

Youth Employment 2025 Outlook



Achieving this starts with ambition - the ‘north star’ goal we’d like to see adopted is to be world-leading; to have the highest participation rate in education and employment across the OECD for young people by 2050. Setting this goal would mean that the generation born today would transition from being young into a system that truly works and enables them to access good work – with the right focus, this is a vision we can and should achieve.

Barry Fletcher, Chief Executive
at Youth Futures Foundation

Contents

Foreword	4
Executive Summary	6
1. The youth unemployment and inactivity challenge in 2025	8
1.1 A challenging labour market	15
1.2 Additional headwinds	16
2. The cost of inaction	20
2.1 Long-term unemployment and NEET	20
2.2 The consequences for young people, society and the economy Spotlight: marginalised groups & compound disadvantage	22
3. Change is achievable: lessons from the OECD	24
3.1 International NEET trends and best practice	24
3.2 Case study – The Netherlands comparison	26
4. Setting world-leading ambition: the £86 billion opportunity	28
4.1 An ambitious north star goal	28
4.2 The economic reward of leading the OECD	29
5. An ambitious, evidence-based policy agenda to turn the tide	30
5.1 NEET prevention	31
5.2 Youth Guarantee with an in-built wage subsidy scheme	32
5.3 Apprenticeships and skills	34
5.4 Address mental health as a barrier to labour market participation	36
5.5 The way forward	39
Appendix	40

Foreword



Updated analysis shows the long-term economic benefit of the UK achieving the lowest NEET rate in the OECD is an additional £86 billion. This is a £17 billion increase since our 2023 calculations.

We have recently seen a welcome focus on the challenge facing young people who are not in work or education, including the Chancellor's commitment to 'end long term youth unemployment'. The Government has committed to a number of new initiatives and reforms as part of its developing Youth Guarantee and recent *Post-16 Education and Skills white paper*. This includes setting up eight locally-led trailblazers, the expansion of Youth Employment Hubs, automatic enrolment in college to stem the flow of young people out of education, and the announcement of a new wage subsidy scheme to help ensure long-term NEET young people have an opportunity to change trajectory.

These new initiatives are welcome but, given the scale and complexity of the challenge and the likelihood that it will worsen given some of the headwinds described in this report, we know much more action will be needed to address this sustainably. This will need to focus on all aspects of the youth employment system to ensure that every young person can secure good work, and this report makes evidence-based recommendations that could help move the issue in a meaningful positive direction.

As we outline here, the opportunity is significant. Updated analysis shows the long-term economic benefit of the UK achieving the lowest NEET rate in the OECD is an additional £86 billion. This is a £17 billion increase since our 2023 calculations due to the growing gap in NEET rates between the UK and Netherlands, who currently lead the OECD in terms of youth participation in education and employment.

Most importantly, in addition to the massive economic benefit, matching the NEET rate of the Netherlands would mean 567,000 more young people would be in work, education or training in the UK. This would transform not only their lives but those of their families and wider communities.

In each of the last 25 years the UK's NEET rates have never averaged below 10% and are now at a decade long high. However, as we highlight in this report, other countries with similar labour markets to the UK have shown our high rates are not inevitable.



Barry Fletcher, Chief Executive at Youth Futures Foundation

Too many young people, especially those with low or no qualifications, are being locked out of the world of work.

Since we published our 2024 Outlook last autumn, the number of young people not earning or learning has risen to nearly one million. We have also seen a significant rise in the number of young people who are long-term unemployed (for over six months), increasing by 124% in the last three years.



Executive Summary

The youth unemployment and inactivity challenge in 2025

- 1 in 8 young people across the UK are not earning or learning, an increase of approximately over a third in four years. Marginalised groups of young people face more barriers than others and there are stark regional disparities.
- The data shows clear worrying headwinds with rises in mental ill-health, the erosion of quality apprenticeship opportunities, all against a backdrop of a challenging labour market.

The cost of inaction

- More than 1 in 3 unemployed young people have been unemployed and looking for work for over 6 months. This number has more than doubled over since 2022, rising by 124% from 107,000 to 240,000.
- This is concerning given the strong evidence of a 'scarring' effect on a young person's health, lifetime income prospects, their participation in society and the short and long-term fiscal implications for our economy and growth.

Change is achievable: lessons from the OECD

- The UK consistently lags behind other countries who have managed to reduce their NEET rates and sustain these levels; a third of OECD countries featured in recent research had a NEET rate among 15 to 24-year-olds of at least 10% lower than the UK.
- The UK was one of just eight European countries – out of 32 – where the NEET rate increased between 2015 and 2023.
- The Netherlands leads the OECD with less than 1 in 20 young people NEET, compared to 1 in 8 in the UK; its impressive progress demonstrates what can be achieved through a coordinated regional approach, integrated support across education and employment, a dedicated focus on vocational and technical education and strong employer partnerships.



Setting a world-leading ambition: the £86 billion opportunity

- The prize for young people and the economy of sustainably addressing the UK's stubborn NEET challenge is enormous; analysis suggests if the UK matched the Netherlands' youth participation rate, approximately 567,000 more young people would be in work or education, boosting the economy by £86 billion.
- Achieving this requires a national long-term commitment: a new "north star" goal to lead the OECD in youth participation by 2050, through a clear and transparent trajectory of improvement over the next 25 years.

An ambitious, evidence-based policy agenda to turn the tide

- Reaching the ambitious 2050 goal requires an evidence-based and integrated public policy agenda built holistically around young

people, with both a universal youth employment offer and additional targeted support for those who need it the most.

Four priorities for immediate attention:

1. *NEET prevention*: act early to identify and support young people at risk of becoming NEET, including by improving tracking systems.
2. *An ambitious Youth Guarantee with a wage subsidy scheme built in*: offer every young person a path into work, training or education, supported by a significant wage subsidy scheme.
3. *Apprenticeships and skills*: create more high-quality opportunities and move towards an apprenticeship guarantee for young people.
4. *Address mental health as a barrier to participation*: treat mental ill health as a core barrier to employment and integrate support across services.

1. The youth unemployment and inactivity challenge in 2025

Summary: One in eight young people across the UK are not earning or learning, an increase of over a third in four years. Marginalised groups of young people face more barriers than others, and there are stark regional disparities. The data shows clear worrying headwinds with rises in mental ill-health, the erosion of quality apprenticeship opportunities, all against a backdrop of a challenging labour market.

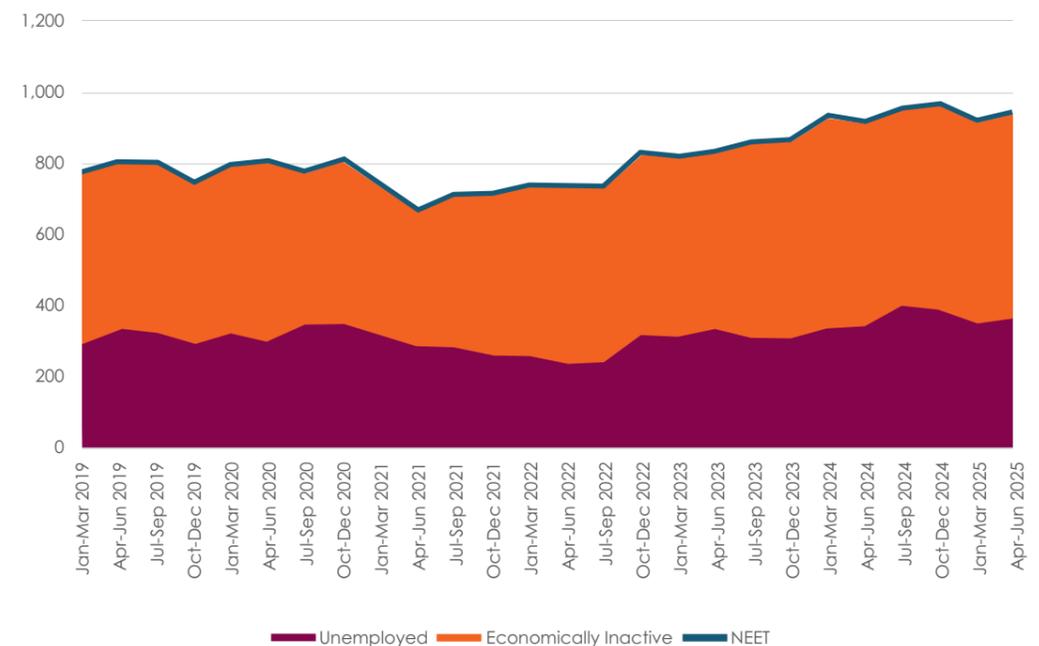
Trends in the NEET rate for young people

The latest ONS data shows that 948,000 young people aged 16 to 24 in the UK are not in education, employment or training (NEET), around one in eight (12.8%) young people. This represents an increase of 26,000 young people from last year. The number of NEET young people is currently higher than the 750,000 figure from just before the pandemic (October to December 2019), with the number of NEET young people increasing steadily from a low of 673,000 four years ago when the UK was emerging from the pandemic. The ongoing rise in the NEET numbers since 2021 has been driven by increases in both unemployment (+76,000) and economic inactivity (+198,000). As Figure 1 shows, there is a higher proportion of NEET young people who are economically inactive (61.5%) than unemployed (38.5%).

