

# BREAKING BARRIERS COLLECTIVE

Action plan for  
preventing youth  
disengagement

July 2026





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# Breaking Barriers: Britain Can't Afford to Lose Another Generation

## Summary

If there was one message that emerged from the Breaking Barriers Collective, it was that Britain's growing NEET (not in education, employment or training) crisis cannot be solved by data alone.

Behind every statistic around those not in education, employment or training is a young person facing a labour market that is becoming increasingly more difficult to enter, an education system that often struggles to explain where qualifications lead, and a support landscape so fragmented that many fall through its cracks entirely.

The challenge is not new. But as participants from government, education, research, employment services, local communities and the voluntary sector gathered to discuss the future of young people in Britain, there was a striking sense that the issue is

finally on the agenda and with the first part of Alan Milburn's review recently published, it's starting to get the attention it needs.

The numbers are alarming. Disadvantaged young people are significantly more likely to become NEET. Care leavers, those facing health challenges, young people from some ethnic minority backgrounds and those who have experienced exclusion continue to face disproportionate barriers. The decline of traditional entry-level jobs, the rapid adoption of AI and automation, rising childcare costs and widening regional inequalities all threaten to push those figures higher over the coming decade.

Yet despite the scale of the challenge, the mood was not one of blame, panic or despair. It was one of determination.





## Humanise the data

Again and again, contributors returned to the same concern: policy discussions have become dominated by metrics while losing sight of the people they represent.

Even the term "NEET" itself was deemed unsatisfactory. For many, it feels detached and impersonal, reducing complex lives and circumstances to a bureaucratic label.

Participants spoke about young people applying for hundreds of jobs without receiving a response, of the emotional toll of repeated rejection, and of the frustration of being told to pursue qualifications while seeing little evidence of opportunities waiting on the other side.

"We need the stories behind the statistics," one attendee reflected.

Attendance data, for example, may identify risk factors, but too often triggers punishment rather than curiosity. Why is a young person disengaging? What barriers are they facing? What support do they need?

The consensus was clear: systems designed to measure outcomes must not lose sight of the human experience of navigating them.



## Changing labour market

The discussion took place against the backdrop of a British economy undergoing profound transformation.

Many of the "starter jobs" that once acted as stepping stones into employment have disappeared or are disappearing. Employers increasingly seek experience from applicants who have had little opportunity to gain it. Skills demands shift rapidly across regions and sectors, while career pathways remain opaque to many young people.

Participants highlighted a contradiction at the heart of the current system.

For years, society has encouraged more young people to remain in education. Yet many leave school, college or university only to encounter a labour market unable to absorb them.

There was broad agreement that the challenge is not simply creating more qualifications but creating clearer routes from learning into meaningful work.

Questions emerged about how employer-led pathways can remain resilient during economic downturns, how procurement policy (including social value metrics) can be used to create opportunities for young people, and how employers can be encouraged to take more risks on young talent.

One proposal that generated significant support was finding ways to de-risk hiring young people through incentives, work experience support and stronger partnerships between employers and communities.

## Not just exit and entry points

Many contributors described a system that focuses heavily on entry and exit points but pays insufficient attention to the journey in between.

Young people often need support not only to access opportunities but to navigate them.

The challenge may be practical: securing a bank account, accessing reliable Wi-Fi, affording transport or understanding what a qualification actually leads to.

It may be emotional: managing anxiety, rebuilding confidence or receiving support from a trusted adult after negative experiences with institutions.

Or it may be structural: recovering from involvement with the youth justice system, caring responsibilities, health challenges or unstable housing.

The message from practitioners was consistent: success cannot be measured solely by outcomes. The quality of support throughout the process matters just as much.

Most importantly, when young people fall out of education or employment, there must always be a route back in.

A recurring theme was that re-entry should not carry stigma or penalties. Systems should be designed around recovery and resilience rather than permanent exclusion.



## Place matters

One of the strongest themes was the importance of place. The barriers facing a young person in West London may look entirely different from those facing someone in a coastal town, former industrial community or rural area.

