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Giving Young People a Chance

A place-based exploration of barriers to employment for young people from Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds



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Foreword

Young people from Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds continue to face significant barriers when entering and progressing in work. Youth Futures Foundation's research shows that ethnic disparities persist across the labour market, and that experiences of discrimination continue to affect many young people's access to and experience of work. Yet statistics alone cannot fully capture how these barriers are experienced, or what needs to change to address them.

This report takes us beyond the numbers. Based on qualitative research with young people, employers and local stakeholders in Bradford, Brent, Leeds and Walsall, it provides a rich picture of the realities young people from minority ethnic backgrounds face as they move from education into employment. Most importantly, it places young people's experiences and perspectives at the heart of the discussion.

Three themes emerge from the research: work readiness, fair hiring and employment, and the need to give young people a chance. While these challenges are not new, the experiences shared by young people highlight just how persistent they are. Bringing together the perspectives of young people, employers and local partners reinforces the importance of thinking carefully about how we prepare young people for work, how recruitment processes operate in practice, and how experiences of discrimination can shape confidence, aspirations and opportunities.

What stands out throughout this report is the strength, determination and ambition of the young people who took part in the research. While many describe significant challenges, they also offer practical insights into what could make a difference. They want fair opportunities, meaningful support, transparent recruitment processes and workplaces where they can feel valued, respected and able to grow. Their experiences remind us that talent is widely distributed, but opportunity isn't. Education providers, community organisations, funders and policymakers all have a role to play in addressing this, collaborating to support smoother transitions into work and tackling barriers that prevent young people from flourishing. Improving outcomes requires coordinated action across the whole system.

I would like to thank the young people, employers and partners who generously shared their time and experiences, and the Runnymede Trust and Work Foundation for conducting this important research. We hope the findings will encourage reflection, discussion and, most importantly, action. By listening to young people and acting on the evidence, we can help create a labour market where every young person has the opportunity to thrive.

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The Runnymede Trust

The Runnymede Trust is a leading race equality think tank. For more than 50 years, Runnymede has worked tirelessly to build a Britain in which we all belong. From broadening the curriculum to exposing the Windrush scandal, our work is rooted in challenging structural racism and its impact on our communities. Runnymede's authoritative research-based interventions equip decision makers, practitioners and citizens with the knowledge and tools to deliver genuine progress towards racial equality in Britain. Understanding and addressing racialised labour market economic inequalities is central to our work as demonstrated by our research on flexible working, ethnicity pay gap reporting, the progression of women of colour in the workplace and problem debt. We work closely with young people throughout our work, particularly in our flagship education work which influences both policy and practice.

The Work Foundation

The Work Foundation at Lancaster University is a think tank focused on improving working lives across the UK through applied research and new ideas. For over a century, we have worked to break down the barriers individuals and communities face in accessing good work. We believe everyone should have access to secure, rewarding, and high-quality work. By engaging directly with workers, employers, policymakers, and leading academics, we deliver rigorous applied research to tackle structural inequalities in the labour market and improve working lives across the UK. We are part of Lancaster University's Management School, and work with a range of partners and organisations across our research programmes.



Executive summary

Young people from minority ethnic backgrounds continue to face multiple barriers to employment, including systemic and institutional barriers. This research was commissioned by Youth Futures Foundation and conducted by the Runnymede Trust in partnership with the Work Foundation at Lancaster University. It aimed to explore the barriers that young people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds face when entering the labour market, and actions employers can take to address these.

The research took a place-based case study approach. Researchers conducted interviews, focus groups and participatory workshops with local stakeholders, employers and young people in Leeds, Bradford, Brent and Walsall. Three main themes emerged from these activities: 'Work readiness,' fair hiring and employment, and giving young people a chance. The report discusses each theme, presenting young people's stories and local case studies, and draws on the insights to propose potential solutions to these challenges.

'Work readiness', and what this means, was a central topic of discussion for participants. While some employers and stakeholders shared concerns about young people's 'work readiness', young people identified several challenges, including a perceived gap between education and employment; disproportionate skills and experience requirements for entry level roles; a lack of support to navigate key transition points; and mental health challenges.

When it comes to fair hiring and employment, young people expressed concerns around local employers not investing in local young people, and around limited feedback on applications. There were also frequent reports of workplace discrimination.

Discussions around giving young people a chance focused on reimagining how employers run their recruitment processes in ways that are inclusive and recognise potential, and looking holistically at the main actors in the system to ensure that they can provide consistent and joined-up support for young people.

Suggested solutions to these challenges include fostering greater collaboration between schools, local employers and community sector organisations to connect learning to local opportunities; expanding careers support; and updating recruitment policies and approaches to make them more youth-friendly and embed anti-discrimination principles.

Introduction

Young people from minority ethnic backgrounds continue to face significant barriers to employment, including racial discrimination in the workplace. Analysis conducted by Youth Futures Foundation (Youth Futures) shows that between January and December 2024, the NEET (not in education, employment, or training) rate for Black, Black African, or Black Caribbean young people was higher than for other ethnic groups, at 14.3%, compared with 13.5% for white young people. The statistic for Black young people was driven by the unemployment rate, which was 7.4%, compared to the UK average of 4.8%.[1] Further analysis drawing on pooled Annual Population Survey (APS) data from January 2020 to December 2022 shows that unemployment rates are higher for young people from Black and Asian minority ethnic groups than for their white British peers, with the exception of those identifying as "Mixed [ethnicity] – White and Asian".[2]

Factors that underlie these statistics include deep-seated institutional racism and the legacy of Covid-19, which was marked by job losses during lockdowns. The effects of the pandemic deepened pre-existing vulnerabilities, especially in sectors where minority ethnic young people are overrepresented, such as hospitality and retail.[3]

Discrimination and racism remain obstacles, from hiring bias to workplace exclusion and job insecurity, further constraining opportunities and amplifying the cycle of disadvantage.[4] In a recent survey by Youth Futures, almost half (48%) of minority ethnic young people reported having experienced some level of prejudice and discrimination at work. The vast majority (79%) of those with this experience did not report these incidents to their employer, most commonly because they did not believe it would make a difference. Experiences of discrimination were also closely linked to labour market churn, with almost three quarters reporting they felt motivated to look for opportunities at other companies (73%) or even in different industries (71%) as a result of experiencing discrimination.[5]

The current project was commissioned by Youth Futures Foundation and conducted by the Runnymede Trust in partnership with the Work Foundation at Lancaster University. The research aimed to provide insights into how employers can take action and change behaviour on tackling discrimination against minority ethnic young people.

[1] Youth Futures Foundation (2025). *Youth Employment Outlook*. Report_Youth-Employment-2025-Outlook_Youth-Futures-Foundation_November-2025.pdf.

[2] Youth Futures Foundation analysis (Unpublished).

[3] Learning and Work Institute (2021). *Facing the Future - Employment prospects for young people after coronavirus*. https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/facing-the-future-employment-prospects-for-young-people-after-coronavirus/.

[4] Youth Futures Foundation (2024). *Discrimination and Work: Breaking down the barriers faced by ethnically minoritised young people.* https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/publication/discrimination-and-work/.

[5] Youth Futures Foundation (2024). *Discrimination and Work: Breaking down the barriers faced by ethnically minoritised young people.* https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Discrimination-and-work-report.pdf.

The project covered the following research questions:

Main question:

What are the key opportunities and barriers to employers taking action to address youth ethnic disparities and tackle racial discrimination? How can identified barriers be addressed?

Sub-questions:

1. What actions do employers report they are currently taking to a) recruit and retain more young people and b) tackle racial discrimination against young people in the workplace?
2. What barriers do employers report in relation to a) recruiting and retaining more young people and b) tackling racial discrimination against young people in the workplace?
3. How far do employers recognise and understand the issues in relation to ethnic disparities and racial discrimination in the workplace? Do they recognise the need for action, or is this in itself a barrier to action?
4. What further actions do employers say they would like to take to a) recruit and retain more young people and b) tackle racial discrimination against young people in the workplace?
5. What actions do young people think employers should take to a) recruit and retain more young people and b) tackle racial discrimination against young people in the workplace?

The research took a qualitative case study approach, which included conducting interviews and focus groups with employers, local stakeholders, and young people in Leeds, Bradford, Brent and Walsall.

This report explores the systemic challenges that young people face when trying to find employment, and the role that employers play in addressing these challenges.

It sets out the research methods used, before discussing the main themes which emerged: 'work readiness,' fair hiring and employment, and giving young people a chance. These sections draw on findings from interviews and focus groups. They are presented thematically, with some young people's stories featured more prominently throughout to add a narrative component to the report. These sections also feature a handful of anonymised employer case studies which highlight how some employers are addressing the challenges raised in this research. The report then draws together the overall conclusions and sets out a series of implications and potential actions for employers and organisations working to improve employment outcomes for young people.

Note on terminology

This report refers to ethnicity using the preferred terminology of the Youth Futures Foundation. Where possible, the names of specific ethnic groups are used (e.g. Black, Pakistani or Bangladeshi). Where a broader term is needed, 'minority ethnic' and 'minoritised ethnic' are used. This does not reflect the usual and preferred usage of the Runnymede Trust.

Methodology

This project took a place-based and qualitative research approach in Bradford, Brent, Leeds, and Walsall. Relevant stakeholders, local employers, and young people aged 16-26 from Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Black backgrounds took part in interviews, focus groups and workshops. All participants have been given pseudonyms, and organisations are fully anonymised.

The project was split into four phases:

Phase one: understanding place

The first phase of this research involved hour-long online semi-structured interviews with three local stakeholders who are working with Youth Futures, to gain a deeper understanding of place and local dynamics. These participants also suggested local employers for inclusion in Phase Two. A review was conducted which focused on the structure of the local economy and labour market of each area, including job availability, work quality, economic inactivity, and employment trends. This drew on regional analysis and local labour market data analysis undertaken by Ipsos for Youth Futures (forthcoming).

Phase two: understanding local employers

For the second phase, researchers engaged with 18 employers and seven stakeholders, such as local government representatives and voluntary and community sector stakeholders, across the four areas. This included representatives from a mix of small and medium-sized local organisations, and employers across the following sectors: finance, retail, professional services, and social care. Most of the employers involved were large businesses. Hour-long semi-structured individual interviews were then conducted with all participants.

Stakeholder interviews explored:

- Understanding the local employment context
- Practical engagement and the role of local government, community organisations, and employers in shaping youth employment outcomes

Employer interviews explored:

- The key opportunities and challenges faced in addressing ethnic disparities in youth employment
- Recruitment approaches and barriers to action
- Practical engagement with local services or community organisations
- Opportunities for action and change.

Using thematic analysis, the themes were drawn out to inform the final report.

Phase three: understanding young people

The third phase involved conducting workshops with young people aged 16-26 across the four case study areas. The young participants were tasked with creating a zine. A zine is a mini handbook or magazine that artistically expresses thoughts and feelings on experiences. Zine-making was adopted as a method because it is a creative and low-pressure medium to engage with young people. In total, 48 young people created an array of zines that detailed their experiences of employment barriers and the changes they want to see within the labour market. The zine-making workshop included a discussion on employment barriers around the following:

- Obstacles they may or may not face in securing and maintaining employment
- If and how their ethnicity plays a role in all stages of employment
- The support they had available to them in their employment journey

A creative prompt was given to encourage the young people on what to include in their zine. The prompt was "Your Journey in Employment - The Struggles, The Hope, The Change You Want to See". After the zines were created, the young people had a chance to share and reflect on what they had included and why. The conversations were recorded (with permission), and these were thematically analysed to extract topics relating to the research.

An additional 14 young people took part in one-to-one interviews. The interviews covered:

- The participants' context, e.g. their age, ethnicity, and employment background
- Experiences of the labour market such as the types of difficulties faced, any positive experiences and what they look for in employers
- Challenges and opportunities, including what they think employers could do to make the workplace more inclusive and how local employers could engage with young people

Young people who were involved in the interviews and/or focus groups were recruited through local stakeholders who work with Youth Futures. The interview and workshop questions for this phase were co-created with young people from Youth Futures' youth steering group.



