National Youth Agency



Where futures begin:

How youth work supports positive life outcomes

Building confidence, fostering belonging and creating opportunity for young people

November 2026

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Executive summary

Young people need more than a route into employment, they need confidence, belonging, wellbeing, trusted relationships and access to opportunities that help them thrive. There is growing recognition that improving young people's outcomes requires an earlier, more preventative approach that supports them before they become disconnected from education, training, work or their communities.

Almost 1 million young people are not in education, employment or training (NEET), and between a quarter and a third of economically inactive young people identify a health condition or disability as the principal reason.[1] The youth sector is seeing these pressures first-hand: 79% of youth sector organisations reported increased need for mental health support, while 56% reported rising demand for employment, training and skills support.[2] And 59% of youth sector organisations responding to the 2026 National Youth Sector Census are offering targeted help for employment, training or support.

Youth work plays a distinctive role. Built on voluntary participation, trusted relationships and long-term engagement, youth work helps young people develop the foundations that enable positive life outcomes. Youth work supports confidence, wellbeing, belonging, participation and agency, while helping them navigate services, opportunities and the transition to adulthood. It is often the bridge between young people and wider systems including education, employment support, health services and community provision. Targeted employment support for young people needs a strong universal and preventative foundation. Universal youth work plays a vital role in creating the relationships and early points of connection through which targeted help can become effective.

This report brings together findings from a National Youth Agency (NYA) survey of 221 youth work practitioners and organisations, conducted in August and September 2026, with desk research on the existing evidence and policy landscape surrounding the high number of young people who are NEET. By combining fresh insights from the youth work sector with wider research, the report sets out the pivotal role youth work can play in preventing disengagement and supporting young people towards positive life outcomes.

1. Latest available figures show that an estimated 981,000 young people aged 16 to 24 years in the UK were NEET in April to June 2026. Office for National Statistics, 'Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK', 2026. Published on ONS.GOV.UK

2. National Youth Agency, 'National Youth Sector Census Snapshot, Summer 2026'. Published on NYA.ORG.UK

1. The foundations of opportunity: confidence, belonging and trusted support

The challenges facing many young people extend beyond participation in education, employment or training. Evidence from the NYA's youth work practitioner pulse questionnaire suggests that the most significant barriers are often relational and emotional rather than simply economic.



Practitioner snapshot: relational and emotional barriers often come before labour market challenges

The three most cited barriers to young people engaging with education, training or employment in NYA's practitioner pulse questionnaire were:

- Low confidence or self-belief (54%)
- Mental health or wellbeing challenges (50%)
- Poor experiences of education (37%)

A lack of a trusted adult or consistent support was also cited by nearly a third of respondents (31%).

Confidence helps young people recognise what they can offer and encourages them to try, learn from setbacks, and try again. Belonging helps them engage by ensuring they feel known, accepted and supported by trusted adults and peers. Opportunity turns aspiration into action by providing realistic routes forward and support to take the next step.

"When someone struggles in education, and education is presented as their only option to build upon opportunity, they can feel like it will be hopeless them trying. Most don't even know there are other routes beyond the traditional ones into education, employment or training."

– Youth worker



Youth work brings these foundations together. Through voluntary engagement, trusted relationships and informal learning – learning shaped around young people's interests and experiences rather than a formal syllabus – youth workers help young people recognise their strengths, build self-belief, connect with others and navigate the choices ahead of them. These principles are reflected in the National Youth Work Curriculum. This approach is particularly important for young people who have experienced poor outcomes in education, low wellbeing, isolation or repeated setbacks.

Without confidence, belonging and opportunity, policy interventions risk reaching young people too late or failing to sustain their engagement. With them, young people are better able to participate, progress and build futures that feel meaningful to them.

Youth work builds confidence and creates pathways beyond traditional education by providing safe, non-judgemental spaces where young people are valued for who they are, rather than defined by their academic achievements."

