



# Grown Up? Journeys to Adulthood

Education to Work ‘Deep Dive  
Workshops’ findings report

Hopkins Van Mil  
Commissioned by the Nuffield Foundation  
May 2025



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**The Nuffield Foundation** is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare, and Justice. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. The Foundation has funded this project, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation.

**Hopkins Van Mil (HVM)** has for 20 years specialised in deliberative and participatory approaches. We create safe and trusted spaces for important discussions on the issues that matter to society and for which strategies for the future need further exploration. Our work brings people from across society together to examine contentious, emotionally engaging, and technically challenging topics on which a broad range of viewpoints need to be heard.

# Introduction: The Deep Dive Workshops and the Youth Insight Group

The [\*Grown Up? Journeys to Adulthood\*](#) engagement programme was launched in Summer 2024. This programme dives into how young people aged 14 to 24 are making the journey to adulthood – and what this means for policy, research and wider society. It aims to fill the gaps that exist in understanding how Generation Z is experiencing this phase of life and how policies and systems can better support them throughout their journeys to adulthood.

As part of the Grown Up? programme the Nuffield Foundation commissioned specialist social research agency Hopkins Van Mil (HVM) to carry out two intersecting research and engagement projects with young people during the course of 2024-2025.

The first is running a Youth Insight Group (YIG) made up of twenty 14-24 year-olds from across all four UK nations, who meet in-person or online, nine times over the course of the *Grown Up? Journeys to Adulthood* programme. The YIG work alongside HVM to shape and inform the second part of the programme; three sets of place-based Deep Dive Workshops (DDWs) with 16-24-year-olds.

These workshops take place in a diverse range of locations across the UK and focus on three specific topics within the programme: young peoples' experiences of education to work transitions, digital lives, and mental health and wellbeing. The findings from the first set of DDWs, on the journey from education into work, form the basis of this report.

# Foreword from a Youth Insight Group (YIG) member

My name is Amani, I'm from London and I'm a proud member of the YIG. I joined the YIG because I believe that young people deserve to have a say in the decisions that shape our futures. Too often, conversations about important things in our lives, including our education and employment, happen without us – but this project is different.

As a YIG member, I was involved in shaping the 'education to work' workshops. From helping shape the workshop content to reflecting on the findings and analysis, the YIG played a central role in shaping how the workshops were designed and delivered. Our goal was to make sure that the sessions reflected the real concerns, barriers and ambitions of young people navigating the path from education to work.

This report matters because it's more than just a summary of data – it's a reflection of the voices, concerns and ideas of young people from different backgrounds. It matters because it speaks directly to policymakers, educators and employers to show them what is working, what's not and what still needs to change. It will hopefully encourage and urge them to listen, to act and to include youth voice in their decisions. Young people are not just subjects of the system – we are experts in our own experiences, and we deserve to be heard.

Written by Amani Salim, YIG member

# Executive Summary

## About the Deep Dive Workshops

The Nuffield Foundation commissioned specialist social research agency HVM to carry out a set of three DDWs exploring young people's journeys from education to work in different areas of the UK. In parallel, HVM were also asked by the Nuffield Foundation to convene a YIG, made up of twenty 14-24 year olds from across the four nations. YIG members helped to shape the content and format of the workshops, and reflect on the findings. These intersecting projects are part of the Nuffield Foundation's *Grown Up? Journeys to Adulthood* engagement programme. Two more sets of Deep Dive workshops are to follow, on the topics digital lives and mental health and wellbeing.

The three-hour DDWs on education to work took place in Middlesbrough, Newcastle and Newport in February and March 2025. Participants were aged between 16 and 24 and came from a range of social backgrounds as well as education and employment pathways. The cohort of 8 participants in Newport were all care-experienced; this location was chosen for its high rates of looked after children and care leavers. 15 young people took part in both Newcastle and Middlesbrough. These two locations were selected for their geographical proximity but contrasting work opportunities for young people.

## Findings from the Deep Dive Workshops

### The meaning of work: hopes and aspirations

Participants spoke with enthusiasm about a broad range of career paths. Many feel strongly about finding a meaningful career, which makes a difference to society as well as bringing them personal fulfilment. Across all groups, participants asserted the importance of a work/life balance, and careers that leave them with time and space for family, friends and looking after their physical and mental health. Several said that they value their wellbeing and professional fulfilment over wealth, although they would like to achieve financial stability and secure employment. Participants hope for careers where they can learn, develop and be creative, as well as employers who understand different ways of thinking, working or dressing so that young people can bring their true selves to their work.

