

FUTURE FOCUSED

A ZINE EXPLORING THE BARRIERS TO
EMPLOYMENT YOUNG PEOPLE FACE

Editor's Note



Future Voices (FVG) is a group of 20 young people passionate about advocating for young people across England. We all joined Youth Futures Foundation, the national What Works Centre for youth employment, to spend some time putting our own knowledge and insight into the organisation's strategy and vision.

We have been involved in consultations with the organisation and external partners, shared our experiences of barriers to employment and worked with staff to inform the three main pillars of their work: Systems Change*, Creating Opportunities* and Building Capacity*.

As we came closer to the end of our FVG tenure we wanted to take some ownership...that is how this zine came about.

This zine is an expression our experiences of barriers to employment and we believe needs to change, accompanied by evidence from Youth Futures' research.

The zine has also been a chance for us to be a bit creative together and reflect on everything we have done as FVG members, using the skills we have learnt.

Future Voices has not just been about us sharing what we know - we have all experienced a lot of personal growth and had opportunities to develop more as leaders and changemakers. This zine is split, in what we feel are three drivers of youth unemployment and workplace inequality: Ethnic Disparities, Regional Disparities, and Disability Support. We have used statistics and numerous creative mediums to share our thoughts and ideas.

We are very proud of what we have created and would like to present to you 'Future Focused': a zine exploring the barriers young people face to employment.

Future Voices Group 2022-2024

*Systems Change: Changing the youth employment system by working in partnership with organisations, policy makers and young people to address structural and systemic barriers

*Creating Opportunities with employers to recruit and retain more young people from marginalised backgrounds

*Building Capacity with practitioners to support and train more young people from marginalised backgrounds to be ready for work



Ethnic Disparities

OUR FUTURE

A Podcast Series on Youth Employment
& Ethnic Disparities

ft. Samuela,
Obaida, Yi Kang



Yi Kang in conversation
with Obaida

Welcome to our two-part podcast series, where Future Voices Group members Yi Kang, Samuela, and Obaida dive into their reflections on YFF's research report, *Discrimination at Work* - launched in early 2024.

Yi Kang in conversation
with Samuela

In these episodes, we'll explore ethnic disparities in the workplace and their personal insights, thoughts, and hopes for a more equitable future.

Click on the QR code above to listen.



By Yi Kang, Obaida and Samuela

By Olivia

I mbued with deep shame,
A lone young girl sits alone, enveloped by hidden pain.
Many surround her, yet, they just add to her internal rain.
E vergrowing self doubt,
Now, the vision of her future looks like a drought.
One person is all she sought.
U can be that light in someone's life,
Give another person the ability to once again strive,
Here, we will achieve a collective drive.

As a young person who has struggled with mental health, I deeply relate to Youth Employment UK's 2023 Census, which found that 51% of young people over 19 view mental health as their biggest barrier to work, and 49.1% of students feel exams negatively impact their mental health.

Recently receiving my A-Level results, I found the process damaging and isolating. Despite working in Youth Employment, I made poor choices at 16 and 17 due to inadequate career advice. BTECs should be more widely supported, and older Sixth Form students need better A-Level support, especially with no resit options. Positive feedback and mental health resources should be mandatory.

As a South Asian, I faced community shame. I aim for change to eliminate stigma and foster unconditional support. My acrostic poem reflects how these barriers can tear individuals apart, often overlooked by teachers and families who fail to see that a person's worth isn't defined by exam results.

By Zoya



NOT JUST A NUMBER

Not Just a Number is an intentionally unfinished work, inviting viewers to complete the title with their own identity — transforming it into 'WE ARE not just a number' or 'I AM not just a number'. The piece is filled with symbolism, reflecting themes of diversity, disabilities, the search for help, personal growth, and the often reductive 'tick-box' exercises in our society.

By embracing abstraction, this piece underscores the importance and beauty of individual stories and identities, reminding us that we are each unique and special — not just data points in a larger system, but distinct voices that enrich our collective world.