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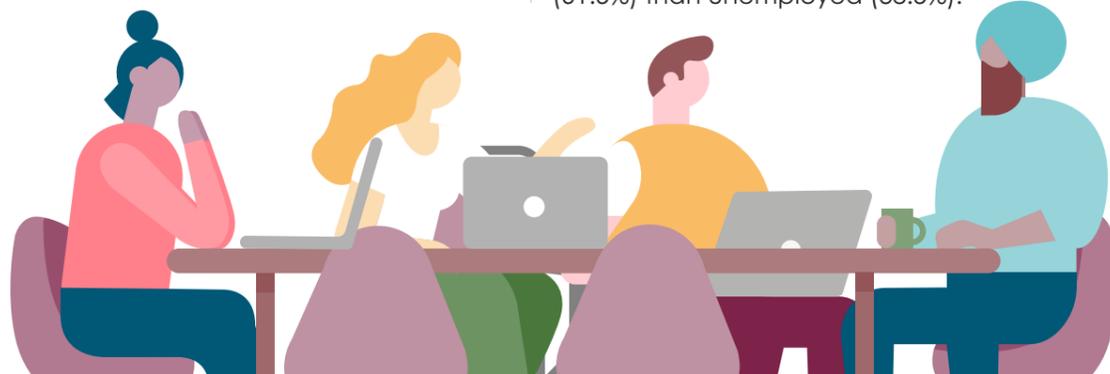
Figure 1: NEET levels have risen considerably since 2021

Trends in NEET, unemployment and economic inactivity levels in thousands, ages 16 to 24, seasonally adjusted, January to March 2019 to April to June 2025, UK



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

This concerning overall picture becomes even more complex when we examine how outcomes for young people vary by region, ethnic group and gender.

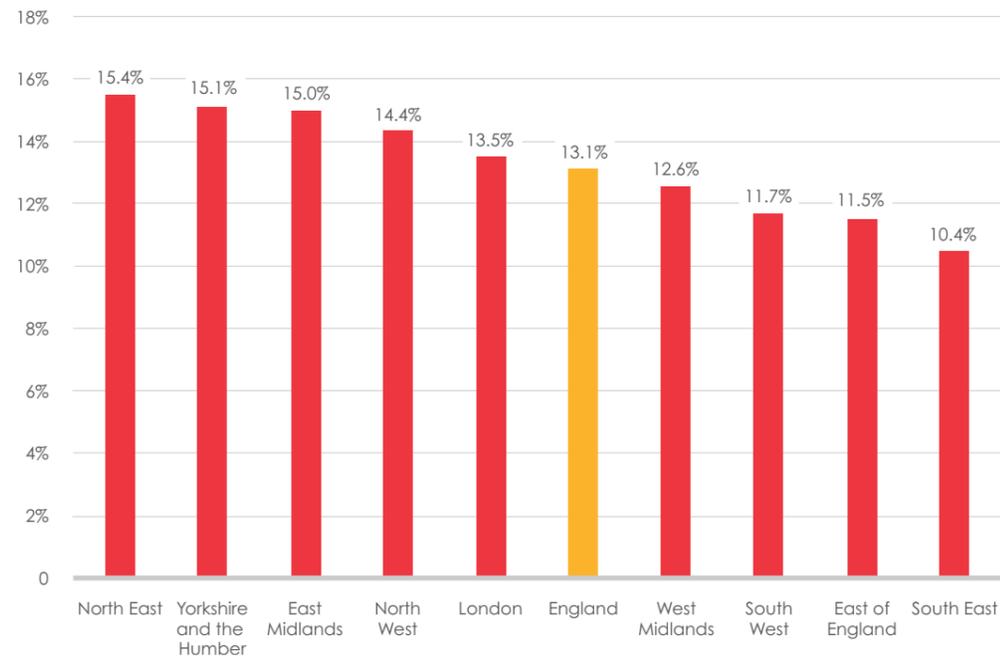


Regional inequality

There is substantial regional inequality in NEET rates across England. As shown in Figure 2, three regions currently have a NEET rate of more than 15%: the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber and the East Midlands. By contrast, the NEET rate is much lower at 10.4% in the South East.

Figure 2: The North East, Yorkshire and the Humber, and the East Midlands have the highest proportion of NEET young people

Proportion of the population who are NEET by region, ages 16 to 24, UK



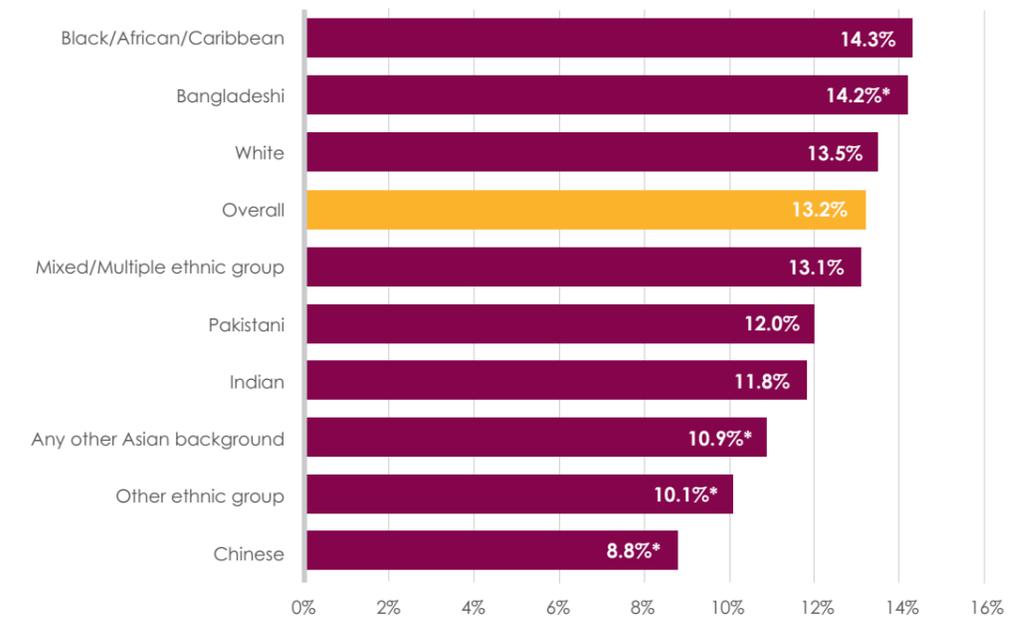
Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics
 Note: Due to the quality issues with regional data, we have taken the quarterly average from July-September 2024 – April-June 2025, as advised by the Get Britain Working White Paper

Ethnic background and NEET

Between January to December 2024, Black, Black African, or Black Caribbean young people had a notably higher NEET rate than other ethnic groups, at 14.3%. This is around one percentage point higher than the UK average, with this rate being heavily driven by unemployment, which was 7.4% for this group compared to the UK average of 4.8%. At the other end of the spectrum, Chinese young people (8.8%) and those from 'Other ethnic groups' (10.1%) and 'Any other Asian background' (10.9%) had the lowest NEET rates of all the ethnic groups.

Figure 3: Black young people have the highest NEET rates

Proportion of the population who are NEET by ethnicity, January to December 2024, ages 16 to 24, UK



Source: Annual Population Survey (APS) from the Office for National Statistics
 Note: Figures marked with an asterisk (*) are derived from fewer than 25 responses in the APS. These estimates have higher uncertainty and should be treated with caution, as per ONS guidance.