– Youth worker

The Independent Review into Young People and Work, chaired by the Rt Hon Alan Milburn, has brought renewed focus on the 1 million young people who are NEET.[3] It has found that between a quarter and a third of economically inactive young people cite a health condition or disability as the main reason.

3. Department for Work & Pensions, 'Young people and work: interim report', Published on GOV.UK



The language used to describe young people also matters. The term NEET defines young people by what they are not doing and obscures the fact that many are actively seeking opportunities or navigating significant barriers. The Be Free 'From NEET to LEET' campaign is advocating for more strengths-based language, including "looking for education, employment or training" (LEET), to better recognise young people's agency, aspirations and potential. While NEET remains the established term in official statistics and policy, this emerging debate reinforces the case for support that starts with young people's experiences and strengths first.

A recent government-commissioned survey of young people who are NEET reinforces this wider understanding of the challenge.[4] It shows the need for an engagement-first approach that centres young people's experiences, aspirations and barriers, and supports them with the wider issues affecting their lives.

This is where youth work has a distinctive contribution to make. Through voluntary participation, trusted relationships and sustained support, youth work helps young people build confidence, belonging and wellbeing, while connecting them to education, employment, health and community support.

Many young people are being asked to make significant decisions about education, training and employment at a time when the world they are preparing to enter feels increasingly uncertain.

They are expected to know what they want to do, choose the right qualifications and make decisions that appear to determine their future, while simultaneously hearing that employment is becoming less secure, housing is increasingly unaffordable and technology is rapidly changing the labour market.

For some, the enormity of that expectation does not create aspiration; it creates anxiety, uncertainty and paralysis. What can sometimes be interpreted as a lack of motivation may actually be a fear of making the wrong decision or of failing before they have really begun."

– Youth worker

4. Department for Work & Pensions, 'Survey of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET): young people and work report', 2026. Published on GOV.UK



Standard Qualification Framework

2. The unique value of youth work

Youth work is a professional practice rooted in voluntary participation, informal education, trusted relationships and young people's lived experience. Its contribution is distinctive but complementary to that of schools, careers services, Jobcentre Plus, health services and employers. The NYA's Standard Qualification Framework for youth work practitioners supports this professional practice by setting out training and qualifications from Essential Training through to a Level 6 degree or degree apprenticeship, with each level mapped to the progression of knowledge and practice.

Practitioner snapshot: youth work's distinctive contribution

Nearly two-thirds of practitioners (64%) identified long-term trusted relationships as youth work's most distinctive contribution.

Other distinctive contributions included helping young people recognise their interests, strengths and aspirations (54%), supporting young people at their own pace (46%), and building confidence and resilience (40%).

Research shows that consistent relationships with trusted adults help identify and engage young people at risk of disengagement. These relationships build confidence and connect them to education, training, mental health and employment support.[5] Evidence from the NYA's report Better together: Youth work with schools (2023) also found that youth workers often act as a bridge between schools, families and communities. These trusted relationships and holistic support help young people address barriers to attendance and engagement. Similarly, the evaluation of the government's Alternative Provision Specialist Taskforces found that multidisciplinary teams, including youth workers, were able to build trusted relationships with young people and families. This rapid, integrated support tailored to individual needs helped to improve engagement and attendance.[6]



The lesson for policy is that stronger pathways into education, employment and training must be matched by relational support, with youth workers embedded within mainstream services and multidisciplinary teams to build young people's trust, confidence and sustained engagement.

"Youth work can help young people experience success. A young person who may struggle to engage in a classroom can thrive when learning is connected to something meaningful to them.

Through building positive relationships with trusted adults and peers, young people can develop confidence, communication skills, resilience, problem-solving abilities and a belief in their own potential. I believe informal learning should not be seen as an alternative to education, but as something that can work alongside and complement formal education. By recognising that young people learn in different ways, we can create more opportunities for them to discover that they are capable of learning and achieving. Sometimes, giving a young person a different environment in which to learn can be the first step towards changing the way they see themselves as a learner."

