

# Strategy 2025-2028



# Contents

## FOREWORD

Yi Kang Choo, Futures Voices Ambassador  
Seyi Obakin OBE, Board Chair

04

04

05

## INTRODUCTION

Barry Fletcher, CEO  
About Youth Futures Foundation  
Youth employment context

06

06

07

10

## OUR STRATEGY

Vision, mission and 'north star' goals  
Theory of change  
Themes of work  
Marginalised groups  
Audiences, levers of change and outcomes  
Youth inclusion  
How it fits together

12

12

14

16

18

19

21

22

# Foreword

Yi Kang Choo, Futures Voices Ambassador (Alumni)



**As young people from marginalised backgrounds continue to face significant barriers in securing good work in the UK, the mandate of Youth Futures Foundation remains as crucial as ever. By focusing on robust evidence of 'what works,' Youth Futures is strategically positioned to drive lasting, systemic change and help reduce the persistent disparities in employment outcomes for marginalised young people.**

Since joining the Future Voices Group in 2022, I have witnessed firsthand how deeply youth voice is embedded within Youth Futures' organisational strategy and work. I am particularly pleased to note the continuation of embedding youth voice when forming this newly-refreshed strategy. As young people, we're tired of being sidelined when employment policies are crafted 'for' us, and we're frustrated when policies or practices fail to deliver the support we need. The continuation of youth involvement in shaping this strategy shows Youth Futures' genuine belief in the power of lived experience as a key driver for change.

The revised vision and mission of Youth Futures now resonate more strongly with our hopes and ambitions as young people. It is bold, action-oriented, and laser-focused on Youth Futures' role in identifying 'what works' to shape policy and practices that enable young people to secure and thrive in good work.

I am also encouraged by Youth Futures' adoption of a 'thematic framework approach'. This strategic shift enables a more focused categorisation of key issues and themes amongst the organisation's work, ensuring that resources are allocated effectively and impactfully. More importantly, it also reflects the complex, intersectional challenges young people face when trying to access good work. Furthermore, the identification of eight marginalised groups who will be the focus from 2025-2028 – those who currently face the most significant barriers to employment – demonstrates Youth Futures' commitment to being intentional, evidence-driven, and targeted in its efforts. Recognising the distinct needs of each marginalised group helps to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach that sees youth as a homogeneous entity.

As we embark on this new chapter, I want to acknowledge the dedication of everyone involved that has brought us to this point. I am also grateful for the continued commitment to embedding youth voice at the heart of Youth Futures' work. With the guidance of the refreshed strategy and theory of change, I am confident that Youth Futures is well-positioned to play an even more transformative role nationally in meaningfully reducing the employment gap for marginalised young people.

# Foreword

Seyi Obakin OBE, Board Chair



**The scale and complexity of the UK's youth employment challenge requires co-ordinated systems change to deliver sustainable solutions. As the What Works Centre for youth employment, Youth Futures Foundation has a key role to play in facilitating this change.**

In its first five years of operation, the organisation made significant progress, building important foundations to enable systems change for young people. But there is much more we and others collectively need to do to deepen our understanding of the employment barriers faced by marginalised young people. Plus, what works to address this, ensuring these insights are translated and embedded into the realities of policy and practice.

Looking ahead to the next phase of our activity, the 2025-2028 strategy reiterates our clear intent to identify and test promising interventions and share our learnings with decision-makers who have the power to adopt and scale up evidence-based solutions for young people.

Core to our approach is collaboration and working in partnership. As an organisation seeking change within the system that marginalised young people navigate, we will continue to align high-quality evidence with real-world experiences and practical application, operating with and connecting evidence producers and decision-makers. Most importantly, we will continue to listen to and involve young people, putting their voices and experiences at the heart of what we do.

I am energised by the ambition of this new strategy and the path ahead, and I am proud to renew my contribution to such an important organisation that strives to build a future where every young person can achieve good work.



