

# Supporting young people

**Mental health, meaningful  
activity, and life transitions**





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# Foreword

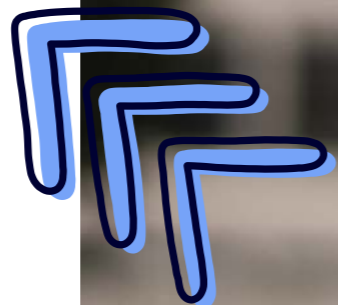
**The transition into adulthood is always a significant step, but today's young people are doing so in a landscape that feels increasingly complex. Many are trying to move forward while managing pressures that can easily chip away at confidence, such as uncertain work, rising costs, and long waits for support. Employers and services, too, are navigating their own challenges as they try to respond to these shifting needs.**

What this report shows is that young people and employers are not at odds; they are often asking for the same things: clarity, consistency, and environments that understand the emotional realities of starting out. When people are met where they are, supported without judgement, and given practical tools, they feel more able to take the next step. We see this every day in our work.

With several reviews underway, there is a real opportunity to build a more coherent system that supports young people earlier and more effectively. The recommendations that follow offer a grounded, hopeful route toward a future where every young person can begin their journey into meaningful activity with confidence, dignity, and the right support around them.

At Mental Health UK, we believe that prioritising mental health strengthens not only individuals but communities and the UK as a whole. This report reflects that belief in practice: a call for systems that lift young people up and workplaces that help them thrive.

**Brian Dow**  
**Chief Executive**



# Executive summary

## The challenge

**One in seven young people (14%) are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) by the age of 23 in the UK. Early mental health difficulties, behavioural issues, and living with SEND strongly increase the likelihood of being NEET, particularly for young people from low-income households<sup>i</sup>. Amid record levels of people missing work due to illness, unaddressed mental health problems are leading to people needing to take time away from work or ultimately losing their jobs.<sup>ii</sup>**

Beyond mental health, MHUK has found through our services and lived experience work that time spent NEET is the result of overlapping pressures including financial insecurity due to the cost of living, disrupted education, limited work experience, a narrowing labour market, and a lack of coordinated support at key life transitions. The consequences of these pressures are significant and can scar, as prolonged disengagement from education, work, and other meaningful activities increases the risk of poorer mental health and lack of long-term economic participation. However, poor mental health can also make engagement more difficult and riskier with recovery, showing that this issue needs a careful and mental health informed approach.

## Why this report, and why now?

**It is undeniable that the government is working to address the rise in time spent NEET, but young people are being offered reassurance with one hand, while support is being threatened or withdrawn with the other. The UK is in a rare moment where several major reviews are examining, at the same time, different parts of the same interconnected challenge around mental health as well as its relationship with other areas of life like money, independence, and employment.**

But alongside these reviews, the policy landscape is already shifting and not always in a direction that supports young people. The Universal Credit Act 2025 halved the health element for new claimants. The Pathways to Work Green Paper proposed removing the health element from claimants under the age of 22 and delaying access until they reach that age. This is despite almost half (48.4%) of all lifetime mental health conditions emerging before the age of 18, and over 62% before 25. The most common early-onset conditions include anxiety, fear-related disorders, neurodevelopmental conditions, and stress-related disorders, many of which have peak onset in mid-adolescence<sup>iii</sup>. Work Capability Assessment reassessments are being reintroduced ahead of being abolished, with no clear replacement. While the Right to Try legislation rightly protects those who attempt work and volunteering from being reassessed for engaging in these activities, it sits alongside a sanctions regime that can still penalise people who are too unwell to voluntarily engage. The Connect to Work programme is a welcome scheme, but it has struggled to get off the ground. Even so, employers will begin receiving government grants to hire

young people who have been out of work for a long time and are on social security. However, people are facing unexpected reductions in their Access to Work grants.

The policy debate has not played out in a vacuum, with public discourse around young people who are NEET and living with mental ill-health having been too often shaped by stigma, labelling them as “Generation Sicknote”<sup>iv</sup>. Harmful stereotypes are not only a media problem, as more than a third of employers described young people as overly sensitive (34%), and just under a quarter (23%) called young people lazy and work-shy, and more than half of young people (56%) said these stereotypes had

damaged their self-esteem<sup>v</sup>. At the same time, other voices have challenged this narrative, calling out these reports of “laziness” as simply unfair<sup>vi</sup>, and that the worsening mental health amongst young people should not be underestimated and has societal and economic drivers.<sup>vii</sup>

These competing narratives matter because they shape how policymakers, employers, and the public respond to nearly one million young people who are NEET and need help. This is why it is essential to hear directly from those who bear the greatest burden of this challenge — young people themselves — rather than allowing their experiences to be defined by others.



## Our approach

**Mental Health UK gathered lived experience insights to help shape a more coherent response at a moment when many across government and civil society are actively seeking solutions.**

We surveyed 633 young people aged 15-24 and conducted focus groups with both young people and employers. We explored what supports confidence, what undermines it, and where support systems show up — and where they fail — at helping young people move toward meaningful activity, including work.

### Key insights

- **Most young people told us they want to work** but for some, work is too risky because of health reasons. 77% of NEET young adults in our sample were actively looking for work, despite most having had prior experience through jobs, volunteering, or training.
- **Mental health and confidence are pivotal factors.** 76% said their mental wellbeing affects their ability to look for work, and 90% experience stress or anxiety while job-hunting.
- **The system leaves gaps at key transitions.** Mental health support being hard to access, financial barriers blocking opportunities, and existing employment programmes focusing too narrowly on job starts rather than readiness and retention.
- **Employers want to do better but lack support and resources,** with this being particularly true for small employers.

In the report, we identify two illustrative cohorts: the “Hopeful Uncertain” (younger people preparing to enter the labour market), and those “Blocked at Every Turn” (young adults already NEET). These show how needs differ across stages of life, and why a one-size-fits-all approach falls short.

