



PEOPLE AND WORK

GROWTH THROUGH PEOPLE TAKING ON THE NEET CHALLENGE: CREATING JOB OPPORTUNITIES FOR GEN Z

**FUTURE^{OF}
THE
ECONOMY**
WHERE BUSINESS BELONGS

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CONTENTS

| | |
|--------------------------------|-----------|
| Foreword | 4 |
| Executive summary | 5 |
| The Challenge | 7 |
| Scale of the NEET cohort | 7 |
| Risk factors | 8 |
| Skills | 8 |
| Health | 8 |
| Discrimination | 9 |
| Barriers for Employers | 9 |
| Recommendations | 10 |
| Recommendations for Government | 10 |
| Structural fundamentals | 11 |
| Employer incentives | 11 |
| Education and skills | 13 |
| Health | 15 |
| Recommendations for employers | 16 |
| Conclusion | 17 |



FOREWORD



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Young people are the workforce of the future; harnessing their skills and potential is crucial to creating thriving businesses and growing the economy. Firms need more skilled, engaged and motivated staff in every part of the UK.

That's why employers are becoming increasingly concerned about the growing number of young people who are not in employment, education or training: known as NEETs. This is a terrible waste of potential and opportunity - and a crisis we urgently need to address.

Around two thirds of firms are experiencing skills shortages - and growing numbers of SMEs are struggling to attract young people to take up great training and apprenticeship opportunities. Yet, at the same time, many young people face significant barriers to finding work and staying in work.

The government and employers need to do more to find solutions. They must prepare young people for the world of work, create fairer and more flexible workplaces, and address health barriers to employment. These are all key to harnessing the potential of young people.

The government has made a good start with plans for a more flexible Growth and Skills Levy, the Youth Guarantee and reform of Job Centres. But there is much more to do, and business also has a crucial role to play. Our report provides recommendations for firms and policy makers. This is a hugely important agenda and there is no time to waste.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The workforce in the UK is aging. In key sectors, such as social care and construction, it is increasingly urgent to attract and retain skilled young people to support the economy. A 2024 report by Youth Futures Foundation found that lowering the UK NEET rate to that of the Netherlands, the lowest in the OECD, could generate £69 billion in GDPⁱ.

The government's mission to kickstart economic growth must tap into this pool of potential productivity. There are a range of government initiatives that could provide an opportunity to seize hold of the NEET challenge. These include the Department for Work and Pensions' Plan to Get Britain Workingⁱⁱ, as well as the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's upcoming government-wide National Youth Strategy, the forthcoming Industrial Strategy, the Department for Education's Post-16 Strategy, and the formation of Skills Englandⁱⁱⁱ. Employers, government and other stakeholders must work collaboratively to kickstart growth by unlocking the potential of the UK's young workforce.

BCC research shows that 62% of employers are experiencing skills shortages, rising to 74% for manufacturing firms^{iv}. The Workplace Equity Commission, convened by BCC, also found that employers are struggling to access diverse talent pools and SMEs face barriers to creating equitable, inclusive workplaces^{xix}.

Decisive action is needed to address this challenge and turn it into an opportunity. Otherwise, we are not only letting down a generation of young people, but employers will continue missing out on a talent pool that can deliver future prosperity. Our goals should be to support everyone who wants to work to achieve their full potential and help employers to embrace talent pools from every part of society.

BCC's 2024 Workforce Survey found that just 13% of businesses have a specific recruitment, training or retention plan for workers under 25^v. Larger firms and public sector employers were far more likely to have these schemes, meaning small businesses are missing out on the benefits that a targeted approach to youth employment can bring. How well we address these challenges will not only impact on the life chances of hundreds of thousands of young people, but also the extent to which firms can access and develop the people they need for the workforce of the future.

Business can, and should, do more to support young people. But the government also has a role to play in clearing a path for them. It must avoid introducing additional cost, risk and restrictions for firms. This can give them the capacity, confidence and resources to employ people facing the biggest barriers. Achieving the right balance in the Employment Rights Bill will be essential as it goes through the House of Lords and implementation.





THE CHALLENGE

Scale of the NEET cohort

The number of NEETs is on the rise. According to the ONS, nearly 1 million people aged 16-24 are NEET, more than 13% of this demographic, and the highest level for a decade^{vi}. This is a key challenge to the government's growth mission and industrial strategy, and one which it seeks to address through the 'Get Britain Working' white paper, and its forthcoming post-16 strategy.

