

[Home](#) ▾ [Work](#) ▾ [Working, jobs and pensions](#)

▾ [Qualitative research with NEET 16 to 24 year olds not currently claiming health or disability benefits](#)



[Department
for Work &
Pensions](#)

Research and analysis

Qualitative research with NEET 16 to 24 year olds not currently claiming health or disability benefits

Published 27 August 2026

Contents

[Executive summary](#)

[Glossary](#)

[Abbreviations](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Why young people are NEET](#)

[Perceived barriers to entering work, training or education](#)

[What support young people want](#)

[What steps young people are taking](#)

[Aspirations around work, training or education](#)

[Conclusions](#)

[Appendix 1: Sampling criteria](#)

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) ad hoc research report no. 136.

A report of research carried out by Verian on behalf of DWP.

Crown copyright 2026.

You may re-use this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit the [Open Government Licence](#) or write to the

Information Policy Team,
The National Archives,
Kew,
London
TW9 4DU

or email: psi@nationalarchives.gov.uk.

If you would like to know more about DWP research, email socialresearch@dw.gov.uk.

First published August 2026.

ISBN: 978-1-80786-040-0.

Views expressed in this report are not necessarily those of DWP or any other government department.

Executive summary

This report outlines findings from qualitative research with young people aged 16 to 24 who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) and were not currently claiming health or disability benefits.

Background

This research was commissioned to inform the Milburn review by providing in depth insight into the experiences of young people aged 16 to 24 who were not in

employment, education or training (NEET) and were not currently claiming health or disability benefits. It sought to understand why young people were NEET, the barriers they faced in progressing, the support they wanted, the steps they were taking, and their aspirations for the future.

Methodology

The research involved 30 qualitative interviews with young people conducted in March 2026. Participants were purposively sampled to reflect a range of ages, gender, educational backgrounds, time spent NEET, caring responsibilities, health and neurodivergent conditions, and region.

Key findings

NEET status was not framed as the result of disengagement or lack of motivation. Young people consistently reported wanting to move into work, education or training. Being NEET was typically described as the result of a constrained or disrupted transition, often following education, insecure work or unexpected events, rather than a deliberate choice to opt out. Where activity was paused, this was usually temporary and linked to health, caring responsibilities or exhaustion after repeated setbacks.

Lack of relevant work experience was consistently identified as a key barrier in a highly competitive labour market. Young people across different qualification levels described a “vicious circle” in which entry-level roles required prior experience, but opportunities to gain that experience (particularly paid, career-relevant experience) were scarce. Young people reported repeated rejection with little or no feedback, making it difficult to improve applications or sustain confidence.

Financial constraints, health and caring responsibilities compounded labour market barriers. Limited income or family support restricted some young people’s ability to take unpaid placements or cover costs of training, travel or childcare. Mental health conditions, neurodivergence and caring roles further reduced capacity to engage, often interacting with financial pressure and weak support to slow progress.

Existing education and employment support was widely perceived as misaligned with need. Careers guidance in schools and colleges was described as insufficiently practical, while Jobcentre support was often reported as compliance focused and

poorly tailored to young people’s goals or constraints. Many young people relied more on family, peers or informal online sources for advice.

Young people were actively trying to progress but recalibrated their expectations over time. Most participants described sustained job search activity, engagement with training or volunteering, and efforts to build experience. Over time, many adjusted their aspirations due to lack of progress, prioritising immediate income over longer-term fit, broadening the roles they would accept, or delaying ambitions.

Conclusions

These findings indicate a need for support that helps young people convert their effort into outcomes. This includes greater availability of paid, progression-linked work experience and reduced reliance on prior experience for entry-level roles. Employment support is likely to be most effective when tailored to young people’s differing levels of capability and capacity to engage, including flexibility and clearer communication about viable routes and available help.

Glossary

Key term	Explanation
Alternative provision	Education arranged for pupils who cannot receive suitable education in mainstream school, for example because of exclusion, illness or other reasons. It can also include provision arranged by schools to support pupils off-site.
‘Capability’	In this report, this means a young person’s ability to take up work, education or training opportunities, including their skills, qualifications, knowledge and relevant experience.
‘Capacity to engage’	In this report, this means a young person’s practical ability to engage with opportunities at a given point in time. It may be affected by factors such as health, confidence, time, caring responsibilities, financial stability and access to support.
COM-B	A behaviour change framework which suggests that behaviour is

behavioural framework	shaped by 3 interacting factors: capability, opportunity and motivation.
Conditionality	Work-related activities that a Universal Credit claimant may have to do to receive their full entitlement.
Hidden NEETs	Young people who are not in education, employment or training but are less visible to services or official support systems, for example because they are not claiming benefits or engaging with employment support.
Universal Credit	A payment to help with living costs for people who are on a low income, out of work or unable to work. It is paid monthly, or twice a month for some people in Scotland.
Young carer	A young person who provides care for someone, usually a family member, because of illness, disability, mental health condition or substance misuse.

Abbreviations

Key term	Explanation
----------	-------------

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council qualification
COM-B	Capability, Opportunity, Motivation – Behaviour framework
GCSEs	General Certificates of Secondary Education
JCP	Jobcentre Plus
LCWRA	Limited Capability for Work and Related Activity
NEET	Not in education, employment or training
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Introduction

This report outlines findings from qualitative research with young people aged 16 to 24 who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) and were not currently claiming health or disability benefits.

Background to the research

The Milburn review is an investigation into the causes of record unemployment and inactivity among 16 to 24 year olds. An interim report [\[footnote 1\]](#) was published in May 2026, defining the problem, before moving into a solutions phase with a final publication in Autumn 2026. This research aims to ensure the Milburn review is informed by robust evidence, supporting a compelling case for change and the development of effective policy recommendations.

While there is a large amount of existing research on young people who are NEET, there is an evidence gap relating to those who are not in contact with the benefit system, often referred to as “hidden NEETs”. This group is estimated to make up around half of the nearly 1 million young people who are NEET in the UK. Understanding their experiences and perspectives will be crucial in designing policies that are effective and inclusive.

This research was commissioned to better understand the experiences of young people not in work, training or education and who are not currently claiming health or disability benefits. It is intended to complement existing ‘Work Aspirations’ qualitative research with NEETs who are claiming a health or disability benefit, carried out by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen).

Research aims

The aims of this research were to understand, from young people’s perspectives:

- why are young people not in employment, education or training (NEET)?
- what are the perceived barriers to entering work, training or education?
- what support do young people want/think they need?
- what steps, if any, are young people taking to enter work, training or education?
- what are the future aspirations of young people who are NEET around work, training and education?

The report is structured around these research questions, drawing out the key themes and insights.

Method

Verian conducted 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with young people who were not in work, training or education (NEET) and were not claiming health or disability benefits at the point of interview. Fieldwork took place between 16 and 27 March 2026. Interviews lasted up to an hour and took place either online or by telephone. Participants were offered a £60 shopping voucher to thank them for their time.

Young people were purposively sampled to achieve a mix of ages, gender, benefits status, length of time NEET, qualification level, caring responsibilities, health conditions, region, and additional characteristics (including identified SEN at school, experience of care, young carers, and experience of the criminal justice system). See Appendix 1 for a table of the achieved sampling criteria.

The topic guide was adapted from materials used in the 'Work Aspirations' qualitative research with NEETs claiming a health or disability benefit, conducted by NatCen for the Disability Analysis Division, to ensure consistency and enable rapid set up.

Since some of the interview topics could lead to sensitive conversations, Verian provided all young people with information about support services that they might find useful (for example mental health support, debt advice) and encouraged participants to pause or take the interview at their own pace.

Analysis

The qualitative analysis followed a process-driven, interpretative approach. The process-driven element used a matrix mapping framework technique, in which data was systematically summarised into an analytical framework organised by issue and theme. The framework was developed to reflect the research objectives, the discussion guide and the themes which emerged from brainstorming sessions.

The second analysis element, which was interpretative, focused on identifying features and patterns within the data, mapping the range and nature of data, finding associations, defining concepts, creating types, and undertaking sub-group analysis. This process created descriptive accounts and explanatory data, which came not only from aggregating patterns but by weighing up the salience and dynamics of issues and searching for structures within the data that had explanatory power. Researcher analysis sessions were used to support interpretation of the data, during which the research team came together to discuss and test emerging themes and insights.

How to read this report

Findings in this report reflect the range of experiences of those who participated in the research. It is important to note that the findings cannot be generalised to all young people in the UK, due to the small sample size and the qualitative nature of the research. Participants' accounts of their pathways into being NEET and their experiences, views and aspirations are based on recall and personal interpretation.

Anonymised verbatim quotes and pen portraits are used throughout the report to illustrate key findings from young people. Pen portraits are based on real interviews, but names and identifying details have been changed to protect participants' anonymity. Quotes are attributed as follows: (Gender, age group, length of time NEET, qualification level).