Phase four: participatory workshops

For the final phase, employers and young people were brought together to discuss and reimagine what the labour market could look like for young people, and what needs to change. A participatory workshop is a collaborative knowledge and idea-sharing session. It aims to encourage open dialogue and free-flowing conversation through prompts from a facilitator. The workshops included 14 young people and five employers. Through collating and analysing the themes from the employer and young people phases, the workshops focused on three themes:

- 'Work readiness' – What does it really mean to be 'work ready'?
- Fair hiring – What does a fair hiring process look and feel like for everyone involved?
- Giving young people a chance – How can employers give young people a chance?

These participatory workshops facilitated a space for young people and employers to co-create an agenda for change.

Limitations

Practicalities of engagement meant that employer participation in the project was lower than expected. To mitigate this challenge, perspectives on local employment were supplemented with additional stakeholder interviews with representatives from local government and the voluntary and community sector. Difficulties in maintaining engagement from young people meant that we conducted different numbers of interviews with young people in each of the areas included. In addition to this, we were unable to hold participatory workshops in Brent and Leeds owing to challenges with recruitment and organisational capacity.

This project is relatively small-scale and qualitative, so caution should be taken with generalising the findings. However, the findings offer depth of insight, particularly in relation to the experiences of young people, whose voices are not always centred in research. While this is a slight shift from the original scope, which was more focused on employers, this work offers substantial value in highlighting young people's perspectives and experiences.

Work Readiness

> I kind of always felt like I needed to figure things out on my own.
>
> *(Tanya, aged 20, employed, Brent)*

The theme of 'work readiness'[6] emerged as a key issue for all stakeholder groups involved in this research. This section explores this theme, focusing on the 'education-to-employment gap', skills and experience requirements, navigating transitions, and mental health and wellbeing.

Education-to-employment gap

'Work readiness' emerged as a concern for a majority of the employers in this research. Employers described 'poor levels of preparedness' and 'a lack of basic employment literacy' among young people seeking work. There was a perception that young people were emerging from school or college without the skills or behaviours required for work. For example, one employer representative said:

> *"From a business perspective, I think some of the barriers of employing young people are whether people who are coming from school or college are work ready enough. You know, there'll be some perception around 'it's too much like hard work' and 'I have to invest more in employing a young person and getting them work ready before they can then actually learn the jobs that they're doing'."*

Many of the young people in this study agreed that the education system had not prepared them to enter the workplace. They said that at school, they had received limited or no guidance on career pathways or practical preparation for work. A lack of training in basic job-seeking skills such as CV writing and interview techniques was widely lamented, and many participants struggled to remember any directly taught skills. Cass, 18, from Brent, said:

> *"The main thing we did was like a random career person would come in and talk about their field, and if you didn't connect with that, it was going to be boring."*

[6] Findings from the 2022 Employers Skills Survey show that employers equate work readiness with having relevant or direct work experience, literacy and numeracy skills, and job specific vocational skills. Other sources, such as the Skills Imperative 2035 and Impetus' 'Ready for Work' report, highlight 'soft skills' or 'essential skills' as components of work readiness, although definitions of these skills vary.

Tanya, 20, also from Brent, reflected further:

> *"You're not really [taught] how to sell yourself. I don't really know how to do that. I even mentioned that to my aunt the other day, and then she was like, 'Sell yourself!' And I was like, 'How do I do that? I don't know'."*

This viewpoint was shared by a local stakeholder in Bradford, who noted that the students they work with are often unable to identify and communicate their vocational and transferable skills, particularly when completing entry-level job applications.

Young people felt that access to good quality and relevant careers guidance was patchy. Participants in Brent said that their school had offered only generic advice and nothing that would directly help a young person onto the path they had chosen.

Young participants also said that schools didn't understand that some young people wanted early contact with the job market, for example, through work. In Nancy's (age 18, from Brent) experience, for instance:

> *"They [teachers] were very much like: put education first […] It felt like I was choosing money over my academics. I didn't like how it was one or the other."*

Some stakeholders argued that employers should play a role in supporting young people to become 'work ready.' They pointed out that young people cannot be expected to know what the world of work is like, given their life experience will be based mostly on school. We found some sympathy for this position among employers. For example, a member of staff at a large firm said:

> *"I think teachers have a really challenging role around connecting what young people are doing at school to the workforce, and that's something employers should try to help with."*

They noted that some young people grow up in homes with limited or narrow work experience, so their exposure to the working world is in turn limited and they have not developed 'basic employment literacy'. Additionally, young people are often not familiar with workplace recruitment processes, and the levels of support they receive at home or through education can vary considerably, which means some are more prepared than others when entering the workforce.

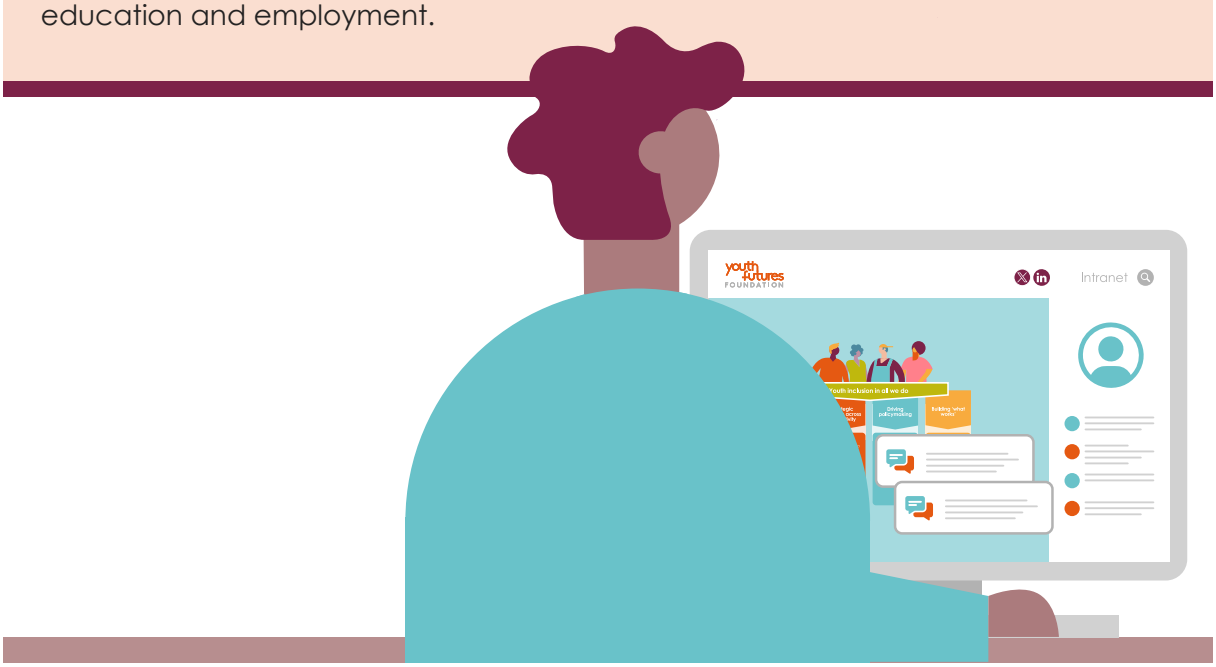
How early the contact needs to be between the young person and the world of work was a subject of debate during the participatory workshops. A general consensus emerged that information and contact with local employers could be made age-appropriate for students, even as early as aged eleven. One employer commented that:

> *"In my experience, the age of people I'm talking to is very young, before school leavers, and their perspective of work is very narrow. You can't expect them to have these really intricate career aspirations. I think what we try and do is be there, talk, and listen, and maybe that creates a spark for someone."*

Two year T Level programmes now offer direct contact with a chosen field for 16-year-olds. In Leeds, Tahir, aged 17, is combining volunteering and work experience with working towards his T Level in Sports Education, and this vocational option has been life-changing. His formal qualification gives him a placement at a local cricket ground and a structure to develop his skills, and he notes how much he has gained in confidence and self-esteem from learning primarily by doing, rather than just studying:

> *"I had been volunteering, helping out with the coaching and umpiring, and then as soon as I turned 16, I had more opportunities to get paid."*

T Levels, together with opportunities to volunteer or access work experience, may offer more structured and supported pathways to bridge the gap between education and employment.



Skills and experience requirements

Stakeholders in Bradford observed a cycle that traps young people: they cannot get a job because they do not have experience, but they cannot gain experience because they cannot get a job.

Some employers require applicants to have previous experience, which can be difficult for young people to demonstrate, particularly when they have just left school. One stakeholder in Bradford reflected on the link between the experience gap and the education-to-employment gap, noting that schools don't always have time to support young people into the right work experience placements:

> *"If [young people] apply for a job, they've not got the experience, so they need the experience before they can have the role […] and I don't think teachers have got enough time to, you know, try and get them on the right placements."*

Stakeholders also commented on how some employers require young applicants to be completely work ready, and to have all the skills required for the role, rather than being willing – or able – to invest in potential. This reflects some of the comments on work readiness made by employers in the previous section. During a workshop, one stakeholder observed that:

> *"There's this intense competition between employers. They need the young people to turn up fully formed, to minimise their costs and minimise the amount of time they need to spend with that person, and that enables them to become more competitive."*

Similarly, a stakeholder in Brent observed that employers expect young people:

> *"to turn up on day one completely ready for the job, and obviously for young people who have multiple barriers, they don't have those skills necessarily, they don't have the language they need to use in the workplace, they're not ready for work, and it's this mismatch of employers saying they want to help these young people but then still expecting the best of the best young people to turn up, and only wanting to reward those who are already up there."*

As noted in the previous section, it can sometimes be difficult for young people to identify – and therefore demonstrate – the skills that employers require, even if they already have these. In Brent, Malaika, now in her early twenties and well established in both paid employment and at university, looked back and reflected on an earlier version of herself when she did not understand what her skills were, and therefore what she did or did not have to offer an employer:

> *"I feel like it's probably a lack of knowing what skills and transferable skills I had – so underestimating myself. Not thinking, 'I'll be able to do this job', because I don't have enough skills, when really, I do. I think being so young, you don't have that knowledge."*

However, the research also uncovered examples of employers who were trying to adapt their recruitment processes to hire for potential, rather than just existing experience or skills. One stakeholder told us about an employer who was using assessment centres instead of CV-based hiring to allow young people with limited work experience to demonstrate potential and relevant skills. Another employer explained how they had removed academic minimum requirements for A Levels and degrees, and used assessments rather than CVs to recruit candidates, meaning that they are not assessed based on previous work experience or extracurricular activities.[7]

Young people stressed that they should not be underestimated and that many of them have "big degrees" and strong capabilities but lack the opportunities "to cultivate their talents", and the in-work support needed to demonstrate their potential. They argued that employers need to see employment as a platform for growth rather than a test of whether they are the "finished article".

Navigating transitions

Young people spoke about the difficulties of transitioning from education to work. In Bradford, Hamza recalled a period of not really knowing how to find work:

> *"I think it was more daunting [trying to find my way on my own]. I think it was just too much for me. I really needed a job, and nothing I was doing was helping."*

Similarly in Bradford, Rami echoed Hamza, almost word for word:

> *"I had no sense of direction when I left school. I didn't know what to do or where I was going. I had no person back then, or no real mentor to help me push through it. So, I had no sense of direction. I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know what to do."*

[7] Note that the evidence for the impact and inclusivity of these practices is very limited. They are generally used on the basis that they are likely to support diversity and fairness in hiring.

Rami spoke proudly of his own journey from aged 15 to where he is today, now 24 years old:

> *"I worked my way from bottom to the top. So takeaways, and from there I went into supermarkets. Then, from supermarkets, I went into work in hospitals for a few months. Then, from hospitals I went into care work. From care work, I went into support work. So it's been quite a few different things that I've done."*

Rami's experience represents how, without the right support in place, the transition from school to work can be challenging and difficult to navigate.

