

STARTING OUT: BOOSTING YOUTH EMPLOYMENT IN LOCAL LABOUR MARKETS

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June 2026

With thanks

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CITATION

If you are using this document in your own writing, our preferred citation is: Jyoti, D., Suttill, B., Quinn, M., Watt, P., Redmond, J., Williams, E., Fitzmaurice, J. & Martin, A. *Starting out: Boosting youth employment in local labour markets* | June 2026. The Work Foundation at Lancaster University.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are grateful to all the young people who shared their experiences with us. We are also particularly grateful to the following people for their support and insights:

- Elaine McCausland, Christy Ryder, Jane Gilinsky, Kate Bull, and Joe Finkle, Liverpool City Council
- Anna Wolnik, Lancashire County Council
- Catherine Westell and Yak Patel, RISE Young Lancaster District and LCDCVS
- Daniel Braithwaite and Victoria Carter, Lancaster and Morecambe College.

We gratefully acknowledge the thoughtful comments and support from Career Connect, City of Liverpool College, Elevate EBP, Forsberg Services, Granby Toxteth Development Trust, Lancashire Skills and Employment Hub, Lancaster City Council, Liverpool City Council, Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool John Moores University, Mersey Care, Merseyside Youth Association, Morecambe Bay Curriculum, Morecambe FC Community Foundation, Stagecoach Cumbria and North Lancashire, The Reader Organisation, University of Liverpool, Youth Futures team, Lancashire County Council.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The number of young people aged 16-24 in the UK not in education, employment, or training (NEET) has risen sharply since 2021, and now sits at just over a million - the highest figure on record since 2013. At the same time, opportunities in the labour market have severely declined.

Addressing this problem is complex. For every young person not in work or education, there is a unique story shaped by their personal circumstances, experiences and where they live. But there are also shared structural challenges limiting their ability to enter and progress in work.

The Government has responded by announcing a series of major youth employment initiatives and commissioning the Milburn Review to identify the factors driving the rise in the NEET numbers. To inform these initiatives and provide policy recommendations, this briefing examines how local labour markets, young people's experiences, and employer behaviours shape NEET rates. It draws on national data and case studies from two contrasting places in the North West of England: Morecambe and Liverpool.

The UK has entered a 'youth employment drought'

'Starter' jobs – vacancies that would be accessible for someone entering the workforce for the first time – have fallen by 49% over the last decade. Analysis of Adzuna UK job vacancies data shows that the UK now has fewer starter vacancies than in January 2021, when the country was in the third national COVID-19 lockdown.

Although this trend mirrors a more general fall in available vacancies across the UK, the fall is 1.6 times faster for starter jobs in the last year. The country has seen a large decline in sales and retail assistant roles, and it is unclear whether those jobs will come back. In addition, the ones that remain are highly insecure.

Young people can also face fewer and lower quality opportunities than others simply based on where they live. Across the UK, there is only one entry level job vacancy per three NEET young people, but this rises to one in six in the North East and one in five in the East Midlands. However, NEET young people will be competing for these jobs with applicants who are in education, those already in work and looking to change jobs, as well as older workers looking to re-enter the workforce. Job quality also varies by location, with starter jobs for young people in the North West more likely to be temporary than those for the wider UK population in 2025.

Where you live shapes your employment prospects and experience of being NEET

In focus groups in both Morecambe and Liverpool, young people spoke openly about aspiring to work but were unanimous in identifying local issues as being central to their struggles to move into education, employment, or training.

In Morecambe, participants described the long-term decline of the town, lack of employment opportunities, and feeling geographically isolated due to a complicated transport system. Despite the arrival of Eden Project Morecambe promising new investment and employment opportunities, young people were sceptical it would improve the town or their lives.

In Liverpool, participants discussed living in an inner-city environment. In recent years, the city has benefitted from significant investment but some young people described challenges in their neighbourhoods, which resulted in a lack of connection and pride in their area as well as a reluctance to engage with systems and institutions.

The long-term impact of challenges in education and training

Across the two locations, some young people described school and college as a site of disruption and frustration, instead of a stable and supportive route into adulthood and employment.

Early experiences of being 'let-down' for the young people in the study meant that future support – such as through JobCentres or council funded services – was then approached with caution, scepticism, low confidence, and low trust. Many of the young participants in the study spoke about not having the 'right' qualifications to transition into work.

Young people reported that some hiring processes are alienating them from the labour market, making it difficult to make headway. Most young people were grateful for support through the local council and voluntary sector, but awareness of these opportunities varied and many employment schemes run by councils and the voluntary sector struggle for long-term funding.

The role of local and national stakeholders in overcoming tricky transitions

Young people who have experienced educational disruption, illness, or do not have the required qualifications are at a significant disadvantage at a time of a declining youth jobs market.

In places like Morecambe and Liverpool, educational institutions, support systems, and employers are struggling to keep up with the needs of the growing numbers of young people who are experiencing complex and intertwined challenges. The Government's £1 billion youth employment drive is a welcome first step to tackling some of these challenges, but a more holistic and long-term approach is needed.

To achieve this, the analysis in this report suggests action to be taken in three key areas:

1. Adopt a bolder, more localised approach to the Jobs Guarantee
2. Strengthen the devolution roadmap in England to tackle place-based barriers to youth employment
3. Boost support in education to improve young people's transition into work and reduce the risk of disengagement.

1. INTRODUCTION

One million young people aged 16-24 in the UK are not in education, employment, or training (NEET). This represents a rise of 270,000 since the start of 2021.¹

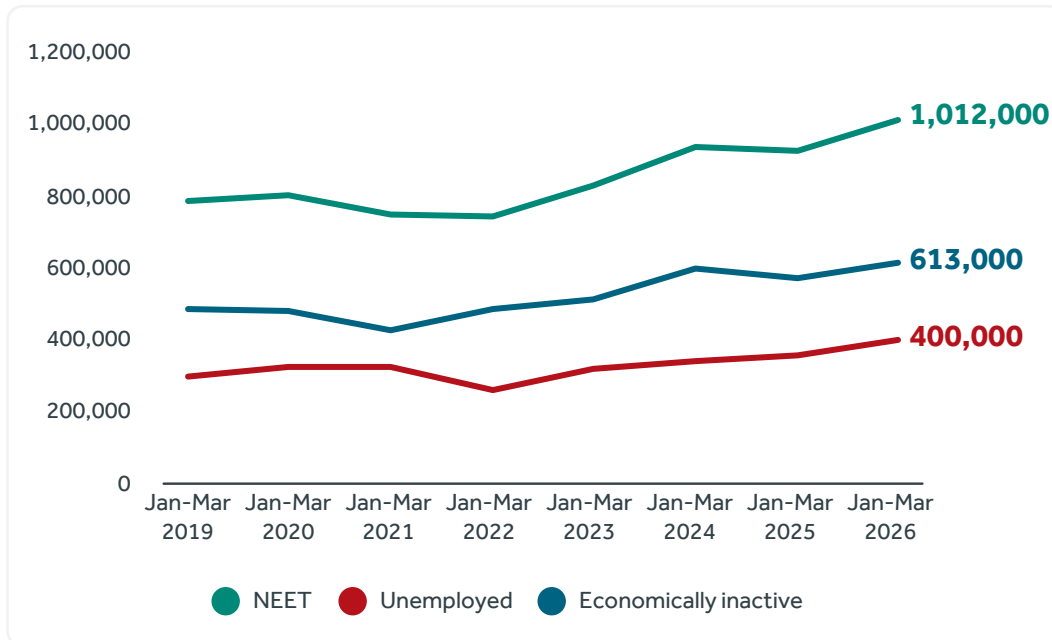
Ministers have warned that there is a “crisis of opportunity” for young people which requires urgent attention and risks undermining their ambition to Get Britain Working.² However, addressing this crisis is complex. For every young person not learning or earning, there is a unique story which is shaped by their individual circumstances, personal experiences, and where they live. Yet these experiences are also rooted in wider structural challenges, including a shortage of suitable and secure entry level jobs and a lack of accessible training opportunities, which limit many young people’s ability to enter and progress in work.