Why young people are NEET

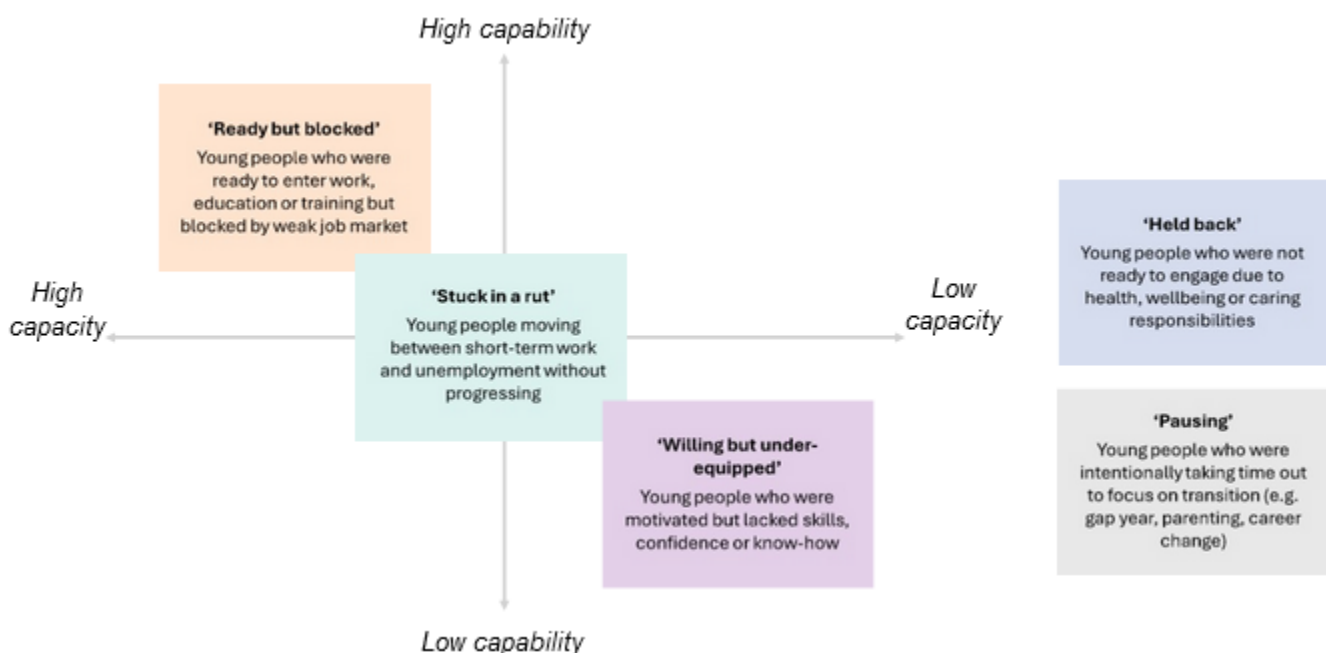
Across our sample of young people, pathways into being NEET were varied and rarely straightforward. Being NEET was often the result of a blocked or disrupted transition between education and work, shaped by labour-market conditions, health, caring responsibilities and limitations in education and support systems. Where decisions initially appeared voluntary (for example, taking a break from education or

leaving a job), these were typically described as being made within constrained circumstances rather than an empowered choice.

Young people’s experiences of being NEET varied in several important ways, including the number and types of barriers they faced (both structural and personal), what stage of transition they were at (school leavers, graduates, those with prior work experience), and how long they had been NEET (short vs longer-term or repeated cycles).

While young people’s experiences and pathways into NEET status varied, it may be helpful to distinguish between 2 interacting dimensions which draw loosely on the COM-B behavioural framework.^{[\[footnote 2\]](#)} These are: young people’s capability to take up opportunities (including skills, qualifications, and relevant experience) and their capacity to engage with opportunities in practice (shaped by a combination of know-how, health, time, stability, confidence). This distinction highlights potentially useful differences between 5 groups of young people (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Typology of young people in our sample



Text description of diagram

The diagram is a 2-dimensional matrix that categorises groups of young people according to their capability (vertical axis) and capacity (horizontal axis).

The vertical axis represents capability:

- high capability at the top
- low capability at the bottom

The horizontal axis represents capacity:

- high capacity on the left
- low capacity on the right

Five groups are positioned within the matrix.

First group: Ready but blocked

Location: upper-left quadrant (high capability, high capacity).

Description: young people who were ready to enter work, education or training but were blocked by a weak job market.

Second group: Stuck in a rut

Location: near the centre of the matrix, slightly left of centre.

Description: young people moving between short-term work and unemployment without progressing.

Third group: Willing but under-equipped

Location: lower-centre/right area (low capability, moderate-to-low capacity).

Description: young people who were motivated but lacked skills, confidence or know-how.

Fourth group: Held back

Location: upper-right quadrant (high capability, low capacity).

Description: young people who were not ready to engage due to health, wellbeing or caring responsibilities.

Fifth group: Pausing

Location: lower-right quadrant (low capability, low capacity).

Description: young people who were intentionally taking time out to focus on transition activities, such as a gap year, parenting, or a career change.

Summary

The framework segments young people into 5 groups based on their levels of capability and capacity. Those with higher capability and capacity are described as “Ready but blocked”, while those with lower capability and capacity are described as “Pausing”. The other groups represent different combinations of barriers, motivation levels and personal circumstances that affect engagement with work, education or training.

Note that these are not fixed or discrete categories of young people, but analytical groupings used to support interpretation of the findings. In practice, young people in our sample sat along a fluid spectrum and may move between these positions over time.

‘Ready but blocked’

These young people had typically followed a conventional education route, often to degree level, and therefore possessed relatively strong capability (qualifications, skills and in some cases work experience). They were also actively job searching and motivated to find opportunities, showing a clear capacity to engage. However, they struggled to convert this into work. The main barrier they identified was high competition in the labour market and lack of experience required for entry-level roles in their area of interest (see pen portrait 1: Katie). They reported a lack of feedback from applications and interviews, and those who had been NEET for longer described a growing sense of frustration and despondency about what they could do to improve their chances.

Pen portrait 1: Katie [\[footnote 3\]](#)

Katie is 23 and currently lives with her parents in rural Scotland after graduating from university last summer.

Katie enjoyed school socially but felt its structure did not suit her way of learning. She moved to college after GCSEs, initially studying for arts-related A levels, before changing to a different college to study for a BTEC in sciences, as she felt that better aligned with her interest in working in environmental conservation. After college, she continued studying science at university, but in hindsight realised this was a default next step rather than a fully informed choice. Although she completed her degree, she struggled with poor mental health at university and felt she missed out on placements and other confidence building experiences that now seem essential.

Since graduating, Katie has been out of work. She describes her days as quiet and

repetitive, spent walking the dogs, applying for jobs, and managing on limited money. Living in a rural area without the ability to drive leaves her feeling isolated and cut off from opportunities.

Katie feels the main barriers holding her back are financial and structural. She recognises that entry-level roles in conservation are competitive and require unpaid or self funded volunteering, which feels out of reach. She described feeling caught in a cycle: “You need 2 years of experience to get an entry-level job... but you have to be able to fund yourself to do that.”

She recently applied for Universal Credit and has engaged with Jobcentre support. However, she found it generic and focused on securing any job, rather than helping her move towards a long-term career.

Despite setbacks, Katie remains forward looking. She still aspires to a career in conservation where she can see the impact of what she does, alongside achieving a stable and comfortable life. To move forward, the support Katie would find most valuable is financial breathing space, more tailored careers guidance, and clearer entry routes into conservation work that do not depend on unpaid experience. In the short term, she is exploring non-career roles to earn money, alongside volunteering, travel, and further training as ways to build experience.

Katie’s timeline

School (until age 16)	College (age 16-19)	University (age 19-22)	Post university (age 23)
Attended a local community school Positive school experience Limited careers guidance, university presented as default pathway	Moved to a local college Switched to a different college after one year– from A Levels to BTEC to study a more relevant subject	Completed foundation year and degree Mental health challenges during study Part-time casual work for income	Moved back home to live with parents in rural Scotland Active job search, but lacking experience for entry level work in her area of interest Considering paid short-term work for income Applied for UC

School (until age 16)	College (age 16 to 19)	University (age 19 to	Post university (aged 23)
-----------------------	------------------------	-----------------------	---------------------------

Attended a local community school. Positive school experience. Limited careers guidance, university presented as default pathway.	Moved to a local college. Switched to a different college after one year — from A levels to BTEC to study a more relevant subject.	Completed foundation year and degree. Mental health challenges during study. Part-time casual work for income.	Moved back home to Scotland to live with parents in rural Scotland. Active job search, but lacking experience for entry-level work in her area of interest. Considering paid short-term work for income. Applied for UC.
---	--	--	--

‘Stuck in a rut’

Young people in this group tended to have more limited capability than the previous group, with fewer qualifications and less stable work histories. They described being regularly in and out of work, with roles often found through the Jobcentre or temp agencies that they struggled to sustain (see pen portrait 2: James). This resulted in periods of unemployment, with reasons for leaving roles including short-term or seasonal contracts, poor job quality, lack of progression routes, and negative workplace experiences. While their NEET status was viewed as temporary, repeated cycles of insecure work and unemployment often led to frustration and declining confidence.