In some communities, taking up an apprenticeship is financially impossible because families cannot afford the reduction in household income due to parents of apprentices losing Child Benefit and elements of Universal Credit. In others, particularly rural areas, weak transport links make employment inaccessible. Elsewhere, opportunities simply do not exist.

The discussion pointed towards the need for sustainable, place-based interventions rooted in local realities. The evidence is clear that these interventions boost pride in place and community cohesion, whilst ensuring that young people are not forced to relocate for employment opportunities.

Youth hubs, community organisations and voluntary sector groups were repeatedly identified as critical assets. Participants argued for long-term investment rather than short-term project funding cycles that create instability and undermine trust.

The third sector, many suggested, often succeeds precisely because it can build relationships that larger systems struggle to maintain.

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## Education's new challenge

Pre-16 education featured prominently throughout the day. There was support for stronger careers education, clearer pathways between qualifications and employment, and earlier interventions before young people become disengaged. Yet contributors also challenged schools and colleges to think differently.

Several participants argued that schools are increasingly expected to tackle complex social challenges without the specialist support required to do so. Youth workers, community mentors and family support networks all have a role to play.

A particularly powerful observation emerged around absenteeism. Rather than asking how schools can improve attendance, participants suggested a more fundamental question: what is school attendance telling us about a young person's experience?

If a student is repeatedly absent, perhaps the most valuable response is not enforcement but conversation. Talk to them. Ask why. Understand what is happening in their lives.

## The case for better systems

Alongside personal stories sat a clear call for structural reform. Participants pointed to fragmented data systems that fail to connect education, employment, health and welfare information. Data collection often stops at 18, leaving policymakers with an incomplete understanding of what happens next. Better intelligence sharing, stronger local skills planning and closer alignment between agencies were all proposed.

There was optimism about efforts to improve coordination through Local Skills Improvement Plans and greater collaboration between employment services, education providers and employers. Responsibility for improving young people's destinations should not only lie with schools and colleges, but be shared between local authorities, employers, training providers, Jobcentres, universities, and more

Several participants argued for a more outcomes-focused system, but one that defines outcomes broadly enough to reflect the realities of young people's lives and the state of their local labour market. Not every success can be captured by a spreadsheet.





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## A question of responsibility

Underlying many conversations was a deeper question about responsibility. What obligations do employers have to the next generation? What responsibility does education have to prepare young people for an uncertain future? And what duty does society have to those who struggle to find a place within its systems?

There was a strong sense that civic responsibility must extend beyond individual institutions. Employers cannot simply demand work-ready young people. Education cannot solve labour market failures alone. Government cannot create opportunity without local partners. The challenge belongs to everyone.



## Reasons to be hopeful

Perhaps the most striking moment came during a discussion about motivation. One participant observed that professionals are often more invested in young people's careers than the young people themselves. It was a comment that lingered. Not because it reflected indifference from young people, but because it raised a more uncomfortable possibility.

In our desire to help, have we sometimes removed opportunities for young people to develop agency, resilience and ownership over their own futures? The answer may not be more intervention but better intervention. More listening.

More trust. More opportunities for young people to shape solutions themselves.

Throughout the day, participants returned repeatedly to the importance of youth voice. Not consulting young people after decisions have been made, but involving them in designing systems from the outset.

Because while Britain faces undeniable challenges, including economic uncertainty, changing labour markets, technological disruption and widening inequalities, it also possesses an extraordinary generation of young people whose potential remains largely untapped.

The question is not whether they have something to contribute. It is whether the rest of us are prepared to build systems that allow them to do so. The barriers are real. But so is the opportunity.

# Collective action plan for preventing youth disengagement

Young people face fragmented support, unclear pathways, growing labour market barriers and widening regional inequalities. The solutions therefore require coordinated action across government, education, employers and communities.



## 1. Create a national transition framework from education to employment

Too many young people only receive intensive intervention once they have already disengaged from education, employment or training. Contributors argued that transition planning should begin much earlier, with sustained support through key milestones including school-to-college, college-to-work and education-to-employment transitions.