Young people are facing a complex web of challenges

Some young people are more likely to fall out of education or employment, including those with caring responsibilities, limited formal qualifications, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, or those who are disabled or have special educational needs.³ While the UK has had a significant population of young people out of work and education for over two decades, the recent increase has been marked by a rising proportion being economically inactive, rather than unemployed. This matters because it suggests a new level of disengagement with job seeking. This research sets out to improve the understanding of why that might be the case.

Prolonged periods of inactivity can make it harder to support a young person back into work, which in turn can have significant scarring implications for their future employment. Estimates suggest that a 22-year-old who falls out of work for health reasons could be more than £1 million worse off due to lost earnings over the course of their lifetime.⁴

Figure 1: Total NEET levels and breakdown (Oct-Dec 2019 to 2025)



Source: ONS Not in Education, Employment or Training (‘NEET’) by age: People (seasonally adjusted), 28 May 2026

Evidence indicates that the rise in economic activity is in part being driven by a rise in ill-health, particularly mental ill-health. Nearly half of NEET young people are now classed as disabled (45.8%) – a 24 percentage point rise since 2013/14.⁵

But where young people live, and the opportunities available to them, also matters. Significant regional disparities exist, with young people in post-industrial urban and coastal areas in the North of England more likely to be NEET.⁶ Where you live determines not only the availability of the quality and security of entry-level jobs, but also shapes the accessibility and design of support services which aid transition into learning or work.

Building new pathways back into work and education

Young people are entering a weakening labour market having navigated severe disruption to their education and formative years during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, they are experiencing the ongoing impacts of persistently low economic growth and an enduring cost of living crisis. These trends have significant consequences for young people's futures and local economies, and require urgent, evidence-based policy responses.

The Government has responded by announcing a series of major youth employment initiatives. These include:

- Youth Guarantee Trailblazers to pilot innovative approaches to support 18-21-year-olds to find local training or job opportunities in eight areas, including the Liverpool City Region
- A Jobs Guarantee to create 90,000 subsidised jobs over the next three years
- A Youth Jobs Grant for 60,000 young people – which will give businesses £3,000 for every young person they hire who is on Universal Credit and has been looking for work for six months.⁷

Employment initiatives are unlikely to work in isolation. Recent evidence suggests only half of the recent rise in NEETs is due to the weaker labour market.⁸ To address this, the Government has appointed Rt Hon Alan Milburn to identify reforms across the welfare, health, skills, and employment systems that can tackle the factors driving the rise in NEET numbers. The interim report stated that "Britain faces a generational fault line" that requires urgent action. The final report and recommendations are due late in 2026.⁹

To inform these initiatives, this paper will provide insights into how local labour markets, young people's experiences, and employer behaviours intersect to shape NEET rates. The research analyses national data and spotlights two contrasting North West areas: Morecambe and Liverpool. The analysis was led by researchers from Lancaster University and the Work Foundation, and has been supported by Liverpool City Council and stakeholders in Morecambe.

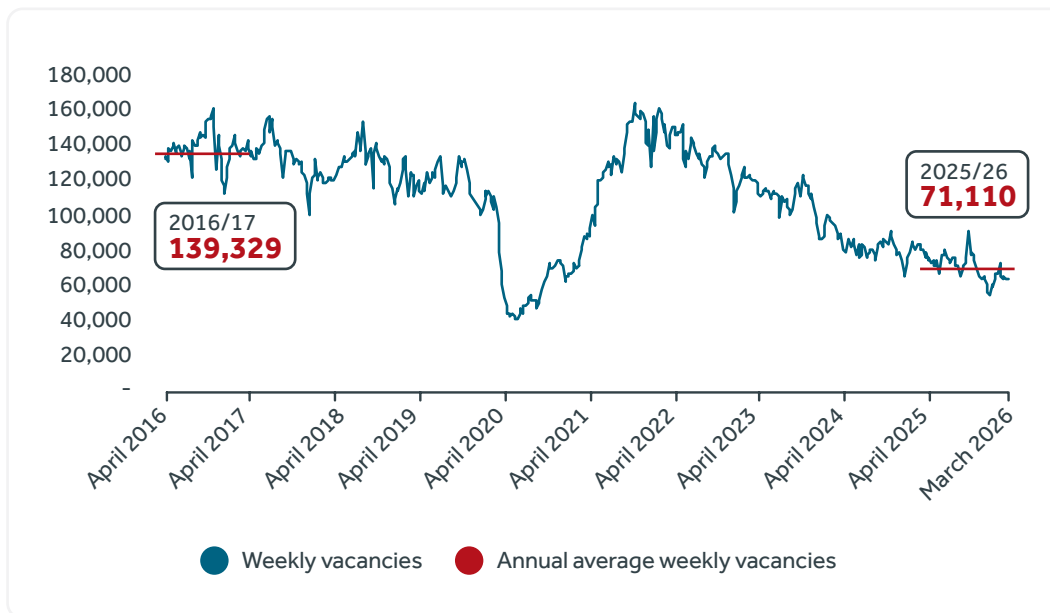
2. JOB OPPORTUNITIES ARE DECLINING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

To understand the labour market that young people entering adulthood are navigating, this research used data from the Adzuna UK Intelligence platform, which collates advertised job vacancies from employers, recruiters, and job websites. The data reveals a dramatic fall in ‘starter’ jobs – vacancies that would be accessible for someone entering the workforce for the first time – over the last decade. Starter jobs in professional, sales, and customer service roles have seen a collapse, with the jobs that remain being less secure and less flexible than the rest of the economy. The analysis also shows the youth employment landscape is significantly tougher for young people in the Midlands and the North of England.

2.1 The UK has entered a ‘youth employment drought’

According to Adzuna data for the UK, average weekly starter job vacancies have fallen by 49% from 2016-17 to 2025-26. The late 2010s saw a slow decline in the availability of starter jobs, but following the pandemic and brief jobs rally in 2022 there has been a marked decline. So much so that the number of vacancies was lower in March 2026 than in January 2021, despite the third national COVID-19 lockdown in 2021 when large parts of the economy were deliberately shut down.

