

# Evaluation of Youth Employment Service North East – final report

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**Youth Futures Foundation** is the national What Works Centre for youth employment, with a specific focus on marginalised young people. We want to see an equitable future society where all young people have the opportunity to be in good work.

**Learning and Work Institute** is an independent policy, research and development organisation dedicated to lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion. They research what works, develop new ways of thinking and implement new approaches. Working with partners, they transform people's experiences of learning and employment.

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## List of abbreviations

Acronym	Definition
EEO	Employment Engagement Officer
JCP	Job Centre Plus
MI	Management Information
NEAS	North East Autism Society
YES North East	Youth Employment Service North East

# Executive summary

This report presents findings from the evaluation of the Youth Employment Service North East (YES North East) programme, which ran for two years from October 2021 to November 2023. The report examines the delivery of YES North East, young people’s experiences of participation and an assessment of outcomes. It also provides a set of recommendations to inform the design and delivery of similar programmes.

## The project

YES North East was a collaboration between Youth Futures Foundation (YFF) and North East Autism Society (NEAS). The programme was designed to support neurodiverse people aged between 18 and 24 living in Tyne and Wear who were not in employment, education or training, to move into, or further towards, employment and education. The evaluation aimed to understand which elements of the model are most effective in driving education, employment, and training outcomes for the target group.

## Evaluation objectives

Table 1 outlines the evaluation objectives and the sections in the report which address them. A more detailed exploration of evaluation objectives is included in the methodology section on page 11.

Table 1: Evaluation objectives

OBJECTIVE	REPORT SECTIONS
1. Fully understand the programme theory behind the YES North East support model and the critical drivers and mechanisms of change	Chapter 2: Programme design and delivery See also Appendix 1: Theory of Change
2. Understand the pathways and drivers of outcomes, which elements of the model are most effective, and the impact of contextual factors	Chapter 4: Participant experiences of YES North East
3. Capture a rich understanding of how and why participants achieve outcomes from the support model, to understand the participants that do and do not achieve outcomes, and what are the most important triggers of outcomes	Chapter 6: Programme outcomes

4. Use ongoing evaluation findings to support NEAS to know which elements of delivery work most effectively and to refine practice to support further achievement of education, employment, and training (EET) outcomes

Chapter 2: Programme design and delivery

Chapter 7: Conclusions and recommendations

## Findings

### Who did YES North East support?

YES North East supported 140 young people to improve their work readiness and overcome barriers to employment. Most participants disclosed a learning difficulty or type of neurodiversity upon joining the programme – with autism being the most common. The majority of young people on the programme were male (72%) and almost all participants were white.

### How was YES North East delivered?

The main referral source was Jobcentre Plus (JCP), though over time, more self-referrals were made via a dedicated project website and word-of-mouth.

The main part of the programme consisted of twice-weekly half-day in-person workshops. These lasted 12 weeks, followed by four weeks of delivery reserved to address any knowledge gaps among participants.

During the 16 weeks of delivery, participants were supported to complete up to two work placements, intended to last between two and five days. Participants were matched to employers according to their interests and skills.

After the end of the workshop sessions, participants were contacted weekly or fortnightly by an employment specialist<sup>1</sup> for up to 13 weeks to give participants the opportunity to access further support to move closer to employment.

### What difference did YES North East make?

More than half of programme participants (59%) achieved at least one outcome. The percentage of participants achieving each of the main types of outcomes are given in Table 2.

Table 2: Percentages of participants achieving different outcomes

OUTCOME	ACHIEVEMENT RATE
Employment	14%

<sup>1</sup> NEAS employment specialists supported with workshop delivery and offered one-to-one support outside of group sessions.

Education	14%
Volunteering or work experience	36%

Source: NEAS Management Information. Base: 125.

The participant survey found that the majority of respondents reported the following:

- no change to their employment aspirations (64%)
- no change to how positive they felt about being able to secure a job (51%).

However, in the qualitative research interviews, some programme participants said that they had experienced positive changes, including:

- feeling better informed about how, and where, to look for jobs
- increased confidence about their capability to apply for work and navigate interviews
- developing a greater awareness of their existing skills which increased their confidence and focus on gaining work in a specific sector or role.

The participant survey found that young people’s confidence and wellbeing increased over the time they participated in the programme. In interviews, participants said they felt the programme helped them to improve their social and communication skills so they were better able to meet and interact with new people, speak on the phone and ask for support.

### Recommendations for the design and delivery of similar programmes

The evaluation identified a number of lessons for future delivery of similar programmes.

- The need to explore additional ways to raise awareness and promote similar programmes. This could include working with community organisations and services to support outreach and engage the target group and their parents/carers.
- Investing in developing strong relationships with employers of all sizes, and across growth sectors. Evidence from the evaluation found that developing relationships with employers took time and considerable resource. Stronger links with employers would help to build pathways to employment for participants.
- Maintaining and expanding valuable relationships with external partners and services. Partnerships have been key to the implementation and delivery of the YES North East model, particularly referrals from JCP and the arrangement of work placements with local employers.

# 1. Introduction

Learning and Work Institute (L&W) was commissioned by Youth Futures Foundation (YFF) to evaluate the Youth Employment Service North East (YES North East) programme delivered by North East Autism Society (NEAS). This report presents the findings of L&W's two-year evaluation. It builds on findings from an interim report written in February 2023 to highlight key learning and to produce a series of recommendations to inform the design and delivery of similar programmes.

## Background

The programme was designed to provide a fresh approach to employment support for young neurodiverse people in Tyne and Wear, who are perceived to face a range of barriers to employment, including:

- a lack of familiarity with the job search and application process
- a challenging local labour market
- specific barriers to employment which increase their risk of long-term unemployment, such as employer perceptions of neurodiversity and individual challenges (e.g., social anxiety)
- the impact of the pandemic on their confidence and motivation.

## Programme

YES North East was launched in October 2021 and ran until November 2023. The programme supported neurodiverse people aged 18-24 living in Tyne and Wear who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) at the time of referral. The programme was designed to support participants to move into, or further towards, employment and education.

The programme comprised five cohorts, each running for six months. It utilised a multi-staged support model, consisting of:

- group workshops (two half days per week for the first 12 weeks), followed by four weeks of delivery reserved to address any knowledge gaps among participants
- up to two work placements (lasting between two and five days)
- after the end of the workshop sessions, participants were contacted weekly or fortnightly by an employment specialist for up to 13 weeks to give participants the opportunity to access further support to move closer to employment

The programme model targets a mix of attitudinal, behavioural and skills outcomes. These outcomes and the associated measures of success are set out in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Outcomes and measures of success for YES North East

TYPE OF OUTCOMES	AREA OF FOCUS	MEASURE OF SUCCESS
Soft outcomes	Mental health and wellbeing	55% of participants will report improved confidence in gaining a job
	Improved knowledge about career options	60% of participants to have improved knowledge of career options
Intermediate outcomes	Moving from economically inactive to actively job-seeking	20% of participants
	Completing a work placement	80% of participants
	Completing a CV	80% of participants
Hard outcomes	Meaningful employment	20% of participants
	Relevant education or training	20% of participants

## Methodology

The evaluation has sought to:

- fully understand the programme theory behind the YES North East support model and the critical drivers and mechanisms of change
- understand the pathways and drivers of outcomes, which elements of the model are most effective, and the impact of contextual factors
- capture a rich understanding of how and why participants achieve outcomes from the support model, to understand the participants that do and do not achieve outcomes, and what are the most important triggers of outcomes
- use ongoing evaluation findings to support NEAS to know which elements of delivery work most effectively and to refine practice to support further achievement of education, employment, and training (EET) outcomes.

The evaluation followed a mixed-methods approach to achieve its objectives. Each component of the research is explored in the sections below.

### Mobilisation and evaluation design period

The mobilisation period was used to develop a clear understanding of the programme support model and causal pathways. This included familiarisation interviews with key NEAS staff members involved in the design of the programme, a review of relevant documents and resources, and analysis of local labour market data. Findings from this stage resulted in the development of the programme Theory of Change (ToC) which sets out the overarching logic for the delivery of the programme and informed the subsequent evaluation framework.

A copy of the ToC is provided in the [Appendix 1](#) and the evaluation framework is shown in [Appendix 2](#).

### Programme evaluation

The evaluation was guided by a comprehensive understanding of the theory behind the programme, underpinned by the ToC and evaluation framework. This utilised robust data gathering and analysis to identify which elements of the model are most effective, for whom, and why. This included analysis of:

- management information (MI)
- participant surveys
- depth interviews with participants, NEAS staff, referral and delivery partners, and employers.

The table below sets out the number of participants engaged in each evaluation activity.

Table 4: Evaluation activities

EVALUATION ACTIVITY	NO. OF PARTICIPANTS
MI data	Data was available for 140 participants
Participant surveys	Pre-intervention survey: 88 participants Mid-intervention survey: 72 participants Post participation survey: 60 participants
Interviews with participants	Interviews were conducted with 23 participants. A further four participants engaged with the evaluation by providing written answers to key questions
Interviews with NEAS staff	Interviews were conducted with six NEAS staff members
Interviews with referral and delivery partners	Interviews were conducted with three participants involved in making referrals to the programme, and one participant involved in delivering the programme
Interviews with employers	Interviews were conducted with seven employers

Additionally, four workshops were carried out between L&W and NEAS staff which provided opportunities for discussion at key stages of the evaluation. The following subsections describe each of these sources of data in more detail.

### Management information analysis

Analysis was undertaken of YES North East MI, provided by NEAS. This was used to gain an understanding of programme participants and delivery, including participant characteristics and circumstances, participation in the programme, and outcomes achieved. MI on the characteristics of participants was available for 138 individuals who received support through the programme. In addition to this, information on outcomes was available for a further two participants. This gives a total of 140 programme participants.

### Participant survey and outcomes tracking

All participants taking part in the programme were invited to take part in pre, mid and post-intervention surveys. The surveys aimed to collect evidence on the achievement of a range of priority outcomes focused on soft skills, wellbeing, and preparedness for employment, brought about through participating in YES North East. In total, 88 participants completed the pre-intervention survey, 72 completed the mid-intervention survey, and 60 completed the post-participation survey.

The surveys were structured to measure distance travelled, with data collected at three points around participants' engagement with the programme – prior to starting, at the mid-point of their participation in the workshops, and after completion of the workshops.

The surveys used tools to measure the priority outcome areas to ensure the metrics were appropriate and the results robust. The measures were assessed against a number of criteria, including suitability for the programme cohort, use in similar contexts, ease of use, and transferability and ease of practical application. Table 5 provides an overview of the measures, including the target outcome, measure name, and a brief description.

Table 5: Pre, mid and post intervention survey measures

TARGET OUTCOME	MEASURE	OVERVIEW OF MEASURE
Wellbeing	WHO 5 Wellbeing Index <sup>2</sup>	The WHO 5 Wellbeing Index measures participant wellbeing and quality of life. The tool uses five statements which ask respondents to rate how they have been feeling over the previous two weeks. This includes feeling 'cheerful and in good spirits', 'calm and relaxed', 'active and vigorous', 'fresh and rested' and 'daily life being filled with things that interest me'.
Confidence	Personal development scale <sup>3</sup>	The personal development scale measures confidence in carrying out tasks related to communication, teamwork and leadership. This includes respondent's confidence in carrying out a range of activities, such as 'meeting new people', 'having a go at things that are new to me' and 'getting things done on time'. Most of these behaviours are particularly relevant to the workplace, such as 'working with other people in a team', 'putting forward new idea' and 'being the leader of a team'.
Self-efficacy	The New General Self-Efficacy Scale <sup>4</sup>	The New General Self-Efficacy Scale measures the extent to which respondents believe they can achieve their goals, despite difficulties. The scale uses general statements related to achieving goals, completing tasks and overcoming challenges. These are relevant to all areas of a person's life.

<sup>2</sup> [WHO \(Five\) Well-Being Index \(1998 version\), WHO Collaborating Centre in Mental Health](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Personal Development Scale, The Journey to Employment \(JET\) Framework, NPC](#)

<sup>4</sup> [New General Self-Efficacy Scale, Stanford University](#)

<p>Capability to find a job</p>	<p>Attitudes towards future – career questions, NCS<sup>5</sup></p> <p>L&amp;W developed ‘confidence in employment’<sup>6</sup></p>	<p>NCS career questions present three statements related to capabilities and opportunities to find a job and ask respondents to select an answer on a scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree.</p> <p>L&amp;W developed a ‘confidence in employment’ metric which asks respondents to strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the statement: ‘I am confident that I can find a job that suits me’.</p>
<p>Career aspirations</p>	<p>L&amp;W developed ‘aspirations in employment’</p>	<p>The L&amp;W developed ‘aspirations in employment’ metric is a five-point survey which measures the importance participants place on employment-related factors, including opportunities for progression, job satisfaction, and opportunities for development.</p>

In total, 88 pre-intervention survey responses, 72 mid-intervention survey responses, and 60 post-intervention survey responses were collected during the evaluation period. To assess distance travelled, the evaluation focused on analysis of responses from 48 participants who completed the pre-intervention, mid-intervention, and post-intervention surveys. Therefore, around one-third (34%) of the 140 programme participants completed all three surveys and just over half (55%) of those who responded to the pre-intervention survey completed all three surveys. Results should be interpreted with caution due to the relatively small number of participants responding to the survey.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> [Career-related questions from ‘attitudes towards future’: National Citizen Service 2016 Evaluation, Technical Report, Kantar Public and London Economics, 2020](#)

<sup>6</sup> The ‘confidence in employment’ metric was derived from a wider set of questions. More information about this can be found on page 36 of this report: [Social Metrics: Measuring the outcomes of non-accredited learning - Learning and Work Institute](#)

<sup>7</sup> Survey response rates were low for cohorts one, two and three. In response to this, revisions were made to the survey management approach, including the introduction of a shared tool used by delivery and evaluation partners to track survey responses. This tool made it easier to identify participants who had not completed surveys and arrange for delivery staff to encourage and support completion. This process helped to raise the response rates for cohorts four and five.

## Depth interviews

The evaluation team spoke to programme participants, NEAS staff, referral and delivery partners and employers to identify which elements of the model were most effective and why.

### Interviews with programme participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 participants in total. Interviews were held with participants following completion of the full programme. A further four participants engaged in the evaluation by providing written answers to key questions.<sup>8</sup>

All participants who had opted into research activities, and who completed the post-survey, were invited to take part in an interview following completion of the programme. The interviews explored:

- circumstances prior to joining YES North East
- motivations to enrol on YES North East
- experience and satisfaction with provision of support and work placement/s
- benefits experienced as a result of participation in the programme.

### Interviews with delivery staff

Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with six NEAS staff involved in the delivery of YES North East, with some interviewed twice. Interviews were held during delivery for cohorts three and five to provide insights into changes to delivery over time. Interviews covered:

- how participants initially engaged with YES North East
- how participants were supported through YES North East
- reflections on the effectiveness of working with employers, Jobcentre Plus (JCP) staff, and delivery partners providing guest speaker sessions
- challenges experienced and how these were overcome
- reflections on how participants (and employers) benefited from the YES North East programme and how positive outcomes were achieved.

### Interviews with referral and delivery partners

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three partners involved in the referral of participants to YES North East, and one with a partner involved in programme delivery. Interviews were held during the delivery of the programme to cohort three and cohort five. The interviews explored:

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<sup>8</sup> To accommodate the participation of those with different access needs, participants were given the opportunity to take part in the research via different means – including face-to-face, phone, and video call interviews, written submissions, and the submission of audio and video recordings.

- experience of engagement with YES North East;
- reflections on the effectiveness of working with YES North East;
- perspective on the impact of the programme.

### Interviews with employers

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven employers involved in the provision of work placements to YES North East. Interviews were held with employers during the delivery period for cohorts three and five. The interviews explored:

- experience of engagement with YES North East and details of their participation in the programme
- the perceived impact of YES North East on the young people receiving support through the programme
- perspectives on the impact of the programme on the employer's own staff and the organisation as a whole.

### Feasibility study

A study of the feasibility of estimating the causal impact of YES North East was carried out alongside the programme evaluation. The purpose of this was to establish whether the intervention was ready to be scaled up for an efficacy study. The feasibility study drew on findings from the early stages of the programme evaluation and considered the likelihood that it would be possible to generate high-quality, causal evidence about the impact of YES North East on its intended outcomes.

To estimate the causal impact of any programme, it is necessary to form a credible estimate of the outcomes that participants would have been expected to attain in the absence of the intervention. This is known as the counterfactual. The difference between the observed outcomes for participants and counterfactual outcomes provides an estimate of the causal impact of the programme.

The feasibility study explored the possibility of estimating counterfactual outcomes through the use of experimental or quasi-experimental methods. In an experiment, such as a randomised control trial (RCT), those eligible for the intervention are randomly assigned to receive the intervention, or to a control group who receive business-as-usual provision for the eligible population. In this instance, outcomes for the control group are used to estimate the counterfactual. The feasibility study explored options for an RCT, but decided this would not be possible for two main reasons outlined below.

- At the point at which randomisation would need to take place, those eligible to participate would already have undertaken several activities to confirm their interest and suitability for the programme, such as participation in a taster day. Given the target population, asking young people to undertake these activities, only to inform them they had been randomised to a control group raised ethical concerns. This was because there

was a risk that this could potentially undermine their confidence and make them less likely to engage in other support programmes in the future.

- The numbers of individuals expressing an interest in taking part in the programme was lower than expected. As a result, it appeared unlikely that it would be possible to generate a pipeline of potential participants of sufficient size to be able to detect an impact from the programme if half of the trial participants were assigned to a control group.

Having determined that a RCT would not be feasible, the option of using quasi-experimental methods was explored as an alternative. These approaches use statistical techniques to estimate the counterfactual. However, these methods require access to data on a potential comparison group, such as those meeting the eligibility criteria for YES North East, but living in areas where the programme is not running. As it is difficult to identify the target population for the programme in existing data sources in order to observe outcomes for a potential comparison group, the feasibility study concluded that currently it is not viable for an efficacy study to estimate the causal impact of YES North East.

### Structure

The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

- chapter two outlines programme design and delivery, including providing an overview of the programme specification and structure, distinctive elements of support in comparison to mainstream provision, and staff reflections on different elements of delivery
- chapter three provides an overview of participants so far, including participant characteristics and circumstances, and barriers to employment
- chapter four details participants' experience and satisfaction with the programme, including referrals and registrations, and views on workshops, work placements and sustained contact
- chapter five provides an account of the experience and views of employers and JCP staff, including their suggestions for improvement
- chapter six examines the outcomes of participants and employers taking part in the programme, including social and emotional, employability and skills, and employment, education, and volunteering outcomes
- chapter seven provides a concluding summary of the main lessons and recommendations that should be considered for the future delivery of similar programmes aimed at this target population.

## 2. Programme design and delivery

This chapter provides an overview of how YES North East was designed and delivered. It is informed by a review of programme-related documents, interviews and workshops with key staff involved in the design and implementation of the programme.

### Programme specification and structure

YES North East aimed to support neurodiverse people aged between 18 and 24 living in Tyne and Wear who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). The programme was designed to support participants to move into or further towards employment and education. The rationale, inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and intended impact are set out in the Theory of Change included in the Appendix.

### Key components of programme

The programme was designed to achieve its aims and objectives through six key elements:

#### Eligibility

To be eligible for the programme, individuals needed to be aged between 18 and 24, living in Tyne and Wear, and be neurodiverse. Participants were not required to have a formal diagnosis of a neurodiverse condition as a prerequisite for joining. Instead, participants could register if they felt the support was suitable for them, with need then assessed through the registration process. This approach was taken to ensure the programme was open to all who felt they may benefit from it, and not exclude people who have not received formal health support in relation to their neurodiversity, or who may be on a waiting list for diagnosis and support. In addition, individuals were required to commit to the entire 16-week programme, be willing to engage in group sessions and to complete up to two weeks of work placements. Participants were also required to have a degree of personal independence, with the confidence to travel independently to support sessions and the capability to take part in workshops and learning activities with limited support (group workshops operated on 13:1 participant-to-staff ratio).

#### Engagement and onboarding process

The programme received most referrals of neurodiverse young people from JCP Youth Employment Consultants through Youth Hubs, which were followed by a phone call with the referred individual to confirm suitability and eligibility. Individuals were then invited to attend a practical taster day. The taster day was held in-person, with ice-breaker tasks, activities in a group setting, a needs assessment through observation, and completion of a Do-it-Profiler assessment tool<sup>9</sup> on a one-to-one basis.

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<sup>9</sup> The Do-It-Profiler is an online assessment of areas of strengths and challenges for neurodiverse people which also offers tools, tips, and resources to support individuals in their work or education context. The Do-It-Profiler is used by individuals and by organisations in sectors such as healthcare and education. More information is available here: <https://doitprofiler.com/>

### Twice weekly half-day in-person workshop support sessions delivered over a 12-week period by YES North East employment specialists

The workshop sessions were designed to follow a set curriculum designed by YES North East employment specialists.<sup>10</sup> The curriculum was structured to progressively identify and develop the skills and knowledge of participants. This lasted twelve weeks, and was followed by four weeks of delivery reserved to cover any knowledge gaps among participants, particularly where participants may have missed earlier sessions. The workshops were led by YES North East employment specialists with a focus on:

- preparation for work sessions (covering mental health, skills development, job searching, CV development, communication in the workplace, vocational matching, familiarisation with workplace settings and workplace expectations)
- information, advice and guidance enabling participants to be informed about career choices
- guest speakers from various industries
- workplace tours/virtual tours.