Gender and NEET

The number of young men who are NEET (497,000) remains higher than for young women (450,000). Since 2019, NEET levels for men have been higher than for women, reversing the long-standing trend of higher NEET levels for women before 2016. Unemployment levels for men have remained consistently higher than unemployment levels for women over the long term.

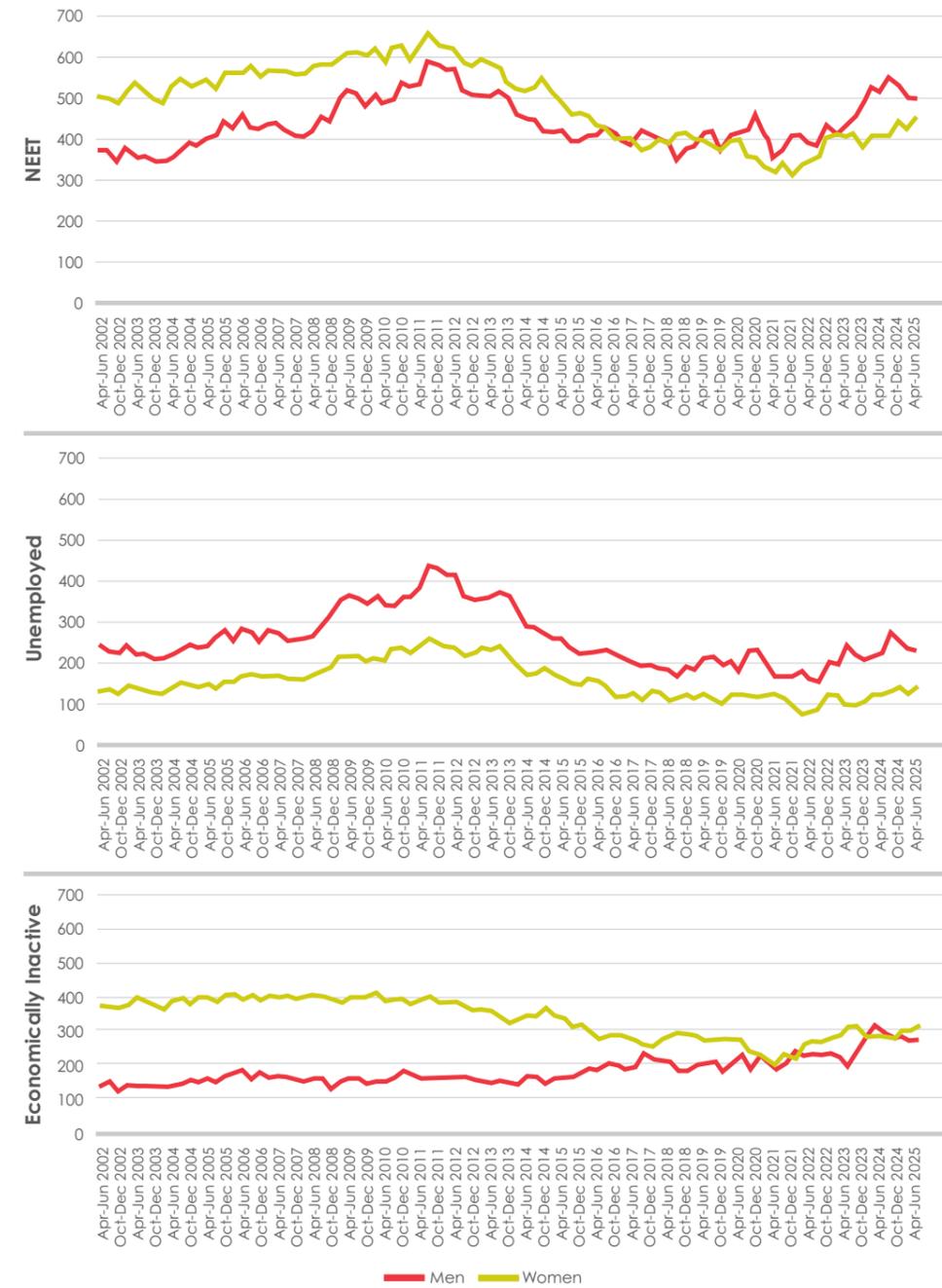
Economic inactivity trends by gender are more complicated. The long-run trend has been that economic inactivity levels for men and women have converged, reaching a similar level in 2020. This was driven by decreasing levels of economic inactivity for women and increasing levels of economic inactivity for men. Since 2020, economic inactivity levels for both men and women have risen.

Overall, NEET levels for women continue to be driven more by economic inactivity (69%) than unemployment (31%). In comparison, NEET men have a far more even split between economic inactivity (55%) and unemployment (45%).



Figure 4: The number of NEET men remains higher than NEET women

Trends in NEET, unemployment and economic inactivity levels (not in full time education) by gender, in thousands, ages 16 to 24, seasonally adjusted, April to June 2002 to 2025, UK



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics



Sometimes it doesn't matter how hard you work; there are systematic barriers that prevent young people from marginalised demographics from achieving certain goals/ careers that are otherwise easier to access for those who have the support and resources.

Farzana, Future Voices Group Ambassador

1.1 A challenging labour market

Young people are typically hit hardest during labour market downturns. They accounted for nearly two-thirds of all job losses during the COVID-19 pandemic.^{1,2} This structural labour market vulnerability exists for three main reasons:

- 1. Sectoral concentration:** Young people are highly overrepresented in sectors where the volume of jobs closely tracks macroeconomic conditions, such as retail and hospitality. These sectors shed jobs quickly when the economy slows down and consumer spending falls and were particularly affected during the labour market downturn of the COVID-19 pandemic.³ Currently, 42.9% of employed 16 to 24-year-olds work in these sectors, compared with 16.1% of adults over 25.⁴
- 2. Job precarity:** Young people are overrepresented in casual, short-term and gig economy roles that lack security and benefits.⁵

These positions are easier to cut during economic downturns and were concentrated in 'shutdown sectors' during the pandemic.⁶

- 3. Less experience:** Employers tend to prioritise experienced candidates when the labour market is weaker. Therefore, young jobseekers, especially those entering the labour market for the first time, face a heightened risk of being excluded.⁷

The UK labour market has weakened from its post-pandemic high. Between summer 2021 and summer 2022, over 40% of employers said that they expected their total staffing levels to increase, but the latest data shows this figure dropped to 25% of employers in Summer 2025.⁸ The number of vacancies fell from a high of 1,290,000 in Q2 of 2022 to 726,000 in Q2 of 2025, and the number of unemployed people per vacancy rose to 2.3 in Q2 2025 from 1.7 a year earlier. The UK employment rate currently stands at 75.1% (June to August 2025), still below its pre-pandemic level of 76.5% (October to December 2019).⁹ The UK unemployment rate has edged up to 4.8%, from 4.1% a year earlier.

1. Resolution Foundation, *Young Workers in the Coronavirus Crisis* (London: Resolution Foundation, 2020), PDF, <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2020/05/Young-workers-in-the-coronavirus-crisis.pdf>.
 2. Office for National Statistics, "Labour Market Overview, UK: March 2021," statistical bulletin, March 23, 2021, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/uklabourmarket/march2021>.
 3. Office for National Statistics, "The Impact of the Coronavirus so far: the Industries that Struggled or Recovered," December 9, 2020, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/economicoutputandproductivity/output/articles/theimpactofthecoronavirussofartheindustriesthatstruggledorrecovered/2020-12-09>; and Elise Gould, Julia Wolfe, and Josh Bivens, "Young Workers and the COVID-19 Recession," Economic Policy Institute, October 14, 2020, <https://www.epi.org/publication/young-workers-and-the-covid-recession/>.
 4. Office for National Statistics, "Annual Population Survey (APS) Data," Nomis, data retrieved April 2024–March 2025, <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/articles/1433.aspx>.
 5. The Work Foundation, "Zero Choices: Swapping zero-hour contracts for secure, flexible working" (Lancaster: The Work Foundation, 2024), <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/work-foundation/publications/zero-choices>.
 6. Resolution Foundation, *Young Workers in the Coronavirus Crisis*, <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/young-workers-in-the-coronavirus-crisis/>.
 7. David N. F. Bell and David G. Blanchflower, "Young People and the Great Recession," *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 241–67, <https://academic.oup.com/oxrep/article/27/2/241/429358>.
 8. James Cockfield, *Labour Market Outlook – Summer 2025* (London: CIPD, 2025), PDF, <https://www.cipd.org/contentassets/cf73843a106949d9b16ac2bc9b526278/8934-lmo-summer-2025-report-web2.pdf>.
 9. Office for National Statistics, "Employment in the UK: September 2025," statistical bulletin, September 2025, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/employmentintheukseptember2025>.