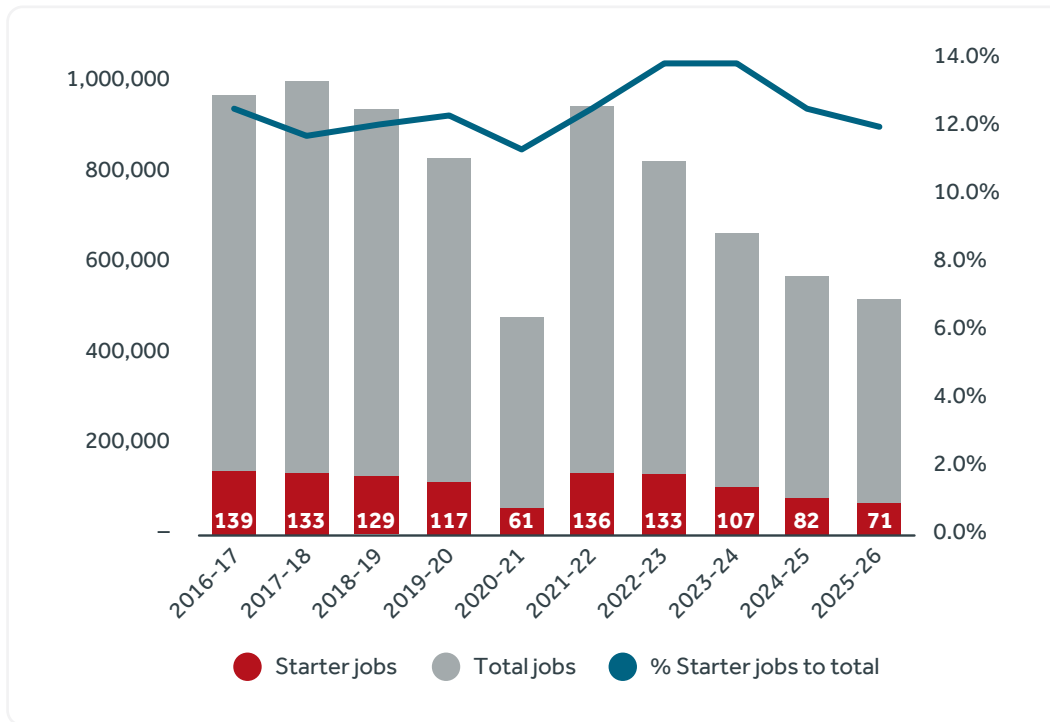
Figure 2: The number of available ‘starter’ jobs has fallen dramatically



Source: Adzuna weekly vacancies of ‘starter’ jobs (Work Foundation defined category), UK, 24 April 2016 – 22 March 2026.

Although this mirrors a more general fall in available vacancies across the UK, the fall is 1.6 times faster for starter jobs in the last year. From 2024-25 to 2025-26, total weekly vacancies have fallen by 8.1% across the UK, whereas starter vacancies have fallen by 12.8%. The proportion of starter to total jobs peaked in 2022-23 at almost one in seven jobs (14%) but has since fallen to a similar proportion than before the pandemic at just over one in eight jobs (12%). Alongside falling starter jobs, recent research has identified that the number of young people aged 16-24 in payrolled employment has fallen to just over one in two (50.6%).¹⁰

Figure 3: The fall in starter jobs mirrors the drop in total vacancies



Source: Adzuna weekly vacancies of 'starter' jobs (Work Foundation defined category) and all jobs, UK, averaged from April-March from 24 April 2016 – 22 March 2026.

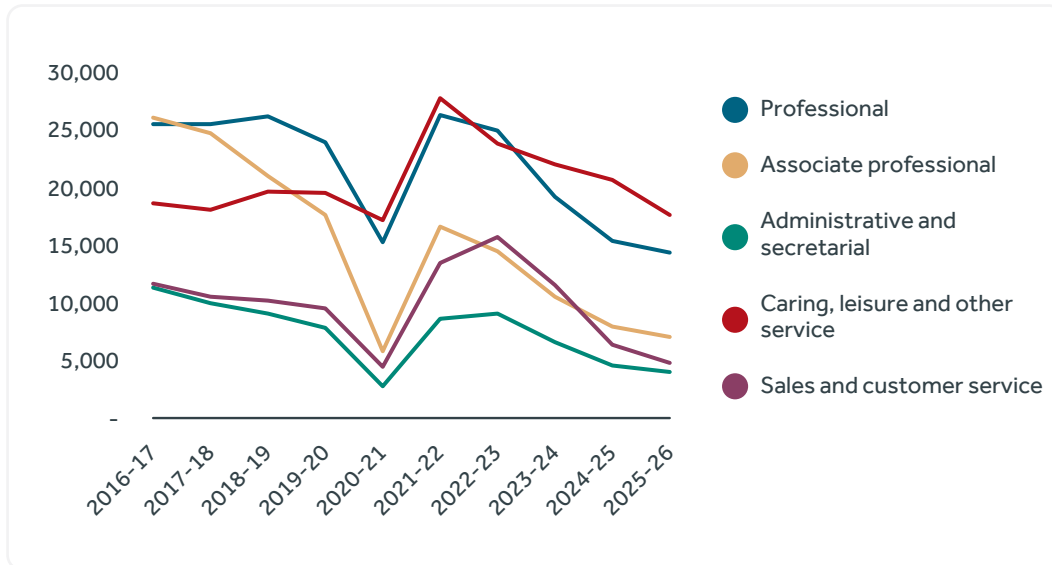
2.2 It is unclear whether starter jobs will come back and the ones that remain are highly insecure

The fall in starter job vacancies has been driven by reductions across most occupation categories. However, the most significant declines in adverts for starter jobs have included associate professional occupations (such as roles in human resources, business sales executives, and advertising and marketing roles), and sales and customer service occupations (such as retail assistants and call centre operatives). Vacancies in these categories fell by around 73% for associate professional occupations and 59% for sales and customer service occupations between 2016-17 and 2025-26.

Within sales and customer service occupations, a significant amount of the fall is due to the collapse in sales and retail assistant roles which have decreased by 53% from 2016-17 and 2025-26.

While starter jobs in professional occupations had been steadily declining prior to the pandemic, sales and customer service jobs had been more stable and peaked above pre-pandemic levels in 2022, before experiencing a rapid decline.

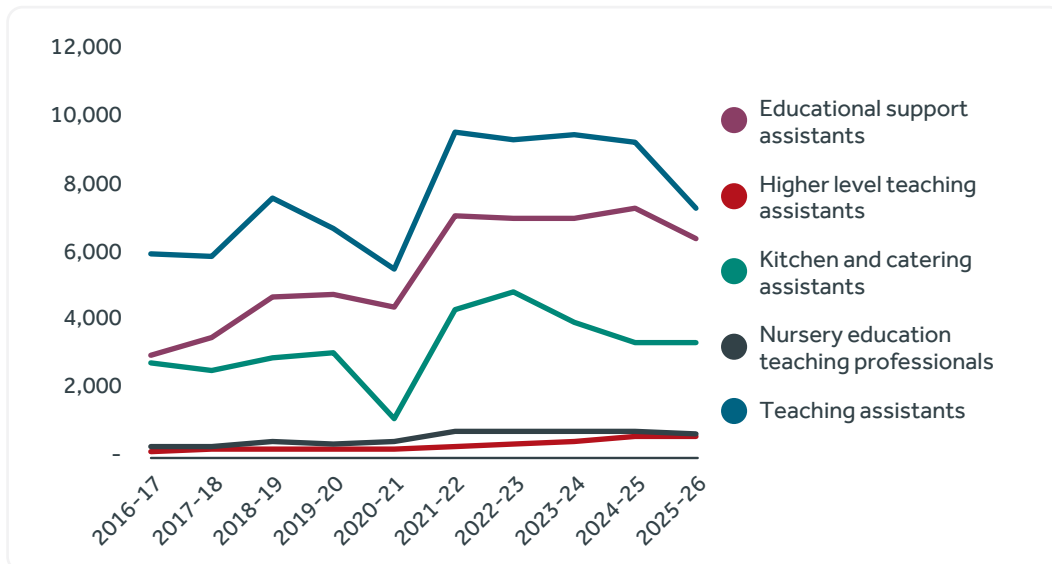
Figure 4: Major starter jobs categories have declined rapidly since 2016, including 'associate professional' and 'sales and customer service' roles



Source: Adzuna occupation data, aggregated from SOC Unit Group to SOC categories, 2016-2026

Occupations which have seen growth in starter jobs since 2016-17 are concentrated in education, including educational support assistants and nursery education teaching professionals. However, the growth of these opportunities has done little to slow the overall fall as they make up a small proportion of total starter job vacancies.

