for young people, a clear and ambitious framework is required at both national and local level. Our recommendations set out how government can strengthen the design and implementation of Hubs, supporting its aim to widen access to opportunity through the Hubs, and to tackle the barriers identified in the Milburn Report.

Building skills, confidence, and resilience

- **Hubs provide an offer of inspirational programmes of open-access activities and opportunities.** This should be available throughout the week and weekends, providing frequent and consistent engagement to ensure sufficient ‘dosage’ to improve outcomes, and designed to be appealing and engaging for young people.

Strengthening connections between Young Futures Hubs and DWP services

- **Extend support for young people in Young Futures Hubs up to the age of 25,** bringing them into line with DWP Youth Hubs and preventing a cliff-edge of support. A clearly articulated pathway between Young Futures Hubs and DWP Youth Hubs is required, especially if Young Futures Hubs serve young people up to 25, and young people themselves should play a central role in designing these pathways.

- **DWP work coaches should deliver sessions within Hubs, to make employment support more accessible in informal, youth-friendly environments, and to reduce barriers associated with Jobcentre provision.** Their role should be clearly communicated and focused on voluntary, supportive engagement, ensuring the hub remains a safe and trusted space that encourages participation rather than deterring it.

Breaking the link between mental health and being NEET

- **Young Futures Hubs should include a comprehensive mental health offer**, as we set out in our previous paper with the Future Minds and Fund the Hubs campaigns.⁶¹ This should combine NHS involvement and clinical oversight with accessible, community-based interventions, underpinned by strong partnerships with specialist and youth services, to ensure hubs can provide early support as well as respond to more complex need.
- **Scale-up the IPS-Y model within Young Futures Hubs**, in line with their role as a single access point for coordinated support, bringing together employment, health and community services in one place. Young Futures Hubs are suitable locations to further test the model, which would support the Government's wider focus on tackling economic inactivity among young people by addressing one of its key drivers – mental health - through a model that is both evidence-based and youth-centred.

Tackling the risk factors of low attainment and school absence

- **Young Futures Hubs should establish formal partnerships with regional Careers Hubs, schools, and Alternative Provision settings**, including school attendance teams, to enable early identification of need, reduce absenteeism, suspensions and exclusions, and improve attainment. Data sharing agreements should better support the in and out-of-school support available to young people. Partnerships should also support better use of school facilities as community assets.
- **Guidance should encourage local authorities to embed some Young Futures Hubs within schools and other community spaces**, following models such as Oasis Community Hub Hadley, to create trusted, accessible spaces that build belonging, engage families, and provide consistent wrap-around support throughout the year.

Work experience and employment support

⁶¹ Future Minds & Fund the Hubs (2025) [Embedding Young Future Hubs as part of a neighbourhood health vision for young people: A briefing paper](#)

- **Careers advisers in Young Futures Hubs should be qualified professionals, working with schools to identify young people at risk of becoming NEET early.** They should provide targeted one-to-one support and personalised transition plans and should operate as part of an integrated system of tracking and outreach, delivering practical employability support and proactively re-engaging young people through close partnership with schools and wider services.
- **Young Futures Hubs should offer high-quality, meaningful work experience, employer-led projects, and part-time opportunities such as Saturday or holiday jobs.** The Milburn Review identifies lack of work experience as one of the most significant barriers to employment, particularly for those already at risk of becoming NEET. The *Practical Solutions* project demonstrates how hands-on, real-world employer engagement can build confidence, teamwork, and employability while providing a clear understanding of career pathways. Young Futures Hubs should replicate this model by creating structured, place-based pipelines of opportunities with local employers, and offering meaningful work experience in line with the Gatsby Benchmark 6 definition.
- **Young Futures Hubs should embed high-quality Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) as a core part of their offer, ensuring it is accessible, accurate, youth-centred, and delivered through both drop-in and structured support.** Hubs should integrate IAG with wider services through clear referral pathways and partnership working, enabling coordinated support across areas such as education, mental health, housing and employment. This joined-up approach is essential to helping young people navigate complex systems, particularly at key transition points, and to ensuring they receive timely, consistent support that leads to sustained positive outcomes.

Fixing the architecture

- **Building on the landmark National Youth Strategy, develop a cross-government plan for vulnerable young people, mapping clear pathways of support and shared accountability across services.** Too many vulnerable young people fall between the gaps separating education, employment, health, youth justice and social care services. Government should establish a cross-departmental strategy with shared outcomes and accountability across departments, ensuring that support is coordinated around the needs of the young person rather than organisational boundaries. This should include clear referral pathways, integrated local delivery, appropriate data sharing, and coordinated support for young people at risk of becoming NEET. A more joined-up approach would help ensure that young people receive the right support at the right time, improving outcomes while making more effective use of public resources.

- **DCMS, along with DWP, DHSC, DfE, and the Home Office should publish a comprehensive, joint guidance document for Young Futures Hubs.** Together, these departments should design a centrally mandated ‘core offer’ of services to be delivered through the Hubs. This framework should set out a nationally defined core offer, alongside shared expectations around outcomes, partnership working, data collection and evaluation, while allowing sufficient flexibility for local areas to respond to local needs and priorities. The guidance should also provide the flexibility and direction needed for local partners to shape delivery, build partnerships, and align existing services. This should include support for local areas to develop referral pathways, governance arrangements, and integrated delivery models, enabling them to strengthen the local support architecture rather than simply delivering a prescribed set of services.
- **Expand Young Futures Hubs through a cross-departmental Spending Review 2027 settlement.** The Spending Review 2027 should include a long-term, cross-departmental plan for expanding Young Futures Hubs, ensuring that every young person can access joined-up support in their community. Backed by investment from relevant departments, including education, health, employment and crime prevention budgets, this would provide certainty for local areas, strengthen multi-agency partnerships, and support earlier intervention for young people at risk of poor outcomes, including becoming NEET.

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