It was striking to see how much having the right connections can play a part in young people's access to their earliest contact with the local labour market. For Hamza, an unpaid work placement in a cousin's pharmacy proved instrumental, providing insider knowledge and valuable experience that would have been difficult to obtain otherwise. Without relatives working in the pharmacy, he admitted, his interest in the profession might never have developed. But what about the young people without connections? Hamza contrasted his experience with that of a friend of his who wanted to pursue optometry. Without a network, his friend ultimately could not find suitable work experience because he did not have any connections in the profession and local opticians were unwilling to take him on, even for a short period.

Similarly in Brent, Cass left school for college and, despite getting a Level 1 qualification in plumbing, struggled to get work:

> *"It was sort of like: 'You've left school, now get a job!' There was no connective tissue between the two, so I didn't really know what to do."*

Then, one day, someone at his church led him to his current employment at a local charity as a youth worker. Cass was no longer frustrated:

> *"It's really important you [support and guide] the young person, you know? If you don't, they can spiral into negative things."*

However, while some young people in this study were able to find opportunities through friends and family members, not all have access to these social and professional networks. During a participatory workshop in Bradford, one stakeholder admitted:

> *"We've been doing a lot around networks, and we know, because a lot of research shows, that people from Black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds don't have the same social networks as their white counterparts."*

Without contact with local employers, job roles, and the local labour market, young people can struggle to make a smooth transition into work. Young people in Brent, for instance, were aware of big high street employers like B&M, Sainsbury's and Waitrose, but were surprised to find out that what they called "underground" opportunities also existed: smaller brands and employers, offering potential roles in technology, gaming, and the creative industries. This lack of awareness was striking and suggests how easily young people can limit their horizons to major brands and big corporate employers simply because that is all they know.

Some programmes offered by the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and other organisations seek to support young people to transition into employment, but there are inconsistencies in the relevance, quality, and availability of provision. Young people may not know these opportunities are on offer in their local area, or they may need support simply to identify what would help them. Mira, based in Brent, reflected:

> *"Sometimes young people don't realise they need [mentoring]. But if they have someone to hold them accountable, then they might not realise it now, but in the future, they realise, 'Oh, actually, that was good for me.'"*

Employers in this study also recognised, on the one hand, the importance of offering wraparound support to aid young people's transitions into employment, but on the other hand, the challenges with providing this:

> *"Wraparound support to get people into employment and then support them when they're in employment is often a barrier because resources are so stretched, but we know that the role of mentors and the role of pastoral support, that peer kind of support when somebody first starts, is really, really crucial."*

Stakeholders also discussed the challenges for young people transitioning from school into post-16 education. One stakeholder suggested that one of the main challenges in their area is a lack of suitable post-16 education provision that meets the diverse and complex needs of young people. While mainstream colleges and training providers are available, they often fail to accommodate those who have been out of formal education, have additional needs, or come from alternative educational backgrounds such as home schooling. Young people who have spent some time out of education can find it difficult to re-engage with large, mainstream colleges. Even when they enrol, they may drop out again after a relatively short time and are at risk of becoming NEET.

Mental health and wellbeing

> The main correlation that I found between unemployment and the barrier that they're facing was mainly mental health issues, especially among the younger generation.
>
> *(Aaron, aged 23, employed, Walsall)*

Poor mental health is repeatedly described as one of the main barriers standing between young people and the world of work, compounding an already complex transition from education into employment.[8] For many, this is not simply a background issue, but the defining factor that shapes how they experience the labour market, how confident they feel about their prospects, and whether they can take advantage of and sustain opportunities once they appear.

According to NHS England survey data, the proportion of young adults aged 16–24 in England with a common mental health condition rose from 17.5% in 2007 and 18.9% in 2014, to 25.8% in 2023–24.[9] Research commissioned by Youth Futures found that these increases in poor mental health can be linked to a range of factors, including worsening sleep quality, economic instability, reduced services for children and young people and rising social media and smartphone use.[10]

The multiple complexities and challenges of contemporary recruitment mean that those struggling with mental health find themselves at a distinct disadvantage. Aaron, aged 23 from Walsall, said:

> *"[…] you are put out there, into the open world, and it can be quite daunting […] quite depressing, actually, because it's that lack of support and guidance."*

For Aaron, his mental health was impacted by a sense of disorientation as the work available bore little relationship to his qualifications or aspirations:

> *"I got a part-time job at a [large retailer] for a month, and during that time, it was one of the worst times in my life. I'm thinking, 'I've got a first-class business degree. What am I doing here? I don't know where to go from here'."*

[8] Youth Futures Foundation (2025) *Understanding drivers of recent trends in young people's mental health: Research briefing.* https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Briefing_Understanding-drivers-of-recent-trends-in-young-peoples-mental-health_University-of-Manchester_UCL_July-2025-final.pdf.

[9] NHS England (2025) *Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey: Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing.* https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/adult-psychiatric-morbidity-survey/survey-of-mental-health-and-wellbeing-england-2023-24/common-mental-health-conditions

[10] Youth Futures Foundation (2025) *Understanding drivers of recent trends in young people's mental health*. Understanding-drivers-of-recent-trends-in-young-peoples-mental-health-July-2025-final.pdf.

After months of applications and only one application progressing to interview, the stress of repeated rejections led to self-doubt for Ahmed, aged 24, also in Walsall. It diminished his confidence and reinforced a negative cycle of lack of self-esteem and unemployment.

One participant in Walsall described the support that he had received from the Jobcentre as unhelpful for young people experiencing mental health issues. He said that the Jobcentre Plus (JCP) model of 'fixed' appointments does not allow time for JCP staff to explore issues and work out how best to support clients:

> *"because you can't really get a job if your mental health isn't in a positive state, or if you are facing other battles financially, or with family or housing."*

Based on his experience, he suggested that many different public services, such as Jobcentres and the National Careers Service, should be part of a support structure for young people which centres their mental health.

Yet we also heard some powerful examples of what can be achieved when intensive, relationship-based support is available. One stakeholder recounted working with a young person with very severe anxiety. Over six months, a structured process of "handholding," such as weekly Zoom calls which then led to in-person sessions, enabled her to build confidence to the point where she became able to undertake a range of activities entirely independently, demonstrating that sustained, compassionate support can impact both employability and wellbeing.

Hafsa, aged 21, also in Walsall, talked powerfully about the impact that accessing a mentoring programme had on her mental health. With the programme, she was able to speak privately and regularly with a wellbeing counsellor and talk about the things that were affecting her ability to thrive in social and public situations, such as the pressure to speak up and fit in, or her initial struggles with the English language and different accents. Her access to compassionate support has transformed her life, and she is now enjoying her first job in a retail position and focusing on gaining her accountancy qualifications.

Young people also recognised that not all support needs to come from mental health professionals. They talked about the value of having a colleague in the workplace whose job is to listen, such as a 'buddy' system or a mental health first aider, to help them think through challenges and to provide a point of continuity. In Brent, Tanya spoke of feeling lucky that she has access to this kind of in-work support.

Employer actions to address 'work readiness'



Some employers discussed actions they are taking to support young people to develop skills for employment. One employer representative described how they are addressing challenges around 'work readiness' by running a ten-week course for young people who are long-term unemployed. The programme is designed to help trainees to build their confidence, achieve greater independence, and access career opportunities. Trainees are supported by a programme leader, work buddy, psychotherapist, and counsellor, and can access a mentor for six months after the course ends. To inspire and motivate the trainees, they also hear from peer mentors who previously took part in the programme and have gone on to find jobs. Trainees leave the course with a five-year plan, up-to-date CV, extensive interview practice, industry contacts, and help to apply for jobs.

Another employer representative in Bradford saw a positive impact from partnering with a local South Asian female community centre, where they delivered sessions on confidence building, CV writing, and interview skills for young people. Out of 30 participants, 15 applied for roles within the organisation, and two secured employment after the first eight-week programme.

Another employer described how they used targeted outreach to support young people into apprenticeships:

> *"From an apprenticeship perspective, [recruitment] starts quite early on, so we do a lot of school engagement activity and we will work with specific schools, so we'll perhaps work with the Careers and Enterprise company and identify some schools, perhaps where there's a high proportion of free school meals, and so we will target specific activities in those schools where we can really partner with them and help the students really focus on building up their essential skills."*

Fair hiring and employment

> I think definitely for the Asian community and the Black community, we don't get opportunities in employment.
>
> *(Aaron, aged 23, employed, Walsall)*

In this section, the hiring and employment experiences of young people are discussed. The subthemes explored include hiring young people; issues around lack of feedback; discrimination before and in the workplace; and employer actions to address discrimination and support inclusion.

Hiring young people

Almost all young people felt that when it came to employment, they were not a priority. They believed that employers did not invest in and nurture them, and that they often had limited opportunities for skill development, mentorship, and meaningful career progression.

Ahmed, from Walsall, felt that employers could show a greater commitment to the communities where they are located:

> *"When your local community is struggling, and you've got kids in your local community who could do the job, I don't understand why you wouldn't, kind of look there first, and I think that's the problem. There's a saying that charity starts at home, but nobody seems to want to kind of help the community as it is."*

Ahmed believed that the local community and young people of Walsall could benefit from more employment opportunities as this would strengthen the community and local economy. Aaron echoed the view that employers in Walsall did not prioritise the local community:

> *"I think in terms of local employers, sometimes I think they take advantage of the community, and this current state of it. So there's some parts of Walsall which are nice, and some parts aren't as financially well, and I think that the employers can take advantage […] You can see employers treating their employees as if they are less […] It's not about helping people progress their situation."*

For Ahmed and Aaron, fair hiring looks like employer and community engagement such as targeting local upskilling and investment, social mobility, and equitable employment.

In Brent, both young people and employers noted a misalignment, whereby employers expressed a desire to hire more young people, but were not always effective at reaching out to them. Tanya commented that:

> *"[Employers are] saying that, 'Oh, we want young people, but young people aren't putting themselves out there'. Then we're like, 'But you guys aren't like, trying to hear us. So like, why are we even going to you in the first place?' So, yeah, it's been good hearing both sides. But again, there is, like, I don't know, there's a lot to be done because, like I said, there is this miscommunication."*

This disconnect creates further barriers for young people trying to enter the world of work. One large employer shared that a key barrier they face is ensuring that young people are aware of the wide variety of roles available within the organisation. When it comes to hiring, many young people see the business primarily through frontline roles such as cleaning and security, but are less familiar with career pathways in technical, engineering, and corporate functions. This lack of awareness makes it difficult to attract talent into these fields.

A lack of awareness of diverse career pathways – or engagement with young people to support them into these – can mean that young people remain in low-wage or precarious forms of employment. These findings highlight the importance of ensuring young people are aware of diverse career pathways, and that those who do enter organisations as frontline staff are offered training and development to support their progression.