Figure 5: There has been weak starter jobs growth in educational roles



Source: Adzuna SOC Unit Group occupation data, five most increased between 2016-2026.

Not only have vacancies fallen for starter jobs but based on 2025-26 data, starter jobs are also more likely to be insecure than other jobs.

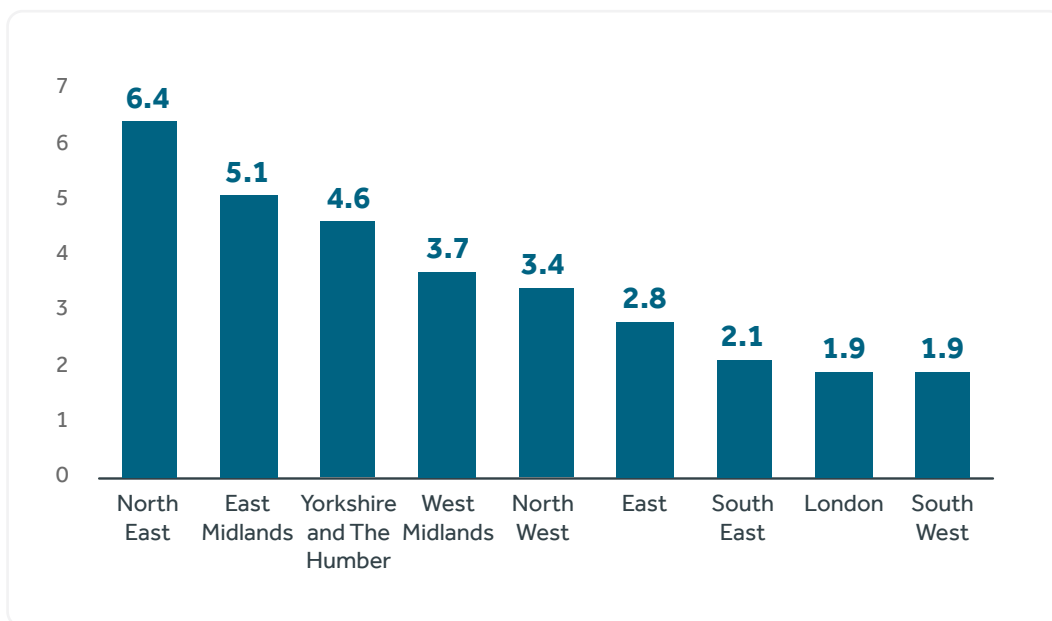
They are less likely to be flexible or remote, less likely to be permanent, and less likely to be full time. The median salary of job vacancies available for young people is £27,073, around £10,000 lower than the overall UK median vacancy salary of £37,155.

2.3 Young people face fewer and lower quality opportunities than others simply based on location

As the number of NEET young people not in education, employment or training rises, they are competing for a shrinking pool of suitable jobs. Across the UK, there is only one entry level job vacancy per three NEET young people.ⁱ Competition for these entry level jobs is even higher than these figures suggest, as NEET young people will be competing with applicants who are in education, those already in work and looking to change jobs, as well as older workers looking to re-enter the workforce.

NEET young people in the North and the Midlands face a more significant starter jobs shortage and are more constrained by the ongoing weakening in local labour markets. In the North East, there are six NEET young people for every entry level vacancy, and in East Midlands, there are five.

Figure 6: The availability of jobs per NEET young person and varies widely by English region



Source: Adzuna data, ONS NEET data, Department for Education NEET data, Oct-Dec 2025.

The quality of starter jobs also varies by region. In the North West, for example starter job vacancies for young people in 2025-26 were more likely to be temporary than starter jobs available for the wider UK population (24.5% compared to 20.9%). They were also significantly less flexible on work location. This is despite job vacancies overall in the North West generally tracking UK averages for contract security and flexibility of workplace model.

i. Adzuna analysis and ONS data on Not in Education, Employment or Training ('NEET') by age: People (seasonally adjusted), October - December 2025.

3. PLACE-BASED EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

To illustrate the place-based employment challenges facing young people, this research focuses on two coastal locations in the North West of England, Morecambe and Liverpool. Both places have been impacted by the recent 'drought' in employment opportunities for young people.

Four focus group discussions were held with 17 NEET young people in Morecambe and Liverpool alongside two online stakeholder workshops in each area in March and April 2026.*

The young participants who took part in the focus groups were not in education, employment, or training, but all aspired to be. While they each had different lived experiences, they identified several shared place-based constraints and barriers in their reflections.

Morecambe is a former tourism destination town on the Lancashire coast

It has faced economic challenges in recent years, with a lack of employment opportunities creating social issues for some residents.¹¹

Morecambe is part of both the City of Lancaster District Authority and Lancashire County Council. The County Council's Get Lancashire Working plan has identified young adults and NEETs as a priority cohort.¹² Across Lancashire, 45% of unemployed or inactive young people aged 16-24 have never had a job.¹³ In Morecambe, particularly the West End, the challenges are stark with one in three children (33%) growing up in poverty, a figure that stands well above the North West average.¹⁴

However, Lancashire has a strong and well-established network of employment, health, skills, and community support services. On the horizon, Eden Project Morecambe – a £100 million regeneration project aiming to transform the seafront of Morecambe Bay – promises new employment opportunities in the visitor economy.



Liverpool is a major port city in the North West of England

It has re-invented itself as a destination for tourism, culture, and business after a legacy of post-war economic decline had left areas of significant embedded deprivation.¹⁵

Liverpool City Council is one of six local authorities that make up Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, which is led by a Mayor. The Liverpool City Region has seen strong growth since devolution in 2017, with more than 74,000 apprenticeships started, around 45,000 additional jobs created, and the economy has expanded to a value of £43.4 billion.¹⁶

Liverpool is a young city, with children and young people making up a third of its population (33.1%), but over 60% live in areas of deprivation and more than a quarter (26.3%) experience poverty.¹⁷ The city also records some of the lowest levels of educational attainment among 15-16-year-olds in England.¹⁸

The Get Liverpool City Region Working plan recognises the rising rate of youth economic inactivity, and the Combined Authority has implemented targeted support and commissioned research through the Government's Youth Guarantee Trailblazer.¹⁹

* See methodology section for a detailed note on the methods used in the study.

3.1 Where you live shapes your employment prospects and experience of being NEET

Young people in the study unanimously highlighted local factors as barriers to entering education, employment, or training.

