

DWP Young People and Work Report: Call for Evidence - NYA Response

About the NYA

The National Youth Agency (NYA) is the professional, statutory and regulatory body for youth work in England, whose primary mission is to enable high quality youth work across a range of settings, building the capacity and sustainability of the youth work sector.

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

Young people face a wide range of barriers that prevent them from participating in employment, education or training. These include inconsistent local support, growing mental health needs, limited access to specialist provision and wider structural inequalities. Youth workers see these challenges first-hand and are often the professionals young people turn to when other services are not available or accessible. However, youth work's role in supporting young people who are NEET (not in education, employment or training) is frequently undervalued and under-recognised.

Findings from the NYA's National Youth Sector Census 2025 show a rising demand for support addressing employment, training and skills across 52% of youth organisations.¹ Furthermore, learning from the [Local Youth Transformation Programme \(LYTP\) pilot](#) - a national DCMS-funded programme working across 12 areas in England to rebuild a high-quality, place-based youth offer, for which NYA is the lead delivery partner - reinforces this need. Early insights from the LYTP pilot areas found that both providers and young people report strong demand for skills, employment and financial support, reflecting the important role youth work plays in supporting the nearly one million young people currently not in education, employment or training (NEET).

The quality and consistency of youth work support on offer in different localities across the country varies significantly, and these disparities impact young people's participation in employment, education and training. According to the National Youth Sector census (2025), 45% of organisations provide targeted support around youth employment, training and skills, a figure that is much higher, 55%, for organisations in the highest IMD (Index of Multiple Deprivation) quintile compared to those in the lowest IMD quintile. This discrepancy exposes a structural inequity in youth

¹ [The National Youth Sector Census - National Youth Agency](#) 'National Youth Sector Census', National Youth Agency, 2025.

provision, suggesting that a young person's capacity to access youth work support for education, employment and training is primarily determined by where they live.

Young people's mental health

Research published by The King's Trust and the Learning and Work Institute shows that England's escalating mental health crisis is a major factor preventing young people from accessing employment, education or training.² When young people who are NEET were asked why they were struggling to find, or not actively looking for employment opportunities, the most common reason given was having a mental health problem or disability, as cited by 39% of respondents. This evidence suggests that young people's poor mental health is having a significant impact on their ability to access academic or professional development pathways.

Findings from the NYA's National Youth Sector Census 2025 reinforce this picture, with 84% of youth sector organisations reporting an increased demand for mental health support services.

Vulnerable groups of young people, including those who have experienced adverse childhood experiences, care leavers or those with a learning disability are more likely to have poor mental health and require additional support. According to research published by Barnardo's, looked after children are over four times more likely to have a mental health disorder than the general population.³

Shauna's story

Shauna's story is an example of the impacts of Covid-19 on a young person's educational experience. Shauna completed her GCSE examinations during the Covid-19 pandemic and found that, on starting college, she found the classroom environment overwhelming and anxiety-inducing.

After discovering an opportunity with a local charity, Building Self-Belief, Shauna began working with young people. Youth work provided an alternative pathway to help Shauna discover her passion and purpose. She has since achieved a Level 6 apprenticeship in Youth Work and was recognised as 'Youth Worker of the Year' at the NE Youth Impact Awards 2024.

² [Power of Potential: Supporting the future of NEET young people](#) 'The Power of Potential: Supporting the future of NEET young people', The King's Trust and the Learning and Work Institute, 2022.

³ [neglected-minds.pdf](#) 'Neglected Minds', Barnardo's 2017.

The mental health crisis has been significantly exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, with many young people experiencing isolation, a lack of motivation and increased financial pressures. According to figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) from 2024, NEET rates have grown exponentially since the pandemic.

Young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) often face additional barriers to accessing education, employment and training, and are at an increased risk of being excluded from school. These barriers can include unmet support needs, inaccessible learning environments or limited specialist provision, with particular gaps in support identified during the transitional period from education to adulthood. The National Education Union identifies the need for a “more inclusive system which takes a more holistic, whole child approach towards behaviour support.”⁴ Youth workers can help bridge this gap since youth work takes a relational, person-centred approach that is focused on achieving positive outcomes for the young person in question.

