

Better Futures – Helping to develop skills for all

Research Report
commissioned by Hampshire Chamber of Commerce
Local Skills Improvement Plan
2026

A Better future
youthoptions.org.uk

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1. Summary

Key Findings and Recommendations

This paper sets out the key recommendations emerging from Youth Options' consultation with young people, employers and training providers, focused on supporting NEET young people and those facing additional barriers to employment and training in Hampshire. It was commissioned on behalf of the Hampshire Chamber of Commerce in order to inform the 2026 Local Skills Improvement Plan and ensure that there was a focus on addressing the needs of young people from backgrounds that are seldom heard with recommendations for improving the local skills ecosystem that would create meaningful opportunities for NEET young people to enter employment.

NEET young people, employers and training providers highlight a system struggling to support those with the greatest barriers. All report gaps in confidence, skills, guidance and coordinated pathways, but also a shared appetite for earlier work exposure, personalised mentoring, inclusive recruitment and clearer, better-aligned support, pointing to a strong mandate for targeted system reform.

Key issues identified

- A significant proportion of young people lack the social networks, exposure and informal knowledge that others take for granted, limiting access to jobs and progression opportunities.
- There is insufficient and inconsistent support for young people aged 19+ to navigate training and employment pathways, particularly for those with:
 - no functional maths and English,
 - disrupted education, exclusion or prolonged absence,
 - experience of the care system.
- Practical barriers continue to prevent engagement, including transport costs, digital poverty, and lack of appropriate clothing or resources to be work- and interview-ready.
- There is limited understanding and adaptation around neurodiversity and additional needs. Young people and employers are often not using shared language or realistic, solution-focused expectations.
- Employability, resilience and soft skills are not consistently embedded across education, leaving young people underprepared for work culture, team working, communication and the practical application of learning.
- Employers express concern about recruiting untested young people, particularly in the context of tighter employment legislation that reduces willingness to take perceived risks.

Recommendations

- Develop a flexible range of career exposure opportunities, including work shadowing, insight sessions, paid work experience, informal employer conversations and supported placements.
- Recruit employability mentors with a youth-centred approach to help young people build confidence, overcome barriers and develop practical skills such as CV writing, applications, interview techniques and workplace behaviours.
- Introduce more inclusive recruitment approaches, offering alternatives to traditional interviews so young people can demonstrate their potential in ways that reflect different communication styles.
- Provide high-quality training for employers and providers on barriers to engagement, including neurodiversity, mental health, trauma and adverse childhood experiences.
- Remove the strict cut off for access to free education from 19 particularly for young people who have had disrupted educational careers due to additional barriers and increase awareness and coordination of avenues open at 19+.

Business specific proposals

- Establish a best-practice employer network to share learning, innovation and practical HR support, with opportunities for buddying and pooled expertise, particularly for SMEs.
- Improve coordination of employer engagement with schools and training providers, reducing reliance on individual institutions or key staff.
- Explore targeted employer support schemes or legislative exemptions to encourage the recruitment and retention of young people who are furthest from the labour market.

2. Research Background

This research project *Better Futures - Helping to Develop Skills for All*, was commissioned to inform the Hampshire Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) 2026 by capturing the lived experiences, challenges and ideas of the three groups most directly involved in supporting young people into employment: young people, employers, and training providers. The project was delivered by Youth Options, an organisation with more than 85 years' experience supporting disadvantaged young people across Hampshire through prevention, targeted support and progression programmes. Youth Options specialises in trauma-informed, asset-based youth work and provides accredited learning, employability development and supported placements for NEET young people.

The purpose of the research was to explore the barriers young people face when seeking to enter work or training, particularly those who are seldom heard including: care-experienced young people, neurodiverse young people, those with mental-health challenges, those excluded from education, and young people who have experienced adverse childhood experiences. The research also examined employer experiences of recruiting entry-level staff and their capacity, confidence and needs when working with young people who have additional barriers. In parallel, training providers contributed insights into the quality, accessibility and alignment of existing pathways, as well as gaps in provision and opportunities for improvement.

Findings from this research will contribute directly to the Local Skills improvement Plan (LSIP 2026) by:

- Amplifying the voices of young people who are under-represented in formal consultations
- Identifying barriers to success within the current employment and training ecosystem
- Highlight areas examples of best practice, and potential innovation, additional support and system change

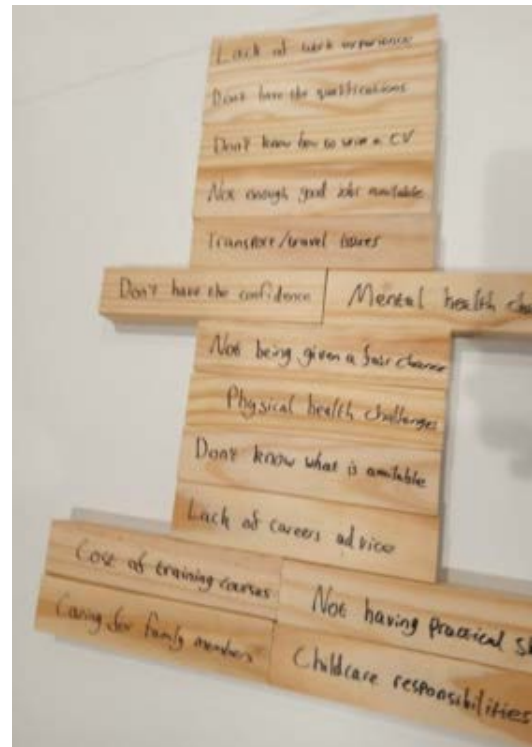
The project took place between January and March 2026.

3. Research Methodology

The research adopted a targeted qualitative design to investigate the interconnected experiences of three key groups: young people aged 16–25 who were NEET, recently NEET, or at risk; employers recruiting at entry level; and post-16 training providers. This multi-stakeholder structure enabled triangulation of findings across those seeking work, those creating employment opportunities, and those shaping the training pathways intended to support transitions into the labour market. The aim was to generate a balanced and nuanced understanding of barriers, expectations and potential system improvements.

The lived experience of NEET young people

To explore the lived experiences of young people, Youth Options facilitated four structured focus group sessions involving 25 participants aged 16–26. These young people were recruited through a range of Youth Options pathways including: key work, employability programmes, and care-experienced or mental health support pathways alongside focus groups with partner organisations including The King's Trust in Hampshire. All participants were seldom-heard young people facing complex barriers including disrupted education, SEND, neuro-divergence, anxiety, exclusion or wider Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) related challenges. Sessions were designed not only to gather insight but also to build confidence and communication skills through youth-work-informed activities. These included a “barrier wall” Jenga exercise,



emoji-based confidence scaling, and a series of mapping, preference-ranking and idea-generation tasks. Data was captured through facilitator notes, post-its, annotated flipcharts, observation of group dynamics, and pre-session background information sheets.

Employer Perspectives

Employer perspectives were captured through two online focus groups involving nine employers from diverse industries; technology, engineering, food manufacturing and retail, DIY retail, optical healthcare, maritime, law, and automotive recycling, as well as a wider survey completed by 24 additional business representatives. Participants were drawn from Hampshire Chamber of Commerce networks and Youth Options corporate partners. The first workshop explored perceived barriers to employing young people, expectations around work readiness and key challenges, while the second session was solution-focused, responding directly to the findings generated by young people.