– Youth worker

5. Youth Futures Foundation, 'The missing link: the role of trusted adult relationships in tackling youth unemployment and inactivity challenge', 2025. Published on YOUTHFUTURESFOUNDATION.ORG

6. Department for Education, 'Evaluation report – alternative provision specialist taskforce', 2025. Published on YOUTHENDOWMENTFUND.ORG.UK



The National Youth Work Curriculum provides a flexible framework to support young people's personal, social and political development. In practice, youth work helps young people engage, build confidence and agency, and navigate routes into education, training, employment and wider opportunity by providing:

- **Trusted relationships young people choose.** Young people engage voluntarily, creating a different and often more engaged relationship than one based on compliance, assessment or sanction.
- **Continuity and prevention.** Youth workers can remain alongside young people as needs and circumstances change, helping at an early stage to prevent problems becoming entrenched.
- **Strengths and agency.** Youth work starts with interests, capabilities and aspirations, helping young people experience success and make informed choices.
- **Navigation and advocacy.** Youth workers connect young people with specialist support including education, training, employment support and opportunities, and can help them keep going when systems feel complex.
- **Informal learning and employability.** Activities, volunteering, leadership and social action build communication, teamwork, resilience, problem-solving and other transferable skills.

Rather than focusing solely on qualifications or what a young person has struggled with, youth work takes a strengths-based approach and helps them recognise what they can do and how those abilities could translate into future opportunities. For young people who have become disengaged from education, the trusted relationship with a youth worker can be particularly important. Youth workers can provide encouragement without recreating the pressures of a classroom, help young people break larger ambitions into achievable steps, advocate for them where appropriate and connect them with other services and opportunities.

Ultimately, youth work helps young people understand that there is more than one pathway to success. It can give them the confidence to try new things, experience achievement, learn from setbacks and make informed choices about their future – helping them move towards a pathway that reflects their own strengths, interests and potential."

– Youth worker



Supporting young people into employment: a toolkit for youth workers

The NYA and Youth Employment UK's supporting young people into employment toolkit turns youth work principles into practical guidance, resources and conversation tools that help young people recognise their skills, understand routes into work and navigate their next steps – without reducing youth work to a transactional employment intervention.

Laura-Jane Rawlings, CEO of Youth Employment UK, has said that youth workers play a vital role in supporting and inspiring young people. She described the collaboration on this toolkit as reflecting a shared commitment to equipping youth workers with the tools and resources they need to help every young person thrive.

Case Study: Barca-Leeds Young Futures Hub

Darcy, 11, was experiencing difficulties managing anger, friendships and challenges at home while her Mum struggled with poor mental health. After earlier family support, she was connected with services at the Young Futures Hub in Bramley.

Through drop-in sessions, trusted youth workers listened to Darcy, supported her family and helped her access positive activities. She contributed ideas to the design of the new facility and began developing as a young leader, meeting peers and building confidence. Joined-up support also enabled her Mum to receive mental health help and register for Healthy Holidays. Darcy has since enjoyed horse riding, swimming, forest days, clubs and trips. She now feels safer, more confident and inspired to support other young people facing similar difficulties.

“Since engaging with support, Darcy has grown significantly in confidence and developed many positive friendships. She has successfully transitioned into secondary school, is attending all of her lessons and maintains good school attendance. I have been particularly impressed by the way Darcy has embraced every opportunity offered to her. She has actively engaged in one-to-one support, attended new groups, taken part in trips and activities, and stepped into the role of a Young Leader. Darcy has shown real commitment to her personal development and should be extremely proud of the progress she has made.”

– Sophie Cherry, Senior Youth Worker,
Barca-Leeds Young Futures Hub

“The Young Futures Hub is a safe space. I have made friends, tried new activities, grown in confidence and want to support other young people.”