# Introduction

Barry Fletcher, CEO



**Youth Futures Foundation was founded in 2019 with a mission to address systemic employment disparities and disadvantages faced by marginalised young people in England. In our first five years, we have built the evidence to better understand why these different employment outcomes exist and their long-term impact on our young people. Despite progress, the challenge remains stark: 1 in 8 young people are not in education, employment, or training (NEET), with those from marginalised backgrounds disproportionately affected.**

As England's What Works Centre for youth employment, Youth Futures plays a pivotal role in building evidence, shaping policy, and influencing practice. Over the past five years, we've matured from a start-up to an established organisation, navigating major challenges like the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis. These events have underscored the urgency of addressing employment barriers and the interconnected impacts on young people's wellbeing, communities, and the economy.

Our 2025-2028 strategy focuses on the key levers of change within the system to transform employment outcomes for specific groups of young people. We will work with policymakers, funders, and employers to embed evidence-driven solutions through accessible tools and continue to centre youth voices in our work.

To galvanise action, our new strategy sets an ambitious goal: for England to have the lowest NEET rate in the OECD by 2050. The challenge is big but so is the prize for getting it right, not only for young people but our society and economy at large. This is a statement of intent we hope others will join us in calling for.

This strategy reflects the collective input of our Board, staff, partners, and young people. It is a call to action for policymakers, employers, and funders to join us in creating a future where all young people can thrive, contributing to a more inclusive, prosperous society.



# About Youth Futures Foundation

## Who we are

Youth Futures Foundation is the national What Works Centre for youth employment, with a specific focus on marginalised young people.

## What we do

We find and generate high-quality evidence to better understand England's youth unemployment and inactivity challenge and, most importantly, to learn what solutions work to address this. We do this by bringing together the best evidence already in existence and build on this by conducting original research and testing. We then evaluate promising interventions to produce much-needed new evidence where there are gaps.

We put evidence into action with policymakers, employers, and funders who have the means to make direct, impactful change within the system for young people. We do this by translating the evidence practically for stakeholders to use and understand. Through partnerships and engagement to influence, we inform and support them as decision-makers to back evidence-based interventions that work.

## Youth inclusion

Throughout our work, we proudly involve the voices, perspectives and participation of young people experiencing marginalisation, through our Future Voices Group, our young Board members, and beyond. We believe that the young people who are most affected by the system have invaluable perspectives and experience and, therefore, must be at the heart of efforts to change it.

We actively ensure that all young people engaged with Youth Futures Foundation meaningfully influence our work and advocate within the employment system while also developing their skills and personal outcomes. Our Future Voices Group programme harnesses these insights to craft impactful narratives that influence the knowledge, practice, and behaviour of key actors and audiences within the system such as policymakers and employers. The group also participate in decision-making and projects throughout Youth Futures.

Our Connected Futures Ambassadors elevate stories from Connected Futures partnerships, creating compelling narratives about young people's local experiences and systemic change efforts. Our Building Futures Youth Advisory Group, composed of 14-16-year-olds, provides crucial input on programmatic elements that shape the delivery and evaluation of the Building Futures programme.

# Our History



# 2025: The current picture for young people

Across the UK, the proportion of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET) has stayed persistently high over decades. The challenge is even greater for the most marginalised young people, who face serious systemic barriers to finding and keeping good work.

## Youth employment

- NEET rates in the UK are worsening, with 1 in 8 young people not in of education, employment or training.
- Young men and those from some minoritised ethnic backgrounds including Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi young people experience higher NEET rates.
- There is significant regional variation, with the North East seeing the highest NEET rate at 15% for 16-24 year olds.
- Marginalised young people face significant barriers to employment, particularly those with special educational needs and disabilities and those with experiences in the care system.
- Two major issues affecting young people's employment in 2025 are poor mental health and the lack of access to apprenticeship opportunities.



