



# Child Poverty Action Group response to call for evidence: Young People and Work Report

February 2026

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## Summary

We welcome the government's focus on pathways for young people. Many are currently unable to access and participate in learning opportunities and move into quality work, despite their willingness. We know from our work that young people are ambitious and want to develop fulfilling careers. However, there are a range of structural factors that are often working against them and for those who grow up in poverty and/or continue to live in low-income households, the barriers are significant.

We stand at a unique moment in time, with children who grew up in the shadow of austerity moving into adulthood. Given the almost constantly increasing levels of child poverty since the early 2010s, this generation deserve support, compassion and ambition to overcome the structural disadvantages they have been forced to face. The government's recently published child poverty strategy provides a vital first step to improving the childhoods and life chances of children and young people. This review must build on that positive start, developing a clear vision and recommend a set of investments in our collective future. We encourage the government to work alongside young people to develop effective solutions and to take a holistic approach to supporting them into learning and earning pathways.

This submission draws on CPAG's analysis and research and is informed by the views and experiences of our Youth Panel, many of whom have lived experience of these challenges.

Our evidence shows that the factors stopping young people from participating in employment, education or training include:

- Growing up and living in poverty
- The high costs associated with education at different stages
- Inadequate provision for young people with SEND and mental health challenges
- Limited careers support and work experience opportunities
- Lack of high quality, secure work opportunities

However, there are steps government can take to ensure more young people can fulfil their potentials and meaningfully participate in the labour market. These include:

- Adequate support through the social security system
  - Bringing down the cost of education
  - A more inclusive school system
  - Working alongside young people to develop solutions.
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We ask the review to recognise too that where young people are unable to participate in employment, education or training due to disability or ill health that this is recognised and they are supported to have a decent standard of living.

## CPAG's Youth Panel

This submission is informed by the views of CPAG Youth Panel members. The CPAG Youth Panel is comprised of young people aged 14-21 who have grown up in London. They represent a wide range of backgrounds, including those with lived experience of poverty, both past and present. The group includes young people from racialised communities, with long-term health conditions, disabilities, as well as caring responsibilities. The group also includes young people who are not currently participating in employment, education or training.

It will be vital to the success of this review that the way it is conducted - including finding workable solutions informed by young people - and that the way it is discussed, do not alienate young people from political decision-makers or different age groups. There is an important opportunity here to build bridges between generations as well as to build a better future for many of our children and young people. Young people want to participate in the labour market and have clear views about how they can be better supported to do so. CPAG extends an invitation to the author of the report and expert panel to meet with our Youth Panel, who have valuable insights to share.

## Introduction

Many young people are leaving education without the qualifications they need and the pathways in place to move onto apprenticeships, further and higher education, and ultimately, into secure jobs. When young people don't have the opportunities to develop their skills and find decent work, we all lose out, and for young people living in low-income households, the risk of this is much higher. Growing up in poverty has a scarring effect on young people's outcomes with those in receipt of free school meals in Year 11 being twice as likely as their peers in later life to not to be in education, employment and training.<sup>1</sup>

CPAG welcomes this review as it is clear that more investment in children and young people is needed to ensure their full potential is realised and they can develop fulfilling careers. In our experience, young people do not have a lack of ambition to participate in education, employment and training when they reach 16, but instead have been held back by failures in the structures and systems that surround them, with those living on a low income at the sharpest end of this. With child poverty at a record high, action that builds on government's recent child poverty strategy will be crucial to improving the prospects of the next generation.

Coverage of this review consistently reports, and proposals set out in the Pathways to Work green paper indicate, that cuts to the benefits system for young people with disabilities may be one route the government takes.<sup>2</sup> It feels important to address that issue here. We are concerned that taking this approach would discriminate against young people, forcing them to live on less than they need simply on the basis of age. It would risk further fueling a sense of disengagement in young people from political decision makers, undermining the work of this review. And even if judged on its own terms, it is unclear – and we anticipate unlikely – that it would have an effect on the NEET rate.

We strongly encourage the review to take an holistic approach, tackling the range of interconnected factors that prevent young people from learning and earning, with reforms needed at different stages of a young person's life, not just when they reach 16. And we ask that this approach identifies the different support that young people need, while not treating them differently on an arbitrary basis. For example,

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<sup>1</sup> Impetus, [Youth Jobs Gap - Exploring compound disadvantage](#), 2025

<sup>2</sup> DWP, [Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working Green Paper](#), 2025

we know from our work with young people living in poverty that they are more likely to have protected characteristics, such as being from a racialised community, or they may have a disability. These factors can have a huge impact on young people's experiences of moving into education, training or employment and they may need additional practical support (such as reasonable adjustments) or resolutions to the discrimination they may have faced. Similarly, young people's experiences of education or employment can vary hugely across the country and therefore different solutions or approaches might be needed across different parts of the UK.