By Yi Kang Choo

ENOUGH

**Why am I not good enough?
Is it because I grew up rough?**

**Is it because I'm young and new,
Or wear my hair in Afro hues?**

**Is it because I won't erase
The life I carry, my "too much" case?**

**The workplace should adjust, not bluff.
Embrace the difference with acceptance, not rebuff.
But maybe, it's you who's not enough.**

How to be Enough

Mentoring

**Peer
Support**

**Zero tolerance on
discrimination in the
workplace**

On the job training

By Ladajah



Regional Disparities



Unkept Promises


In the West Midlands,
where factories whispered promises long,
silenced,
I walk among shadows, a child of these streets,
carrying stories untold.

Opportunity slips through fingers,
elusive as smoke
Youth unemployment—
two cold words
masking the heat of frustration,
the ache of days spent searching,
nights spent wondering if the future
has a place for us.


In a body marked by history,
I carry a weight—
pulling me down,
into a system not built for me.
The West Midlands,
where dreams defer in the quiet struggle
of my brothers, my sisters.

We are the sons and daughters,
of the Caribbean winds,
blown across the Atlantic,
to these shores that promise,
but often do not deliver.
Yet we stand,
in defiance of the odds,
in the face of a world
that tells us no.

But we are more than the statistics, more
than numbers on a page.
We carry the light of our ancestors,
the fire that burns, unseen,
in defiance of the odds,
in the heart of this land.
One day, our voices will rise,
our dreams will be seen,
and the chains of disparity will fall
like the promises they once were.



By Elijah Denning



Silent factories, Silent futures

An accompanying piece to Unkept Promises by Jayden McFarlane

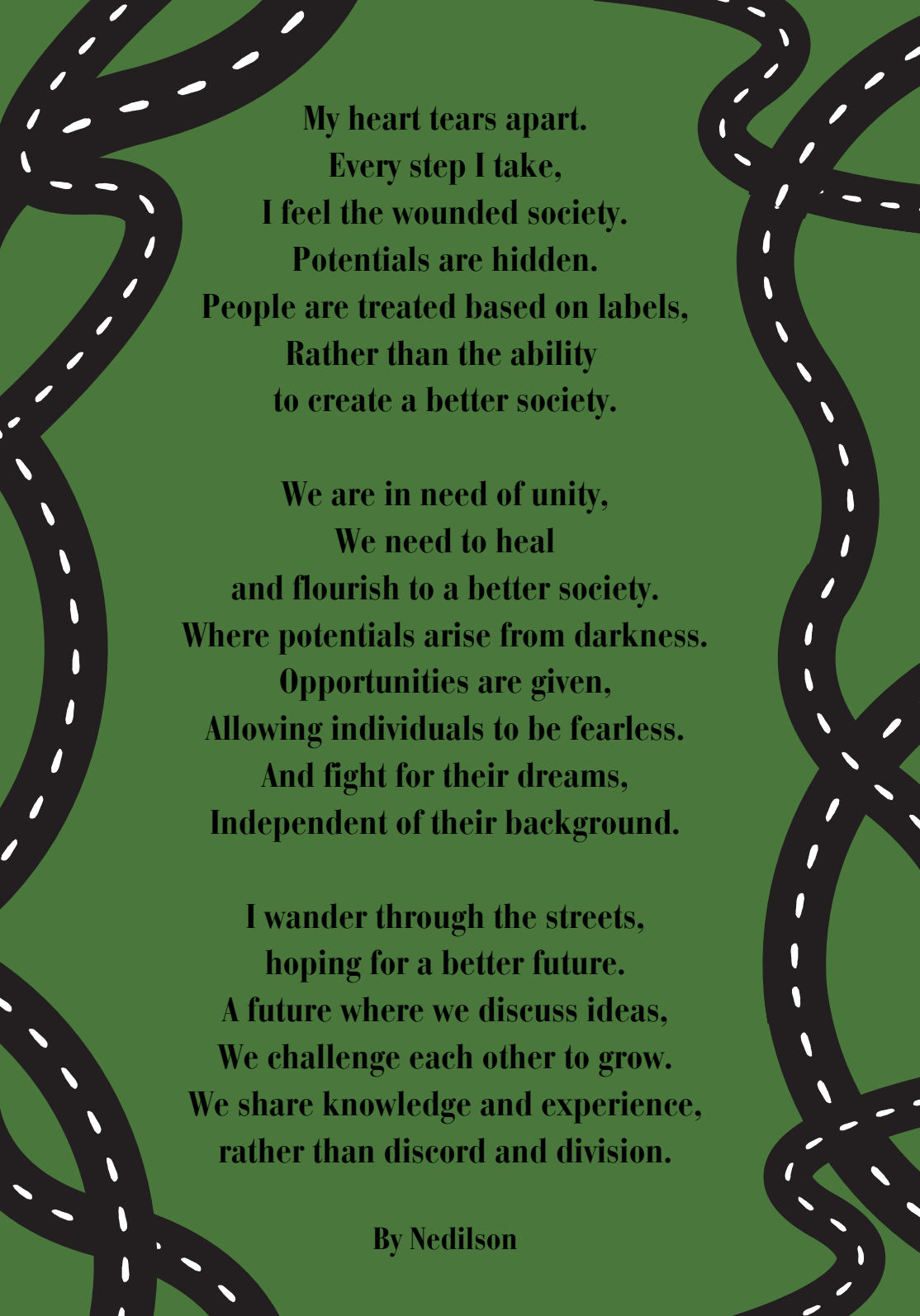
My grandparents came from Jamaica during the Windrush era, believing in the promise of a new life in a country that was said to be the land of opportunity. They were met with challenges, but they also found work in the factories and industries that defined the region. But today, those factories are silent, their whispers of opportunity long gone.