– Darcy, 11,
attendee of Barca-Leeds Young Futures Hub



3. The universal foundation for targeted support

Policies to support young people who are looking for education, employment or training will only succeed if they are built on the foundations that make sustained engagement possible – confidence, belonging and opportunity. Universal, open-access youth work provides these foundations by giving young people places they choose to be, trusted adults they can approach, and practical opportunities to build skills, relationships and self-belief over time. The evidence also points to significant long-term value: for every £1 of public money invested in the youth sector, between £3.20 and £6.40 in benefits to the taxpayer are generated, while youth work contributes an estimated £0.8 billion in indirect value through improved education and employment outcomes.[7]

7. UK Youth and Frontier Economics, 'The economic value of youth work', 2022. Published on UKYOUTH.ORG

Targeted programmes are important, but they cannot create sustained participation on their own. A system focused only on young people already classed as being or at risk of being NEET will always reach some young people too late. Universal access to youth work creates earlier points of connection, before a young person reaches crisis point or becomes visible to a formal programme. It also makes targeted support more effective, because young people are more likely to accept ongoing help when it comes through a trusted relationship rather than as a one-off referral.

> **“We are often supporting young people through significant transitions – primary to secondary [school], parent’s divorce, friendship changes, hormone changes, bereavement, care experience and so on. We regularly see teachers, social workers and care teams come and go – we have stayed. For me, this is primarily the most important part of our work. Our relationships are solid, predictable and for us. We do this as a team, so even if someone leaves or isn’t available, our young people know us all. This consistency is by far the most important factor for creating change, and means it must stay funded and available for all young people.”**
>
> – Youth worker



Young Futures Hubs, the Youth Guarantee, Youth Hubs and other initiatives supporting young people across education, employment, health and communities should be understood as parts of the local youth ecosystem. Their value will depend on how far they connect around young people’s lives, rather than expecting young people to navigate separate programmes, thresholds and referral routes.

Universal youth work can provide the infrastructure that joins this up. Open-access provision and outreach create access, trust and belonging; targeted support responds to specific needs, and youth workers help young people move between services without losing the relationship that keeps them engaged. This is especially important for young people whose barriers are shaped not only by practical or economic factors, but also by poor experiences of education, low confidence, anxiety, isolation or a lack of consistent support.

Case study: Manchester's Young Futures Hub

Manchester's Young Futures Hub demonstrates how a networked approach can make support more accessible for young people facing complex challenges.

Built around key delivery sites including Manchester Youth Zone and Moss Side Millennium Powerhouse, with additional neighbourhood outreach planned across the city, the Hub brings together mental health and wellbeing support, employment advice, community, and positive activities through a coordinated local offer. Young people can access trusted youth workers, mental health support through services such as M Thrive, employability guidance and wider community support, without having to navigate multiple disconnected services.

Youth workers act as a bridge between young people and specialist services, supporting referrals, identifying needs early and providing a consistent, safe space. Working with schools, police and mental health practitioners, the Hub co-ordinates targeted support around young people and their families or carers.

The approach is also helping young people remain engaged with education, training and employment. At Manchester Youth Zone, this includes mentoring, CV support and employer engagement, while Powerhouse provides one-to-one support, vocational learning and alternative pathways that help young people build confidence, explore future careers and overcome barriers to participation. Early examples of impact include improved school attendance, progression into college, stronger engagement with positive activities and increased access to mental health support.



"You can put all the interventions in the world in place, but if you've not got that wraparound support, it's not going to be impactful."

– Danny Percival, Director of Operations, Manchester Youth Zone

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's Local Youth Transformation pilot and the further planned roll-out of the Young Futures Hub and Transformation programme provides a practical route to rebuilding this universal foundation. By supporting local authorities (LAs) to understand need and gaps, strengthen leadership and partnerships, develop the workforce and embed young people's voices into local approaches, it is helping areas rebuild coherent, high-quality local youth offers. Learning from the programme should inform wider national action so that every community has the universal and preventative youth work infrastructure needed to connect young people to ongoing support and opportunity.