According to the latest *CIPD Labour Market Outlook*¹⁰, employer hiring intentions in 2025 are the lowest they have been since the pandemic and are still lower than the years preceding the pandemic.¹¹

This worsening labour market is already starting to impact young people's employment outcomes negatively. This contraction in hiring demand overlaps with recent increases in NEET rates, suggesting that young people are being disproportionately affected by a lack of suitable job openings.

Sectors that have cut the most job openings are those which typically hire the most young people. Hospitality vacancies have decreased by 46% since 2021 and retail saw the largest volume decrease in workforce jobs this past year.¹² Between 2022 and 2024, occupation-level data from the Employer Skills Survey (ESS) shows the sharpest falls in the roles most accessible to young people: vacancies in elementary jobs are down by 55% and sales and customer service jobs are down by about 48%. By contrast, jobs for managers, directors and senior official roles only fell by 6% over the same period.¹³

Employer sentiment suggests this downward trend for young people will continue. The retail and education sectors face particularly weak demand and only 11% of retail employers expect workforce growth. Employers also report the effects of rising cost pressures in the past year.

The National Living Wage and employer National Insurance contributions are the largest cost pressures reported and are disproportionately reported by employers who hire young people.¹⁴

Overall, the signs clearly point to job entry points narrowing for young people and demand-side challenges beginning to play a significant role in rising NEET rates. With hiring slowing, employers are typically reducing entry-level roles, placements, and apprenticeships, further constraining access to the labour market for young people. This creates a bottleneck for entry that can lock many young people out of the labour market entirely.

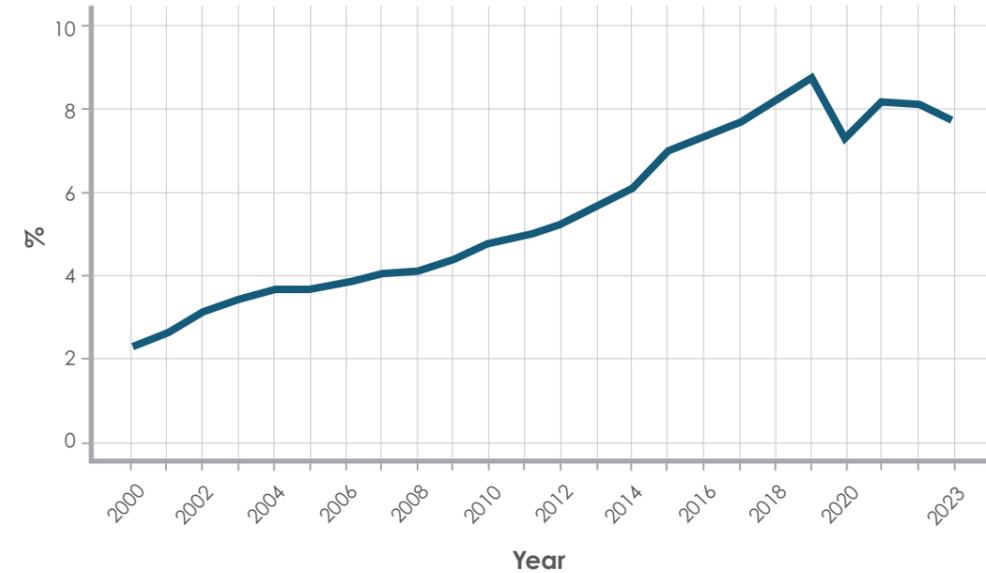
1.2 Additional headwinds

1.2.1 Health and inactivity

Alongside a challenging and worsening job market, young people face additional headwinds in finding employment. The number of young people reporting mental health issues/poor mental health has risen sharply since 2010 and has recently plateaued at a high rate. Nearly half of NEET young people report having a disability, with mental health being the leading issue cited. There has also been a marked increase in the number of NEET young people with learning difficulties/autism as their primary health condition, from 5.5% in 2020 to 13.6% in 2024.¹⁵

Figure 5: Trends in young people's mental health problems

Proportion of young people with a presentation to primary care for a mental health problem, ages 14 to 24, England, 2000 to 2023



Source: CPRD-Aurum



10. CIPD, *Labour Market Outlook – Spring 2025* (London: CIPD, 2025). <https://www.cipd.org/contentassets/cf73843a106949d9b16ac2bc9b526278/8869-lmo-spring-2025-web.pdf>.

11. Cockett, *Labour Market Outlook – Summer 2025*.

12. Office for National Statistics, "Jobs and Vacancies in the UK: July 2025," statistical bulletin, July 2025.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/jobsandvacanciesintheukjuly2025>.

13. Department for Education (2023).

<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/employer-skills-survey/2022> Employer Skills Survey and (2024)

<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/employer-skills-survey/2024> Employer Skills Survey

14. Ibid.

15. Department for Education, "NEET statistics annual brief 2024," Explore Education Statistics, 2024.

<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/neet-statistics-annual-brief/2024>.

Factors driving the growth in mental-ill health for young people

Youth Futures Foundation commissioned the University of Manchester to conduct research into the factors driving this, with four key trends emerging.



Declining sleep quality

Markers of young people's sleep quality have deteriorated, and robust evidence links poor sleep to higher rates of depression and anxiety symptoms.



Employment precarity and affordability pressures

Financial insecurity has increasingly impacted young people since 2010. This appears to be driven by lower access to stable jobs and careers, and affordability pressures, in particular housing.



Reduced access to children and youth services

Funding for youth services in England declined by 73% since 2010 and evidence suggests that these and early intervention services were previously having a positive effect on young people's mental health.



Social media and smartphone use¹

The most robust evidence indicates that social media and smartphone use has a small negative impact on mental health, contributing to recent trends given their wide-spread adoption since 2010.

1.2.2 Insufficient apprenticeship opportunities

International evidence summarised in our Youth Employment Toolkit tells us apprenticeship opportunities can be impactful for getting young people into employment, particularly for those most marginalised. Multiple young people's surveys suggest interest in apprenticeships is increasing.¹⁶ Yet, availability is too low, with a 31.4% decrease in opportunities since the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy. A report from UCAS and St Martin's Group last year found that, on average, for every apprenticeship available, there were 4.4 young people interested – demonstrating a significant mismatch between demand and supply.¹⁷ Department for Education data from 2021 showed that only 7% of applicants aged 25 and under who submitted one or more applications via the Find an Apprenticeship service successfully secured an apprenticeship.¹⁸

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have a particularly good track record of offering apprenticeships to young people. Data from 2021 showed that 69% of apprentices in SMEs are

aged 25 or under, while the figure is only 39% for large businesses.¹⁹ However, between 2016/17 and 2022/23, the number of starts at SMEs fell by 48%, compared to a 2% decline at large employers.

Alongside shortfalls in supply, there are concerns around apprenticeship quality. The achievement rate of 60.5% in 2023/24 is an increase from 51.4% in 2021/22. However, the apprenticeship achievement rate remains low in comparison to other qualifications and compared to other countries' apprenticeship systems.²⁰ A recent Sutton Trust report highlights poor training availability as a potential driver of low achievement rates. In 2023, 300,000 apprentices in England received less than their training entitlement, and nearly 75,000 received no training at all.²¹



16. The Careers & Enterprise Company, Future Skills Questionnaire (FSQ) Insight Briefing: Student career readiness in 2023/24 (London: The Careers & Enterprise Company, 2024), PDF, <https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/media/mntpofw1/fsq-insight-briefing-2023-24.pdf>; UCAS, "UCAS launches new apprenticeships service as demand hits all-time high," news release, October 23, 2024, <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/ucas-launches-new-apprenticeships-service-demand-hits-all-time-high>.