### Unique features this generation shares

Participants think that several factors unique to this generation are limiting their career prospects:

- Older participants are still navigating the long-term detrimental effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on their social, academic, and professional skills.
- The cost of living crisis is severely limiting opportunities, with moving away from home (whether for university or work) unfeasible for many, and increasing university fees making higher education perceived to be more financially risky.
- Employers are perceived to be demanding more qualifications and experience, and competition for jobs means that answering employment adverts online does not tend to bring success.
- Social media, AI and life online potentially bring exciting opportunities, but contribute to uncertainty about the future, overwhelm about options available, and often crippling comparison with others.

## **Enablers and barriers: what shapes young people's pathways**

### **Family and friends have the greatest influence over pathways**

Familiarity with a particular job, industry or way of working like self-employment, leads many young people to follow in the footsteps of family members. Participants are very aware of the significance of 'who you know', and some think they lacked useful connections to progress with work or to navigate university life if they are the first in their families to apply. A few participants talked about being held back by outdated family expectations, such as overly protective attitudes discouraging them from moving away or taking on challenging work.

Some of the care experienced workshop participants described being held back by a lack of safety, support, consistency or positive examples to follow, with family members living from benefits long-term, selling drugs or involved in other illegal activity. Participants from all groups emphasised the importance of their peers to share ideas about different pathways, to navigate systems like university or apprenticeship applications, but most of all for emotional support when they were feeling lost or unsure.

Several participants suggested that building local professional networks, or communities of driven young people, could be a fruitful and motivating way to share experiences and make professional connections.

### **Provision and uptake of careers guidance varies widely**

Across all groups there is agreement that careers guidance often works well when based on an ongoing and evolving relationship with a teacher or careers adviser. Careers guidance seems helpful and straightforward when the student has a clear idea of what they want to do. However, participants in all groups talked about barriers to seeking useful advice, because it is often optional, and provided before they were ready to engage with it by staff that don't know the students. There is a perception amongst many participants that its purpose is to provide answers, rather than to give young people the tools to find their own paths.

In all groups, younger participants talked about feeling under pressure to make important decisions too early. They said they need the time and freedom to try things out, make mistakes and change course.

Some participants suggested that careers advice should be mandatory, and provided regularly within school time.

### **Careers fairs and insight days are useful for ideas if not connections**

Some participants think insight days at school or careers fairs at university were useful to hear real-life stories about jobs or industries, and to meet people who could answer their questions directly. But these events do not tend to be a place where participants make connections or find jobs. Experiences also varied widely, with several participants saying careers fairs and insights days were of limited value, because they felt overcrowded and unstructured.

### **There is a lack of careers support after education – when it is needed most**

Older participants often talked about feeling 'cut loose' from support on leaving school or university. As a result, many feel that they had to make important decisions and find

work from a relatively isolated and vulnerable position, particularly for participants who left school suddenly during the pandemic.

### **Online resources, social media and AI are not commonly used for careers research**

For many participants, exploring career paths online is not something they have done spontaneously. Only one participant mentioned having used a careers focussed website. Participants said that they are more likely to use social media like Facebook or LinkedIn to look for particular jobs. Those moving towards self-employment or creative industries use YouTube or TikTok to learn new skills, build an online community or promote their work. Additionally, several participants talked about looking online to solve a specific problem related to education or employment.

Participants said that young people tend not to have used AI to shape their career paths but find tools such as ChatGPT very to brainstorm or prioritise ideas.

### **Work experience is highly valued, and much more is needed**

In all groups, participants talked about the value of work experience while they were in school, alternative provision or college. For those considering a career path in gardening, cooking, construction or childcare, experiential opportunities including time outdoors was found to be beneficial.

However, not everyone had the chance to take part in proper work experience, and many said it was very short, between two and five days, because demand was high. Participants said that it would be ideal if work experience undertaken while at school or college could be substantial enough to be recognised by employers.

### **The 'experience paradox' has replaced learning on the job**

Many participants shared their frustrations about looking for work, saying that employers tend to ask for 3-5 years' experience, whilst young people often leave education with minimal or no work experience.