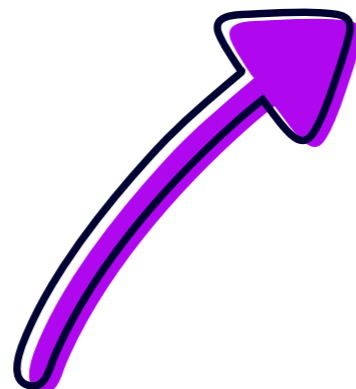
## What needs to change

**This challenge cannot be solved by government alone. It requires coordinated action across government, employers, education, health, and the voluntary sector. The recommendations that follow reflect that shared responsibility while being clear about who needs to lead each part.**

- 1. The Department for Work & Pensions (DWP), Department for Education (DfE), and devolved administrations** should establish a UK-wide Meaningful Activity Support Programme for 15–24 year olds, building on and extending Connect to Work. This should expand definitions of “success” beyond paid work to include education, training, volunteering, and gradual re-engagement, and provide voluntary, personalised one-to-one mentoring and peer support across transitions.
- 2. The UK Government (HM Treasury, DWP, DBT)** should reform employer incentives so they promote retention and wellbeing, not just recruitment. Incentives should be linked to good practice, such as structured onboarding, named mentors, and regular wellbeing check-ins.
- 3. The Keep Britain Working Vanguard Taskforce** should develop youth-friendly employment standards and close the expectations gap between young people and employers. This means trialling youth and mental health informed recruitment and retention practices and involving young people with lived experience in shaping new standards.

**4. HM Treasury, DWP, and devolved governments** should remove financial and system barriers so young people who are unwell are protected and can engage in meaningful activity when they are ready. This means ensuring secure financial protection and support regardless of ability to work or seek work; removing cost barriers (e.g., travel); ensure sanctions are a last resort with appropriate safeguards<sup>viii</sup>; maintaining access to the Universal Credit Health Element; recognising education, training, volunteering, and gradual supported activity as legitimate outcomes; and co-designing safe, voluntary pathways into meaningful activity with young people who have lived experience of being NEET while unwell.

**5. The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), NHS England, and devolved health systems** should ensure mental health spending keeps pace with physical health and that the cliff-edge at 18 is removed. This means improving transition planning from CAMHS to adult services; reducing waiting times through sustained investment; and recognising early mental health support as the foundation for participation in work, education, and meaningful activity.



## Findings:

# Teenager perspectives

**Our survey of teenagers aged 15–18 provides insights into how they view the transition from education into work. Most are still in education (61%), with just over a quarter already in employment (27%), apprenticeships (6%), and smaller numbers in other activities.**

## Confidence and mental wellbeing

Teenagers we engaged with are broadly optimistic about their long-term prospects, with 57% confident about moving into work once they finish education or training, a theme also identified in our focus groups.

Most teenagers do not expect mental health to prevent them from working, but for a significant minority, mental wellbeing will shape how and when they are able to start. Nearly one in five anticipate that their mental health could make the transition into work harder without the right support, and a smaller group already feel unable to start work at all.

## Anxiety about job searching

Although optimistic about their futures, 61% of teenagers feel worried about starting to look for work. We noticed the same theme in our focus groups and much of the worry stems from a lack of clear information about employers' expectations,

their limited access to experience, and uncertainty about the process of finding work. Our survey findings reflect some of these concerns as they worry about:

- **Applications, interviews, and assessments (57%)**
- **Not having enough experience (53%)**
- **A lack of available jobs (51%)**
- **Rejection (44%)**

Many teenagers emphasised the need for clearer guidance and practical, accessible, and relational support.

**“Simple things like regular feedback, realistic goals, and having one person they can ask small questions make a huge difference.”**

*Survey respondent*

Others highlighted the importance of supportive working environments that value growth mindsets rather than fixed mindsets.

**“Employers should understand the fact that lads are meant to make mistakes and to be corrected.”**

*Survey respondent*

Meanwhile, 38% are not worried about starting to think about their future employment, largely because they are prioritising their education first and are not in the place to start thinking about work yet.

## Concerns about employment itself

Teenagers' worries extend beyond job searching into the realities of work. Social concerns are common, with 47% worried about being judged by peers if they face difficulties adjusting to a new workplace, and 40% unsure about fitting in with

colleagues. They also express concerns about workload (32%), low pay (31%), gaps in available support (29%), and unsuitable hours (27%).

As one teenager expressed, “Being friendly and helpful to the people in the community and the organisation” can make workplaces feel more welcoming. Others emphasised the practical conditions that matter for young people, such as “better pay and adjustable work shifts” and the value of flexibility: “I feel that flexible work arrangements empower young people by accommodating their diverse needs and promoting a better work life balance for success.”

## Support received and support needed

Most teenagers have received some support in preparing for work (78%), primarily from parents or carers (77%), aligning with what we found in our focus groups. Schools and colleges also play a role (58%), yet far fewer have been supported by careers advisers (30%), peers (26%), online resources (24%), or community services (11%).

One teenager explained how support during this phase is vital by calling for “as much help as possible to prepare for the adjustment from full-time learning to full-time work.”

Practical support is common through CV guidance (58%) and help finding experience (52%). Nearly half have also received emotional or wellbeing support (45%). However, 22% report receiving low levels of support overall.

Teenagers are clear about what would help most:

- **Support from family and friends (58%)**
- **Clear, practical guidance about what preparing for work involves (54%)**
- **Careers advice and mentoring (46%)**
- **More opportunities to gain experience (41%)**

Throughout our focus group discussions, participants emphasised that beyond general careers guidance, what they want most is clarity around workplace expectations and what day-to-day working life looks and feels like. Most would like support in learning workplace communication skills, and those with more complex needs expressed how they need to understand how to clearly communicate their needs with employers in order to get the support that they need to thrive. This parallels MHUK's findings showing that 39% of 18-24 year olds report discomfort discussing high stress with senior staff.<sup>ix</sup>

These insights mirror our survey findings, with many wanting to understand what to expect at work (67%) and what employers expect of them (62%). Nearly half also want advice on managing life transitions, including moving from education and into the labour market (48%). As one teenager put it, they need “clearer guidance and mentorship from experienced colleagues, so young people know expectations and can learn faster”.