But the problem is likely to get worse before it is resolved. In recent years, the NEET population has continued to rise, despite a tight labour market and firms struggling with skills shortages and recruitment difficulties. The rising cost of employment is now forcing firms to scale- back recruitment plans and, in some cases, to downsize the workforce. This loosening of the labour market will reduce employment opportunities for young people. At the same time, barriers such as mental health problems continue to trend upwards, resulting in fewer young people finding and staying in work.

There is evidence that COVID-19 lockdowns have negatively impacted the attainment, social development and mental health of all pupils, and that the attainment gap between disadvantaged students and their classmates has grown^{vii}. This will become more apparent as this cohort reaches working age. Government intervention is required to correct the labour market and prevent any worsening of the NEET challenge. Effective policies are needed, such as offering financial support and incentives to employers who offer work placements.

For young people, a lack of opportunities, training, confidence and qualifications can present major barriers to accessing work. In addition, recent research from the King's Trust Youth Index 2024

reveals that struggles with mental wellbeing are a further barrier to moving into work, training or education^{viii}. One in four NEET young people (27 per cent) would like to work but were unable to, due to their mental health. More than half of young people (52 per cent) said the longer they were unemployed, the harder it was to find work, while 45 per cent felt being out of work meant they had lost confidence in their skills.

Similarly, Youth Futures Foundation's Youth Employment 2024 Outlook report found that 85% of young people who reported having a mental health condition believed that it affected their ability to either find work, or to function in a professional environment^x. More young people could start and progress in work if they are given opportunities and the right support.

The NEET challenge is often hyperlocal, and local areas are best placed to identify the specific opportunities and challenges for their young people. For example, a training scheme will not be successful if there is no local bus route for young people to get to work. On the other hand, an upcoming infrastructure project may not be on the radar of central government, but local stakeholders could identify this as a chance to offer supported internships or apprenticeships.

The government's English Devolution White Paper recognises this opportunity but could go further. It should require every Strategic Authority to address the NEET challenge through Local Growth Plans and Local Skills Improvement Plans, in collaboration with employer representative bodies.

Risk factors

The chance of a young person becoming NEET is greatly increased by compounding and interacting risk factors identified by the National Centre for Social Research and Youth Futures Foundation. The most frequently reported risk factor – caring responsibilities after the age of 16 – affects nearly half of NEETs(45%)^{ix}.

Other risk factors linked to being NEET are: not having an academic qualification above level 1; having a limiting disability; having own child before the age of 21; having own child between ages 21 and 25; having a poor mental health condition; having been identified as having special educational needs (SEN).

Skills

The same research conducted by NatCen and Youth Futures finds that the lack of a Level 2 qualification is the biggest risk factor. Therefore, improving skills must be the primary focus of tackling the NEET challenge. In education settings, this should include embedding essential employability skills into the curriculum.

Employers want the government's Curriculum and Assessment Review final report to embed careers information advice and guidance and contextualised learning in the curriculum, as well as essential employment skills.

Health

Ill-health is a key challenge and risk factor that needs addressing, to help prevent young people becoming NEET. Research from the Health Foundation shows that, in 2023, people in their early twenties were more likely to be economically inactive due to ill health than people in their early forties^x. Additionally, 79% of people aged 18–24 who are out of work due to ill health have qualifications at only GCSE level or below.

The most prevalent type of work-limiting health challenge for young people is a mental health condition. The mental health of the whole working-age population appears to be getting worse, with over 10% of working-age people reporting signs of poor mental health. However, the greatest increase in mental ill health has been in people aged between 16 and 34 years^{xi}.

While the pandemic undoubtedly had an adverse impact on mental ill-health prevalence, the greatest increase in incidence was seen between 2010-2019. This suggests there are more structural causes to the current crisis. However, the government's proposed solutions do not match up to the scale of this challenge as existing services are under-resourced. Increasing access to, and resourcing of, mental health services must be a priority. For employers, this could include:

- The establishment of best practice preventative workplace health support, return to work support and improved guidance on how to access that support.
- Support and guidance to upskill line managers, giving them the confidence to support employees who may be at risk of falling out of the workforce due to mental ill-health.
- Improved access to affordable return-to-work support for SMEs, including occupational health services, and vocational rehabilitation services provided directly or via an insurance policy.
- Using the tax system to help employers offer preventative and rehabilitative workplace health services to all employees.