Casual or seasonal employment is a way for young people to experience the world of work, but for many, this trial and error approach only tells them what they *don't* want to do.

### **Apprenticeships provide experience, but university is perceived to have higher value by others**

Several participants reflected on feeling that an apprenticeship was the right choice for them after they left school; they would gain experience doing something they enjoy, and possibly get a foot in the door to work. Despite this, teachers and parents strongly encouraged them to go to university. Information or advice about apprenticeships was hard to come by for some young people, as schools seemed geared up to prepare students for university by default.

Many participants said that university no longer seemed like a wise choice for their generation, as they would graduate with massive debts, and still no work experience or contacts.

### **Low grades in English and Maths are experienced as a barrier to further training or work**

Several participants said that low scores in English and Maths not only limit the jobs open to them, but limit their next steps into training or apprenticeships.

A few participants with dyslexia or English as a second language described leaving school feeling unprepared for jobs that involve writing or paperwork. They said that they don't feel they had received the right support at school to build their confidence, or find ways around their language difficulties.

### **Volunteering is a key pathway to work for care experienced young people**

Several care experienced participants volunteer for organisations that have supported them, and this often leads to employment. The group in Newport were generally well connected with support systems, for example youth clubs, Inspire 2 Achieve and young offenders services. There is a strong desire amongst many care experienced participants to get involved in work that helps young people in a way that they themselves were supported. Their life experiences often become an asset in their pathways to work.

### **Mental health support is fundamental throughout the transition to work**

Participants in all groups emphasised the challenges of looking after their mental health throughout the transition to work, and how support (or a lack of it) can determine future pathways. Many said that schools lack the capacity to provide personal support to help pupils who are struggling. Between education and work, when a lack of stability or certainty is anxiety inducing, participants said they didn't know where to turn. Employers can also lack understanding about mental health issues, and without support, some participants said they had to leave their jobs.

### **The influence of local context in Middlesbrough, Newcastle and Newport**

#### **Life in the UK feels less hopeful and growing up here is more difficult now**

There is a shared sense of decline in Middlesbrough, Newcastle and Newport, which stems from participants' experiences of the cost of housing and food, unaffordable university fees, the difficulty of finding meaningful work, as well as Brexit limiting their mobility. All these factors make moving away from the family home more challenging.

#### **Moving for a better life or staying near support networks is a dilemma**

Many participants would not hesitate to move away, either to a bigger UK city, or a more affordable country with better weather and a higher standard of living (Dubai, Australia and Thailand were all mentioned by several). But for others, the cost of housing and travel makes moving away challenging or impossible, and losing their support network of family and friends may not be worth the risk. Therefore participants would like to have more opportunities and support from the education system to work or study abroad.

#### **The lack of functioning public transport severely limits opportunities**

Closer to home, participants from rural, suburban and urban areas all described limited, unreliable, and expensive public transport. Even in a major transport hub like Newcastle, participants said that if you don't live in the city centre, public transport can be frustrating. In all groups, participants said many job opportunities are out of reach without a car, but learning to drive and owning a car is prohibitively expensive.

### **Participants regret that Middlesbrough lacks the dynamic reputation of other Northern cities**

Participants agreed that there is a tendency to be pessimistic about the Middlesbrough area, and a lack of pride in the city. In contrast to what they saw as dynamic cities like Newcastle, several said there is not much to see and do, and a lack of access to nature. Some described being surrounded by people who lack direction or ambition, or live for a long time on benefits. They said this can either drag you down the same path, or motivate you to strive for something better. There is agreement that the extensive higher and further education opportunities and infrastructure in the Middlesbrough area are better than the local job opportunities available.

### **Newcastle participants would like to see a greater variety of opportunities in the North East**

In Newcastle participants feel that Manchester or London offer a wider variety of career opportunities than the North East, especially in creative industries and STEM sectors. The exception seems to be engineering, where participants said quality jobs and pathways to progression do exist. Participants highlighted the many casual and city-centre jobs in hospitality, retail and beauty, but noted that limited public transport puts these opportunities out of reach. Roles available to young people often involve shift work or late nights, so limited public transport in the evenings can lead to particularly long or unsafe commutes.