### Up to two work placements – each meant to last between two and five days

The programme provided a brokerage system, matching participants to employers according to participant interests and skills. This was facilitated by an employer engagement officer (EEO), who utilised their relationship with participants and employment specialists to gauge participant preferences and identify suitable opportunities. As part of the placement, YES North East provided in-work support to participants to help ensure the employer could make any reasonable adjustments required.

### Additional support

Additional support was offered to help with a range of factors that impact on individuals' ability to progress into education or employment. This included additional one-to-one support in workshop sessions to accommodate different learning needs, additional support related to accessing work-placements (for example, travel training), and Better-Off-in-Work<sup>11</sup> calculations on receipt of job offers. Young people also received funding for their food and transport costs to support their participation in the programme.

### Sustained contact

Sustained contact involved remote, mostly phone, contact with an employment specialist for up to 13 weeks following the workshops (though cohorts four and five were given the option to attend in-person sessions), with participants contacted weekly or fortnightly. This support gave participants the opportunity to access further support to move closer to

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<sup>10</sup> Employment specialists explained that their role involved delivering workshops, offering one-to-one support outside of group sessions, and working with Job Centre staff to support referrals onto the programme.

<sup>11</sup> The Better-Off calculator is operated by Policy in Practice. It is used to work out how much benefit someone is eligible for and how much better off they might be in work. The calculator is available here: <https://www.betteroffcalculator.co.uk/login>

employment, referrals and brokerage to additional employment or education support opportunities, or in-work support for participants who entered employment.

### Distinctive elements of support in comparison to mainstream provision

Each part of the programme was designed and informed by the skills, expertise and, in some cases, lived experience of neurodiversity by the programme delivery team. The service aimed to incorporate distinctive features that may not have been used in other employment support programmes to provide a person-centred approach tailored to the needs of neurodiverse young people, including:

- a programme delivered by dedicated staff with lived experience of neurodiversity
- a programme of regular workshops following set curriculum focused on supporting the development of employment-related skills which young people may not yet have
- group work and socialisation among participants who may experience social anxiety, to encourage them to develop their social skills
- the offer of a meaningful work placement providing real experience of different workplace activities.

### Alterations to programme design during implementation

During the delivery of the programme, changes were made to the approach and target group as detailed below.

- Widening of age eligibility from 18-19 years old to 18-24 years old. Originally the programme sought to engage neurodiverse people between 18 and 19 years old. This was expanded during the first cohort to widen the number of individuals who could benefit from the programme and support recruitment.
- Increase in number of cohorts and extending the delivery timeline. The programme was intended to be delivered in three cohorts with 40, 40, and 70 participants respectively. Two additional cohorts were added as the number of participants in the earlier cohorts was lower than expected.
- Additional pilot for 16-17 years old in education cancelled. The programme had planned to include an additional pilot supporting a cohort of 45 young people aged 16 to 17 who were in education but at risk of becoming NEET in the future. This pilot was not put into practice and the resources were reallocated to the core YES North East programme.
- Interactive group project with presentation to community was dropped from the course content. Initially, workshops also included a group project based on the theme, 'leaving a legacy'. This was not carried out beyond cohort one due to staff resourcing and capacity issues.

## Programme delivery

YES North East staff described a range of support available for participants from referral and registration through to the end of the programme. These elements of programme delivery are set out in the Activities section of the Theory of Change (see Appendix) and the following subsections explore staff perspectives on each activity, what worked well, what did not work so well and the reasons why.

### Referrals, signposting and outreach

Referral routes were a key consideration during the design phase, with several options listed in early delivery plans: including Housing Bodies, schools, FE Colleges, and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAHMS). Staff explained that YES North East not being an accredited course made engagement more with schools and colleges more difficult. Moreover, it was presumed that colleges would prioritise referrals to their own programmes and courses. As a result, it was determined that focusing on referrals from JCP would be the most efficient way of reaching the target group.

### Jobcentre Plus

Relationships with JCP contacts were initially established by employment specialists, with support from the programme manager, if required. To engage JCP staff and encourage referrals, employment specialists attended communications meetings to share information about YES North East. Information about the programme was also available on internal JCP databases for Work Coaches to refer to when sharing details with potential participants. JCP staff originally made referrals of suitable participants by calling YES North East directly.

### Challenges with referrals and signposting

During the delivery period, referrals were lower than anticipated. This meant the programme experienced significant problems meeting recruitment targets. Staff noted the reasons for this related to three factors:

- Many young people in the target group did not engage with JCP as they lived with their parents and did not claim Universal Credit.

*"There's a whole group of people that are kind of unreachable in that sense, unless you market to them directly. Now, the marketing strategy first time round didn't really care for that. It wasn't penetrating into people's houses where parents would go, 'This is suitable for my son, or my daughter,' or whoever. So, it would definitely be something that we'd, maybe, change." YES North East delivery staff*

- JCP prioritising referrals to other contracted provision (including flagship Kickstart).

*"I think it's working well. I think it is highly dependent on the Jobcentre, which is a risk, and we did experience this with the Kickstart programme. Jobcentre, for whatever reason, defocused on our provision and focused their attentions on something else. It can have a massive impact, so building those external referrals is important even though any 1 other organisation is not going to match the numbers of Jobcentre." YES North East delivery staff*

*"I think that the Jobcentre have 16 to 24-year-old specialists who have their own targets within the Jobcentre and because it was bang on trend with the government, the Jobcentres have pushed, possibly, their own provisions rather than being actively signposting people to our provision." YES North East delivery staff*

- The group format of support deterring engagement by young people with social anxiety.

### Changes to referrals, signposting and outreach

To help address these challenges, YES North East employment specialists made a number of changes to programme delivery.

- Employment specialists worked with JCP to identify how better to facilitate referrals and address any concerns from advisers or individuals. This led to the co-location of YES North East employment specialists at JCP sites during recruitment periods so they could raise awareness of the service, answer any queries from advisers, and meet with potential participants directly to help alleviate any concerns and expedite the referral process. NEAS staff felt this approach helped to develop awareness of YES North East amongst JCP staff, improving partnership working between the two organisations.
- Project staff built links with other referral sources which had been considered during the design phase, including NHS social prescribers and local authority careers services, although these referral routes were not as well developed as the JCP route.
- Employment specialists also considered engaging with schools and colleges, although this was not fully explored. At the time of the interim report, delivery staff felt improvements could be made to the referral system through more effective engagement with schools and colleges. They anticipated this would give them good access to their target group, with a focus on preventing young neurodiverse people becoming NEET and increase referrals. Ultimately this was not developed further. Delivery staff reflected that YES North East not being an accredited course made engagement more difficult. It was also presumed that colleges would prioritise referrals to their own programmes and courses.

Project staff also reported that, over time, more self-referrals started to come via the dedicated project website and word-of-mouth within the community. This was supported by the completion of the website and an online marketing strategy (which was not fully operational when the project launched), as well as improved awareness of the service amongst parents of young people meeting the programme eligibility criteria. These developments were seen as particularly beneficial for reaching young people who were not in contact with JCP - for example, if they were not on Universal Credit.

During the first round of interviews, project staff were unclear whether changes to the referral process would have a significant impact on programme numbers, with concerns that they would not be able to reach overall programme targets across the final two cohorts. However, participant numbers increased substantially across the final two cohorts. This is explored further in Chapter 3.

## Onboarding and registration

Following the initial referral, YES North East provided 'onboarding' activities for potential participants prior to them being accepted onto the programme. These activities are outlined below.

- A phone interview within 48 hours of the initial referral to ensure the offer had been explained and check the individual's suitability for the programme. If an employment specialist was co-located at JCP, the interview sometimes took place face-to-face.
- Attendance at a 'taster day' where participants visited a delivery centre. This included participating in group activities and completing a Do-it-Profiler assessment. The group activities were thought to give staff the opportunity to observe potential participants and understand their needs and suitability for the programme (for example, if they were comfortable with group support and interacting with other people). Potential participants were then invited to have a one-to-one conversation with a staff member. Following this, staff met to share feedback from the observations and one-to-one conversations and discuss participant suitability.

Delivery staff noted that it was sometimes difficult to gauge participant needs within such a short timeframe.

*"So, what you're asking the staff to do is do a 42-point assessment of an individual over a day where they're practising things that they might do on the course and make snap judgments based on that short observation that they have. One, staff aren't trained psychologists, they're not trained in techniques to be able to understand somebody in such a short amount of time."* YES North East delivery staff

While the taster days did not enable staff to fully assess suitability for workshop delivery, they did provide an opportunity for participants to become more familiar with the YES North East tutors and the workshop setting.

*"One of the indications was that almost 100 per cent of people that attended their taster day and has been successful on taster day also attended the workshop."* YES North East delivery staff

- Confirmation of acceptance and registration onto the programme, including assignment to a cohort and group, and being given a start date and delivery centre for workshops. Staff noted that while the Do-it-Profiler was intended to be completed during the taster day, it was often completed afterwards, once participants had been accepted onto the programme.

*"I think just being able to see them face to face, so even if they're not suitable maybe they can decide it a bit more quickly other than say if it was a phone call. It's a bit easier to explain, to have that conversation."* YES North East delivery staff

## Suitability and need

The referral and onboarding processes aimed to ensure that participants were eligible for support and that their needs could be met during programme delivery. Delivery staff reported that most of those referred to the programme did meet the eligibility criteria. Staff were particularly positive about the flexibilities in the eligibility criteria which meant young people could be accepted onto the programme without a formal diagnosis of their neurodiverse status if a need was gauged during the onboarding process. Delivery staff felt this helped to broaden the scope of the programme and include people who may have been missed otherwise.

The use of a 'no wrong door' approach for referrals, meant that employment specialists were able to refer any ineligible potential participants to other services in the local area. This approach was taken to ensure anyone referred would be able to find appropriate support, even if they were not suitable for YES North East.<sup>12</sup>

It was noted that in a few instances the programme may have accepted people who did not completely meet the programme criteria, for example, as some individuals had higher levels of pastoral support needs than the project was designed to accommodate. It was noted that this could add to the overall pressure on project staff.

*"I think the staff have actually signed-off on people that perhaps they shouldn't have, which then, in turn, has had an impact on how effective you can kind of deliver support when you're dealing much more with a one-on-one, kind of, 'This person needs this,' or, 'I need to go out because I need to speak to this other person.' It becomes much more pastoral than kind of progression-led where you're moving somebody towards a target."*  
YES North East delivery staff

## Workshops

YES North East staff were mostly positive about how the workshops were designed and delivered. The workshops were facilitated by YES North East employment specialists with expertise in delivering education and employment-related support to young people.

Elements of the programme highlighted by staff as working particularly well are listed below.

- The content of workshops giving young neurodiverse people the opportunity to progressively develop their skills. The content of the workshops was seen as beneficial as it allowed employment specialists to progressively identify, and build up, participants' skills and knowledge over the 16-week period, from awareness of strengths, understanding of different jobs and sectors, CV and interview skills, worker rights and how to positively disclose a condition in the workplace.
- Additional support being available during workshops to provide 1:1 support if needed to accommodate different learning levels and styles. The support worker role was seen as particularly important to ensuring all participants felt engaged and to allow the sessions to progress at an appropriate pace.

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<sup>12</sup> Data showing number of referrals made to other organisations was not recorded.

- Group work providing the opportunity for participants to develop on their confidence and social interactions. Employment specialists felt participants benefited from meeting with peers and seeing how others managed and made progress in different situations.

*"I think that sometimes the group setting is conducive to moving towards a goal. The fact that they can see the progress of other people, that there is a peer element that is at play in addition to what you would have in a one-to-one setting. So they see colleagues of the same age with similar challenges and the progress that they make. That can have a positive impact on others."* YES North East delivery staff

### Work placements

#### Employer engagement and participant matching

Employer engagement was led by the EEO. It was noted by senior staff that some employers were reluctant to engage with the programme due to concerns related to Covid-19 in the early stages of the programme. As such, the EEO used mostly existing contacts and networks to identify placement opportunities. This was supplemented by LinkedIn searches and direct 'cold' approaches to organisations.

The EEO also led the employer matching process. First, the EEO met participants to understand their interests and identify suitable placement opportunities. This approach was perceived to work well and enabled the EEO to align placements with participant interests. Where this was not possible, the EEO would identify where an individual's wider interests and skills may align with another sector or opportunity and discuss with them whether they would be interested in using one of the work placement opportunities to explore this.

#### Designing and delivering the placement

Once an employer engaged with YES North East, project staff worked closely with them to discuss the programme, conduct risk assessments, introduce potential participants, and consider adjustments to better support participant needs. Autism awareness training was also available through NEAS, which some of the employers took up.

Delivery staff felt these different activities helped employers understand more about the individual's needs and helped to tailor roles for them and make reasonable adjustments. For example, one of the employers offered a remote work placement to help manage potential triggers for a young person with anxiety. Other employers made sure to ask specific questions about participants' needs and preferences in preparation for the work placement.

*"The member of staff was asking all the right kind of questions, about sensory issues, about where they'd be sitting, do they mind that people are walking behind them, so they were really taking the autism awareness training on board and putting it to good use."*  
YES North East delivery staff

### Key success factors

Delivery staff reported that most programme participants had taken part in one or two placements, with individual placements typically lasting around two days.<sup>13</sup> Delivery staff observed that participants who completed work placements benefited from the opportunity to meet employers and gain experience within the workplace. Particular factors seen as contributing to successful work placements are listed below.

- Offering more than one placement to provide different perspectives and opportunities for the individual to consider their options.
- Ensuring placements offered meaningful opportunities, and employers engaged with the programme with an understanding of its purpose, and a commitment to supporting young people to develop their experience within the workplace. In a few instances, YES North East did not take up offers of placements from employers where it was felt they were not able to offer meaningful opportunities.

*"I think it's when the employer is interested in the person and interested in what they're getting out of it. Not just interested in what jobs they can get done by having some extra hands-on board. In this [negative] instance, they showed them how do something that was really straightforward, wouldn't take that much effort to train then left them to get on with it because then they could just leave them getting on with that, without having to participate themselves and they are getting done something that they needed done. I suppose it's real work experience but it's not as meaningful as it could be."* YES North East delivery staff

- Ensuring the skills and information gained during the workshops were aligned with what an individual may experience or require for their placement, as this allowed them to put what they had learned into practice.

*"I think it's a good opportunity for them to put into practice what they've been learning when we're dealing with things like workplace social situations and different kinds of work. They get a few weeks of theory learning and then it's a good chance to have some actual practical, let's put this into practice, type sessions, as well as like I've said beforehand, getting an insight into what they may or may not want to do going forwards in terms of their careers."* YES North East delivery staff

- Involving both the EEO and employment specialists in the vocational matching process, as this helped identify and match participants to appropriate roles based on their interests and needs, improving the quality of work placement matches.

*"The vocational matching really goes between the employer engagement officer and the tutors who have got rapport and understanding with the participants and will look at the opportunities that are registered. So they'll look across a number of opportunities, understand the profile of the individual, their transferable skills and vocation matching*

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<sup>13</sup> MI data on the number of placements and length of time on placement was only collected for cohorts 2 and 3.

*and then they'll have that conversation with the employer engagement officer to match a particular participant."* YES North East delivery staff

- Providing participants with the opportunity to visit the workplace and have an introductory meeting ahead of their placement so that they felt more comfortable.

## Challenges

While placements were seen as providing valuable work experience for those who completed them, there was a general feeling among delivery staff that too few placements were offered overall, with limited numbers of participants completing more than one.

The key challenges associated with securing work placements are outlined below.

- Failing to engage with the number of employers required to be able to offer two work placements to all participants.

*"I think that the placements could have been an absolutely fantastic thing if more people had done them and there were more businesses that signed up. That was a failing on our part, we did not get enough businesses signed up."* YES North East delivery staff

- Difficulties relating to the logistics of organising work placements. Delivery staff reflected that securing work placements took significant time and resource. This included time spent with participants to identify suitable opportunities, and working with employers to ensure placements were beneficial for both parties. Organising autism awareness training for those employers who needed this prior to offering placements also lengthened the process.

*"Starting the programme and then engaging with the participants, but then having the placement officer to come and meet with each individual to see where which sector of work they would be willing to try and trying to align that, is a lengthy process. The intention was to start placements within four weeks of the participants starting the programme and then to try and offer a second placement a little later on. That was always a challenge. Really, ideally you would need a placement officer for each of the sites, for each group, as opposed to 1/2 for the whole programme."* YES North East delivery staff

- While work placements were intended to last between two and five days, NEAS staff reported that the majority only lasted two days. NEAS staff later reflected that communicating to employers that two days was the minimum may have inadvertently made this the standard.

Even with the option of shorter work placements, some workplaces found it harder to offer meaningful experiences. Delivery staff noted that this was the case particularly for job roles which require previous training. In these instances, NEAS staff found it more difficult to arrange meaningful placement opportunities.

*"So for example, a placement within catering and working in a kitchen, two days doesn't particularly work from their point of view because ideally they want to train that person up to enable them to work in a kitchen"* YES North East delivery staff

- Participants turning down placements due to low confidence and mental health challenges.

*"We've had at least two [participants who] have been offered at least three placements and they've rejected all of them. And that's a mental health and confidence thing from a personal point of view, as opposed to the actual placement itself."* YES North East delivery staff

### Additional support

As noted previously, opportunities for additional support were built into the programme for participants where needed. The availability of a support worker to provide one-to-one support to accommodate different learning needs, travel training, and funding for travel and lunch were available for all participants if needed, although delivery staff did not discuss how frequently people engaged with these. While Better-Off-In-Work calculations were intended to be part of the additional support on offer, it is not clear how frequently these were used. Referrals to wider opportunities were also identified as a form of additional support. For example, one employment specialist had signposted participants to volunteering opportunities to aid skills development, while another participant was given information about Diversity North East<sup>14</sup>, a programme offering one-to-one support for people who were neurodiverse.

Delivery staff were positive about the additional support opportunities on offer as it helped to create a more personalised offer for participants and remove some of the barriers they faced to education and employment.

*"If they're worried about how they're going to get there, obviously we cover travel costs. If they're worried about buses, or what have you, I'll do travel training with them to make sure they know where they're going."* YES North East delivery staff

It was, however, noted by employment specialists that it was important that not too many workshop participants required one-to-one support in sessions, as it could indicate that they had higher support needs than the programme was designed to accommodate, and could affect the overall group experience.

### Sustained contact

Sustained contact was intended to last for 13 weeks following the workshops, with participants contacted weekly or fortnightly via a phone call by an employment specialist. Across cohorts one to three, the extent to which employment specialists were providing sustained contact varied, with no clear process in place. This led to inconsistencies with how sustained contact was provided.

Where sustained contact did take place, project staff felt the approach worked well as it allowed them to provide ongoing support to the individual in a personalised way. It was also noted that the EEO would flag vacancies to colleagues if young people were job ready. However, this was mostly ad-hoc, and many participants were instead looking for education

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.ne-as.org.uk/diversity-ne>

opportunities to address any knowledge or qualification gaps for their preferred future employment.

*"Not all the participants are looking for that stage when they get to the end of the course. They may be looking to go back into education or training or what have you, it's the ones that are job ready, the employment specialists do make me aware of them so I will keep a record of this along with an idea of what they're looking for so I can jump in as and when required."* YES North East delivery staff

For cohorts four and five, drop-in sessions were introduced, giving participants the option to attend a delivery centre for face-to-face support. Delivery staff reported that cohort four participants attended these sessions in larger numbers than cohort five. It was suggested that not being able to cover expenses to attend drop-in sessions may have been a barrier for some participants, whilst others may have already taken up employment by this point in the programme. Delivery staff emphasised that the sustained contact phase naturally changed depending on the cohort, the needs of individuals, and their preferred means of communication.

Delivery staff reflected that sustained contact was mostly used by participants as an opportunity to socialise with their peers, though some sought out further support and guidance with job seeking activities.

*"They broadly fall into two camps, those that [were looking for] social connection and that's what they were coming to achieve [...] To feel like they found their tribe, they found people they can connect and relate to. Others it was about looking for a job and coming into a supportive environment where they could get advice and guidance and support around, you know, applying to or even identifying suitable jobs to apply for."* YES North East delivery staff

Earlier in the evaluation, a few delivery staff highlighted that larger cohorts of participants receiving sustained contact over time may create resourcing challenges for employment specialists. However, NEAS staff did not report any capacity issues in relation to the sustained contact phase.

### 3. Programme participants

This chapter explores the characteristics and prior experiences of participants who engaged with the YES North East programme. The chapter draws on analysis of Management Information (MI) data and depth interviews with participants.

The MI data provides information on the number of programme participants and their characteristics and circumstances at the point of joining the programme. For the purpose of this chapter, a programme participant is someone who enrolled on the programme. The MI covers participants across all five cohorts. MI data on characteristics was available for 138 participants that participated in the programme, although there were some gaps in the MI at the time of reporting.