17. St Martin's Group and UCAS, Overcoming the Barriers: Stimulating Growth and Unlocking Supply in UK Apprenticeships (London: St Martin's Group, 2024), PDF, <https://stmartinsgroup.org/publications/overcoming-the-barriers-stimulating-growth-and-unlocking-supply-in-uk-apprenticeships/>.

18. Department for Education, "Apprenticeships in England by Industry, Characteristics and Geography, 2020 to 2021," Explore Education Statistics, last modified 2021, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/apprenticeships-in-england-by-industry-characteristics-and-geography/2020-to-2021>.

19. Ibid.

20. Simon Field, A World of Difference: International apprenticeship policy and lessons for England (London: The Sutton Trust, 2025), PDF, <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/a-world-of-difference/>.

21. Ibid.

2. The cost of inaction

Summary: More than 1 in 3 unemployed young people have been unemployed and looking for work for over 6 months. This number has more than doubled over since 2022, rising by 124% from 107,000 to 240,000. This is concerning given the strong evidence of a 'scarring' effect on a young person's health, lifetime income prospects, their participation in society and the short and long-term fiscal implications for our economy and growth.



2.1 Long-term unemployment and NEET

The most recent data on the proportion of unemployed young people who have been looking for work for over six months (Figure 6) shows that:

More than one in three (37%)

unemployed young people in the UK have been unemployed for over six months

One in five (19.7%)

unemployed young people in the UK have been unemployed for more than a year

Since 2022,

the number of unemployed young people in the UK who have been unemployed for over six months has more than doubled, rising by 124% (from 107,000 to 240,000).

Figure 6: Around one in five unemployed young people have been looking for work for over a year

Proportion of the unemployed youth population that have been unemployed for six months or more, June 2019 to August 2025, ages 16 to 24, UK



Source: Labour Force Survey from the Office for National Statistics

While we have data around the number of people who are long-term unemployed (see Figure 6), long-term NEET figures are not readily available. To provide an indicator of the number of young people who were NEET for 12 months or more, we looked at the number of young people who were NEET in both 2023 and 2024 in the latest two-year longitudinal Annual Population Survey (January–December 2023 to January–December 2024).²² Our analysis found that being NEET in consecutive years is a good indicator of sustained periods outside education, employment or training. We estimate that around 431,000 young people (7.1%) were NEET in both years. An Impetus report from 2019 highlights the stickiness of NEET status, as for those who have been NEET for 3 months, 75% of this group have been NEET for at least 12 months.²³

22. See Technical Note 1 for full explanation of methodology used here

23. B. Gadsby, Youth Jobs Gap Research Briefing 6: The Long-term NEET population (London: Impetus, 2019), <https://impetus-org.files.svdcdn.com/production/assets/publications/YouthJobsGap-The-Long-term-NEET-Population.pdf>.

2.2 The consequences for young people, society and the economy

Youth unemployment and inactivity have costs for all of us.

Cost to young people

Extended periods of unemployment or inactivity are extremely damaging to young people. They have a “scarring” effect on their futures, harming their future health, lifetime income, and job prospects.²⁴ Youth unemployment itself can both cause and result from poor health.²⁵ Young unemployed people are five times more likely to experience health problems, and the number unable to work due to ill health has more than doubled in a decade.²⁶ Young people who are NEET miss out on critical early years of professional development including building skills and gaining experience, increasing the risk of future unemployment.²⁷

Crucially, previous experience of unemployment is one of the strongest predictors of future unemployment.²⁸

This cycle comes at a great social and economic cost to the individual and, considering the scale of the issue, to wider society.

Cost to society and the economy

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately represented among the NEET population. As a result, the individual costs of being NEET compound to entrench structural inequality and limit social mobility.²⁹

There are also wider societal risks. NEET young people are more likely to feel alienated and disconnected from systems of support and are less trusting of political and social institutions.³⁰ Consequently, NEET young people tend to be less politically engaged, with one study finding that past unemployment experience decreases electoral participation by around 9%.³¹

Addressing the high NEET rate is an economic and moral imperative. Inaction undermines the current government's core economic goals on growth and labour market participation (80% of 16 to 64-year-olds in employment).³² Investing in better youth employment outcomes now generates long-term economic returns

through improved public finances, a larger working population, and higher wages. In the short term, the fiscal impacts include increased welfare spending, greater demand for public services, reduced tax revenue and lower overall productivity.³³ Over the long term, scarring effects reduce lifetime workforce participation and wages of the affected generation. Over decades, the total loss in potential earnings and economic contribution amounts to billions in lost tax revenue and economic output.

SPOTLIGHT: marginalised groups & compound disadvantage

Young people who become NEET are disproportionately likely to be from marginalised groups. This includes young people who share one or more of the following characteristics:

- **Young people from particular ethnic groups:** Analysis of the ONS Annual Population Survey shows the NEET rate for young people from a Black, African or Caribbean background is 15.2% compared to the 13.1% average across groups.
- **Learning disabilities and Autism:** The odds of a young person with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) becoming NEET are 1.9 times higher than for a young person without SEND.
- **Experience of the care system:** Young people aged 19-21 with experiences of the care system were three and a half times more likely than all other young people to be NEET - with the latest figures indicating a NEET rate of 38%.
- **Experience of the justice system:** Ministry of Justice data for January-March 2024 shows that only 19.5% of 18-20 year olds and 24.9% of 21-24 year olds are in employment 6 months post release from custody.
- **Mental health challenges:** Half of economically inactive young people are currently out of the labour force due to sickness or injury – with mental ill-health the most cited factor.

Young people that face multiple barriers are particularly at-risk of becoming NEET, with these factors often overlapping and compounding risk, particularly where SEND status and low qualifications are combined with other characteristics. Fuller analysis can be found in research Youth Futures commissioned from NatCen, and in recent analysis from Impetus.



24. Paul Gregg, "Employment, economic inactivity and incapacity: past lessons and implications for future policy" (A thought paper written for the Commission for Healthier Working Lives, 2024); The Health Foundation, "How employment status affects our health," (2025), <https://www.health.org.uk/evidence-hub/work/employment-and-unemployment/how-employment-status-affects-our-health>
 25. Paul Gregg and E. Tominey, "The wage scar from male youth unemployment," *Labour Economics* 12 (2005): 487–509; Paul Gregg, "The impact of youth unemployment on adult unemployment in NCDS," *Economic Journal* 111, no. 475 (November 2001)
 26. Efforts to tackle Britain's epidemic of poor mental health should focus on lower-qualified young people [Accessed 15/10/2025] The Health Foundation, "How employment status affects our health,"; Resolution Foundation, "Efforts to tackle Britain's epidemic of poor mental health should focus on lower-qualified young people", 2024, <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/press-releases/efforts-to-tackle-britains-epidemic-of-poor-mental-health-should-focus-on-lower-qualified-young-people/>
 27. Gregg, "Employment, economic inactivity and incapacity."
 28. Eurofound, NEETs – Young people not in employment, education or training: Characteristics, costs and policy responses in Europe (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2012).
 29. P. Muthoora et al., "Inequality in Good and Bad Times: A Cross-Country Approach," IMF Working Paper, 2019.
 30. L. Azzolini, "The scar effects of unemployment on electoral participation: withdrawal and mobilisation across European societies," *European Sociological Review* 37, no. 6 (2021): 1007–26.
 31. Ibid.
 32. Department for Work and Pensions, HM Treasury, and Department for Education, *Get Britain Working White Paper* (London: HMSO, 2024), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/get-britain-working-white-paper>.

33. A. Coufts, D. Stuckler, and D. Cann, "The Health and Wellbeing Effects of Active Labor Market Programs," *Wellbeing* (2024): 1–18.

3. Change is achievable: lessons from the OECD

Summary: The UK consistently lags behind other countries who have managed to reduce their NEET rates and sustain these levels; a third of OECD countries featured in recent research had a NEET rate among 15-24 year olds at least 10% lower than that of the UK. The UK was one of just eight European countries – out of 32 – where the NEET rate increased between 2015 and 2023. The Netherlands lead the OECD with less than one in 20 young people NEET, compared to one in eight in the UK; their impressive progress demonstrates what can be achieved through a coordinated regional approach, integrated support across education and employment, a dedicated focus on vocational and technical education and strong employer partnerships.