To fully understand the challenges that young people face in entering, staying and progressing in work, the review must work closely with young people themselves. We have seen significant progress in government working with those with lived experience to strengthen policymaking, for example through the development of the child poverty strategy and the co-production work taking place with disabled people as part of the Timms Review. Ensuring there is space for young people to feed in directly to the review will be important, so that they can share their first-hand experience of the challenges they face moving into education, employment and training.

## 1. What is stopping more young people from participating in employment, education or training?

### 1.1 Trends in the NEET population

Focusing on supporting young people to succeed is the right approach from government. When young people become NEET, this scars future earnings, their health and wellbeing and affects the wider economy. In recent years, we have seen a shift in the reasons recorded for young people being NEET, with more young people saying they are economically inactive because of sickness (long-term or temporary). This number has risen from 1.4 per cent in 00s to 3.4 per cent in 2024. More widely, there has also been an increase in the number of 16-24 year olds who report having a disability, from 8 per cent in 2012/13 to 18 per cent in 2024. This trend is also reported across the whole population, so this is not isolated to young people, but the rise is higher for this age group. However, it is important to note that the data shows only in a small minority of cases does this prevent young people from working (3.4 per cent out of 18 per cent).

Conversely, since 2000 the share (as a fraction of all young people) who say the reason for being NEET is looking after family/home eg, caring for children, has fallen considerably from around 4 per cent in the 00s to 1.5 per cent in 2024. Linked to this – the gender balance of those economically inactive is now even, whereas it used to be overwhelmingly women.

While the drivers of the NEET rate have changed, when it comes to the scale of the problem, the data suggests that the current NEET cohort is fairly consistent when compared to both previous cohorts and the wider population.

Firstly, when we compare to older generations we see that there is little difference in labour market participation. The latest statistics (Jul-Sep 2025) indicate that the NEET rate is 12.7 per cent, where 7.8 per cent is due to economic inactivity and 4.9 per cent is due to unemployment.<sup>3</sup> It is not possible to compare directly to other age groups as we do not know how many people not working in

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<sup>3</sup> This submission will refer to the NEET rate as the seasonally adjusted share of people aged 16-24 not in any form of employment, education or training. This is different from the 'youth unemployment' rate as some NEETs are economically inactive not unemployed and some people in education or training will also be unemployed. Data can be found at ONS, [Young people not in education, employment or training \(NEET\), UK: November 2025](#), 2025

older age groups are in education or training. But for some context the overall working-age economic inactivity rate is 20 per cent and unemployment rate is 5 per cent.<sup>4</sup>

The current NEET rate is not historically high, from 2000 (when records began) to 2015 the NEET rate was consistently higher than the current rate of 12.7 per cent. The NEET rate has also stayed consistent during this government's term (currently 12.7 per cent, while the Apr-Jun 2024 NEET rate was 12.6 per cent).<sup>5</sup>

There have been some slight divergences in recent years in NEET economic inactivity compared to wider inactivity. While NEET unemployment has continued to mirror wider unemployment, since COVID, NEET economic inactivity has risen slightly more than the working-age inactivity. The rise in NEET economic inactivity compared to pre-COVID (6.5 per cent to 7.8 per cent) is slightly greater than the working-age rise of 20.6 per cent to 21.0 per cent.<sup>6</sup>

As well as these trends in the NEET population, evidence clearly shows that growing up in poverty is a risk factor for becoming NEET. Children in receipt of free school meals in Year 11 are twice as likely not to be in education, employment or training as their peers.<sup>7</sup> Across all educational metrics, the evidence presents a stark picture that poverty has an impact on children and young people's outcomes and life chances as they transition into adulthood (discussed further below). Our experience of working with young people underlines how many of the barriers experienced by young people trying to move into education employment or training are exacerbated for those living on a low income. Reducing child poverty from its record high levels should be a key consideration for government when seeking to bring down the NEET rate.

## Conclusion

The data suggests that some of the driving factors behind young people becoming NEET are changing, with sickness and disability playing an increased role. However, this trend broadly mirrors the wider population and when it comes to the size of the NEET cohort, there is nothing particularly unique about this group compared to other age groups and previous cohorts. Despite this, much of the public narrative surrounding this issue leaves young people today feeling singled out, and many of them have experienced negative treatment and stereotyping, which research suggests is further fueling the NEET issue.<sup>8</sup> Against the backdrop of record high levels of child poverty and all it entails for the life chances of those it has an impact on, reducing child poverty must be a key focus for government's work on this issue.

## 1.2 Young people and social security

### Disability benefits

The Green Paper Pathways to Work proposed cuts to disability benefits for young people as one route the government may take, and is often discussed in the press as a likely outcome of this review. Specifically, the Green Paper suggested cutting the health element of universal credit for those aged under 22.<sup>9</sup> CPAG is concerned this would have a detrimental effect on those entitled to this support, pushing many NEET and non-NEET households into deeper hardship and having little impact on the NEET rate. A principled starting point must be that entitlement to support from the social security system should be based on need, rather than age.