Both sessions involved facilitated discussion, virtual whiteboards and systematic collection of employer contributions, supported by AI-generated transcripts and facilitator notes.

Training Provider Insight

Further depth was added through interviews with representatives from six FE colleges and training providers spanning ITPs, sixth forms and local authority provision. Providers supported cohorts with NEET levels ranging from under 10% to over 75%, including large multi-site organisations. Semi-structured interviews and surveys explored provision types, barriers to attendance and completion, employer engagement, curriculum alignment, functional skills (English and maths) challenges and support needs for transitions and SEND learners. Providers contributed headline data on NEET levels, barriers and effective practice.

Oversight

Oversight for the project was provided by a cross-sector steering group of 6 members, including Chamber of Commerce, business, local authority and voluntary-sector partners, who met three times to shape the research design and reflect on interim findings, ensuring the robustness and relevance of the overall approach. In addition, we undertook contextual tabletop research into the national and regional landscape for NEET employment using available online government data sets.

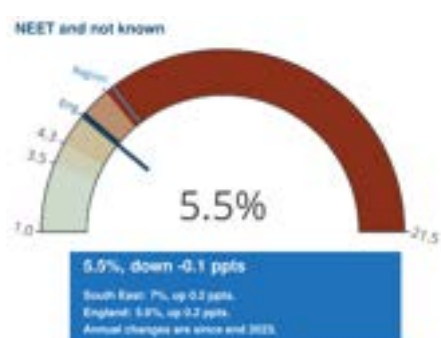
4. Context of research

4.1 Current scale of youth unemployment and NEET

1. Youth unemployment in England remains significantly higher than unemployment among the wider working-age population, reflecting long-standing structural challenges in the labour market. According to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), around 729,000 young people aged 16–24 were unemployed in late 2025, with a youth unemployment rate of approximately 15.9%, compared with an overall UK unemployment rate of around 5.2%. Although employment levels for young people have increased slightly, the rate of unemployment has risen over the past year, underlining the continued difficulty many young people face in securing stable work during the transition from education into employment.
2. A related issue is the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). Latest ONS estimates show that around 946,000–957,000 young people aged 16–24 were NEET in mid to late 2025, equating to roughly one in eight young people. In England specifically, Department for Education figures indicate that 13.6% of 16–24-year-olds were NEET in 2024, continuing an upward trend since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. This trend reflects increases in both youth unemployment and economic inactivity, rather than short-term job search alone
3. In response, the Government announced a review on Young People and Work¹ by former Secretary of State for Health, Rt Hon Alan Milburn. Launched in November 2025, it is an independent review for the Department of Work and Pensions to examine why rising numbers of young people aged 16 – 24 are NEET and what needs to change.
4. The review takes a system-wide approach, focusing on how education, skills, health, welfare and employment systems interact—and often fail—at key transition points in young people's lives. Its core questions are:
 - What is stopping more young people from learning or earning?
 - What would make the biggest difference to helping them participate?
5. Key areas under examination include:
 - The growing role of mental health and neurodiversity in youth inactivity
 - How benefits and employment support can both help and hinder engagement
 - Weak transitions between school, college, health services and work
 - The availability and accessibility of apprenticeships, vocational routes and entry-level jobs
 - Regional and socio-economic inequalities affecting opportunity

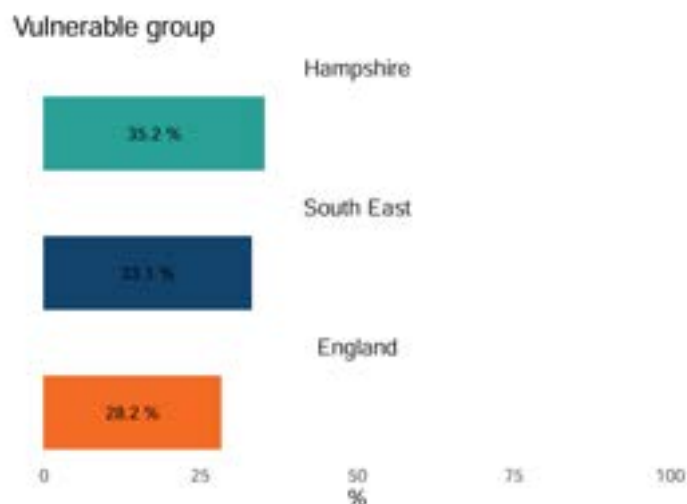
¹ [Alan Milburn calls for a 'movement' to address lost generation of young people not earning or learning as investigation opens - GOV.UK](#)

6. Interim findings are due in Spring 2026 with final recommendations in summer 2026. Milburn has been explicit that the rise in young people who are NEET represents what he calls a “crisis of opportunity”. And said that “this isn’t about young people lacking aspiration. It’s about a system that too often fails to support them at the moments when it matters most”.
7. Separately, Parliament’s Work and Pensions Committee have also launched an enquiry into NEETs. The call for evidence is now closed²
8. Hampshire is slightly lower than national the national average on youth participation for 16 – 17 but similar to South East generally, but NEET remains a persistent and uneven issue, particularly for vulnerable young people and in certain districts.



9. Proportion in education and training (ONS data)³. 5.5% are NEET and not known compared to 7% for the SE and 5.6% for England.

10. Those in vulnerable groups (looked after, refugee, carer, disclosed substance use, care leaver, supervised Youth Offending Team, parenting or in Alternative Provision, the figure for NEET and not known in Hampshire increases to 35.2% compared to 28.2% England (see attached report Appendix 2)



4.2 Vocational and technical qualifications

11. England’s post-16 system is undergoing a significant but moderated reform aimed at simplifying vocational and technical pathways while preserving choice for learners. This is in

² [Committee launch new inquiry on tackling youth NEET crisis - Committees - UK Parliament](#)

³ [Create your own tables on participation in education, training and neet age 16 to 17 by local authority - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

response to the Government's Post 16 Education and Skills White Paper published in October 2025⁴. The White Paper focuses on four key areas:

- a. Joining up skills and employment system included through Local Skills Improvement Plans
- b. FE system that delivers high quality education and training for all
- c. Strengthening higher education system.