Pen portrait 2: James [\[footnote 4\]](#)

James is 18 and lives at home in the north of England with his parents and older brother. He left school without passing his GCSEs and recalls struggling to focus in a classroom environment. However, his experience improved when he moved to college and valued the more practical learning environment. He completed a Level 1 qualification in carpentry, describing college as a turning point where he “got my head down” and benefited from supportive tutors.

Since leaving college last summer, his pathway into work has been fragmented. He has taken on a series of short-term manual jobs in construction, landscaping, and labouring, typically lasting a month or two. His first role was an apprentice mechanic, for which he lied about passing his GCSEs, and was let go after a few months for “messing about”. He enjoyed a later role landscaping, where he felt valued and motivated in a physical, outdoor role. However, this job ended when the linked

training pathway fell through: “I was meant to go to college and study, but it couldn’t get me in there... they didn’t have a tutor.” Without access to the required college provision, the employer could not keep him on despite his positive performance and interest.

He has now been out of work for 4 months. He feels the main barriers holding him back are practical rather than motivational. Many of the roles he is interested in require travel, but without a car his options are limited: “Once I get a car, it’ll open up a lot more opportunities.” While he is actively job searching, using online listings and Jobcentre support, and has shown he can secure work, he struggles to access stable, longer-term roles that offer continuity.

Looking ahead, he is clear that he wants hands-on, physical work and has no interest in desk-based roles. He remains optimistic about the future, particularly once he passes his driving test and can access a wider range of opportunities.

To move forward, he feels he would benefit most from greater continuity in training and employment pathways. More reliable links between employers and colleges, consistent staffing in training provision, and practical support to help him stay in roles would reduce the cycle of short-term work and help him build a more stable footing in the labour market.

James’s timeline

School (until age 16)	College (age 16-17)	Apprenticeship (age 17)	In and out of work (age 17-18)
Struggled at school and did not pass his GCSEs Limited careers guidance	Enrolled in vocational course at college Felt better able to focus Achieved level 1 qualification	Secured an apprenticeship– but left early after making mistakes due to being young and inexperienced	Moved between a series of manual and out door jobs– typically lasting 1-2 months Secured a job linked to further training but college was unable to finalise plans Out of work for nearly 4 months – actively job searching Claimed UC

School (until age	College (age 16 to	Apprenticeship (age 17)	In and out of work (aged 17 to 18)
----------------------	-----------------------	----------------------------	------------------------------------

16)

17)

Struggled at school and did not pass his GCSEs. Limited careers guidance.

Enrolled in vocational course at college. Felt better able to focus. Achieved level 1 qualification.

Secured an apprenticeship — but left early after making mistakes due to being young and inexperienced.

Moved between a series of manual and outdoor jobs — typically lasting 1 to 2 months. Secured a job linked to further training but college was unable to finalise plans. Out of work for nearly 4 months — actively job searching. Claimed UC.

‘Willing but under-equipped’

This group tended to have more limited capability, often shaped by disrupted education experiences and relatively weak qualifications. Their capacity to engage was also constrained. While they expressed a desire to work, they typically lacked skills, confidence or know-how to navigate the labour market effectively (see pen portrait 3: Anna). As a result, their job search activity was often unfocused and inconsistent, and they described feeling unsure of employer expectations and performing poorly in interviews. For those with prolonged periods of rejection, often without feedback, they reported feeling increasingly despondent about whether their job search efforts were worthwhile.

Pen portrait 3: Anna^{[\[footnote 5\]](#)}

Anna is 20 years old and lives in London with her parents and sister. She left school without a clear sense of direction, describing her school experience as disengaging and exhausting, something that “felt really long and stupid” and she felt did little to prepare her for adult life. Careers support was minimal, leaving her unsure of her next steps after school: “I didn’t know who to talk to about what to do next.” As a result, she applied to college late and largely on her own, choosing a retail course because it seemed closest to her interests.

College proved a better fit. Anna valued the independence, practical learning, and work experience, and successfully completed a Level 3 BTEC in retail. However, after graduating she spent almost a year unemployed before briefly securing a remote job, only to be made redundant after just 2 weeks due to company cuts. Since then, she has remained out of work. Day-to-day life is constrained by low income and limited opportunities, with Universal Credit covering basic costs but not

enabling independence or progression. “I don’t really go out... I don’t have any disposable money”.

She feels the main barrier holding her back is a lack of experience, and the difficulty of gaining it. Despite completing training, volunteering, and obtaining a vocational qualification via the Jobcentre, she repeatedly encounters the same barrier: “If you don’t have any experience, qualifications aren’t very helpful. It’s like a roadblock.” Support from the Jobcentre has felt impersonal and inefficient, involving long journeys for short appointments that “don’t really help you as an individual”.

Despite growing frustration, she remains motivated and forward-looking. She still hopes to build a career in retail, though feels increasing pressure to “just settle for anything” to earn money. She has applied for apprenticeships and secured a place at university, keeping multiple pathways open.

What she feels she needs most is opportunities to gain meaningful, paid experience. More tailored guidance and stronger links with employers would help her move beyond the current block and towards a future with greater stability, independence, and work she enjoys.

Anna’s timeline

School (until age 16)	College (age 16-18)	Post-college (age 18-19)	Current situation (age 20)
Attended state secondary school Poor school experience Minimal careers guidance Left school feeling unprepared for next steps	Signed up to college without knowing much about the course Completed Level 3 BTEC Better experience than school Limited employment support	Unemployed for a year Claimed UC Secured a seasonal job via JCP – but was made redundant after 2 weeks due to company cuts	Completed vocational training through JCP but unable to secure a role due to lack of experience Completed a college training course with guaranteed interview which did not materialise Actively applying for work

School (until age 16)	College (age 16 to 19)	Post-college (age 18 to 19)	Current situation (aged 20)
Attended state	Signed up to	Unemployed	Completed vocational

secondary school. Poor school experience. Minimal careers guidance. Left school feeling unprepared for next steps.	college without knowing much about the course. Completed Level 3 BTEC. Better experience than school. Limited employment support.	for a year. Claimed UC. Secured a seasonal job via JCP — but was made redundant after 2 weeks due to company cuts.	training through JCP but unable to secure a role due to lack of experience. Completed a college training course with guaranteed interview which did not materialise. Actively applying for work.
--	---	--	--

‘Held back’

These young people reported substantial constraints on their current capacity to engage with work, education or training. This was typically related to physical or mental health conditions, neurodivergence or caring responsibilities (see pen portrait 4: Rebecca). They struggled to match their needs and aspirations to available opportunities; for example, viewing training and work opportunities as inflexible or lacking accommodation for their individual circumstances.

Pen portrait 4: Rebecca [\[footnote 6\]](#)

Rebecca is 22 and lives in the Midlands. She has a history of involvement in the care system and currently lives alone in supported accommodation. She is not in work, education or training and describes her day to day life as largely unstructured, often spent at home gaming on her PlayStation or talking to friends online. Her sleep pattern is irregular and she “goes with the flow” rather than keeping a routine. She is struggling financially, describing herself as living “month to month”, and is claiming Universal Credit as her main source of income. She has recently learned from a friend that she may be eligible for Limited Capability for Work and Related Activity (LCWRA) and is awaiting an assessment.

Rebecca’s mental health is the main factor keeping her out of work. She has anxiety and depression and is currently adjusting to new medication following a recent mental health “breakdown”. She explains that “if my mind’s not situated, I can’t focus on other things”, like job search or training applications. She is also awaiting assessment for ADHD and autism, having received special educational needs support at school, including time-out cards and additional help with behaviour.

Rebecca’s education was highly disrupted. She attended 8 different secondary

schools, largely due to repeated exclusions linked to behaviour outside the classroom. She reflects that she generally coped well in lessons but struggled when unstructured, and felt most settled in alternative provision with small groups and weekly practical activities. She also preferred schools where she felt socially safe, including a predominantly Black school where she said she felt more “comfortable”. Despite this education instability, she completed her GCSEs during the Covid pandemic.

After school, Rebecca briefly pursued joining the Armed Forces but withdrew after reaching the testing stage, due to anxiety about long-term commitment and pressure. Since then, she has moved between short-term roles in sales, hospitality and customer service, often leaving due to boredom and lack of progression. “I just got bored... I need something that stimulates my mind.” Her most recent job was followed by a mental health crisis.