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<sup>4</sup> ONS, [Employment and Labour Market](#)

<sup>5</sup> See note 1

<sup>6</sup> See notes 1 and 2

<sup>7</sup> Impetus, [Youth Jobs Gap - Exploring compound disadvantage](#), 2025

<sup>8</sup> UK Youth, 'Harmful stereotypes of young people fuelling record number to fall out of work', 12 November 2024

<sup>9</sup> DWP, *Pathways to Work: Reforming Benefits and Support to Get Britain Working Green Paper*, 2025

The UC health element is there to replace income lost through incapacity to work because of sickness or disability, and the cost of living is the same regardless of age. This proposed change would mean more than 100,000 young people who are deemed to have work-limiting disabilities would be £97 a week worse off – a total cut to household income of over £500 million.<sup>10</sup> This represents a significant cut to benefits for young people and their families, which could in some cases exacerbate the reasons why they are not in education, employment, or training by pushing them into (deeper) hardship.

Cutting the UC health element is also a blunt and poorly targeted tool that is unlikely to bring down the NEET rate. As noted earlier in this document, it is the case that an increased number of young people who are NEET are in that position due to ill health or disability. However 44 per cent of NEETS are not claiming UC at all, and only 3 per cent of all 16-24 year olds receive the UC health element. This is far lower than the 18 per cent of the same age group who report that they have a disability. For those who are claiming UC, there are many young people, who although they have a sickness which limits their ability to work, they are in some form of work. For many, social security support will in fact be a tool that supports them to work.

From the data available, there is no evidence that the availability of the health element is a 'pull' factor that leads young people not to join the labour market. In addition, cutting the health element for this age group will affect many young people who are not NEET.

It is difficult to assess long-term trends in incapacity/disability benefits due to new benefits being introduced and people migrating from legacy benefits over to UC, but it is important to note that 16-24 year olds are not responsible for recent rises in caseload. For instance, the PIP caseload has risen from 2.1 million in January 2019 to 3.9 million in October 2025, however 16-24 year olds only account for 0.2 million of the 1.8 million rise.<sup>11</sup> Out of all PIP claimants the share who are aged 16-24 has only risen from 10 per cent to 11 per cent.

This also sits against the wider picture on expenditure on social security over the last few decades. Overall social security spending has been flat over the last decade at 11 per cent of GDP.<sup>12</sup> The forecast for 2029/30 is that the share remains at 11 per cent. In cash terms, real spending on personal independence payment (PIP) is forecast to rise from £29 billion in 2025/26 to £37 billion in 2029/30.<sup>13</sup> To put this in context, in 2029/30 real expenditure on the state pension is forecast to be £153 billion, £54 billion higher than in 2010/11 when the triple lock was introduced.

The green paper stated that savings would be re-invested into expanding and improving the work and training opportunities for young people. While investment in employment support is important and welcome, this should not be viewed as an adequate replacement for financial support that young people with a disability rely on. Delivering high quality employment support at scale is resource intensive and without sizeable investment it is unlikely to be sufficient to provide support to all, or even the majority, of young people who are affected by the cut. This means they will lose the financial support they need to survive but will not see a change in employment status as a result of employment support, leaving them substantially worse off. Some of these claimants will have severe disabilities, meaning moving into employment is not a realistic proposition.

## Sanctions

In addition to possible cuts to benefit rates for young people, CPAG is also concerned about any changes that would increase the level of conditionality that young people are subject to when claiming benefits, as has been proposed as part of the Youth Guarantee, where engagement will be mandatory

<sup>10</sup> CPAG's calculations from DWP, *Stat-Xplore, UC Work Capability Assessments*, December 2025

<sup>11</sup> J Diniz and L Murph, *False Starts: What the UK's growing NEETs problem really looks like, and how to fix it*, Resolution Foundation, 2025

<sup>12</sup> M Brewer and A Clegg, *Ratchets, retrenchment and reform*, Resolution Foundation, 2024

<sup>13</sup> DWP, *Benefit expenditure and caseload tables 2024*, 2024

(or claimants risk sanctions). Evidence shows that sanctions are not particularly effective at moving people into work, and can be very damaging for relationships between claimants and work coaches.<sup>14</sup> A far better approach would be to invest in tailored employment support for young people, as outlined later in this submission.

## Conclusion

There is no rationale for blanket cuts to benefits for younger age groups as this will have a damaging effect on those claiming and there is no evidence that this will reduce the NEET rate or disability benefit caseload. Cost of living pressures are being felt by young people in the same way as the rest of the population, and the social security system should be there to provide adequate levels of support to people based on their need and to help protect them from poverty, regardless of their age. Similarly, young people should be able to access meaningful employment support from DWP, that is not delivered under the threat of sanctions. Investing in young people led, tailored employment support for this age group has the potential to be very effective at supporting young people into the labour market, if delivered in the right way.