Young people also discussed the challenges of finding work with low or no qualifications. In Leeds, one young man aged 18 noted that due to having only four GCSEs, he struggled to be hired by anyone:

> *"I came out with four GCSEs from high school, and it was hard for me to get a job. No one would take me on, not enough qualifications. A minimum of five GCSEs are needed to get a job. [This isn't fair] because some people are not academically smart, and they can't do academic work, which is not fair, but what can we do?"*

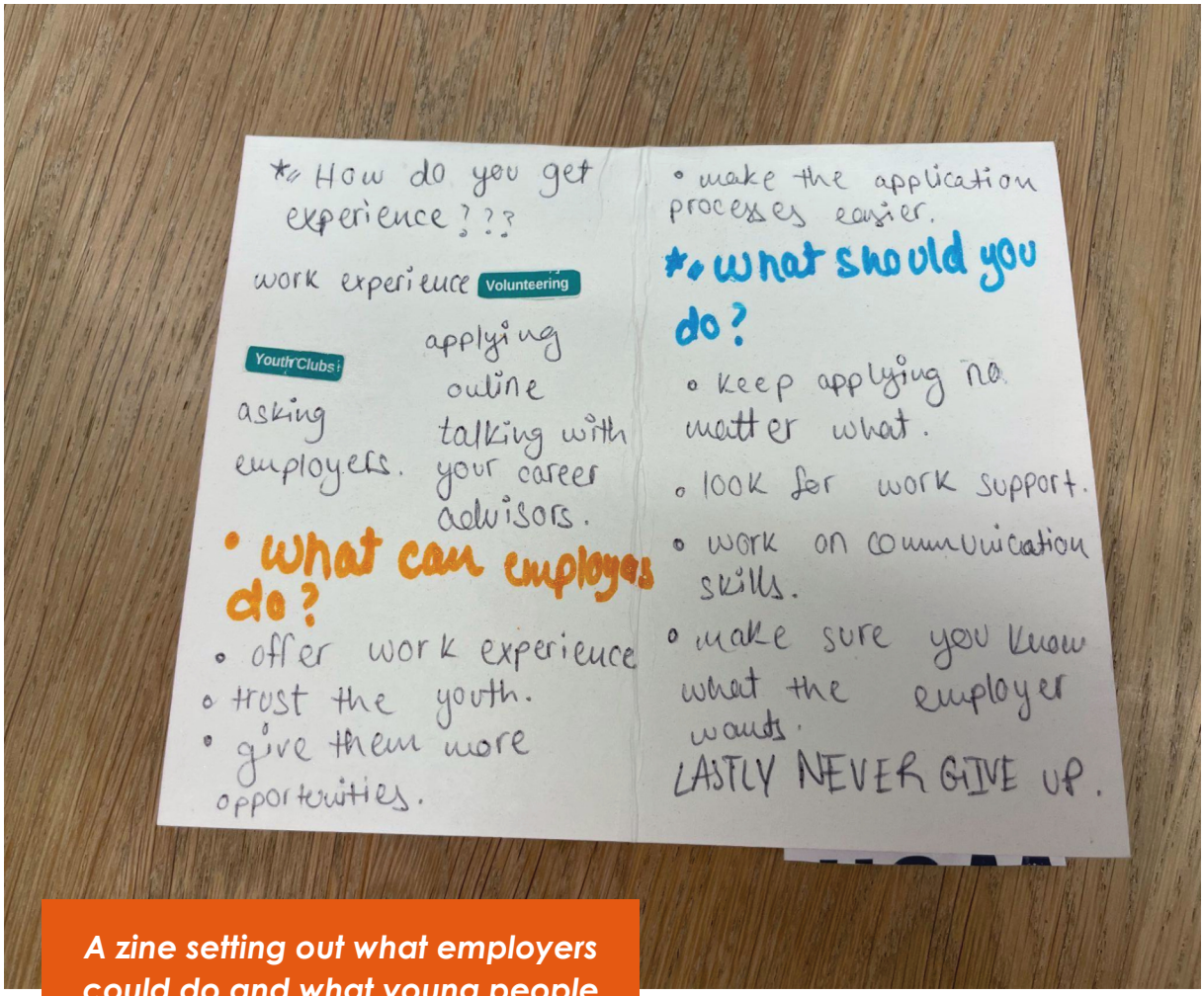
Young people with low or no qualifications could benefit from other opportunities to demonstrate and gain skills for employment, and a more inclusive recruitment process that recognises a variety of skills and competencies. For instance, an employer in the participatory workshops said:

> *"For us, we work in the care sector, so we're not interested in qualifications. If you've got it, brilliant; if you don't have it, no big deal. We'll train you up here. It's about the inner self, the empathy, the kindness, the love, the compassion; we can't teach you that. So that's, as an employer, what we look for. Now, if it was a specific role, then we would look for a bit more."*

Young people explained that they want to be assessed based on their abilities and potential, rather than reduced to stereotypes based on how they look, what they wear, or which boxes they tick on paper. As one young person from Bradford explains:

> *"I'd rather they just see me through my qualifications of what I have, rather than my background, where I come from. I'd rather they just see what my qualifications are and see whether I'm worthy based on what I've achieved."*

They stress that each person brings a distinct mix of skills, experiences, and personal qualities to the workplace, and that employers who equate "smart casual" clothing with maturity or professionalism risk overlooking exactly the kind of commitment and potential they say they are looking for.



A zine setting out what employers could do and what young people should do.

Where's the feedback?

> They don't even email you back, they just leave you there hanging.
>
> *(Taslima, 21, unemployed, Leeds)*

Most young people found a lack of feedback on unsuccessful job applications to be a source of frustration. This can make applying for jobs a more difficult and arduous process, as young people are unsure about what to improve on. Cass said:

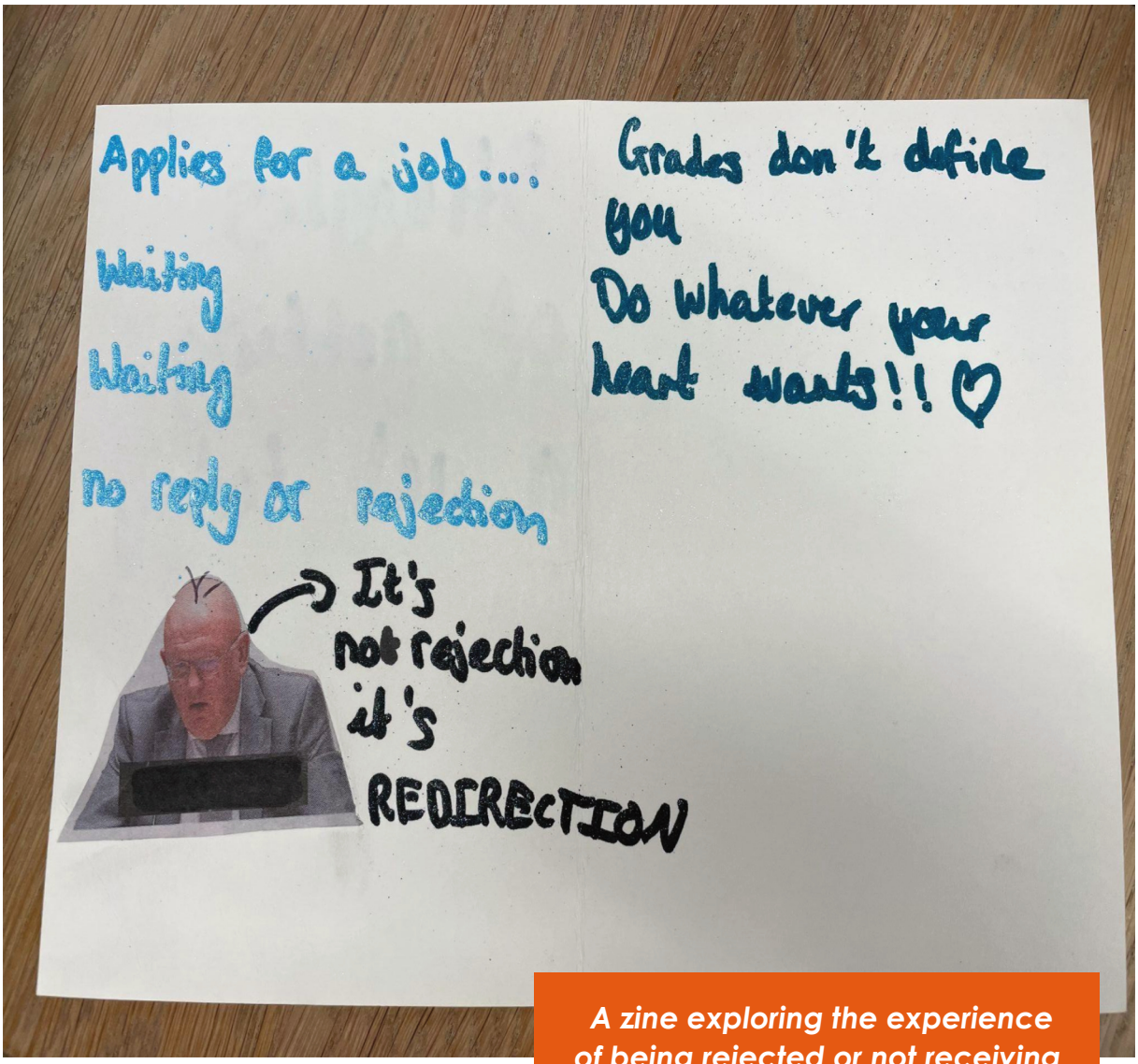
> *"The main difficult part was actually applying and then not hearing anything back. That's why I'm a very big hater of [online job platform]. I hate the app because, you know, say, if you're a young person and you applied to ten jobs a day with the exact same formula, and you hear nothing back, you're going to carry on using that CV. Maybe you have not formatted it well, but you don't know that yet."*

Cass noted that it is difficult for young people to improve their applications without feedback. Cass's situation also suggests that young people need more support, advice, and guidance to understand expectations of applying to jobs, such as tailoring CVs and cover letters. Twenty-four-year-old Itty from Bradford, who is currently working night shifts at a local supermarket, agreed with Cass:

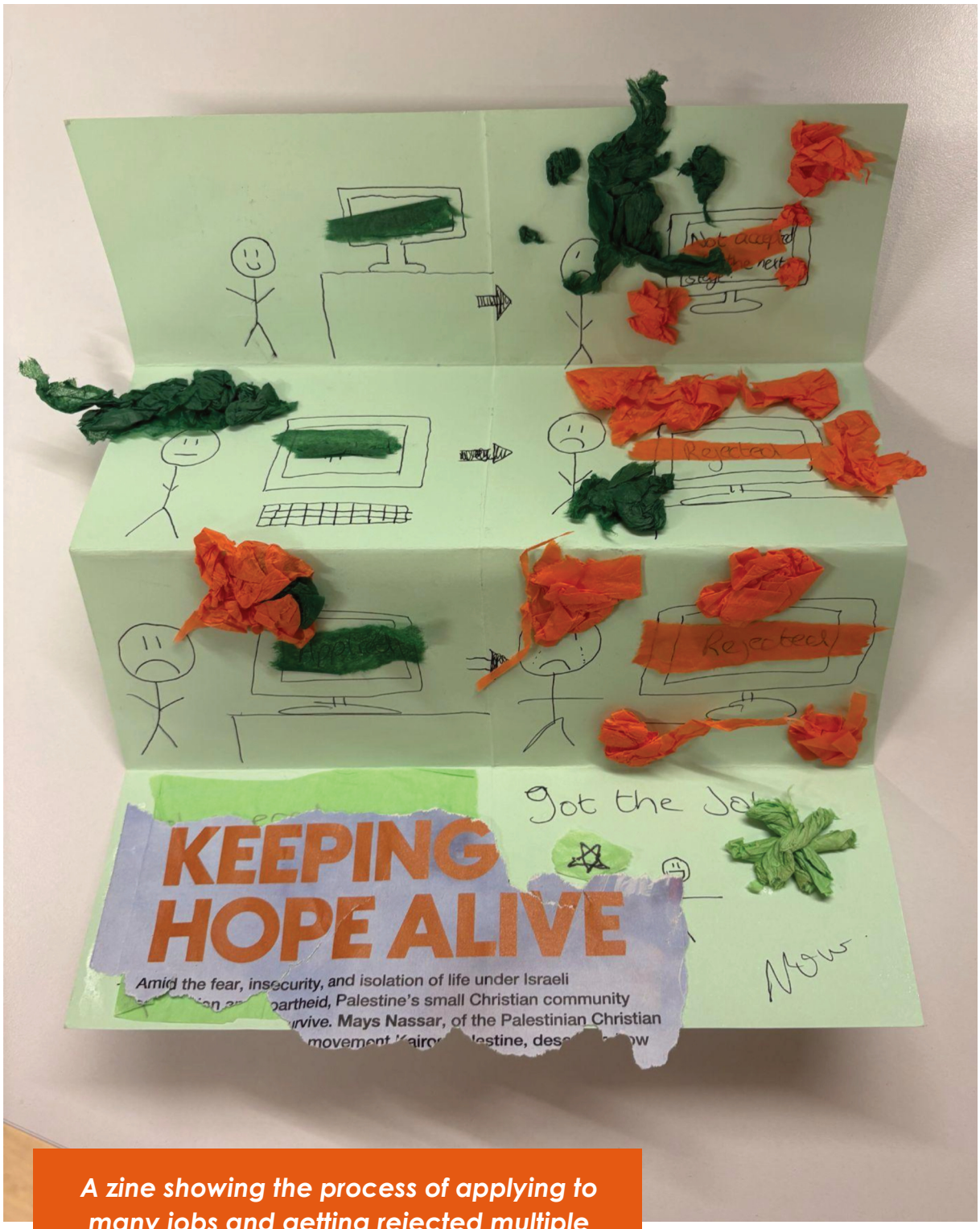
> *"I think some of them were silent, and the rest of them were more rejection emails. And to be honest, they didn't give any areas to improve, which I have asked them before, the few places I've applied for; I didn't get any feedback on my CV or my questionnaire, or anything like that. They just told me to 'jog on, essentially'."*