### **In Newport, care experienced participants explain that a job doesn't mean good quality of life**

Participants in Newport said poor working conditions, a lack of security, and pay that fails to cover the basics, is demoralising and leads many local people to illegal activity and living from benefits long term. They described how low wages make life particularly difficult for young people who do not have family they can live with. Some said exploiting young people is easier in small towns or within small businesses, where checks are not made. In rural and suburban areas, it is particularly difficult to get around, as only the bigger cities in Southwest Wales are well connected by public transport.

# 1. About the Deep Dive Workshops

This report contains findings from the first set of three DDWs delivered by the specialist social research agency [Hopkins Van Mil](#) as part of the [Nuffield Foundation's Grown Up? Journeys to adulthood](#) programme.

[Grown up? Journeys to adulthood](#) focuses on the 8.6 million young people in the UK between the ages of 14 and 24 – a time when they face critical decisions that shape their futures. The programme is working with young people to understand when and how they make key choices and investigate how the landscape of adulthood is evolving. As an exploratory programme, *Grown up? Journeys to adulthood* aims to provide an overview of the key issues and debates across three themes, while identifying important questions that future research and innovative practice should address.

The first DDWs focused on the theme of 'education to work'. The next set of DDWs will take place in June 2025 and focus on 'digital lives'. The final set of DDWs will take place in autumn 2025 on the topic of 'wellbeing and mental health'.

## 1.1 Where did the workshops take place?

Workshops 1 and 2 were held in the North East of England, in Middlesbrough and Newcastle. These two locations were chosen because whilst they are geographically close, the data suggests that they offer very different prospects for young people moving from education into work:

Middlesbrough	Newcastle
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• North Yorkshire, including Middlesbrough, 9.7% NEET/not known for those aged 16 to 17 (4<sup>th</sup> highest, 2023).<sup>1</sup></li> <li>• Tees Valley LEP, including Middlesbrough, 4% projected employment growth 2023-2035 (5<sup>th</sup> lowest, 2023).<sup>2</sup></li> <li>• Middlesbrough, 29.2 % of people 16-64 who are not in employment and are not actively seeking work (11<sup>th</sup> highest, 2023).<sup>3</sup></li> <li>• Middlesbrough has 2<sup>nd</sup> highest weighted average of NEET risk factors after Blackpool (1.63, 2023).<sup>4</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Newcastle's NEET/not know rate for those aged 16 to 17 at the end of 2023/start of 2024 was 7.4%<sup>5</sup></li> <li>• Around 24.0% of the population aged 16 to 64 years in Newcastle upon Tyne were "economically inactive" in the year ending December 2023. This compares with around 29.4% in the year ending December 2022.<sup>6</sup></li> <li>• Newcastle's weighted average NEET risk factor score is lower than Middlesbrough<sup>7</sup>.</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> ['NEET by characteristics' from 'Participation in education, training and NEET age 16 to 17 by local authority', Permanent data table - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> [department-for-education.shinyapps.io/local-skills-dashboard/](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Economic inactivity rate \(Great Britain\) - ONS](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Risk of NEET Factors - Youth Futures Foundation](#)

<sup>5</sup> [newcastle.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Education and Skills Annual Report 2022-23 FINAL.pdf](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Newcastle upon Tyne's employment, unemployment and economic inactivity - ONS](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Risk of NEET Factors - Youth Futures Foundation](#)

Both also allowed for recruitment of young people from coastal communities, which demonstrate additional challenges for local economies and employment.

Workshop 3 was held in Newport, in South Wales. This location was chosen specifically for the opportunities it provided to involve care experienced young people, of which there are high rates around Newport and across Wales. In January 2024, Newport City Council recognised care leavers as a protected characteristic, giving them greater recognition when designing policies and services. In addition, Wales offered an interesting contrast to England in the context of education to work transitions because it has a different approach to career guidance, operated through Careers Wales rather than through education providers.

## 1.2 Who took part?

The workshops in Middlesbrough and Newcastle were each attended by 15 young people between the ages of 16 and 24. In Newport, the workshop was attended by 8 care experienced young people between the ages of 16-24, including care leavers.

HVM worked with their recruitment partners Acumen Fieldwork to recruit the Middlesbrough and Newcastle cohorts. A recruitment specification was provided that required range across gender; age (16-24); disability; those with long-term (physical and/ or mental) health conditions; current working status and type; socio-economic situation; urban, rural, coastal and suburban geographic locations.