3.1 International NEET trends and best practice

Commissioned by Youth Futures, RAND Europe's report *What works in reducing NEET rates: an international comparative study* explores the international evidence to understand what works to reduce the rate of young people not in education, employment or training.³⁴ The review identified that the UK NEET rate has remained close to the OECD average, but it consistently lags behind leading countries that have sustained low NEET rates.³⁵ Ten European countries have had consistently lower NEET rates than the UK, with these countries having rates 10% lower between 2015 and 2019.³⁶ 24 out of 32 European nations reduced their NEET rate between 2015 and 2023, while the UK was one of eight European countries where the NEET rate increased over this period.³⁷

34. Youth Futures Foundation, *What Works in Reducing NEET: a comparative study*, prepared by Rand International (London: Youth Futures Foundation, 2025), 18–19.
35. Youth Futures Foundation (2025) *What Works in Reducing NEET: a comparative study*. Rand International. Pp.18-19.
36. The ten countries are: Austria, Czechia, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland and Sweden.
37. Ibid.



The review highlighted that countries facing similar pressures after the global financial crisis have successfully reduced or maintained low NEET rates, share a set of core practices, demonstrating policy choices and system design matter.

- **Early and sustained engagement:** Interventions are most effective when they reach young people early and maintain support through transitions. Engagement alone is not enough – success depends on personalisation, relevant content, and action on underlying barriers such as health conditions, insecure housing, and financial hardship.

- **Holistic, tailored support:** Evidence from programmes such as France's Youth Guarantee and Denmark's Bridging Initiatives shows that personalised, wraparound support – including mentoring, coaching, and access to services – is key to converting participation into lasting outcomes.

- **Employer and stakeholder involvement:** Strong partnerships between employment services, education providers, and employers create more relevant opportunities and improve labour market outcomes.



CASE STUDY: The Netherlands comparison

The Netherlands has maintained its NEET rate for young people aged 15-24 as among the lowest in the EU and OECD countries. The rate has remained steadily under 5% since 2015, with the most recent data from 2024 showing a NEET rate of 3.6%. Over this period, less than one in 20 young people in the Netherlands have been NEET, compared to the current rate of one in eight in the UK.

This is despite a pronounced increase in youth unemployment for 15-24-year-olds seen in the Netherlands, as in the UK, following the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID pandemic. Substantially more of this age group are in paid (including part-time) employment in the Netherlands than in the UK. In 2023, the employment rate for 15-to-24-year-olds in the Netherlands was considerably higher than in the UK (76.5% vs 52.9%).

Features of the Dutch system

The Dutch system is characterised by robust institutional structures that promote coordination and collaboration across levels of government, the education sector, and the employment sector, while allowing flexibility in implementation. In contrast, UK efforts often rely on specific programmes that may lack systematic integration.

Wage subsidies and other demand-side employment incentives are key components of the Dutch approach. Active labour market programmes, including wage subsidy schemes, are underpinned by strong employer engagement. This ensures that employers are actively involved in shaping the support measures but are also incentivised to participate.

What can be learned from the Dutch experience

While caution should always be exercised on directly 'importing' public policy from a different country, there are valuable lessons for UK policy makers from the Netherlands:

1. Coordination within regions: clear regional coordination structures would strengthen the implementation of national level policy change.

Youth employment policy in the Netherlands works through a framework of interventions at the national, regional, and local level. Robust institutional structures, through its 35 labour market regions, facilitate consistent national strategic direction while enabling flexibility of implementation at a local level.

2. Coordination between different levels of government (national, regional, local): policies addressing NEET status in the Netherlands comprise a wraparound package of integrated interventions operating across government levels.

To enhance young people's transition into the labour market, these policies integrate:

- Financial support
- Tailored career guidance
- Vocational training
- Structural reforms

3. Importance of employer engagement in successfully reducing NEET rates.

In the Netherlands, this is institutionalised through the Foundation for Cooperation on Vocational Education, Training and Labour Market, which ensures sustained collaboration between employers and vocational education providers. Active participation of employers is vital in the success of interventions to targeting NEET young people.



4. Setting world-leading ambition: the **£86 billion** opportunity

Summary: The prize for young people and the economy of sustainably addressing the UK's stubborn NEET challenge is enormous; analysis suggests if the UK matched the Netherlands' youth participation rate, approximately 567,000 more young people would be in work or education, boosting the economy by £86 billion over the long term. Achieving this requires a national long-term commitment: a new "north star" goal to lead the OECD in youth participation by 2050.

4.1 An ambitious north star goal

In order for Government to set the pathway for achieving its pledges on tackling youth unemployment and inactivity, it will need to set an ambitious goal with a clear and transparent trajectory of improvement over the next 25 years.³⁸



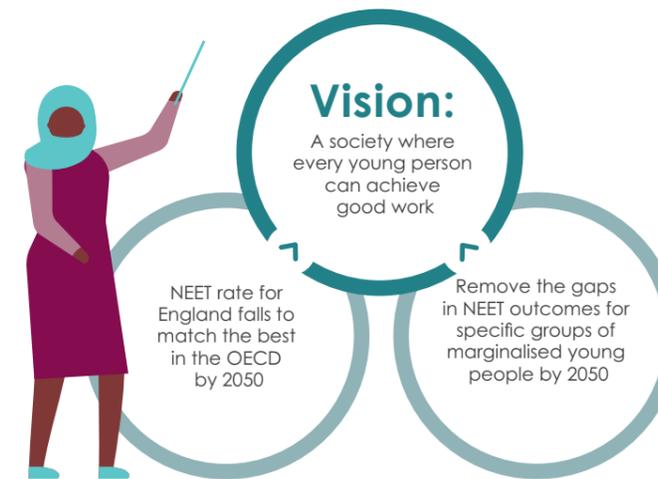
38. The Prime Minister said in 2024 he plans to "eradicate inactivity and unemployment for our young people" and the Chancellor said in 2025 that she would "commit this Labour government to nothing less than the abolition of long-term youth unemployment". See Keir Starmer, "Keir Starmer speech at Labour Party Conference 2024," press release, The Labour Party, September 24, 2024, <https://labour.org.uk/updates/press-releases/keir-starmer-speech-at-labour-party-conference-2024/>; Rachel Reeves, "Chancellor Rachel Reeves's Speech at Labour Party Conference 2025," The Labour Party, 2025, <https://labour.org.uk/chancellor-rachel-reeves-at-labour-party-conference-2025/>.

Youth Futures proposes that the UK adopt a new "north star" goal: the UK should aim to have the lowest NEET rate in the OECD by 2050.



This goal is ambitious but achievable. Concerted effort over the next 25 years could see us match the youth participation rates of our economic peers, with enormous benefits.

To achieve this goal, the UK will also need fairer, more inclusive education and employment systems that provide opportunities for all young people and ensure no one is left behind. That is why Youth Futures also proposes a second "north star" goal: removing the gaps in earning or learning outcomes for specific groups of marginalised young people by 2050.



4.2 The economic reward of leading the OECD

If the UK matched the youth participation rate of the Netherlands as the current OECD leader, there would be approximately 567,000 more young people in the workforce or education. The UK's NEET rate would reduce by more than 60%, dropping from almost 13% to just over 5%. Analysis suggests this increase in youth participation could add £86 billion to our economy over the long term. The benefits of a low NEET rate go beyond just these figures. Countries like the Netherlands demonstrate that sustained low NEET rates generate substantial economic and social returns.

5. An ambitious, evidence-based policy agenda to turn the tide

Summary: Charting the critical path to an ambitious 2050 goal requires an evidence-based and integrated public policy agenda built holistically around young people, with both a universal youth employment offer and additional targeted support for those who need it the most. Four priorities stand out for immediate attention: early prevention, a nationwide Youth Guarantee, an apprenticeships system rebalanced towards young people and action on mental health.

To achieve OECD-leading youth participation rates by 2050 will require significant public policy attention to better support young people into work and training. A new, evidence-based NEET reduction policy agenda, ambitious in scope and designed for the long term should be grounded in two overarching principles:

- **Systems change:** Move from a programmatic approach to integrated solutions spanning employment, education, skills, health, social care, youth policy and more.
- **Universal provision plus targeted support:** Ensure every young person can access high-quality support while directing specialist help to those facing the greatest barriers.