In Morecambe, the long-term decline of the town and lack of employment opportunities were a key concern for many. Participants stated that there was a sense of isolation from the rest of the Lancaster City district. Young people openly described how they thought that both people and businesses were better off leaving the town to seek opportunities elsewhere. The visible impact of the decline of the tourism industry has embedded an impression of living in a run-down, left behind town detached from the mainstream. As one young person from Morecambe commented: *“people (are) leaving as they don’t see the point of staying as it becomes more run-down and is a dead town.”*

Likely shaped by this context, even where there are positive developments the young people in the study were not optimistic for change. For example, there was scepticism as to whether Eden Project Morecambe – a major regeneration project – would improve the town or have any impact on their lives.

In addition, the complicated transport system and the distorted ‘city district’ geography led to a feeling of disconnection from surrounding areas. The practical implication of these factors for young people is that travelling to an interview or job can be cost and time intensive as it can involve navigating three or more different bus routes and providers.

Increasing local approaches to tackle the youth unemployment crisis

The UK Government has recognised that some barriers preventing young people entering employment, education, and training are place-based. It has responded by introducing a Youth Jobs Guarantee, expanding Youth Hubs across Great Britain to provide CV advice, skills training, mental health support and careers guidance, and investing in a Risk of NEET Tool to support earlier intervention.²⁰

Government has also built on devolution to help regions tailor support to local needs. Greater Manchester and West Midlands Combined Authorities now play a stronger role in aligning post-16 technical education with labour market demand,²¹ while eight areas including Liverpool City Region have received Youth Trailblazer funding to pilot innovative employment support.²²

In Liverpool, participants discussed the experiences of living in an inner-city environment. Concerns of travelling between areas of the city alongside fears of knife crime were raised, including one participant stating they had been stabbed and another said they had witnessed a stabbing. Some participants expressed a general feeling that their neighbourhoods had been left to decline, and this resulted in a lack of connection to their area and a reluctance to engage with systems and institutions.

These sentiments from both Morecambe and Liverpool participants reflect real geographic inequalities in opportunity, particularly for those already facing disadvantage. Morecambe and Lunesdale constituency receives a ‘low’ ranking in Sutton Trust’s Opportunity Index, with only 6.2% of pupils receiving Free School Meals reaching the top 20% of earners by age 28 (compared to an England average of 10.5%). Data for the different constituencies within Liverpool also reveal deep inequalities in the city. The areas of the city with the least opportunity also have the least young people who leave the region by age 28, at 3.3% for Liverpool Walton and 5.9% for Liverpool Derby, compared to 15.1% average for England.²³

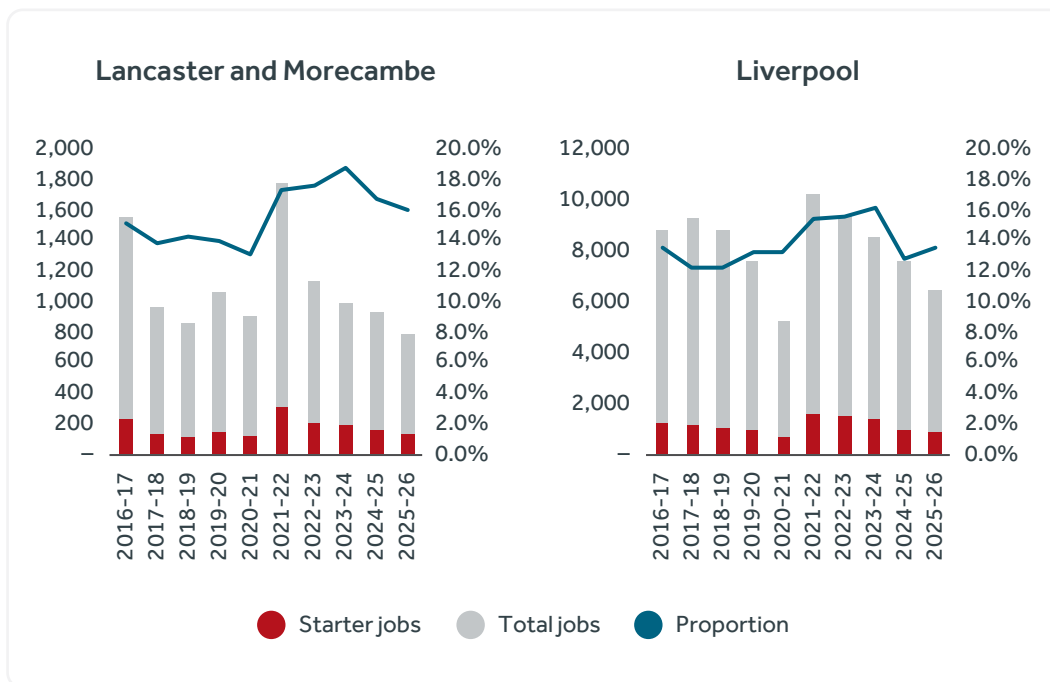
In both places, some young people reported feeling that they were judged by their teachers and schools negatively based on the area of the town or city that they came from. One respondent from Morecambe recalled being told at school that *“children from his estate did not get qualifications or jobs”*.

3.2 Barriers to finding work facing young people in the North West

Adzuna UK data reveals that starter job vacancies in Morecambe and Liverpool have fallen significantly in the last decade, mirroring the UK-wide trend. Since 2016-17, average weekly vacancies of starter jobs in the Lancaster and Morecambe Travel to Work Area fell by 46.8% and total jobs fell by 49.8%.

In comparison, the Liverpool Travel to Work area has seen a steadier but less dramatic decline overall. Since 2016-17, there has been a 26.1% decline in starter job vacancies and a 26.2% decrease in total job vacancies. However, the decline in Liverpool accelerated after 2022, with both total and starter weekly vacancies in 2025-26 now approaching the low levels seen during the 2020-21 pandemic.

Figure 7: Job vacancies are declining in Liverpool and have remained persistently low in Lancaster and Morecambe



Source: Adzuna weekly vacancies of ‘starter’ jobs (Work Foundation defined category) and all jobs, TTWA, averaged from April-March from 24 April 2016 – 22 March 2026.

The top available occupations for young people in both locations are identical – teaching assistants, social workers, educational support assistants, and sales and retail assistants. With the exception of social work roles, many of these jobs are temporary and relatively low paid, lack flexibility, and offer limited progression opportunities. For many young people, the choice is therefore between applying for insecure, low-quality work, which can be hard to sustain, or disengaging from the labour market.

Reflecting this picture, young people in both Morecambe and Liverpool spoke openly about aspiring to work but identified a number of the key barriers they faced in securing a job. In particular, the costs of finding and entering work were reported as a significant factor shaping young people’s perceptions of employment, which impacted their self-esteem and confidence when pursuing opportunities. Young people listed the prohibitive costs of travelling to and from interview locations, JobCentre appointments, accessing computers and internet or phone data, and buying appropriate clothing for interviews. In 2023, the average cost of applying for a job for 16–24-year-olds in the UK was estimated to be £103.15 – and is likely to have risen since.²⁴

“I don’t have data so if I was running late, I couldn’t text my boss to say so”

17-YEAR-OLD PARTICIPANT, LIVERPOOL

Unreliable transport was also reported as a major barrier. In Morecambe, poor transport connectivity was identified as a key impediment to education and employment opportunities, particularly for those without access to a car. Limited links with nearby Lancaster dispersed job opportunities across the district, and the cost of relying on multiple bus routes and operators restricted access to work and training. In both locations, participants raised concerns that accessing jobs required a driving licence, but they could not afford to learn to drive.

One participant used this image and said *“a bus stop and money as the block keeping me from finding work”* (18-year-old participant, Morecambe).