## Youth employment in an international context<sup>1</sup>

- In the most recently available international comparison (2022), the UK sat near the middle of the OECD with a NEET rate of 12.5%; lower than, but close to, the OECD average of 14.3%.
- The UK's NEET rate fell from 15.3% to 12.5% between 2002 and 2022, but this is a smaller reduction than in comparable countries.
- Analysis tells us that over the long term, UK GDP could be increased by £69bn if NEET rates were reduced to the levels seen in the Netherlands.

1. OECD data refers to 20-24 year olds



## Young people's outlook on the labour market in 2025

- Young people perceive that finding a job has become more difficult, but many remain optimistic about the future.
- There is high awareness of many services available to find career, job, and training opportunities, with 79% of young people aware of job websites such as Glassdoor, Indeed, and Totaljobs.
- In-school and online activities see the highest levels of engagement from 16 to 25-year-olds, with seven in ten young people (69%) reporting they had accessed careers advice and guidance within a school or college.
- There remains variation between the way in which young people who are NEET access services, and the approach of those who are in education, employment or training.
- 16 to 25-year-olds face significant barriers to entering the world of work and the most commonly cited perceived barrier is a lack of training, skills, and work experience.
- A third of young people report having a mental health condition, and 85% of those believe that their condition affects their ability to either find work, or to function in a professional environment.
- While apprenticeships are seen as helpful, some young people encounter significant barriers to accessing them.

Source: The 2024 Youth Employment Outlook

Explore the latest data: <https://data.youthfuturesfoundation.org/>



# Our Strategy

## Vision and mission

A vision that speaks to our core beliefs and aspirations for all young people.

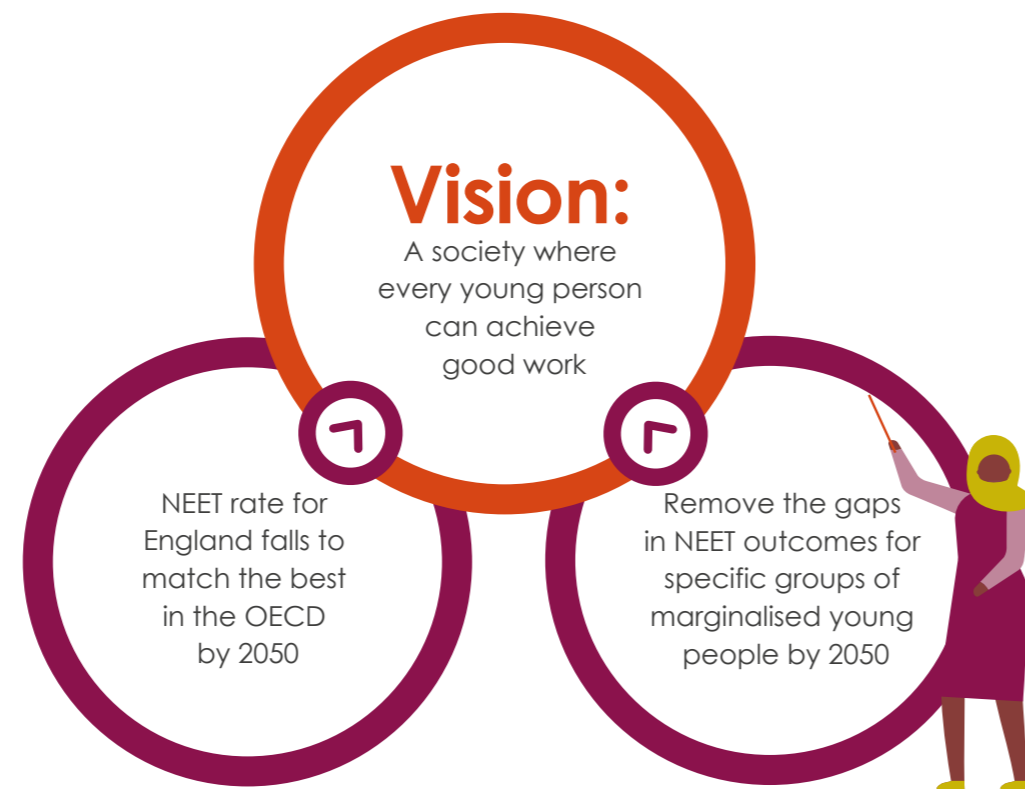
An action-orientated mission as a What Works centre focusing on young people facing marginalisation and seeking transformational change in the system.