There are significant, long-term benefits for young people facing multiple, complex challenges and who are often particularly vulnerable, of having the support of skilled youth workers. Some of these benefits are outlined in the [NYA's guidance around the benefits of Transitional Safeguarding](#) for under-supported groups of young people aged between 15 and 24. This guidance explains that the nature of the trusted relationships forged between youth workers and the young people they support are not designed to change or stop when the young person reaches 18 or leaves formal care or education. This consistency of support is particularly important for young people with a learning disability, care leavers or other vulnerable groups who often report experiencing a “cliff edge” in support on turning 18, as service provision drops off rapidly and their needs are no longer met.

Cost-of-living impact on young people

Wider societal and economic challenges can impact a young person's participation in employment, education and training. A prominent, recent example is the cost-of-living crisis, which has had a knock-on effect on young people's wellbeing and social and economic mobility.

Many young people cite rising costs as a barrier to participating in employment and education. According to the King's Trust's Youth Index report, one out of ten young people who are NEET have turned down a job because they could not afford the costs associated with it, such as transport, rent or uniform.⁵ This finding is particularly concerning for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, who, as

⁴ [SEND children and exclusion | National Education Union](#) SEND children and exclusion, National Education Union, 2023.

⁵ [King's Trust TK Maxx Youth Index 2025](#), Youth Index Report, King's Trust and TK Maxx, 2025.

a result of these increased financial pressures and in the absence of standardised financial education and support, are at an increased risk of becoming excluded from the labour market and post-16 education and training pathways. Fragmented access to education, employment and training opportunities for young people underscores the importance of the Government's Opportunity Mission to create fair access to opportunity, regardless of background or postcode.

Access to transport

The cost of travel and unreliability of transport in certain areas of the country can further limit a young person's access to opportunities and act as a barrier to participation in education, employment or training. Learning from the LYTP pilot areas revealed that transport links vary depending on a young person's postcode, with young people in rural areas experiencing more barriers to accessing education, employment and training opportunities as a result. Additional findings from the LYTP pilot areas included reports that some young people in urban areas may limit where they travel to and through if there are certain areas they feel unable to access safely, for example areas that may be territory where a gang operates and is therefore inaccessible or unsafe to them.

These findings reinforce patterns arising from other research, which reflect the structural inequalities of local support and provision on offer, with young people from low-income households at a significant disadvantage compared to their peers.

In summary, young people experience a myriad of barriers to education, employment and training, and access to these opportunities varies depending on the local youth offer, a lack of affordable or available transport links, and wider factors like mental and physical health. At the same time, there is an increasing need for support that enables young people to overcome these barriers and access education, employment, and training. However, services dedicated to helping young people with these challenges often cannot keep up with the demand.

Youth work plays a vital role in filling this gap, providing a safe, trusted space for young people to overcome challenges, discover and develop their potential and explore what success looks like for their future.

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

Investment in transformative youth work

Youth workers are in a unique position to support young people to access education, employment and training opportunities. The transformative potential of youth work is demonstrated by the journey of Lorraine Lambert, GB Paralympian and Youth Worker, who leads employment programmes for young people at The King's Trust.



Lorraine led the launch of the NYA's Youth Work Week 2025 campaign and her full story can be found here: ['I'm prouder of my youth work than any gold medal' - Paralympian Lorraine Lambert launches Youth Work Week 2025 - National Youth Agency](#).

Lorraine celebrates the breadth of support youth workers give young people, whether it's helping them to write their CV, providing them with relevant contacts, or supporting them to boost their confidence and self-esteem.