Young people also described entry into the labour market as a circular problem – citing the need to have a job to build experience, but needing that experience to get a job in the first place.

Participants highlighted difficulties accessing work experience and entry-level opportunities, and had felt the slowdown in the youth jobs market in their local areas. Young people in Morecambe suggested that the opportunities were all in the *“bigger cities”* and put the lack of jobs down to Morecambe being a small town with *“very limited job opportunities”*.



“... no one is hiring”

21-YEAR-OLD PARTICIPANT, MORECAMBE

Despite boasting an economy of a significantly greater scale, Liverpool has also seen a significant reduction in jobs suitable for young people in recent years, and this has increased the competition for the roles available. Young people in Liverpool described struggling to find opportunities in their area, with one participant stating that training and opportunities can sometimes be too far away from where they live. In both Morecambe and Liverpool, limited opportunities for apprenticeships were highlighted. One young person described being accepted onto an apprenticeship course at college, however, there were no employers offering apprenticeship opportunities.

A lack of access to secure part-time work was also cited as a barrier. One of the participants indicated that their personal circumstances made it tricky to have a full-time job.

“The changes and challenges can make it harder to feel settled enough to get into employment”

17-YEAR-OLD PARTICIPANT, LIVERPOOL

A disabled participant in Liverpool suggested that full-time work may be *“too much”* for them and working a couple of days a week would be *“more manageable”*. They highlighted that there was a lack of part-time jobs and that good disability support was vital to their prospects of sustaining employment in the future.

“There is too much pressure on people to work full-time”

23-YEAR-OLD PARTICIPANT, LIVERPOOL

3.3 Hiring processes are alienating young people from employment

Recruitment methods have undergone significant change across a number of sectors in recent years, with many firms moving to online systems, introducing AI software, and automating processes. Young people in the study reflected on a number of these shifts, citing the experience of job searching and applying for work as a barrier to finding a job. These changes appear to particularly disadvantage young people with lower attainment from secondary education and those who live in areas with reduced levels of starter jobs.

Participants described a complex, multi-layered, and often demoralising experience. They reported that some online job search platforms do not allow applicants to create a CV without qualifications which excludes some young jobseekers. Participants also reported struggling with using multiple websites for job searching as this requires multiple accounts, which was time-consuming and challenging to negotiate. There was also frustration that some platforms post jobs later than others or do not take down jobs which are no longer available.

The lack of personal connection and *"it all being online now"* was also noted. One participant in Morecambe, who wanted to work in nail salons, shared how it would *"be easier to go hand the CV in"* at a shop, but all applications were now done online.

Participants also shared frustrations and raised concerns about AI, noting how it was not only taking over jobs, but that AI-led recruitment processes were also disadvantaging those who were *"different"*. Although the precise use of AI was not always clear to the participants, this uncertainty appeared to matter and consolidated the frustrations and lack of trust with recruitment, job searching, and hiring systems.

"AI should be for fun things, not for work or business ...It is making life hard – harder to be hired because of it."

20-YEAR-OLD PARTICIPANT, MORECAMBE

The participants were unsure whether their applications were being read by a person, filtered automatically, or rejected because they had failed to include the *"right"* words or format. Rather than being able to learn from each application, they expressed being *"blanked"* by the process where their efforts disappeared into the black hole of a system that offered little or no explanation or response.

A related concern raised unanimously by all participants was the absence of any feedback during or following unsuccessful job applications. While employers insist that providing feedback for all applicants is resource and time intensive, the absence of feedback for the NEET young people in the study reinforced existing doubts about their suitability for work and made it difficult to improve applications in the future.

"I keep thinking what have I done wrong"

20-YEAR-OLD PARTICIPANT, MORECAMBE

Experiences with the recruitment processes do not only determine whether young people gain access to employment, but they also play a key role in shaping their confidence to apply for roles. It became evident in the discussions that some participants, having received a generic rejection and no explanation had internalised the outcomes as a personal failure. Participants did not understand or recognise that such rejections are a feature of competitive, poorly designed, and increasingly AI-automated recruitment systems.

"I want the work, but the work does not want me"

21-YEAR-OLD PARTICIPANT, MORECAMBE

Receiving no constructive feedback led some young people to question their educational choices, as the courses they had completed did not lead to a job, with one participant asking: “*did I waste the past 3 years doing creative stuff?*” (21-year-old participant, Morecambe). Young people had internalised the lack of job opportunities, support and feedback as personal failings, leaving some feeling they were not “*good enough*” for work.

“I didn’t know what I did wrong”

20-YEAR-OLD PARTICIPANT, MORECAMBE

3.4 A reliance on the local voluntary sector for employment support – but awareness varies

Across the UK, employment support is provided through local JobCentres, local councils, and a range of place-based charitable organisations who offer young people services and support with costs of new clothes, shoes, haircuts, and travel to interviews. However, the provision of such services inevitably varies across communities, and not all young people were fully aware of these offers from the third sector and beyond.

In Morecambe, young people highlighted the support they received from the local JobCentre that helped them with work experience and accessing technology, such as offering a laptop. They also highlighted the role of local charities, such as Rise Young Lancaster District, which helped them to develop their confidence, giving them a space to talk and meet people. One of the participants highlighted how they “*kept their head down*” prior to engagement with the charity and did not have anything to get them through every day.

The young people in Liverpool also highlighted the supporting role of charities such as the Merseyside Youth Association (MYA), Strawberry Field, and Clay Kitchen, and council services including Career Connect. This support helped young people to explore different opportunities. For one of the young people, their engagement with MYA led to them undertaking voluntary work at Oxfam – a role they continued to do two days a week – and their engagement with Clay Kitchen led to them considering whether catering was in their future.

4. TRICKY TRANSITIONS: CHALLENGES IN EDUCATION

While local issues were central to the young people's struggles to move into employment, education, and training the participants also described the long-term impact of challenges in education and training.

4.1 Disruption at school and college can have far reaching impacts

Experiences of educational disruption can both decisively impact levels of attainment and shape young people's confidence and belief in the other offerings of education, employment, and training. For example, a number of participants in Morecambe and Liverpool described school and college as a site of interruption, frustration, and unmet needs – instead of a stable and supportive route into adulthood.

Research has found that nearly a quarter (22%) of young people missed more than 10 days of education last year, and 55% said their learning had been disrupted.²⁵ Young NEETs are almost three times as likely (40%) to report mental health or stress as a reason for missing school compared with 15% of all young people.²⁶

This was reflected in the engagement with young people in this study, who described how their experiences of education had, at times, been disrupted by personal circumstances. Critically they also reported how a lack of support and understanding around mental health and special educational needs had pushed several out of education.

One participant who left school due to a pre-existing mental health diagnosis explained how, following the death of a close relative, no special arrangements were made by their college to understand or accommodate their grief. Frustrated and heartbroken at being unable to attain the requisite grade during a very difficult time, they left education altogether and became NEET.

“Why would you go back to school if they are not going to take into account your situation?”

20-YEAR-OLD PARTICIPANT, LIVERPOOL

The Children's Commissioner for England has highlighted that a lack of data sharing between schools and colleges can create a negative school to college transition, which particularly impacts young people at risk of becoming NEET.²⁷ They have recommended timely information sharing between schools, local authorities and colleges so further education institutions can meet their young people's needs. At stakeholder workshops, participants discussed ongoing interventions to reduce barriers for learners through improving data sharing between institutions.