### Vision:

A society where every young person can achieve good work

### Mission:

To ensure marginalised young people can secure and thrive in good work, by finding out What Works and driving change in policy and practice



## ‘North Star’ goals

**Providing a clear measure across the system for the long-term change we want to see.**

Reaching our vision of a society where every young person can achieve good work will be no easy task. It requires bold ambition, sustained effort, and a shared commitment across all parts of the system. The two ‘north star’ goals we have set provide a clear measure for the long-term change we want to see. These goals speak directly to the transformative impact required for a marginalised young person born today to experience a different reality when they reach working life in the future.

Working towards this future means setting clear milestones and taking consistent action over decades. This is not something Youth Futures can achieve alone – it demands collective effort from policymakers, employers, and funders alike. By adopting world-class measures inspired by the best-performing countries like the Netherlands, we can set the UK on a path to be the best in the OECD by 2050. These goals are about more than numbers; they represent a commitment to fairness, inclusion, and opportunity for all young people, ensuring that no one is left behind.

# A theory of change that clearly describes:

Our '**evidence engine**' which describes at a high level the activities we will carry out and how they fit together through four broad elements:

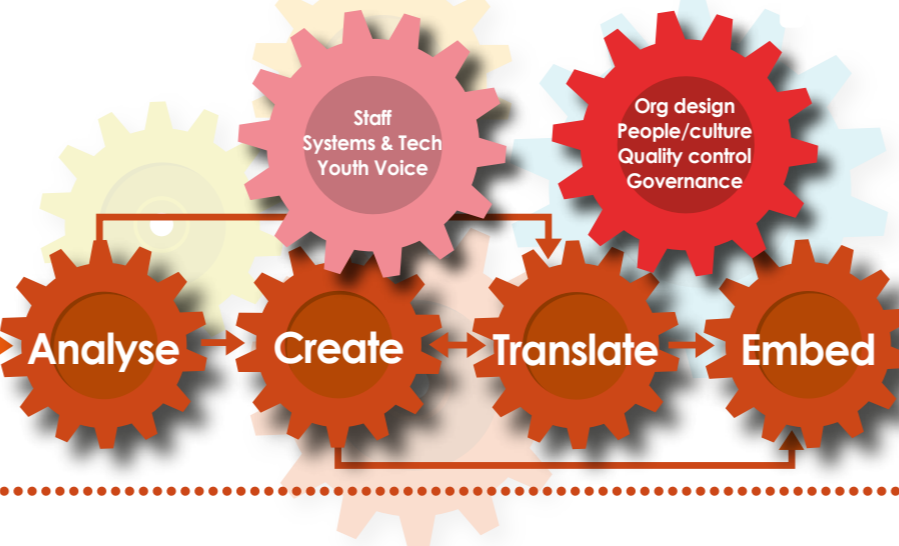
- 1. Analyse:** we capture, collate and analyse data, research, and insights from stakeholders, delivery partners, and young people to understand what is happening to young people and why.
- 2. Create:** we address gaps by partnering on research, designing and funding evaluations of interventions, and generating findings that refine our understanding and help us meet the needs of those working in policy and practice who can most directly affect change for young people.
- 3. Translate:** we turn complex evidence (our own and from elsewhere) into practical and accessible formats for policymakers, funders, employers and others in the system, ensuring it can be applied effectively in real-world settings.
- 4. Embed:** we work with key audience stakeholders (primarily policymakers, funders, and employers) to help them put evidence into action directly to better support marginalised young people for lasting, systemic improvement.

