

# Young people's access to the labour market

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# Executive summary

Many young people are struggling to start their careers in sectors where they can see a long-term future. This is an issue for young people as well as for the labour force more widely. In October 2025, Involve and The New Economics Foundation ran three deliberative workshops with a diverse group of 42 young people across England. In these workshops participants shared their lived experiences of trying to enter and progress in the labour market. They identified the key barriers which they experienced and worked together to develop solutions.

Young people identified three main barriers to entering and progressing in the labour market:

1. Insufficient career pathways and guidance
2. Competitive job market and gaining key experience
3. Low pay and the cost of living

## Insufficient career pathways and guidance

Participants reported a lack of clear, high-quality careers guidance, particularly in state schools. This meant that they were not aware of career pathways which they could pursue. Careers advice was seen as overly focused on higher education, with insufficient information about apprenticeships, technical routes and vocational careers.

The solutions which participants developed to this barrier included better signposting and guidance from school and prioritising how they prepare young people for careers, not just higher education. Participants developed two particular ideas to overcome this barrier - meaningful mentoring that would help with social mobility, job fairs that work better for employers and prospective employees.

## Competitive job market and gaining key experience

One key observation which all participants shared was how competitive the job market was. Many found it very difficult to even get interviews for jobs which were described as entry-level. They were often told this was due to a lack of experience, even where roles were advertised as junior or entry-level. Risk-averse recruitment practices, over-qualification of successful candidates, lengthy application processes with little to no feedback has created a cycle that prevents young people from gaining their first opportunity. Participants described how this had a significant negative impact on their confidence, motivation and mental health.

The solutions which participants developed required employers to take less risk-averse approaches to hiring people into entry-level jobs. Participants emphasised that employers needed to be more confident in hiring people who could grow into roles, rather than

playing it safe and hiring people who had already done a similar job elsewhere. Participants also felt that the government has a role to play in regulating what jobs can be advertised as entry-level, so as to avoid jobs being entry-level in name and salary, but requiring experience to get an interview.

## **Low pay and the cost of living**

Low wages in entry-level jobs, apprenticeships and training programmes were a major barrier to young people beginning their careers. Often these early steps were seen as important to get relevant experience or skills. However, they are not accessible to young people who cannot afford to be on very low or no pay unless their family is wealthy enough to support them to do that over months or even years. Due to the cost of living crisis, many participants felt forced to prioritise short-term income over education, training or work experience that could benefit them in the long term. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds were particularly affected, lacking the financial safety nets that allow others to take risks such as unpaid or low-paid opportunities.

The solutions which participants developed to this barrier mostly focused around providing more financial support to young people. This looked like raising the minimum wage and ensuring apprenticeships are paying enough for people to live on. They also recommended providing discounted travel in some circumstances, providing bursaries and also requiring employers to provide financial support for interviewees for things like travel.

# Introduction

Young people across the country are struggling to get into the labour market and start careers where they can progress. Over 1 million 18-25 year olds in the UK are not in employment, education or training (NEET) and many young people are only able to get work in sectors where they are unable to earn much more than minimum wage.

In order to understand what young people are experiencing, Involvement and the New Economics Foundation brought together a total of 42 young people across three 1-day workshops in October 2025. In these workshops the participants firstly discussed what barriers they faced when trying to access the labour market. This included thinking about accessing jobs, training and apprenticeships. Secondly, they developed ideas together on what they thought could be solutions to those barriers. The workshops focused on the labour market barriers more broadly with occasional discussions on the specific barriers to green jobs.

The deliberative structure of these workshops allowed the young people who participated to develop thoughtful suggestions of what would genuinely help address the barriers. In the workshops they shared lived experiences and discussed the issues with each other to develop a nuanced understanding of not just what barriers are, but what they mean for people. This understanding was crucial for developing ideas for solutions that spoke directly to the lived experience of young people. Some of the problems which cause the barriers are systemic, and so are the solutions. However, building on the detailed understanding of participants' lived experiences, some of the solutions are more practical and specific to address the immediate needs young people have.