I walk the same streets, a child of this land, carrying within me the stories of my ancestors, but also the weight of a reality that starkly contrasts the past. I too moved to the West Midlands seeking opportunity; the place that once offered jobs to my grandparents has become a place where opportunity slips through my fingers like smoke, intangible and elusive.

The heat of frustration rises, and the ache of uncertainty kills. I am nearly twice as likely to be unemployed than my white peers, for the fact I am Black Caribbean. My grandparents fought and paved the way for people to like me to have a future, yet I have suffered being NEET for my class, ethnicity and disability. I have felt the sting of rejection by a world that doesn't have a place for me, unless I am a token. Youth unemployment is more than a statistic, it's a lived experience. It's my experience.



Jobcentreplus



**My heart tears apart.
Every step I take,
I feel the wounded society.
Potentials are hidden.
People are treated based on labels,
Rather than the ability
to create a better society.**

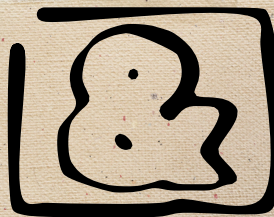
**We are in need of unity,
We need to heal
and flourish to a better society.
Where potentials arise from darkness.
Opportunities are given,
Allowing individuals to be fearless.
And fight for their dreams,
Independent of their background.**

**I wander through the streets,
hoping for a better future.
A future where we discuss ideas,
We challenge each other to grow.
We share knowledge and experience,
rather than discord and division.**