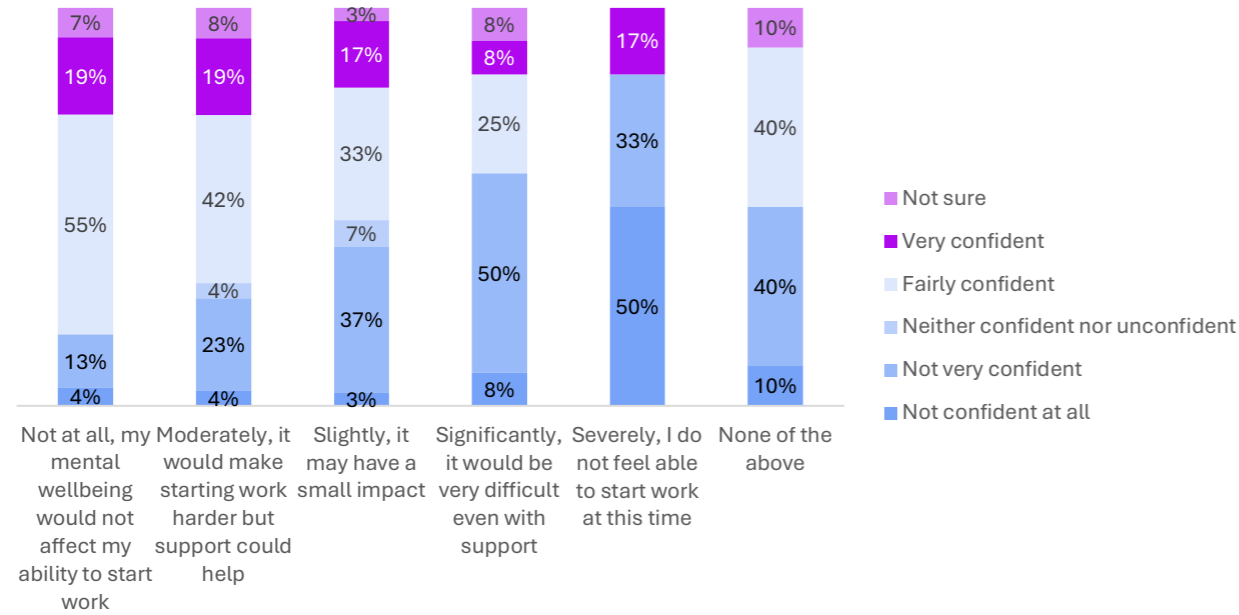


## Cross-analysis

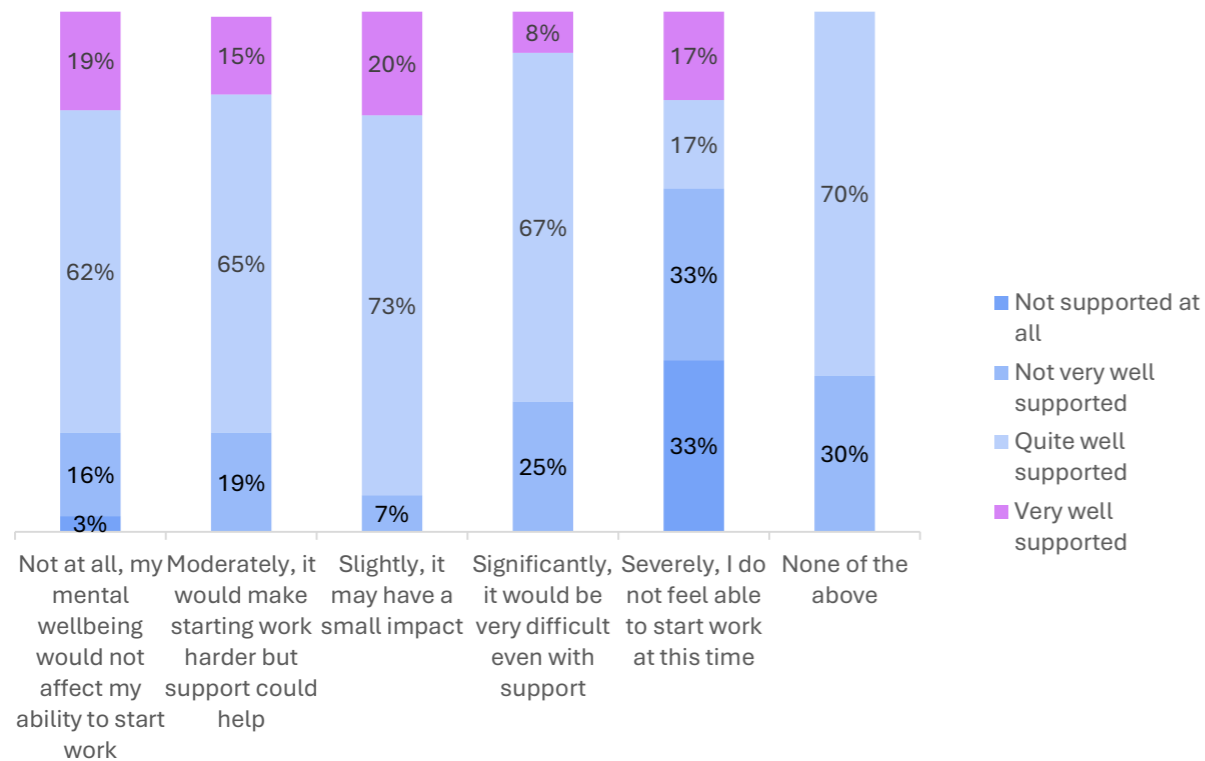
Cross-analysis suggests that teenagers with better mental wellbeing report higher confidence (Figure 1), while those with limited support are more likely to have their mental wellbeing severely affect their

future entry into work (Figure 2). In our focus groups, we observed that privilege plays a role in shaping young people's experiences. Those with parents who have the resources to support their children into quality work experience opportunities and a longer period in education, experience fewer worries than their peers from low-income households.

**Figure 1: Levels of confidence about moving into work crossed with levels of mental wellbeing**



**Figure 2: Levels of support in preparation for work, crossed with levels of mental wellbeing**



## Illustrative case study: The Hopeful Uncertain

### How they feel

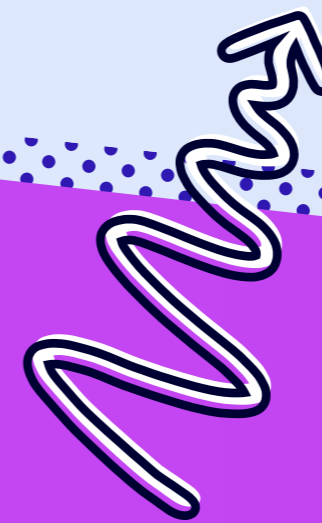
At 16, the Hopeful Uncertain is optimistic about their future but often feels socially anxious in unfamiliar settings. They believe things will work out eventually and trust that their parents will support them, but they also feel unsure and worried about how to begin their working life after leaving school. They don't know what they want to do and what path suits them best, and the uncertainty weighs on them.

### What they need

They want support that helps them understand how to approach job applications and interviews, what employers expect from young starters, and what everyday working life looks like. They are seeking practical, confidence-building guidance and support that makes the world of work feel less overwhelming and more within reach.