The 42 participants in these workshops reflected a [diversity of gender, ethnicity, location and current occupation](#) (e.g. in work, training, education, NEET etc.). They were recruited through a range of youth service providers and charities who they had been in contact with before. After they completed an expression of interest form, the 42 participants were randomly selected to ensure a diversity of gender, ethnicity, location and current occupation. The three workshops took place in London, Manchester and online to ensure that people from a range of locations in England could attend. They were given £75 thank you gifts for attending the workshop and also were reimbursed for travel costs. This was important to ensure that we did not create a financial barrier to participants, when they may be missing out on paid shifts at work to attend the workshop.

## Structure of the report

This findings report is structured around three thematic chapters. These themes emerged from our analysis of the workshop. Each chapter explores a key barrier which was identified during the workshops by the participants. This includes an explanation of what the barrier is and how young people experience it (including quotes which illustrate these

points), and the solutions participants identified to address this barrier based on their hopes, aspirations, needs, and lived experience. This separation was done to make the report easy to read, however, young people do not experience each barrier in isolation and so most of the solutions could not be achieved in isolation either.

# Insufficient career pathways and guidance

**Participants said they often did not know how to start their careers, that there were too few realistic career pathways on offer to them and that they did not receive enough useful guidance.** Almost all participants described feeling pressure to make good decisions about what qualifications and jobs to pursue. However, they said they received little to no helpful career guidance which might support them to make these decisions.

Particularly in state schools, participants felt they needed more support to learn about what career opportunities were open to them. In the absence of this guidance, many participants described being pushed towards higher education without a clear career pathway.

## How do young people experience this barrier?

Due to the competitiveness of the entry-level job market, they felt that they needed to have impressive CVs with lots of relevant experience and qualifications, but without a clear sense of realistic career pathways or guidance to help them, they could not start to plan their careers in any way. This meant they were unsure which kinds of experience, skills, qualifications and skills they should aim to build up to help them start their careers. If they had more information about what career pathways are available, and guidance to help them in those directions they could build up their CVs towards those careers, but without that initial support they did not know where to start.

*"No real direction given [in careers support at school]"*

*"Not very authentic career support"*

*"I found it [careers advice received in school] patronising"*

The majority of participants said that schools had encouraged them to focus on higher education and academic attainment. However, some participants worried this may not be best for them and was not helping them access job sectors with more entry-level career opportunities, such as technical skills and trades.

*"Schools and colleges focused on higher education and grades"*

*"Lack of awareness of opportunities – not aware of other pathways to work, lots of focus on education levels"*

Some participants described being encouraged to make choices which don't work for them. Some described fear of building student debt without it helping them towards the career they want. One example given was of someone finishing their degree and then finding out it is less useful than an apprenticeship would have been to get a job which they

want, and there was a sense for several participants of uncertainty in how to move towards the career that will work for them;

*"You can end up with a degree but you actually need experience to get a job"*

*"At young age even if you're proactive [gaining qualifications and experience for a job you want], you might be proactive in the 'wrong way' which isn't right for people"*

Often participants explained that it was not realistic to develop skills that would help them start in a new sector once they had left university. This meant, once they had started a career pathway by doing a degree, they were stuck trying to get entry-level jobs which their education led them, and many other viable candidates, towards. Participants felt they were being let down. They were told throughout school that higher education was a pathway to a career that would include good pay and progression. They had invested time and money in a degree, but now felt burdened by that investment. They worried that it would be a waste if they did not get a job which did not require the degree they had invested in.

Participants highlighted privilege as a key factor which impacted how they experienced this barrier. Generally participants thought that young people from wealthier backgrounds who went to private schools were getting better support and guidance than them. This was helping them not only decide what careers to pursue but how to go about doing that<sup>1</sup>.

*"young people from private schools have better connections, parents able to support choices more easily, easier pathway"*

## **Solutions designed by young people**

Participants discussed how to overcome this barrier. Central to their proposed solutions were career pathways which were not reliant on higher education, expanding opportunities through traineeships, apprenticeships and technical qualifications.

Young people did not feel they knew enough about career pathways that did not go through higher education. Some thought that these career pathways outside of higher education were uncertain and they wanted more reliable information about them such as what careers are available, what it's like working in the jobs they lead to, what opportunities for progression exist, where those jobs are needed, and how you would get into those sectors.

*"More transparency on statistics for each pathway"*

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<sup>1</sup> We did not gather data on what kinds of schools participants went to. However, most of those who talked about their experiences at school specifically referenced state schools.