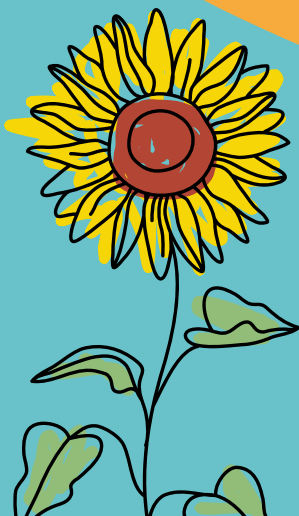
By Nedilson



Disability



Unemployment



WE AREN'T LISTENING

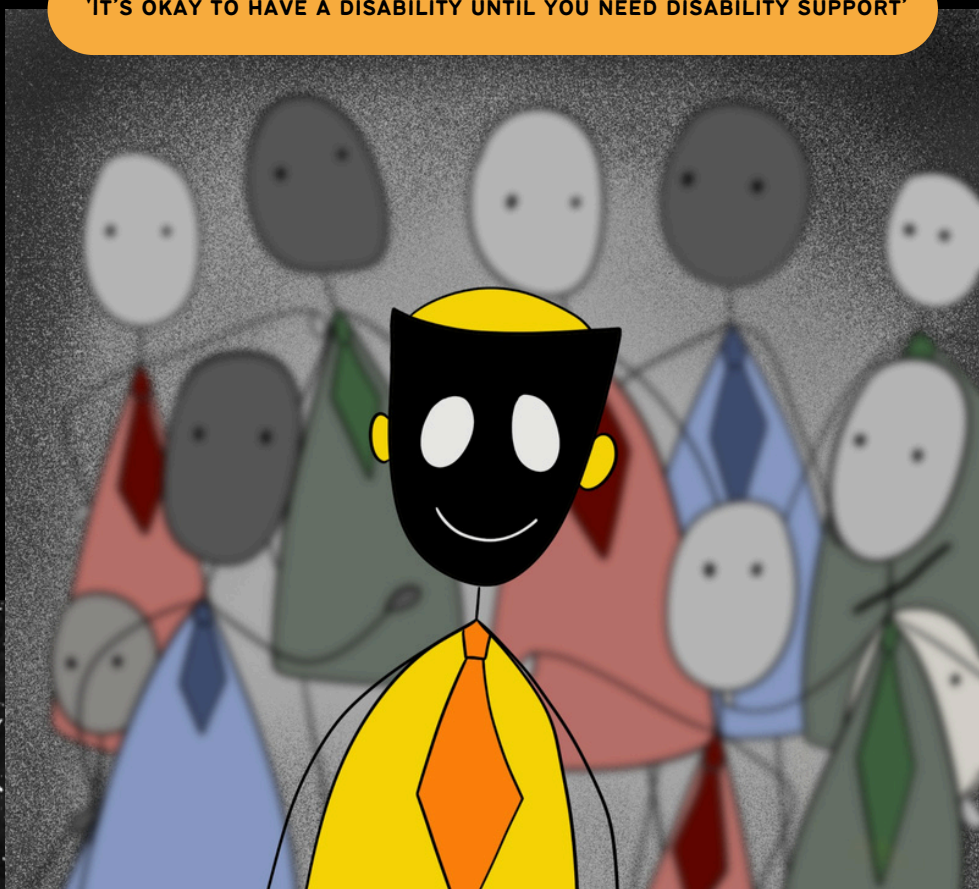


There seems to be a huge disability employment gap. In 2024, according to the National Institute of Health, 21.7% of autistic people in the United Kingdom were employed in 2020 compared to 81.3% of people without disabilities.

Tackling this gap will take a coordinated effort; we need policy change but we also need a change in the support and awareness of employers and educators to break the stigma that all these groups feed into and reflect. This kind of change is not a 'quick fix', but I believe it is the only way to make real, lasting change.

Youth Futures reports like 'Unlocking Youth Unemployment: Opportunities for Employers and Marginalised Groups', 'Finding a NEET solution', and 'Young people, ADHD, and Employment' highlight in their recommendations some key practical actions that need taking, including prioritising supported employment and internships for young people with learning disabilities, the rollout and effective evaluation of Youth Hubs, providing incentives for organisations offering apprenticeships, providing more time for candidates to complete job applications (and other interview adjustments), and creating a safe space where candidates can disclose their diagnosis (and other workplace adjustments).