For Itty and Cass, fair hiring looks like a process that allows candidates to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses for future applications. Young people also expressed a desire for feedback in the zine-making workshop in Brent:

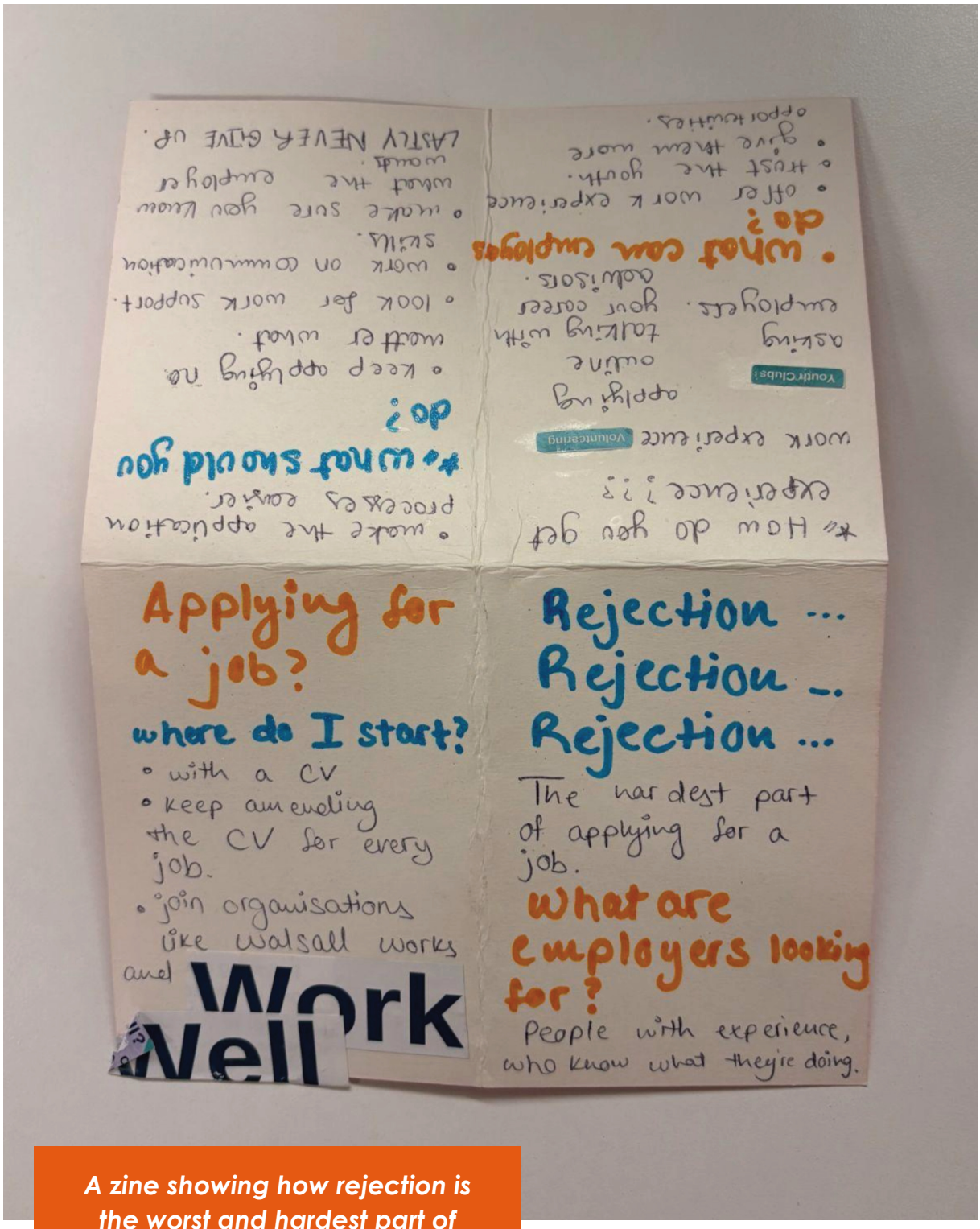
> *"At the front [of my zine], it says, 'It's not rejection, it's redirection'. However, why don't employers give us a reason for what led to rejection? It also says that employers should trust the youth more and give more opportunities."*



A zine exploring the experience of being rejected or not receiving a reply from a job.



A zine showing the process of applying to many jobs and getting rejected multiple times, until finally getting accepted.



A zine showing how rejection is the worst and hardest part of applying for a job.

During the participatory workshop in Walsall, an employer reflected on their own experience of applying for jobs over two decades ago:

> *"When I was younger, this hiring manager, I didn't get the job, but he gave me some really good feedback, down to 'you don't make eye contact', and you showed, and you didn't do this. Just really things that I thought, right? I'll take that into my next interview, and I still remember that twenty-five years on, because that person spent a good thirty minutes going through that on the phone with me, and it meant so much."*

This feedback had a lasting positive impact on them, so much so that they now ensure that each candidate receives feedback. Constructive feedback can build self-confidence and resilience, which is highly important and crucial for young people.

Hiring and workplace discrimination

A large majority of the young people in the study had experienced racism and discrimination at both the application and hiring stages, and while in the workplace.

Some participants were worried that their 'ethnic sounding' names or ethnicity might hold them back from getting an interview or being hired. For instance, Mo from Leeds, aged 23 and currently employed, noted:

> *"I apply for a job, you need your name, your date of birth, your ethnicity and all these things. And I don't know why, but I don't think they need the ethnicity bit, because no matter where you are from […] you can apply for any job".*

This quote suggests that there needs to be more transparency around why demographic data is collected, but also the fact that it is not compulsory to share.

Mahid from Walsall, a medical student, described how his friend has been continually rejected from roles, which he believes is because of his ethnicity:

> *"I even have a friend that has got all those academic accolades you could think of, master's degree, bachelor's, everything. And he's a Black person mixed with Asian, so his name is very much on both sides. And he was getting turned down by employers left, right and centre."*

Tamia from Brent shared:

> *"Is my name holding me back in certain jobs? Because my first name and my last name is clearly Ghanaian. It's clearly Black. There's no going away around it. And I don't know if I'm applying for a job, and they see that, and they think either we've already ticked our diversity [box], so we don't really need that. Or they just – I don't know what internal racial bias that they have – they'll rather pick a Molly Smith."*

Another young person told us how they actually 'gave up' saying their birth name and resorted to using an English-sounding name. This corresponds with findings from existing research. In 2020, researchers reported that employers are more likely to reject job applications from people with 'non-white' names.[11] For decades, research has identified racial discrimination based on candidates' names, particularly in the USA. These findings emphasise the challenges that minoritised ethnic people face when seeking employment.

The risk of experiencing discrimination can discourage young people from applying for jobs. Tanya, from Brent, observed:

> *"If you're Black British or Black Caribbean, I don't really want to play it, because I feel like I have a lesser chance at getting the job, or doors opening up for me."*

Pointing out the difficulty without ever really knowing that racism is in play, she goes on to say:

> *"I don't have the experience to back up my fears, but the fear is there. Maybe it stops me from pursuing roles because of my race."*

Young people can also experience discrimination during the job-seeking process, before even applying for a role. After months of frustrating online job hunting, Cass recounts his decision to go into a shopping mall and speak to prospective employers. Armed with copies of his CV and a positive attitude, Cass wasn't prepared for the intense level of suspicion he received from the security guards, which made the experience an ordeal.

He says:

> *"I've gone into these places, and the looks! The looks are like – the looks are like – do you know what I mean? Like you can feel it. I can't really put it into words, but you can feel the sort of, like, 'Wow, you're like, what we've never had' sort of thing."*

[11] British Sociological Association (2020). Ethnic minorities more likely to be unemployed because employers reject applications from 'non-white' names. https://www.britsoc.co.uk/media-centre/press-releases/2020/december/ethnic-minorities-more-likely-to-be-unemployed-because-employers-reject-applications-from-non-white-names/

Discrimination is also an issue once a young person has been hired. Some young people explained that they were the only ones from a minoritised ethnic background in their workplace, which left them feeling isolated. Aaron from Walsall noted:

> *"I was the only Black male there. Pretty much the rest of my colleagues were predominantly white, and my manager was white as well. I found that there was quite a bit of discrimination towards me while I was there".*

In Walsall, Hafsa said:

> *"I've been hearing so many stories about the discrimination that the Black people, South Asian people, or any people from different ethnicities face, apart from the British. So I always get scared, and always I pray to Allah that wherever I go, and whatever company I choose, is the one that doesn't discriminate against me at all. And is open to help you learn, because I'm just on the first step of the ladder.*
>
> *"But if I find out that a [company] is purely white, I do think, would I fit in a little bit? So it just kind of depends, like the culture of the place, would I feel like I belong? Will I feel heard?"*

Nancy from Brent, aged 18 and currently unemployed, echoed similar fears to Hafsa, wondering if she'd fit into a workplace that is 'purely white.' Aaron, Hafsa, and Nancy have a real concern about being a minority in the workplace, and fear that they could face discrimination as a result. Aside from this, when you are the only person or one of a few, there is likely no model for how your religion, ethnicity, and/or culture will be handled in the workplace. There is also the potential for continual explanation, which is exhausting.

Experiences of racism, discrimination, and prejudice can impact a young person's belief and confidence in the world of work. Retail and service sector jobs, such as working in shops and supermarkets, are among the entry-level jobs that are most accessible to young people, but young people were aware that these 'frontline' roles could make them more vulnerable to racism from the general public. In a survey of young people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds conducted by the Youth Futures, 75% of respondents felt that customers and clients assumed they were more junior or less capable than their white colleagues.[12]

[12] Youth Futures Foundation (2024) Discrimination and work: breaking the barriers faced by ethnically minoritised young people. Discrimination-and-work-report.pdf.

Racism and sexism

Often, racism is compounded with sexism. In 2024, the Young Women's Trust found that workplace discrimination is on the rise again, particularly for young women from minority ethnic backgrounds.[13] Discrimination becomes multilayered when it involves young women, as it brings together age, gender, race and often, religion.