Sustained effort should focus on four key areas to start to meaningfully address the UK's stubborn NEET challenge and chart a path to a world leading 2050 target:

1. **NEET prevention**
2. **An ambitious Youth Guarantee with a wage subsidy scheme built in**
3. **Apprenticeships and skills**
4. **Address mental health as a barrier to participation**



5.1 NEET prevention

We need to prevent young people from becoming NEET in the first place, learning from the Netherlands' successful coordination approach to ensure early identification of those most at risk of becoming NEET and tailoring support to enable successful transitions for all young people.

Address barriers to GCSE achievement

- Strengthen measures to support young people in school to achieve Level 2 qualifications, particularly in maths and English, given its critical role in reducing the risk of becoming NEET. These should focus on attendance, attainment and teaching quality in schools.
- New routes to achieving Level 2 qualifications should be introduced, like the welcome measures outlined in the October 2025 Post-16 education and skills white paper.³⁹

Improve tracking of NEET risk and act early

- Extend NEET tracking by local/strategic authorities to age 21.
- Improve local data-sharing and use effective risk of NEET indicators (RONI) to trigger support for young people before they leave the education system.

Offer additional funding to support at-risk young people

- Provide additional funding for targeted, personalised support (through schools and colleges) for at-risk young people still in education who require tailored support.
- Provide additional funding for re-engagement support to get young people who have dropped out of education back into learning.



39. Department for Education, Post-16 Education and Skills (London: HMSO, 2025), PDF, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68f518ee06e6515f7914c7ce/Post-16_Education_and_Skills_white_paper_Accessible_Version.pdf.



5.2 An ambitious Youth Guarantee with a wage subsidy scheme built in

The government has taken welcome steps towards a Youth Guarantee that aims to ensure every 18-21-year-old has access to further learning, help to get a job, or an apprenticeship, but we will need greater ambition to match the scale of the youth employment challenge.

Make the guarantee permanent and accessible to every young person

- *Expand the age range:* widen eligibility to 16 to 24-year-olds.
- *Nationwide with place-based delivery:* a national entitlement delivered by regional authorities who adapt the offer to the local context
- *Fast response:* every young person receives a substantial intervention within six months of leaving education or work to prevent scarring effects of longer-term NEET.
- *Permanent:* government should consider legislating the Youth Guarantee as a statutory entitlement to drive the long-term systems change required.

Reach young people 'hidden' from the system via youth services and trusted adults through Government's National Youth Strategy

- *Youth services as a key delivery partner:* 44% of NEET young people are outside the benefits system and therefore not engaged with mainstream employment services.⁴⁰ Place based youth services can reach economically inactive young people mistrustful of mainstream provision.
- *Embed trusted adults:* Adult figures like youth workers, mentors, and careers advisers play a critical role in engaging NEET young people and helping them navigate support.⁴¹ Government should work to give all young people access to a trusted adult and embed them in government youth services like Youth Employment Hubs.

Provide greater support for those facing additional barriers

- Targeted support for young people with learning disabilities or autism: invest substantially in supported internships and supported employment pathways.
- Intensive specialist programmes: for young people with experience of care or the criminal justice system.

Build in clear success metrics and evaluation

- *Set formal targets for reducing long-term NEET rates (6+ months, 12+ months):* develop clear milestones for the Chancellor's commitment to "abolish long-term youth unemployment".
- **Track outcomes of the most marginalised:** success should be tied to specific indicators for groups with the worst outcomes to ensure the guarantee reduces inequalities.
- *Evaluate and improve:* embed continuous evaluation into the guarantee and use it to improve the scheme iteratively.

Build in a permanent, counter-cyclical wage subsidy scheme⁴²

- *Permanent and counter-cyclical:* Make demand-side employment incentives a permanent part of the youth employment landscape, as in countries like the Netherlands. The scheme should be counter-cyclical, meaning it expands when youth unemployment rises and scales back when the economy strengthens.
- *Target young people facing the greatest barriers:* the scheme should be open to some groups regardless of economic conditions, including young people who have been unemployed for six months or longer, those without Level 2 qualifications, care-experienced young people and those with learning disabilities or autism.
- *Employability and skills training:* evidence shows wage subsidies work best when combined with on-the-job and off-the-job training, building both technical skills and essential employability capabilities.
- *Minimum six months duration:* placements should be six months or more to be most effective. This gives employers enough time to see a young person's potential, supports meaningful skill development, and increases the chance of conversion to a permanent role.

40. Resolution Foundation, False starts - What the UK's growing NEETs problem really looks like, and how to fix it (London: Resolution Foundation, 2025), <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/false-starts/>

41. Youth Futures Foundation, The Missing Link: Trusted Adults and Youth Employment (London: Youth Futures Foundation, 2025), PDF, https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/The-Missing-Link-Trusted-Adults-and-Youth-Employment_policy-paper_Youth-Futures-Foundation_September-2025.pdf.

42. For more detail, see Youth Futures Foundation, "Making wage subsidies work for young people," blog post, accessed October 23, 2025, <https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/blog/making-wage-subsidies-work-for-young-people/>.



5.3 Apprenticeships and skills

Making an ambitious Youth Guarantee a reality will require further strengthening our apprenticeships and skills system. The Netherlands demonstrates that a strong vocational education and training system with systematic employer influence can deliver excellent youth employment outcomes. There are reforms in progress in this area, with plans for V Levels and the ongoing reform of the Growth and Skills Levy which funds the apprenticeship system.

Work towards an Apprenticeship Guarantee for young people

- *Aspire to an apprenticeship guarantee:* work towards ensuring a Level 2 or 3 apprenticeship place available for every qualified 16 to 24-year-old, as recommended by Lord Layard, called for by CIPD and Youth Futures Foundation, and supported by employers.⁴³ This can be enabled through levy reform and the measures outlined below.
- *Resource the system:* meeting the demand of young people and achieving the government's 10% target for participation in apprenticeships and higher technical education by 2040 will require additional resources for the apprenticeships system over the coming years.

Prioritise young non-graduates within the reformed Growth and Skills Levy

- *Growth and Skills Levy spending on apprenticeships limited to non-graduates:* this has been recommended by the Fabian Society as a method of refocusing resources on young people with limited alternative pathways to good work.⁴⁴

Support SMEs to take on young apprentices

- *Apprenticeship grant for SME employers:* £3,000 per apprentice aged under 25 at SMEs, as recommended by the Fabian Society.⁴⁵

- *Apprenticeship grant for providers:* £1,000 per apprenticeship start at non-levy paying employers (i.e. SMEs), with a 50% increase in incentives for providers working with young or disadvantaged apprentices, as recommended by the Fabian Society.⁴⁶
- *Better publicise existing incentives:* grow employer awareness of National Insurance relief for apprentices aged under 25.

Reduce financial barriers for apprentices

- *Maintenance support:* Introduce interest-free maintenance loans for apprentices, similar to support available for students in higher education.



43. Resolution Foundation, Applying the Robbins Principle to Further Education and Apprenticeships (London: Resolution Foundation, 2023), <https://economy2030.resolutionfoundation.org/reports/applying-the-robbins-principle-to-further-education-and-apprenticeships/>; Lizzie Crowley, Balancing act: Youth apprenticeships and the case for a flexible skills levy (London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2024), PDF, https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Research_Apprenticeship-Level_Report_CIPD_May-2024.pdf

44. Fabian Society, Levying Up (London: Fabian Society, 2025), <https://fabians.org.uk/publication/levying-up/>.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.



5.4 Address mental health as a barrier to labour market participation

Youth Futures' research shows a genuine rise in mental ill-health and identifies areas where government can intervene to address this significant barrier to employment and training.⁴⁷

Develop a strategy to address the four identifiable factors linked to declining youth mental health:

- Declining sleep quality
- Employment precarity and affordability pressures
- Social media and smartphone use
- The reduction in children and youth services

Invest in specialist employment support addressing health barriers

- *Individual Placement and Support (IPS)*: This model has proven highly effective for individuals with severe mental health conditions, providing intensive support for rapid job placement and sustained employment.⁴⁸ A youth version (IPS-Y) offers early promise.



47. Youth Futures Foundation, Understanding drivers of recent trends in young people's mental health (London: 2025)
 48. Department for Work and Pensions, "What works to support disadvantaged groups towards employment? - Research report," GOV.UK, last updated August 11, 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/what-works-to-support-disadvantaged-groups-towards-employment/what-works-to-support-disadvantaged-groups-towards-employment-research-report#ips-and-employment-support>.