To recruit the Newport cohort of care experienced young people, the HVM team connected with community networks in South Wales, including Newport Youth Academy, Newport City Council Children and Young People Services team and Urban Circle Newport. The brief was to recruit a group of young people all living within a 20 mile radius of Newport, of a mix of ages between 16-24 years, a mix of genders, and a mix of care-experienced and care leavers.

Each workshop was attended by 2 experienced HVM facilitators as well as a member of the HVM event support team. A member of the Nuffield Foundation team was also present at each workshop.

## 1.3 Workshop process

Each workshop lasted 3 hours. All participants received a £70 thank you payment for attending. Any travel expenses were also reimbursed. The workshops involved a combination of short presentations, facilitated small group discussions and creative activities.

The table below presents an overview of the workshop process. Each DDW followed the same process.

Time	Activity
11:00	Welcome and introductions
11:10	Nuffield Foundation team explains more about the Grown up? Journeys to Adulthood project
11:15	Small group discussions - experiences of and hopes for moving from education to work

12:20	Lunch
12:50	Video and quotes sharing experiences from the Youth Insight Group
13:00	Small group discussion – work and your local area
13:30	Creative exercise – writing a postcard to yourself from the future
14:00	Thank you and goodbye

HVM facilitators audio recorded each of their small group discussions. After the workshops, these audio recordings were transcribed. During the workshops facilitators also captured discussions using post-it notes and flipcharts. This report has been written by the same HVM team members who facilitated the DDWs. The writing team used both flipcharts and transcriptions in their thematic analysis.

### 1.4 Relationship between the DDWs and the YIG

Before these DDWs the YIG, as project collaborators, helped with:

1. Shaping the workshop process, including workshop format and discussion questions

After the Deep Dive Workshops, the YIG helped with:

1. Reflecting on the thematic analysis of DDW findings conducted by the HVM team
2. Sharing the findings (see creative output published alongside this report on the Nuffield Foundation website)

The YIG will be involved in a similar way in the second and third sets of Deep Dive Workshops.

## 2. Findings from the Deep Dive workshops

### 2.1 The meaning of work: hopes and aspirations

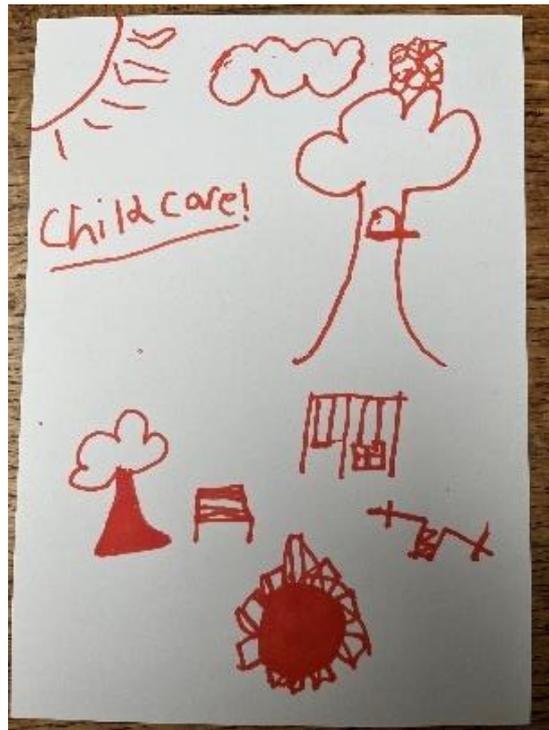


**Figure 1:** Ideal jobs, young people in Middlesbrough, Newcastle and Newport

At the start of each DDW, facilitators asked participants what their ideal career looks like. Many spoke with excitement about their aspirations to pursue careers in specific fields (see Figure 1), whilst others reflected more generally about their values and priorities. This section explores their visions for the future.

Many participants feel strongly that they would like a career with meaning, which “*makes a difference*” and has a positive impact on society, as well as bringing personal fulfilment. Examples included scientific research, youth work or helping others with their health and wellbeing.