Participants felt that it was particularly the responsibility of schools and the government to help address this. Working together in facilitated small groups they developed a set of proposed solutions which they collectively believed would help tackle this barrier:

### **What schools could do to help address this barrier**

- Link up with local employers better to signpost students towards career pathways which did not rely on higher education
- Teachers and careers counsellors should encourage young people to pursue careers which do not require higher education. This includes teaching young people about these career pathways and highlighting that it may prevent them from getting into student debt
- Teaching young people skills to prepare them for apprenticeships and training, not just academic skills which prepare young people for higher education

### **What government could do to help address this barrier**

- Evaluate schools on how well they support young people into careers that do not rely on higher education, not just academic grades
- Invest in more subsidies / scholarships for areas where workers are needed (NHS etc) so people can afford qualifications and fill gaps
- Incentives such as the Career Ready Programme<sup>2</sup> that help support social mobility by supporting young people to prepare themselves for the labour market through capacity building, signposting and advice
- Incentives such as bursaries post higher education to get people who have degrees to try vocational and/or technical jobs so they do not get stuck only looking for jobs related to their degree
- Provide a regulated course everyone in each school should take, to look at different career choices

### **Effective careers mentoring**

Some young people were enthusiastic about the benefits of mentoring outside of school. Some participants had positive experiences with mentors who they had worked with through charities. They thought that good mentoring could overcome a lot of the questions and uncertainties they experience, especially those which made starting their careers difficult, and could help young people to find out about less obvious career pathway opportunities. Participants felt this would particularly support those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://careerready.org.uk/>

*“Mentoring and shadowing alongside career advice so young people know what jobs involve so they can make better decisions and stay in jobs longer”*

*“Government should fund mentors”*

Participants suggested that good mentors would be sector focussed and could offer advice on steps towards a career in their sector. They explained that this would look like advice on what qualifications and/or training programmes to take, which organisations could be trusted to deliver those to a high standard, what experience employers will look for and how to go about gaining it.

Some participants suggested that mentors might also be useful contacts in gaining work experience. Participants hoped that this would help to redress the inequality of wealthier young people benefiting from nepotism when accessing the labour market.

One group described their ideal mentor; someone from a similar background to them who made it into the sector they are interested in; with lived experience of the same social class, geography, ethnicity, religion or cultural background. The ideal mentor would then be able to appreciate the aspirations, barriers and needs faced by that young person and also potentially provide a source of inspiration.

*“They know what the challenges are [to get into that sector] and can tell you what it's like”*

*“They know where I'm coming from and have the same values”*

One group identified Employee Resource Groups within organisations as a way of providing helpful mentors to young people. These groups are usually employee-led groups which aim to support a diverse and inclusive workplace. Some participants hoped that these groups could provide target mentoring at specific groups who are marginalised based on characteristics such as wealth, ethnicity, gender or location.

## **Making careers fairs work**

One group discussed the effectiveness of careers fairs, citing them as an example of opportunities and resources which are technically available to young people, but not currently working as they should. They thought that these events could be an important way to encourage young people towards careers which did not require higher education, but only if they were improved.

Participants said they were not confident going to careers fairs because they felt unsure of what to do at them, what careers they might find there and what they should be trying to achieve when attending. These are the key ideas the Participants had to help improve careers fairs:

- Provide information for young people that enables them to make the most of the fair. Useful information would include what to expect, what outcomes to aim for, how long to stay, what sorts of things to ask and how to speak to employers.
- Advertise the jobs fairs through a range of networks and locations including schools, cafes, pubs, youth centres, sports leagues, religious groups and soup kitchens
- Advertise what sorts of careers will be representing and which employers will be there
- Ensure careers fairs are accessible to people who have finished school as often people do not feel ready to make careers decisions when at school
- If possible, provide reimbursement for people travelling to the fair, as well as food and refreshments

Participants felt that careers fairs which factored in these ideas could more successfully advertise career opportunities to young people.

## Summary

Participants expressed concerns that they were mostly being encouraged to pursue career pathways through higher education, despite it being highly competitive and not suited to everyone's strengths. They wanted to see schools advertise diverse careers and encourage young people towards a wider variety of future pathways where suitable. They also wanted government to better incentivise people, schools and employers to get people into apprenticeships and traineeships. To enable this they wanted to see more effective mentoring which would help young people to decide on and take early steps in their careers. Lastly, participants highlighted how careers fairs are often not working as they should, and provided practical recommendations for how to ensure those fairs are helping employers and potential employees.