Depth interviews were conducted with 23 participants across all five cohorts once they had completed the programme. Interviews with cohort one participants were held over summer 2022; interviews with cohort two and three were held in winter 2022; interviews with cohort four were held in summer 2023; and cohort five were interviewed in winter 2023. A further four participants contributed to the evaluation by providing written answers to key questions.

Participant quotes included in this section, and across the report, are taken from interview transcripts. To reflect differences in the way neurodiversity affects men and women and the potential for these differences to shape experiences of the programme, throughout this report participant quotes have been labelled with the gender of the respondent. Quote labels also include the cohort number to make it easier to compare the experiences of different groups.

Throughout this chapter, links are drawn to the Theory of Change (see Appendix), where findings relate to key elements of the Rationale for the programme.

#### Registrations

A total of 140 participants started on YES North East over the lifetime of the programme, although the MI only provided details on 138 participants.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Data on the number and characteristics of participants who started the YES North East programme but left part way through was not available.

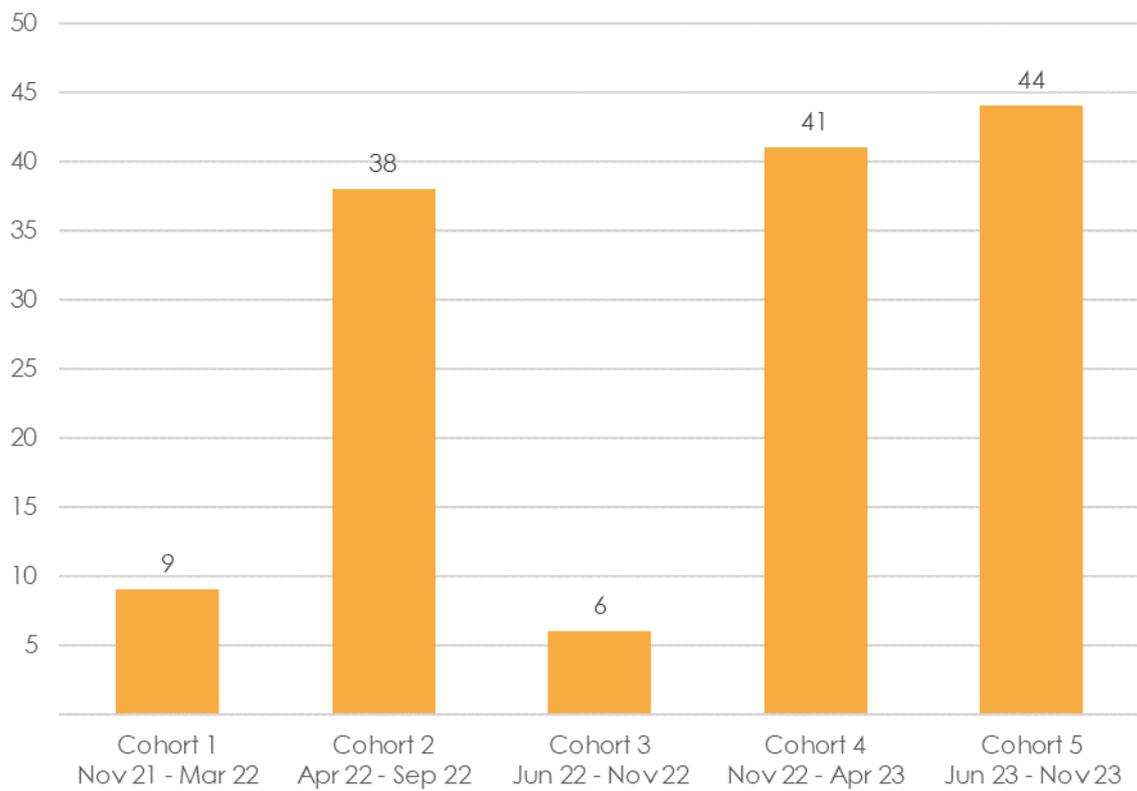
Figure 1

Figure 1 shows that cohorts one and three were far smaller than cohorts two, four and five.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> During the delivery period, referrals were lower than anticipated. This meant the programme experienced significant problems meeting recruitment targets. Cohort one had substantially lower registrations, resulting in just nine participants. Cohort three was operated as a smaller follow-on group to aid recruitment of participants shortly after cohort two. As a result, it was not expected to reach similar numbers to the other cohorts.

Figure 1: Programme participants registered per cohort (all cohorts)



Source: NEAS management information. Base: 138.

## Participant characteristics and circumstances

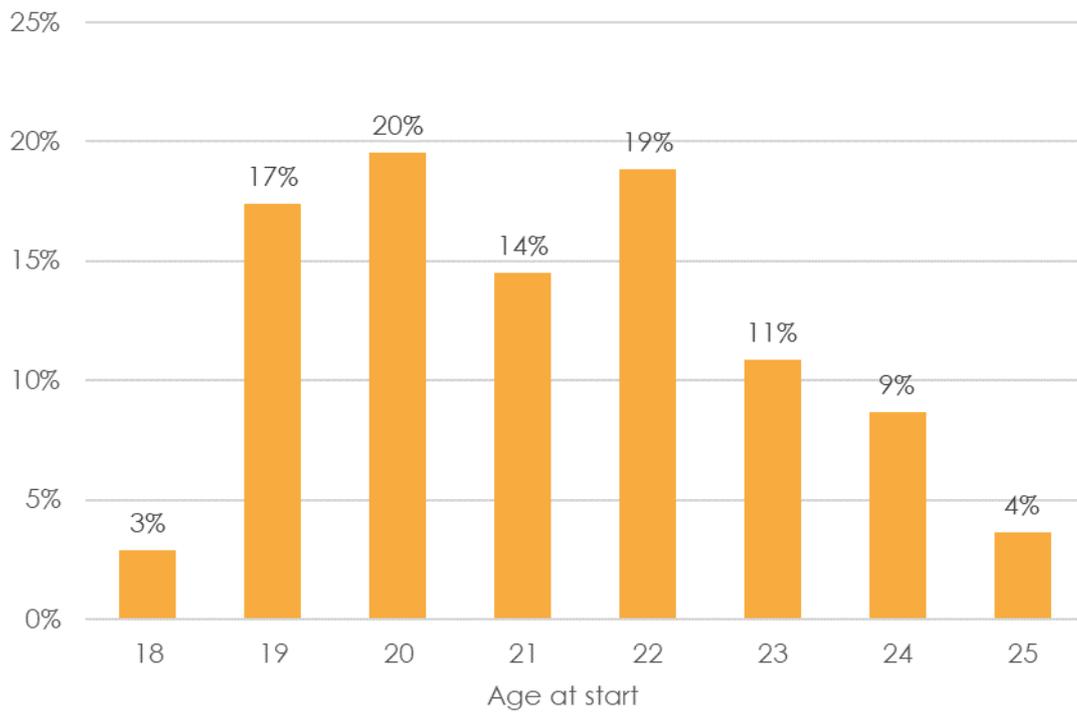
### Age

The age of participants ranged from 18 to 25 years old (

Figure 2). Most participants (70%) were aged between 19 and 22 years old.

Four-fifths of participants were older than the initial age criteria. Widening the age group eligible for the programme was necessary to increase the number of registrations, especially given the low number of 18-year-olds who engaged with the programme. Overall, nearly three quarters of participants were still living with their parents.

Figure 2: Participants by age (all cohorts)



Source: NEAS Management Information. Base: 133.

### Gender identity

Of the 138 participants who registered for the programme and were included in the MI, 72% identified as male and 24% identified as female (

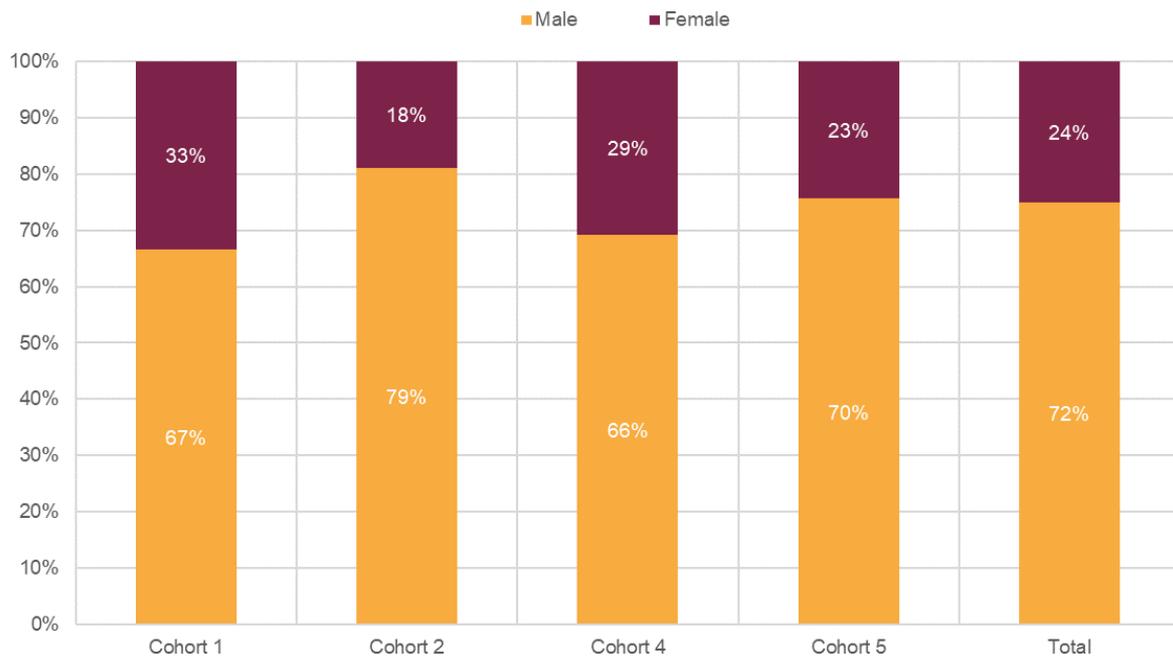
Figure 3). The overrepresentation of males was likely to be due to the disparity in recognition and diagnosis of autism and other types of neurodiversity between men and women<sup>17</sup>

This suggests that, despite not requiring a diagnosis of a neurodiverse condition, the programme could potentially have done more to reach a broader range of participants suitable for the programme.

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<sup>17</sup> To reflect differences in the way neurodiversity affects men and women and the potential for these differences to shape experiences of the programme, throughout this report participant quotes have been labelled with the gender of the respondent.

Figure 3: Participants by gender identity (all cohorts)



Source: NEAS Management Information. Base: 132. Cohort 3 is not shown due to small sample size. Some participants identified as non-binary and transgender but are not shown due to small numbers.<sup>1819</sup>

## Health

### Learning difficulties and neurodiversity

Complete MI on learning difficulties was available for 117 participants. As would be expected given the focus of the programme,

<sup>18</sup> Where MI data refers to groups of fewer than ten participants, in some cases information has been omitted to protect anonymity.

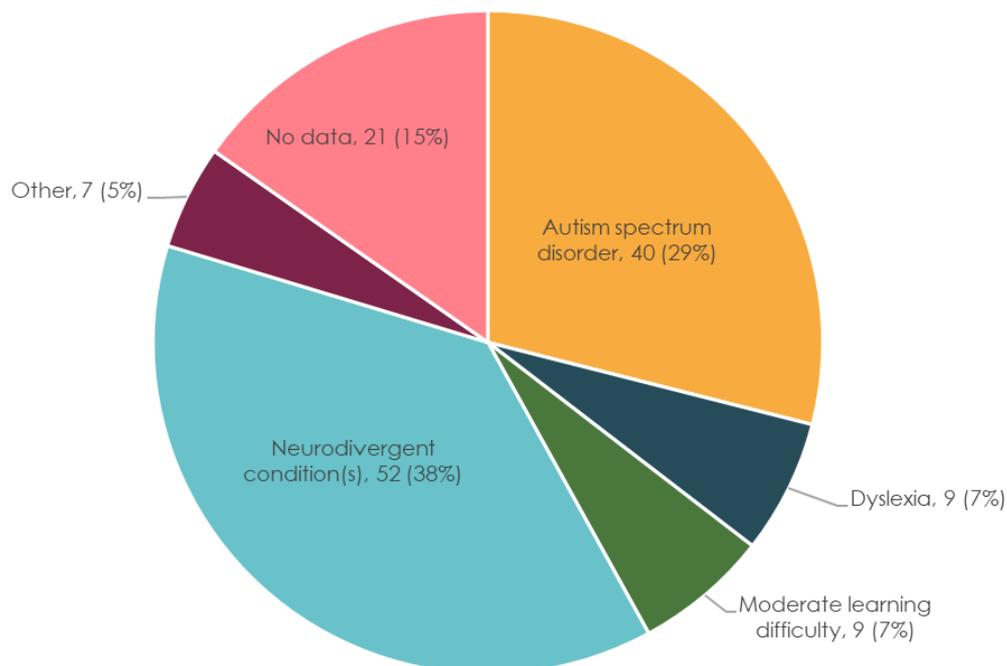
<sup>19</sup> All participants who opted into research activities, and who completed the post-survey, were invited to interview. No transgender or non-binary participants took part in interviews, so their experiences of the programme are not captured in interview findings or quotes.

Figure 4 shows most participants disclosed a learning difficulty or type of neurodiversity upon joining the programme. While autism was the most common type of neurodiversity reported, a variety of different types of neurodiversity were recorded amongst programme participants, including dyslexia.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Management information relating to learning difficulties grouped wider neurodiverse conditions within broad groups 'Neurodivergent condition(s)' and 'Other'. As a result, it is not possible to identify the specific conditions disclosed.

Figure 4: Participants by learning difficulties disclosed on registration (all cohorts)



Source: NEAS Management Information. Base: 117.

The majority of participants interviewed identified as having one or more neurodiverse conditions including autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia and ADHD. Some participants shared brief details of their experience of different types of neurodiversity, as set out in the following sections, although others were not willing to share their experiences. Participants often linked their experience of neurodiversity to challenges in securing and sustaining employment, which supports some key elements of the Rationale for the programme set out in the Theory of Change (see Appendix).

### Autism

The most commonly reported type of neurodiversity amongst participants interviewed was autism. This mirrors programme MI. Some participants explained that their experience of autism could effect their ability to communicate and socialise with others confidently. Examples given included not feeling able to speak up and ask questions in a group and not enjoying meeting new people. Some participants experienced hypersensitivity which they managed by listening to music or wearing ear buds. Others mentioned the need to keep to a routine and said that they struggled with processing information.

*‘I am socially awkward and autistic and struggle to quickly adapt to new situations.’*

Participant, female, cohort 4

*‘Socialising is very hard for me in general, it’s like, I sometimes find it very hard to talk on the phone or in person.’* Participant, female, cohort 2

A couple of participants linked their experience of autism to their difficulties with finding employment. They mentioned struggling to perform well in job interviews, having to limit employment opportunities to those within reasonable travelling distance, and finding it challenging to communicate appropriately in work situations.

*'How I describe it is everyone has got a script they read from, like every member of the public has got a script to read from and I haven't got one and I'm just trying to fit in. So even in employment situations, or it can be just generally in public it's really awkward.'*

Participant, male, cohort 4

A small number of participants interviewed explained that they believed they had autism but had not been officially diagnosed.

### Dyslexia

Some participants interviewed reported having dyslexia, and one also had dyscalculia. Participants explained that this affected their literacy and numeracy capabilities.

*'When it comes to reading emails and things like that, I can read stuff, but I don't understand it, I can read a full paragraph, but there's something about it. I feel like my mindset is more slower when it comes to reading or writing... that's where dyscalculia comes in, because I struggle quite a lot with money, counting and numbers, it's like place value and things like that.'* Participant, female, cohort 4

### Dyspraxia

A number of participants reported having dyspraxia. Where participants shared information on their experiences, they explained that it affected their ability to communicate with others, as well as their balance and coordination.

### ADHD

Some participants shared that they had ADHD. All of these participants also reported having one or more of the neurodiverse conditions mentioned above. Participants did not provide clear insight into how ADHD affected their daily life, but difficulties staying motivated when looking for work were mentioned.

### Disability and health conditions

Of the 138 participants in the MI, 68 or 49% indicated that they had a disability or health condition and five per cent said that they had multiple disabilities. The types of health problems mentioned by participants in interviews are described in the following sections.

#### Mental health difficulties

Most participants interviewed reported having one or more mental health difficulties including depression and anxiety.

#### Depression

Many participants explained that they had depression which could affect their daily lives in a range of ways. One participant explained that this resulted in a lack of self-belief:

*'I can't seem to get trust in myself that I can do stuff.'* Participant, male, cohort 2

The same participant explained that it also affected his ability to leave the house:

*'My depression's been quite bad the past few months. I've found myself confining myself to my bedroom.'* Participant, male, cohort 2

### Anxiety

Several of the participants interviewed shared their experiences of having anxiety. Some of the ways in which this affects their daily lives include not feeling able to leave the house alone, not feeling confident or at ease in social situations, and feeling too worried to put in job applications or attend interviews.

### Physical health conditions

One participant reported challenges with their physical health which made it difficult for them to carry out certain physical activities (for example, lifting heavy objects).

### Coexistence of neurodiversity and mental health difficulties

Most of the participants interviewed reported having a combination of different types of neurodiversity and mental health difficulties. Some explained that these conditions were often interrelated and, in some cases, neurodiversity exacerbated poor mental health for participants. For example, one participant explained that their neurodivergence could sometimes have a negative impact on their mental health. They shared that their dyspraxia could make them feel unmotivated to partake in their usual day-to-day activities at times.

Another shared that their autism and ADHD causes sensory overloads which they managed by self-medicating with alcohol because prescription medication caused panic attacks. In the past, this had exacerbated poor mental health, with episodes of depression. A final participant felt that their anxiety – which had been diagnosed as severe – resulted from their autism, as they found it difficult to communicate and read people, and found loud, crowded environments stressful.

These findings align with the Rationale of the Theory of Change that young neurodiverse people experience additional needs and barriers to meaningful employment and education.

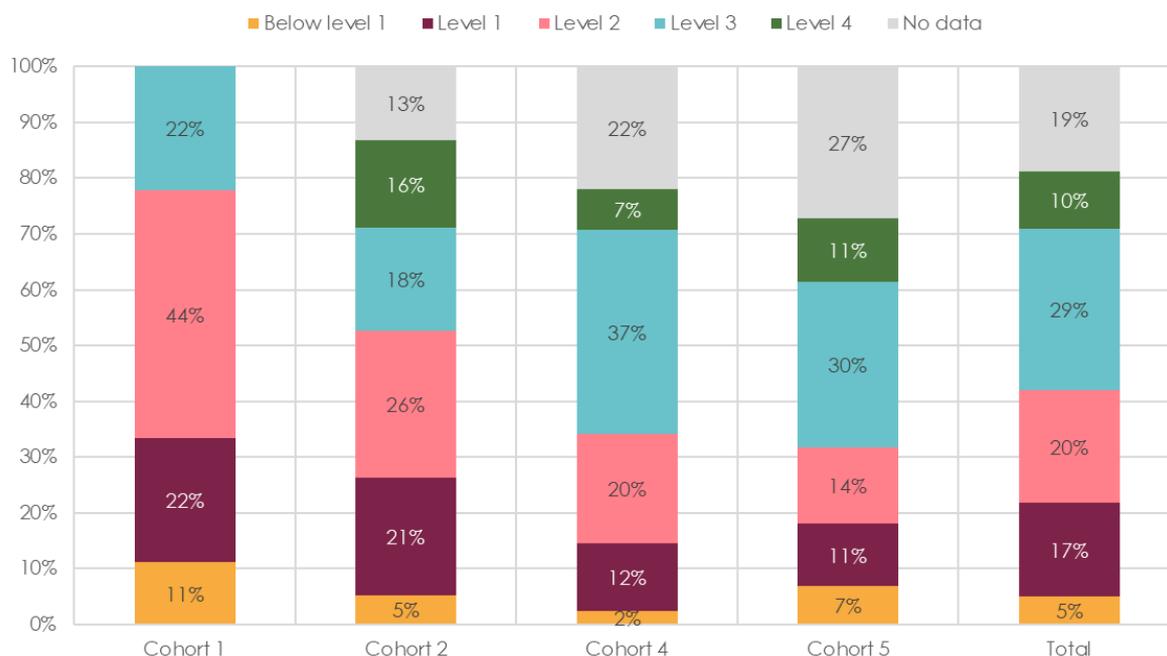
### Ethnicity

Information on ethnicity was available for 117 participants. Almost all participants were white with English as their mother tongue.

### Education and skills

There were 112 participants who completed MI data on their highest educational qualification. Figure 5 shows that 82 participants (59%) had achieved a qualification at Level 2 or higher (i.e. higher pass grades at GCSE or equivalent) as a minimum. Just over a quarter (30 participants or 27%) of participants had not achieved a qualification higher than Level 1 (i.e. they had not achieved pass grades at GCSE or equivalent) indicating low levels of qualification for a substantial minority of programme participants.

Figure 5: Participants by highest qualification



Source: NEAS Management Information. Base: 106. Data for cohort 3 is not shown due to small numbers.