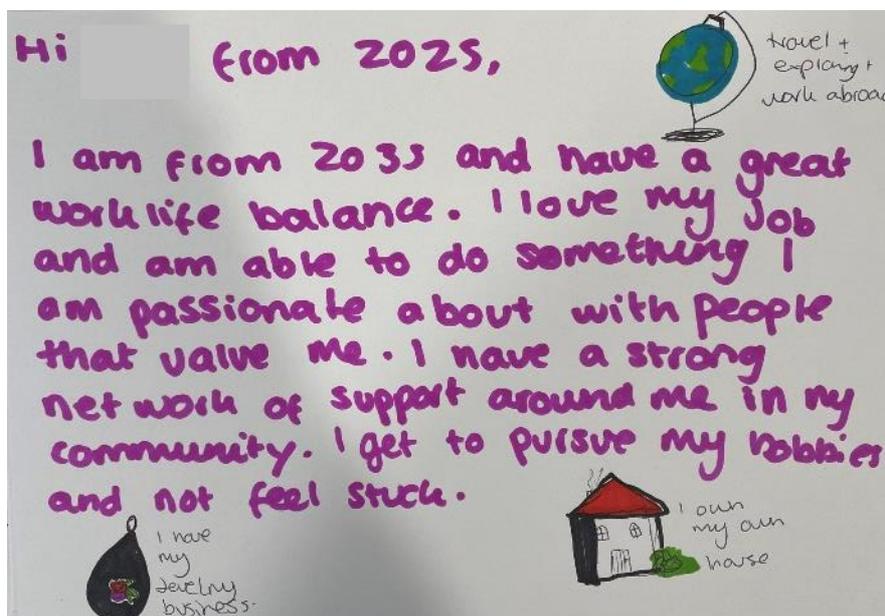
*“For me, I wanted to do something impactful, that’s initially why I was doing research. I focus on human diseases so I thought that would be...fulfilling...making an actual impact. But so far it has just been lots of experiments which I have found frustrating. I think that’s shown me I actually really want to do something that changes something.”* Newcastle



*"I'd like to work with children who have been through similar situations to me."  
 'Postcard to yourself from the future'  
 Newport*

However, many participants across all groups emphasise how important it is to find a work/life balance. Many hope for careers that leave them with time and space in their lives for friends, family and looking after their health and wellbeing. Several participants said that they would prioritise their wellbeing and work/life balance over a higher salary. For them, being 'rich' is about much more than just monetary wealth; it also means making a difference, having a good social life, hobbies and good physical and mental health.

*"I don't think there is any point in having a higher wage at the expense of being miserable and stressed all of the time."* Middlesbrough



'Postcard to yourself from the future', Middlesbrough

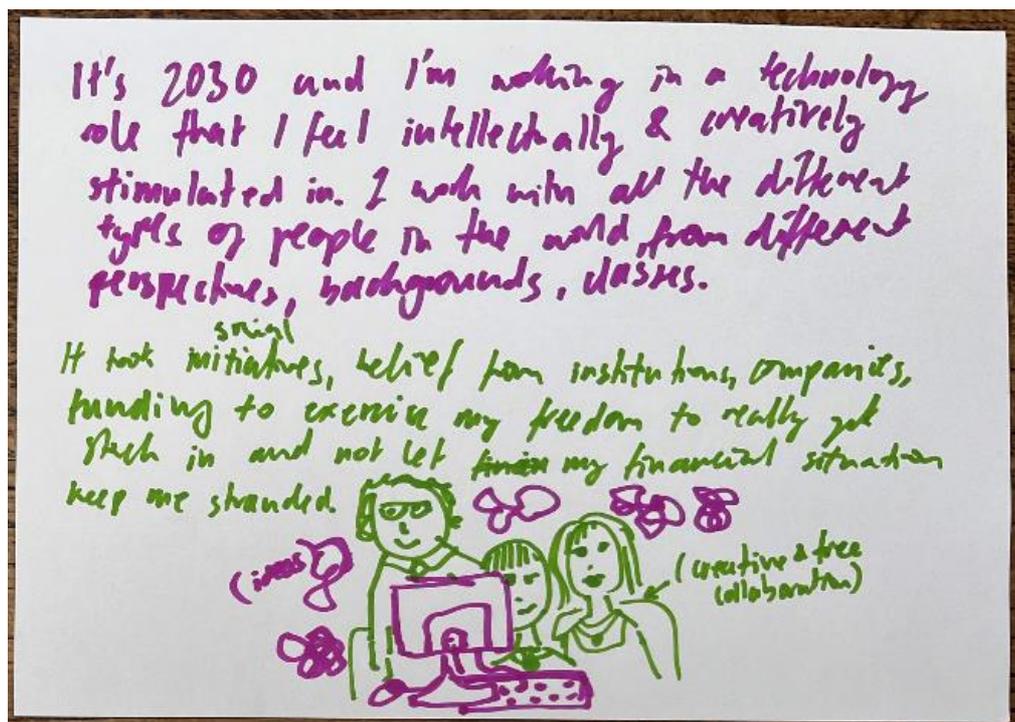
Some participants elaborated on this in the context of feeling that money “*does not go far*” these days due to the cost of living crisis, but that health and wellbeing is the most valuable asset.