12. In response to the plans on the FE system, the Government announced reforms to the vocational education system. In March 2026, the UK Government announced the introduction of new Vocational Levels (V Levels)—Level 3 qualifications, each equivalent in size to one A level, designed to sit alongside A levels and T Levels (Technical levels) as a clearer vocational option for young people who prefer applied learning linked to real jobs. The first V Levels, in education, finance and digital, will begin teaching from September 2027, with further subjects to follow, as part of a wider ambition to ensure two-thirds of young people are in higher education, training or apprenticeships by age 25⁵.
13. T levels were introduced in 2020 and are broadly equivalent to 3 A levels. They have been developed in collaboration with employers and education providers to that they meet the need of industry. As well as practical and knowledge-based learning at school or college, they also include on the job experience through industry placement of 315 hours. T level foundation year is a 1 year post GCSE level 2 study programme designed to support progression to T level but for learners who would benefit from additional preparation and support before starting the full T level⁶.
14. The Government also confirmed a phased and less disruptive transition away from existing applied general qualifications, including BTECs. Funding for large BTEC diplomas and extended diplomas will continue through the 2026–27 academic year, with defunding delayed until from autumn 2027 onwards, subject by subject, once V Levels or T Levels are available. Ministers described this as a “phased, sustainable approach” in response to concerns from colleges and sixth-form providers about the risk of qualification gaps for learners—particularly in high-demand areas such as health and social care.
15. As a result, England's vocational and technical landscape now comprises three main Level 3 routes:
 1. A levels (academic),
 2. T Levels (large, occupation-specific technical programmes with substantial industry placements), and
 3. V Levels (smaller, flexible vocational qualifications),

⁴ [Post-16 education and skills white paper - GOV.UK](#)

⁵ [First V Levels subjects revealed as part of landmark reforms - GOV.UK](#)

⁶ [Introduction of T Levels - GOV.UK](#)

5. Findings: Skills Needs Analysis

5.1 Lack of Social Capital and Informal Knowledge of the Labour Market

NEET lived Experience

Young people consistently described feeling isolated “*on their own*” in navigating the job market, lacking the informal networks and “*insider knowledge*” that others rely on. Many felt that opportunities were only accessible “*if you have family or friends in the industry,*” leaving them unsure where to seek guidance or how to connect their skills to real career pathways. Young people felt they lacked informal “*Understanding of expectations in jobs – how to prepare and what is going to be expected.*” Several reported that statutory support ended abruptly—particularly care-experienced young people, one noting they were “*left in the cold*” with no help to explore options. They were clear that the challenge was not simply the volume of information but the absence of support to interpret it: “*Too much information and not enough support with processing it... one size fits all.*” Others spoke of wanting simple, low-pressure conversations that would help them understand expectations and next steps: “*Sometimes you know what you want to get into, but not how to get into it.*”

Employer perspectives

Employers repeatedly said young people lack a clear map of roles, routes and expectations and the ability to talk through their career goals and aspirations in a realistic way. There was agreement within the business focus group that a significant proportion of young people if they did not have family support were directionless and that this came across in recruitment. They felt that this group were almost ‘*second class citizens*’ when it came to recruitment because no one had sat down with them to think through what their passions and skills were and what possibilities existed. These young people didn’t then show passion for the jobs they were apply for or seem to know why they wanted the jobs. The group agreed that the main thing they look for in a candidate is positive attitude, initiative and research into the role and how they fitted it. This group of disconnected Young people might have potential but this wasn’t what came across in recruitment, so they were a risk for an employer to take on. Employers felt that this was not what was being offered through conventional careers services and schools because it involved individualised time to explore options.

Trainer provider perspectives

Training providers also emphasised the need for brokerage and guidance for NEET young people the majority of those interviewed were already utilising links with external support services and providing careers guidance and coaching, indicating sustained demand for trusted “*navigators.*”. However they reported that employer engagement was generally weak

constraining access to informal networks and insider routes for those young people without social support networks that already linked them into employment.

5.2 Confidence, Skills and Self-Presentation

NEET lived experience

“My brain shuts down when I try to talk in formal situations.”

Low confidence was a dominant barrier affecting young people’s willingness to apply, persist, or advocate for themselves. Many were acutely aware of negative stereotypes about their generation: *“We know people don’t think we are robust.”* Anxiety around “getting it wrong” and being judged made formal interactions overwhelming, with some avoiding interviews entirely—*“I overthink interviews to the point where I just won’t turn up.”* Several froze when asked about industry knowledge, not realising this preparation was expected. A lack of experience compounded these challenges, leading to feelings of inadequacy: *“They all want experience, but I’m 19—where am I supposed to have got experience from when I can’t get my first job?”*

Employer perspectives

Following on from employers feedback about a significant proportion of young people’s lacking careers guidance social capital our focus-group employers also highlighted confidence as a barrier (hesitation to speak up, difficulty linking experiences to the role). They asked for pre-interview coaching and clearer preparation check lists so potential isn’t masked by anxiety. Surveyed employers echoed this: 21.7% cited “lack of confidence/commitment” as a challenge when developing young employees. At the same time, they emphasised hiring for attitude — Attitude/Motivation appeared in 69.6% of “top-3 skills” lists; Communication in 30.4%.

Trainer provider perspectives

Training providers also identified that Low confidence/self-esteem was a consistent barrier to NEET young people entering employability. The majority responded to this with pastoral/wellbeing support but only had limited access to formal mentoring programmes. Four of the participant ranked Learner engagement and retention as a top delivery challenge and strongly linked this to issues of confidence (4/5).

5.3 Functional and Practical Skills

NEET lived experience

Young people highlighted difficulties interpreting job descriptions, navigating digital job platforms, and understanding qualification requirements. Without structured support to develop these skills, they struggled to evaluate opportunities or identify realistic routes forward.

Basic literacy and numeracy—particularly English and maths after age 19—were described as major gatekeepers for employment and further training. There was also an opportunity cost of focusing on these at the expense of more vocational applied training that would help them gain access to career progression within a particular area. Some felt they had “*missed the boat*” when access to funded provision ended, forcing a choice between unaffordable professional training or abandoning progression routes altogether.

Employer perspectives

The focus groups discussed wanting less emphasis on formal qualification and more on employability skills. Business survey priorities align: 52.2% want employability/soft-skills training; 30.4% want industry-specific technical training; 26.1% want basic digital skills. Barriers to recruiting more young people included lack of work-ready candidates (17.4%) while 8.7% flagged basic literacy/ numeracy/ communication gaps.

Another area picked up on was alignment of skills with work place scenarios “*Closer alignment between skills taught in school and how they’re used at work — Excel is very different in the professional workplace.*” — Professional & Business Services [250+] Employers asked for practical digital proficiency (e.g., Excel, PowerPoint) and clearer teaching of workplace-relevant basics (how to read job descriptions, qualifications, and sift criteria).

Trainer provider perspectives

Training providers identified foundational skills as a gatekeep to progression: *Lack of basic skills (English/maths)* is cited as key alongside *practical experience, customer service and commercial awareness* as key gaps in knowledge and skills preventing young people from entering the labour market. Requests for support included *curriculum development funding and industry-standard equipment* in order to develop this further.

5.4 Preparation for Workplace Expectations and Employability

NEET lived experience

Many felt unprepared for workplace culture, expectations and practical responsibilities. They wanted to be treated like emerging adults—supported through team-based tasks, opportunities to practise workplace behaviours, and guidance on rights, finances, communication and CV/interview skills. Young people described assuming employers would reject them outright if they lacked GCSEs, as no one had explained alternative pathways or how to compensate for gaps in their profile. This contributed to a sense of being locked out before they had even begun.

Employer perspectives

Employers within our focus groups highlighted the need for a stronger focus on soft skills within education and training – the ability to fit into working culture and communicate, punctuality and reliability. Employers talked about young people understanding their impact on the rest of their teams. There was also a discussion around resilience, ability to respond to feedback and realistic expectations for the amount of work that needed to go into gaining trust to take on responsibilities and be given opportunities. Employers want workplace culture and “how work works” embedded earlier: bite-sized practical instructions, talk-through scenarios, early hands-on team involvement, Survey responses point to the same need: 26.1% want pre-employment programmes to build “work-ready” behaviours before day one.