## 1.3 Young people and the education system

Too many young people are unable to realise their full potential at school because poverty gets in the way and holds them back. Experiences and outcomes from time in compulsory education have a significant impact on young people as they transition to further education, training and employment. Poverty has a detrimental impact on attainment,<sup>15</sup> attendance,<sup>15</sup> participation and belonging<sup>16</sup> at school, these factors influence the pathways young people take when they leave school. Efforts to increase participation for young people in education, employment and training must address the inequalities and barriers young people face during their time at school.

### Poverty-related attainment gap

From early years all the way through to post-16 education there is a stubborn and pervasive poverty-related attainment gap which means that children from lower-income households achieve lower grades in comparison to their peers.<sup>17</sup> We know, through working alongside children and families, that poverty at home makes it harder for children to make the most of their time at school.

*'Money is basically everything you use to get what you want... in school you need a lot of stuff for you to actually participate, you need equipment, you need food in lunch and break... money has a big role' (Secondary pupil)*

Despite efforts to eradicate the gap, the longer children spend within the education system the greater the inequality in their outcomes becomes. The poverty-related attainment gap between children in receipt of free school meals and their peers widens from 4.6 months in early years through to 19.2 months by GCSEs.<sup>18</sup> As a result of this gap only 26 per cent of children in receipt of free school meals passed both their maths and English GCSE in 23/24, in comparison to 53 per cent of other pupils.

The level of qualification a young person achieves has an impact on their ability to access further or higher education or to secure employment. Research from Impetus has shown that a young person's outcomes after leaving school are strongly linked to the educational qualifications that they obtain. They have concluded that 'each step up the qualifications ladder halves your chances of being not in

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<sup>14</sup> M Taulbut, D Mackay and G McCartney. 'Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA) benefit sanctions and labour market outcomes in Britain, 2001–2014', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 42(5), 2018, pp1417-1434

<sup>15</sup> Department for Education, [Key stage 2 attainment, Academic year 2024/25 Revised](#), 2025 and Department for Education, [Key stage 4 performance, Academic year 2024/25 GOV.UK](#), 2025

<sup>16</sup> Department for Education, [State of the nation 2022: children and young people's wellbeing](#), 2023

<sup>17</sup> Education Policy Institute, [Annual Report 2025](#), 2025

<sup>18</sup> E Hunt and others, [Breaking down the gap: The role of school absence and pupil](#), Education Policy Institute, 2025

education, employment or training'.<sup>19</sup> The NEET rate for young people aged 22-24 whose highest qualification level is a GCSE or below is three times as high as the NEET rate for university graduates, supporting the notion that level of qualification is linked to participation in employment and education for young adults.<sup>20</sup>

### The cost of attending school

CPAG evidence shows that the minimum cost of education parents in the UK must meet is £2,300 a year for a child at secondary school. The cost to young people and families of providing learning resources and equipment that their children need has risen significantly since 2022, outstripping the increase in inflation and earnings. Money at home also has an influence on subject choices and the pathways that students are choosing while at school.<sup>21</sup>

*'Music you have to have an instrument, or art you have to have all the supplies, food tech you have to bring in the ingredients. I know art supplies are really expensive.'* (Secondary pupil)

*'In primary the school provided books, equipment and stuff, but in secondary you have to buy everything.'* (Secondary pupil)

### Attendance, suspensions and exclusions

Children in receipt of means-tested free school meals are more likely to be persistently absent from school, suspended or permanently excluded. There is a correlation between being excluded from school and youth unemployment.<sup>22</sup> The Education Policy Institute has reported that being suspended from school leads to poorer outcomes for children and young people. Those that are suspended are 2.7 times more likely to receive health-related benefits, 2.1 times as likely not to achieve a Level 3 qualification and 2 times as likely to be without education, employment or training.<sup>23</sup> CPAG evidence shows that mental health related absenteeism is more prominent in lower-income pupils. Missing out on learning at school through suspension, exclusions and school absences, has an impact on the qualifications that young people attain, which then has an impact on their life after leaving school.

*'[If I don't have something I need for school] I will get anxious about the troubles that I will face, which causes me to not go to school that day.'* (Secondary pupil)

*'A lot of pupils lose confidence over their financial problems...they're embarrassed about how they're poor, they tend to be quieter.'* (Secondary pupil)

### Higher Education costs

Youth Panel members shared that young people are often priced out of education pathways when they leave school. The cost of attending university is a significant concern and a direct barrier for some young people.<sup>24</sup> Young people from lower-income households are more worried about taking on debts including for higher education and living costs while studying.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Impetus, [Youth Jobs Gap - Exploring compound disadvantage](#), 2025

<sup>20</sup> A Joseph and W Crenna-Jennings, [Early adult outcomes for suspended and excluded pupils](#), Education Policy Institute and Impetus, 2024

<sup>21</sup> CPAG, [Priced out of school: how lack of money prevents young people from attending school](#), 2025