# Competitive job market and gaining key experience

**A key theme which emerged throughout workshop discussions was the competitiveness of the job market.** Participants said they are consistently getting rejected from lots of entry-level jobs and are unable to start their careers.

Participants generally expected wealthier people to have an easier time than poorer people accessing the labour market. When talking about this barrier, they described wealthier people as getting a leg-up through better career advice support and nepotism. Many also felt that the actual process of applying for jobs was inaccessible. This was due to time consuming unpaid labour spent on application processes by applicants, often without employers even acknowledging receipt of a job application. Overall participants saw too few opportunities which were highly competitive and favoured young people from wealthier backgrounds.

## How do young people experience this barrier?

Participants described applying for a vast number of jobs with little hope of success. Many shared the same experience of having their applications regularly rejected. They described how employers usually said that they had received a large number of competitive applications and that they were not able to provide feedback to individuals. When employers did explain why an application was rejected, they tended to say that they needed more relevant experience. This is creating a collective sense for young people that the labour market is very difficult to access.

*“There’s no such thing as an entry level job anymore, really.”*

*“We really liked you, but someone else had more experience.”*

*“As a university student who has never worked a paid role, finding roles (even low paid, part-time) has been difficult due to jobs favouring those who have previous experience.”*

## A lack of real entry-level jobs

Participants felt that employers were filling entry-level roles with people who were over-qualified and/or already had experience of that sort of role. For example, roles advertised as a ‘junior assistant’ might actually hire someone with multiple years of experience. Participants felt this was a very risk-averse approach by employers who were unwilling to give people just starting their careers a chance. It suggests a disconnect between what young people are learning and being trained in from the needs which many employers are looking to fill. The requirement for relevant experience was excluding many

of them from starting their careers because they found themselves in a loop of needing experience to get a job, but needing a job to get experience. Participants developed a range of ideas for how they could get more relevant experience which are detailed in the solutions section of this chapter.

Some participants felt that to get over this barrier, they needed to start preparing for their careers earlier and make themselves a more impressive candidate. They described thinking it was necessary to start gaining qualifications and experience which is directly related to the career they want from a very early stage, such as during secondary school. They worried that they risked falling behind their peers if they did not do this. A key theme in this barrier is risk. Participants thought employers were risk-averse in hiring practice. Alongside that was the fear that young people risked falling behind their peers if they were not preparing themselves for a specific career. However, as explored elsewhere in this report, young people making early decisions about what career pathway they take does not necessarily mean they develop into the candidates who employers want to hire. Similarly, this pressure allows little space for young people to change their minds, and their career pathways. This means selecting a career becomes a very high-stakes decision for young people.

## **Rejection without feedback**

Participants emphasised how the lack of constructive feedback was having a negative impact on their mental health and contributing to a sense of hopelessness. They said that failing so often without understanding why damaged their confidence. Losing that confidence then reduced their motivation to keep applying for jobs in their preferred sector.

*“You don’t even know where you stand or what you need to do to improve – it just feels like nothing is ever enough.”*

*“It takes such a toll on your mental well-being to constantly be facing rejection. To constantly be stressing about money and worrying about where your next paycheck is going to come from.”*

Many participants were also demotivated by how inaccessible and impersonal they found the job application and feedback process. Multiple people described experiences of being ‘interviewed’ by an artificial intelligence bot, where they were asked questions and required to provide answers in the moment whilst speaking into a webcam, meaning they never directly interacted with another human during the application process. Some said application processes were not accessible to neurodiverse people, though they did not have time in the workshops to explore this angle further.

## Geographical barriers

Participants at the Manchester workshop also raised geographical barriers. They were frustrated at how many opportunities were only available in London, which made the fewer opportunities available outside the capital even more competitive. For some moving to London was not feasible due to family and/or caring commitments. This touches on broader issues within the country of regional inequalities as so many opportunities are concentrated in and limited to London. Participants across all three workshops also highlighted the challenge of geographical barriers for people who live in rural areas which do not have as many employment opportunities and are less well-connected.

Overall, they felt that better career pathways would enable people to get good jobs across the country and not have to move to major urban centres, particularly London, or be only on offer to wealthier young people.