Training provider perspectives

Work-readiness was a key focus of concern for providers. They emphasised practical experience and professional behaviours as gaps and wanted better preparation of learners for work plus simplified placement processes to make exposure feasible.

5.5 Neurodiversity-Informed Support

NEET lived experience

Neurodivergent young people expressed a strong need for tailored support to manage sensory demands, communication pressures and executive functioning tasks in both job-seeking and workplace environments. They often felt misunderstood: *“I am high masking, so people assume I’m coping when I’m not.”* Others emphasised that being “allowed” into a space did not make it accessible. A common theme was the lack of guidance on what reasonable adjustments might look like—*“I don’t know what I can ask for... I don’t so ask for something that doesn’t exist and be judged for this.”* Another young person identified that they saw *“no suitable guidance pathways for someone who is neurodivergent but not considered high-needs SEND”*.

Employer perspectives

Both focus groups stressed that many managers feel less confident making adjustments for neurodivergence/mental health than for physical disability; they asked for practical examples, simple toolkits, and clarity about what’s reasonable in different settings. This was echoed in the survey “Neuro-divergence is one of the biggest challenges... we need more training to support those with additional needs.” - Retail [250+] 30.4% want training for staff on neurodivergence/trauma-informed practice; employers also noted Health & Safety limits in some roles and the costs and time associated in making adjustments without supportive guidance on how to do this for SME’s. There was a real enthusiasm for doing this properly and the value of having a broad range of employees who would feel valued and loyal to companies. There was also innovation shown within the focus groups with employees trying to tailor different ways of assessing employees and having a choice of formats. One employer had even supported a young person to represent their knowledge of the workplace through cartooning.

Trainer provider perspectives

Interviewees stressed that provision is stretched for neurodivergent/SEND support: *Additional learning needs or disabilities* are cited by 3/5 as a barrier; providers ask for *access to specialist support* and highlight limits in autism/ADHD-specific capacity. When individualized SEND support is available to young people it was seen as a real strength aiding retention and progression but access to this support is not universally available.

6. Key Skills Gaps and Priorities

6.1 Soft Skills and Employability

NEET lived experience

Young people wanted explicit support in how to behave, communicate and collaborate in the workplace. They were keen for earlier exposure to team-based projects in school, alongside opportunities to understand their rights and how to request reasonable adjustments. Being able to have clear, honest conversations about needs—without judgement—was seen as essential.

Employer perspectives

As previously identified Employers consistently identified a gap between academic qualification and the level of soft employability skills that they felt were needed to ensure that young people had a successful entry into employment : good attitude, resilience, proactivity/initiative, passion for the field, understanding expectations and ability to take feedback onboard; they wanted a skills ecosystem that prioritised opportunities for young people to gain these skills and a careers advice that maps strengths to roles. This mirrors the survey's "top-3" skill themes: Attitude/Motivation (69.6%), Communication (30.4%), Problem-solving (21.7%), Teamwork/Customer (17.4%).

Trainer perspectives

Soft skills gap is material: Training Providers echoed that employability skills, professional behaviours and customer service are among the top skills gaps for NEET young people. They felt that "attitude/readiness" challenges were reflected in employer reluctance to take on inexperienced candidates alongside linked concerns about reliability and acted as a significant barriers to progression.

6.2 Accessible Work Experience and Exposure

NEET lived experience

Work experience was described as both crucial and largely inaccessible but in 3 out of the 4 focus groups unanimously put as a top stressor. Barriers included age-related restrictions,

insurance requirements, and a lack of opportunities beyond school-organised placements. Not knowing “the right people” made unconventional careers feel closed off particularly those in the creative industries or those jobs that were less traditional. Costs—transport, clothing, food—added further obstacles. Young people wanted varied, meaningful exposure and the chance to talk to real professionals: “*I would really use this to ask how they got their job—and how I could get one.*”

Employer perspectives

Employers want better integration of work experience to see “fit” within current rules and to give young people low-risk exposure (shadowing, tasters). They wanted work exposure to be integrated into the curriculum and start earlier so that learning was applied to real life situations. They also asked for clearer advertising of post-16 and post-18 opportunities via a single platform. Current employer activity gained from our survey showed that respondents (self-selecting and already engaged with HCC and or Youth Options) were already very engaged with local training providers: career talks (56.5%), workplace visits (47.8%), work experience placements (43.5%), mock interviews (43.5%) — but their capacity was also tight: 47.8% cite lack of time, with 13.0% mentioning costs/admin of engaging with these opportunities. Again, the larger impact this can have on smaller companies was also acknowledged.

Trainer Perspectives

Training Providers argued that mechanisms for exposure to employment exist but are brittle: challenges include *employer reluctance* and fear to take on young people with complex needs, partly due to additional resources needed for *insurance/safeguarding* and *limited capacity*. Providers request *supported employment models*, *financial incentives*, *simplified processes*, and *dedicated employer engagement coordinators*. For this group of young people who often have complex needs and limited resources it was also emphasised that pay work placements made them viable and accessible, increasing retention and incentivising engagement. Part of experience of employment is to be paid and rewarded and this supports young people into being work ready and understanding their impact and the benefits of working.

6.3 Career Navigation and Decision-Making

NEET lived experience

Short, generic careers meetings were widely criticised “*What is the point of 10-minute meetings?*” Young people wanted personalised, extended conversations that recognised their individual circumstances. Others felt overwhelmed by long, information-heavy sessions without support to break content into manageable steps. Job platforms like Indeed were seen as poorly suited to entry-level job-seekers, adding to confusion and disengagement.

Employer Perspectives

Employers called for more consistent, tailored, better-quality careers advice in schools, embedded into the curriculum and focused on what's out there and what's expected (not one-size-fits-all, not just grades).

The biggest single system ask from the survey: "Better careers information reaching young people about our sector" (47.8%). Within the focus group we explored the specific targeted need for access to this support with those young people who are most marginalised and at risk of being NEET and who have had disrupted education and access to careers support in schools. As well as the need for a range of different styles of communication and access points to accommodate neurodivergence and different learning styles.

Training provider perspectives

Progression clarity is uneven: Training providers gave mixed response to the availability of clear progression routes for young people. Many felt that the current offer was fragmented and that coordination across different services could be better. They called for investment in support for navigation for NEET young people and better sharing of information between partners.

6.4 Post-19 Support

NEET lived experience

Turning 19 represented a "hard cut-off" that left many young people confused and unsupported, despite disrupted education or additional needs. A care-experienced participant described losing their key worker and being "*in the cold*" with no clear next steps. Many felt they were expected to make major career decisions without adequate exposure to training or vocational pathways. Some felt that because of a range of other factors including prolonged periods out of education, mental health problems and caring responsibilities they had not got to the same point academically as other young people by the cut-off date and this would discount them from career paths forever.