### Experience of compulsory education

Of the 138 participants in the MI, 59 or 43% had received free school meals. Despite over half of participants having existing qualifications that indicated some success at school, most participants interviewed had a negative experience of compulsory education.

Participants’ negative experiences of compulsory education were commonly related to a perceived lack of support and understanding of their neurodivergence or mental health needs by teachers. For example, one participant who has dyspraxia had additional support withdrawn due to being deemed ‘too smart’ by their school. Another participant with dyslexia felt he was not provided with appropriate support due to a mislabelling of his needs:

*‘I had challenges all the way through school, even when I was a kid, and when my mum pulled up with the school about it they just said I was lazy and I would catch up. But I never did.’* Participant, male, cohort 2

Another felt misunderstood due to a lack of support during his school years. This led him to think of school as a scary place:

*‘I did not enjoy school. It was boring and scary at times I felt misunderstood.’* Participant, male, cohort 2

Conversely, one participant in the later cohorts said he struggled with the high level of one-to-one support he received at school, as it meant he was never without their learning assistant:

*'I liked going to college and high school and stuff, but I didn't like it because I was never by myself, I always had support with me. And that was part of my care plan and I didn't enjoy that because I like being by myself.'* Participant, male, cohort 4

Two participants reported being bullied for 'being different'. One participant was homeschooled in later years due to their severe anxiety and struggles at school. Another explained that her school did not understand what autism was which led her to feel that she was a distraction to other learners:

*'I have sensory needs. And I have a lot of fidgeting problems, so I wouldn't stop. So, like, even in school it would be a bit of a distraction to other students, the fidget. They didn't really understand about what my autism really was'* Participant, female, cohort 2

Some participants in the later cohorts said they enjoyed school as it gave them a routine, chances to socialise and opportunities to learn about different jobs roles. However, some mentioned the negative impact of the pandemic on their education and struggling with remote learning during lockdown.

### Experience of post-16 compulsory education

Most participants interviewed had gone onto post-16 education which they mainly described as "college". Courses that participants engaged in included media production, graphic design, cookery, carpentry, joinery, mechanics, music, hair and beauty, construction, IT and health and social care. Some participants had completed an apprenticeship.

Overall, participants explained they had a more positive experience of post-16 education due to more support and understanding from tutors, as well as enjoying the courses they had chosen. Participants attributed their enjoyment of these courses to their practical nature, in contrast to their experience of being 'stuck in a classroom' at school. Some who had failed GCSE English and/or maths at school went on to successfully complete Level 1 and 2 at college.

However, some participants expressed dissatisfaction with their post-16 learning experiences. Some said that the communication from their tutors was unclear, with last minute notifications that left them little time to adapt their plans. One participant explained how they struggled to fit in with the other students on their course:

*'It was hard fitting in because I'm a really antisocial person and I couldn't really tell if I'd be able to fit in with others. There were a few rough patches and I did struggle throughout the three years, but overall I did, you know, I did create some memories there.'*

Participant, female, cohort 4

Some participants had not completed their post-16 courses. For one, this was due to being on medication that caused a worsening in their mental health and the onset of panic attacks. Another was not able to finish their course as they were admitted to hospital due to poor mental health. A third participant from later cohorts dropped out of college due to moving house and leaving local authority care.

### Experience of university and degree level education

Five participants had studied towards a degree, and reported varying levels of success with their studies. When reflecting on what they liked about their experience of degree level education, participants reported enjoying the creative and practical elements of courses. However, one participant recalled struggling in their final year as this coincided with the start of the pandemic and introduction of online learning. Another had started to study an undergraduate degree at university but left after their first year as the course had too much theory.

### Experience of prior employment

#### Experience of looking for work at time of joining YES North East

All participants were NEET at the time of joining the YES North East programme and most were looking for paid employment. Those who were actively looking for work described applying online, asking friends and family, and looking in newspapers. However, even those looking for work said they only submitted applications from time to time. Some participants said this was due to a lack of skills in applying for jobs; they were interested in working in a range of sectors but did not know how to put in an application. Other participants explained that, prior to YES North East, despite actively job searching and applying for jobs, they were not receiving a response to their applications.

*'No one was responding to me when I was applying for them. I wasn't getting any replies back.'* Participant, male, cohort 2

Many of those who were not actively looking for work shared that they had other priorities at that time. For example, one participant was not looking for jobs as he was focused on improving his mental health:

*'I wasn't actively looking for jobs because I was trying to fix my mental health with the Jobcentre.'* Participant, male, cohort 2

Many explained that, at the time of referral to the programme they were receiving support from JCP. Some explained that their JCP Work Coach provided tailored support that met their needs. For example, they said that they understood their health conditions and provided adjustments. Examples include providing daily check-ins, making appointments in private rooms and not “pushing” them into activities before they were ready:

*'She [my Work Coach at JCP] understands, like, as it were, my ADHD and also, my depression and stuff. My old work coach used to, kind of, push me a little bit and be a little bit too full on, whereas she understands.'* Participant, male, cohort 2

However, others felt that their Work Coach pushed them to get any kind of job, without considering their aspirations or interests. One participant said that they found the idea of being sanctioned by their Work Coach very stressful. Another participant who had a degree described how their Work Coach asked them to lower their aspirations in relation to employment.

*'It was like, 'Oh, I'm looking for software development or data analysis opportunities,' because I did those two things at university. They were like, 'Oh, we need you to put down*

*something more basic,' and that was data entry. It's like they don't, sort of, help me find opportunities for graduate-, they don't help me find opportunities other than referring me to other organisations.'* Participant, male, cohort 4

In one case, the participant had stopped their job search as they were unable to find a role that matched their aspirations. Barriers to employment are discussed in more detail in the next section.

### Previous experiences of employment

The MI shows that 70 (50%) participants had no previous employment experience, 56 (40%) did have previous employment experience and 14 (10%) did not answer.

Of those with previous employment experience, 41 (75%) were men and the average age was 22 years old. Nearly two-thirds (34 participants or 64%) had a qualification at Level 2 or above, and 30 (22%) reported that their highest previous qualification was below Level 2.

Participants interviewed reported a mixed experience of previous employment. Some had one or more paid jobs prior to joining YES North East. This included roles in retail, hospitality, and factories. Others had no experience of paid employment, although some had voluntary roles in the past.

Of those who had been in work, dropping in and out of employment was common. For some this was reported to be due to being in insecure work and being unfairly treated by employers. For example, one participant had worked in a corner shop for a year but reported often not getting paid correctly and was let go while isolating with Covid. Another participant explained how working for an agency on short-term contracts led to frequent changes in their employment status. Others reported a lack of suitable support and adjustments made in the workplace which hindered their capability to maintain employment.

*'I think I looked at everything, but I always ended up in the kitchen. I feel like those jobs are always available, only because they're so rubbish. But yes, just kitchen ones, because I knew I could probably always get a job there, even if it was short term.'* Participant, male, cohort 5

Some participants had previously had more regular work but with very few hours per week. One participant in a later cohort had a six-hour a week job; one did dog walking and another was a freelance referee. Two participants had previously secured fixed-term roles as part of the Kickstarter scheme, but both were let go after they completed the initial contract. One participant had done an unpaid work placement supporting adults with disabilities which turned into a traineeship, but this did not lead to paid employment.

Many of the participants had done some volunteering, even if they had never had paid employment. Participants described working for foodbanks and charity shops, volunteering at a local community centre, and doing voluntary placements at IT and care companies.

Having friendly and supportive colleagues, enjoying what they did and having a role that suited their needs were key factors for those few participants who had positive experiences of employment and volunteering. For example, one participant who liked interacting with

new people had been in a voluntary customer-facing role that they had really enjoyed. Another explained that they had enjoyed working in the stock room of a shop as it meant they did not have to interact with customers. Similarly, one participant who was on the Kickstarter scheme explained that they enjoyed the work as it was outside with few people:

*'The only job I've actually been able to stick to that I enjoyed was Groundworks North East, but that was a six month fixed contract. And I was outside. I was only in a small group just me, two other people and the supervisor, and it was outdoors in country parks, so. Just fairly empty environment.'* Participant, male, cohort 4

## Perceived barriers to employment

This section focuses on the barriers participants reported they faced moving into, and sustaining, work prior to engaging with YES North East. The majority are systemic barriers that impact on participants' employment-related opportunities, and align with the Rationale for the programme as set out in the Theory of Change (see Appendix). They are:

- the job search and application process
- a lack of support
- a lack of reasonable adjustments in the workplace
- the type of roles and requirements within roles
- the location and travel
- employer understanding and attitudes.

Overall, participants attributed their experiences to their own health conditions and poor mental health rather than these systemic barriers. For instance, participants gave examples of their health acting as a barrier to employment, including feeling overwhelmed with certain types of roles and lacking motivation and commitment to finding and maintaining work due to their mental health.

## Job search and the application process

For some participants, taking the steps to look for work and engage in the job search process was a challenge. Participants reported this to be particularly difficult when they were experiencing poor mental health. Finding time to focus on job search activity whilst also trying to prioritise their health impacted on their ability to look for work:

*'[My] depression and anxiety was really bad, and that was the thing that was stopping me mainly from getting to work, because I was just really trying to focus on getting better. It was like climbing a really big mountain, I just couldn't find that first step.'* Participant, male, cohort 3

Some participants commented that without support they felt overwhelmed by the job search process. For example, one participant explained that their anxiety could lead them to doubt themselves which could make independent job search difficult:

*‘With anxiety it makes me unsure of myself. When you’re searching for a job on your own, it’s like, ‘What do I search for?’ Because I don’t know what to do. So that was my main barrier’* Participant, male, cohort 3

A number of participants described their lack of confidence and skills in writing job applications as a barrier to finding work. For example, one explained that they found the process of writing a CV stressful as they struggled to remember everything they had done. These participants would have liked more help with this prior to joining YES North East.

### Types of roles and requirements

In some cases, the type of role, or requirements within a role, was a barrier to moving into, or staying in, work. For example, one participant who had dyspraxia that affected his communication skills was unable to progress into work following an apprenticeship due to the customer-facing nature of the role:

*‘I completed the apprenticeship, got the qualification, but didn’t get the job because I couldn’t answer the telephone.’* Participant, male, cohort 2

Another participant with depression and anxiety explained how being in the workplace often triggered panic attacks that stopped him from working.

*‘I had a big job opportunity and it triggered a massive panic attack but that wasn’t the first time it’s happened. It’s happened everywhere I’ve worked. I get overwhelmed and then I find myself slipping away to the toilets, sitting in the toilet and just sobbing.’*  
Participant, male, cohort 2

In both cases, these experiences had in turn negatively impacted on participants’ motivation and self-esteem which further hindered future job searches. One participant described their difficulties searching for jobs online, as they found that entry-level or internship positions were often incorrectly listed.

### Lack of reasonable adjustments in the workplace and lack of employer support

Others reported a lack of reasonable adjustments or support from employers as a barrier to employment. For example, one participant who had successfully completed an apprenticeship was not able to move into a paid position with the employer as they struggled with answering the telephone and this was deemed to be a necessary part of the role.

### Location and travel

Some participants noted that one of their main barriers to employment was location and travel. For some, the barrier was not having access to public transport that would get them to, and from, the job. For example, one participant who relied on public transport was unable to find a job that was feasible to travel to from their home.

*'Some of the jobs I was seeing tended to take us further than I was hoping to. I can get to Newcastle perfectly fine, but some of the locations just weren't practical.'* Participant, male, cohort 2

For others, they were unable to find work in a location that they felt comfortable travelling to independently. For example, one participant with autism reported not enjoying travelling alone to unfamiliar places:

*'I tried searching once for my own but they were mainly out of where I would feel comfortable travelling to by myself.'* Participant, male, cohort 2

For some, their anxiety and challenges around travelling prevented them from even attending interviews.

*'There was one disadvantage, as much as I love to search for jobs and things like that, I did have opportunities that came my way, I did actually have a few interviews but unfortunately I couldn't attend due to travelling reasons.'* Participant, female, cohort 4

## Employer understanding and prejudice

Some participants felt their main barrier to work was poor understanding of their health conditions and neurodiversity by employers. Some participants felt employers had negative attitudes towards them because of their neurodiversity. For example, one participant with autism felt he had not been able to get a job due to repeated negative attitudes from employers.

*'A lot of employers, when you say that you've got autism they think, 'Oh, here you are, he's a special case, he won't be able to do whatever,' and they look down on you, almost like you're the bottom of the pile kind of thing.'* Participant, male, cohort 2

Numerous participants in later cohorts felt that their neurodiversity meant they may struggle in the workplace, for example because they found it difficult to concentrate in busy environments, found it hard to adapt quickly to different situations, or felt socially awkward. These participants felt that this would put them at a disadvantage when competing with others for jobs.

*"I feel like employers don't want to employ a person that can't remember things, they're very forgetful and it's hard to remember to keep to a routine."* Participant, female, cohort 4

One participant reflected that being on YES North East had made them understand some of the barriers they had faced around employment prior to joining the programme, due to employers' lack of understanding or offer of reasonable adjustments and support.

*'So I'd say I found it hard to hold down jobs before YES NE, because I never disclosed my differences, I suppose. So it was both on part on the employers', like they couldn't help me because I didn't ask to be helped, sort of thing. And I didn't know why I was struggling, being overwhelmed, or getting really stressed out, [with] what seemed to be small things. But YES North East, I think, gave me a clear understanding of potential stress factors, why it's important to tell them, what can be done about it, what's legal...'* Participant, male, cohort 5

## 4. Participant experiences of Youth Employment Service North East

This chapter explores participant experiences of the YES North East programme. The chapter draws on analysis of MI data and depth interviews with participants. The MI data provides information on participant engagement with certain elements of the model. This chapter focuses on those who enrolled on the programme.

Depth interviews were conducted with 23 participants across different cohorts once they had completed the programme. A further four participants engaged with the evaluation by providing written answers to key questions. All participants who had opted into research activities, and who completed the post-survey, were invited to take part in an interview following completion of the programme. Participant quotes included in this section, and across the report, are taken from interview transcripts.

### Referrals and registrations

The referral of young people to YES North East is a key Input in the Theory of Change (see Appendix). This section explores participants' experience of this process, along with how they found the first three Activities described in the Theory of Change – the initial engagement by phone, taster day and needs assessment - which constituted the engagement and onboarding process for the programme.

#### Referrals and signposting routes

All of the participants interviewed were referred or signposted to the programme by external sources.

Jobcentre Plus. Most participants interviewed were already attending JCP prior to joining YES North East and were referred to the programme by their Work Coach.

Referrals from other support services. Some participants had been referred by other support services, for example, supported accommodation and the Prince's Trust.

Self-referrals and word of mouth. Other pathways to the service included signposting via word of mouth from friends and family.

While one participant had engaged with NEAS before, having attended one-to-one sessions at Employment Futures, there was no evidence of NEAS recruiting participants from their existing contacts.

Information on referral and signposting source was not available in the programme MI.

#### Experience of referral and signposting

##### Information provided about the programme

Participants reported that the information provided at referral stage was a key driver in encouraging their engagement with the programme. Most participants were given

information about the YES North East programme and the role it could play in supporting them to move closer to work. This included being told the programme had been specifically designed for young people with neurodiverse conditions. This did not vary according to referral route.

Participants explained that information that tapped into their needs and aspirations was the most effective engagement hook. Two participants from the later cohorts spoke about meeting an employment specialist from NEAS at JCP, as part of their referral from their Work Coach. These participants seemed to appreciate the chance to meet someone who would be working on the programme, as they were able to talk through their own needs and the support they would receive:

*‘My work coach told me, “There’s someone that’s going to come in and speak to you about YES North East.” Then following on from there, we started having discussions and then did a trial run in how they’d help me.’* Participant, female, cohort 4

### Meeting employment-related skills or knowledge need

Some participants were attracted by the opportunity to access support which would help address specific skills or knowledge gaps that would allow them to find, and move into, employment. This included conducting a job search, writing a CV, interview practise or understanding career options. One said he joined in the hope that YES North East had links with employers in the sector in which he wished to work, namely the creative arts.

*‘It’s something I jumped on because I can write a CV, but my interview skills were obviously not the best. So, that was the portion that helped me a lot.’* Participant, male, cohort 2

*‘They just said, ‘We can help you.’ If you’re unsure what kind of career you want to go down, they can help you find different careers. Because that’s what interested me, essentially I didn’t know what options I had.’* Participant, male, cohort 3

One participant described wanting to overcome their fear of employment and explore whether they could have a “normal job”. Another said she wanted to join the programme to gain work experience, which she felt would improve her chances of finding employment.

*‘Because there was also education as well, and it was work experience, so I was like, “That could be something that I could look into, and maybe I could potentially get a job or there could be employment or something.”’* Participant, female, cohort 4

### Targeted support offer for neurodiverse young people

Others reported that the offer of targeted support for neurodiverse young people, as opposed to a generic employment support offer, was the key driver for engagement with the programme.

*‘Because she said that it was specifically for people with autism...other people that were the same as me, who understood what it was like’* Participant, male, cohort 2

Some noted that the opportunity to access a service attended by people with similar circumstances was a particular pull.

*'I thought it could be useful...I could meet people who were like me and in a similar situation as well.'* Participant, female, cohort 2

*'I'm not great with other people but it was nice to actually be around some autistic people, kind of, like me.'* Participant, male, cohort 4

One participant highlighted the importance of being explicitly offered specialised support, as his mental health conditions can often make it difficult to seek support.

*'When you have anxiety and depression, even asking for the support can be so difficult. That's why when it's offered, I'm always like, 'Yes, I'll take it.' I did want help, but asking for help was always a barrier for me.'* Participant, male, cohort 3

### Providing a routine

For some, the programme was attractive as it offered a routine and a sense of purpose. This was specific to participants who felt they lacked direction and motivation due to either being out of work for a long period of time or related to their experience of mental health conditions.

*'I just needed to, you know, do something for myself, rather than staying inside.'* Participant, female, cohort 2

*'It gave us something to do. I was just, sort of, stuck in a rut and I was happy to do anything at that point.'* Participant, male, cohort 2

One participant explained that these feelings had been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, leaving them feeling more isolated. They were grateful that the YES North East programme provided an opportunity to get out and about.

### Told to attend by Jobcentre Plus or parents

A small number of participants – particularly in the later cohorts – said that they felt they had little choice but to join YES North East because they were told to attend by their Work Coach or were signed up by their parents. Two participants described their Work Coach pushing them to attend; one said he would be sanctioned if he declined the programme:

*'Nothing really drew me to it, it was the fact of, if you don't go, we're going to take your money away... it's hard on Universal Credit and when someone says, 'Look, if you don't go to this we're going to look into taking your money away,' it's like, 'Well, I suppose I'm going to have to aren't I?'* Participant, male, cohort 4

A further two participants said they were signed up to the course by their parents but, although they were not involved in the original decision to register, they were happy to attend to boost their chances of finding work.

### Registration process

Overall, participants reported that the registration process was straightforward. None of the participants had a negative experience of registration or provided suggestions for

improvement. Most participants could not remember the exact steps that were taken during registration and were unable to provide any detail on the process.

### Facilitators during registration

Participants identified two key factors that made their registration process smoother. They were:

#### Supportive employment specialist at registration

Participants did not feel confident communicating with new people. As a result, some felt nervous initially about the prospect of attending a registration process at a new place and with new people. Some noted the key role the employment specialist played in overcoming these fears and putting them at ease by being friendly and supportive:

*'She read it out to me, and she explains it really well. It might be irrelevant but like, I really liked the way she talked, like, her tone was very nice and comforting. I didn't feel pressured.'* Participant, female, cohort 2

Some attributed the smooth registration process to being supported by the employment specialist to fill out paperwork and being provided with clear and relevant information about the programme.

### Taster day

Four participants mentioned the taster day. A couple of others were asked but could not remember attending the day; one said that they missed it and emailed YES North East to register afterwards.

One participant commented that attending was a big step for them, but they were determined to join the course. Another described completing some paperwork and doing an activity, but had no strong views about how useful it was. A third participant felt that the taster day provided a useful stepping stone into the support as she could try it out without having to commit:

*'And she said, like, a taster day will give me a little insight. If it's not for me, it's fine. So it's just for one day, so I gave it one go and I was okay with it.'* Participant, female, cohort 2

## Views of programme delivery

Participants reported engaging in a variety of support elements including:

- workshops (group support focused on soft skills development, employability and employment opportunities, alongside additional activities such as guest speaker sessions and projects)
- one-to-one support from YES North East employment specialists during or after the workshops (including interview practice and ad hoc guidance sessions)
- work placements

- sustained contact.

These elements are set out in the Activities section of the Theory of Change (see Appendix) and the following subsections explore participants' perspectives on each activity, which they enjoyed, what did not work so well and the reasons why.

### Workshops and additional support

Participants attended workshops in person at the different YES North East sites. They explained that the workshops comprised of interactive group activities led by employment specialists. Participants reported that workshop activities focused on the following items:

- job search and CV writing support
- confidence building sessions
- mental health in the workplace
- communication skills
- introduction to the workplace and employment opportunities
- research on different job sectors
- workplace rights and reasonable adjustments
- interview skills
- guest speaker sessions.