Many participants did not feel they had realistic chances of starting their careers in preferred sectors without moving to London, which was not doable for some. This did not apply to low-paying jobs in sectors such as retail and hospitality which for some people were the sectors they wanted to work in long-term, but for others they were seen as only short-term options. More young people felt able to get those jobs, but they did not see long-term futures for themselves there.

## Nepotism

Participants also believed that wealthier young people had more chances to get interviews for jobs due to nepotism. This contributed to a sense that young people from poorer backgrounds had to work harder than young people from wealthier backgrounds to get the same opportunities.

*“You either have to have a multitude of experience or know someone to get a job.”*

*“Not knowing anyone - most jobs are only available to those who know people inside the organisation “*

## Solutions designed by young people

Participants want truly entry-level jobs available for them in sectors where they could build a career. The ideas they had for addressing this barrier focused mostly on what employers should do, but some also looked at what government should do.

## What employers could do to help address this barrier

Participants said that employers are too risk-averse when hiring people into junior roles.

They said companies are not taking enough chances on people at the start of their careers. They wanted employers to be more open-minded on who they think could do a role well. They felt that if job descriptions and requirements were less specific for entry-level roles, then they could benefit by hiring someone who grows into the role.

*"We need more understanding employers, [offering] less specific job descriptions for entry level jobs - understanding limitations"*

*"Employers need to take a chance on those with less experience but a willingness to learn."*

*"I'm not the finished product if I'm applying for an entry job"*

They tended to recognise that there was a range of practice among different employers, but overall they felt employers needed to change how they approached hiring people at the start of their careers. Some participants questioned what would motivate employers to make these kinds of changes to who they hire. This is because they acknowledged most private employers would prioritise profit over risk. The lack of agency which participants felt in the labour market suggests the power imbalance between employers and employees. Given they did not feel much agency to influence employers, some young people focused more on what role the government could play to incentivise employers to do things differently.

## **What government could do to help address this barrier**

Participants felt there was an important role for government to incentivise employers to stop hiring people who are overqualified for entry-level jobs. Instead, they could hire people who are starting their careers and get their first experience in the sector. Addressing this may help break the cycle which participants described of needing experience to get a job, but needing a job to get experience.

*"If companies got something in return for hiring someone younger or new to the sector, they might actually do it."*

*"Could employers be paid/incentivised to take on young people, to encourage smaller organisations to take part"*

Some participants thought this barrier could be addressed by government enabling young people to gain stronger work experience. They thought this could be done through schools and colleges. A few participants also suggested that this could be an opportunity for government to advertise to young people the opportunities in green jobs.

*"More in-depth work experience (1 month)"*

*"A Level courses should come with a summer work placement if you get a certain grade"*

*“Offering opportunities to shadow on Green Jobs and hands on experience to discover what it entails”*

This kind of work experience would help address one of the needs that young people said they had. They wanted to know what jobs and sectors would actually be like to work in. They wanted realistic insight so they could decide if that sector might be right for them. Some also thought government could regulate how vacancies and opportunities are advertised and how they are filled.

*“Stricter government regulation on entry-level and apprenticeship roles being advertised - i.e they legally need to meet a certain criteria”*

They wanted to see more government regulation on this because they felt that many people were being misled by entry level job and apprenticeship adverts. Participants felt that there were not currently the right incentives in place for employers to offer entry-level roles to young people. This is harming young people and the government, but does not impact on employers enough to prompt change. Participants wanted the government to bring employers along to be part of the solution.

## **Summary**

Participants felt that there were too few genuinely entry-level jobs in which they could start their careers. They described how they were often overlooked for people with more experience, even in the most junior roles. This negatively impacted their careers as well as their mental health, especially as they often did not receive any feedback after investing a lot of time into lengthy job applications. They wanted government to help address this by regulating what can be advertised (and paid) as an entry-level job or apprenticeship whilst also improving work experience offers through schools.

Some young people wanted government to financially incentivise employers to hire young people who did not have much experience. Participants thought that employers needed to be less risk averse when hiring for entry-level or junior roles, and instead hire people who could grow into roles, rather than requiring the ‘finished product’.