In Brent, a young Black woman named Patsy, aged 18, spoke of her experiences of being the only person from a minority ethnic background in her team and encountering racism. Working in a customer-facing role exposed to the general public has made her observe how her supervisors are unsure of her, or how to react when she needs to speak up or has to be assertive with the customers. She said:

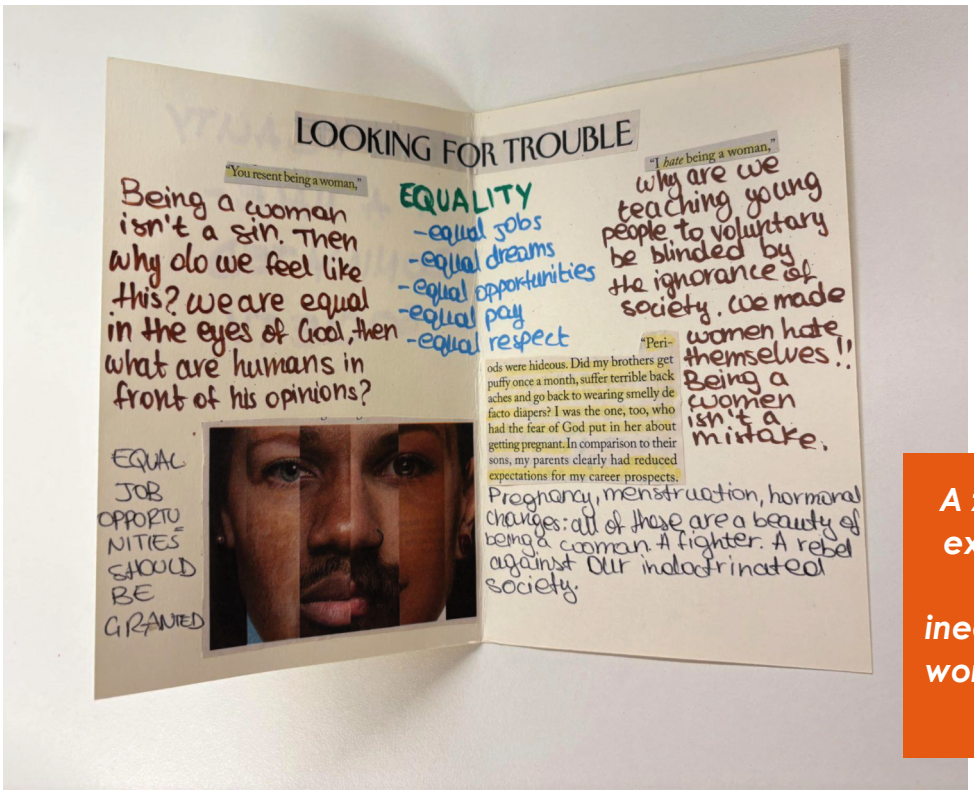
> *"I feel like people don't know how to handle me at work. If I tell a customer [who is getting 'crazy', to 'calm down'] it's like people look at me and don't know what to do. There's a bit of a pause before they decide what to do. It's subtle, yeah, it's there."*

Patsy shared her experiences of racism from colleagues that include viewing her with confusion when she simply asserts boundaries with customers. Black women often face racism and sexism, which is also known as 'misogynoir'.[14] Even if this is expressed "subtly", these racialised and gendered subtleties can make a workplace uncomfortable and sometimes unsafe for young people, particularly young women from a minority ethnic background.



[13] Young Women's Trust (2024). Workplace discrimination at a three year high for young women. https://www.youngwomenstrust.org/media-centre/workplace-discrimination-at-a-three-year-high-for-young-women/

[14] Runnymede Trust (2024). Misogynoir in the Workplace: Understanding the Experiences of Black Women in Leadership Positions. https://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/misogynoir-in-the-workplace-understanding-the-experiences-of-black-women-in-leadership-positions



A zine detailing experiences of gendered inequality both in work and outside of work.

Comparably, Hafsa, from Walsall, reflects on her experiences:

> *"So basically, sometimes the people are so rude. I don't know if they are like, targeting a certain ethnicity, certain gender. They are so rude. It's also their way of seeing you; you can instantly feel that there's something definitely wrong. And also they are giving you a response that they can give you brightly, but they are using a harsh tone. So sometimes, it's all about the tone and etiquette."*

23-year-old Reema, also from Walsall, shared similar sentiments:

> *"I just kept thinking, like, you know, you can speak to everyone else, but maybe it's because I've got a hijab on my head, or, you know, you just don't want to associate yourself."*

Reema and Hafsa both described encounters they experienced as gendered and racialised, which left them feeling confused and frustrated. They interpreted colleagues' tones as rude, dismissive and harsh, experiences that they felt signalled exclusion and contributed to a sense of being 'othered'. A buildup of microaggressions can lead to lower confidence, wellbeing, and a lack of a sense of belonging for employees. As a hijab wearer, Reema began questioning whether it is her religion that is causing the hostile reception.

Islamophobia

Islamophobia, which can be defined as a "form of racism that reworks and reproduces religious bigotry to discriminate against and harm Muslims, and people perceived to be Muslims,"[15] has become a palpable presence in our society. As Quentin, a young person from Walsall, articulates, it has become "an insidious affliction that has metastasised within our society, and the view has become that it has become normalised within our society".

Hamza, from Bradford, experienced Islamophobia while working in the healthcare sector. He was told that he would have to shave his beard in order to do a face fit test.[16] However, Hamza stood his ground and refused, telling them:

> *"I'm not willing to shave my beard off. I go, I am more than happy to do the fit testing for you, but I'm not happy to shave my beard off because it's part of my identity. It's part of my religion. I'm not going to do that."*

Despite Hamza expressing his willingness to do the test but not wanting to shave his beard, his supervisor placed him down as being 'non-compliant' and following this "all the supervisors and majority of the workers acted really differently towards [him]". An article in the Huffington Post (UK) describes similar experiences amongst religious NHS workers who had been shamed or even dismissed for not shaving off their beards.[17]

Ryan, aged 25, in Walsall, noted:

> *"I feel there are stereotypes about different races [...] employees need to first of all change their mindset, because obviously not all the people are bad [...] I think most of the stereotypes are really linked to religion. They might think it's related to violence or aggressiveness, so that hesitates them."*

Broader societal narratives and both structural and institutional racism contribute to these hostilities. Rami reflects on media portrayals, where people from minority ethnic backgrounds are disproportionately linked to crime or social issues:

> *"[…] when a terror attack happens, or when a knife attack happens [...] it's always either a South Asian person, or it's always a person with an African background [...] It's never the other side."*

Such experiences can lead to feelings of isolation and anxiety. The shift in behaviour from colleagues illustrates how discriminatory practices can become embedded within organisational culture, exacerbating the normalisation of Islamophobia in wider society.

[15] Runnymede Trust (2025). *Islamophobia: towards a working definition* https://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/islamophobia-towards-a-working-definition

[16] A Face Fit Test is a way of fitting a mask to a person's face. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/safety-services/what-expect-when-having-face-fit-test

[17] Huffpost UK (2021). *Exclusive: Religious NHS Workers Sacked Or Shamed For Refusing To Shave Beards Off.* https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/nhs-men-beards-religious-shave-off-racism-muslim-sikh_uk_6009c1f1c5b6df63a91e2b4c

Employer actions to support fair hiring and employment

Across the case study areas, some employers are taking action towards tackling discrimination in the workplace. To create a more inclusive recruitment strategy, one large private employer operates 'blind' screening so that when shortlisting, hiring managers will not see the names of candidates.[18]

Another large employer described how they are working to improve representation across their workforce, and in their security division, have actively recruited staff from particular faith-based communities to better reflect the diversity of the spaces they are tasked with protecting. By partnering with local religious leaders, the business has been able to build trust and improve engagement with these communities.

Other employers have taken action through elevating cultural awareness. One large employer actively celebrates cultural holidays and runs training for managers on microaggressions and racial discrimination to build a more inclusive environment. Another large employer delivers training around discrimination and microaggressions, where they focus on understanding the diversity of their colleagues and the experiences of colleagues from minority ethnic backgrounds in the workplace and wider society.

A representative of one large employer said:

> *"We use our foundation really heavily. Our foundation has a team of employability coordinators, so actually, if we identify a barrier in our normal recruitment teams, we can have a really collaborative approach. Whether they're an employability partner that focuses on disability or career transitions or ethnicity and race, we can go out there and really be collaborative with our employment partners to say, actually we've identified this barrier, is this something that you're seeing in the demographics that you're trying to engage with to get them into employment and what solutions can you recommend to us to try?"*

[18] Note that the evidence for the impact and inclusivity of these practices is very limited. They are generally used on the basis that they are likely to support diversity and fairness in hiring.

Case study: The transport industry and transforming culture and inclusion

The bus transportation industry has historically been a male-dominated environment, with a lack of visible diversity at the top.[19] As a result, a representative of a transport company recognised a need for transformation to ensure its workforce and culture internally reflected the diverse communities they serve.

The company began by looking inward and seeking cultural transformation by initiating internal conversations with colleagues that emphasised the importance of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and introduced educational materials in bite-sized formats that demystified concepts of diversity and inclusion, making them more accessible. To foster greater understanding, the organisation began celebrating a broader range of cultural and religious events, to include Ramadan, Eid, Hanukkah, and Holi. These celebrations included educational content that explained the significance of each event, which sparked genuine conversations across teams.

As awareness grew, areas were identified that still needed attention, which included behaviour, 'banter', and bias. As a result, they rolled out educational modules focused on these three areas, aiming to ensure that colleagues understood how seemingly harmless jokes might affect others. This education helped to chip away at old cultural norms and move the organisation towards a more respectful and inclusive environment.

The company also established employee resource groups (ERGs), including "Origins" (for ethnicity) and "Enable" (for wellbeing and disability). They intentionally named this initiative "Celebrating Our Differences" to foster a culture of pride in diversity. These groups provided valuable insights for management from frontline employees, helping shape policies and initiatives, such as the introduction of menopause policies, free period products at all sites, and designated prayer and medication rooms. Reverse mentoring programmes were introduced where frontline colleagues mentor senior leaders to help them understand the realities of operational roles. In addition to this, they also created a mentorship programme called "Elevate" exclusively for colleagues from minority ethnic backgrounds to encourage confidence and ambition among employees to seek promotions and leadership opportunities.

[19] Sustainable Mobility for All (2023). *Gender Imbalance in the Transport Sector.* https://www.sum4all.org/sites/default/files/d7/gender_imbalance_in_the_transport_sector_a_toolkit_for_change.pdf

Give young people a chance

> With my ethnic background, I know that I will face more challenges with my opportunities in the world of work.
>
> *(Rami, aged 24, employed, Bradford)*

This final section explores how young people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds can be given a chance in the workplace, and what employers, charities, and education can do to make the world of work a better place for them. This draws on the views of both employers and young people.

Employers

Young people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds appealed for employers to conduct their recruitment processes with an open mind; open to listening, to hearing, and to valuing young people from diverse backgrounds, and giving them a chance. They want to engage with employers, to understand the range of careers and workplaces that could be available to them, and to know how best to approach the opportunities which come up in their local areas and regions.

As an example, Mo, aged 23 from Leeds, wants employers to give young people more time and be more present:

> *"I guess being more out there, obviously there are the careers fairs, but even then they have the flyer, or they'll have an email, but it's like they don't have a lot of information […] You know, if somebody wants [to they could] schedule appointments for people who are generally interested, so, like, rather than on the day, they could do it at a later time, give the person the time it make them feel a bit heard."*

Access to informal professional networks may be more uneven for those from minority ethnic backgrounds, which makes transparent and fair recruitment processes particularly important. Where an employer chooses to advertise their vacancy, or how they go about their selection process, or structure their interviews, or how they foster an inclusive workplace, matters. Employers can extend their commitment to fairness by considering a wider range of factors when judging the best candidate and by being open to candidates who do not come from communities more familiar to them.

In a participatory workshop in Bradford, participants discussed their views on competency-based versus values-based selection processes. The former is the most familiar type of assessment, based on the candidate demonstrating direct experience or skills acquired in the past as a way of proving they can fulfil the job role. For employers, this approach has been a traditional way to mitigate costs and risks, but this sets up additional barriers for young people. Taking a values-based approach engages with a candidate's personal values and behaviours and whether they align with the organisation's core values and culture. Based on the assumption that skills can often be acquired on the job and that values are harder to teach, this approach can have the advantage of being more flexible, acknowledging potential and giving the young person a chance.

In the same workshop, a consensus emerged that it was not about competency versus values, but that both were needed depending on the nature of the role. However, a values-based approach steps away from requiring the candidate to be the "finished article" and starts to see the young person as potential who needs the opportunity to develop. As one employer argued:

> *"Skills can be taught. Skills can be taught by the employer whilst you're on the job."*

The young people in this study raised some bold and unequivocal challenges for employers. They felt that employers need to accept and embrace their part in investing in young people and have obligations to the communities where they trade and operate. They are not the only partner in this, but certainly one of the most significant for nurturing talent. For example, they can play a key role in helping young people develop 'soft' and interpersonal skills.