<sup>22</sup> K Gill and others, [Who is losing learning?](#), IPPR, 2024 and FFT Education Datalab, [Long-term outcomes of pupils who experience alternative provision](#), 20 July 2022

<sup>23</sup> A Joseph and W Crenna-Jennings, [Early adult outcomes for suspended and excluded pupils](#), Education Policy Institute and Impetus, 2024

<sup>24</sup> The Sutton Trust, [Reforming student maintenance](#), 2024

<sup>25</sup> The Sutton Trust, [Reforming student maintenance](#), 2024

*'In some areas people are discouraged from going to university because of the costs, tuition fees are high and maintenance loans don't get close to covering living costs or rent. If you do go, you have to get a job to help pay for it.'* (CPAG Youth Panel member)

*'Parents don't want their children getting into debt so are sometimes encouraging them not to go to university.'* (CPAG, Youth Panel member)

*'I personally wanted to do an apprenticeship and not do the uni because of the funds.'* (CPAG Youth Panel member)

## Conclusion

Poverty remains the single biggest driver of educational inequality, restricting young people's time in school and their future prospects. Poverty hinders learning and young people's development, increasing the likelihood of becoming NEET. Young people have talked powerfully about the unaffordability of the education system at different stages and how this acts as a very real barrier to them doing well in education and progressing into further learning opportunities and work.

## 1.4 SEND, mental health and wellbeing

Young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are significantly more likely to be out of education, training or employment after leaving school. Young people with SEND and eligible for free school meals in Year 11 are 140 per cent more likely to be NEET than average.<sup>26</sup> Young people with SEND also face barriers to learning at school, and this has an impact on the qualifications that they achieve. They often face a long wait to have their learning and health needs identified and met.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, by the end of secondary school students that have an EHCP are 39.6 months behind their peers. Students without an EHCP but identified as having a special educational need are 3.5 grades behind their peers by the time they do GCSEs.<sup>28</sup> Achieving qualifications makes it easier for young people to transition to further education and employment. Currently students with SEND face additional barriers to achievement and young people shared how the school system does not always feel built for them and their needs.

*'Lots of people who are 'NEET' are often diagnosed with autism. I went through school not knowing I had autism and the school was always complaining about my attendance and behaviour. But some people aren't built for the school environment and it's really frustrating people not understanding.'* (CPAG Youth Panel member)

*'It was something I found especially frustrating during Sixth form, as I was old enough and self-aware enough to be able to communicate my needs and advocate for myself, but I often wasn't listened to or taken seriously.'* (CPAG Youth Panel member)

The rate of mental health issues among young people has increased in recent times. It is estimated that in 2000, one in four 18-24 year olds reported symptoms of conditions including depression, anxiety or bipolar disorder, by 2022 it had increased to one in three young people within the same age group.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, mental health and youth services have seen significant cuts and underinvestment meaning young people are not getting the support they need at the right time. More than a quarter of a million children are waiting for support after being referred to Children and Young People's Mental

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<sup>26</sup> Impetus, [Youth Jobs Gap - Exploring compound disadvantage](#), 2025

<sup>27</sup> A L Atkinson, U Papen, M L Wood and others, [A country that works for all children and young people: An evidence-based plan for addressing the special educational needs and disabilities \(SEND\) assessment and support crisis](#), 2024

<sup>28</sup> Education Policy Institute, [Special educational needs and disabilities \(SEND\)](#)

<sup>29</sup> Resolution Foundation, [Efforts to tackle Britain's epidemic of poor mental health should focus on lower-qualified young people](#), 26 February 2024

Health Services, with 40,000 waiting more than two years to access support.<sup>30</sup> A large proportion of young people facing mental health difficulties but not able to access support report declining mental health during while on waiting lists.<sup>31</sup> However, only a small proportion, 3 per cent of young people, are claiming the UC health element.<sup>32</sup> Research also shows that being in low quality work can have a detrimental effect, worsening people's mental health, and sometimes causing a cycle of moving in and out of the labour market.<sup>33</sup>

Youth panel members described the mounting pressures they face to do well in education and make themselves distinguishable to employers. For those on a low income this is often combined with juggling part-time work and stress at home. Young people shared that despite their best efforts, securing good quality work, with opportunities for progression is highly challenging and stressful.

*'Really big juggling act of doing your degree, which is hard enough, and doing so many other things to help you stand out to an employer.'* (Youth Panel member)

## Conclusion

There is a strong correlation between children with SEND and those who go on to be NEET in later life. Young people have shared that the school environment is not always built for those with neurodiversity and additional needs and that this can drive a wedge between pupils and families and the education system, with young people more likely to be persistently absent or drop out of school altogether. Mental health challenges among young people are also growing and it is increasingly hard for them to access the right support at the right time, further exacerbating issues. Initiatives aimed at supporting young people into adulthood and work, must respond to the increasing mental health challenges that young people face.