### Participant experience of workshops

Participants were largely positive about the workshops, attributing this to the following factors:

an interactive and social format

interesting, relevant and fresh content of the sessions

the approach taken by NEAS staff leading the sessions.

### Group interaction and social format

Central to the format of the workshops were interactive activities. This gave participants the opportunity to meet other people in a relaxed setting and supported them to feel more comfortable and confident in social situations. Most participants said that playing games with their peers and working in groups to problem-solve was fun and engaging.

*'We were doing this game, it was, like, it was a blindfolding game. We had to lead someone using communication by speaking. It was really, really fun. I feel like during that challenge was the most I ever talked to people on that course, because I'm quite a quiet person and during that game I actually talked a lot to the other people there. I got a lot of laughs out of it.'* Participant, female, cohort 2

The group format and interaction was key, given that many participants found socialising challenging.

*'It's going out of my comfort zone, and I would never [normally] participate, but seeing there was a massive improvement, so I think YES North East was possibly one of the best experiences when it came to group work.'* Participant, female, cohort 4

However, one participant in the later cohorts felt that they were forced to work in a group when they did not enjoy this type of activity.

### Content

Participants explained that they valued the wide-ranging content of the workshops. This included job search and CV writing support, confidence building, mental health in the workplace and communication skills.

*'Primarily we went through different methods, how employment worked, what makes someone employable, your CV skills, your interview skills, and stuff like that. As well as confidence and mental health in the workplace which were really good, I was really happy we did those lessons.'* Participant, male, cohort 2

Participants were most positive about the workshops that they felt met a perceived skills or knowledge gap as they felt they had learned something new. For example, one participant explained how the workshops looked at different job sectors and what each would expect from an employee. Another described how he learned to develop a CV and enhance it by including skills gained through his life experience.

*'Some skills you wouldn't realise can actually be placed on your CV. Like, if you've taken care of relatives, you can actually put that down. I didn't realise there was quite a few skills I could put on which would be applicable.'* Participant, male, cohort 2

One participant explained that the workshops provided useful information, as well as space to reflect in relation to his own goals:

*'I had the chance to sit back and look at it and figure out what I really wanted while I was in the lessons... My mind has been broadened.'* Participant, male, cohort 2

The most commonly mentioned and highly-valued sessions included job search, interview skills and CV writing support. Some participants explained how they learned about job vacancy websites that supported their job searching. Others were pleased that they left the programme with a high quality and up-to-date CV.

*'There were some websites I didn't even know about. I think direct gov where you can have a long list of different jobs and sectors, and even just where you get lots of filters as well, so by location, hours, type of contract. So it really was helpful, because no one had ever told me about it before.'* Participant, male, cohort 3

In contrast, a few participants who already had these skills and knowledge felt these sessions were less relevant. For example, one participant already had an up-to-date CV and so did not find that session very engaging. He suggested that the workshops could include differentiated activities and content to meet mixed needs and goals.

*'The way to improve is, if you have people who are more able and higher ability than others, to give them extra leeway in certain aspects.'* Participant, male, cohort 3

A participant in the later cohorts who also already had a CV instead spent this time job searching. He was aware that this would be the case so was content with using his time in this way:

*'It's the same job searching that I could've done at home, but, like I said, it was just...I could be doing that while also talking to people.'* Participant, male, cohort 4

Participants in the later cohorts also highlighted the usefulness of workshops which improved their knowledge about wider employment-related issues, such as visas, unions, workplace rights and managing finances. They tended to enjoy these sessions and felt they learned a lot about the world of work from them.

*'Obviously, to stay in the UK you have to work in order to get your visa and things like that, and they were discussing that, and I was like, you know, 'That's a topic that never, ever comes up.' That's where I was like, you know, 'This place is really interesting.'*  
Participant, female, cohort 4

While positive about the opportunity for social interaction, several participants felt some of the games and activities in the workshops were not age-appropriate resulting in less engaging sessions. In one case, a participant withdrew from the programme due to this:

*'The actual course itself, that's why I ended up leaving because it was that same sort of thing where it was basically babying us. I think there was 1 activity that we did where it was like, 'Build a tower made out of spaghetti and marshmallows,' and I was sat there and I was like, 'This is what you do in nursery.'* Participant, male, cohort 2

However, other participants explicitly mentioned the ice breakers and fun group activities as elements of the workshops that they enjoyed.

### Role of YES North East staff

Participants reported that the YES North East staff were integral to their enjoyment of the workshops. Involvement with YES North East staff came through two main routes, workshops and one-to-one support.

### Leading the workshops

Participants attributed their positive experience of the programme to the approach taken by the employment specialist running the workshops. They explained that staff made them feel like equals, which was often in contrast to their experience at school. They also made group activities fun and interactive.

*'When you're at school or when you're at college, how, quite a lot of the time, it seems like people are looking down on you. He was never like that, he got himself involved, he sat there and he was treating us like we were equals and I really like that.'* Participant, male, cohort 2.

## One-to-one support

Participants received additional one-to-one support from YES North East staff in two key ways.

Most participants reported that they had received support with job interviews during the workshops. This was provided one-to-one by YES North East staff, outside of the group sessions. Sessions included coaching, mock interviews and feedback. Participants in the later cohorts also had one-to-one mock interviews with National Careers Service staff who came into the NEAS offices.

Participants reported that one-to-one support meant the session was personalised to them and their needs.

*'My best lessons were probably my interview skills [as] I don't like talking too much. I can ramble and I can speed up too fast to the point where people can't understand me. We had a private one-on-one mock interview. Then we got written and verbal feedback. I was told I actually did quite well in my interview, more than was expected.'* Participant, male, cohort 2

Participants reported that this helped them to develop their skills in a key area of the job search process, which many of them had limited, or no, experience of. For example, one participant explained the session was a valuable refresher, given they had not had a job interview in a few years.

Participants felt the sessions helped to improve their confidence and ability to perform well in an interview. This was particularly valued by those who felt their self-belief and capability to communicate comfortably with others was negatively affected by their experience of neurodiversity and mental health conditions.

*'She also gave me little interview questions that we'd practice. At first, I wasn't the best, and then by the end of it I was quite comfortable.'* Participant, female, cohort 2

However, a couple said that they would have liked to have people from the sector they were interested in working in interviewing them, as the feedback given by NEAS and NCS staff was quite general.

Some participants also received one-to-one support in applying for jobs. They reported that YES North East staff helped them apply for roles they were interested in, and that matched their aspirations, unlike their JCP Work Coach.

Some participants received additional one-to-one support provided by YES North East staff. Examples of additional support include one-to-one sessions to discuss progress and challenges away from the group setting, referrals to, and support accessing, wider support (including additional employment-related support) and brokerage of suitable progression opportunities (including employment and education opportunities). For example, one participant was supported by a YES North East team member to find, and apply for, a suitable college course. They accompanied them to the college to support them during the enrolment process and advocated on their behalf to ensure suitable adjustments were put in place to meet their needs.

Participants felt one-to-one support had helped them to progress and meet their goals.

For one participant, the opportunity to engage on a one-to-one basis with a YES North East team member had led to a trusting relationship where they felt they could safely share their concerns:

*'I was able to share things that I wasn't able to share with anyone else. After the sessions sometimes I'd stay back to talk to them. Her support was really nice.'* Participant, female, cohort 2

### Additional activities

#### Getting out and about

Some participants reported workshops and group activities were sometimes held outside of the YES North East service buildings. For example, some sessions were held in the town centre and on the beach. Participants would also be provided with a budget to purchase lunch each day. These activities and responsibilities required participants to visit new and different areas, sometimes with little or no supervision. Participants explained that this helped them to overcome pre-existing fears of visiting new places, helping to improve their confidence.

One participant explained that they were asked to complete a group project that involved visiting the local high street and collecting information about local businesses. This helped them learn about different sectors and potential employment opportunities. It was also an opportunity for them to become familiar with where they might be doing their work placement. Other participants enjoyed visiting businesses and learning about their workplaces.

A few participants in the later cohorts said they would have liked more opportunities to go outside of the NEAS office. One participant felt that a visit to a workplace would have been beneficial for the group as they did not get to do this, and another suggested that rather than all the guest speakers coming into the office, the group could have visited their premises:

*'I do think that if we could have gone out to see them instead of them coming to see us that would make it more interesting.'* Participant, male, cohort 4

#### Guest speaker sessions

Participants in the first three cohorts found the guest speaker sessions unengaging, with little opportunity for interaction or peer activities. This limited the value these participants placed on guest speaker sessions.

*'The [guest speaker] were a bit boring. It was mostly just, like, them speaking and us listening. And like, if a bit more activity was involved, they would of been a bit more fun.'* Participant, female, cohort 2

However, those in the last two cohorts were more positive about having guest speakers attend their sessions. One participant felt that this brought real world experience into the programme. A few participants particularly enjoyed hearing from the union speaker,

although one participant felt they were unprepared to answer their questions. One participant had joined a union as a result of this talk.

Some participants in the later cohorts still reported that the guest speakers were unengaging. One felt this was due to the demographic of the speakers, who tended to be older business owners. The one speaker he found interesting was younger and could relate their experiences to those of the participants.

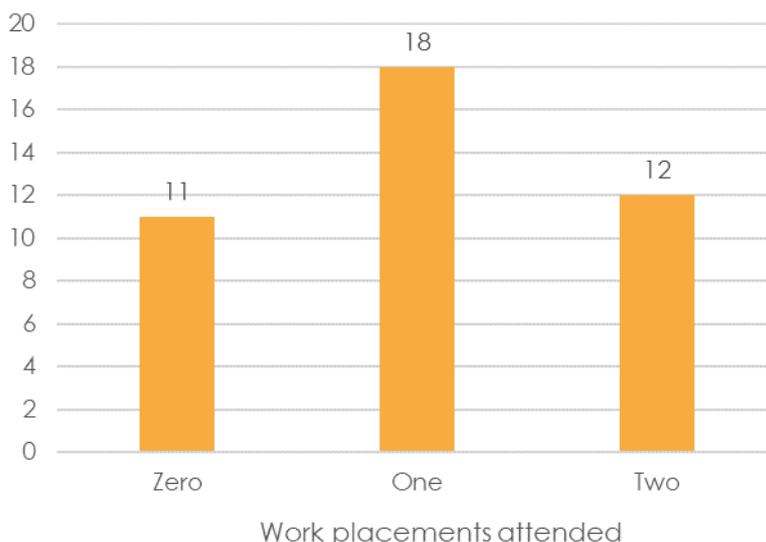
*‘Well they were a little bit younger, so more around my age, a little bit older than me. They were more, like, ‘I’ve been unemployed, I’ve done this, I’ve done that, and this is how I’ve done it,’ which is a little bit more helpful than, ‘Oh, back in my day I was forced to go down the coal mines.’* Participant, male, cohort 4

One participant felt they would have benefitted from more guest talks from disability inclusive employers and on how to become self-employed.

### Work placements

Of the 41 participants in cohorts 2 and 3 for whom participation in work placements was recorded<sup>21</sup>, 11 did not undertake any work placements, 18 completed one placement, and 12 completed two placements.

Figure 6: Participants by number of work placements attended (cohorts two and three only)



Source: NEAS Management Information. Base: 41.

Of 25 placements where the length of the work placement was recorded, the vast majority lasted for two days (21). Three lasted for one day, and one lasted for three days.

Most participants interviewed completed one work placement while on the programme, with only a couple completing two placements. Work placements typically lasted two days, with the longest lasting three days. Some participants reported experiencing shorter

<sup>21</sup> MI data on the number of placements and length of time on placement was only collected for cohorts 2 and 3.

placements including one who was with the employer for just a few hours. Shorter placements occurred when participants struggled with travelling to in-person placements or the host employer was short on staff. Interviewees from later cohorts were more likely to have completed an online placement than an in-person one.

Some participants interviewed did not complete a work placement, including nearly half of those interviewed from cohorts four and five. For some, this was due to wider events in their lives. For example, one participant was unable to complete the placement due to family events, while another had prior commitments that could not be changed. This individual was not offered alternative dates. Participants in later cohorts were more likely to say that although NEAS staff tried to secure them a placement, this did not happen due to a lack of response or staff time by employers. These participants were disappointed that they did not get this opportunity.

*'[Employment specialist] put loads of effort in but then placements never got back to him so none of us really got to do anything.'* Participant, female, cohort 4

*'I think we were close to setting up for one and then we had an issue with lack of staff... it would have been good to have that sort of experience and then also in terms of that it helps the employer to employ or find a way to be more inclusive of autistic people.'* Participant, female, cohort 4

Participants explained that work placements were allocated to them by their employment specialist, with placements arranged based on their interests, prior experience and future goals, as well as their needs. Where this worked well, it made for a high-quality experience.

*'It was really good... it was the sort of thing that I've wanted to do for ages, and it was all thanks to YES North East for getting me this work placement because I was buzzing with excitement and I couldn't thank them enough for helping get to it.'* Participant, male, cohort 2

A couple were disappointed that they were not able to secure a work placement in the sector they were interested in, although they appreciated that this was a challenge for NEAS staff.

*'I wanted to work with animals and they couldn't find any placements for me unfortunately. Not due to lack of effort though there simply wasn't anything available at the time.'* Participant, female, cohort 4

*'...the last studio was like, "We'll get you down and we'll do this and that," and then when it came to it, she just couldn't do it. So that's not NEAS' fault, but it would be good if there was more creative sectors, like niche sectors, kind of thing, but I know it's hard because it's just about what's available.'* Participant, male, cohort 5

Most participants felt the placements had given them an opportunity to learn new skills, broaden their knowledge of different job roles and sectors, receive tips and feedback on working, and build connections with employers.

*'The placement I was doing was with software. I liked learning because I honestly didn't know work like that existed.'* Participant, female, cohort 2

*'They were impressed with the work ethic and one even put forward that he would be a reference for me.'* Participant, male, cohort 2

Participants who only completed an online placement were less positive, generally saying that they felt they would have benefitted more from an in-person experience.

*'It wasn't even like an opportunity to be like, 'Oh come into the offices,' or anything like that. It was all online and it was, basically, I couldn't even use that work placement on my CV because we never even got into the office or even did anything related to working.'*  
Participant, male, cohort 4

The key factors participants associated with a successful work placement are detailed below.

Matched aspirations – participants who had been matched with employers that closely aligned with their aspirations reported positive experiences.

*'I was working in the engineering like fixing the buses and making sure they were all working. It was really good, out of all of the jobs I think the engineering had to be one of the best projects and interesting one and probably my most favourite.'* Participant, male, cohort 2

Location - some participants reported that having their placements in an easily accessible and familiar location helped them to feel more comfortable and engaged. In contrast, one participant felt their placement was located too far from where they lived, which resulted in them not attending on their second day.

Supportive employer and colleagues – having supportive and friendly workplaces, with the opportunity for participants to have proper introductions to staff, helped to provide positive experiences for participants.

*'The staff [on my work placement] were really nice, we were talking more about ourselves, we were getting comfortable at first. They demonstrated how to do all the work.'*  
Participant, female, cohort 2

While feedback was largely positive, participants did feel that the work placements were too short. Participants felt longer placements would provide more meaningful opportunities and were disappointed by the lack of long-term options. Some felt that the length of the placement was too short to use it in future job applications.

*'I can't put a 2-day work placement onto my CV... I need something at least a week and even longer.'* Participant, male, cohort 4

### Sustained contact

Most participants said that they had engaged with sustained contact. This tended to be a weekly phone call for several weeks following completion of the workshops, but some also received texts and emails. Calls were led by a YES North East employment specialist. Participants explained that the purpose of the call was to check in and discuss job search progress. Sometimes this led to advice and additional support.

Overall, participants had mixed views on the sustained contact. Some stated that it helped them to remain motivated with their job search beyond completion of the workshops.

*'It kept me on my toes, I'll tell you that. It was good, because I could always reflect and get feedback on how I was doing.'* Participant, male, cohort 2

Some also appreciated the advice, help with job searching and information about opportunities that NEAS staff continued to share with them. One participant in the later cohorts continued to attend weekly drop-ins at the centre, although this was more for the social aspect than employment support. Another had continued to receive weekly, and then monthly support, and drew on this when they started employment following the programme.

*'So when I got my first job, there were a few issues at first like hours and stuff like contract issues, and my support person, mentor, I guess, went into work and talked to them about it and was walking me through it and stuff like that.'* Participant, male, cohort 5

Most participants, however, were ambivalent about the support offered and felt that it served little purpose.

Participants also experienced issues around the scheduling of the calls. Some participants explained that calls were not scheduled, meaning they were often made at inconvenient times which made it challenging for them to engage with. Others said that calls that were scheduled did not take place. This had a negative impact on participants who had expected phone calls at certain times but received no communication or update.

*'I feel that if you are promising to call someone you should do it. I waited several times for calls that did not come. As a person with autism answering calls is quite stressful and it is not helpful when you are stressed waiting and then the call does not come.'* Participant, male, cohort 2

Participant feedback on the programme was collected during interviews conducted by researchers at L&W. This feedback was shared with delivery staff at NEAS who went on to make changes to the design of the programme over time (see section on programme delivery in chapter 2).

## 5. Employer and stakeholder experience and views

This chapter summarises views of the YES North East programme, from the perspective of employers and other stakeholders, such as referral and delivery partners. It covers their experiences of the programme across the Input and Activities sections of the Theory of Change (see Appendix). It is based on analysis of depth interviews with a range of parties. Employers and referral and delivery partners interviewed were mostly positive about the aims and objectives of YES North East as they felt it was important that neurodiverse young people are supported to find appropriate opportunities for them. However, respondents did provide some insights into ways in which the programme might be improved and these suggestions are summarised at the end of the chapter.

### Jobcentre Plus experiences

The three JCP staff interviewed were involved with the referral process, working with YES North East to support the identification and referral of unemployed neurodiverse young people to the programme.

Some of the JCP delivery staff were already aware of NEAS and had previously received training from them. They were made aware of the programme through direct contact with YES North East, most often through engagement from NEAS who were focused on improving awareness of the programme among key referral partners. YES North East staff sometimes co-located at JCP.

JCP delivery staff involvement with the programme included engaging suitable young people and referring them directly to YES North East. JCP staff were in touch with YES North East with any queries they had on the programme, and they maintained communication with YES North East staff to provide updates on referrals. YES North East gave updates on the progress of clients referred to the service.

JCP delivery staff had positive views of a number of key aspects of the programme, as outlined below.

Addressing a perceived gap in the available local provision. JCP staff valued having an employment-focused programme specifically for neurodiverse young people which they could refer suitable clients to, and which complemented their own support.

*'I think, prior to having this programme it was quite a challenge to know where we could refer people to get the support, so without more targeted support for people with neurodiverse conditions, it was basically, 'We'll try this,' or, 'Maybe this organisation can help,' or, 'We'll try this first.' So, it was much more of a, kind of, scattergun approach. Having something targeted and more specific has been immensely beneficial.'* Stakeholder

Effective partnership working between JCP and YES North East to support referrals. JCP staff interviewed felt their partnership, and the referral process, with YES North East worked well. They found the information provided by YES North East to be helpful, including detailed briefings and resources. This was added to internal information systems at JCP to improve understanding of neurodiversity by JCP staff. Co-location allowed potential participants and JCP staff to speak directly with YES North East employment specialists.

*'We have a district provision tool that the work coaches can access but because I have very good relationships, you know, with the people on the ground, then they usually tell us, they give us the heads-up when something's about to happen, so we can actually prepare the work coaches and they can start having conversations with the young people, to hopefully get them to participate.'* Stakeholder

High quality service for young neurodiverse people. JCP delivery staff valued the combination of pre- and in-work support offered by the programme. Good relationships with employers and the opportunity to participate in placements were also identified as key indicators of the quality of the service.

*'To have good quality support, to have good relationships with employers who are willing to give people a chance and to have the in-work support once they're, you know, placed into employment. So, it's a superb programme....so we would just want more.'* Stakeholder

Flexibility in who can be referred to YES North East, including participants with no formal diagnosis of neurodiversity. JCP staff valued the flexibility offered by the referral system which meant that neurodiverse people with no formal diagnosis could still access and benefit from the programme.

*'You want to get them the best possible support, but I think, with programmes like YES, it is targeted. It is specific but they're also, kind of, willing to embrace-, even if the work coach isn't maybe sure that this person has a spectrum condition, YES are willing to take a hold of them, just to support them and to help them move forward, even if it's just maybe, "Well, we don't know what this person's barrier is but we suspect it might be X, Y and Z".'* Stakeholder

Regular communication from the programme. JCP staff valued communications from YES North East across all elements of the programme. This included communication about the nature of the programme and the referral process, and feedback about how clients were progressing with the programme.

*'They will actually feedback to the work coaches on how the clients are doing and what progress they're making and, you know, whether they've gone into work or whether there's a further period of support needed. So, the communication levels are really good.'* Stakeholder

JCP staff identified one main challenge relating to their relationship with YES North East. They explained that it was sometimes necessary to prioritise referrals to other programmes that may be of benefit to young people, particularly where referral targets were

implemented and monitored by JCP. As a result, it was not always possible for JCP staff to recommend potential participants to YES North East.