Employer perspectives

Employers want clearer signposting and brokerage for post-16/post-18 routes, including a single platform to reduce duplication for small businesses and ensure opportunities reach those no longer in education. In the survey, 21.7% asked for a single front door/point of contact, and 26.1% for pre-employment programmes — both of which help reconnect 19+ candidates with employers.

Training perspectives

Training providers also highlighted the need for flexible post-19 pathways: Providers prioritise *flexible training options, entry-level apprenticeships, basic skills provision* and *transition support* in that order. They saw *lack of post-completion support* is a key barrier to progression and

were concerned about the follow up with students after they had left their provision. Suggestion that at 19+ there may be limiting system-level alignment

6.5 Support for Neurodivergent Applicants and Employees

NEET lived experience

"I'm neurodiverse so I'm not that fun to be around." Young person reflecting on their desire to get into air traffic control and how they would come across in interview.

Young people described uncertainty about interview expectations, workplace communication norms and how to identify or request adjustments. *"An Interviewer told me I was unprofessional for wanting to bring notes into interviews. I thought I was being prepared"*

They emphasised that questions felt unclear or overly broad. *"Questions... did not seem to be related to the role. I was asked what my values were – this is really broad I wanted to understand why they asked this, my values of what the job is? life in general? how did it help them knowing this?. I didn't understand how to answer this or what they wanted to know "*

Timed video interviews also created unnecessary barriers. *"I was overwhelmed by my online interview 15 seconds to read question then 1.5 min response quick fire and no time. I could see myself on the screen and had to look at myself talking – or not talking - it was grim. I couldn't concentrate on the questions or what I was going to say. I was overwhelmed. It was awful. I did really want the but I can't perform like that – how would this help me be an engineer?"*

Experiences of being judged for "stimming", stammering, saying "um", or showing visible anxiety were common. They advocated for alternative recruitment models—skills trials, practical demonstrations, supportive conversations—and clearer upfront communication about processes and expectations.

Employer perspective

Employees were clear about the importance of embracing different tailored options for recruitment and workplace support in-order to all young people are chance and get the right people in the right roles. However, employers also wanted guidance on reasonable adjustments and a balanced view of legal risk for taking on employees with additional needs for workplace adjustments there was a degree of uncertainty about new legislation and how this would affect employment rights to the detriment of employers feeling able to take a chance on employees with additional needs for fear of litigation if adjustments didn't work and staff were unable to perform tasks critical to their roles. Surveyed employers most often reported challenges with NEETs (34.8%), physical health/disability (30.4%), and mental health (30.4%); 30.4% want staff training on neurodivergence/trauma-informed practice.

Trainer perspectives

Training Providers highlighted the need for *shared background understanding for SEND and neurodivergence at an individual level for all participants in order that adaptations and support can be put in place. This requires investment in specialist capacity, and more supported work experience to enable reasonable adjustments.* These individualised measures require a more systemic approach to coordination and sharing of best practice.

6.6 Practical Barriers to Skills Development

NEET lived experience

A lack of experience created a “catch-22,” with young people repeatedly rejected for the very thing they were trying to gain. Some opportunities required relocation or unaffordable costs, while others—like roles requiring driving licences—excluded younger applicants altogether. Transport, clothing and equipment costs further compounded these challenges: *“It’s like employers want you in a gold suit.”*

Training provider perspectives

Training providers strongly highlighted the practical barriers faced by young people with additional needs and NEET. Transport and cost pressures dominated in preventing young people from engaging with opportunities and completing work and training placements. All identified transport and over half of the interviewees highlighted general financial barriers faced by trainees. Providers were unable to offer limited financial *and* travel support and wherever possible *sort* financial incentives for employers to unlock opportunities. This is partly why some highlighted the benefits of paid work experience. However, local labour market constraints limit local job opportunities and weigh on outcomes.

7. Recommendations

7.1 Expanding Career Exposure Opportunities

NEET lived experience

Young people strongly valued job shadowing, informal conversations and opportunities to observe real workplaces. All participants in one session said they would seize a shadowing opportunity, yet many were unaware it could be listed on a CV, signalling a gap in career literacy. They stressed the importance of low-pressure opportunities to ask questions and understand real-world roles. *“I would really use this to ask them about how they got their job and how I could get a job. What they wanted from me”*

Employer perspectives

Employers wanted to ensure that exposure started early within education and that it was embedded in the curriculum through links with learning, educational scenarios based in the work of work and project working. Employers wanted to expand shadowing, tasters and supported placements but there were practical constraints around this and they felt this was possible if admin is light, with template packs and clear risk guidance; many want help designing supported work experience. From the survey: 13.0% explicitly want help designing supported work experience; employers already run talks/visits/placements but needed time-saving coordination.

Trainer provider perspectives

Training providers called for *supported employment models*, *simplified placement processes*, *financial incentives*, and *case studies/success stories* as important factors that could levers to scale shadowing/tasters/placements.

7.2 Recruiting Youth-Centred Employability Mentors

NEET lived experience

“Someone to talk through difficulties and instructions and to check-in with in advance of an interview so I knew I was doing the right thing... perhaps an interview mentor.”

Young people repeatedly asked for a consistent, understanding adult who could help them navigate instructions, prepare for interviews, and validate their experiences. They emphasised the need for “*low-pressure support*,” neurodiversity-informed approaches, and structured but flexible one-to-one mentoring. Simply participating in facilitated group sessions had already helped build their confidence and social readiness.

Employer perspectives

Focus-group employers backed mentoring through careers navigation and within employment through near-peer buddies, company mentors, and first-month check-ins to build confidence and clarify expectations. 17.4% of survey respondents want support with mentoring younger employees; several cited the efficacy of regular 1-to-1s.

Trainer provider perspective

Training providers identified that mentoring demand exceeds supply and there was increased need for a multi provider coordinated response to support NEET young people. Some mentoring exists, but providers mainly rely on pastoral/wellbeing *and* careers coaching which is not always systematic, *while* increasing learner needs *and* staffing *challenges* limit capacity for consistent 1:1 support within their settings.

7.3 Implementing Inclusive Recruitment Practices

NEET lived experience

Young people expressed strong support for receiving interview questions and panel information in advance, clearer explanations of what employers were assessing, and more transparent communication—positive or negative. Many found digital interviews inaccessible and high-pressure. They described being rejected for natural communication differences or visible nerves, reinforcing the importance of alternative, strengths-based recruitment options such as practical trials, portfolios and supportive interviews.

Employer perspectives

Employers are open to different evidence formats (tasks/portfolios), questions in advance, clearer rationales for questions/tasks, pre interview talk through instructions and direct invitations to discuss adjustments; they also want balanced guidance on AI sifting. Within the survey some called for a shift to “Attitude-based recruitment process.” — Transport & Logistics [50–249]

There was also some concern about the time this tailored recruitment could take if it was not paired with improvements to careers advice due to the volume of applicants applying to jobs that they were not committed to or lacked understanding of. Employers also noted that adjustments can have unintended consequences and not always benefit those young people that they are targeted to support. One focus group participant noted that they had moved to sending questions to candidates in advance in-order to give candidates the chance to prepare and think through their responses but recently removed this because it unfairly discriminated against harder to reach candidates as those with stronger social support networks and family connections had access to coaching and preparation that marginalised groups did not have. There was a plea for more transparency and sharing of learning between companies on best practice and innovation.