## 1.5 Careers advice and work experience

The availability, accessibility and quality of careers guidance young people access at school is a factor which influences the choices young people make around employment, further and higher education. The Careers and Enterprise Company has found that students attending schools that meet all eight Gatsby Benchmarks,<sup>34</sup> have lower NEET rates in comparison to schools where fewer of these benchmarks are being met, and where consequently careers support is lower quality.<sup>35</sup> While there has been an upward trajectory in the number of Gatsby benchmarks schools meet on average schools are finding meeting some of the benchmarks more difficult than others.<sup>36</sup> Only 60 per cent of schools have fully met the standard around encounters with further and higher education and only 62 per cent of schools have fully achieved the benchmark around meeting the needs of all students.<sup>37</sup> There is more to do to ensure that all young people benefit from careers support, and to ensure that high quality support is universally available.

*'I wanted to add there isn't enough opportunity for those NEET to have one to one support, especially gap year students etc, schools only cater to those until they finish their exams.'* (CPAG Youth Panel member)

<sup>30</sup> Children's Commissioner for England, ['Over a quarter of a million children still waiting for mental health support, Children's Commissioner warns'](#), 15 March 2024

<sup>31</sup> Young Minds, [Deconstructing the system](#)

<sup>32</sup> J Diniz and L Murph, [False Starts: What the UK's growing NEETs problem really looks like, and how to fix it](#), Resolution Foundation, 2025

<sup>33</sup> M Marmot, *Fair Society, Healthy Lives: The Marmot Review: Strategic review of health inequalities in England post-2010 (Report 2/2010)*, UCL Institute of Health, 2010

<sup>34</sup> The Gatsby Benchmark is a framework for careers guidance in education.

<sup>35</sup> C Percy, [Looking deeper at destinations](#), The Careers & Enterprise Company, 2024

<sup>36</sup> The Careers & Enterprise Company, [Gatsby Benchmark results for 2024/25](#), 2025

<sup>37</sup> The Careers & Enterprise Company, [Overall benchmark analysis - 2024-2025](#), 2025

This analysis correlates with feedback from CPAG Youth Panel members. Young people have told us that the quality of the career's advice, guidance and support that they receive in school is often inconsistent. Where schools are proactive in providing careers support, including engagement with employers and opportunities for work experience students feel better equipped.

*'We have external speakers from universities from degree apprenticeships about what those pathways look like. The higher ed sessions have really helped, and I'm glad that my school does it because I don't know what course I want to do yet so I'm hoping that the sessions will help. It was definitely very useful.'* (CPAG, Youth Panel member)

However, other students report that careers education within their schools is too generic, does not help them to identify appropriate work placements and pathways and does not provide them with experiences and connections with employers.

*'You are told to get work experience, but school doesn't really help with this or check that you've done it. And it's the same in sixth form, you are left to your own devices to find work experience and sort it all out.'* (CPAG Youth Panel member)

*'Some young people know what they want to do but don't know how to get there and some don't know.'* (CPAG Youth Panel member)

*'We don't get that much talks about university and things to do after school until you're in Year 13. I'm in Year 12 and I haven't heard anything. My friends have no idea, there's no help even when you ask for it.'* (CPAG, Youth Panel member)

## Conclusion

Good careers advice and relevant work experience opportunities are necessary in equipping young people with the insights and skills they need to navigate the job market successfully. However, many young people are not getting the right support in this area and have identified this as a factor that hinders their progression and ability to make the right choices.

## 1.6 Employers and job-seekers support

Many young people that are not currently in employment, education or training want to participate in the labour market. Resolution Foundation have shown that two in five young people that are NEET are actively looking for work.<sup>38</sup> A survey of young people found that 62 per cent believe it is harder to find a job now than a decade ago.<sup>39</sup> CPAG Youth Panel members have set out the difficulties young people can face when seeking work including not having prior experience and being overlooked by employers, lack of suitable jobs, not having employer or industry connections and juggling responsibilities including study.

*'It's really hard to get a part time job, I've applied for over 100. They're looking for people over 18 and have experience already working in shops.'* (CPAG Youth Panel member)

*'Most of my friends that have jobs is due to their connections, not if they are qualified. I've found it extremely hard to find a part-time job. It's really difficult to juggle with studying.'* (CPAG Youth Panel member)

Even for young people who achieve while at school, securing employment can still be challenging. Research has shown that only half of the 'employment gap' can be attributed to a lack

<sup>38</sup> J Diniz and L Murph, [False Starts: What the UK's growing NEETs problem really looks like, and how to fix it](#), Resolution Foundation, 2025

<sup>39</sup> Youth Futures Foundation, ['One in eight young people across the UK not in work or education'](#), 24 August 2024

of qualifications.<sup>40</sup> CPAG Youth Panel members agreed that qualifications, including a university degree does not guarantee success in the job market. CPAG Youth Panel members reported that young people are often working hard to study, build their CVs through extra-curricular opportunities, work experience and volunteering, and yet can still find it difficult to move into employment. Young people have talent, skills and an appetite to work hard, but there are not always opportunities available.