The BCC welcomes the government's Keep Britain Working review led by Sir Charlie Mayfield as an excellent opportunity to establish best practice in workplace health support, and improve the support provided to SME employers who may otherwise struggle to access it. The review should set out clear roles for the government and for employers in supporting ill and disabled people in work, and into work.

Discrimination

Prejudice and discrimination can impact on people of all ages in the workforce and the BCC's 2024 Workplace Equity Commission heard evidence that young people had experienced barriers to entering, progressing and thriving at work^{xii}. It was felt that, to address the issue, employers needed to take a zero-tolerance approach to tackling non-inclusive behaviour and that the government should look at legislation to close pay gaps for underrepresented groups. The government has since proposed these measures through the Equality (Race and Disability) Bill.

Compared to other forms of discrimination, ethnic discrimination is seen by young people as the biggest barrier to entering the workforce. The latest Census data shows almost a quarter of the UK's population below the age of 25 are now from an ethnic minority background. Therefore, discrimination against this group will have a sizeable detrimental impact on the current and future workforce, and the UK economy.

Government and business need to work together to remove barriers and provide additional support. This includes affordable access to high quality occupational health, vocational rehabilitation and preventative workplace health, adopting a broad range of flexible working options and action to remove discrimination in recruitment, training and progression.

Barriers for Employers

While the NEET population expands, businesses are also facing a rising tide of cost pressures. The cumulative impact of changes in the Employment Rights Bill and the wider Plan to Make Work Pay will cost businesses around £5 billion. In addition, above inflation increases in the National Living Wage (NLW), and the proposed lowering of the NLW age threshold, will make it more expensive for employers to take on inexperienced workers. All this, together with the rise in employers' National Insurance Contributions, will increase the risk for firms of taking on people who have additional barriers to work.

The BCC's latest Quarterly Recruitment Outlook (Q4 2024) found that less than a quarter of businesses are planning to increase their workforce and around one fifth will be cutting investment in training^{xiii}. This challenging cost environment will further eat into the budgets that businesses have set aside to train staff or take on apprentices.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Government

Addressing the risk factors identified by Youth Futures Foundation could provide a framework for government intervention to prevent young people becoming NEET and reduce the long-term rate. This will require investment in childcare, mental health support and special educational needs and disability (SEND) services, along with targeted provision of education, training and careers services.

Government strategies, including a Youth Guarantee, a post-16 strategy, and the Plan to Get Britain Working will be key to addressing the NEET challenge. However, they will require substantial investment in targeted services. Employers must also play a key role in helping young people to access work experience, employment and training, and providing healthy, supportive workplaces.

The government's Youth Guarantee is a pledge that everyone, aged 18 to 21, will be supported to access education, training, work, or an apprenticeship. However, details of how this will be delivered, and the role of employers, are still unclear. While employers want to support the initiative, the rising cost of employment and the squeeze on training budgets could restrict their ability to participate.

Targeted consideration should be given to address the specific challenges faced by young women, who are more likely to fall out of education or employment due to caring responsibilities and are more likely to experience mental ill-health. Despite this increased vulnerability, there is limited research into the lives of young women who are NEET^{xiv}.

Resolving the rising NEET crisis will require a collaborative approach involving the government—including the Department for Education, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Business and Trade, the Department for Health and Social Care, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and Skills England—alongside employers, education providers, strategic authorities, health services, and other key stakeholders. The government should outline clear roles for all stakeholders in the skills and employment system.

Evidence from employer-led Local Skills Improvement Plans shows that, when engaging employers, government must 'speak the language' of business. This means showing the impact and social value of taking on NEETs, outlining the support available, and demonstrating a clear return on investment.

Employers report that young people are more resource-intensive to train and employ, due to their increased need for pastoral care, and their higher staff turnover. Combined with the likelihood that NEETs may have additional needs such as Special Educational Needs (SEN) or mental health challenges, resource-stretched SMEs may feel unable to offer the support needed. The role of government should be to 'derisk' this for employers and demonstrate the return on investment for businesses who recruit and train these NEET young people.



Structural fundamentals

The NEET challenge must be addressed with a holistic view, recognising the role of all stakeholders as well as structural and interconnected barriers. A cross-departmental effort should be made to ensure every young person has access to:

- Affordable childcare;
- Affordable, reliable and well-connected public transport;
- Affordable housing in the places that people live and work.