A significant consequence of disruptive and negative experiences in school or college can be the long-term impact it has on engagement with formal learning and support processes. Early experiences of the young people in the study being 'let-down' meant that future support – such as through JobCentres or council funded services including Career Connect – was then approached with caution, scepticism, low confidence, and low trust. During the study, various stakeholders who work with young people through councils, charities, and JobCentres emphasised the need to 're-build' trust and highlighted how rebuilding confidence is a painful and slow process.

This emphasis aligned with an emerging sense from the young people in the study that a hesitation or reluctance to re-enter education or training should not be interpreted as necessarily signifying a lack of aspiration or motivation. Instead, one young person who feels let down by people and systems articulated, *“it's easier to stay shut in”*. This indicates that a lack of confidence or disengagement from institutional systems can be a legacy of earlier experiences of institutional failings.

4.2 Challenges when transitioning from education to employment

For many young people, their experience of education significantly shapes their transition to employment. This is particularly clear in relation to levels of attainment, where research suggests that those with low levels of qualifications are 75% more likely to become NEET.²⁸ It also shows that young people with no qualifications (21%) face almost double the risk of becoming NEET than those with GCSE-level qualifications or above (11%).²⁹

“A life defined by lack of English and Maths”

YOUTH CASE WORKER, MORECAMBE

Many of the young participants in the study spoke about not having the ‘right’ qualifications, with one of the focus groups concluding with a plea to policymakers to “*introduce something else instead of GCSEs*”. Discussions alluded to the fact that current minimum requirements for Grade 4 GCSE English and Maths were gatekeeping entry into employment, with employers failing to recognise that Grade 2 Functional Skills are a practical and applied equivalent.

Lack of formal attainment is a major barrier to young people’s transitions into work, training, and further study in both Morecambe and Liverpool. In 2025, one in three 19-year-olds in Liverpool lacked Level 2 English and Maths, which is higher than the England average of one in four. Disadvantaged young people in Liverpool are particularly affected, with one in two lacking these key qualifications which are often the minimum requirement for apprenticeships, training, and entry-level jobs.³⁰

Yet lack of formal attainment is only part of the picture. In Morecambe and Lunesdale, the challenge is low attainment. More young people complete their studies with less than a Level 3 qualification, contributing to only 73.8% of study leavers progressing into a sustained next step in 2022/23, compared to 78.9% in England. In Liverpool, young people leaving school with Level 3 qualifications in 2022/23 were about as likely to progress into sustained education, employment or apprenticeships than the England average (86.3% Liverpool to 85.6% England), however young people were less likely to progress into a sustained next step if completing study with Level 2 qualifications (59.7% Liverpool to 62.3% England) or Other qualifications (50.1% Liverpool to 56.1% England).³¹

Young people with Level 2 or Level 3 qualifications – in subjects, such as Plumbing, Engineering, Beauty, and Art and Design – described how they felt effectively excluded from the labour market as they do not have English and Maths qualifications. The young people expressed this made them feel at a disadvantage for having chosen to take a functional skills route, given employers continue to prioritise more traditional standards. It was also reflected in a significant lack of confidence expressed by the young people in the study. One participant described their unemployment as being because of “*me as an individual*” and being “*not good enough*”.

Research also suggests that more young people are arriving at working age dealing with wider, and potentially related, mental health challenges. Almost one third (30%) of young jobseekers agree that anxiety is the biggest barrier to accessing work.³² This is even more prevalent among young NEETs, where the proportion reporting a health condition lasting 12 months or more has increased by 70% in the last 10 years.³³

Several participants in the study had an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) – a legally binding plan required for those who have complex special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). The debilitating impacts of anxiety and depression coupled with other conditions such as autism, epilepsy, and ADHD were described by a 24-year-old from Morecambe, “*You know what you want to do but cannot do it due to your mental health ... it feels like you are chasing something but not moving*”.

Participants described the everyday challenges in getting on with the basic daily routine, lack of sleep, feeling trapped by overthinking, persistent procrastination and forgetfulness impacted overall confidence levels. One participant summarised how hard it was to overcome the mental block of, “*I am going to mess it up again*”. The combined effect on confidence levels and ability to express oneself, turned into a vicious negative inwards loop, which resulted in even further isolation. The discomfort of a couple of participants to stay in the room and engage in conversations was evidently visible. There

were at least four participants who constantly needed to step out of the room, with a couple who said they almost turned back at the door due to feeling overwhelmed at the sight of a group of people. Some young people who were not willing to attend the focus groups highlighted that they felt like a 'failure' so why would they want to sit and talk about that.

"It takes over and I cannot physically enter a room... it is like something is holding you back, like a rope around a tree"

24-YEAR-OLD PARTICIPANT, MORECAMBE

Participants also shared how it can be difficult to get support, including being on long waiting lists awaiting diagnosis for conditions such as ADHD.³⁴ Another participant described how they had repeatedly forgotten to complete their ledger for Universal Credit and this had led to difficulties with payments. They described how one case worker had made a note for them, but when they moved to another area they ran into constant trouble without support and suitable reasonable adjustments.

4.3 The role of local stakeholders in overcoming tricky transitions

Worryingly, young people who have experienced educational disruption, illness, or who do not have the required qualifications, are at a significant disadvantage at a time of a declining youth jobs market. The participants in the study aspired to work in their local areas but require support in developing their skills and confidence to be ready for work.

This research highlights the complex and interrelated challenges that prevent young people from securing training or a job. Employers are often unaware of the barriers that young people not in education, employment, or training face and what they need to thrive in employment. The findings in this study reiterate the importance of supporting young people through mentoring, flexible working arrangements, wellbeing support, and ongoing supervision – and this is likely to need a new approach to support local employers, particularly SMEs.

Stakeholders also emphasised that local, place-based partnerships are essential to complement national and regional policy responses. In Morecambe, networks such as the NEET Task Group and Children and Young People multi-agency forums were described as "*critical infrastructure*" for supporting young people into education, employment and training.³⁵ By bringing together public services, schools and colleges, health providers, and voluntary and community organisations, these partnerships can help improve coordination, share local intelligence, and build the trusted relationships needed to engage young people who may otherwise remain disconnected from formal support systems.

5. TOWARDS SYSTEMS AND INTERVENTIONS THAT WORK WITH AND FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

The UK is facing a youth jobs drought at a time when nearly one million young people are not in education, employment, or training. Through no fault of their own, many young people in this study are poorly positioned to find work in such a competitive labour market.

The young people we met aspire to be in education, work, or training but need and want support and more suitable job opportunities. Our findings show that supporting young people into employment cannot be separated from their health, educational experiences, and where they live. Targeted employability support must recognise how health conditions and previous institutional experiences shape young people's ability to engage with education, employment, and training. The challenge is deepened by the fact that there is a shortage of suitable jobs. Many of the young people faced bruising and alienating experiences of searching for work – with complex and multi-layered systems providing little feedback or encouragement.

Importantly, welfare and work were not seen by participants as opposed to each other. Young people in fact need the firm foundations and support that lead to sustainable work. Welfare support, therefore, needs to be complementary, moving beyond carrot and sticks to change behaviours.

In places like Morecambe and Liverpool, educational institutions, support systems, and employers are struggling to keep up with the needs of the growing numbers of young people who are experiencing complex and intertwined challenges. However, the study also identified some outstanding local support, and a strong commitment by stakeholders in Morecambe and Liverpool to tackle these challenges head on.