Since then, she has applied for apprenticeships and entry-level roles but reports repeated rejection after interview and no feedback, reinforcing her view that many opportunities are “fake”. She finds Jobcentre support frustrating, describing being sent cleaning and physically demanding jobs she explicitly asked not to receive. Looking ahead, she hopes to start a course in construction with a summer intake and wants a “career, not just a job”, supported by hands-on training and better integrated mental health support.

Rebecca’s timeline

School (until age 16)	Post school (age 16-20)	Current situation (age 20-22)
Care-experienced Attended eight different schools, including mix of mainstream and alternative provision Received SEN support at school Completed GCSEs during Covid lockdown (no exams)	Initially applied to join the armed forces but got 'cold feet' due to the time commitment In and out of short term jobs across a wide range of sectors (most found via Indeed) – typically left due to boredom	Mental health breakdown age 20 Currently not working, attributed to mental health issues Claiming UC Applied for training course

(age 20 to 22)

Care-experienced. Attended 8 different schools, including a mix of mainstream and alternative provision. Received SEN support at school. Completed GCSEs during Covid lockdown (no exams).	Initially applied to join the armed forces but got 'cold feet' due to the time commitment. In and out of short-term jobs across a wide range of sectors (most found via Indeed) – typically left due to boredom.	Mental health breakdown aged 20. Currently not working, attributed to mental health issues. Claiming UC. Applied for training course.
--	--	---

‘Pausing’

This fifth group were largely NEET by choice or design. These included young people on gap years, new parents, and those making a career or academic transition (see pen portrait 5: Micah). They were often financially supported by family, savings or drawing on state benefits, and viewed their NEET status as intentional and temporary. These young people may, however, re-emerge in one of the other groups at a later stage.

Pen portrait 5: Micah [\[footnote 7\]](#)

Micah is 23 and lives in the Southeast, sharing a one-bedroom flat with his partner. He is currently not in work, education or training, having completed a masters degree in September. Since then, he has been applying for jobs while preparing to start a funded PhD later in the year, and spending much of his time at home. He relies largely on his partner’s income, supplemented by savings he built up during his studies. “I started being quite frugal with my money... so that I had money left over at the end of that, because I knew I might not have the job or anything else lined up immediately.”

Micah is not claiming benefits, which is a conscious choice. While aware of Universal Credit, he believes the financial support would be limited and outweighed by the pressures attached to conditionality. He is particularly concerned about being required to apply for roles that do not align with his personal needs relating to his autism, such as customer-facing or shift-based jobs. “From what I’ve heard, there’s quite a lot of pressure there and that kind of made me anxious.” Knowing his PhD is due to start in September, he sees his NEET status as a short, transitional gap and is reluctant to engage with a system he perceives as focused on rapid job entry rather than supporting people through temporary periods between education and

work.

Academically, Micah has followed a consistently high-achieving pathway. He gained strong GCSEs and A levels and thrived in structured, exam-based learning environments. Although he found the social side of school challenging (which he now links to his autism, which was undiagnosed at the time), this did not affect his academic progress. After sixth form, he completed an unpaid gap year research internship, as well as undergraduate and postgraduate study, maintaining a clear ambition to pursue an academic career.

Since finishing his masters, he has actively sought temporary work but struggled to secure anything. Barriers include a weak local labour market, not having access to a car, and employers’ expectations for prior experience even in junior roles. Health-related factors also shape the work he feels able to do, such as anxiety, autistic masking, and a physical condition limiting prolonged standing, which make many customer-facing roles difficult. Following past experiences of racism in his area, concerns about personal safety further restrict his options, making him reluctant to take on early or late shifts. “I wouldn’t take a job where I have to walk in the dark.”

Looking ahead, he remains focused on starting a PhD and pursuing an academic career. “I’m in quite an odd position where I am unemployed... but in September I actually will be doing a PhD.” In the meantime, he would benefit from flexible, short-term work and transitional financial support that better reflects the realities of graduate transitions.

Micah’s timeline

School (until age 18)	Gap year (age 18)	University (age 19-22)	Current situation (age 23)
Studied Alevels Strong academic performance Ambition for academic career	Deferred university entry due to Covid Completed an unpaid research internship	Undergraduate degree– alongside research focused work experience Mastersdegree– alongside writing PhD applications	Lives with partner Awaiting start of PhD Applying for short-term roles in the meantime

School (until age 18)	Gap year (age 18)	University (age 19 to 22)	Current situation (age 23)
Studied A levels. Strong academic performance. Ambition for academic career.	Deferred university entry due to Covid. Completed an unpaid research internship.	Undergraduate degree — alongside research focused work experience. Masters degree — alongside writing PhD applications.	Lives with partner. Awaiting start of PhD. Applying for short-term roles in the meantime.

Perceived barriers to entering work, training or education

Across the interviews, young people described a wide range of barriers to entering employment, education or training. While their individual circumstances varied, the barriers they experienced included common structural and personal challenges. These barriers were often interrelated and cumulative. For example, limited work or training opportunities interacted with financial pressures, health issues, caring responsibilities and gaps in guidance or support. This section sets out the key barriers identified by young people, as well as variations across key subgroups.

Education not preparing young people for transition

Almost universally, young people felt that school had not prepared them for the transition into work or adulthood. This was expressed regardless of their overall school experience, which ranged from positive stories of friendships, supportive teachers and academic success to more negative experiences, including boredom, social difficulties, lacking support for neurodivergence and mental health needs. Among those who felt their needs had been poorly supported at school, particularly where conditions such as ADHD were undiagnosed at the time, these experiences underpinned a negative attitude towards formal education.

“I was only diagnosed like a couple years ago with autism so that kind of affected I guess growing up and school... You kind of don’t fit in so I kind of struggled

with a bit of everything.”

(Non-binary, age 21, 6 to 12 months NEET, Level 3 qualification).

“I never really tried hard in school because my teachers absolutely gave up on me when my mental health got bad... So a lot of my teachers were mostly just like angry with me because they thought I just didn’t want to be at school.”

(Female, age 22, 3 to 6 months NEET, Level 3 qualification).

Young people’s key criticism of schools was their perceived focus on academic qualifications, with university often promoted as the default pathway and limited discussion of alternative options, such as apprenticeships. School careers guidance was widely described as generic and lacking practical value. Participants also highlighted a lack of preparation for everyday and employment-related skills, including budgeting, managing taxes, job searches and interviewing. As a result, young people described feeling underprepared for their next steps and reported making decisions without a clear understanding of the full range of options available to them.

“I thought that the education system would have held my hand a bit more and like guided me to where I wanted to be... They would just be like, ‘make sure you go to university’. Apprenticeships are an option, but they wouldn’t tell you how to look for apprenticeships or anything like that.”

(Female, age 20, 2 plus years NEET, Level 3 qualification).

“I think they should explore a lot more opportunities and make children, like students aware that it’s not always this linear path of you have to do, like you have to do school and then college and university and then you get to a dream career.”

(Female, age 24, 3 to 6 months NEET, Level 4 plus qualification).

Lack of experience

Across the interviews, young people consistently reported lack of relevant work experience as a key barrier to getting a job. This was closely linked to a perceived lack of available and appropriate opportunities, particularly at entry level. Young people had a sense that competition for job roles or training was intense and employers could be highly selective. This resulted in a vicious circle in which entry-

level roles required prior experience, but opportunities to gain that experience were scarce.

“It’s like, how do you want me to have experience if I’m only 18 and you’re not even letting me have the chance to get the experience?”

(Female, age 18, 1 to 2 years NEET, Level 1 qualification).

“I just remember thinking, how can I not get that job? I just remember thinking, that is a very entry-level role. I’m thinking, do you really need experience in that job? It’s not really difficult, is it?”

(Male, age 20, 6 to 12 months NEET, Level 3 qualification).

Even when young people had some experience of work, this was typically limited to short-term or low-paid roles, such as work in cafes, bars, cleaning or warehouse settings. These roles were rarely seen as progression-oriented. Participants often described leaving them because they were temporary, physically or emotionally exhausting, poorly paid, or offered no clear development. While some recognised transferrable skills, such as time management or customer communication, they felt these were not valued by employers, particularly if gained in a different sector.

Career-related experiences of work, such as placements and internships, were rare and often unpaid or short-term. Several participants felt these experiences “didn’t count”, as employers prioritised longer or more formalised experience. This was particularly evident among graduates, who expressed frustration that roles marketed as graduate or entry level still required prior, often sector-specific, experience.

“For grad roles, a lot of them, even though they’re meant to be graduate roles, some of them ask for experience and all of that. But how am I meant to obtain it? Unless I chose to do a year in industry, I feel like it’s very unfair.”

(Female, age 21, less than 3 months NEET, Level 4 plus qualification).