*'I think sometimes that's because there is a bit of a pressure to fill up some of the contracted provision first, and there's quite a lot of provision available. So, you know, it can become a bit of a numbers game, just to make sure that all of the other provision is being utilised as well but I think we've done really well to promote it and to get people onto the programme.'* Stakeholder

### Delivery partner experiences

Resources Northeast was a delivery partner for the YES North East programme, providing training in practical skills to participants. They also became a referral partner; as a local private training provider, they worked with organisations such as Barnardo's and referred eligible young people to YES North East.

The Resources Northeast representative interviewed was very positive about YES North East. They recalled initially having a conversation with one of the employment support specialists on the programme and then visiting their delivery centres to discuss what they could offer participants. They described a positive and reciprocal partnership between the two organisations.

The Resources Northeast representative appreciated the professional and knowledgeable approach of the YES North East team and felt that their values were strongly aligned. They described their own provision as offering a "string to the bow" of the YES North East offer, and felt their "no pressure, no obligation" approach worked well for participants, especially those with anxiety.

Overall, the Resources Northeast representative felt that YES North East was an effective programme, noting their understanding of participants and their integrity in signposting suitable opportunities, as well as selecting appropriate partners to deliver the programme.

### Employer experiences

Eight interviews were carried out with seven employers (one was interviewed twice at different stages of the programme). Overall, employers were very positive about their experiences of the programme. Those interviewed had all offered work placements, with a couple also offering workplace tours. Employers found out about the programme in a variety of different ways, including through direct approaches by YES North East and social media posts about the programme.

The employers interviewed were from different sectors, including retail, food manufacturing, IT, conservation, heritage and creative. The employers explained that the placements lasted two days. Employers had received various forms of support to provide work placements through the programme. This included initial meetings with YES North East to understand more about the programme and its requirements, risk assessments, autism awareness training and introductory meetings with the placement candidates before starting the placement. In some cases, YES North East staff provided additional support to aid the successful completion of the work placement if required.

*'I think they were very supportive and the fact that even when we did the placement days, one member of staff from them would turn up to make sure that all of the young people actually got to the location and were there on time.'* Employer

Key aspects of the programme highlighted by employers are detailed below.

Good quality candidates. Employers were mostly happy with the quality of the candidates YES North East matched them with. Employers felt most participants had a good level of interest in the placement and were open to seeing how different sectors work.

*'I think YES North East did a great job. I think they brought us a lot of suitable candidates and we never had a complaint about anyone we worked with. They were well mannered, they were respectful and certainly, no. I had no complaints whatsoever about anyone who came to us to be honest with you.'* Employer

Support from YES North East which provided reassurance for employers and participants. Employers reported that they found support provided by NEAS to their organisation before and during work placements to be beneficial. This helped both the staff and participants feel more comfortable and assured about the placement. For example, one employer noted that they felt YES North East had prepared the candidates well.

Pre-meetings with YES North East and participants. These helped employers to tailor placements and tasks to participants' interests and ensure they had a good understanding of what they would/would not like to do before starting their placement.

Good communication from YES North East before and during the programme. Employers felt they were fully informed about the programme needs and processes, and were able to meet and discuss any queries with the employer engagement officer.

*'It was very well put together, it was very professional. They kept in constant contact. They organised things when we needed them. The other involvement with us led to us networking with other departments from their company.'* Employer

## Suggestions for improvement

While JCP staff and employers were mostly positive about their experiences with YES North East, there were some areas where they felt there were gaps or that improvements could be made.

JCP staff suggested alterations to the model to increase referrals and improve the quality of support, as listed below.

Expanding the eligibility age-range further. JCP staff recommended increasing the age range up to the late 20s, so that the programme could benefit more neurodiverse individuals. They felt this would be particularly beneficial for individuals who have gone longer without a diagnosis and may only recently have learned about their neurodiversity.

*'I'd probably maybe expand the age range a bit because, you know, 18 to 24, even just a couple of years, I almost find the age 24 is a bit of a sharp cut-off. I think there could be a little bit more flexibility around that.'* Stakeholder

Offering in-work support to employers and participants to support sustainment of job outcomes. JCP staff felt providing additional support (including guidance around reasonable adjustments and support for participants in work) could help sustain job outcomes achieved by participants and maintain good relationships with employers.

*'We can do retention work if we know what's happening but quite often, people, they lose their jobs and it's because there isn't the, you know, specialised support available to them, and sometimes that person doesn't even know that they need support.'* Stakeholder

Showcasing the benefits of the programme to support engagement. JCP staff felt clear communication of the impacts of the programme and the ways this had helped previous participants would help to reduce concerns around the group aspect of the programme and improve engagement and participation.

*'Some of them are put off by the group experiences. That's probably the biggest put off by the mention that there's group work involved. It was despite us trying to say, 'Well, it can alleviate your social, it could address that social anxiety or the group anxiety.' They're not quite ready.'* Stakeholder

One JCP staff member commented that the only drawback of the programme was the limited number of spaces and its time-limited delivery. They identified a need for this type of targeted provision in their local area which is no longer being met now that YES North East has ended.

*'When the programme's operating it's absolutely brilliant, but we're just waiting on another one coming on board really... it's keeping the momentum going.'* Stakeholder

Employers who had been involved in work placements had mixed views on how the programme might be improved. This mostly related to how employers were engaged and how the experience of offering work placements could be improved. This included:

- considering financial incentives to encourage more employers to offer placements
- ensuring potential placement candidates are fully engaged and want to do the placement to reduce drop-outs or negative experiences
- collecting and implementing ongoing feedback from participants and employers to ensure placements are meaningful on both sides, and to provide feedback to employers post-placement so they can improve or further tailor the experience for young people
- organising longer placements for participants to gain more experience and employers to learn more about supporting neurodivergent young people
- involving their staff in other activities on the programme, for example, delivering mock interviews and running workplace tours which include a presentation about entry level roles.

## 6. Programme outcomes

This chapter presents findings on the outcomes experienced by participants taking part in the YES North East programme. It relates to the Outcomes section of the Theory of Change, and includes an overview of how effective the programme has been in supporting participants to achieve social and emotional outcomes, intermediate skills to support the job search process, and moving them closer, and into, employment and education. This is based on analysis of MI, the participant surveys, and interviews with participants, delivery staff and employers.

The MI data provides information on outcomes achieved by participants up to the end of the sustained contact phase. The participant survey provides information on the achievement of a range of social and emotional outcomes, including:

- capability to find a job
- career aspirations
- confidence
- self-efficacy
- wellbeing.

The participant survey is structured to measure distance travelled by monitoring change between data collected prior to starting on the programme, during programme participation and after the main phase of support (the workshops). The survey analysis covers participants from cohorts one to five. Eighty-eight participants completed at least one of the surveys. However, in order to measure individual distance travelled, most of the findings in the chapter focus on participants that completed the pre-, mid- and post-intervention surveys. It was only possible to match responses to all three surveys for 48 participants, so results should be interpreted with caution.

In addition to the survey data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 participants in total. All participants who had opted into research activities, and who completed the post-survey, were invited to take part in an interview following completion of the programme.<sup>22</sup> A further four participants engaged in the evaluation by providing written answers to key questions.<sup>23</sup>

Interviews were conducted with participants across all five cohorts, and with a mix of men and women of different ages. Participant quotes included in this section, and across the report, are taken from interview transcripts.

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<sup>22</sup> The post-survey asked respondents whether they were happy to be contacted about taking part in an interview. Those who answered “yes” were then invited to interview.

<sup>23</sup> To accommodate the participation of those with different access needs, participants were given the opportunity to take part in the research via different means – including face-to-face, phone, and video call interviews, written submissions, and the submission of audio and video recordings.

## Participant experience of outcomes

Some of the participants interviewed reported positive changes since engaging with YES North East while others identified little or no change.

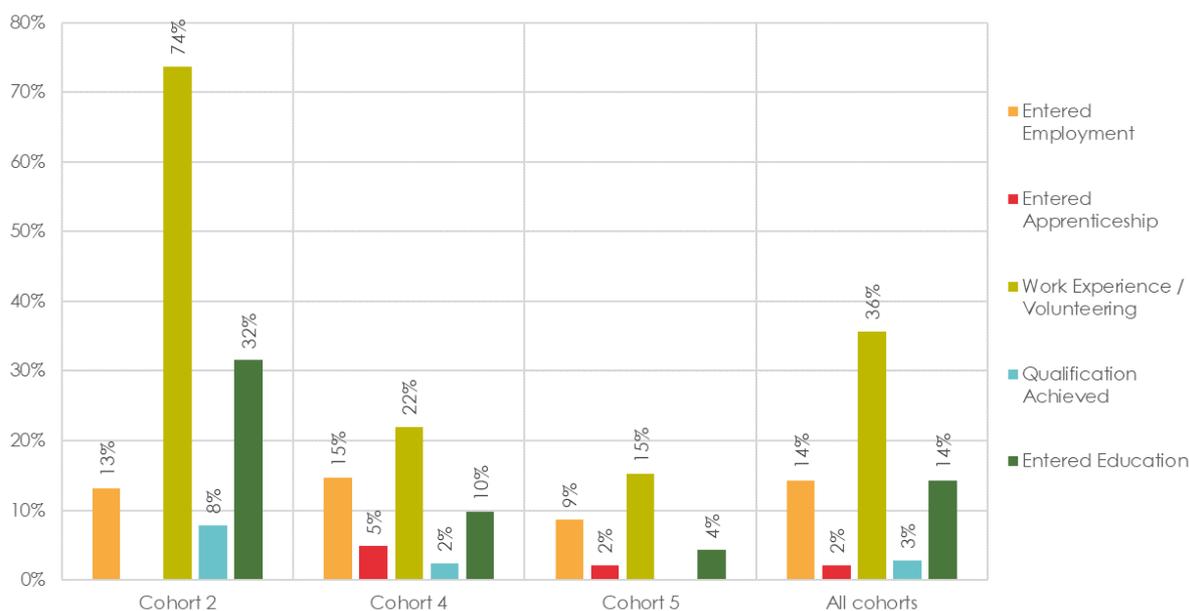
### Participant destinations following course completion

This section explores the outcomes that participants achieved under the Behavioural outcomes section of the Theory of Change. The MI shows that 59% of programme participants achieved at least one outcome:

- 14% moved into employment
- another 14% moved into education
- 36% engaged in volunteering or other work experience.

Figure 7 shows outcome rates for the different cohorts. These are expressed as a percentage of all participants.

Figure 7: Outcome rates post-programme across cohorts



Source: NEAS Management Information. Base: 125. Data for cohorts 1 and 3 are not shown due to small numbers. Note: Participants were able to record multiple outcomes, with some participants achieving more than one type of outcome (employment, education and training, or volunteering). As a result, the total number of outcomes achieved is not equal to the total number of participants to achieve a destination outcome.

Table 6 shows the type of outcomes achieved across all cohorts.

Table 6: Outcomes achieved post-programme across cohorts

OUTCOME	NUMBER
Entered Employment	20
Entered Apprenticeship	3
Work Experience / Volunteering	50
Qualification Achieved	4
Entered Education	20
Total outcomes	134
Participants achieving outcomes	82

Source: NEAS Management Information. Base: 140. 54 participants achieved one outcome and 28 achieved more than one outcome.

Cohort 2 achieved the most outcomes post-programme, with 64 outcomes for 38 participants. This means that some participants were achieving more than one outcome, while others achieved no outcomes at all. Across all the cohorts, 41% of participants did not achieve any outcomes, 39% achieved one outcome and 20% achieved two or more outcomes.<sup>24</sup>

### Employment

Twenty participants (14%) achieved an employment outcome and three participants (2%) started an apprenticeship.

Five of the participants interviewed had secured employment following the programme, and one had set up their own dog walking business. Another participant found a job but struggled with the initial training and left.

One of these participants had gained full-time work at a logistics company. Their role involved administrative tasks and logistical planning for a transport company. Another participant had secured a job via Barnardo’s guaranteed job scheme, which they were signposted to by their employment specialist at YES North East. The participant explained that the specially tailored scheme for people with mental health needs provided by Barnardo’s had been beneficial for them, considering the impact their anxiety and depression had on their job search activities in the past.

*‘Barnardo’s have a special program where they find people who have learning difficulties, or struggles, or disabilities, and have a special training for them. It was kind of like an 8-week course to prepare you to work for [employer]. I found it through YESNE, because they said they had links with the organisation. It was really good for me, because it eliminated a lot of those processes where you do all these interviews and stuff like that. It*

<sup>24</sup> Outcome data is broken down by cohort group but does not include reference to participant characteristics.

*was just much easier. You just had to complete the course. That's what I mean, it took a huge pressure off, I didn't have that anxiety of it all'* Participant, male, cohort 3

A third participant was also working at this employer but provided no further details on how they secured this role or what the role entailed. The fourth participant who had found work had gained this through Groundwork and was working at a production company. However, they felt that YES North East would have enabled them to get a job if they had not already secured a role. Finally, a fifth participant had started part-time work but did not share what this involved.

#### Case study:

Tom was signed up for YES North East by his parents, but was very willing to try the programme as he was actively looking for work at the time. Prior to joining YES North East, Tom had some work experience from catering and hospitality roles.

Tom enjoyed the relaxed nature of the taster day and felt that the staff were genuinely interested in his goals for the future. While on the programme, Tom enjoyed doing group projects and researching the support employers can put in place for people with disabilities, which helped him learn about reasonable adjustments. The guest speakers also broadened Tom's understanding of different job roles and sectors, and he felt the structure of the programme built up his skills and confidence to do a real interview.

*'It was kind of building it up so that over like a few weeks or so you would do more and more activities... building kind of our confidence up a bit about interviews and type of jobs without the stress.'*

A key element of the programme for Tom was his work placement with a software company. He found this very helpful in learning about the project and working through the kind of tasks that would be set at interview. Following his placement, Tom was successful in getting a two-day-a-week job at a logistics company, which has since increased to full-time hours. Tom is pleased with this outcome and felt YES North East gave him the confidence to present himself in a way which helped him secure the role.

*'It's kind of benefited with everything but how to, like, talk to people a bit more, how to kind of present myself, just improved in general. And the entire culture has kind of, like, improved everything in my life a bit more.'*

Three of the participants who had not secured employment through the programme expressed disappointment that they were essentially in the same place as when they started. These participants did not feel closer to employment, either because they felt they already knew how to look for jobs, or because they still lacked confidence to submit applications. One felt that the programme was oversold as almost guaranteeing they would find work by the end of it, and they felt they had wasted their time participating.

*'We were told that it would be, like, we would be in employment... I just feel like it was a waste of time and opportunity because at the end of the day I've already... been*

*unemployed at that point for around two years, it just looks bad if I add another six months onto that.’ Participant, male cohort 4*

### Education and training

Twenty people (14%) achieved an education outcome. Of the participants interviewed, some reported progressing into education and training since completing the programme. This was largely to help them realise their ambition to move into work. YES North East had played a role in supporting them to access training. For example, one participant interviewed was signposted to a job guarantee training programme. This led to paid employment. Another participant had completed their CSCS card training (organised through YES North East), which enables them to work on construction sites.

A third participant moved onto a part-time Access to HE course. They attributed their progression onto a course to the one-to-one support they got from YES North East staff, which helped them to realise their ambition to go back into education, engage with the course and get suitable support from the college for their mental health needs.

*‘It was actually YES North East that got me into education again. We also had a 1-to-1 chat and I, kind of, realised that I still want to go back to education. I’ve been really supported... one of the people of Yes North East came to my, like, sign up for it and they explained about the mental health condition, and they got tutors involved, and it’s helping a lot.’ Participant, female, cohort 2*

This participant went on to access further employment support tailored for people with mental health conditions and was planning their progression onto a Higher Education course.

### Volunteering outcomes

The most common outcome post-programme completion was volunteering or getting work experience. Fifty participants (36%) achieved this outcome. Two of the participants interviewed held voluntary positions at the time of interview. Both of these participants secured the opportunity without support from YES North East. One participant, whose goal was to have a career in graphic design, was volunteering in a local café. Another, whose goal was to work with animals, was volunteering on a farm. She found this position through a family member. She really enjoyed the role as it matched her interests and felt it could lead to a paid job in the future:

*‘I’m learning how to take care of animals, how to spot if something’s wrong with them, the different types that are there, the equipment, health and safety. It’s really just to help find a job in that general area of animals.’ Participant, female, cohort 2*

### Employability and skills outcomes

This section explores the outcomes that participants achieved under the Skills outcomes section of the Theory of Change.

### Participant job seeking status following course completion

Forty-two per cent or 16 participants said they were seeking employment, whilst 11 per cent were not, due to health reasons.<sup>25</sup> Most participants interviewed expressed a desire to move into work and were actively seeking employment. Some participants were keen to move into a paid job to increase their independence. Others had ambitions related to their skills, strengths, and interests. For example, one participant wanted to move into a customer service role as they enjoyed meeting and talking to new people. And some had more long-term goals, for example one participant wanted to build on their specialism and qualifications to start their own design business.

Three participants explained that their main goal at the time of interview was focusing on improving their health. They felt that they were unable to focus on employment-related aspirations until their health was better. All these participants were neurodiverse and had poor mental health.

*‘I need to be able to believe in myself again before I can get into a job.’* Participant, male, cohort 2

Another participant was now in full time education related to their career ambition, and not presently looking for work.

Participants explained that there had been no major change in their goals to move into work since taking part in the programme. This is supported by the fact that most participants interviewed were already looking for work when joining the programme. Similarly, those who shared their job aspirations reported no change in their goals since joining the programme, although some said it had helped them rule out some sectors or types of employment. Instead, participants explained that the programme had helped to develop their skills and increased their understanding of how to achieve their ambitions.

*‘I would say I feel more prepared to look for work and find a part time job and know more information about the type of job I would like to do.’* Participant, female, cohort 4

### Capability and opportunities to find a job

Participants surveyed were asked to complete career-related questions from the National Citizenship Service evaluation, alongside an additional L&W-developed question.<sup>26 27</sup> These related to capabilities and opportunities to find a job. The questions were positively worded, meaning agreeing with a statement indicated a higher rating of capabilities and opportunities – whereas disagreeing indicated a lower rating of capabilities and

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<sup>25</sup> This data is only available for cohorts 2 and 3. However, numbers for cohort 3 are very small, therefore the above is based on participants in cohort 2 (base = 38).

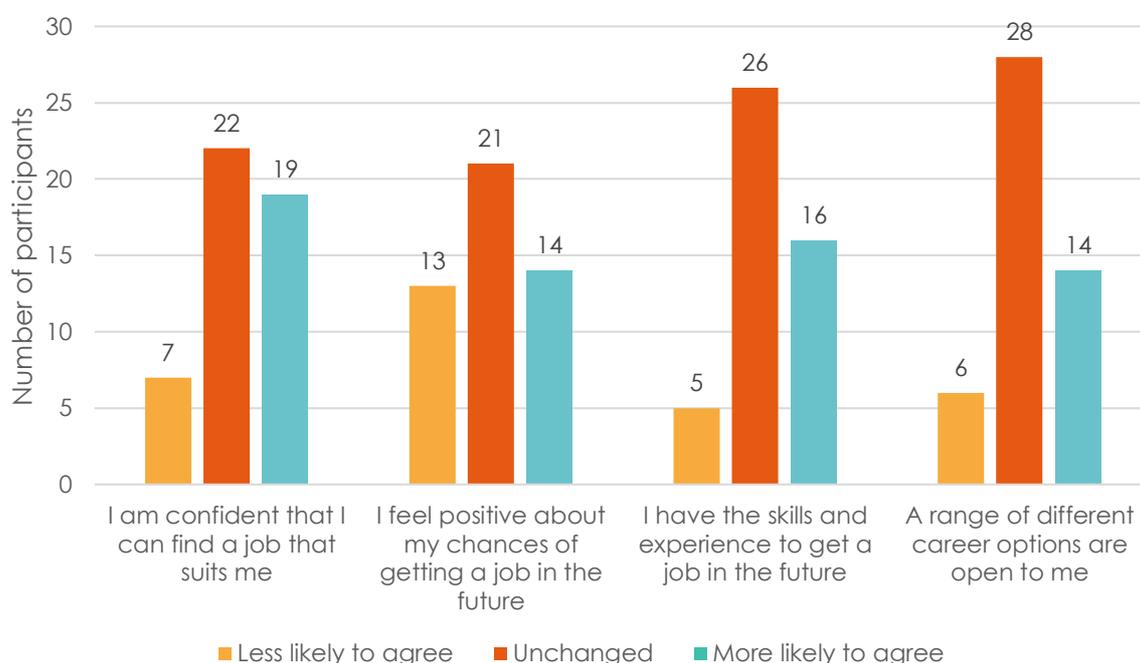
<sup>26</sup> [National Citizen Service 2016 Evaluation, Technical Report, Kantar Public and London Economics, 2020](#)

<sup>27</sup> The L&W developed confidence in employment metric asks respondents to strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the statement: ‘I am confident that I can find a job that suits me.’

opportunities. Measuring change in agreement levels between points in time gave a measure of distance travelled.