'IT'S OKAY TO HAVE A DISABILITY UNTIL YOU NEED DISABILITY SUPPORT'



I WAS INSPIRED BY YOUTH FUTURE'S REPORT ON YOUNG PEOPLE, ADHD, AND EMPLOYMENT, AND THE EXPERIENCES OF MYSELF AND MY NEURODIVERSE FRIENDS WHEN TRYING TO FIND WORK. EVEN WITH THE THEORETICAL PROMOTION OF NEURODIVERSE TALENT AND 'BEING INCLUSIVE', I FEEL THAT THERE IS STILL LITTLE GENUINE UNDERSTANDING WITHIN WORKPLACES, AND REAL, MEANINGFUL ACCOMMODATIONS AND ACCEPTANCE ARE RARE. IN A STUDY CONDUCTED BY YFF, NO PARTICIPANTS REPORTED RECEIVING SUPPORT DIRECTLY TAILORED TO ADHD AND ACCESSING EMPLOYMENT, AND DUE TO PERSISTENT NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES, MANY PARTICIPANTS WERE RELUCTANT TO DISCLOSE THEIR ADHD TO EMPLOYERS.

PARTICIPANTS WHO HAD DISCLOSED THEIR ADHD TO THEIR CURRENT EMPLOYERS REPORTED ANXIETY ABOUT FUTURE EMPLOYMENT, AND THE POSSIBILITY OF MISUNDERSTANDING AND DISCRIMINATION. THERE WAS ALSO GENERAL FRUSTRATION REGARDING STEREOTYPES AROUND ADHD. WHILE THE SOLUTION SEEMS SIMPLE - MANY PARTICIPANTS EMPHASISED THE NEED TO EDUCATE EMPLOYERS ON ADHD - MY FEAR IS THAT WHILE MANY ORGANISATIONS SAY THEY ARE WILLING TO CHANGE AND BE MORE INCLUSIVE, IN PRACTICE THEY ARE STUCK IN RIGID WAYS OF THINKING, AND AREN'T REALLY 'LISTENING'.