### Support they received

They have had a brief careers guidance session, but it focused mainly on qualifications rather than the practical steps they feel they need. While they know their parents can offer advice, they have had limited access to clear, structured guidance from school or other services.



## Findings:

# Young adult perspectives

**This cohort of young adults aged 18-24 are all currently not in education, employment, or training (NEET), yet most (77%) are actively looking for work, 12% are unable to work for health reasons, and 6% hope to return to education or training. Finding what is right for each person at different points of life is key.**

## Experience and negativity cycle

**A large majority (77%) of the young adults we surveyed have a rich history of meaningful activity despite currently being NEET.**

Many have held part-time jobs while studying (45%) or full-time jobs (40%), or participated in work experience placements (21%), volunteering (20%), or apprenticeships (9%).

Over half (60%) believe that they have the skills or training needed to find work but are still navigating a difficult labour market, unable to find work. They believe that employers do not value or recognise their skills and experience. Some young adults also spoke about not fully understanding what employers expect from them.

**“I don’t feel comfortable or really understand what companies need.”** *Survey respondent*

**“There’s not enough flexible jobs or jobs willing to train without experience”** *Survey respondent*

For those who do not have experience of paid employment or the workplace, the pathway into work is likely to be even harder depending on their circumstances. They face the job market without the experience, networks, or confidence that others may have been able to accumulate over time.

**“ I keep getting rejected even for the lowest of the lowest level jobs such as cleaning despite having plenty of experience. ”**

*Survey respondent*

”

**“It’s incredibly difficult to get a job, only being able to get a job through who you know.”**

*Survey respondent*

**“I have the qualifications, but no work experience and most jobs require work experience.”** *Survey respondent*

For many, being NEET is the outcome of repeated knock-backs rather than a lack of motivation or ambition. It’s these knock-backs that prevent them from sustaining or restarting engagement with meaningful activities. Focus group participants described their frustration at repeated rejection or non-responses from employers, strengthening a sense of being unseen in the labour market. For many, their experiences have created a negative cycle of failed applications, financial pressure, and worsening of their mental wellbeing.



## Confidence and mental wellbeing

Overall, this cohort reported feeling very or somewhat confident: when job hunting (58%) and keeping a job once starting it (70%). This could be since most of them have had some experience with meaningful activities, so they have confidence in themselves, but the external environment makes it more difficult to reach their goal.

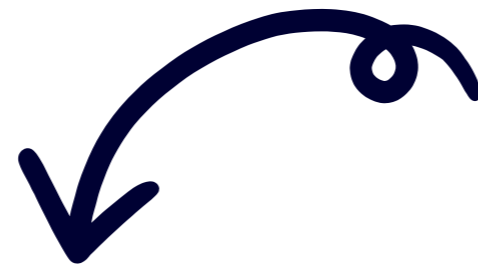
When asked what knocks their confidence when job hunting, young adults most often cited fear of rejection (51%), restricted access to experience and skills building (51%), feeling unprepared (35%), fear of the unknown (33%), and negative past experiences (29%). Many also described the impact of comparison to others, or discontent with the current salaries available to them and, from what we can infer, the impact of Artificial Intelligence on the labour market weighing on their mind.

**“Knowing that tons of other people probably have better experience or skills than me applying for the same job.”** *Survey respondent*

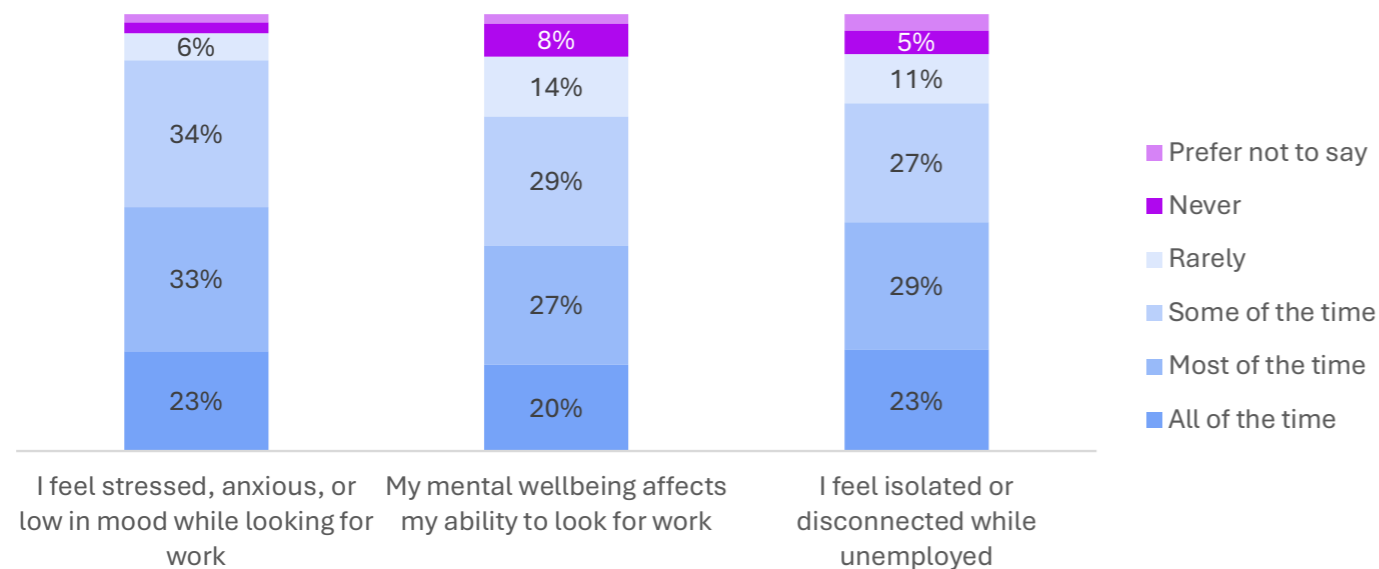
**“I just don’t want to because the jobs are bad the pay is bad and we’re gonna be replaced soon anyway.”** *Survey respondent*

These patterns are echoed in our focus groups, where many described deep pessimism about their futures, and the impact that repeated rejection, financial pressures, and unpredictable employment conditions can have on self-esteem over time. This was noted as contributing to anxiety, low mood, and in some cases feelings of emptiness.

Overall, Figure 3 (below) shows that the impact of mental health difficulties is widespread. Behind these numbers are young people spending long stretches of time feeling anxious, isolated, and unsure how to move forward.