Figure 8 presents the changes in agreement levels with career-related statements between the pre- and post-intervention surveys for participants that completed all three surveys. The majority of participants recorded no change in their level of agreement with the statements. However, for three of the four measures, greater numbers of participants reported more positive views post-intervention compared with the pre-intervention period. For one of the measures ('I feel positive about my chances of getting a job in the future'), similar numbers of participants experienced reductions and improvements in their ratings over time.

Figure 8: Change in agreement levels with employment-related statements from pre- to post-participation with workshops, matched responses



Source: participant survey. Base: 48 respondents with matched pre, mid and post-surveys.

While the majority of survey respondents reported no change in their level of agreement with the employment-related statements, interviews with participants highlighted the impact of the programme on their skills in securing a job. Some participants felt better informed about how, and where, to look for jobs; they had broadened their job search activities as they learnt about a wider range of job vacancy websites through YES North East. For example, one participant explained that prior to joining YES North East he only used Indeed as a job search site, but now used a wider range of resources which helped him to identify more jobs.

*‘There were some websites I didn’t even know about. I think direct gov where you can have a long list of different jobs and sectors...you get lots of filters as well, so by location, hours, type of contract. So it really was helpful, because no one had ever told me about it before.’ Participant, male, cohort 2*

Some participants also felt more confident about their capability to apply for work, such as completing applications and interviews. For example, one participant explained that the opportunity to develop an improved CV had helped them greatly, while a number linked their improved confidence to participate in job interviews with the workshop focused specifically on interview skills. One participant also reported feeling more confident to ask for adjustments in interviews.

*'I feel like I was super ready for a job, and I think that came across when I was getting interviewed because I was confident.'* Participant, male, cohort 5

Two participants felt that, although they had not yet secured employment, they were getting further in the recruitment process and much more positive feedback from potential employers as a result of participating in YES North East.

*'After being on that course, I feel like I've applied to the same amount of jobs, but I feel like I'm getting to the point where there's been a lot more phone calls, maybe talking, even though they haven't progressed to, for example, I've gotten a job, but when I've applied to a job, I've gotten to later stages more often.'* Participant, male, cohort 4

Despite this progress, some participants explained that they still felt a long way away from being able to independently apply for, and interview for, jobs, and thought they required ongoing support to progress closer to work.

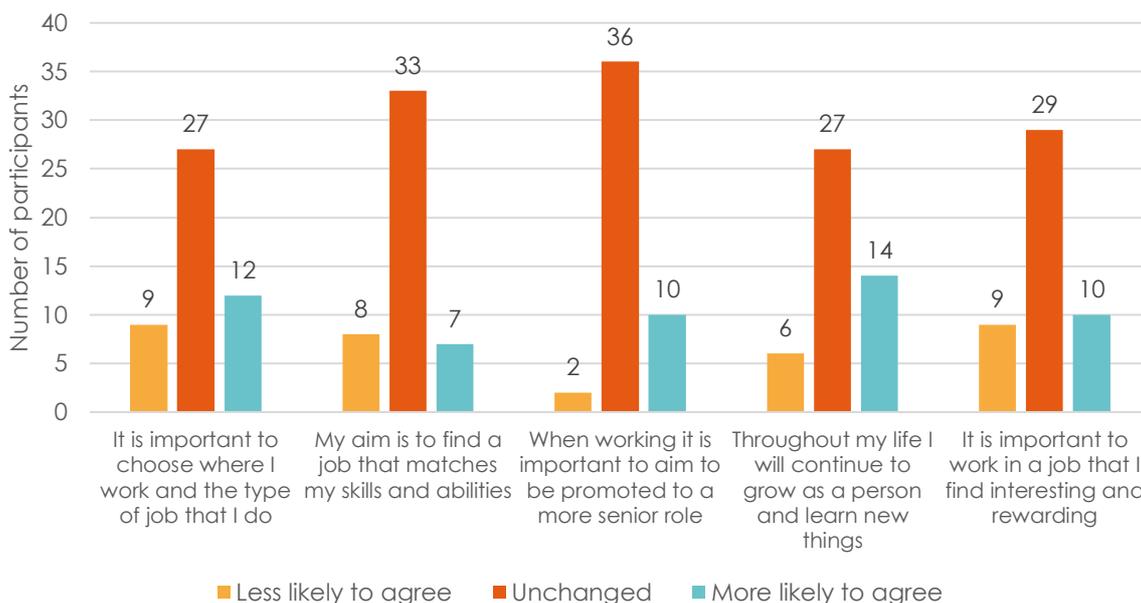
*'I think my confidence has built right up ever since I got the support. [But] I don't think I'd be in the right state to do [an interview] myself because I know it's quite scary going to an interview when you've got other things... I think support would be the answer to that.'* Participant, male, cohort 2

### Employment-related aspirations

Participants surveyed were asked to complete the L&W-developed 'aspirations in employment' survey. The five-item survey measured the importance participants placed on employment-related factors. This included progression, job satisfaction, and opportunities for development. The questions were positively worded, meaning agreeing with a statement indicated higher aspirations – whereas disagreeing with a statement indicated lower aspirations. Measuring change in agreement levels between survey points provides a measure of distance travelled.

Figure 9 presents the changes in agreement levels with the employment-related aspiration statements, from pre to post participation in the programme. The majority of respondents reported unchanged levels of agreement with the statements over time. Across three of the five measures, the number of participants with positive views increased over time and exceeded the numbers reporting more negative views at the post-intervention survey. For two of the statements ('My aim is to find a job that matches my skills and abilities' and 'It is important to work in a job that I find interesting and rewarding;'), there was no evidence that overall participants were more likely to agree with the statements following participation in the programme.

Figure 9: Change in agreement levels with employment-related aspiration statements from pre- to post-participation with workshops, matched responses



Source: participant survey. Base: 48 respondents with matched pre, mid and post-surveys.

In interviews, some participants reported that through the programme, they gained a greater awareness of their existing skills which resulted in them being more confident and focused on progressing towards a specific sector or role. Both the workshops and the work placement were key elements of the programme that led to these outcomes.

*‘I do want to work in IT because it’s something I’m capable of doing, it’s something I’m very passionate about.’* Participant, male, cohort 2

Many participants interviewed also reported that the programme had improved their understanding of suitable employment opportunities - for example, what types of jobs exist, and which may be suited to their interests and skills.

For these participants, both the workshops and the work placements were key elements of the programme that led to these outcomes. For example, one participant explained how her knowledge of different sectors and job types had grown during the workshops.

*‘[Before YES North East] I wasn’t aware of all the sectors of different jobs. I assumed hospitality was, like, retail and I didn’t like that stuff. Hearing more detail about each sector, and it did give me a lot more suggestions on what I want to do’* Participant, female, cohort 2

Other participants explained that the work placement had helped them understand more about a specific sector and job role and the extent to which their skills matched that role. Even if the work placement had not been a perfect match, this had helped them focus their job search.

A couple of participants felt that their main barrier to finding work following the programme was a shortage of suitable local job opportunities. These participants had

specific needs in relation to work in order for them to manage being in the workplace. One also commented that she felt the attitudes and assumptions of local employers were her main barrier to work.

*'I think [YES North East] made me feel a lot more confident towards my goal, but what I would say is that what I seem to notice is that some workplaces aren't disability inclusive so it makes it even more difficult for me to look for work.'* Participant, female, cohort 4

### Social and emotional outcomes

This section explores the outcomes that participants achieved under the Attitudinal outcomes section of the Theory of Change.

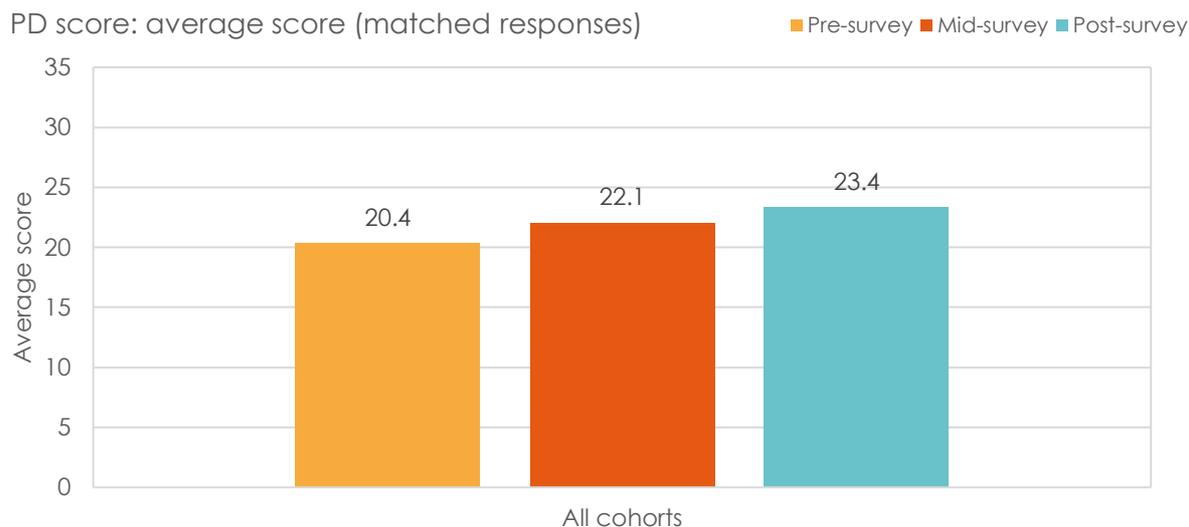
#### Increased confidence

Participants were asked to complete a personal development survey. The seven-item survey measured their confidence in carrying out tasks related to communication, teamwork and leadership. This included their confidence in activities such as 'meeting new people', 'having a go at things that are new to me' and 'getting things done on time'. Most of these behaviours are particularly relevant to the workplace, such as 'working with other people in a team', 'putting forward new idea' and 'being the leader of a team'. A higher rating indicated higher levels of confidence with each task and the maximum possible score across all items was 35.

The results from the matched responses indicate that 32 participants (67%) experienced an improvement in their confidence, 12 (25%) recorded a decrease and four (8%) recorded no change.

Figure 10 shows the average personal development score at each of the different stages of participation for participants who completed all three surveys. This shows that confidence increased with participation in the programme.

Figure 10: Average personal development score at each survey, matched responses (with a maximum possible score of 35)



Source: participant survey. Base 48 respondents with matched pre, mid and post-surveys.

Participants interviewed also reported increased confidence in a range of areas:

**Self-esteem.** Participants reported feeling more confident in themselves generally and noted a change in self-esteem. For one participant, increased confidence overall led them to engage in a course following the programme which ultimately led to a job.

*‘I do feel being in the course gave me confidence. I then had confidence to go on another course which did lead to a job.’ Participant, male, cohort 2*

**Communicating with others.** Most participants said the programme had helped them to communicate with others socially, including feeling more able to meet and interact with new people, have a phone conversation and ask for support. Some attributed this to the group dynamic which gave them the opportunity to interact with new people and practice their social and communication skills in a safe space. A couple mentioned that being in a group where they could be open about their experiences helped them develop their confidence in socialising with others.

*‘Obviously with my confidence a lot, it’s a case of I’ve been able to kind of talk to different people a bit better. Because I used to be kind of, I don’t have a way, but I would call it a bit bland in a way of kind of how I talk to people. So yeah, so I kind of... got a better idea of how to talk to people.’ Participant, male, cohort 5*

**Going to new places.** Some participants had grown in confidence to get out and about more. Participants attributed this to having to travel to engage with the programme:

*‘I’m getting more used to being outside because I had to, it was either a 3 hour walk to YES North East for me, or it was a very long train ride. I still need my coping mechanisms, obviously, but I can get outside and I won’t fuss much.’ Participant, male, cohort 2*

### Case study

Aaron joined YES North East after his mum heard about the programme. He had some previous work experience from a paper round job he had done whilst at school. He was keen to find paid employment after his Kickstart placement had finished. Aaron also wanted to socialise more with other people of a similar age.

Aaron found the group nature of the programme very beneficial. He described how this took him out of his comfort zone, but that the relaxed environment and being with other people helped to develop his confidence.

*'I think just being around people more than I'm used to be... I think it definitely helps when it's not out of obligation. Choosing to socialise was more the catalyst for it, rather than just having to, be like, you're forced to go to school, you're having to deal with people there... I definitely think if I hadn't gone in it I would be a little bit more nervous, a little bit more insular, I guess. It definitely helped.'*

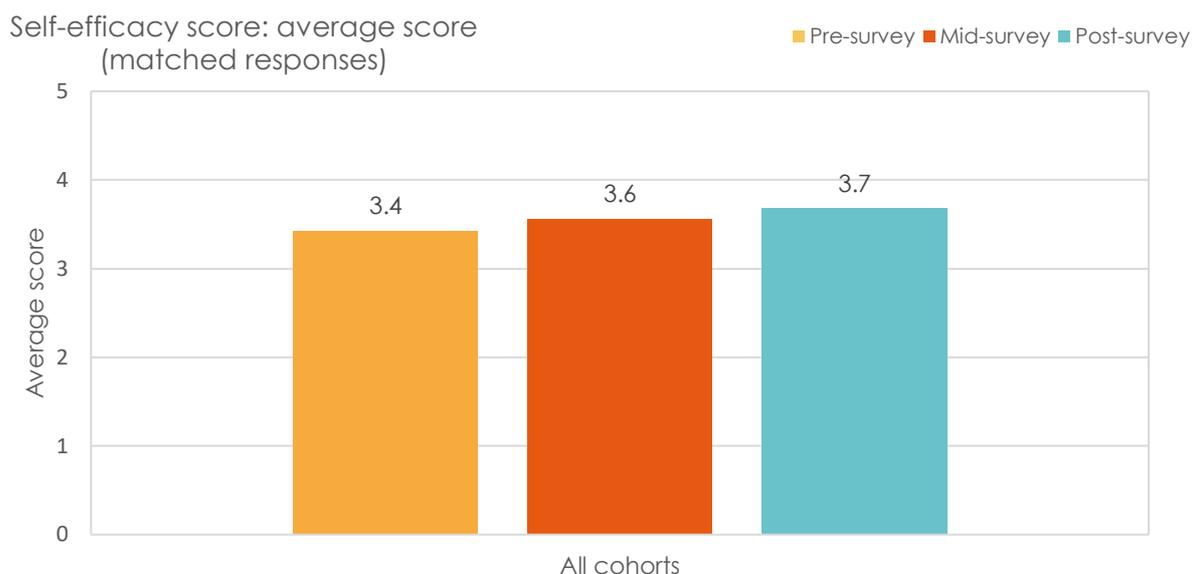
### Self-efficacy

Participants were asked to complete the New General Self-Efficacy Scale (NGSES). The eight-item survey measures the extent to which participants believe they can achieve their goals, despite difficulties. The scale uses general statements related to achieving goals, completing tasks, and overcoming challenges. These are relevant to all areas of a person's life. Respondents are allocated a score based on their answers, with a higher score indicating higher levels of self-efficacy. The score for NGSES ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The results from the matched responses indicated that 21 participants (44%) experienced an improvement in their self-efficacy, while 18 (38%) recorded no change and 9 (19%) recorded a decline over the time they were participating in the programme.

Figure 11 shows the average self-efficacy score at the different stages of participation, for participants that completed all three surveys. Participants reported an average score of 3.4 before the intervention, which increased to 3.6 in the mid-participation survey. By the time of the post-participation survey the average score had risen to 3.7.

Figure 11: Average self-efficacy score at each survey, matched responses (maximum possible score of five)



Source: participant survey. Base: 48 respondents with matched pre, mid and post-surveys.

Most participants interviewed had goals for the future. These included short and long-term objectives related to future study, moving into employment, career aspirations, improving health and living more independently.

Some participants had taken steps to achieve these goals before joining YES North East or whilst on the programme, including accessing additional support, applying for courses and jobs, and making plans related to their wider lives. These participants had clear ideas of how to achieve their goals. For example, one participant who wanted to start a degree had been supported by YES North East to move onto an Access to HE course, which was now preparing them to find a university course suitable for them. Another felt that their goals were more achievable and linked this to some of the specific information and support they received on YES North East.

*‘Definitely feels more achievable. It feels like it’s less cryptic, the job world... planning career moves and knowing about legislation that supports you as a worker with your rights and working around that to make plans [has helped].’ Participant, male, Cohort 5*

Other participants shared limited insight into the extent to which they believed they could achieve their goals, or the steps needed to achieve them. Some felt less clear, or confident, about how, or when, they would achieve their goals. Some participants related this to not presently receiving support with their goals. For example, one participant had moved into paid work since completing YES North East but felt ready to progress further. They explained that they felt the only option was to go back to university where they had a negative experience in the past. This left them feeling confused about their next steps:

*‘I’d want to progress and go on to bigger things, but I know that would have to mean going back to uni. And my previous experience at uni is really putting me off, but the only way to advance would be to get a degree.’ Participant, male, cohort 3*

Other participants did not provide any detail on steps planned or taken to reach this goal, nor barriers preventing them.

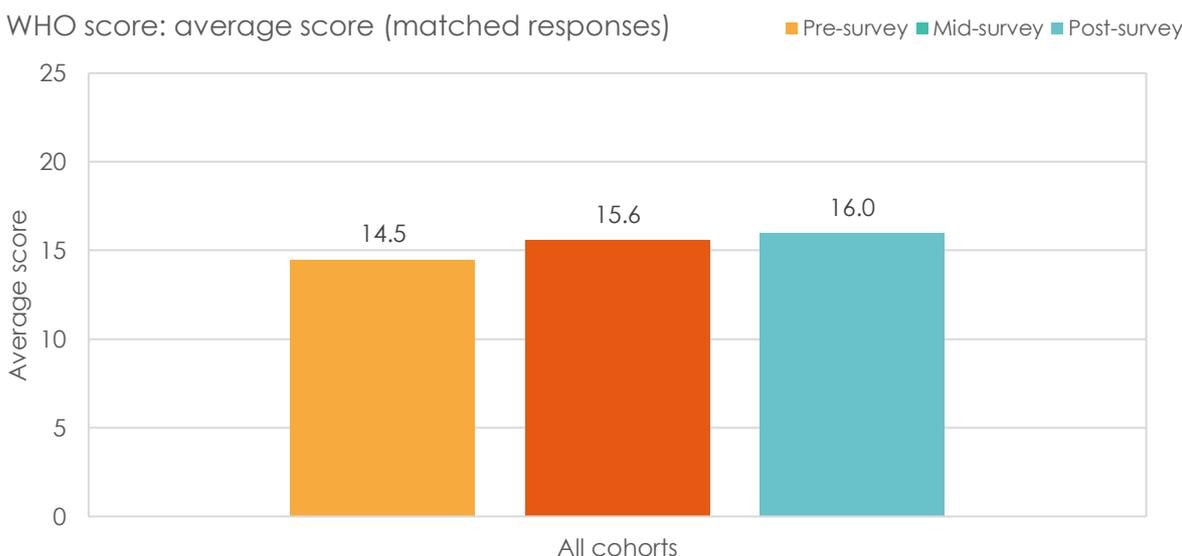
### Improved wellbeing

Participants were asked to complete the WHO Wellbeing survey. The five-item survey measures participants’ wellbeing. The maximum possible score is 25. A score of zero represents the worst possible quality of life, and a score of 25 represents the best possible quality of life. A score under 13 indicates poor wellbeing.

The results from the matched responses indicate that 27 participants (59%) experienced an improvement in their wellbeing, while eight (17%) recorded no change in their score and 11 (24%) experienced a reduction in wellbeing over the time they were on the programme.

Figure 12 shows the average wellbeing score at the different stages of participation, for participants that completed all three surveys. The results indicate that the average wellbeing score increased over time.

Figure 12: Average wellbeing score for each survey, matched responses



Source: participant survey. Base: 48 respondents with matched pre, mid and post-surveys.

Some of the participants interviewed reported increased wellbeing and improved mental health because of the programme. Others recognised that although they still experience poor mental health, the programme and their improved wellbeing meant they feel better able to deal with it and overall felt more positive.

One participant explained that the course had helped him feel more at ease about his neurodiversity and mental health by making him see that the system presented barriers to progression into employment:

'...the course did help me to come to terms with it...They helped me to see there was nothing wrong with me. It's just the way things are'. Participant, male, cohort 2

### Improved social connection

Many of the participants reported that they had made friends through the programme. Some were still in contact with other participants from their cohort who they could rely on as a source of support. They attributed this to having the opportunity to meet people like them during the workshops, feeling more confident and being more outspoken as a result of the programme.

#### Case study:

Paul joined YES North East after meeting an employment specialist at JCP. He signed up as he was actively looking for work and was keen to improve his interview skills. Paul already had some volunteering experience, but liked the idea of gaining work experience to boost his CV.

While Paul found the employability support offered by the programme very helpful, the key outcome he experienced as a result of participation was the improved social connection he felt with his peers.

*'[The] opportunity to socialise was the greatest aspect of that course, because it's, like, I never had the opportunity to actually speak to people my age or a bit below of their experiences and stuff. Secondary school, we didn't talk about it. We hid it or whatever. But, it was like, obviously, we've all had those experiences, and so, we complained about it with each other, and obviously we could relate, and I feel that that was just great, and honestly... I would have maybe gone an extra day on that course just to have that additional opportunity there.'*

Paul felt that YES North East's approach to matching up participants according to their experiences and support needs was key to him being able to make such good friends while on the course.