In practice, this meant that both those with no work experience and those with short-term or non-relevant experience described similar outcomes. Regardless of background, several participants described submitting large numbers of applications for jobs, apprenticeships or training places without receiving feedback or interviews. The lack of feedback made it difficult for young people to understand why applications were unsuccessful or how to improve. In some cases, it also led to reduced motivation or temporary disengagement from searching for opportunities. This was reported by participants across different age groups and qualification levels, and was especially common among graduates and those targeting specific

sectors.

“Like a lot of these places don’t even give you a reply and it’s really disheartening. And then you would get a reply, an automated reply, 5 months down the line for a role that you’ve forgotten you applied for to say that you’ve been rejected. Or you just don’t hear at all.”

(Female, age 21, less than 3 months NEET, Level 4+ qualification).

Financial pressures

Financial constraints emerged as a substantial barrier for some participants. For young people from lower-income backgrounds or with limited family support, the need for immediate income limited their ability to pursue opportunities they felt would improve their employability. These included the inability to take unpaid or voluntary roles, fund further training, or pay for travel or equipment required for certain opportunities.

“They did have like opportunities and work experience at uni, but they were all unpaid and because I was working while at university, I felt it wasn’t really something I could do because I didn’t have the time with working as well... There’s a lot of barriers for people [like me] who are from like lower socio-economic backgrounds.”

(Female, age 22, less than 3 months NEET, Level 4 plus qualification).

Those with children reported that the cost of childcare made work financially unviable. Similarly, both parents and carers noted that benefit rules or caring allowances limited the feasibility of taking on part-time work.

In contrast, a minority of participants with strong family financial support reported less urgency to enter work, which in some cases appeared to reduce their motivation to engage with available support or commit to a specific pathway. These young people also typically described relying on family support for navigating options, which suggests that standard interventions based on benefit compliance or rapid job entry may have limited traction unless they clearly add value beyond what families or trusted institutions (such as universities) already provide.

Gaps in employment support

Formal employment and careers support was widely viewed as not aligned with young people's needs. Where young people had experience of Jobcentre support, this was often described as generic or 'tick box', with limited tailoring to their individual circumstances or aspirations. Job suggestions were often perceived as inappropriate or irrelevant.

"They send you everything [job suggestions] that you told them not to send."

(Female, age 22, 1 to 2 years NEET, Level 1 qualification).

"I didn't really find them [Jobcentre] much help... They were showing me how to do a CV and all this stuff, but I already had my CV and everything. And I told them my interests and, I don't know, everything they were doing was the same that I could do, just Google it."

(Female, age 23, 2 plus years NEET, Level 3 qualification).

Some young people also reported stigma associated with claiming benefits or engaging with Jobcentres, which discouraged them from seeking support. A lack of awareness about available schemes and eligibility criteria further limited take-up.

"Even just going there [to the Jobcentre] for one appointment, I felt, I don't want to say embarrassing, but it feels like you know what the stigma is if you're getting benefits, you're just lazy and you don't want to work or something like this."

(Female, age 23, 2 plus years NEET, Level 3 qualification).

"I had never thought about going to a Jobcentre because I didn't think they'd be able to help me out in my situation... As in like, I've already gotten a degree and stuff. I thought it was more for like hospitality and stuff, maybe working in shops."

(Female, age 21, 6 to 12 months NEET, Level 4 plus qualification).

University and school careers services were similarly described as generic and of patchy quality. For example, some participants described experiences of promised employer connections or opportunities that did not materialise. As a result, many young people relied more heavily on family, peers and informal networks, including social media, for advice and opportunities.

Health, wellbeing and caring responsibilities

Individual-level barriers related to health and caring responsibilities were common and often compounded other challenges. In particular, mental health or neurodevelopmental conditions, including anxiety, depression, ADHD and PTSD, were widely reported and affected motivation, confidence and capacity to engage in training or job searching. Some young people described cycles of anxiety and avoidance, particularly following repeated rejection.

“With my mental health right now that I just got put on [medication]... because my mind’s not situated, I can’t focus on other things [like job search], if that makes sense. I physically can’t.”

(Female, age 22, 1 to 2 years NEET, Level 1 qualification).

“When you don’t get replies from places you apply to and you get no feedback, it’s kind of demotivating because it’s kind of you’re being ignored and then the one time you get a reply, like say for example, it’s an interview and it’s unsuccessful, you also don’t really get any feedback from that either. So it’s kind of like every time you think you’re progressing you get straight back to the beginning, like step one again... It definitely does [take a toll on their mental health].”

(Non-binary, age 21, 6 to 12 months NEET, Level 3 qualification).

Physical health conditions also limited job options, particularly where roles involved physical demands or inflexible hours. Young people with ‘invisible’ or fluctuating conditions described a sense that employers and educators struggled to understand and accommodate their needs. These typically included things like flexibility in hours and location (including hybrid or remote options), and adjustments that recognise variable capacity rather than constant impairment.

Caring responsibilities, particularly for young children or family members with health needs, also constrained young people’s availability for work or training. Childcare costs, inflexible hours and limited local opportunities were cited as key barriers, particularly for young parents. Caring roles also affected confidence and social engagement, with some young people feeling disconnected from peers who were able to progress more easily. Suggestions to build confidence included peer support and local support groups, particularly after long periods out of work or education.

Transport

Transport emerged as a significant practical barrier, particularly for those without a driving licence or access to a car. Young people described how the lack of a car, limited public transport, high travel costs, and rural or semi rural locations restricted the range of jobs they could realistically apply for. For some, the cost of driving lessons or insurance was prohibitive, while for others, unreliable transport made shift work or early starts unfeasible.

“I’d say the fact I can’t drive as well probably doesn’t help me with searching for jobs because I’ve found a lot of jobs even then that you don’t really need to be able to drive for, require you to have a driving licence... I can’t afford the driving lessons because I’m not in work.”

[Female, age 22, less than 3 months NEET, Level 4 plus qualification].

These constraints often narrowed job searches to a small geographic area, reducing the likelihood of finding suitable work and reinforcing feelings of being ‘stuck’.

Variations across young people

While the barriers above were widespread, they were experienced in different ways across the young people in our sample. For example, the following variations were identified across the 5 groups outlined in section 2:

- ‘Ready but blocked’ were most obviously constrained by structural barriers, including limited entry-level opportunities and a ‘vicious cycle’ of lacking experience to get a job, while needing a job to gain experience
- ‘Stuck in a rut’ experienced repeated insecure work, weak progression routes and, for some, mental health or transport constraints
- ‘Willing but under-equipped’ faced relatively more barriers with their capacity to engage, including weaker job search skills and incomplete understanding of available pathways
- ‘Held back’ were often struggling with health and wellbeing issues or caring responsibilities which meant entry into work or training was not currently realistic
- ‘Pausing’ reported fewer barriers, reflecting their intentional transition stage

Across all 5 groups, young people's circumstances also shaped how they experienced barriers. For example, socio-economic background influenced their ability to mitigate barriers, and those without family safety nets were more constrained by financial pressures and more likely to describe frustration at not being able to afford unpaid work experience which might boost their chances. Health conditions, neurodivergence and caring responsibilities also affected what young people were looking for and their readiness to pursue that. Across different qualification levels, both graduates and less qualified young people were similarly frustrated about employer expectations of experience for entry-level roles and lack of feedback from applications.

What support young people want

Across the interviews, young people felt that existing education, employment and welfare-related support did not meet their needs. They were generally able to identify types of support they felt would improve their ability to enter work, education or training. These included earlier careers guidance, access to work experience, personalised employment support, targeted training, and practical financial and wellbeing support.

This section sets out the key support needs reported by young people, highlighting common themes as well as variations across different subgroups.

Key support needs

Careers guidance

A clear theme across the interviews was a need for earlier and more realistic careers guidance, particularly during secondary school and college. Suggestions included sessions explaining the full range of pathways available, including apprenticeships, vocational training or staged entry into work. They felt young people should leave school or college with a clear understanding of what different jobs involved, what employers expected and how long progression might realistically take.

“I think they [schools] could have taken more time just to discuss with us individually what we want to do with our lives.”

(Female, age 20, more than 2 years NEET, Level 3 qualification).

“I feel like [college and employment support] could have went into more of the apprenticeship route... They should have given tutorials about apprenticeships, explained what different types of apprenticeships there are and what apprenticeships they may have to offer.”

(Male, age 23, 1 to 2 years NEET, Level 3 qualification).

Work experience

Young people consistently said that access to paid, meaningful work experience would be the most important factor to help them break the ‘vicious circle’ of needing experience to get a job but needing a job to gain experience. Suggestions included government-backed work experience schemes, particularly paid placements that were clearly linked to progression. Some suggested that employers should be incentivised or required to take on inexperienced candidates and train them on the job. While work experience was widely viewed as essential, views diverged when it came to unpaid placements, with some viewing them as exploitative or inaccessible.

“I would make it mandatory for every workplace to, if someone asks for experience, you should give them experience.”

(Female, age 20, more than 2 years NEET, Level 3 qualification).