**Figure 3: Mental health and wellbeing in relation to looking for work**



- 76% said that their mental wellbeing affects their ability to look for work some, most, or all of the time.
- 90% report feeling stressed, anxious, or low when job hunting some, most, or all of the time.
- 89% feel isolated or disconnected while unemployed some, most, or all of the time.

**“I’m always unwell which makes it difficult to hold down a job”** *Survey Respondent*

While not everyone we engaged with lives with mental illness, the frequency in which young adults experience mental health difficulties at varying levels cannot be underestimated — neither can the impact that mental health has on finding work and vice versa.

## Financial barriers

Financial pressures create significant obstacles to job-searching. For young people without savings or family support, even small costs can become reasons to give up or feel ashamed, compounding existing mental health pressures. Two-thirds of young adults are worried about the travel costs to interviews or support services, and 63% are concerned that available jobs pay too little to cover their needs.

**“I’m also having to consider travel times and costs when looking at job opportunities due to a lack of savings since I have never worked before which is incredibly frustrating.”** *Survey respondent*

Focus group findings sharpen this image, as young people spoke about their difficulties affording travel and described the pressure from their parents to contribute financially to the household, alongside the shame and embarrassment they feel from not earning money.

Those who have accessed the social security system are notably more likely to say that they feel stressed, anxious, or low in mood while looking for work (61%), their mental wellbeing affects their ability to look for work (56%), and they feel isolated or disconnected while looking for work (58%) most or all of the time.

When seeking financial support from the social security system, few young adults reported positive engagement. Only a minority found the process fair and straightforward (22%), helpful in managing essential costs (26%), and beneficial to their wellbeing (13%).

**“The process (e.g., Personal Independence Payment, Work Capability Assessment, etc.) made my mental health worse.”**  
Survey respondent

Those receiving Universal Credit Health Element (UCHE) acknowledged the financial support it provided but highlighted an ongoing lack of supported pathways into work or other meaningful activity.

## Support that young adults need

Young adults say they would feel most confident entering work if they received support focused on accessing meaningful activity, advice, and mental health and wellbeing support:

- building skills and experience (42%)
- flexible or part-time opportunities (40%)
- training or qualifications (37%)
- tailored advice on their options (30%)
- wellbeing support (27%)
- mental health support (29%)

Among young adults whose mental wellbeing interacts most strongly with the stresses of job-searching, 43% report that access to mental health support would significantly increase their confidence in finding and preparing for work.

We know that young people face a “cliff-edge” when trying to access mental health care after reaching the upper age limit of child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). Research shows that only a small percentage are successfully transferred to Adult Mental Health Services (AMHS) because of the abrupt age cut-off, higher eligibility thresholds in AMHS, and long waiting times.<sup>x</sup> This discontinuity leaves young people without access to the support that they need when their mental health is still vulnerable.

Rethink Mental Illness analysis in the 2025 Right Treatment, Right Time report showed that, in England alone, there are 12 times as many people waiting over 18 months for community mental health care for people with a mental illness than for elective physical health treatment<sup>xi</sup>, yet mental health has been excluded from the government’s flagship plan to reduce long waits and waiting lists.

Our survey respondents describe the difficulties that young adults have experienced in accessing mental health support and treatment; below are direct quotes detailing various experiences.

**“I was receiving help when I was younger but once I turned 18 the help stopped and I’m too anxious to reach out for help”**

**“Got rejected from Counselling.”**

**“Long waitlists, or high costs for care like therapy sessions”**

**“NHS waiting lists, and not enough money to pursue private diagnosis”**

**“Long NHS waiting times”**

**“The NHS are too full and it only have to be severe cases”**

**“There’s none, no one’s willing to help”**

**“The support needed is just not there”**

Preferred modes of support that will help them move closer to work or other activities include:

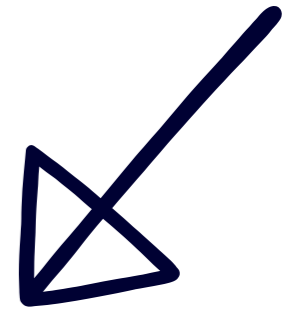
- one-to-one personalised support (47%)
- digital tools or online resources (40%)
- group workshops (20%)
- community youth services (19%)

Preferences vary depending on current support levels: young adults who have not received the support they need show an even higher preference

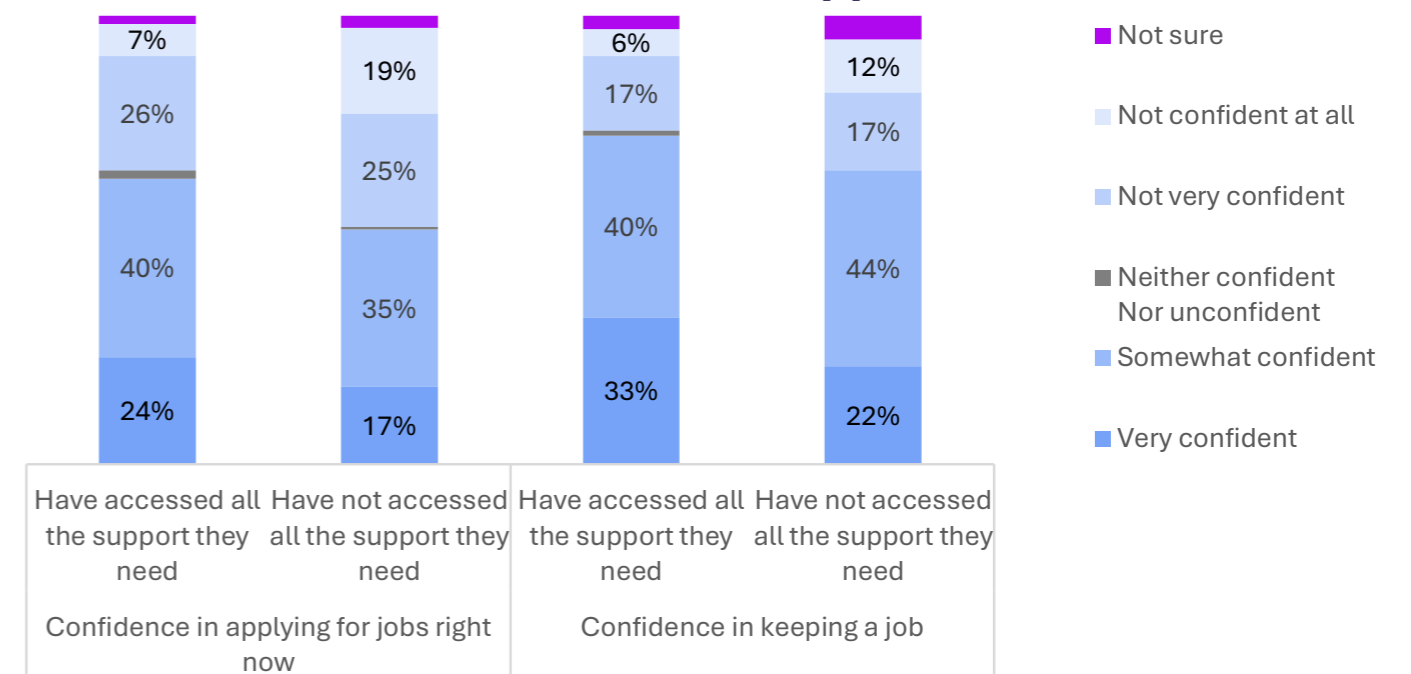
for one-to-one support (50%). This emphasises the importance of supportive approaches that are personalised, consistent, and mental health informed. Focus groups highlight this finding. Young adults said that any practical support must recognise and respond to anxiety, low confidence, and stress.