> **It starts with a trusted relationship that opens doors to options they might never have known about, or had the confidence or belief in themselves or the ability to explore on their own, and this may be more than confidence. It could be that they don't know where to start, or, if they do, they don't have the funds to get there, or someone to walk through it with them and give them advice they trust."**
>
> – Youth worker

If universal youth work is the foundation for engagement, progression and wellbeing, it cannot rely on local discretion or short-term funding. Yet access to youth work remains highly variable across England, partly because the current statutory duty requires LAs to secure services only "so far as reasonably practicable", without a clear definition of sufficiency or consistent expectations on access, workforce capacity and investment. A strengthened statutory duty, backed by clear sufficiency expectations and sustainable funding, would help ensure that every young person can access a baseline level of universal and preventative youth work. In practice, this would provide the local infrastructure needed for national youth policies to succeed.

> **Ultimately, youth work is about working with young people rather than doing things to or for them. By combining trusted relationships, consistency, professional curiosity, appropriate challenge and genuine opportunities for young people to have a voice, youth workers can help them recognise their own strengths and develop the confidence, resilience and skills needed to achieve positive outcomes throughout their lives."**
>
> – Youth worker



4. Issues affecting youth work's reach and impact

Despite its distinctive contribution, youth work is not yet consistently recognised, resourced or embedded within the systems that shape young people's access to support and opportunity. Its preventative role in building confidence, wellbeing, attendance, participation, skills and employment pathways is often underused in policy design and delivery. As a result, policy can focus on responding to crises or measuring destinations without investing sufficiently in the relationships and engagement that make positive outcomes possible.

Practitioner snapshot: supporting more young people

Practitioners said the three most important conditions needed to help organisations support more young people were sustainable funding (81%), greater recognition of youth work in local strategies and by local partners (56%) and more local opportunities for young people (47%).

Improved cross-sector partnership working (28%) was also regularly cited.

These pressures are reinforced by fragmented local systems and limited recognition of youth work across allied sectors. Education, employment and health services often operate in parallel rather than around the reality of young people's lives, and do not consistently involve youth workers in designing or delivering support. Youth workers often act as connectors and advocates, but this role is not consistently recognised or built into local multi-agency arrangements.

> **Youth workers' value often lies in what they notice – early signs of disengagement, risk or unmet need that formal services miss, because the relationship is built on trust rather than referral. Their skill set is also inherently place-based and adaptive: they meet young people where they are, literally and figuratively, and tailor the approach to what that individual or community needs."**
>
> – Youth worker

This sits within a wider decline in youth work capacity. Youth services in England have experienced a £1.2 billion or 73% reduction in funding over the past decade, alongside the closure of more than half of council youth centres.[8] As local provision has contracted, many young people have lost access to the open-access spaces, outreach and trusted adults that help keep them connected before they reach crisis point or become visible to targeted services. Rebuilding youth work is therefore not only a workforce issue; it is central to the prevention infrastructure needed to identify risk earlier and sustain young people's engagement over time.

> **Consistency is by far the most important factor for creating change. And means it must stay funded and available for all young people."**
>
> – Youth worker

8. YMCA, 'Beyond the brink? The state of funding for youth services', 2025. Published on YMCA.ORG.UK



The current government's commitment in September 2026 to support the training of 1,000 specialist youth work practitioners is both timely and welcome.[9] It recognises that tackling youth unemployment and disengagement requires investment in a skilled workforce capable of building trusted relationships, sustaining young people's participation and connecting them to education, training and employment opportunities. It should be understood as an important further step towards rebuilding capacity. Its long-term impact will depend on sustained investment in the services and organisations that will employ, retain and develop practitioners once trained.