SPOTLIGHT: The importance of young people's voices in policy design

At Youth Futures, we believe that the young people who are most affected by the system must be at the heart of efforts to change it. Through our engagement programmes, we embed their voices in our work and in national policymaking.

The young people that we work with highlight the structural barriers preventing them from thriving in education, training or employment:

"Sometimes it doesn't matter how hard you work; there are systematic barriers that prevent young people from marginalised demographics from achieving certain goals/careers that are otherwise easier to access for those who have the support and resources"

I do believe young people can achieve incredible things if they work hard. But hard work alone isn't enough when the system still puts up barriers. With the right support, fair access to opportunities, and a system that believes in us too, there's no limit to what young people can achieve.

Farzana, Futures Voices Group Ambassador



This year, young people from our Futures Voices Group together with young ambassadors from Youth Employment UK, have put young people's voices at the heart of youth employment policymaking by being core members of Government's Youth Guarantee Advisory Panel. Future Voices Group members attend regular workshops with the Department for Work and Pensions and Department for Education, helping to ensure young people play a meaningful role in shaping the development of the Youth Guarantee.

“ It has been empowering to be a member of the Youth Guarantee Youth Advisory Panel.

I've had the opportunity to make connections with other young people who share my passion for creating a better future.'

Since we are the ones using the system, we are aware of its challenges and where it needs to be improved. For this reason, youth voices are important.

Shana Fatahali, Youth Advisory Panel member and Future Voices Group Ambassador



5.5 The way forward

The policy agenda set out here offers the beginning of a way forward. It is ambitious, informed by the evidence, requiring investment and commitment, collaboration across government, employers, education providers, youth services, and young people themselves.

These recommendations work most effectively in combination in the pursuit of an ambitious goal to achieve real systems change for young people. A Youth Guarantee without strong skills pathways will fall short. Apprenticeships without a developed mental health support system will exclude those who need them most. Wage subsidies without prevention measures will treat symptoms rather than causes.

The rewards for getting this right are substantial: £86 billion added to the economy and hundreds of thousands more young people earning or learning and on the pathway to good work.

Appendix

Technical note 1

We explored this using the five-year longitudinal Quarterly Labour Force Survey, where we tracked young people who were NEET in both Quarter 1 and Quarter 5 to see if any had returned to education or work in between, and did not find any evidence of this. Because the group of young people in this analysis was quite small, we repeated the same check for all age groups. We found that only 2.3% of people who were NEET across two years had any short spells in education or employment. This suggests that being NEET in consecutive years is a good indicator of sustained periods outside education, employment or training.

Technical note 2

For the 2022 Youth Employment Index, PwC developed a macroeconomic model estimating the long-term GDP benefit if the UK reduced NEET levels to match a comparator country, using a per-percentage-point GDP multiplier derived from Coles et al. (2010). In last year's Youth Employment Outlook, we used the methodology to calculate the benefit to the economy if the UK matched the country with the lowest NEET rate in the OECD: the Netherlands. This led to an estimated benefit of **£69 billion**.

This year, we re-calculated the estimate using 2023 OECD NEET data and the latest ONS UK GDP figures. The estimation process is unchanged, but with updated inputs.

2025 estimate of impact on UK GDP uplift from matching the Netherlands' NEET rate

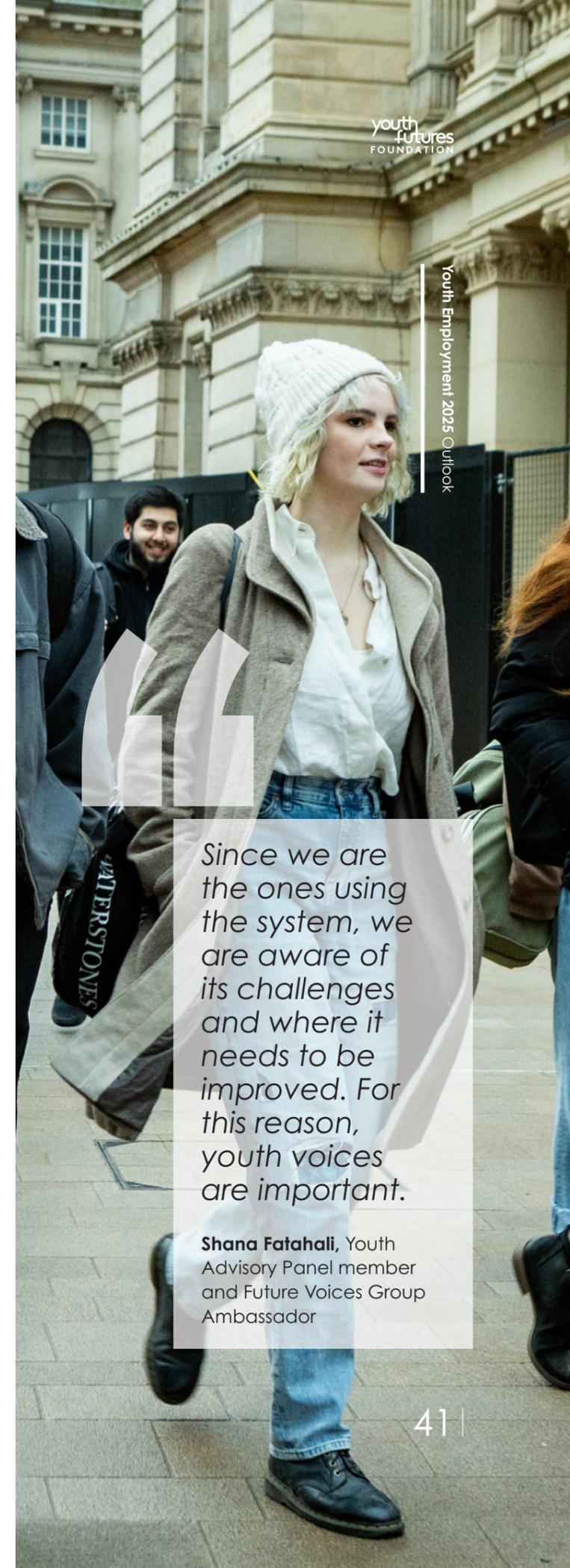
Step	Action	Result
1.	Comparator	Netherlands, 2023
2.	Difference in NEET rate (age 20–24)	Netherlands: 5.14%; UK: 14.46% Gap: 9.32 ppts
3.	Apply the GDP multiplier	$9.32 \times 0.34 = 3.17\%$ uplift
4.	Apply to GDP	ONS UK GDP estimate for 2024: $\pounds 2.71\text{tn} - 3.17\% = \pounds 86 \text{ billion}$

Notes

- The NEET gap between the Netherlands and the UK widened by ~15% since 2022; both countries' rates rose slightly, but more so in the UK. The uplift in £ terms is greater than 15% because UK GDP also grew. The new estimate uses current GDP in today's prices.
- 20–24 age group is used for international comparability; ONS UK NEET figures typically cover age 16–24.
- The 0.34% GDP uplift per ppt NEET reduction is indicative and subject to review. Future estimates should revisit the GDP multiplier to reflect updated evidence.

References

- Bob Coles, Christine Godfrey, Antonia Keung, Steven Parrott, and Jonathan Bradshaw, *Estimating the life-time cost of NEET: 16–18 year olds not in Education, Employment or Training* (York: University of York, 2010), research undertaken for the Audit Commission, PDF, <https://www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/research/pdf/NEET.pdf>
- PwC Youth Employment Index (2022) <https://www.pwc.co.uk/economic-services/YWI/youth-employment-index-2022.pdf>
- OECD NEET rates for 2023: **OECD Youth NEET Data**
- UK GDP: ONS Gross Domestic Product at market prices: Current price: Seasonally adjusted £m <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossdomesticproductgdp/timeseries/ybha/ukey>



Since we are the ones using the system, we are aware of its challenges and where it needs to be improved. For this reason, youth voices are important.

Shana Fatahali, Youth Advisory Panel member and Future Voices Group Ambassador

Working together

If you would like to work with Youth Futures Foundation to transform employment outcomes for young people from marginalised backgrounds, please get in touch with us.
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