*'Lots of young people have worked hard and done well but feel really disheartened because there is no guarantee of work and the job market is so competitive.'* (CPAG Youth Panel member)

While employer-side changes are not the focus of this submission, it is clear that this review must link to the government's wider Plan to Make Work Pay, and the Employment Rights Act implementation and to consider how it can ensure there are decent and appropriate employment opportunities for young people. As an employer, CPAG recognises that due to funding constraints we often have to recruit candidates with existing knowledge, skills and experience. This limits our ability to offer pathways into the charitable sector and to support young people in their careers. We would encourage the review to consider how government can support diverse sectors to support young people in the early stages of their careers.

## Conclusion

Many young people who are currently NEET want to work. Young people do not lack ambition, but the labour market is highly challenging and there are specific barriers that this age group, and particularly those on a low income, face. Young people are frustrated and want more opportunities for fulfilling work that further their life chances once they finish education or training.

## 2. What would make the biggest difference to support more young people to participate?

### 2.1 An adequate social security system

#### Invest in children's benefits

Lifting children and young people out of poverty is essential to unlocking potential. Young people benefit from better educational outcomes and improved health and mental health outcomes as household incomes increase, reducing their chances of being NEET. CPAG has welcomed government's child poverty strategy and steps taken to bring down the number of children growing up in poverty. We know the difference that will be made to children and families through the abolition of the two-child limit and the roll-out of free school meals to families in receipt of UC at the beginning of the next academic year. These policies will lift 550,000 children out of poverty by 2029/30 and will reduce the pressure on household budgets for lower-income families.

However, there is more to do to continue to bring poverty levels down among children and young people. The adequacy of the social security system has been severely eroded over time. Since 2010 government policies, cuts and freezes means spending on social security is £50 billion lower than it would have been. For instance, child benefit has lost 20 per cent of its value since 2010. Removing the two-child limit takes away the biggest gap between entitlement and need, but the social security system is still inadequate across the board.

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<sup>40</sup> Impetus, [Youth Jobs Gap - Exploring compound disadvantage](#), 2025

### **Maintain existing support**

Cuts to UC health element for under 22s would be unfair and unjustified by the evidence. Financial support for people who have an incapacity to work should be a fundamental part of the social security system, for all adults. The current system already penalises young people because of their age. The standard allowance for adults under 25 is lower than for those 25 and over, despite young people facing the same labour market and cost-of-living pressures as older people. If anything, the system needs to be made fairer by abolishing the lower rate for under 25s, rather than looking to introduce further cuts to the system targeted at young people.

### **Support with long-term sustainable employment options**

Employment support should never be seen as a substitute for adequacy of social security support, but effective employment support can and should complement it. The current employment support system in UC is ineffective for claimants and DWP. The rigid conditionality system has been shown to be ineffective at getting people into (better) work, while financial penalties increase hardship and worsen health outcomes. Government should invest in tailored employment support for different groups of claimants, including young people. It should also be focused on improving long-term sustainable employment outcomes, not just moving people from no work into low-paid precarious work, with no chance of career progression.

There are examples of good practice where lessons can be drawn. CPAG's Your Work Your Way programme, which focused on supporting second earners in households claiming universal credit back into work, provided holistic employment support where relationships were prioritised and claimants were given support and time to consider different employment options – something that would be particularly valuable for young people at the beginning of their careers. This was coupled with practical support such as benefits advice and a personal budget, which helped with costs of moving into work such as training or buying equipment. Nearly 50 per cent of YWYW participants moved into sustainable employment, much higher than many DWP delivered employment support programmes.<sup>41</sup>

The Jobs Guarantee may help some young people move into employment. However, the quality of the jobs available, and whether they boost long-term employment outcomes, will be critical. The scope of the scheme is also quite limited, it will only cover 18-21 year olds, who have been out of work for 18 months. This is only a fraction of total NEETs, and an even smaller fraction of young people who could benefit from more tailored employment support delivered at scale. As outlined above, we are also concerned that the Jobs Guarantee is mandatory, and young people will be at risk of being sanctioned if they do not engage. This risk pushing young people into hardship and damaging relationships between young claimants and their work coaches at a critical time.

### **Childcare**

CPAG welcomes recent expansions to free childcare entitlements, but the system is not currently built to support young parents who may want to participate in training or apprenticeships, because the eligibility criteria is restricted to those who are in work. The Department for Education's upcoming review of childcare provision in England must increase access to childcare for families on the lowest incomes, including young parents.