This pledge provides a foundation to build on, but further action will be needed to reverse long-term workforce decline and strengthen the training pipeline. The workforce has been under significant pressure for many years, with shortages of trained and qualified practitioners, the loss of experienced professionals and a narrowing route into professional youth work. Only seven fee-paying undergraduate youth and community work programmes remain, compared with 37 in 2013, and just 53 new undergraduates entered these in 2024. The introduction of degree apprenticeships has provided a useful new route to professional qualification, with 13 providers recruiting a further 180 learners this year, but current provision is not sufficient to meet need. Furthermore, expressions of interest for existing youth work bursary places exceed the number available by almost four to one.

Around 60% of the workforce, particularly in the voluntary sector, do not hold a recognised youth work qualification. Taken together, declining undergraduate provision, limited supported training places and the scale of the unqualified workforce threaten continuity, quality and reach precisely when demand is growing.

> **"It's essential to have consistency. Short-term funding can be a barrier to place-based working and building long term, voluntary relationships where trust has developed. There has been too much of a focus on targeted youth work that can stigmatise young people and their sense of what their communities are and ultimately what youth workers ethos is – to listen, to act on their concerns, to help them develop their sense of identity and to support them to present their thoughts and wishes to those who can act on what they need."**
>
> – Youth worker

9. Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport,'1000 new youth workers to help reduce the risk of unemployment', 2026. Published on GOV.UK



5. Changes needed to better support young people towards positive life outcomes

Taken together, these insights point to the need for a more preventative, joined-up approach that recognises youth work as part of the infrastructure supporting young people's participation, wellbeing and progression in life. The following recommendations set out the action needed across policy, provision, practice, workforce development and outcomes measurement.

1. Recognise participation and youth work as the foundation of joined-up prevention.

National policy should recognise that sustained participation in education, employment and training starts with connection, confidence, belonging and agency. Youth work should be treated as essential preventative infrastructure, creating the trusted relationships and voluntary engagement that keep young people connected to opportunity. Education, employment and health services should involve youth workers in designing and delivering support, and formally recognise their role as connectors and advocates within local multi-agency arrangements.

2. Rebuild universal, open-access youth provision.

Protect and rebuild open-access, outreach and preventative youth work through sustainable, multi-year funding and a strengthened statutory duty, with clearer expectations of sufficient local provision so every young person can access safe spaces, trusted relationships and early support before reaching crisis point or becoming NEET. Learning from the Local Youth Transformation pilot and the planned roll-out of the Young Futures Hub and Transformation programme should support LAs to assess need and gaps, strengthen leadership and partnerships, develop the workforce and embed young people's voices in local approaches. This should inform wider national action to rebuild high-quality universal youth offers in every community.

3. Embed youth work practice in mainstream support.

Schools, colleges, Jobcentre Plus, careers services and local employment pathways should build in youth work approaches, with qualified youth workers involved in design and delivery.

4. Grow and sustain the youth work workforce.

While the commitment to support the training of 1,000 specialist youth work practitioners represents a step towards building back the youth work workforce, the government should go further by recognising the youth work workforce as a priority skills sector and making apprenticeships more accessible to smaller youth organisations by addressing the costs and practical barriers to participation. It should back investment in training with sustainable funding for youth work provision, so employers can create secure roles and recruit, retain and develop qualified practitioners in the communities where they are most needed.



Youth work practitioner pulse questionnaire

The NYA conducted an online questionnaire (September 2026) of youth work practitioners and organisations in relation to how youth work supports young people to build confidence, belonging and positive pathways into education, employment and training.

It received 221 responses. This report includes quantitative analysis of survey responses and quotes from open-text answers (in their own words).

About the National Youth Agency (NYA)

The NYA is the professional, statutory and regulatory body for youth work in England. The NYA is committed to enabling high-quality youth work across a range of settings to benefit the health and outcomes of young people and strengthen local communities. The NYA provides guidance, support, advice, training and staff development opportunities for youth workers and youth work organisations.

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