“Never underestimate that impact of having someone there to support a young person.” – Lorraine Lambert, Youth Worker/ Paralympian, King’s Trust

A key tenet of the youth work profession is the voluntary, trusted relationship a youth worker builds with a young person. Lorraine believes that youth workers are “providing a brighter future just by being there”. The trusted relationship a youth worker fosters with a young person can provide emotional support, positive educational and employment outcomes and protect against the long-term effects of adverse childhood experiences.⁶ According to research commissioned by Youth Futures Foundation with the Institute for Employment Studies on supporting disadvantaged young people into meaningful employment, youth workers can act as “magnets” to attract and engage young people at risk in programmes of support relating to welfare and education provision.⁷

Moreover, the voluntary nature of the relationship between a young person and their youth worker is fundamental in creating safe, supportive spaces for young people to develop their skills and talents. Since engagement with youth work is chosen rather than mandatory or imposed, young people are more willing to form honest connections that can help them build confidence and self-esteem. Youth work is particularly impactful because youth workers approach relationship-building from an equitable, non-hierarchical standpoint, talking with young people as equals. This approach enables young people to feel respected and in control, strengthening the quality of the relationship and potential for young people to develop their skillset.

These voluntary, trusted relationships are particularly important and beneficial to looked after children, who may have had a disrupted education and unstable home life. Evidence highlights that consistent, relational support is vital for young care leavers as they navigate the transition to adulthood. Trusted adult relationships can help to rebuild trust where professional systems may previously have let them down.

Youth workers addressed some of the mental health and wellbeing challenges that arose as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, supporting young people to overcome

⁶ [Trusted adult relationships | Reports and Impact | YoungMinds](#), ‘Outcomes of trusted adult relationships’, Young Minds, no date.

⁷ [v14-IES-evidence-review-FINAL.pdf](#), Supporting disadvantaged young people into meaningful work, Youth Futures Foundation and the Institute for Employment Studies, 2020.



isolation and build confidence and self-worth. Casey dropped out of college due to mental health pressures and found himself isolated in his room during the period of national lockdown. Casey's social isolation was exacerbated by the sudden death of his father just prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. Casey cites the importance of the *Explore* programme that he took part in through the King's Trust, which helped him to overcome his social and physical isolation.

“There’s a lot of people out there who, like me, struggle with social situations, struggle with making friends, struggle with confidence and motivation. I think without youth workers, those people may get stuck in those ways.” - Casey, 24, King’s Trust

Casey now enjoys his job working at M&S, spends time with friends and is happy with his life. Casey credits his youth worker, Lorraine Lambert, for providing him with the tools to reach this place of professional and personal contentment.

Whole system change

As outlined in the Government's National Youth Strategy, young people do not feel prepared for their transition to adulthood, a period that is particularly challenging for those young people with additional support needs. The Government has committed to transforming the post-16 skills landscape, working with local authorities to ensure that all young people, no matter their background, can access employment and training opportunities in their area. This change must be reflected across the system as a whole, with youth workers playing a vital role in supporting vulnerable young people to transition to adulthood, discover their path in life and ensure they are receiving sufficient support and signposting.

The UK Government has also committed to reforming the apprenticeship system, including dedicated funding for local authorities to connect young people who are NEET with apprenticeship providers in their area. Experience from a local authority in the South West highlights the value of investing in apprenticeships as they are vital to providing flexible, tailored learning particularly for young people who find traditional academic pathways challenging.

“Apprenticeships I think, are vital because a lot of people learn better in a practical sense. By investing in youth workers, we're investing in young people. We're investing in their communities. We're giving them hope that things can be different, that things can change.” Tracy Hayes, Plymouth Marjon University.

Signposting - knowing where to go and what to do

A lack of understanding of what opportunities exist can also prove to be a barrier to participating in education, employment and training opportunities as young people are often unaware of the support available.



Youth workers can signpost the young people they support to new opportunities and contacts, sharing ideas and information to help young people to discover future career and other development options. Harley, a young person supported by Lorraine Lambert at the King's Trust, thought that their career aspirations were unrealistic, a viewpoint that was compounded by a lack of support from relatives and their additional needs relating to ADHD. Working with Lorraine made Harley see that anything is possible, providing Harley with the tools to make their aspirations a reality. The trusted, voluntary relationships youth workers carefully construct with young people, coupled with the signposting they can provide puts them in a unique position to build young people's confidence in their abilities and empower them to shape and pursue ambitious future goals.