## Low pay and the cost of living

**The cost of living crisis in the UK is having a significant impact on what jobs and careers young people feel that they can pursue.** This barrier was a key theme in nearly every discussion which participants had during the workshops. The cost of living shapes and intensifies the other barriers which young people experience. For example the lack of helpful career advice support and the competitive job market were more impactful on participants because the cost of living meant they could not afford to try a few different careers, or be unemployed whilst they decided what they wanted to do.

Many entry-level roles, apprenticeships and training programmes either pay very little, are unpaid, or require young people to cover costs such as travel or equipment.

### How do young people experience this barrier?

The high cost of living means that young people are getting stuck in jobs and sectors they do not want to work in long-term. This is because those sectors like retail and hospitality usually pay wages which are low, but enough to live off. Those jobs meet young people's immediate needs, but often they do not offer many opportunities for progression and development. Participants described feeling forced into prioritising a job which pays enough to live off now over any kind of education, training or apprenticeship that may benefit them in the longer term.

*"cost of living makes young people question which is the better choice: a short term job or education which secures a long term progress"*

This links to the sense of hopelessness and pessimism which participants expressed about their opportunities to start careers they wanted. Some also highlighted an aspect of generational inequity as they saw older generations as having been able to afford to be unemployed or on low-incomes. Some participants were dismayed at what they saw as a pattern of being dealt a poor hand, starting with missing key years of education during the Covid-19 pandemic to feeling disadvantaged in the labour market and struggling with the cost of living as they began their adult lives.

Many participants said that in some jobs and apprenticeships the cost of travelling to them often meant they were not earning enough to live on. They could not afford to do an apprenticeship or other occupations that were such low-pay in the short-term. Even if those opportunities may lead to better pay in the future, their immediate financial need to live was too important and was not being met through apprenticeships.

*"travel expenses/tax making it less motivational to go to work as the amount that I was earning wasn't beneficial in the long run especially with high rent costs ."*

*"Two buses in Bristol will cost £5, if you need to take multiple to access work, you can spend the majority of your money in a trip."*

Participants from poorer or disadvantaged backgrounds reported feeling this barrier most acutely. The key reason for this was that participants felt that wealthier people have a financial safety net that allows them to take risks such as unpaid work experience, low-paid internships and even travel long distances and stay overnight in hotels in order to attend interviews. In contrast, young people from poorer backgrounds cannot afford to take those risks where they may have periods of time without pay, even if it might lead to higher pay in the future.

*"People with less wealth have less savings to support them to move jobs"*

*"Cost of Living particularly affects 16-18 year olds who were in the care system - they don't have the safety net of relying on family to support them. Therefore the cost of living exasperates [sic] the difficulties that they go through"*

Some participants described that these kinds of barriers meant that they would sometimes exclude themselves from an opportunity.

*"Lack of self-esteem, thinking 'that is not for me'"*

Participants concluded that if opportunities were not made accessible to them, then they were not welcome or wanted there. They explained that if employers wanted them, then they would make it accessible to them.

The eventual outcome of this was that wealthier people are the only ones who can access many of the best opportunities (in terms of pay and progression). Therefore the inequality gap would be widened and social mobility would reduce.

## **Solutions**

Unsurprisingly many participants felt that it was necessary to raise wages, particularly in entry-level jobs, apprenticeships and minimum wage jobs. Many group discussions acknowledged that this was not an easy solution but they felt this barrier was so important that raising wages is necessary. Some people saw this solution as the responsibility of the government to enforce.

*"Increase minimum wage"*

*"Raise the minimum wage for apprenticeships to get people into the sector"*

*"Universal minimum wage - allowing people to work on training and gaining experience in fields"*

Overall participants almost universally agreed that wages needed to be higher. Many of them also recognised that this was a systemic issue that exists beyond young people and the labour market, so solutions would likely also need to be systemic.

Beyond raising wages, participants developed ideas to mitigate the cost of living as a barrier to young people entering the labour market. Many wanted to see other kinds of income provided for young people which would help them when they are developing skills and experience that would benefit their careers.

*"Access to scholarships - monthly income based bursaries"*

*"Government pays youth (e.g. £50 per day) to undertake unpaid work experience"*

They hoped that with better experience and skills deliberately provided for young people then some of the inequalities described above might be reduced. A few participants individually came up with policy ideas which mirror what the welfare system might usually do.