## PROBLEM

- ▶ Young people not earning or learning has remained stubbornly high
- ▶ Young people who are marginalised face greater barriers to accessing good work
- ▶ Limited understanding and application of evidence in the youth employment system

Data | DA funding | Expert advice

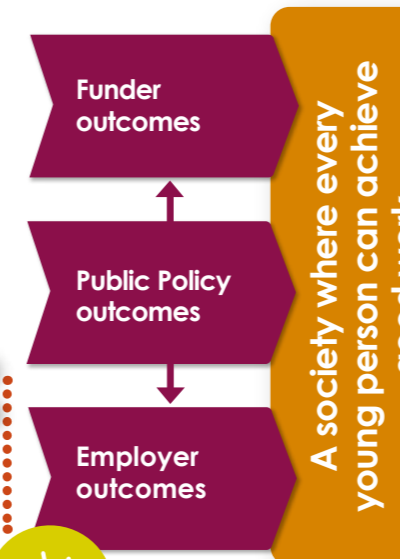
## INPUTS, ACTIVITIES, OUTPUTS WHAT WORKS EVIDENCE ENGINE



## ENVIRONMENT

Discrimination against marginalised groups  
 Stakeholder/partner relations and co-funding  
 Public attitudes towards youth, employment (and evidence)  
 The wider economy and labour market

## OUTCOMES VISION



The youth employment '**problem**' we are focusing on addressing through our work:

- NEET levels have remained consistently high in England.
- Challenges are greater for those most marginalised.
- Evidence is key for solutions, but availability is limited at present.

The **three outcome areas** define the audiences we believe hold significant levers in the system (policymakers, funders, and employers), and are where we will focus our efforts to achieve our ultimate **vision**.

### The arrows signify that:

Collaboration is key to the success of the engine and how we operate to achieve our aims.

The engine is iterative – we learn from our attempts to embed change, that increases our understanding and helps to target the creation of new evidence and ways of influencing.

The changeable **external environment** we operate in, which can act as both an enabler and constrainer to our work over time.

# Strategic focus areas

Based on what the current evidence tells us, and the existing gaps in knowledge, we are focusing on seven key themes of work over the 2025-2028 period to affect change.



Over the next four years, we will focus on seven key themes of work.

## What we mean by 'Good Work'

We know that quality of work is just as important as its availability for young people.

As we strive to make good work accessible for all young people, we need to understand what good work really looks like, putting their voices at the heart of the conversation and underpinned by robust evidence.

Our collaboration with Workwhile has produced a definition of 'Good Work' created with young people from marginalised backgrounds. In July 2024, a diverse group of people aged 18-25 shared their wants, needs, and experiences to co-create this definition. The group had varied experiences of work, but they were united in wanting to be supported to do great things for themselves and their employers.

The definition is designed to be easily communicated and understood by employers, policymakers, and others working in youth employment. As we strive to make Good Work accessible for young people, this definition helps us strive for something that meets their needs and it is a vital staging post in our continuing work to drive evidence-based change. We will give the definition room to evolve over this strategy period as we uncover more evidence.

**“Good work means feeling valued, fulfilled, and supported. It means being respected and treated fairly in a workplace that is diverse and inclusive, where there is open and honest communication and decent pay. Everyone should have a voice. Good work is done to a high standard and gives you a sense of achievement. It happens in a place where you can make change happen. Good work protects your health and wellbeing. You’re excited to tell your friends and family about good work, not because they ask but because you’re proud of it.”**



# Marginalised groups

We remain steadfast in our mission to transform employment outcomes for all marginalised young people. Achieving equity in earning and learning outcomes by 2050 for specific marginalised groups of young people is an ambitious goal that requires targeted and sustained effort. Over this four-year strategy period, we will focus our research and investment on groups identified through robust analysis of data, evidence on outcomes, insights from existing programmes, and the evolving political and environmental landscape.