Survey identified enablers: Support with D&I in recruitment (26.1%), support matching young people to opportunities (21.7%), and financial incentives (26.1%) to underwrite risk/time.

Trainer provider perspectives

Training providers highlight key factors of preparation opportunities and understanding for young people with recruitment processes being clearly explained, and adjustments that are revisited and refined : Re-occurring employer concerns (readiness/reliability) suggest value in trial tasks and structured pre-employment coaching to get to know candidates and their strengths but this is costly and difficult to scale.

7.4 Enhancing Employer and Provider Training

NEET lived experience

“Knowing staff genuinely understand neurodivergent burnout would significantly reduce anxiety around attendance.”

“Support offered was generic mental health input rather than adjustments to environment, expectations or delivery.”

Young people wanted employers and training providers to better understand mental health challenges, neurodivergence and the effects of burnout. They felt support was too often generic, rather than offering small but meaningful adjustments to environment, communication or expectations. They stressed that simply being quiet or overwhelmed should not be interpreted as lack of interest or capability.

Employer perspective

Priority topics for training and wider support to businesses were identified as; mental health, neurodivergence, understanding of potential triggers and reasonable adjustments with examples, and clarity on the legal environment (what's reasonable, what's not, and how to manage risk fairly). Survey: 30.4% want training for staff on neurodivergence/trauma-informed practice; 13.0% want better information about available training options. Employers prefer bite-size, just-in-time resources (checklists/scripts).

Training provider perspectives

Providers cite need for *time for employer engagement, co-design with employers, staff with recent industry experience and curriculum development funding*. These would help embed real-world expectations and accelerate alignment.

7.5 Developing a Best -Practice Employer Network

Employer perspective

“We are a small business and have limited resource.” — Manufacturing & Engineering [10–49] *“As a small not-for-profit... finances are stretched; supervision capacity is the pinch-point.”* — Arts (CIC)

Small organisations, in particular, raised capacity constraints and asked for buddying between large and small employers, plus examples of good practice they can copy. Template packs were identified as a resource / toolkit that had the potential to speed up placement and onboarding and could be usefully shared. There was an appetite across businesses of all sizes for networking for like-minded employers who wanted to share good practice and champion inclusive practices for NEET young people with additional barriers to employment and honestly talk about the barriers they faced and possible ways of overcoming these.

Survey constraints include releasing staff for training (30.4%), cost of training (13.0%), and finding relevant training locally (13.0%).

Training provider perspectives

Providers reference employer forums/networks, and showed some appetite to support this. They identified *case studies* as time-saving assets to spread what works. Dedicated coordination capacity would help SME's participate consistently and be a single point of contact for providers to engage with, advertise opportunities – seek support.

7.5 Strengthening coordination of Employer Engagement with Schools and Providers

NEET lived experience

Young people were clear that earlier, more relevant careers input -and flexible, supported exposure to work environments while still at school- would have significantly increased their confidence and ability to progress.

Employer perspective

78.3% engaged with at least one school/college/training provider in the last year (top three each 56.5%: local schools/FE colleges; apprenticeship providers; plus universities at 43.5%). 21.7% specifically want “a single point of contact for skills and recruitment support.” Main barriers identified from the survey: lack of time (47.8%), don't know who to contact (13.0%), previous attempts not productive (13.0%)

Employers want better coordination so they don't repeat effort across multiple networks and events; clear prep packs for students and follow-up are valued. Each participant within the focus group had good examples of engagement with specific schools or colleges but were concerned that this was usually focused around a key relationship/ individual champion for careers education but that support was patchy and lost momentum if that individual left. They were concerned about those young people who went to schools without these relationships and the lack of a systematic coordinated offer for all young people. They also argued that with coordination there could be more efficiency and less repetition.

Training provider perspectives

The interviewed training providers work with local employers but the majority found that Coordination “could be better” and some struggled to get employees to work with because of the time and resource constraints companies are under and concerns about the risk and resources involved with supporting NEET young people. Providers also work with Careers Hubs/LA NEET teams/other providers and again asked for better information sharing and continuous updates on programmes/cohorts. A systematic way of coordinating employment opportunities and support for those young people with the biggest needs would be welcomed.

7.6 Exploring Employer Support Mechanisms for Young People Furthest from the Labour Market

Employer perspective

Employers wanted to enable a full range of structured stepping stones for entry into employment which included: trial shifts, short supported placements, gradual task introductions, plus opportunities to trial workplace adjustments. Survey respondents highlighted pre-employment programmes (26.1%), financial incentives (26.1%), and support matching candidates to roles (21.7%) as elements that would support them to engage NEET young people.

Discussion within the focus group identified that employers were anxious that the Young people furthest from the labour market needed flexibility to try innovative approaches and were not sure that current legislation around labour rights facilitated this. Employers were unclear about the extent to which they would be held accountable for trying new things. They wanted extended exemption periods in which they could take on NEET young people without being held liable for them as permanent employees.

NEET lived experience

Many young people said that they would be open to flexible exposure with an employee who was willing to try new things to support them into employment; structured trial shifts, short supported placements and gradual introductions to work tasks would help them rebuild trust in the system and in themselves. Flexible opportunities and realistic expectations rather than immediate full-time demands would be something they would welcome. But these needed to be supported by trusted adults/mentors helping them navigate the opportunity and an open dialogue about what was and was not working.

Trainer perspectives

Providers back *trial shifts/short placements* via *supported employment models* and *financial incentives*; they also flag *insurance/safeguarding* and *employer capacity* as constraints that need templated solutions. Requests for *entry-level apprenticeships* and *pre-apprenticeship training access* point to scalable stepping-stones. All of these solutions involve flexibility, transparency and a willingness for partnership between training providers, support services and employers.

7. Conclusion

Taken together, the perspectives of NEET young people, employers and training providers present a clear and consistent picture of a skills ecosystem that currently struggles to meet the needs of those who face the greatest barriers. Young people describe a landscape in which access to opportunity depends heavily on social capital, tailored guidance and early exposure - supports they often lack. Employers echo this, reporting that many young applicants with additional barriers arrive without the confidence, navigation skills or workplace understanding needed to demonstrate their potential, while also expressing a genuine willingness to engage more deeply, if the system enabled simpler, lower-risk ways to do so. Training providers reinforce both accounts: they see the same gaps in confidence, foundational skills and employability behaviours, and report structural constraints including: limited employer engagement, insufficient specialist capacity, fragmented progression pathways and rising learner needs - that mirror the lived and operational barriers identified elsewhere in the research.

The triangulated evidence therefore points to a shared set of priorities across all three groups: earlier and more meaningful exposure to work; personalised, relationship-based guidance and mentoring; more inclusive and transparent recruitment practices; and a coordinated, well-supported system that reduces duplication and increases clarity for young people and employers alike. Importantly, each group expresses not only challenges but also appetite for change—young people for opportunities that feel accessible and supportive, employers for clearer frameworks that enable them to take chances on inexperienced candidates, and providers for the resources and partnerships needed to deliver flexible, high-quality pathways. This alignment provides a strong mandate for system-level reform that is practical, targeted and designed around the realities of those whom the current system too often leaves behind.