Jobcentre support

To combat the sense that Jobcentre support was too generic, young people suggested having a consistent adviser or work coach who understood their interests, constraints and longer-term goals, and who could help them refine applications, practise interviews, and provide constructive feedback. Several participants also wanted more proactive advocacy, such as work coaches liaising directly with employers, recommending them as candidates, and chasing feedback after interviews.

“If I was in the position [of a JCP work coach], I would work harder to have actual contacts who I could be like, oh yeah, this person is hiring and I can put your name forward, instead of making you go and do your own application... I also think them putting a word in for you, like directly telling the employer from a job coach, hey, this person is good at this and this and this, would be helpful.”

(Female, age 20, more than 2 years NEET, Level 3 qualification).

Training

Interest in training was widespread, particularly in short, practical courses clearly linked to employment. Young people were more cautious about committing to longer programmes without a clear link to jobs, especially if training required upfront costs

or unpaid time. This was especially true for young people who had struggled academically or had negative experiences of school. However, there were mixed views on the value of training already undertaken, suggesting young people needed guidance in assessing whether specific courses were worthwhile or feasible alongside other job-search activities.

Financial support

Support with financial barriers, including travel, childcare, equipment, or course fees, were viewed as important to aid participation in work, education or training.

“If I had a bit more money, then I could have gone to a volunteer programme already [to help build work experience] and been able to sustain that.”

(Female, age 23, 6 to 12 months NEET, Level 4 plus qualification).

Young parents and carers emphasised the need for affordable childcare, noting that without this, even part-time work or training was unrealistic. Lack of awareness of existing financial support was also common, and several participants reported discovering help with travel and training costs only by chance. For these young people, there was a strong belief that the Jobcentre or DWP more generally should proactively communicate entitlements, rather than rely on individuals to ask the “right questions”.

“There’s a lot of things that they don’t tell you within Universal Credit that you could be getting... like for example, I found it on TikTok showing me that you can get 40 hours of free driving lessons via Universal Credit.[\[footnote 8\]](#)”

Support for mental health and neurodivergence: Young people with poor mental health expressed varied support needs. For some, readiness to engage with employment was contingent on stabilising their mental health. These young people described being willing to work but feeling overwhelmed by anxiety, low mood or periods of crisis, which indicated a need for reduced pressure and wellbeing-led support before job search activity.

“[The jobcentre should] have more like help for people with [poor] mental health... They need to have their own therapist place where they can send people out to get, even if it’s one therapy session every 3 months or something, just to even help out with people’s mental health.”

(Female, age 22, 1 to 2 years NEET, Level 1 qualification).

Others in this group were already applying for roles but reported declining confidence following repeated rejection. In these cases, participants described

wanting constructive feedback and practical job search preparation to help them persist.

Neurodivergent participants described wanting slower-paced support with CVs and working through applications collaboratively, which appeared to contrast with support they had received from the Jobcentre.

“I said I was neurodivergent [to JCP work coach], obviously she’s got her job to do, so if she hasn’t got the training in that, then she can’t really change what she’s been told to do, I guess.”

(Non-binary, age 21, 6 to 12 months NEET, Level 3 qualification).

Variations across young people

Support needs varied across the sample, reflecting the different barriers young people faced. For example, support priorities varied across each of the groups from section 2:

- ‘Ready but blocked’ primarily sought support to overcome their difficulties entering a competitive labour market, including access to paid, career-relevant work experience and sector-aligned employment support, such as feedback on applications and interviews
- ‘Stuck in a rut’ highlighted a need for stability and progression, rather than repeated access to short-term roles, calling for employer accountability for job insecurity and help with converting experience into permanent opportunities
- ‘Willing but under-equipped’ sought more foundational support to build confidence and job-search capability, preferring practical support that would help them secure a foothold in work
- ‘Held back’ prioritised flexible and trauma-informed employment support, alongside practical enablers such as childcare and health support
- ‘Pausing’ were less likely to express a need for employment support but suggested tailored careers guidance linked to their interests

Across the 5 groups, there were additional patterns in how young people prioritised certain forms of support. For example, young people without family financial support prioritised paid opportunities and practical financial help, viewing unpaid work experience as inaccessible. Those with health conditions, neurodivergence and

caring responsibilities cut across the 5 groups, but emphasised the importance of flexible, needs-led support rather than uniform or ‘traditional’ expectations, such as full-time hours and the requirement to work onsite. Geography and transport also shaped support needs, with those in rural areas or without access to a car prioritising practical financial support to help with travel costs.

What steps young people are taking

Young people described a wide range of actions they were taking to try to move into work, training or education. These included formal job search activity, as well as self-directed learning and adjustments to their plans and expectations. This section sets out the key steps young people reported taking, highlighting common patterns as well as variations by subgroups.

Active job search

The most common step young people reported was job search activities, mostly through online platforms. Young people described applying for roles via sites such as Indeed, LinkedIn, Reed, sector-specific websites and, for graduates, university job boards. Several reported spending hours each day searching and applying, in some cases keeping spreadsheets to track roles, deadlines and responses.

Despite this effort, many described the process as unproductive and demoralising, receiving few responses or interviews. This had led some to adjust their approach, broadening the types of roles they applied for, lowering their salary expectations, or prioritising immediate income over career relevance. One young person considered removing her degree from her curriculum vitae (CV) when applying for non-graduate entry-level work on advice from social media that this might increase her chances of being shortlisted for a minimum wage role.

“I’m trying to be optimistic, but honestly, it’s really disheartening... I think one disheartening moment was getting rejected from places like Costa, Mountain Warehouse, Sainsbury’s and all of that, and saying that they’ve chosen the more highly skilled person, when my CV with my jobs at uni, my degree and all that, you’re telling me I’m not skilled enough? ... What disheartened me even more was the comment [on a social media post] saying that ‘actually take out your degree and take out that XYZ because they think you’re too over skilled’. And it’s

like, is there no balance?”

(Female, age 21, less than 3 months NEET, Level 4 plus qualification).

Work experience

Another widely reported step was trying to gain experience to strengthen their employability, particularly where lack of experience was perceived to be the main barrier. This included seeking voluntary roles, short-term placements, internships, agency or casual work, often alongside job searching. Others pursued casual or informal work, such as gardening, dog walking, tutoring or helping in family businesses, to improve their finances and build a work history.

However, experiences here were mixed. While some felt that any experience was better than none, others questioned the value of unpaid or short-term roles that did not lead to progression or job offers. Graduates in particular described trying to save money through work that was unrelated to their area of interest in order to afford sector-specific experience later, such as volunteering or training that required upfront costs. This often reinforced a sense of being stuck in a cycle where financial insecurity limited access to the experience needed to progress.

Training

Participants described engaging in training or skills development alongside job searching. This included short vocational courses, employer recognised certificates and online learning, often chosen because they were free or low cost and could be completed flexibly. For some, training was a way to keep moving forward while unemployed; for others, it represented a more deliberate attempt to change direction or enter a new field.

“At the end of my degree, I wasn’t quite sure what job I wanted to do. I was open to a lot of different stuff and I was just looking at grad schemes or things that started around the final finished year and it was a detective training scheme... So I applied for that because you didn’t need any experience with it being a training scheme.”

(Female, age 22, less than 3 months NEET, Level 4 plus qualification).

However, views on the value of training were mixed. Those who were sceptical felt employers prioritised experience over qualifications and training would not help them break the ‘vicious circle’ in which experience is needed to get a job, but difficult to acquire without first having a job. A small number of young people described abandoning training pathways after concluding they were unlikely to improve their job prospects.

“Recently I did another hospitality course at a little public free college... I actually only did that because they said I would get a guaranteed interview for a job at the end, which didn’t happen.”

(Female, age 20, more than 2 years NEET, Level 3 qualification).

“I got an internship and that was fine. But I really, really struggled with my neurodivergence there because it was not an environment that was made for people who are neurodivergent. It wasn’t a diverse company.”

(Female, age 22, 3 to 6 months NEET, Level 3 qualification).

Recalibrating plans and expectations

A recurring theme across interviews was young people adjusting their plans in response to prolonged job searching and rejection. Many described assuming that completing qualifications or following the “right” pathway would lead relatively directly to employment. When this did not happen, particularly where entry-level roles required prior experience, plans were adjusted, with greater emphasis on short-term feasibility rather than long-term fit.

These adjustments typically included shifting from interest-specific aspirations to “any job” in the short term, prioritising income over career goals, or delaying further education until finances or confidence improved. Graduates were particularly likely to describe lowering expectations around salary or role level, reframing initial employment as a “foot in the door” rather than an ideal job. Others became more open to alternative routes, such as apprenticeships, part-time work or returning to education later.

This recalibration was often accompanied by frustration or disappointment, particularly where young people felt they had “done everything right” educationally. For some, recalibration was further shaped by practical constraints, such as financial pressure, health or mental health challenges, or caring responsibilities, which limited

the feasibility of unpaid experience or prolonged job searching. While these shifts were sometimes demoralising, they did not typically reflect a loss of aspiration. Instead, young people often described deferring or repositioning longer-term goals, treating revised plans as a temporary response to constrained opportunities.