## Cross-analysis

Survey findings show that confidence in applying for jobs and in keeping a job is lowest among survey respondents who have not accessed the support that they need, and the highest among those who have (Figure 4 below). This emphasises the importance of having access to support.



**Figure 4: Confidence in job-searching crossed with level of support**



## Illustrative case study: Blocked at every turn

### »» How they feel

**At 20, their mental health has been worn down by long periods out of work and training.** Most days they feel anxious, empty, and unsure of their own worth. Repeated setbacks have chipped away at their confidence, leaving them feeling worse overall.

### »» Support they received

**Their early work experiences were limited to insecure, temporary jobs in pubs that offered little pay and no progression — and even these jobs have become harder to come by.** Since being out of work for several months, they feel that employers view the gap in their CV negatively. Even the volunteering they've done in a local charity shop hasn't been recognised as transferable experience, reinforcing the sense that their efforts do not count.

### »» What they need

**Financial barriers add to the pressure, especially since they do not have family to rely on.** They have occasionally been unable to afford transport to interviews, leading to missed opportunities and, at times, sanctions from the Jobcentre. They need practical and consistent financial support to access opportunities and to reduce some of the stressors during this difficult time in life. They need recognition of the experience they do have, as well as personalised and consistent support from a trusted person to identify barriers and help them move at a pace that supports their mental health.



## Findings:

# Employer perspectives

**Many employers were hesitant to take part in this work, preferring one-to-one interviews and we expect for this to be because of their concerns with speaking openly in front of peers. We resolved this by offering more trusted environments for conversation, which was taken up more easily. This hesitation likely reflects how uncomfortable conversations about mental health at work can feel, even for employers who want to do the right thing.**

This common theme of fear of judgement, low trust, and hesitance about saying the 'wrong thing', signals a broader cultural barrier within workplace, and needing more one-to-one spaces to speak openly. Recent polling affirms this point, with nearly one in five workers saying that mental health is treated as a tick-box exercise in their organisation, while almost three in ten report that managers lack the time, training, or resources to offer meaningful support, even though employers express good intentions.<sup>xii</sup>

Meaningful progress toward mentally healthier workplaces will require not only new policies and practices but also a shift in organisational norms. Employers need environments where they feel safe acknowledging challenges, sharing learning, and discussing areas for development as well as successes. This should be supported by a wider culture in which organisations can openly exchange insights and develop a shared understanding of best practice for supporting young people.

## Mental health, confidence, and adjustment to work

Across interviews and focus groups, employers highlighted that many young starters arrive enthusiastic and motivated, but report that pressures, unclear expectations, and fast-paced environments can heighten anxiety, stress, and low confidence, particularly during the first months of employment. Employers noted that early difficulties are rarely about a young person's capability, but challenges often stem from emotional strain, uncertainty about expectations, and difficulty adjusting to workplace norms. Mental health difficulties were often seen as exacerbated by some work environments rather than inherent traits of the young person.

They spoke about how young people's success is strongly affected by how well workplaces support confidence-building through clear expectations, manageable workloads, and early opportunities for guided learning.

## Workplace culture as a determinant of retention

Employers described the emotional climate of the workplace as pivotal to whether young people settle or leave. Supportive and attentive management, clear communication, and open conversations about wellbeing were seen as preventative actions. Young workers thrive in environments where expectations are transparent from the start, feedback is constructive, and wellbeing discussions are normalised.

In contrast, rigid or high-pressure environments are often but not only defined by unclear role expectations, intergenerational tensions, and toxic dynamics, and were said to heighten anxiety and accelerate disengagement. Employers repeatedly emphasised that confidence is especially low in the early stages of employment. Structured and well-thought through inductions, shadowing opportunities, and regular one-to-one meetings were identified as key tools to support young people's adjustment into work and build long-term stability.



## Variability in mental health support across employers

Provision of mental health and wellbeing support varies significantly by organisational size. Larger employers are more likely to offer resources such as mental health first aiders, occupational health services, training for managers, and established pathways for reasonable adjustments.

The smaller employers that we spoke to, while often willing to support young workers, frequently lack guidance, confidence, capacity, and resource to respond effectively to mental health needs. Some employers reported that they are unsure how to provide appropriate adjustments or how to recognise early signs of a young worker struggling. This indicates the need for clearer guidance and low-cost support tools.

Across the sector, employers noted an increase in mental health-related absences among young workers, suggesting that there is a mental health need being unmet alongside other structural factors mentioned already like high living costs, poor quality work, and limited early support. They highlighted that flexibility, early intervention, and proactive wellbeing conversations are essential to improving retention and helping young people sustain employment.



Our next steps:

# Turning insight into action

This work will inform how we strengthen MHUK's programmes for young people. It will support the development of a more joined-up pathway, helping young people access the right support at the right time, from early prevention through to employment and positive workplace experiences.

Building on our Young People's and Into Work programmes, we will focus on three priority areas:



## 1. Developing a prevention-based offer

We will strengthen early intervention to better support young people before they disengage from education or work.

- **Co-produce and pilot** two employment-focused workshops within our Young People's Programmes.
- **Work with Careers Guidance staff**, schools, and PSHE leads to explore a complementary training offer.
- **Develop digital resources to support progression** into employment, including links to the Into Work hub.