This strategic focus is not about excluding others; it reflects a recognition that some groups face compounded barriers that demand urgent attention. We also acknowledge that the experiences of marginalisation are deeply intersectional - factors such as gender, sexuality, poverty, and class interact with race, disability, and systemic inequities, amplifying disadvantages. Our approach will remain attuned to these overlapping dimensions of exclusion, ensuring that our work addresses the broader systems and structures that perpetuate inequality.

Evidence shows that young people with the characteristics outlined here are disproportionately represented among those who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) for extended periods. For instance, around half of those NEET for over a year share one or more of these characteristics:

- Black
- Pakistani
- Bangladeshi
- Experience of the care system
- Experience of the justice system
- Learning disability
- Autism
- Mental health challenges

Our strategy is designed to confront these disparities head-on, ensuring that every young person – regardless of their starting point – has the opportunity to thrive in good work.

# Audiences, levers of change and outcomes

Our theory of change identifies three pivotal audiences within the youth employment system, each holding significant levers of change. By focusing our efforts on these key groups – policymakers, funders, and employers – we aim to equip them with robust evidence of what works to drive change. This strategic approach has large-scale systemic change at the heart of improving employment outcomes for young people who experience marginalisation.

## Ambitions for success

We have assigned a specific ambition to each audience group for achievement by 2028. These ambitions highlight the key areas where we will concentrate our efforts in pursuing our mission.

### Audiences and their levers of change

#### Policymakers

Policymakers are national and regional officials and bodies who set laws and policies that directly shape the structural and operational framework for youth employment opportunities

#### Funders

Funders and commissioners from governmental, philanthropic and corporate sectors who allocate financial resources that shape the scope, reach, and quality of employment programmes and services available to young people

#### Employers

Employers, ranging from small businesses to large corporations, provide the jobs and training opportunities available to young people

### Ambitions for success

More public policy is based on evidence of what works to a) help marginalised young people into and stay in good quality education, employment and training and b) create more employment opportunities

More funding for youth employment, education and training support programmes is a) available and b) evidence-based

More employer practice is based on evidence of what works to recruit and retain marginalised young people

“By focusing on robust evidence of what works, Youth Futures is strategically positioned to drive lasting, systemic change.”

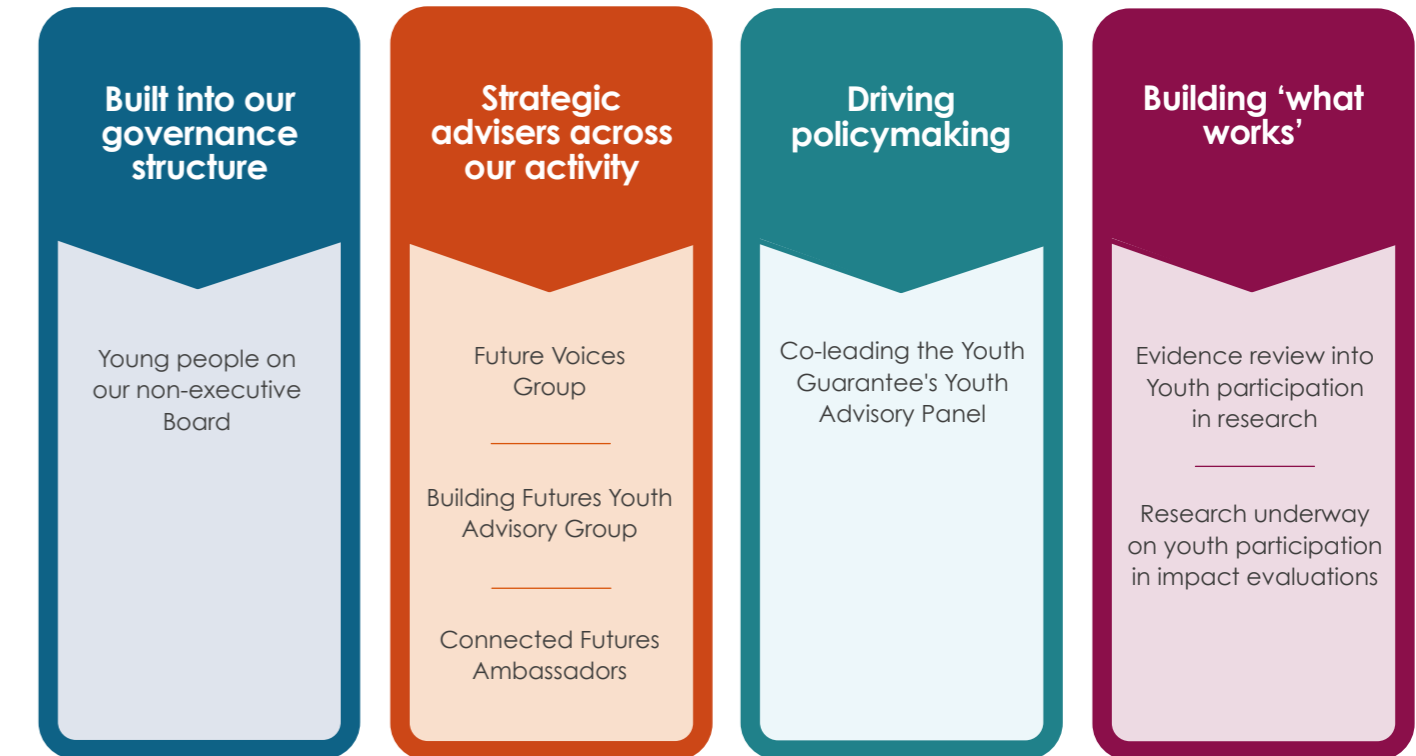
Yi Kang Choo, Future Voices Ambassador.