The NYA consistently hears from young people who have found their vocation through the opportunities provided by youth work. Through accessing a youth centre, young people can connect through sport, art, and other activities, learning what they enjoy and developing essential life skills. Lacie, a young person who attended Strood Youth Centre during a difficult time in her life, improved her confidence and self-esteem, now regularly volunteers at the youth centre and describes herself as the happiest version of herself.

“Before I felt lost and felt like I didn’t have anywhere to go, compared to now I feel like I have somewhere to go. I’m probably the happiest I’ve been for ages.” – Lacie, 16, Strood Youth Centre

To watch Lacie's full story, please click [here](#).

Digital youth offer

Investment in, and support for, the creation of a strong, digital youth offer would help support young people in a similar position to Casey to build the essential skills required to participate in employment, education and training. A high-quality digital youth offer can help combat social isolation whilst also removing practical barriers, such as transport costs, that prevent young people attending in-person sessions. It is important that this offer is co-designed with young people to ensure it reflects their needs and leads to a pertinent course that can upskill and empower young people and support their academic or professional development and progression.

Financial literacy

Key to overcoming financial barriers to young people participating in education, employment and training is a focus on improving the financial literacy of young people, ensuring they have appropriate knowledge of how to manage their money effectively and understand more broadly the financial decisions made around them. The NatWest Thrive programme, in partnership with the NYA, aims to instil young people with essential skills to approach money management, develop their confidence and realise their potential. The cost of living, exacerbated by recent global events like the Covid-19 pandemic, has led to an increased financial pressure

on many young people across the country. A young person who took part in the [NatWest Thrive programme](#), Jordan, explained that he found managing his personal finances stressful and tended to avoid checking his bank balance. Through taking part in the interactive Thrive sessions with youth workers he had developed trusted relationships with, Jordan learnt important budgeting tips, including how to set realistic savings goals and understand interest rates. By the end of the programme, Jordan reported feeling more confident about his finances, had opened a savings account and was feeling empowered to making better financial decisions.

“Money Matters” Case Study

“Money Matters” is a programme of support provided by the Cumbria Youth Alliance (CYA), which provides 1-1 and group support for young people to improve their financial education, access to online education and training and assist with CV writing and interview preparation.

The programme provides targeted support to young people aged 15-24 who are at increased risk of becoming NEET, including those who are care experienced.

Participants in the programme have shared how much the support has helped them when applying to jobs, and more broadly in navigating the challenges of daily life.

There is a direct correlation between increasing a young person’s financial literacy and their participation in employment, education and training, as illustrated by UK Finance’s Financial Education Report (2024), which found that inadequate financial education is linked to higher rates of unemployment.

Youth workers’ expertise in supporting young people who are NEET

The [National Youth Work Curriculum](#) provides a framework outlining how youth work can be used to support the personal, social and political development of young people. One area of focus for the curriculum is the economic and financial wellbeing of young people. Trusted relationships with youth workers enable young people to access spaces where they can develop employability skills, explore education and employment pathways, and prepare for future placements through activities such as CV development. The [NYA’s Transitional Safeguarding principles](#) also align well with the youth work’s key values and ethics, both taking a relational and person-centred approach to supporting young people.

The NYA has also developed a [toolkit for youth workers](#) in partnership with UK Youth, to support young people to get into employment. This toolkit provides information and insights into young people's experiences, hopes for the future and the barriers they face to realising their aspirations. Furthermore, the toolkit includes practical tips and guidance, as well as relevant tools and resources, for youth workers to better equip young people with the skills and knowledge they need to successfully navigate the world of employment and training.

The NYA also [runs free, online courses](#) to educate youth workers on how best to support young people to overcome barriers to employment and education. It is essential that youth workers, and other professionals working closely with young people, are equipped with the knowledge and skills to best support young people who are NEET. This includes understanding the challenges faced by young people who are NEET and knowing where to signpost them for careers advice and further support.

The research and case studies cited above highlight the vital role that youth work plays in supporting young people who are NEET to overcome barriers to participating in education, employment and training. **Through the development of trusted relationships, expert signposting, digital youth offers and financial literacy programmes, youth workers provide bespoke guidance and meaningful support that cannot be found through another service.**

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