Aaron, from Walsall, noticed that his friend was not getting the same opportunities as him due to his different educational background. He suggested that this could be overcome by:

> *"[…] offering more of a chance to young people from marginalised backgrounds and ethnic minorities. I've got a close friend, and he's been applying for quite a lot of jobs, but he doesn't have the same education as me. We'll go for similar roles, and because they don't see that education, or don't see appropriate experience, they just don't give them a chance at all. He might apply for fifty to one-hundred jobs and hear back from about two. So, they need to be broader in their selection process. And even if they're not going to get someone on board, do offer more interviews in the recruitment process."*

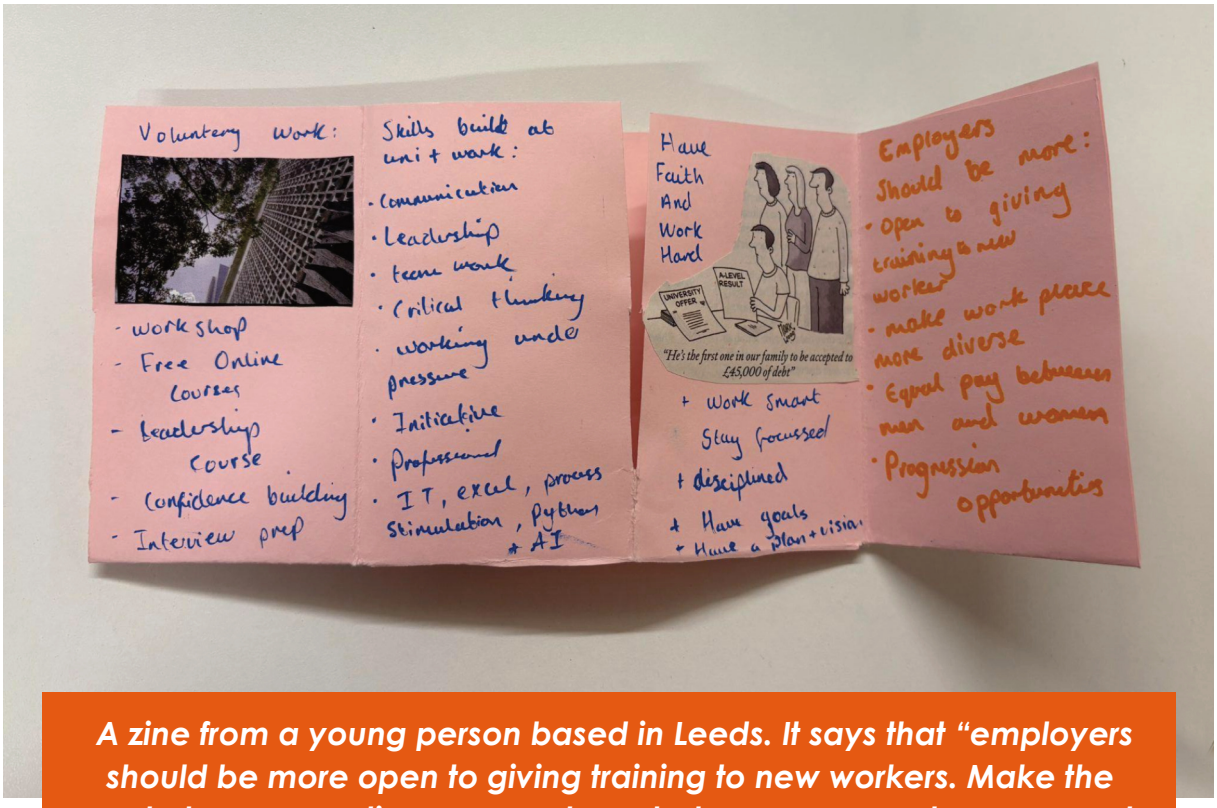
In Bradford, one employer argued for the positive outcomes for both parties if employers embrace this mindset:

> *"I think there's something quite magical in knowing that you can grow your own talent, and that's what you get when you take somebody on who's not experienced […] not expecting the finished article - that's a good thing. That's growth for the organisation."*

Both young people and employers argued for change. They suggested more flexible and adaptable recruitment practices; for example, diverse selection panels, job trials rather than interviews, name blind application forms, and the removal of unnecessary barriers to application such as requirements for irrelevant experience or qualifications.

Our research participants also appealed for employers to check their biases and to be wary of appointing roles in their own image. A young person from Bradford, aged 20, spoke to this:

> *"Sometimes [employers] don't realise they have biases, and they go based on, 'Oh, this is the ideal person. They seem like the ideal person, let me hire them' sort of thing. Unless you're aware of your biases, it's impossible to know that you've got them, because that's the thing. With biases, they exist. They're unconscious. You can't control them. The only way of making sure that people's behaviour is impacted by the biases is if they're educated to know they exist. So education and training, for me […] I think that's the only way. Is that awareness, self-awareness."*



A zine from a young person based in Leeds. It says that "employers should be more open to giving training to new workers. Make the workplace more diverse, equal pay between men and women and progression opportunities".

Employment support, mentoring programmes, and charities

Mentoring and support programmes can have a positive impact on young people by creating supportive environments where they can confidently explore a range of roles, develop essential skills, and safely learn from mistakes without fear of judgement. They offer opportunities for personal growth, such as building confidence and acquiring professional experience that is hard to access for young people from minority ethnic backgrounds. When programmes are well resourced and work placements well structured, with proper guidance and encouragement, young people thrive, increasing their sense of belonging, direction, and career goals.



In Walsall, Hafsa talked movingly about her escape from depression, and her now growing confidence, simply because she was able to access a mentoring programme. She is now thriving and excited to step into her first role working in a shop, whilst also still accessing the mental health and wellbeing aspects of the support programme. For Hafsa, the continuity of support, sustained well into employment and into her first job role, has been particularly transformative.

Young people also felt that job centres could be more welcoming and helpful in directing young people towards personalised support. Cass, from Brent, vividly recounts his experience:

> *"When I was 16, I had gone to the Job Centre as my last hope, yeah, because I was getting really stressed out. I was not getting anything, and I thought, 'Okay, but Job Centres are meant to help.' As soon as I've walked in, what are you met by? Depressing colours, nothing bright, nothing helpful. Half the employees there - they're not happy. They're sort of stressed out. They don't look like they're going to help you really. And the help that they really offered you was just basic help."*

Education sector

Schools and colleges play a vital role in shaping young people's access to work, particularly when career guidance is proactive, relational, and well-integrated into the school environment. Many young people described the value of having dedicated career teams who offered hands-on support, assisting with CV writing, job applications, and connecting them to local opportunities. This kind of holistic, personalised, consistent guidance helps bridge the gap between education and employment, especially for those who may not have family or social networks with professional experience. Collaboration between schools, families, and local community organisations, such as charities that share job opportunities, creates a stronger ecosystem of support around each young person, enabling them to make informed decisions and feel more confident about their next steps into work. Mo, from Leeds, had this experience first-hand:



> *"At my high school, they had a careers team, so they've supported us. Whenever I needed help to write the CV or to apply for a job [or] if someone needed to apply for a job, the career team in high school was there to support them. And also as family, [local charities] also helped, as they always send messages over job opportunities."*

Conclusion

> To close the employment gap, we must first close the confidence gap, the aspiration gap, and then the opportunity gap.
>
> *(Quentin, aged 24, employed, Walsall)*

Young people from minority ethnic backgrounds face multiple barriers when it comes to entering the labour market, specifically through the application, hiring, and early career stages.

The views of young people captured in this report reflect the constraints and challenges they must navigate as they transition from school to the world of work.

In this study, young people were able to talk freely about the possible implications they face for their different skin colour, hair type, or name. They were aware that their treatment in both the recruitment process and in the workplace could be less favourable than their white peers. They understood that racism can take very sophisticated and subtle "dog whistle" forms, and they looked for diversity in the workplaces they sought to be a part of, as that was one way to judge if they could ultimately "fit in".

There were discussions around what 'work ready' looks like. For young people, this entails closing the education-to-employment gap through better access to local services, programmes, and charities that can provide support. Some employers viewed young people as having 'poor levels of preparedness' and a 'lack of basic employment literacy'; however, we need to consider how young people can be better prepared for the world of work and supported to navigate the transition from education to employment.

For fair hiring, the young people expressed concerns around local employers not investing in local young people. They want to see more long-term investment and community engagement. In addition to this, there was frequent reporting of discrimination both during the application process and in the workplace, which can be linked to structural and institutional racism. For the young people who took part in this research, fair hiring looks like community engagement, investment in hiring local young people, anonymising applications, and providing constructive feedback to applicants.

Despite the challenges that young people identified, the positive attitude that they displayed during the study cannot be put aside. In Brent, Mira, for instance, spoke of the need to "put herself out there". In Walsall, Hafsa put it with a slant of poetry when she shared: "You have to step into this world. You have to try something. You have to get out of your room, get out of your home, and do something out of your comfort zone."

Finally, giving young people a chance stems from taking action to help them become 'work ready' and making 'fair hiring' a reality. It means reimagining how employers run their recruitment processes in ways that are inclusive and recognise potential, not just existing qualifications and skills. It requires us to look holistically at the main actors in the system to ensure that they can provide consistent and joined-up support for young people from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Solutions

The proposed solutions below stem from the research findings, as well as an online workshop with local stakeholders where we shared these findings and discussed potential solutions to the challenges raised.

The findings from this research point towards opportunities for action across the employment system, including for employers, education providers, policymakers, funders, community organisations and other local partners.

'Work readiness'

- Support voluntary and community sector organisations as core partners in youth employability, with multi-year funding that rewards collaboration across health, education, employers, and families rather than short competitive contracts.
- Expand careers support in schools and colleges to improve awareness of a wide range of jobs and to include practical guidance on how to apply for and thrive in work. This could include mock interviews, employer drop-in sessions, curriculum-linked employer projects, and visits that help young people understand local labour markets.
- Help schools implement "skills for life" curriculum changes by connecting classroom learning to local opportunities, and by focusing targeted support on young people facing barriers (e.g., through small-group work, community-based provision, and culturally competent outreach).

Fair hiring and employment

- Produce and promote practical guidance for local employers on inclusive, youth-friendly recruitment, co-designed with young people and voluntary sector partners.
- Encourage employers to adopt clear communication standards, for example:
    - Stating upfront if and when applications may close early.
    - Setting expectations for response times and process stages.
    - Committing to providing basic feedback for interviewed candidates, and signposting to alternative opportunities where possible.
- Promote assessment methods that allow young people with limited experience to demonstrate potential, such as structured tasks, project-based assessments, short work trials, and group activities co-designed with local delivery partners.
- Encourage employers to monitor and review data on who applies, who is shortlisted, and who is hired, including by ethnicity and local residence, and to involve voluntary sector partners in interpreting patterns and identifying changes. This must include being transparent with young people about how the data is being used and why it is being collected.

- Embed explicit commitments around anti-discrimination in recruitment policies, making clear that breaches will have consequences for managers and contractors. This should be supported by training for recruitment panels and line managers on how to avoid and address discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, and Islamophobia. This proposal aims to better embed the requirements of UK law into on-the-ground recruitment practice, ensuring legal standards translate into everyday actions and accountability.
- Anonymised and skills-based recruitment processes (such as removing names, schools, and other identity markers from applications, while focusing on structured tests or work samples) have emerged from this research as a potential area to explore, though the strength of evidence supporting their effectiveness is varied. Youth Futures will conduct a series of employer trials to further explore what works to recruit and retain young people from marginalised backgrounds.

Giving young people a chance

- Recognise third sector organisations as key enablers and cultural brokers between schools, young people from minority ethnic backgrounds, their families, and employers, and resource them to build long-term, trust-based relationships.
- Encourage employers to commit to engagement with local communities:
    - Regular, not one-off, engagement with schools and youth groups.
    - Co-created enrichment (projects, site visits, talks) that reflect local cultures and aspirations.
    - Open conversations about how businesses serve the local community, entry routes into their company/industry, and what progression routes exist.
- Explicitly address power dynamics in employer–youth engagement by involving young people and community partners in co-designing activities, setting expectations, and shaping what 'work readiness' means in ways that reflect lived experience as well as employer needs.