This is particularly important as it was announced in the government's English Devolution white paper that adult skills budgets will be devolved, but that Skills Bootcamps and Free Courses for jobs funding will not be ringfenced in Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Government must ensure the adult social care system is properly funded to ensure discretionary spend by MSAs does not eat into skills budgets.**

To achieve the structural change required to shift the dial of the NEET challenge, the government should set an ambitious and stretching target. For example:

- 2. Reduce the UK's NEET rate to that of the Netherlands by the end of the next parliament.**
- 3. Widen the youth guarantee to include all young people aged 16-24 and ensure funding for the eight youth trailblazer areas is continued for at least the lifetime of this parliament.**

Employer incentives

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4. To encourage employer action and derisk investment for SMEs, the government should reintroduce financial incentives for SME employers to take on young apprentices.**
- 5. There are some existing incentives for employers to take on young people, and these should be better promoted to raise awareness.**
 - 5.1. Employers can use social value credentials in the public procurement process.**
 - 5.2. Apprentices under 25, and all employees under 21, are exempt from employer National Insurance contributions, particularly beneficial for businesses given the recent rise in employer NICs.**
- 6. The government should highlight existing best practice case studies, from employers of all sizes and sectors, so that businesses can learn from their peers and competitors.**
- 7. The government should explore options to introduce a wage subsidy scheme to create opportunities targeted at NEET young people with low levels of qualifications.**

CASE STUDY | KICKSTART SCHEME

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government launched the Kickstart scheme, providing funding to create jobs for 16- to 24-year-olds on Universal Credit who were at risk of long-term unemployment.

A Department for Work and Pensions process evaluation of the scheme found that it had a successful effect on employment outcomes, with 75% of young people in education, employment or training within 3 months of leaving the scheme^{xv}. Those without level 2 qualifications were 17% more likely to find work than if they had not completed the scheme.

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The scheme was also well-received by employers of all sizes. Businesses throughout the country engaged in high numbers, using the funding to offer a wide variety of work placements and innovative opportunities that would not otherwise have been possible. 60% of firms received fewer placement applications than expected, indicating a high level of engagement from employers offering work placements as there were more than enough placement opportunities to fulfill demand.

The evaluation found that employers of all sizes were able to offer innovative opportunities, which they would not have done without scheme funding.

The successful aspects of the Kickstart scheme could act as a model for another wage subsidy scheme.

Education and skills

RECOMMENDATIONS

8. The new Growth and Skills Levy has the potential to offer more flexibility and opportunity for firms to employ and invest in young people. It must ensure employers can access more workplace training opportunities for young people that meet the skills needs of business.
 - 8.1. Employers need more flexibility to invest in non-apprenticeship training, modular upskilling and pre-apprenticeship training.
 - 8.2. Funding should be available for apprenticeships from Level 2 to at least Level 5. It is important that there are government-funded pathways for non-academic qualifications up to and including degree-level qualifications. This will help increase parity of esteem between academic and technical routes.
9. Wider qualifications reform should streamline and simplify the skills landscape to ensure there is a clear pathway to progression for every young person.
10. The UK Year of Service programme has been effective in improving the employability skills of participating young people and it should be significantly scaled-up to levels comparable with similar international programmes.
11. The government should invest in the Further Education workforce to ease capacity challenges that are exacerbating the NEET challenge.
12. Funding for careers Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) in schools should be increased to help embed it in the curriculum from primary school onwards. Research from the Careers and Enterprise Company suggests that every £1 invested in careers IAG delivers a £3 return for the economy^{xvi}.
13. The work of employer-led LSIPs has revealed that most employers could benefit from a skills-related business support service, including how to identify the skills they have in their current workforce, understanding the skills gaps linked to their business growth plan, and accessing quality training solutions. Any such programme would need to be properly resourced, especially if it is to engage more employers and hard to reach firms.
14. Employer-led Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) are helping to maximise employer investment in local skills and align employment opportunities with education, skills training and careers IAG. The government must quickly confirm long-term funding for LSIPs, so that these plans can become embedded in the local skills system and built on by all stakeholders.





Health

As shown above, poor mental health is a key risk factor for young people becoming NEET. The government should focus resources on improving access to existing services such as GP appointments, Fit Note reform, NHS funded treatment and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), as part of a wider focus on health and work. It should also offer subsidised access to mental health First Aid training courses for line managers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 15. Offer support for SMEs to access Mental Health First Aid training to upskill managers in the workforce, create inclusive workplaces and prevent people falling out of work due to mental ill-health.**

Where young people are at risk of falling out of work due to ill-health, they would benefit from the preventative health services and specialist return to work support provided by their employer under Group Income Protection (“GIP”) insurance or private healthcare. The return-to-work support under a GIP includes access to specialist vocational rehabilitation support designed for early intervention and to support a successful return to work.