That being said, many participants do want a career that leads to financial stability. When asked to elaborate on what financial stability looks like, many said being able to afford a home and to have children. Indeed, ‘stable’ and ‘secure’ were words chosen by several participants to describe their ideal career, especially amongst the care experienced cohort in Newport.

*“It’s the cost of living. If you go outside the UK you’re going to have such a better life. You’re going to have a partner, a house, a family. You’re going to be chilling.”* Newport

Several participants said that they want a career that allows for continuous learning and creativity, as well as character and skillset development. They hope for employers who are supportive and invested in their progression.

*“I want to work on different projects...so I can do a bit of everything really. That’s my kind of thing. I want to be able to learn on the job...not somewhere where they expect you to know everything before you start.”* Newcastle



‘Postcard to yourself from the future’, Middlesbrough

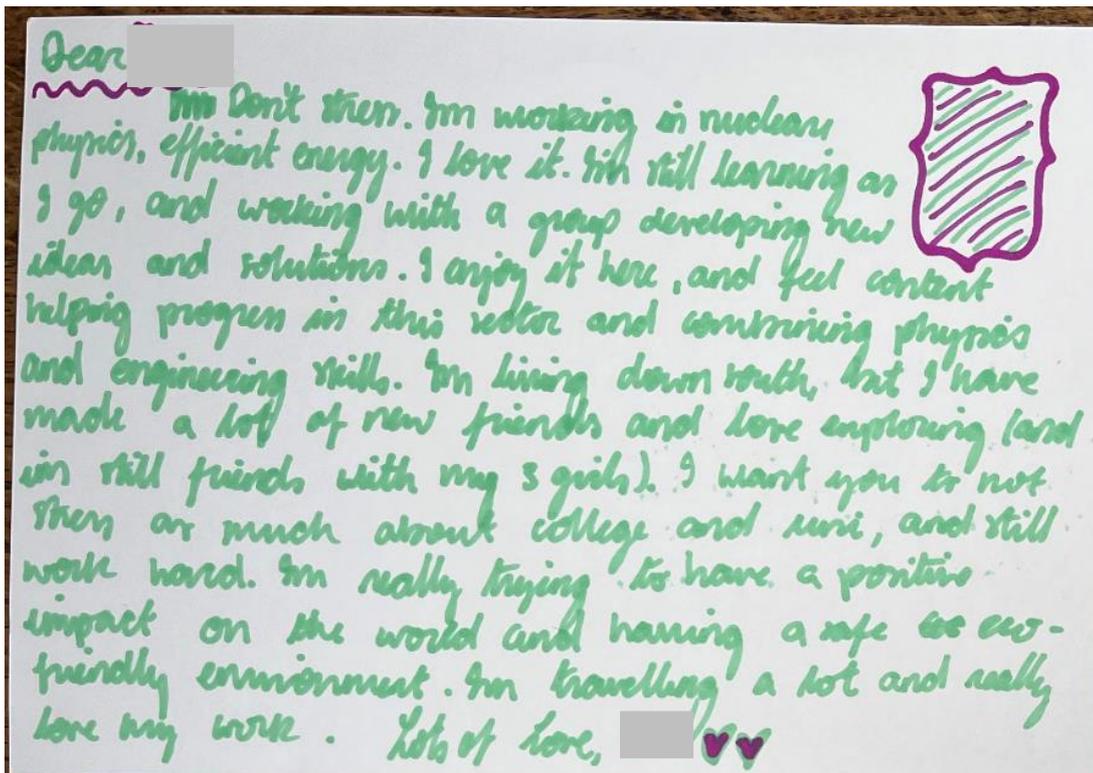
Similarly, many participants hope that their work is understanding of difference – this includes learning and working styles, neurodivergence and personal appearance.