### Actions

- Introduce a national transition framework beginning before young people leave compulsory education.
- Guarantee high-quality careers education and guidance from an earlier age.
- Ensure every young person has access to meaningful employer encounters, work experience and labour market information.
- Strengthen transition support for care leavers, SEND learners, young carers and other vulnerable groups.
- Develop personalised progression plans that follow young people across institutions rather than restarting at every stage.





## 2. Build a youth employment system that prioritises relationships and trust

Young people often need trusted adults, long-term relationships and practical support before they can engage with learning or work. The voluntary and community sector was repeatedly highlighted as playing a critical role in this because of its ability to build trust and maintain engagement.

### Actions

- Shift from punitive responses to preventative and relationship-based approaches.
- Embed youth workers, mentors and community-based support alongside schools, colleges and employment services.
- Make youth voice a core requirement in the design of local and national policies.
- Develop outcome measures that recognise the development of essential skills alongside qualifications and sustained employment outcomes.
- Invest in long-term community partnerships rather than short-term funding programmes.

## 3. Create clearer and more inclusive routes into work

Participants highlighted the disappearance of many traditional entry-level jobs and the growing expectation that young people should arrive "work-ready" despite limited opportunities to gain experience.

There was strong support for greater employer responsibility and for measures that reduce the perceived risk of hiring young people.

### Actions

- Expand supported work experience, traineeships and pre-employment programmes.
- Introduce incentives that encourage employers to recruit young people facing barriers.
- Use public procurement to create youth employment opportunities.
- Support employers to develop entry-level roles that provide progression rather than temporary placements.
- Promote inclusive recruitment practices that value potential alongside experience.



## 4. Develop place-based solutions that reflect local labour markets

Barriers vary significantly between urban, rural, coastal and former industrial communities. Transport, childcare, housing, digital access and local labour market conditions all shape opportunities differently. The Collective strongly rejected a one-size-fits-all approach.

### Actions

- Provide local areas with greater flexibility over youth employment and skills funding, including devolution of 16-19 funding pots.
- Strengthen Local Skills Improvement Plans and local partnership arrangements.
- Invest in community youth hubs as visible points of support.
- Address practical barriers including transport, childcare and digital exclusion.
- Enable local authorities, employers, colleges and community organisations to co-design local solutions.

## 5. Create an integrated cross-government youth opportunity strategy

Young people experience public services as a disconnected system.

Education, employment, health, welfare and justice services often operate independently, resulting in duplication, gaps in support and missed opportunities for early intervention.

### Actions

- Establish a cross-government Youth Opportunity Strategy with shared accountability.
- Improve data sharing between education, employment, health and welfare services.
- Utilise and connect various datasets, such as Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) data, to track long-term student outcomes and progression after leaving education.
- Create shared local accountability frameworks across agencies.
- Measure success through sustained participation, progression and wellbeing rather than short-term programme outputs.

## 6. Put young people's agency at the centre of reform

Perhaps the strongest message from the Collective was that solutions should not be designed for young people without young people's input.

Young people should move from being passive recipients of services to active co-designers of the systems intended to support them.

### Actions

- Embed youth representation within policy development and local decision-making structures.
- Co-design services with young people who have lived experience of disengagement.
- Invest in peer mentoring and youth leadership programmes.
- Ensure policy evaluation includes young people's perspectives alongside quantitative outcomes.
- Promote approaches that build confidence, ownership and long-term agency.



### Conclusion

Reducing youth disengagement requires system change, not another initiative.

The challenge is shared across education, employers, government, communities and wider society. Success will depend on building clearer pathways into work, earlier intervention, stronger local partnerships, more integrated public services and a renewed commitment to listening to young people themselves.

Britain cannot afford to lose another generation of talent. The opportunity now is to build a system that enables every young person to participate, contribute and thrive.

## Contributors and sources

This report is compiled and edited by the Edge Foundation and references points made from contributors to the FE News Breaking Barriers Collective, June 2026.





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