The Keep Britain Working review is timely and should recognise this and other best practice workplace health support. Smaller employers often struggle to judge what is best practice or know how to access it. Therefore, the review can play a crucial role in helping employers identify best practice workplace health support, understand what is suited to their employees and how to access it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 16. Larger firms should be required to publicly report on their workplace health provision. This greater transparency will increase competition between large businesses to improve their workplace health offer.**
- 17. This could be accompanied by a voluntary workplace health standard for smaller employers which would provide a benchmark to aim for, with appropriate guidance and support put in place to help them.**

Separately the government should consider how the tax system supports employers to provide workplace health support to their employees and commit to a review on whether they can support it further. For example, employer-provided occupational health services are a taxable benefit and subject to National Insurance and Income Tax. The high rate of Insurance Premium Tax (IPT) is also a prohibitive factor in both the general public building health cover for themselves, and employers providing cover for their employees.

BCC will publish a further report focused on the health and wellbeing of the workforce in Q2 2025.



Recommendations for employers

Employers are experiencing serious skills shortages that limit growth and productivity across the UK. The NEET cohort is an untapped talent pool that, with support and investment, can be harnessed and developed by business. We risk losing out on a generation of talent if employers don't take action.

Employers can address skills shortages in the workplace by supporting NEET young people in overcoming barriers to employment and career progression. Increasingly, firms are engaging with training providers and other local stakeholders to identify workforce skills needs and access high quality provision. To this end, Chambers are convening employers, Independent Training Providers and FE Colleges to ensure young people can access high quality pre-employment support and study programmes.

Chamber-led Local Skills Improvement Plans are an example of businesses taking a lead to solve their skills needs through collaboration with local training providers. Many LSIPs have already identified young people as a priority focus in addressing local skills shortages. In the first two years of the LSIP programme, over 65,500 SMEs engaged with LSIPs, many engaging with the skills system for the first time. The government has now committed to ongoing funding for employer-led LSIPs under joint ownership with Strategic Authorities, allowing the plans to become embedded in local areas and achieve their long-term objectives.

Across the UK, employers are becoming more confident in talking about how to build inclusive workplaces and having conversations with employees about adjustments they may need – but there is more to do. Youth Futures Foundation's Workplace Discrimination Report found that nearly three-quarters of respondents were motivated to look for opportunities with other companies (73%) or even other industries (71%) after experiencing discrimination at work^{xviii}.

RECOMMENDATIONS

EMPLOYERS CAN SUPPORT NEET YOUNG PEOPLE INTO WORK BY:

- 18. Ensuring workplaces and opportunities are supportive, fair and equitable for all young people with a zero-tolerance approach to racism and discrimination. This should start with the recruitment process, and employers should promote their supportive practices from the application stage.**
- 19. Providing flexible working opportunities for young people who may need to balance work with health, caring and other commitments, recognising that 'flexible working' and 'hybrid working' are separate concepts. Employers should consider that for some young people, the most supportive work environment will be in person, rather than working from home.**
- 20. Working with school and college students from primary age to provide high quality information and experience of the workplace, showcasing career opportunities and helping raise awareness.**
- 21. Providing high-quality work experience opportunities to help NEET young people build their CV and gain core, transferable skills. There should be access to additional funding to bring in support for the employer and the young person to tackle any pastoral needs during the experience.**
- 22. Ensuring young job seekers are given constructive feedback on job interviews to maintain and build self-confidence.**
- 23. Providing a workplace environment that supports the health and wellbeing of employees.**
- 24. To prevent young people falling out of work, employers should train line managers to identify the signs of poor mental health and have the confidence and skills to discuss possible adjustments with employees.**

CONCLUSION

As this report sets out, the large population of NEET young people represents a significant loss of potential for individuals, businesses and the economy and is a key barrier to social mobility.

The recommendations outlined provide a framework that sits alongside the government's growth and opportunity missions. Government can play its role by addressing challenges in the education, skills and health system, as well as supporting and incentivising employers to take action. Employers can support NEET people to access and stay in work by offering flexible and inclusive workplaces and offering appropriate support. This support should be available from the job application stage through to times when an employees may be at risk of becoming NEET.

The government must be decisive and ambitious to match the scale of the NEET challenge and kickstart growth in the UK.



APPENDIX

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