By adopting these initiatives more widely, we can build a society in which young people from minority ethnic backgrounds are seen for the value they bring to organisations and society: one in which they all get a fair chance to explore, and live up to, their potential.

Case studies

Walsall

In Walsall, 18 young people, four employers and three stakeholders were involved in the research. A large majority of the local young people came from Muslim backgrounds. Their barriers to fair employment opportunities stemmed from not only economic disadvantage, but from frequent and systemic experiences of racism and prejudice, particularly Islamophobia.

Local inequalities

Young people discussed the lack of local employment opportunities that genuinely invest in people and community development. They felt that there could be stronger bonds between employers and the local economy. For the young people we spoke to, fair employment is not just about gaining work, but about being part of a system that fosters local engagement, social mobility, and equitable growth.

Recruitment and representation

The young people we spoke to want recruitment that is fair, trustworthy and builds awareness of the jobs available and progression. Young people want employers to be actively present in schools, colleges, youth spaces, mosques, and community centres, not just at one-off careers fairs, but through sustained engagement that builds trust over time, creating inclusive recruitment and workplaces. For them, employers who show up consistently, listen, and adapt their practices are more likely to be seen as credible and safe places to work.

Racism and discrimination

Islamophobia can be defined as a 'form of racism that reworks and reproduces religious bigotry to discriminate against and harm Muslims, and people perceived to be Muslims'. One young person described it as "an insidious affliction that has metastasised within our society". For the young participants, Islamophobia was a harsh reality of exclusion that shaped how they viewed local employment and diminished the trust that they had in the labour market and society. There were stories of outright racism and feelings of social exclusion. Young people from Walsall want psychological and emotional protection and safety from their place of work. They said that experiences of racism had drained their mental health and led to feelings of anxiety and low moods.

Key opportunities to improve youth employment outcomes in Walsall

Employers, young people and local stakeholders identified several opportunities for employers to improve recruitment practices and diversify the workforce in Walsall, including:

- Outlining clear progression pathways for young people, emphasising that young people need to feel inspired and have something to look forward to and learn from.
- Creating mentoring and peer support structures so that young people are not left as "the only one" from a particular ethnic group in their team without anyone who understands their experience.
- Working in partnership with experts and grassroots organisations to co-create programmes, focusing on their strengths and bringing those to the table.
- Encouraging employers to see themselves as anchor institutions that can strengthen Walsall's economy by hiring locally, paying fairly, and investing in staff development so that young people can build long-term careers.

Employers also suggested that the local government, businesses and community organisations need to be better at sharing data, particularly around local youth unemployment levels. If employers had access to this data, this could inform where they target their recruitment efforts.

Leeds

In Leeds, ten young people aged 16-23 engaged in zine-making workshops and one-to-one interviews. Four employers and two local stakeholders also took part in interviews. The young people discussed wanting more support following school and college, particularly better careers advice. Participants described existing careers advice as generic, impersonal, and often disconnected from individual aspirations or the realities of the local labour market. Young people who did not want to pursue university pathways reported feeling particularly unsupported during the transition from education into work.

Local inequalities

Young people discussed a limited availability of jobs that meet their needs outside of Leeds City Centre. This forces young people to look further afield, which means additional costs, such as transport expenses. The lack of geographically accessible opportunities contributes to feelings of disconnection from the local labour market. Young people wanted employers to advertise more in local settings or through local organisations.

Recruitment and representation

Young people discussed the rigidity of qualification requirements which created barriers to employment. For instance, one participant explained the difficulty in securing employment because of rigid requirements for GCSE grades. Participants identified a need for more inclusive recruitment processes that recognise a broader range of skills, alongside expanded opportunities for practical experience such as job shadowing, workshops, and employer-led activities in schools.

Racism and discrimination

Participants discussed how those from minority ethnic backgrounds were often treated differently in the workplace, citing that "their voice is not being heard". They felt that this began from applying to jobs, and there were stories of racial bias directly affecting recruitment decisions. Some young people were also worried about sharing their ethnicity on equal opportunities forms, since they were unsure how this data would be used and whether this would influence the hiring process. This points to a need for more transparency around EDI data collection, to ensure that young people feel comfortable sharing data that can help monitor diversity and inclusion efforts.

Key opportunities to improve youth employment outcomes in Leeds

Participants agreed that the key opportunities for employers to improve their recruitment practices and diversify their workforce include:

- Capturing data and evidence around racial disparities in the hiring process and the workplace and targeting action to respond to that. This could include collecting, monitoring, and reporting data on demographic characteristics (e.g. gender, ethnicity, age) at every level within the organisation. However, this requires transparency around why and how the data is being used, to ensure that young people are comfortable sharing it.
- Simplifying application processes, anonymising candidate applications, and adopting skills-based assessments.
- Having a joined-up approach to pre-employment offers to use those as a vehicle to attract young people. This could include practical, hands-on engagement from employers; relevant, work-focused programmes from education providers; or flexible, youth-centred support from careers professionals.
- Employers having clear visibility within schools and school careers fairs.
- Working with local stakeholders who can provide support and wraparound provision.

Bradford

In Bradford, 14 young people aged 17-24 took part in one or two of either a one-to-one, in-depth interview; a zine-making participatory workshop; or a participatory workshop with two local employers. Four employers and one local stakeholder also took part in interviews. Young people said that seeking work experiences in their local areas, in and around Bradford, felt easier than looking further afield, because its diverse population fosters a sense of safety for them. This is particularly true of young people in Keighley, whereas venturing into unfamiliar places like Huddersfield presents more of a challenge.

Local inequalities

Young people said that job prospects in smaller areas such as Keighley are limited due to the size of the local economy. Family networks play an important role in accessing jobs, and it was not unusual for volunteering, work experience placements and early job opportunities to have become available through relatives in local takeaways, bookshops or supermarkets. Support provided in schools varies, but on the whole young people viewed this as offering little help in preparing them for the workplace, providing neither CV writing skills nor career advice. Some young people had been able to access community organisations as an alternative source of support. Young people are keen on apprenticeships, but employers said that there are often extra costs and pressures for smaller employers, businesses and organisations in hosting these.

Recruitment and representation

Stakeholders discussed moving from experience- and skills-based to values-based hiring practices as a way of recognising the potential in young people and giving them a more realistic chance to succeed. For example, rather than requesting a set amount of experience in a certain field, recruitment could factor in values and interpersonal skills, such as trustworthiness and a respectful attitude. Participants also discussed the value of adopting fairer processes such as redacting personal data and offering alternatives to formal interviews such as work trials which test real-world ability. Young people stressed the importance of diverse workforces that reflect local populations and diverse customer needs and believed they could make a valuable contribution to local employers.

Racism and discrimination

In their early job experiences, young people described a series of discriminatory incidents in retail, healthcare, and care settings. Their hijab, the colour of their skin, their name or adherence to their religious beliefs had all been the basis for discrimination in their experiences of recruitment or the workplace. In some cases, managers had provided individual support and promoted fairness, but we also heard some reports of bias and unfair treatment by managers. Young people called on employers to focus on fairness and to treat all applicants as individuals with different skills and potential.

Key opportunities to improve youth employment outcomes in Bradford

Local employers, community stakeholders and young people agreed that the key opportunities for employers to improve their recruitment practices and diversify their workforce include:

- Gathering, measuring, and monitoring demographic data, and ensuring that everything employers do is as measurable and meaningful as possible. This could include collecting, monitoring, and reporting data on demographic characteristics (e.g. gender, ethnicity, age) at every level within the organisation.
- Communicating and sharing the stories, perspectives, and lived experiences of young people.
- Upholding and enacting the Equality Act and individual company anti-discrimination and anti-racism policies.

Brent

In Brent, 18 young people aged 18-24 took part in both one-to-one interviews and a zine-making workshop. Five employers and one local stakeholder also participated in interviews. The young people who took part in this study were very proud of coming from areas in Brent such as Harlesden, Stonebridge Park and Church Road. However, they did not understand the range of roles and careers that they could aspire to in their local area. They said that local employers need to make the full range of opportunities more visible to the local community, to join in community events and share their job opportunities with local people more widely.

Local inequalities

Young people in Brent felt that it was difficult to find support to transition from education to employment, and that they had to either "sink or swim" when it came to accessing jobs. The young people interviewed for this research also felt that local Jobcentres were unwelcoming, outdated, and poorly equipped to help young people.

From our conversations with participants, it was clear that while opportunities are available in a wide range of sectors in Brent, these are often not visible to the young people who are seeking them. Stakeholders explained that smaller, creative, tech-based and charity employers in the local area want to engage with young people but are not always reaching them. Young people described how these local opportunities are too "underground", and they marvelled at the fact that, for instance, one of the 'Big Brother' television studios is located in their area.

Since young people are unaware of this range of opportunities, they tend to focus on opportunities with well-known retail brands who can be found more easily on national job search websites. However, these roles receive large volumes of applicants. This, combined with a perceived lack of support with school-to-work transitions, has led many young people to fall onto their own limited networks and resources to try to make an income in any way they can. Some young people relied on networks of friends and family to find work, but others lacked the necessary connections to do this.

School to work transitions

Young people reported dissatisfaction with the careers advice and guidance provided in schools. They felt that schools are overwhelmingly focused on pathways to university rather than apprenticeships, vocational career paths or getting into paid work. More information about local labour markets and opportunities was desired. Young people felt very positive about apprenticeships and wanted more support to learn about and access these, as well as more guidance in job search and application skills. They were positive about work experience opportunities, but felt that these were often too short, with insufficient opportunities to build skills, and that they didn't cover sectors that interested them.

Racism and discrimination

Young people in Brent are clear that their ethnicity shapes their job chances. Some avoided stating their ethnicity on forms as they felt it might hurt their applications. Similar to the sentiments in Walsall, the young people identified a lack of transparency around why companies collect diversity data. They were aware that applications from people with names and surnames indicating a minority ethnic background are at greater risk of rejection than those with a stereotypically 'British' name. They felt pressured to monitor their body language to try to avoid falling into racist stereotypes of being read as "lazy" or "aggressive". Being underestimated because of their race, age, or gender was seen as routine, but they felt that this was rarely acknowledged by employers.

Talk of inclusion was met with scepticism. Young people said if a workplace needed to be told to be inclusive, it probably was not likely to be, or become, inclusive. It would not be a workplace where they could belong. Employers who are serious about their commitment to diversity and inclusion could demonstrate this by simply following their own policies on these matters, taking racial complaints seriously and being seen to be doing so.

Young people said that even entry-level jobs often asked for "one year's experience", blocking their access to these opportunities. They also said that they disliked applying for jobs on generic online job boards, which they perceived to offer poor outcomes for the effort and volume of work that applications demand. One young person described being treated with suspicion and harassed by security guards when he tried to distribute copies of his CV in a local shopping mall - a bitter experience which he has never repeated.

Key opportunities to improve youth employment outcomes in Brent

Local employers, community stakeholders and young people agreed that the key opportunities for employers to improve their recruitment practices and diversify their workforce include:

- Raising awareness of a wider range of opportunities from different industries and the smaller, creative sector in the local area. Advertising opportunities in places where young people tend to gather – online and in shopping centres.
- Ensuring that the careers advice delivered to young people is fit for the modern world and tailored to young people's career aspirations.
- Embracing opportunities to deepen their engagement with local schools and colleges to improve career awareness from an earlier stage.
- Working with external partners to review recruitment practices and seeking feedback from young people with diverse backgrounds directly to ensure processes are inclusive and accessible.
- Changing the way they use CVs to level the playing field by considering that young people have different backgrounds and life experiences; and ensuring that interviewers are well trained on unconscious bias and follow best practice to ensure the best possible outcome at every stage.

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