## **2.2 An affordable education system**

### **Cash support with school costs**

The minimum cost to families of attending secondary school has risen 30 per cent since 2022. It is becoming increasingly difficult for young people in low-income households to attend and fully participate in school life, and this has a knock-on effect on their educational outcomes, pathways and

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<sup>41</sup> CPAG, *Your Work Your Way*, 2023

life chances. Young people must not be priced out of taking part at school. Providing cash support with the cost of uniform, kit and learning resources to eligible families will support young people's time in education and ensure that the choices young people are making aren't being shaped by their family's financial situation.

### **Education Maintenance Allowance**

CPAG supports the re-introduction of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) in England. Many young people want to stay in education when they reach 16 but costs act as a major barrier to this, made worse by the current high cost of living. Young people should be supported to focus on their education, ensuring that those from lower-income households aren't being forced to balance study with the need to earn to support themselves. EMA is a much-needed investment in young people who face very real and practical financial barriers to remaining in engaging post-16.

### **Addressing Higher Education costs**

Students from lower-income households are discouraged from participating in higher education because of fears around debts and loans not being enough to cover high living costs. Maintenance loans fall well short of what is needed for a decent standard of living and many young people who want to attend HE are taking different paths to avoid these costs. The introduction of targeted maintenance grants for disadvantaged students on certain priority courses is a welcome start, but more must be done to ensure those who want to access higher education are able to do so.

## **2.3 A more inclusive school system**

The experience that young people have at school has an impact on their transition into adulthood. To ensure that all young people can thrive, realise their potential and attain the qualifications they need for their next steps an inclusive education system is needed.

### **Reforms to SEND provision**

SEND provision in England is currently inadequate, leading to unequal access to education for this group and increased chances of poorer educational outcomes. Government reforms to the system must prioritise inclusive approaches that help to keep young people in education, rather than alienating them, as this will be essential to their outcomes and reduce the risk of young people becoming NEET.

### **Investment in mental health services and support for young people**

CPAG supports more investment in young people's mental health, including a whole school approach to wellbeing to make school cultures inclusive, with a focus on mental health and enrichment activities. Expert mental health provision in schools and in the community is needed to ensure young people can progress and aren't held back by mental health challenges.

It is also vital that government takes steps to further understand the causes behind the rise in mental ill health in younger people and ensuring services are there to support them. It is only by tackling the underlying drivers that it can truly respond to and in time decrease the prevalence of them. This is a vital task not just for the future of the labour market, but is a hallmark of a decent society too.

### **Work experience opportunities**

Support and opportunities for high quality, structured work experience should form part of young people's time in education. Done well, these can help young people to develop relevant skills and increase understanding of pathways to employment. Young people in low-income households face specific barriers to accessing meaningful work experience placements and these must be addressed. For example, young people must be supported financially to ensure they can participate in work experience. Travel costs must be fully reimbursed, alongside meal expenses and other costs such as clothing and footwear.

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## 2.4 Working alongside young people

### Involving young people in the review

The evidence is clear that many young people want to progress in education and work but the structures and systems in place often work against them. Young people are experts in their lives and should have meaningful opportunities to contribute to this work at every stage, to ensure the solutions are fit for purpose and don't further alienate them.

### Developing an effective narrative

Using the right language and tone and accurately representing the data is an important strand of this work. Young people are ambitious and have high aspirations but are currently being held back. Those working on these issues must consider how language can be supportive of young people in a challenging context, rather than singling them out, downplaying their experiences and stigmatising them further. Young people themselves are well-placed to help policymakers develop a better narrative on these issues and government should prioritise their involvement. For the purposes of this response we have used the term NEET, but we recognise that even the term can be stigmatising and have a counterproductive effect. This is something the review may wish to consider.

### Conclusion

Young people's pathways and prospects are being hindered by structural barriers, including being held back by poverty at every stage. In many ways, this current cohort of NEET young people is not unique but the consequences of young people not being able to participate in learning or earning opportunities are stark, and the impact often long lasting. There is no shortage of ambition, but young people need much more support along the way to ensure they can access high quality, secure work opportunities, and this must include lifting families out of poverty. For the generation of young people that grew up under the dark shadow of austerity, as well as for generations to come, it is critical that we invest further in reducing child poverty, reversing the historic wrongs they have been subjected to. Further cuts to disability benefits and sanctions would only push young people into further hardship and CPAG recommends the panel avoid this approach. Instead, we ask the review and government to make a concerted effort to work alongside young people throughout this process, seeking to understand and tackle issues in the round, and ensuring all young people can realise their full potential.

## About Child Poverty Action Group

Child Poverty Action Group works on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. It doesn't have to be like this. We use our understanding of what causes poverty and the impact it has on children's lives to campaign for policies that will prevent and solve poverty – for good. We provide training, advice and information to make sure hard-up families get the financial support they need. We also carry out high profile legal work to establish and protect families' rights. We have particular expertise in the functioning of the social security system, through our welfare rights, training and policy work. CPAG is a registered charity in England and Wales (294841) and Scotland (SC039339). [cpag.org.uk](http://cpag.org.uk)