## 2. Coordinating a clearer pathway into employment support

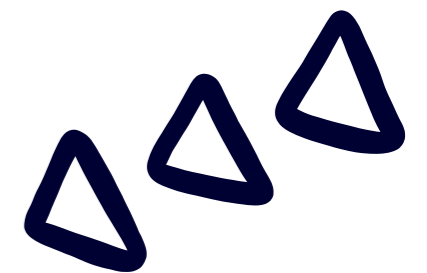
We will create a more structured journey, enabling young people to move seamlessly from early support into employment.

- **Develop and pilot clear pathways** from Young People's Programmes, Into Work and onwards into employment or other forms of meaningful activity.
- **Pilot a peer group support model** for young people, offering structured group-based support as a step between early intervention and more intensive employment support.
- **Provide tailored support for young people** at different stages of readiness, including those at risk of disengagement.
- **Explore alternative entry routes** with employer partners (e.g. micro-placements).
- **Develop digital resources** to improve accessibility and continuity of support.

## 3. Co-producing an employer-facing module

We will strengthen employer support by enhancing our Workplace Mental Health Training offer.

- **Co-produce a new module** with an employer partner to support line managers working with young employees.
- **Ensure this reflects the challenges young people face** when entering and sustaining work.



# Recommendations

**Young people's journeys into adulthood are shaped by families, schools, community organisations, employers, health services, and the social security system. Government has a central role in setting the conditions for young people to thrive, but no single actor can solve this challenge alone. Our findings show two distinct cohorts, those who are younger preparing to enter the labour market and those who are older and already NEET. It highlights a collective opportunity for government, employers, education providers, local authorities, and organisations like MHUK to act together.**

The recommendations below set out where government leadership is essential, while also identifying where voluntary sector organisations, employers, and local partners can play a complementary role to ensure young people can move toward meaningful activity at a pace that protects their mental health.

These recommendations are intended to apply UK-wide in principle, recognising that delivery mechanisms differ across the four nations. Equivalent principles and standards should apply to devolved programmes in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales, and we would welcome dialogue with devolved governments on how best to achieve this.

## Recommendation 1:

**The Department for Work & Pensions (DWP), Department for Education (DfE), and devolved administrations should establish a UK-wide Meaningful Activity Support Programme for 15–24 year olds, building on and extending Connect to Work.**

Connect to Work is an important step towards integrated employment and health support. However, as currently designed it focuses primarily on sustained paid employment and lacks

provision tailored to the developmental needs and circumstances of young people. It does not include a prevention strand and does not reach young people before barriers become entrenched.

We recommend that governments across the UK build on Connect to Work and the evidence-based principles of Individual Placement and Support (IPS) and the Supported Employment Quality Framework (SEQF) to create a UK-wide Meaningful Activity Support Programme for 15–24 year olds. This programme should be mental-health informed and recognise the full spectrum of meaningful activity:

### • Prevention and Early Preparation (15–18 year olds)

- ▶ This strand should be embedded in schools, colleges, and community youth provision, funded by government rather than individual education settings.
- ▶ Young people would:
  - build relationships with consistent, trusted mentors
  - explore education, training, and employment pathways at their own pace and with reliable advice
  - develop confidence and resilience
  - identify and address early barriers with their mentors
  - access peer workshops that normalise shared experiences and build practical skills



### • Navigation and Tailored Support (18–24 year olds)

- ▶ This strand should be accessible via referral or self-referral through provision including but not limited to Youth Hubs, community organisations, post-18 education settings, and mental health services.
- ▶ Mentors would:
  - act as a stable point of contact
  - provide structured, personalised support
  - help young people navigate complex systems
  - connect them to specialist provision when needed
  - support engagement with meaningful activity beyond paid work

### • Broader principles:

- ▶ Support should be consistent, allowing young people to continue working with the same trusted mentor as they move through key transitions (e.g. finishing school at 18) so relationships are not disrupted.
- ▶ Support should be voluntary, available, and actively offered to all young people, and recognising that early, preventative support helps those who are not on benefits and those not yet in crisis.
- **Charities, youth organisations, and local authorities** should be funded and supported to deliver the mentoring, peer support, and navigation elements of the programme, ensuring trusted, community-based provision sits alongside national infrastructure.



## Recommendation 2:

**The UK Government (HM Treasury, DWP, DBT) should reform employer incentives so they promote retention and wellbeing, not just recruitment.**

Opening the door matters, but what happens once a young person walks through it matters just as much. Existing employer incentives, including the Youth Jobs Grant and the expanded Jobs Guarantee, encourage recruitment but offer limited protection beyond the initial hiring period. Kickstart Scheme's evaluation found that employability support was neither consistently given nor monitored, suggesting that job starts alone, without structured and ongoing support, are insufficient to deliver sustained employment outcomes for young people at risk of long-term unemployment.<sup>xiii</sup>

We recommend that employer incentives be redesigned to:

- **require structured inductions, including clear expectations and gradual onboarding**
- **include named workplace mentors**
- **incorporate regular wellbeing check-ins**
- **support a pathway beyond the subsidised period**
- **measure sustained employment outcomes, rather than job starts alone**

MHUK, young people, and employer-facing organisations can partner with government to co-design and deliver guidance, training, and tools that support employers to meet retention and wellbeing standards.

## Recommendation 3:

**The Keep Britain Working Vanguard Taskforce should develop youth-friendly employment standards and close the expectations gap between young people and employers.**

Young people frequently report uncertainty about employer expectations; employers report uncertainty about how to support young starters. The Vanguard initiative under the Mayfield Review is well placed to address this gap but currently lacks a specific youth lens.

We recommend that the Vanguard Taskforce:

- **develop a youth strand focusing on young people entering work for the first time**
- **trial youth and mental health informed recruitment and retention practices, including:**
  - skills based hiring
  - supported entry routes for young people with mental health needs
  - job trials or paid tasters, with support in understanding expectations
  - staged recruitment processes
  - trauma-informed recruitment
- **collect and publish specific data & learnings** on youth retention, mental health related absence, and effective workplace practices through the Workplace Health Intelligence Unit
- **youth organisations, employer bodies, and lived-experience panels** should be embedded in the co-design of the Healthy Working Lifecycle standard to ensure they reflect the realities of workplaces and young people's needs

## Recommendation 4:

**HM Treasury, DWP, and devolved governments should remove financial and system barriers so young people who are unwell are protected and can engage in meaningful activity when they are ready.**

Financial barriers and elements of the social security system currently prevent many young people experiencing mental or physical ill health from engaging with opportunities that could support their progression.