"It was an honour to work with Youth Options and be able to make a real positive impact on young people. Within the short time of two weeks, we witnessed personal growth, increased confidence, a sense of purpose, pride in themselves and their work."

— Paula, Park Life Café Manager

8. Appendices

Appendix 1 -About Youth Options

Founded in 1937, Youth Options is a UK registered charity that works with disadvantaged children and young people across Hampshire supporting them to feel empowered to make positive decisions towards a better future. With over 85 years' experience of supporting children and young people across the county, we have a wealth of knowledge and expertise in delivering impactful services that inspire our beneficiaries. We have also built strong local networks with other services and organisations across the county.

Youth Options offers youth-led, trauma-informed services which are individually tailored to deliver dynamic, and ever-evolving opportunities that connect with and inspire young people. We support children and young people to develop their social and emotional capabilities and emotional wellbeing, improve their engagement with learning and make positive decisions. This is achieved through three key objectives:

- **Prevention Activities:** engaging children and young people to reduce risk of social exclusion through street-based and centre-based youth work by providing diversionary and positive activities and trusted adults to talk to.
- **Targeted Support:** providing focused support for children and young people already impacted by negative life experiences through one to one and group work, including access to nature through outdoor learning alternative provision.
- **Progression Opportunities:** empowering young people to take responsibility for their own future through youth leadership, social action projects, mentoring, employability and skills training.

All of our work is focused on those children and young people who are most in need of our support including those who have suffered from adverse child experiences (ACE); are disadvantaged because of social and/or economic backgrounds; have special educational needs; are excluded or disengaged from education; and children and young people who have had involvement with the care system including care leavers.

We have a vibrant Youth Ambassador programme and Youth Board who guide our work, carry out peer-led research and administer a social action grant to seed fund ideas from the children and young people we work with.

Since 2020, we've seen a significant rise in the number of children, young people, and families turning to our services. Safeguarding cases have also increased and now take longer to resolve because of increasing complexity and involvement of different agencies. Our families work is oversubscribed and running a significant waiting list. At Youth Options, we are leading efforts to tackle the lasting impact of the pandemic, cost-of-living pressures, and years of under investment in youth support. Young people tell us they need safe spaces, trusted adults, and the confidence to speak openly about their challenges. Responding to the growing body of evidence that suggests that positive engagement with nature and the natural environment can lead to a reduction in stress, anxiety and depression, which are all factors that affect mental and physical well-being, we engage children and young people through nature-based activities wherever possible. We currently run outdoor learning alternative provision from two locations in Eastleigh and one in the New Forest. We also offer outdoor learning provision in schools and local green spaces.

Appendix 2 – Hampshire Score Card



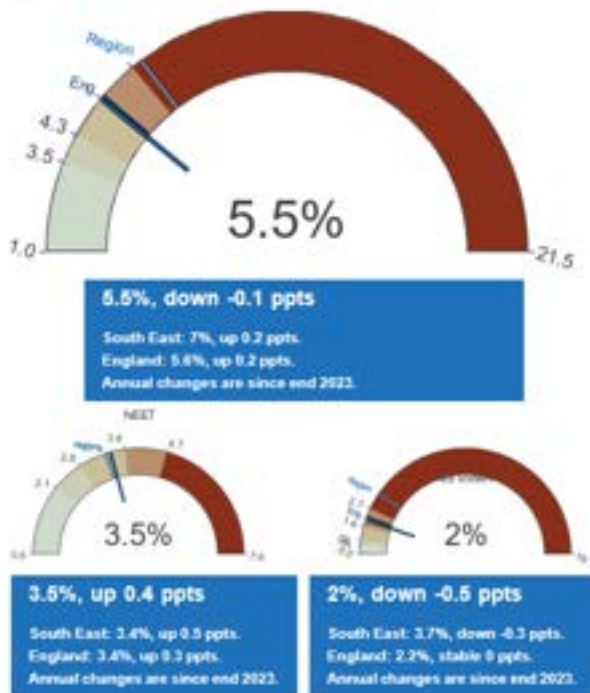
Department
for Education

NEET and participation LA score- card

Hampshire

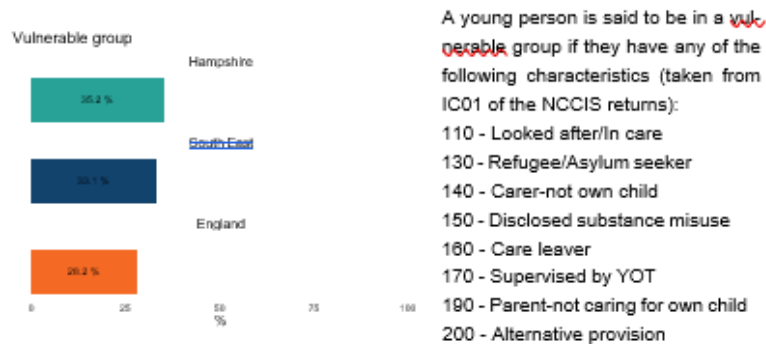
NEET and not known

NEET and not known

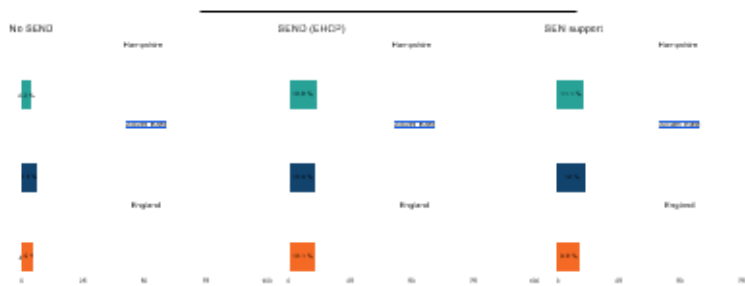


Vulnerable Groups NEET and not known

Vulnerable Groups NEET and not known



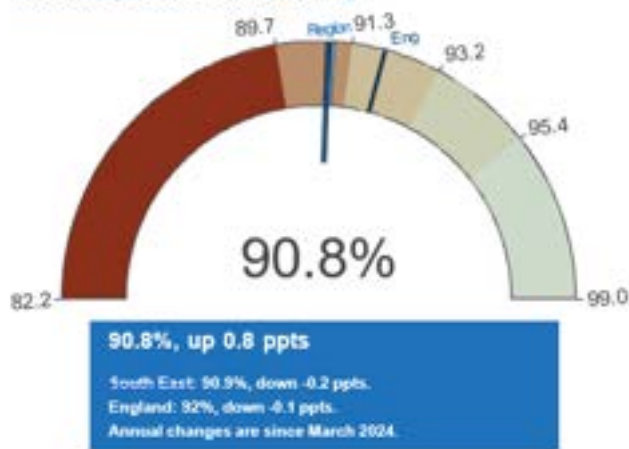
210 - Mental health flag



Participation

Participation

Participating in education and training

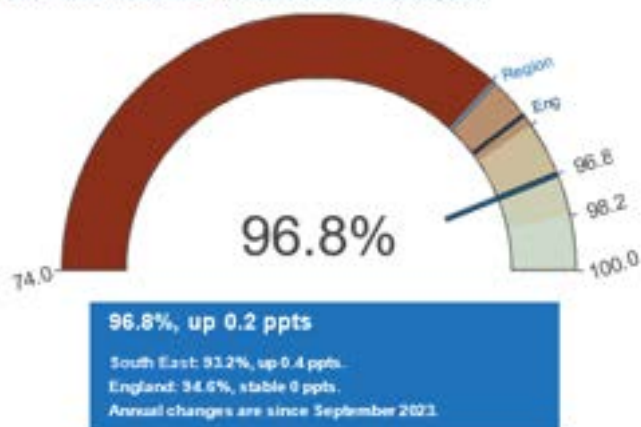


Type of education and training



Participation

September Guarantee: % offered an education place



Contextual - attainment and attendance

Post 16 attainment

% 19-year-olds achieving level 3

Hampshire



South East



England



%

% 19-year-olds achieving GCSE 9-4 standard pass in English and Maths between ages 16 and 19