The Government's £1 billion youth employment drive is a welcome first step to tackling some of these challenges, but a more holistic and long-term approach is needed. The findings in this report suggest that interventions should prioritise:

1. Adopting a bolder, more localised approach to the Jobs Guarantee

The Government has announced that they will support 90,000 18-24-years-olds through a six month, fully paid Jobs Guarantee over the next three years. It will cover young people who have been on Universal Credit for 18 months or more and will cover employment costs for up to 25 hours a week. The first pilots have been launched in six areas, not including Morecambe and Liverpool, before rolling out nationally.

Alongside the Youth Jobs Grant for 60,000 young people,³⁶ these interventions have the potential to support the young people, sectors, and local economies that require the support most. To ensure the scheme does not exacerbate the key challenges keeping young people out of the labour market in the first place, the Government needs to be bolder. To address these issues, the UK Government should:

- a) **Focus on good jobs:** offering roles with a living wage, training, security and progression.
- b) **Keep it voluntary:** participation in the Job Guarantee must be a choice. Previous research shows that the threat of removing benefit sanctions removes agency from people.
- c) **Prioritise socially and locally useful work:** if the Government is subsidising wages, the jobs should serve the public good and local priorities. That could mean investing in creating more jobs in libraries, care, or education, and priority sectors identified in the UK Industrial Strategy such as clean energy and creative industries.
- d) **Fund trusted local intermediaries, not just national partners:** Jobs Guarantee delivery partners are currently large national organisations. However, youth charities, colleges, and community organisations often best support young people furthest from work, but need long-term settlements rather than short-term crisis funding.
- e) **Provide practical wraparound support for employers:** employers supporting Government youth employment interventions should be provided with guidance on inclusive recruitment, job design, workplace adjustments, management approaches and progression pathways to create working environments that enable young people to sustain employment.

2. Strengthening the devolution roadmap in England to tackle place-based barriers to youth employment

The Government should develop a clear plan to further devolve skills, employment support and transport powers across England, enabling local leaders to design integrated responses to barriers facing young people in education, employment and training.

Devolution deals in Greater Manchester, the West Midlands and Liverpool City Region demonstrate the benefits of coordinated local approaches. However, inequalities persist between areas with and without devolved capacity.

As the analysis in this report shows, young people's experiences of transport provision and costs, poor connectivity, limited job opportunities and fragmented support services significantly affect employment and learning outcomes. The Milburn Review interim report highlighted the important role local leadership can play in tackling the NEET crisis but warned that many areas lack the resources and infrastructure needed to respond effectively.³⁷ This is especially true in rural and coastal areas without devolved powers, where labour markets are challenging and national programmes are often poorly aligned with local economic realities.

Government should therefore commit to a strengthened roadmap for devolution in England including non-metropolitan, rural and coastal economies. This should include:

- greater local control and strategic influence over post-16 skills funding and provision including harnessing the experience of devolution in Greater Manchester and the West Midlands to similarly empower other Mayoral Combined Authorities and Mayoral County Authorities;
- the co-commissioning of employment support services aligned with local labour market demand;
- devolved and integrated transport planning powers to improve young people's physical access to education and work, and increase transport funding to enable subsidised youth travel;
- dedicated capacity-building support for areas without existing combined authority infrastructure;
- clear accountability frameworks and outcome measures focused on reducing youth economic inactivity and improving progression into sustained, good-quality employment and training opportunities.

3. Boosting support in education to improve young people's transition into work and prevent disengagement

The Government should introduce comprehensive transition support for young people at risk of disengagement, focusing on improving work readiness, wellbeing, and progression for those with poor educational experiences or low attainment.

Young participants frequently reported that negative educational experiences, including limited mental health support, reduced their confidence and preparedness for work. The transition from school to employment or further learning is often fragmented, with a sudden loss of support increasing the risk of them falling through the cracks at a critical stage.

The Government should develop an integrated approach to support young people's transition from education to employment, focussing on early intervention, pastoral support, and sustained post-education engagement. This should include:

- expanding access to mental health and wellbeing support within schools and colleges, particularly for young people experiencing anxiety, poor self-confidence or other barriers affecting attendance and engagement;
- strengthening the quality and consistency of careers education, information, advice and guidance across all schools and colleges, including earlier and more sustained exposure to different education and employment pathways;

- better connecting of local services that engage with young people at risk of leaving the labour market and those who have already become NEET, to allow for more tailored interventions to be developed and implemented;
- increasing access to high-quality work experience, employer encounters and workplace-based learning opportunities, particularly for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds or areas with weaker labour markets;
- providing intensive transition support for young people leaving school or college, including targeted outreach, mentoring and employment navigation services for those identified as being at heightened risk of disengagement;
- investing in sustained, community-based learning and progression pathways that offer flexible, low-threshold support in trusted local settings, helping young people who have experienced educational disruption or low confidence to reconnect with education and progress into training and employment.

METHODOLOGY

Adzuna analysis

Adzuna UK collates job vacancy data through weekly snapshots of job adverts compiled from multiple sources. The data collected by Adzuna has been used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to support analysis of the UK labour market.³⁸

Adzuna has a high coverage of all job adverts in the UK but because of the fact that this source is limited to online vacancies, there will be some job adverts missed such as work advertised through word-of-mouth, physical advertising and internal vacancies.

Using the Adzuna Intelligence platform, we defined a category of 'starter jobs' which includes all the following:

- Roles indicated as **graduate roles** or **internships**
- Roles which require **no experience** up to **junior level non-graduate roles**
- Apprenticeships up to **degree apprenticeships**

This builds on Adzuna's approach to identifying 'entry-level' jobs as described in *The Guardian*.³⁹

Weekly vacancy data going back to 24 April 2016 was then extracted for all jobs (no filters applied) and 'starter' jobs for the following areas:

- UK wide
- UK NUTS 1 Regions (including North West)
- Lancaster and Morecambe and Liverpool City Travel to Work Areas

To create yearly comparisons and time series, data was averaged using arithmetic mean across years starting from April to end March the following year. Data from 4 April – 18 April 2016 and December 2019 was missing.

For the calculation of NEET young people: 'Starter' jobs, aggregate data for Q4 2025 was pulled from the Adzuna Intelligence platform and compared with Q4 2025 NEET data released by the Office for National Statistics. Aggregated data removes unique postings across weeks to identify the number of unique postings within a time period.

Finally, occupation data was based on aggregated data for March 2025 – March 2026, broken down into SOC Unit Groups.

Qualitative methodology

We held four focus groups across the two locations with young people who were either presently not in employment, education, or training (NEET) or had experience of being NEET, and two workshops with local stakeholders and employers from each area. All research took place in March and April 2026.

In Morecambe, the two focus groups with young people included a total of ten participants plus case workers from the local youth service. One of the focus groups was held at the local college and another in the town's library. In Liverpool, both focus groups were organised in a community venue in Toxteth with seven young people in total. Ahead of the focus groups, young people were asked to identify images to represent their challenges, opportunities, and perceptions of their location. These images were supplemented with photographs at the focus groups to stimulate discussion around the core questions of barriers, support, and place.

The stakeholder workshops included representatives from the local councils, youth services, education providers, employers, and community groups. In both locations, around 15 people attended a 90-minute online workshop led by the project team. An overview of themes emerging from the focus groups with young people was used as a conversation starter to reflect on the existing and required support structures in each location.

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