*'It's not for opportunity just to meet new people, but specifically the fact that it was for people that had my, sort of, disabilities... they very much made sure to learn how our disabilities have affected us and made sure to put us with people that we can relate to. And so, that's basically made it so much more about us interacting with each other.'*

## Employer perspectives on outcomes

This section explores the employer outcomes element of the Theory of Change. Employers interviewed noted a range of outcomes for them, their staff, and their organisation as a result of engaging with YES North East. Overall, employers felt the main driver of these outcomes was being given the opportunity to work with a young neurodiverse person and learn from them and their experiences. They also benefited from the support of YES North

East through discussions about the needs of the individual, and activities such as autism awareness training.

Other outcomes noted by employers are detailed below.

- Having more knowledge and experience of working with neurodiverse young people so they are more understanding about how to support someone when they are next in a position to recruit.

*'I personally as well feel I always learn a lot from engaging with young people, and meeting new personalities but at the same time I think that you end up learning things from them, and it does make you a better person because you take as much as you can, and try and apply that going forward. It gave us, especially after the first placement, I think some of our other staff were a lot more receptive to the idea of it happening again.'*

Employer

- Providing a good learning opportunity for wider staff which can transfer to working with colleagues and customers. One employer was arranging for training from NEAS to be delivered to their wider staff team so they can embed it across their organisation.

*'I think it's been a great learning opportunity for the staff to work with the partnership. And I'm sure they hopefully got things out of the programme as well and learnt new things about themselves and how they do things, so yes, it's definitely probably improved along the way. And probably how they speak to customers as well, and how they support, so definitely a real help.'* Employer

- Increasing the diversity of their staff. Two of the larger employers felt that the experience and knowledge they gained from the programme had enabled them to be more inclusive. They had fed this back to their recruitment teams and felt this had, or would, increase their staff diversity.
- Providing helpful additional capacity for their business. While this was not the primary reason for engaging, this was a helpful outcome.
- Increasing their awareness of, and networking opportunities with, local organisations.
- Providing a sense of satisfaction at having provided a positive experience to support people from the local community. It also helped the company's reputation and showed that they act on their values.

*'We sadly can't give everyone we interact with a job, in fact, we can give very few people we interact with paid work, which is a real shame, but what we can give them is, we can give them the ability to maybe increase their confidence, give them a wider perspective and meet new people and go off and make jobs elsewhere, which is fantastic.'* Employer

Employers who offered work placements also observed several outcomes that the opportunity had for participants and felt these were driven by the young person being given the opportunity to take part in a placement, see how the workplace operates, and work with different people. Key outcomes included:

- increasing the participants' confidence and social skills (which had led to further work experience opportunities for one young person)
- enhancing the participants' CVs with relevant sector experience and knowledge
- improving transferable skills that can help participants get jobs in a range of sectors
- improving the participants' understanding of different industries, work, and the workplace – and their own preferences in these.

*'Really just their confidence growing, and obviously them having been able to kind of see the aspect of a real-life job and understand it, and understand the logistics that go with that. But yes, I'd definitely say their confidence has grown throughout.'* Employer

### Delivery staff perspective on outcomes

NEAS delivery staff were positive about the impact that the programme had on their organisation and staff. A key outcome for delivery staff was the amount of knowledge and understanding they had gained in working with the target cohort for the programme. Staff attributed this to having the time and opportunity to reflect on their practice, identify what was not working and make adaptations to the programme model.

*'There's been a lot of things that went wrong. Because of that, there's been a lot of lessons learned. Because of that, the depth of knowledge that we've gained is much greater.'* NEAS delivery staff

*'It is beneficial to us as it is to the participants, yeah... by reviewing and reflecting on it, it allows you to adapt and improve.'* NEAS delivery staff

One staff member felt that the way in which the Youth Futures Foundation managed the programme enabled them to take this approach of continuous improvement, as their requirements around recording and paperwork were far less than previous local government grants that NEAS had won, leaving more time for delivery and reflection. In hindsight, they felt that having a development grant first would have benefitted the organisation, as the evaluation would then have been assessing a far stronger model.

*'Now we've all got all of this learning we can't apply that to this fund. So we've used up our chance. Whereas if it'd been developed and then we put all that learning into practise and then we'd been evaluated, would [we have] been evaluated on a much better service? I think it would have. Which is a shame.'* NEAS delivery staff

One staff member mentioned that staff's skills and experience in facilitating group sessions had been developed significantly due to the programme focussing on this delivery method.

NEAS staff were also very positive about the changes they had seen for participants on the programme. A key outcome for participants identified by delivery staff was a sharp increase in their confidence and self-esteem. Staff spoke about the change in participants from the start to the end of the programme, in terms of their engagement with others in sessions, confidence to speak up and belief in their own skills and abilities.

*'I've seen people very nervous or very unsure of themselves coming in into the first sessions and then they've come out their shells and been in a much more certain position of how they're going to proceed going forward.'* NEAS delivery staff

Staff linked these outcomes to the group nature of the programme and participants engaging with others their own age in a safe and supportive space, which helped them move out of their comfort zone and have new experiences. This was reinforced by one-to-one feedback from staff throughout the programme.

*'So a lot of the staff would have one-on-one sessions... where they'd say "I really enjoyed the way that you joined in today and I found that the comment that you made was really insightful". You know, they go away and they have a spring in their step as they're walking away because they're kind of like "Wow, I didn't think of that, I didn't think of myself in that way".'* NEAS delivery staff

Delivery staff also felt that the group nature of the programme enabled participants to build new social connections through regular positive interactions with others and sharing their experiences.

Another key outcome delivery staff identified for participants was improved mental wellbeing and the ability to manage their mental health. Staff gave examples of participants having a more positive outlook, having an increased sense of purpose, and appearing happier overall in sessions. They attributed these outcomes to the person-centred nature of the support offered on the programme which tailored activities to participants' needs.

*'There's been an increase in people feeling like they have a purpose, like they belong to something, like they have a clear path now or a vision for the future that didn't exist before.'* NEAS delivery staff

In relation to employment and training, NEAS staff felt that participants often raised their aspirations around the type of work they could do, or being able to gain work at all. Staff explained that many participants joined the programme not feeling that there was a job out there for them, but the strength-based and positive approach of the delivery model, combined with the skills workshops and practical experience they gained, meant that by the end, participants were far more likely to feel they could gain good quality employment in an area that interested them.

*'I always like it when you see people who don't believe they've got transferable skills or they don't believe that there are jobs they can do. Once you go through it with them, then they start realising, 'Yes, I can do this stuff. I can do x,y,z'. It's very rewarding for me and I think it's really good for them to get an idea of what they're capable of.'* NEAS delivery staff

Staff also commented that the skills workshops, CV creation, guest speakers and work placements helped participants to understand their strengths and their interests in relation to work. This often boosted participants' motivation to look for work or training by the end of the programme.

*'Physically wanting to apply, volunteer or do some additional training, going to higher education. I've got examples of each one of those - participants who didn't consider that*

*before the programme, actually thinking about “what do I want to do? How am I going to do it?”* NEAS delivery staff

In the evaluation workshops, NEAS staff reflected on the considerable progress that participants had made towards work, even if they had not achieved a hard employment outcome. They discussed how it is difficult for many people to move from benefits into employment, and this is all the more challenging for neurodiverse young people. NEAS staff flagged that for some participants, just leaving the house and turning up to a group session was massive progress. As such, the intermediate outcomes of job interviews and offers for participants are very positive, and are quite significant achievements for many.

Finally, a couple of delivery staff also felt that the programme had helped local employers to be more inclusive and consider reasonable adjustments for neurodivergent young people. This was through the autism training offered by NEAS, as well as ongoing engagement with programme staff and participants.

*‘I took a participant there to meet the staff at [employer]. I was really pleased to see how the member of staff was asking all the right kind of questions, about sensory issues, about where they'd be sitting, do they mind that people are walking behind them, so they were really taking the autism awareness training on board and putting it to good use.’* NEAS delivery staff

## 7. Conclusions and recommendations

Neurodiverse young people face a greater number of barriers to participating in the labour market than other young people and mainstream employment-related provision may not address all the challenges faced by this group. To tackle this, NEAS created YES North East, offering a new approach to specialised employment support for neurodiverse young people aged 18 to 24 who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET).

Despite challenges securing sufficient referrals and registrations, YES North East engaged 140 participants with the multi-stage programme. This included group workshops, additional one-to-one support, work placements and sustained contact following programme completion.

Findings from the evaluation suggest the YES North East model has successfully supported participants to move into, and closer to, work, with 14% moving into employment, a further 14% moving into education, and 36% having engaged in volunteering or work experience.

The evidence also provides a clear indication of improvements in priority areas for participants, including increased confidence, self-belief, wellbeing, and social interaction. Notably, survey data showed that 59% of respondents experienced an improvement in their wellbeing, and 67% experienced an improvement in their confidence.<sup>28</sup> There was also some evidence of improved capability to look for work and enhanced employment-related aspirations.

While it is clear that YES North East had a positive impact on the participants it supported, the programme fell short of the targets originally proposed. Challenges with referrals and recruitment meant the programme did not meet its target of engaging 195 young people. Furthermore, at 14%, the proportion of participants gaining employment post-programme was substantially lower than the 20% expected. The number of participants moving into education or training also fell short by the same margin.

### Recommendations for the design and delivery of similar programmes

Expand efforts to engage and recruit eligible participants. YES North East overcame a variety of challenges to steadily build referrals and registrations over the course of the programme. Expanding the age eligibility of participants, increasing referrals from JCP and developing awareness of the service in the community helped support recruitment. Yet, some obstacles remained, including difficulties recruiting young women onto the programme. For future programmes, providers should consider the following:

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<sup>28</sup> Base: 48 respondents with matched pre, mid and post-surveys.

Exploring additional ways to raise awareness and promote the programme, including working with community organisations and services to support outreach and engage the target group and their parents/carers. Programme providers should also reflect on how they can capture the experiences of participants who have achieved positive outcomes and use these to promote the programme, for example, by creating videos for social media or designing an information pack to share with potential participants.

Links with colleges and learning providers offer a valuable opportunity to reach education leavers and access a steady flow of referrals. Programme providers should consider engaging with schools and their pastoral teams, as well as local authority SEND teams. Consideration would need to be given to programme design and how this would tie in with the academic year to avoid potential participants being NEET for any length of time before joining.

Programme providers should consider the use of outreach and engagement specialists, whose role is dedicated to developing relationships with key partner services and generating referral pathways and registrations.

Invest in developing strong relationships with employers of all sizes, and across growth sectors. Evidence from the evaluation found that developing relationships with employers took time and considerable resource. Stronger links with employers would help to build pathways to employment for participants.

Programme providers should consider utilising a progressive model of supported work opportunities which guides participants through more intensive levels, fostering their experience and relationships with employers. This could range from brief 'work tasters', longer-lasting 'placements' and more long-term opportunities, depending on the needs and preferences of participants.

Links with employers could be used to offer a job brokerage service, helping to match local job opportunities with programme participants. The offer of specialist guidance with adjustments and options for continued in-work support could be used to support engagement with employers.

Alongside developing strong relationships with employers, providers should focus on understanding local labour markets and future growth sectors. It is crucial that young people are supported to gain the skills and experience needed to progress to sustainable jobs. Understanding local labour market data, growth sectors, skills gaps and employer needs will underpin future proofing of job opportunities for young people.

Maintain and expand valuable relationships with external partners and services. Partnerships have been key to the implementation and delivery of the YES North East model, particularly referrals from JCP and the arrangement of work placements with local employers. Regular contact, good relationships between staff, and integrated working have been key to securing the effective participation of these partners – adding substantial value to the programme. Additional relationships with wider organisations and services also helped to expand the benefits offered by YES North East, via signposting of programme participants to additional support and education and training opportunities (for example, Barnardo's training scheme and the 'Access to HE' college course).

Providers should consider expanding partnerships with wider services to develop referral and signposting pathways to direct any participants in need of further support following completion of a programme – helping to deliver outcomes in the long-term for participants yet to move into work. This should cover the variety of needs that participants who have completed the programme continue to have, including employment, education and skills, health, and housing support.

Evidence from the evaluation found the main barriers participants faced when moving into work were often attributed to their own health conditions and poor mental health rather than systemic barriers. Providers designing or delivering a similar programme should consider how provision can be joined up with health services at a strategic and local level. Participants should be given information about local health services and be signposted to this where needed.

Providers should explore ways in which specialist services could play an active role in the delivery of programmes, for example, by giving presentations or facilitating workshops. This would build links between young people and local services, creating a stronger network of support for them beyond the lifetime of the programme.

Further research. This evaluation did not examine whether lived experience of neurodiversity is a critical factor in the design and delivery of programmes for this cohort. Future evaluations should examine this to better understand if and how it may impact programmes.

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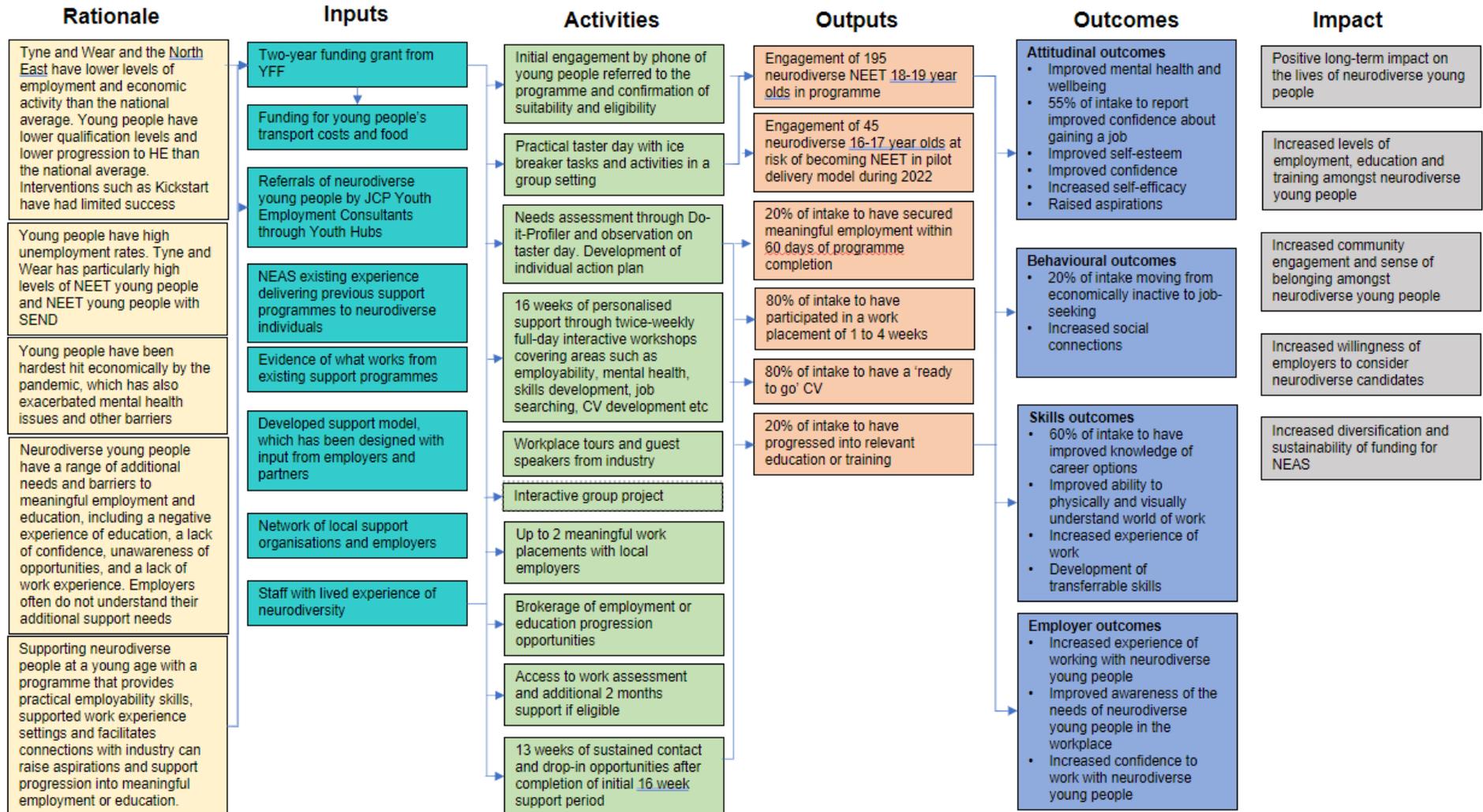
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## Appendix 1: Theory of Change

The Theory of Change underlying the design of the YES North East programme is set out below.



# Appendix 2: Evaluation Framework

EVALUATION QUESTIONS	Data sources						
	MI analysis	Pre, mid and post-participant survey	Interviews with programme participants	Interviews with delivery staff	Interviews with employers	Interviews with stakeholders	Workshops with key stakeholders
<b>IMPLEMENTATION</b>							
Programme delivery							
How is the programme promoted to young people and partner services?							
What are the different pathways young people take/how do they enter the programme?							
Which outreach/engagement activities are most successful in recruiting young people (which young people?)							
How many young people have participated in the programme?							
Is the programme reaching the target groups?							
How are participant needs assessed and identified?							
How and where is the programme delivered?							
What type of activities are being delivered across the programme?							
How is support tailored and personalised to individuals need?							
Who is involved in delivering the programme?							
How are work experience placements brokered to young people?							
What types of challenges and issues are experienced in delivering the programme?							
Young people							
What types of issues and obstacles to employment do neurodiverse young people face?							
What is neurodiverse young people's experience of looking for and being in work?							
What types of support are neurodiverse young people seeking when wanting to move into or closer to work?							
What types of support are neurodiverse young people accessing alongside YES North East?							
How satisfied are young people with the support offered by YES North East?							

How satisfied are young people with work placements offered through YES North East?							
<b>Employers</b>							
What kind of issues and challenges do local employers face?							
How many employers are engaging with the programme?							
What types of employers (size, sector, location) are engaging with the programme?							
What are the most successful methods of engaging employers?							
In what ways were employers involved in the programme?							
In what ways did the programme improve employer awareness and experience working with neurodiverse young people							
How do employers feel that the support offered contributes to young people's outcomes?							
How do employers feel that the programme model contributes to employer outcomes?							
<b>OUTCOMES</b>							
<b>Programme delivery</b>							
Which elements of the programme work as the main drivers of change for improving young people's motivation, confidence and other behavioural outcomes							
Which elements of the programme work as the main drivers of change for supporting improvements in young people's mental health and wellbeing							
Which elements of the programme work as the main drivers of change for improving young people's employability skills and knowledge of career options							
Which elements of the programme work as the main drivers of change for improving young people's experience of the workplace							
Are young people more prepared for employment as a result of attending the programme?							
Is the programme offering suitable support to help young people achieve a positive outcome							
Is the programme offering suitable support to help neurodiverse young people move closer and into employment							
Does support by those with lived experience make the difference for young people with same needs?							
What changes do staff observe their participants making through the support they offer? [what can be attributed to the support							

intervention and what is outside of support/ missing in current support or will be tested in this model?]							
What makes the difference to trigger intervening outcomes / key change points so that young people achieve sustained EET outcomes?							
Young people							
To what extent has NEAS supported young people to overcome mental health needs?							
To what extent has NEAS supported young people to overcome additional support needs?							
To what extent has NEAS supported young people to overcome social isolation?							
To what extent has NEAS supported young people to overcome lack of engagement with services?							
To what extent has NEAS supported young people to overcome low confidence?							
To what extent has NEAS supported young people to overcome limited aspirations?							
To what extent has NEAS supported young people to overcome limited awareness of opportunities?							
To what extent has NEAS supported young people to overcome limited access to / experience of work experience?							
To what extent has NEAS supported young people to overcome negative experiences of education?							
How does the support offered impact on young people's social and emotional outcomes?							
Does the support offered increase young people's work readiness and experience in the workplace?							
How does the support offered impact on young people's mental health?							
How does the support offered support young people into employment, education or training?							
Do young people feel they are better informed about their career and employment options and how to get there?							
What impact do young people's involvement with employers have on their work readiness?							
Does young people's motivation, self-esteem and self-efficacy change as a result of participating with the programme?							

Does young people's social isolation reduce as a result of attending the programme?							
What impact does the programme have on young people's understanding of their existing transferrable skills and aspirations for further development?							
Do young people feel better equipped and confident to gain a job?							
What impact does the support offered have on young people's job searching and interview skills?							
How do delivery staff and referral staff feel that development in young people's behaviours, knowledge and skills improves their outcomes?							
How do young people feel that the support offered impacts on their outcomes in life and work?							
How do young people feel that the support offered impacts on their outcomes in training and education?							
<b>Employers</b>							
What is the value for employers participating in the programme?							
Which elements of the programmes deliver the greatest impact for employers?							
Do employers feel that young people are more prepared for work following the programme?							
How do employers think that development in young people's attitudes/behaviours, knowledge and skills improves their outcomes?							
<b>NEAS</b>							
Which elements of the programmes and how they are delivered act as the main mechanisms of change for neurodiverse young people?							
What jobs/sectors are young people going into following the programme?							