Governments should ensure that young people have secure financial protection and access to support, regardless of their current ability to work or seek work. This should include:

- **removing practical cost barriers** (e.g., travel to interviews, support services, or other meaningful activities)
- **ensuring sanctions are a genuine last resort**<sup>xiv</sup>, with safeguards to protect people experiencing crises or severe fluctuations in their mental health
- **maintaining access to the Universal Credit Health Element**, recognising it as essential financial protection for those eligible due to the impact their health is having on their capability to work, regardless of age
- **placing greater value on education, training, volunteering, and gradual supported engagement** as legitimate positive outcomes, and preventing punitive action for not seeking work

There is currently a "missing middle": young people who are too unwell for work but not supported to build confidence, routine, and connection. Governments should empower charities, local authorities, and voluntary sector partners to help co-design safe, voluntary pathways into meaningful activity and support young people to navigate them. These pathways should prioritise mental health and wellbeing, agency, stability, non-linear progression, and recovery as a foundation for long-term employment.

## Recommendation 5:

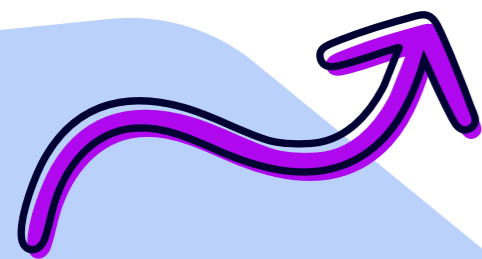
**The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), NHS England, and devolved health systems should ensure mental health spending keeps pace with physical health and that the cliff-edge at 18 is removed.**

The share of spending dedicated to mental health across the NHS has dropped for the second time since reporting requirements were introduced, with indications it will fall further next year. While decisions about mental health funding are broadly made at the local level, systems have been reacting to direction from the national government to prioritise physical health over mental health. Examples of this include the weakening of the Mental Health Investment Standard (which ensured parity with rises in physical health spending) and prioritisation of addressing elective waiting times. They should:

- **develop a clear and urgent plan to reduce waiting times, including sustained national and local investment**
- **strengthen transitions from CAMHS to adult services, preventing loss of care at age 18**
- **recognise quality mental health support as an essential foundation for participation in meaningful activity**

With the right investment, we can ensure more young people engage in education, work, and community life at a crucial point in their development.

By prioritising mental health, we can help chart a clear path to a thriving UK, especially for the young people whose wellbeing will shape what that future looks like. With stronger national focus, early support, and policies that invest early, more young people can stay connected to education, work, and the communities that help them grow. We're committed to working with individuals, organisations, and decision makers to build systems that lift young people up. Together, we can create a UK where good mental health is the foundation for everyone to thrive.



# Appendix

## Methodology

**This work adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection to explore the experiences of young people and employers.** Quantitative data was collected through two primary strands. First, an external provider was commissioned to recruit and survey 300 young people aged 15 to 18 via proxy, with parents or guardians facilitating participation due to safeguarding and consent requirements. The same company was also commissioned to collect a further 300 responses from young people aged 18 to 24 who were not in education, employment, or training (NEET). This approach was taken to ensure access to groups that are typically harder to reach through standard survey methods. Survey questions were co-developed by the Evidence and Impact team, Policy team, and Mental Health UK programme teams, including Young People's Programmes and Into Work, ensuring alignment with both research and delivery priorities. To supplement this, the survey was also hosted and disseminated directly by the project team through existing networks, partnerships, and

service contacts, generating an additional 14 responses from 15 to 18 year olds and 19 responses from 18 to 24 year olds, respectively.

Qualitative fieldwork was undertaken to provide deeper insight into the experiences underpinning the survey findings. This included three in-person focus groups with young people aged 15 to 18 (12 participants) and two in-person focus groups with young people aged 18 to 24 (10 participants), primarily conducted in the South East of England, reflecting existing delivery links through Into Work programmes. In addition, one employer focus group and seven one-to-one interviews were conducted remotely, involving representatives from 11 organisations. Focus groups were audio recorded with consent, and detailed notes were taken throughout. These notes were subsequently reviewed and synthesised, although full verbatim transcription was not undertaken. This data was then analysed and thematically grouped based on its content by members of the Policy & Influencing team and Mental Health UK colleagues. Data collection took place between January and mid-February 2026, with qualitative and quantitative strands running concurrently.

# References

<sup>i</sup> [Beshir, H, Kelly, D, Fitzsimons, E and Macmillan, L \(2026\) Post-16 transitions and destinations: Initial findings from the Millennium Cohort Study at Age 23.](#)

<sup>ii</sup> [Rethink Mental Illness \(2025\) Right Treatment, Right Time.](#)

<sup>iii</sup> [Solmi, M, Radua, J, Olivola, M, Croce, E, Soardo, L, Salazar de Pablo, G, Il Shin, J, Kirkbride, JB, Jones, P, Kim, JH, Kim, JY, Carvalho, AF, Seeman, MV, Correll, CU, Fusar-Poli, P. \(2022\) Age at onset of mental disorders worldwide: large-scale meta-analysis of 192 epidemiological studies.](#)

<sup>iv</sup> [The Daily Mail \(2024\) Generation Sicknote: How an obsession with mental health issues among 18-to-30-year-olds is setting up an entire generation to fail, as revealed in a study by Professor Matt Goodwin.](#)

<sup>v</sup> [UK Youth \(2024\) Harmful stereotypes of young people fuelling record numbers to fall out of work.](#)

<sup>vi</sup> [The Big Issue \(2025\) Number of young people not in work or education highest for a decade — but it's not their fault.](#)

<sup>vii</sup> [Youth Futures Foundation \(2025\) Understanding drivers of recent trends in young people's mental health.](#)

<sup>viii</sup> [PLP & CELC \(2025\) Sanctionable Failures: Universal Credit's failing sanctions regime and the harm it causes.](#)

<sup>ix</sup> [Mental Health UK \(2026\) The Burn Out Report.](#)

<sup>x</sup> [Appleton \(2020\) Understanding why young people fall through the gap between child and adult mental health services and the associated impact and costs for young people, society, and the health service.](#)

<sup>xi</sup> [Rethink Mental Illness \(2025\) Right Treatment, Right Time.](#)

<sup>xii</sup> [Mental Health UK \(2026\) The Burn Out Report.](#)

<sup>xiii</sup> [IFF \(2023\) Kickstart Scheme — Process Evaluation.](#)

<sup>xiv</sup> [PLP & CELC \(2025\) Sanctionable Failures: Universal Credit's failing sanctions regime and the harm it causes.](#)





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