SAFFRON



**THESE ARE REAL HEADLINES FROM
'DISABILITY NEWS SERVICE'.**

**THEY HIGHLIGHT THE REALITIES OF
EMPLOYMENT FOR DISABLED PEOPLE
TODAY.**

**ON THE FACE OF IT, THE WORLD IS
CHANGING, AND BECOMING MORE
ACCEPTING -
BUT IS IT ALL TALK?**



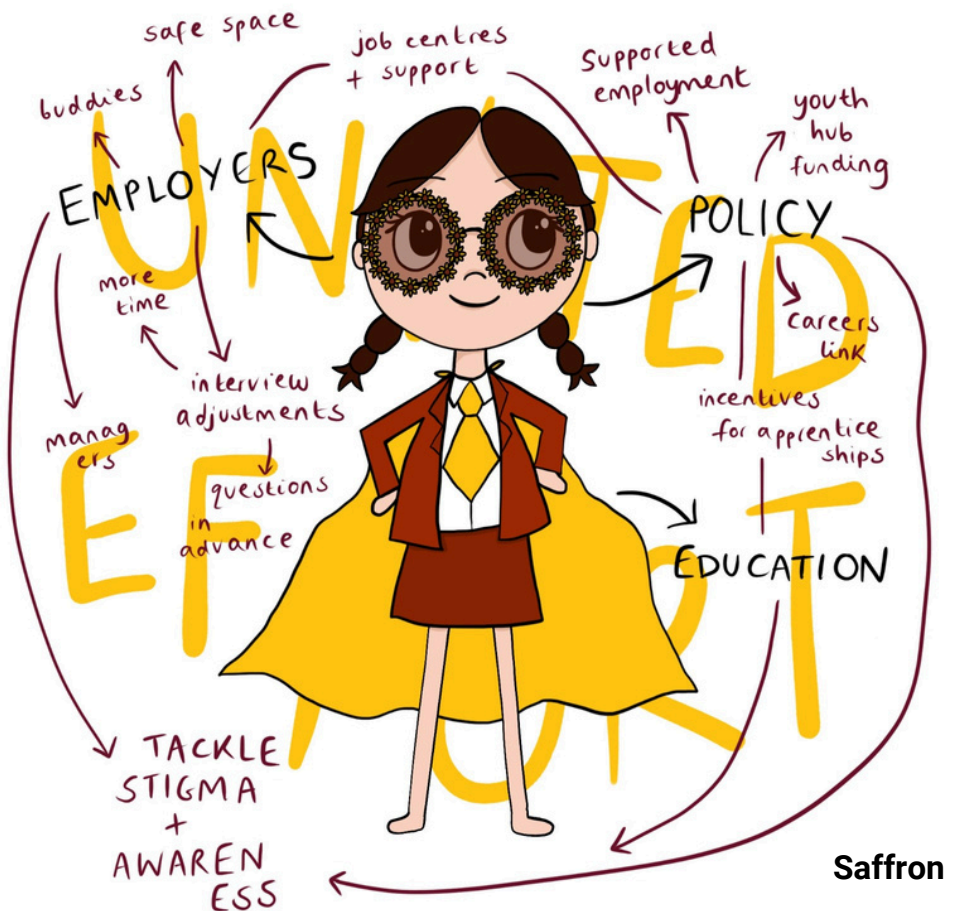
a workforce WITH a
DISABILITY WORK
PLACE *THIS IS NOT OKAY*
1 IN 3 DISABILITY CON
FIDENT EMPLOYERS HAVE EM
PLOYED 0 disabled people

**THIS ARTWORK WAS INSPIRED BY INFORMATION FROM THE
DISABILITY NEWS SERVICE'S ARTICLES ON THE DISABILITY
CONFIDENT SURVEY PUBLISHED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF WORK
AND PENSION IN 2022**

I wanted to paint this to show what it would look like for there to be real diversity and understanding in a workplace. Innovation and creativity captured and harnessed. New ideas and thoughts.

In the National Institute of Health Report, 2023 'Access to employment: A comparison of autistic, neurodivergent and neurotypical adults' experiences of hiring processes in the United Kingdom', the authors emphasise how some of the unique talents and abilities of autistic individuals are unused and left unacknowledged, because workplaces seem unwilling to change.

The study reports that 80% of autistic people are estimated to be unemployed worldwide and that unemployment rates in the United Kingdom are higher for autistic people than other disability groups.





I am AuDHD, and my neurodiversity has made maintaining employment incredibly difficult. Unlike some of my peers, I have found the interview process relatively easy in comparison, but keeping a job without 'burning out' has been unsuccessful. I want to find a workplace where my needs are accepted and I feel comfortable being myself. Thus far my most positive experience of work was a part time job at Argos, in which the team were supportive and worked with me as an individual - and as a result, I experienced huge personal growth, and felt like a really valued member of the team.

Saffron

We, The Future Voices Group, would like to thank Talia Dundoo (Senior Youth Inclusion Officer) and Rosie (Artist) in supporting us with creating this zine.

Additionally, we are all grateful for previous FVG members who have played an important part in our development as individuals and a collective.

We appreciate all the hard work from the wider YFF team that are passionate about incorporating youth voice into what they do, alongside promoting the value youth voice has in the workplace. As a group, we have been uplifted and given a platform to talk about our experiences and wouldn't have been able to do so without peer support.

Thank you!



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YOUTH FUTURES REPORTS

- Ethnic Disparities Research: Discrimination and Work Survey (2024)
- The Effectiveness of Interventions to Increase Youth Employment: An Evidence and Gap Map (2021)
- Risk factors for being NEET among young people (2023)
- Youth Employment UK's 2022 Youth Voice Census (2022)
- Unlocking Youth Employment: Opportunities for employers and marginalised groups (2023)

youth
futures