Hampshire



South East



England



%

GCSE attainment

Average attainment 8 score per pupil

Hampshire



South East



England



%

% 9-4 standard pass in English and Maths GCSEs

Hampshire



South East



England



%

School attendance

Overall absence (% of sessions)

Hampshire



South East



England



%

Persistent absentees (% of pupils)

Hampshire



South East



England



%

16-17 LA population

32,242

Recorded on CCIS

Appendix 3 - Youth Options LSIP Survey 2026

Thank you for your valuable input. Your feedback will help shape local skills provision and support services to better meet the needs of employers recruiting and developing young people. We really appreciate you supporting us with an insight into your experience.

Not shared

* Indicates required question

1. What sector does your business operate in?*

Manufacturing & engineering

Construction

Health & social care

Digital & creative

Hospitality & tourism

Retail

Professional & business services

Transport & logistics

Other:

2. How many people does your organisation employ?*

1-9

10-49

50-249

250+

3. Approximately how many young people (16-25 years) have you recruited in the past 12 months?*

None

1-5

6-10

11-20

21+

4. What entry-level routes do you currently use to recruit young people? (Select all that apply)*

Apprenticeships

T Level Industry Placements (leading to employment)

Graduate schemes

Entry-level jobs (no specific qualifications required)

Traineeships

Work experience/internships/supported placements (leading to employment)

Kickstart or similar government schemes

We don't currently recruit young people

Other:

5. If you don't recruit young people, or recruit fewer than you'd like, what are the main reasons? (Select all that apply)*

Not applicable - we recruit as many as we need

Lack of work-ready candidates

Young people lack basic skills (numeracy, literacy, communication)

Young people lack technical/job-specific skills

Cost of training and supervision
Time investment required
Concerns about reliability/commitment
Don't know how to access young talent
Administrative burden (e.g., apprenticeship paperwork)
Concerns about legislation surrounding younger staff
Difficulty attracting candidates/advertising posts
Other:

6. When recruiting young people, what are the top 3 skills or attributes you look for? *(Please rank 1-3, with 1 being most important)**

7. Have you engaged with any of the following in the past 12 months to support recruitment or awareness about your roles? *(Select all that apply)**

Local secondary schools
Sixth form or FE colleges
Universities
Apprenticeship training providers
Jobcentre Plus
Careers services (e.g., Careers Hub, National Careers Service)
Local authority employment support services
Chamber of Commerce or business networks
None of the above

8. If you have engaged with schools, colleges, careers services, or the voluntary sector, what activities have you participated in? *(Select all that apply)**

Not applicable - haven't engaged
Career talks/presentations
Workplace visits for students
Mock interviews
Enterprise/skills competitions
Work experience placements
T Level Industry Placements
Curriculum development/input
Teacher/staff placements or CPD
Other:

9. How would you rate the quality of support you've received from local education and training providers?*

Excellent - very well supported
Good - mostly helpful
Fair - some support but could be better
Poor - limited or unhelpful support
Not applicable - haven't engaged with them

10. Is there a specific example of your experience with local education and training providers that you would like to share?

11. What barriers, if any, have prevented you from engaging more with schools, colleges, or training providers? *(Select all that apply)**

No barriers - happy with current engagement

Lack of time
Don't know who to contact
Previous attempts were not productive
Too much administrative burden
Not aware of opportunities to engage
Lack of relevant courses/programmes available
Costs associated with engagement
Other:

12. Would you consider working directly with the voluntary sector to reach young people with additional barriers to employment?*

Yes
Unsure
No
Not able to offer employment to this group

13. What challenges do you face when training and developing young employees? (Select all that apply)*

No significant challenges
Cost of training
Finding relevant training courses locally
Releasing staff for training
Quality of available training
Young employees lack foundation skills for further training
Difficulty retaining young people after investing in training
Lack of qualified mentors/supervisors internally
Lack of aptitude from young people to take on the skills required
Lack of confidence and/or commitment from young employees
Other:

14. What types of training or support would help you develop young employees more effectively? (Select all that apply)*

Employability/soft skills training (timekeeping, communication, teamwork)
Basic digital skills
Industry-specific technical training
Short, flexible modular courses
Apprenticeships with better local provision
Support with provision of mentoring/supervision in the role
Financial support for training costs
Pre-employment programmes (getting young people 'work-ready')
Other:

15. If you have successfully recruited and retained young people, what has worked well? (Open text - please share any examples of good practice)

16. What one change to the local skills system would most help you recruit and develop more young people? (Open text)*

17. Which of the following additional support services would be valuable to your business? (Select all that apply)*

A single point of contact for skills and recruitment support
Better information about available training options

More flexible/shorter training programmes
 Support matching young people to opportunities
 Help designing supported work experience programmes
 Peer networks to share best practice with other employers
 Support with diversity and inclusion in recruitment
 Financial incentives for taking on young people
 Better careers information reaching young people about your sector
 Support with mentoring younger employees
 Skills training for existing staff integrating employees with additional needs (neuro divergence or trauma informed practice)
 Other:

18. Are there specific groups of young people you find harder to recruit or support successfully? *(Select all that apply)**

No - we don't face particular challenges
 Young people not in education, employment or training (NEETs)
 Care leavers
 Young people with physical disabilities or physical health conditions
 Young people with mental disabilities or mental health conditions
 Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds
 Young people with caring responsibilities
 Other:

19. If you selected any groups above, what additional support would help you recruit and develop them? *(Open text)*

20. What one change (legislative, resources, guidance, etc) would enable your business to better support young people with additional needs in employment? *(Open text)*

21. Would you be willing to: *(Select all that apply)**

Participate in a follow-up interview or focus group
 Join an employer network focused on youth employment
 Pilot innovative approaches to recruiting/training young people
 Share your experiences as a case study
 None of the above

22. Contact Details *(optional - only if you're happy to be contacted) Please provide: Name; Job title; Organisation; Email and Phone*

Youth Options was established in 1937. We believe passionately that every young person has the potential to realise their abilities and aspirations, and to make a valuable contribution to their communities.

We are committed to developing young people's social and emotional skills to improve their chances in life. Our services are individually tailored to deliver vibrant, dynamic, and ever-evolving opportunities that connect with and inspire young people.