“When I wake up and I see these rejections, it’s really kind of disheartening... At first I was like, I told myself that I was not going to do part-time jobs, I’m going to go straight into my career just in case I might get too comfortable with my part-time job. But like now things have become so desperate for me that I’m applying to anything and everything.”

(Female, age 24, 3 to 6 months NEET, Level 4 plus qualification).

Employment support

Engagement with Jobcentres and local employment services was common, particularly among those claiming benefits. Young people described attending appointments, providing evidence of job search activity and receiving basic support, such as CV checks or signposting to vacancies.

Experiences varied. Some participants valued specific elements, such as interview practice or help accessing short-term roles. Those with less positive experiences felt that support was largely administrative, focused on benefit compliance rather than progression. These included young people who had disengaged from formal support altogether, either because they perceived it as unhelpful or because they preferred to rely on family, university careers services or self-directed approaches.

“I feel they’re [Jobcentre] not as supportive... They do have jobs, like if you want to be a security guard... that was the kind of stuff that was put towards me. But anything related to my career field? They never really had anything like that.”

(Female, age 24, 3 to 6 months NEET, Level 4 plus qualification).

Pausing

There was also a small group of young people who described taking a pause from active searching for work, education or training opportunities. This included participants with health conditions, caring responsibilities or upcoming transitions,

such as returning to education. For these young people, current steps focused on either stabilising their health, caring for dependents, or planning future moves. Importantly, all of the young people in this group expressed some form of future motivation towards work, education or training. Pausing was framed as temporary and conditional, with expectations of progressing into education or work at a later stage.

Variations among young people

The steps young people were taking varied across each of the 5 groups outlined in section 2, reflecting differences in their capability and capacity to engage:

- ‘Ready but blocked’ were typically the most active and strategic, reporting high volumes of applications and targeted use of sector-specific job boards. Many were also seeking to build their experience, through volunteering and short placements
- ‘Stuck in a rut’ described repeated cycles of applying for similar roles and moving between insecure or temporary roles without a sense of forward movement
- ‘Willing but under-equipped’ were also typically proactive, including applying for entry-level roles and undertaking short courses, although less targeted than the previous group
- ‘Held back’ had taken fewer steps, prioritising health and caring responsibilities or preparing for a return to education
- ‘Pausing’ also described less activity, beyond planning next steps or waiting for specific deadlines, such as course start dates or changed personal circumstances

Across the 5 groups, wider circumstances also shaped what steps young people felt were possible. Financial security was a key differentiator, with young people with access to family support or savings describing being able to wait for roles that aligned with their goals, and focus on job searching or seeking volunteering opportunities, rather than feeling pressured to take “any job”. This support legitimised waiting as a strategic choice, but was also seen as risky, with awareness that extended time out of work could make re-entry harder in a competitive job market. Young people without such support felt less able to take this risk and described needing to prioritise paid work, even where it was not career-relevant.

Those with health conditions, neurodivergence or poor mental health described

limited ability to maintain intense job search, including taking breaks or focusing on roles perceived as manageable. Similarly, young people with caring responsibilities described constrained ability to take steps, focusing on longer-term planning until their situation changed. Among this group, caring responsibilities were framed as a necessity rather than a preference, with most expressing a clear desire to work or return to education once affordable and reliable care became available.

Access to informal support was also important for those with supportive family or social connections, particularly where families were able to offer practical help with applications or job leads. Where present, this support was typically seen as more personalised and useful than formal support services, although access to such support was not universal.

Aspirations around work, training or education

Young people described aspirations for the future that were shaped by a combination of personal interests, prior education experiences and the realities of navigating a competitive job market. Across the interviews, young people reported recalibrating their aspirations in response to experiences of rejection, financial pressures, and health or caring responsibilities. These included a mix of short- and long-term aspirations, and often reflected what young people felt was realistic rather than their original or ideal ambitions.

Alongside this recalibration, there remained a clear motivation to move into work. This was typically expressed in practical terms, such as a desire for financial independence and forward momentum. It was also demonstrated through their behaviour, including persistent job-search activity, willingness to apply for roles below their qualification level or outside their preferred areas, and engagement with training and volunteering to boost employability. Where job-search was paused, this was typically linked to health and caring challenges or mental exhaustion, rather than a lack of intent to work.

The sections below explore these aspirations and motivations, focusing on financial independence, meaningful work, gaining experiences, before examining how these varied across the sample.

Financial independence

Achieving financial independence was a goal for most young people in the sample and viewed as a prerequisite for progress in other areas of life. For some, this meant wanting to move out of their family home, contribute financially to parents, or support partners or children. Others framed independence more minimally, such as no longer needing to claim Universal Credit or being able to cover everyday costs without anxiety.

Importantly, this aspiration was typically framed in distinction to finding ‘the right job’, with many young people who had been NEET for a prolonged period prioritising ‘any job’ in the short term over an ideal role, describing the need to stabilise their situation before pursuing longer-term goals.

“I’m sort of just at a crossroads, I guess... I just had a final interview for a role. which isn’t career orientated at all but is a way to get money.”

(Female, age 23, 6 to 12 months NEET, Level 4 plus qualification).

Graduates in particular described lowering salary expectations or widening the types of roles they would consider after prolonged job searching. By contrast, young people with family financial support described less urgency around income, which allowed them to pause or pursue ideal pathways without immediate financial pressure.

Meaningful work

Many young people described aspiring to work that aligned with their skills, values and qualifications. This was especially evident among graduates and those with sector-specific interests, such as healthcare, creative industries or public service. These young people expressed frustration at being pushed to apply for roles they perceived as misaligned with their goals, particularly where this involved low-paid or low-progression work that did not draw on their education or experience.

However, these aspirations were rarely rigid. As noted above, there was a common tension between wanting work that reflected their interests and qualifications, and recognising the need to compromise. Recalibrating aspirations after repeated rejections typically meant moving from a specific career goal towards more pragmatic criteria, such as progression potential, learning opportunities or simply gaining a foothold in the labour market, with varying degrees of frustration.

“I feel like I did [have goals] a lot more before, like I’d always say ‘oh I want to graduate by this age and then by that age be working here’ but I feel like now I’m a little bit more open-minded and I feel like I can’t really put too much pressure on myself because a lot of things aren’t necessarily in my control and I feel like once I start something that’s a little bit more stable then it’ll be easier for me to say that I want to achieve this goal by then.”

(Female, age 21, less than 3 months NEET, Level 3 qualification).

“[In response to a question about her ideal life] I think that now I’ve kind of, I’m not going to say lost my passion, but I’ve just, I can’t be bothered to be too focused on one thing. I just want anything at the moment, which I feel is what rich people want us to do. They want us to just settle for anything you can get. But hopefully I don’t get a little job and then I get caught up in having it and all, having a job versus having nothing. It’s like a risk to go after what you actually want.”

(Female, age 20, more than 2 years NEET, Level 3 qualification).

Experience

As noted previously, a widespread short-term aspiration was the desire to gain experience, particularly paid experience that could lead to progression. Experience was viewed as more valuable than additional qualifications, particularly among young people who already held degrees or vocational qualifications.

Unpaid internships and voluntary roles were frequently described as inaccessible due to financial constraints, especially for those from lower-income backgrounds or with caring responsibilities. This aspiration for experience was therefore closely linked to calls for paid placements and entry-level roles with training.

Aspirations shaped by personal circumstances

For young people with health conditions, neurodivergence or caring responsibilities, aspirations were often constrained by these circumstances. These participants did not necessarily lack ambition, but typically framed their aspirations conditionally or in stages, such as delaying their entry into work, training or education, or finding flexible opportunities that could accommodate their needs. Young parents and carers in

particular described placing longer-term goals 'on hold' until their circumstances changed.

There was, however, variation within this group. Some participants remained optimistic, seeing their situation as temporary, while others struggled to articulate longer-term aspirations at all, focusing instead on coping day-to-day.

Variation among young people

While many aspirations were shared, there were clear differences across the 5 groups outlined in section 2, as well as by young people's individual circumstances.

- 'Ready but blocked' typically held relatively clear and well-defined aspirations, often linked to their qualifications, whilst over time becoming increasingly open to compromise in the short term to get a foot in the door
- 'Stuck in a rut' described narrowing their ambitions over time in response to repeated short-term roles and rejections
- 'Willing but under-equipped' expressed more tentative and loosely defined aspirations, often framed around gaining experience and earning money rather than targeting a specific pathway
- 'Held back' tended to frame aspirations conditionally or in stages, typically deferring work or training goals until their situation improved
- 'Pausing' often described looser aspirations, focusing on longer-term plans rather than short-term goals

Wider circumstances also played a role in shaping what young people aspired to. Younger participants were more likely to describe keeping options open or planning to return to study. Graduates often articulated relatively clear long-term aspirations but expressed frustration at stalled progress and a perceived mismatch between their qualifications and available opportunities. Participants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tended to emphasise immediate income and security, while those with stronger family support described greater scope to pause or experiment.