## Youth inclusion

Throughout this strategy period, high-quality and meaningful youth inclusion will be a key enabler to enriching and improving our work. Built into our governance, our key areas of activity, and influencing of key systemic actors, youth inclusion remains a core way in which we can achieve better outcomes for marginalised young people.

We will continue to maintain and grow the impact of our four flagship advisory groups (Future Voices Group, Connected Futures Ambassadors, Building Futures Youth Advisory Group and our co-leadership of the youth participation group for the Government's Youth Guarantee), alongside building the evidence base underpinning high-quality youth participation practice as a whole (to ensure we are applying 'what works' wherever possible). Over the next four years, young people will particularly help to lead the conversations with policymakers and employers in translating and embedding evidence to drive changes in policy and practice.

### Youth Inclusion in all we do



# How it fits together

Our efforts during this strategy period will build over time to achieve impact, driving necessary change in policy and practice for marginalised young people.

## THEMATIC FOCUS

Barriers & Discrimination  
in Employment

Place-based Change

Mental Health & Wellbeing

Early Intervention &  
Transition

Apprenticeships &  
Vocational Training

Employment Support

Amplifying the Youth  
Employment Challenge &  
Opportunity

## OUTCOMES BY 2028

### Policymakers

More public policy based is on evidence of what works to (a) help marginalised young people into & stay in good quality education, training and employment and (b) create more employment opportunities.

### Funders

More funding for youth employment, education, training and support services is (a) available and (b) more evidence-based.

### Employers

More employer practice is based on evidence of what works to recruit and include marginalised young people.

## GOALS BY 2050

### ‘North Star’ goals

NEET rate for England falls to match the best in the OECD by 2050.

Remove the gaps in earning or learning outcomes for specific groups of marginalised young people by 2050.

Our organisational portfolio of work, encapsulated by our seven thematic areas of focus, is designed to be audience-centric and will be instrumental in achieving the three targeted outcomes outlined for this strategic period. This approach is pivotal not only for immediate success but also for the system to reach the ‘North Star’ goals we are setting by 2050.



**Get in touch:**

**[www.youthfuturesfoundation.org](http://www.youthfuturesfoundation.org)**

 **@YF\_Foundation**

 **company/youthfuturesfoundation**