*"Discounts and bursaries, track people's home income and put them into groups - tells you how much support they need"*

*"Collect taxes from local citizens and get a group of young people to do some sort of volunteering to provide local services. Collect this money and support people who can't afford living costs for a specific time ie one year and then when they get well paid jobs they can probably give something back to the organisation"*

These ideas suggest that current welfare policies, such as Universal Credit, do not meet young people's needs. Further exploration of this topic is outside the scope of this work.

Some participants focused more on how addressing the cost of travel to work, training or apprenticeships would help address this barrier. Some ideas focused on the specific cost of travelling to interviews where participants wanted it to become common practice for employers to support with travel costs.

*"Transport support from employers offering apprenticeships"*

*"Travel is expensed by interviewee to company for interview travel"*

*"Medium to large companies should offer travel compensation when people have to travel for interviews - create a specific fund for it - private companies could pay for their own"*

The unaffordability of travel for work and/or training was a particularly emotive point for some participants as it demonstrated how few decisions were made with an understanding of their lived experience or with their interests in mind. Building on this, participants also suggested ways to make transport costs more equitable across society.

*"Free bus travel for those who are NEET like those who are retired and disabled"*

*“Subsidised travel for those seeking employment, with physical disabilities which impacted on those travelling, step free travel for wheelchair users”*

*“Higher travel costs for people on higher salaries to subsidise free transport for people working in charities and green jobs in private sector - those striving to improve society”*

These ideas demonstrate how the cost of living was experienced by young people as not only a barrier to them accessing the labour market, but as a problem that needs to be addressed across society.

## **Summary**

The UK’s cost of living crisis is shaping how young people approach jobs and careers, acting as a barrier that amplifies every other challenge they face. Limited access to career advice, competitive job markets and uncertainty become more restrictive when young people cannot afford to experiment, be unemployed or pursue training. Many feel trapped in low-paid sectors like retail and hospitality, which cover immediate living costs but offer little progression. As a result, young people often prioritise short-term income over education, apprenticeships or training that could benefit them later.

Participants widely agreed that raising wages—especially minimum wages and apprenticeship pay—is essential. Many viewed this as a systemic issue requiring government action, while others pointed to employer responsibility. Participants also proposed mitigating measures such as bursaries, financial support for work experience and subsidised or free travel, especially for interviews and those seeking employment.

# Conclusion

The barriers which young people face when entering the labour market are not isolated or individualised challenges, but interlinked and systemic issues that shape young people's opportunities, decisions and wellbeing. The three key themes of barriers which they identified were:

1. Insufficient career pathways beyond higher education and poor careers guidance
2. The highly competitive job market for entry-level jobs and challenge in gaining key experience
3. Low pay and the cost of living

This report has outlined the ways in which participants experience these barriers and then set out the solutions which they developed in small group discussions during the three workshops.

Participants proposed a range of actions across schools, employers and government that reflect both immediate needs and longer-term structural change. These include improving careers guidance, advice and mentoring, expanding and legitimising non-academic pathways, creating genuinely entry-level roles, incentivising employers to hire and train young people, regulating misleading job adverts, and raising wages (particularly for apprenticeships). Participants also emphasised the importance of financial and practical support, such as bursaries, paid work experience and subsidised transport, to ensure opportunities are genuinely accessible to people who could not afford to work for little or no pay.

These solutions are rooted in the experiences of young people and provide key insight into what changes can make a difference that do not rely on macro-economic factors that shape job markets. As young people are continually unable to access the careers they want then these practical solutions are essential for providing the help that young people urgently need.

This work has demonstrated the potential for young people to co-design actionable policy solutions to complex issues by drawing on their lived experiences and working together in deliberative settings. Further deliberative engagement with young people could add more detail to the solutions developed and could also enable considered exploration of the tensions and trade-offs inherent in complex problems like this. This would lead to better policy solutions rooted in people's lived experiences and collective wisdom.

# Annexe 1 - participant demographics

This is a table detailing the demographic breakdown of the young people who took part in the three workshops.

<b>Gender</b>	
Men	18
Women	21
Non-binary	3
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
White	11
Asian	12
Black	10
Mixed	4
Other	3
<b>Occupation</b>	
Studying, Training or Apprenticeship	20
In full time employment	6
Not in employment, education or training (NEET)	12
Part time employed	4
<b>Age</b>	
18 or over	35
16 or 17	7