Conclusions

From the perspective of the young people interviewed in this research, being NEET reflected their disrupted transitions into work, education or training. These transitions were shaped by labour market conditions, financial pressures, health or caring responsibilities, and the perceived limitations of existing support. While experiences varied, young people described themselves as wanting to move forward but faced barriers that were difficult to overcome.

The findings are considered below in relation to each of the study's research aims.

Why young people are NEET

Young people described different pathways into being NEET, which were often shaped by events or constraints beyond their control. Some reported leaving education, work or training following negative experiences or unmet support needs, while others described pauses between stages that lasted longer than expected. Decisions that appeared voluntary, such as taking a break or leaving a role, were typically framed as responses to constrained options rather than deliberate disengagement. Overall, young people characterised their NEET status as a temporary or transitional stage that they were trying to move out of.

Perceived barriers to entering work, education or training

Across the interviews, young people consistently identified lack of relevant work experience as a key barrier, particularly in the context of a competitive labour market and high employer expectations for entry-level roles. This was widely described as creating a vicious circle in which opportunities to gain experience felt inaccessible. Financial constraints were seen as reinforcing this, limiting the feasibility of unpaid placements, training or travel. Participants also described gaps in preparation for transitions from education into work and reported that formal employment support was often insufficiently tailored. Health conditions, neurodivergence, caring responsibilities and travel limitations were perceived as further barriers, often interacting with other factors to limit young people's capacity to engage.

What support young people think would help

The types of support young people believed would improve their ability to move into work, education or training included: access to paid, meaningful work experience; earlier and more realistic careers guidance; and personalised employment support aligned to their interests and circumstances. Practical assistance with costs, such as travel, childcare and training, was also viewed as important. Participants with health conditions or caring responsibilities emphasised flexible, needs-led support. Overall, young people tended to describe existing support as not meeting their needs.

What steps young people are taking

Most participants reported taking steps to progress, including job search, applying for training, or volunteering. They described adapting their approaches over time in response to repeated rejection or financial pressures, broadening the roles they applied for or prioritising immediate income over longer-term ambitions. Where young people had paused their activity, this was typically linked to health, caring responsibilities or exhaustion, and were viewed by participants as temporary.

What their future aspirations are

Young people described aspirations relating to work, education or training that were typically linked to financial independence and a sense of progress. However, they also reported having to reassess how and how quickly they could achieve their goals following repeated rejections and a competitive labour market. Differences emerged depending on personal circumstances; in particular, young people with access to family financial support described more leeway to take their time to identify preferred pathways, while those without felt compelled to accept any available opportunity.

Taken together, participants' accounts suggest that barriers to progression were primarily practical and structural, rather than motivational. Young people consistently described the challenge of converting their effort into outcomes. Their accounts suggest that employment support would ideally recognise differences in young people's capability to take up opportunities and their capacity to engage with them in

practice. Reflecting these varied starting points, the findings highlight the importance of tailored support, including access to work experience, clearer and more realistic routes into work or training, flexible employment support provision and proactive communication about available help.

Focusing on each of the 5 groups identified in Section 2 suggests possible variations in the types of support most likely to address the barriers young people described:

- ‘Ready but blocked’ are likely to benefit most from interventions that expand paid, career-relevant entry routes and reduce employer reliance on prior experience for entry-level roles
- ‘Stuck in a rut’ are likely to benefit most from interventions that improve job quality and progression, helping them convert short-term roles into sustained employment
- ‘Willing but under-equipped’ would benefit from intensive, tailored employability support to build confidence and job-search capability
- ‘Held back’ would benefit from flexible and needs-led support that recognises their limited current capacity to engage
- ‘Pausing’ may benefit most from light-touch, tailored guidance that supports planned transitions

Appendix 1: Sampling criteria

Young people were purposively sampled to achieve a mix of ages, gender, benefits status, length of time NEET, qualification level, caring responsibilities, health conditions, region, and additional characteristics (including identified SEN at school, experience of care, young carers, and experience of the criminal justice system). See table below for the achieved sampling criteria.

Age	Number of interviews completed
16 to 17	1
18 to 20	9
21 to 24	20

Gender	Number of interviews completed
--------	--------------------------------

Male	10
------	----

Female	18
--------	----

Other	2
-------	---

Benefits status	Number of interviews completed
-----------------	--------------------------------

Recipients	15
------------	----

Non recipients	15
----------------	----

Length of time NEET	Number of interviews completed
---------------------	--------------------------------

Less than 6 months	14
--------------------	----

6 to 12 months	11
----------------	----

1 to 2 years	3
--------------	---

2 plus years	2
--------------	---

Qualification level	Number of interviews completed
---------------------	--------------------------------

No qualifications/Below Level 1	0
---------------------------------	---

Level 1 to 2	5
--------------	---

Level 3 plus	25
--------------	----

Unknown/Other	0
---------------	---

Parental Status	Number of interviews completed
-----------------	--------------------------------

No children	27
-------------	----

First child before 21	2
-----------------------	---

First child age 21 to 24 1

Health Conditions	Number of interviews completed
--------------------------	---------------------------------------

No health condition	20
---------------------	----

Mental health condition	6
-------------------------	---

Physical health condition	3
---------------------------	---

Both physical and mental	1
--------------------------	---

Additional Characteristics	Number of interviews completed
-----------------------------------	---------------------------------------

Identified SEN at school	6
--------------------------	---

Been in Care	1
--------------	---

Young carer	3
-------------	---

Experience in Criminal Justice System	1
---------------------------------------	---

Region	Number of interviews completed
---------------	---------------------------------------

London	10
--------	----

South East	3
------------	---

South West	0
------------	---

West Midlands	2
---------------	---

North West	4
------------	---

North East	1
------------	---

Yorkshire and the Humber	5
--------------------------	---

East Midlands	2
---------------	---

East of England	1
-----------------	---

Scotland	0
Wales	1
Northern Ireland	1

Urban/rural	Number of interviews completed
Urban/Suburban	26
Rural	4

1. Young people and work: interim report: [Young people and work: interim report — GOV.UK.](#) ↵
2. Susan Michie, Maartje M van Stralen, and Robert West: [The behaviour change wheel: A new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions.](#) ↵
3. This is an anonymised pen portrait based on a real research interview. Name and identifying details have been changed to protect the participant's anonymity. ↵
4. This is an anonymised pen portrait based on a real research interview. Name and identifying details have been changed to protect the participant's anonymity. ↵
5. This is an anonymised pen portrait based on a real research interview. Name and identifying details have been changed to protect the participant's anonymity. ↵
6. This is an anonymised pen portrait based on a real research interview. Name and identifying details have been changed to protect the participant's anonymity. ↵
7. This is an anonymised pen portrait based on a real research interview. Name and identifying details have been changed to protect the participant's anonymity. ↵
8. This reflects the participant's understanding at the time of interview. Universal Credit does not normally pay for or provide driving lessons. At the time of reporting, there is a 40-hour driving lesson grant offered by the Motability Foundation subject to specific eligibility criteria, including receipt of a qualifying mobility benefit and access to a Motability Scheme vehicle, as well as receiving a means-tested benefit such as Universal Credit: [Motability Foundation: driving lessons — Individual grants.](#) ↵

Help us improve GOV.UK

To help us improve GOV.UK, we'd like to know more about your visit today. [Please fill in this survey \(opens in a new tab\)](#).



Services and information

[Benefits](#)

[Births, death, marriages and care](#)

[Business and self-employed](#)

[Childcare and parenting](#)

[Citizenship and living in the UK](#)

[Crime, justice and the law](#)

[Disabled people](#)

[Driving and transport](#)

[Education and learning](#)

[Employing people](#)

[Environment and countryside](#)

Government activity

[Departments](#)

[News](#)

[Guidance and regulation](#)

[Research and statistics](#)

[Policy papers and consultations](#)

[Transparency](#)

[How government works](#)

[Get involved](#)

[Housing and local services](#)

[Money and tax](#)

[Passports, travel and living abroad](#)

[Visas and immigration](#)

[Working, jobs and pensions](#)

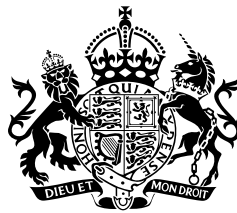
[Help](#) [Privacy](#) [Cookies](#) [Accessibility statement](#) [Contact](#)

[Terms and conditions](#) [Rhestr o Wasanaethau Cymraeg](#)

[Government Digital Service](#)

OGI

All content is available under the [Open Government Licence v3.0](#), except where otherwise stated



[© Crown copyright](#)