*“I hope to work somewhere that is understanding when it comes to different people’s ways of working...and thinking. Because some things set people off that wouldn’t set another person off. Some things will upset someone that won’t upset*

someone else. There should be more talking in the workforce, understanding...more flexibility.” Newport

“I want to work somewhere where I can keep my hair and piercings. Because I have had experiences in the past where employers don't like it and I don't think that is fair.” Newcastle

For some participants, an ideal career is one that creates opportunities for travel – whether this is in the UK (for example, to London) or on a more global scale. For many, this aspiration emerges from feeling trapped and frustrated in the place where they are growing up (see Section 2.4 – the influence of place).



‘Postcard to yourself from the future’, Newcastle

For other participants, an ideal career is one that does not require a move away from home and existing networks of family and friends. Indeed, some aspire to start their own businesses and employ their family and friends.

## 2.2 Unique features this generation shares

### The COVID-19 pandemic robbed young people of ‘growing up time’

Participants who were already at the higher education stage during the pandemic, see the years of COVID-19 lockdowns as years that “*did not count*”, almost as if life was paused. They feel they missed out on crucial life experiences and learnings as a result of ongoing restrictions including social distancing, mask wearing and travel bans.

*“I still, I think because of COVID, I still just see myself as being 18, like, I live my life just thinking I’m 18 years old.” Newcastle*

Generally, participants do not think that older generations fully understand how, and how much, the pandemic impacted growing up, especially when it comes to the education to work transition. For many, the pandemic meant that long-standing plans to study at college or university went out the window.

*“I felt confused as well because I left school during the pandemic...originally on the cards was obviously to go to college, and then uni because that had been the path I thought I was dead strict on taking. And then I didn’t go to college. I ended up working at McDonald’s for a while. Now I’m a bus driver...I’m not happy, I feel trapped” Middlesbrough*

For some, dreams of further education were scuppered by how the pandemic knocked their confidence at sitting exams. Elaborating on this, participants explained how they struggled wearing masks during exams (for some causing sensory overload in an already disconcerting environment) and the lack of practice in exam conditions as a consequence of lockdown.

*“Well, I didn’t sit my exams, courtesy of COVID, so it’s like I tried A Levels, I did half a year of A Levels, and the second I had an exam put in front of me, I was like what the hell do I do with this thing? And I just thought, I’m going to leave. Wrote my name on it and fell asleep in the exam hall...it was really hard when you have to wear masks the entire time and tables were even further apart than they usually were.” Newcastle*

Several participants feel that their journeys from education to work were significantly affected by a lack of classroom time during the pandemic. For some, passing English and maths was impossible without in-person support. Others reflected on how it made them feel despondent about the prospect of further education, affecting their motivation to achieve necessary grades.

*“It happened when I was in Year 12...just when I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do. I think the pandemic made me more despondent. Trying to figure out what I want to do...when there were no classroom interactions...I had no face to face education. So I just kind of felt on the backburner, especially with the use of predicted grades, because I don’t really come from a well-off place and they just took the postcode and were like, yeah, this is a good area, bad area. It meant my predicted grades were quite low. So I kind of felt pushed back and couldn’t find the motivation to get back up.” Newcastle*

School closures and social distancing affected participants’ confidence socialising and thus experience starting university.

*“It really affected me going into university...my mum could see going in I did not do well with people. Having to talk to people was hell because I had just lived through years of not being able to do exactly that.” Newcastle*

Indeed, many participants are worried that they lack the necessary social skills to thrive in the working world (see Section 2.3 – barriers and enablers) and see the pandemic as a major culprit.

Participants want older generations to understand that the impacts of growing up during the pandemic did not cease when lockdowns were lifted. For many participants, COVID-19 shook up long-standing life plans, and changed personalities; issues they will be navigating for many years to come.

*“When you’re not supposed to leave the house, I mean, how can you think about what you are going to do in three years’ time? You are just thinking about how am I not going to go insane stuck in the house.” Newcastle*

### **Older generations have an outdated perception of university and apprenticeships**

Many participants spoke about parents, grandparents or teachers’ hopes and expectations that they would study at university. They also spoke about how their perceptions and experiences of university do not align with those of older generations.

Specifically, participants shared their frustrations towards the outdated perception that a degree level qualification will always lead to a job in the corresponding field. They discussed the idea that as more young people do enrol in university these days, the relative value of the university degree is declining. Their lived experience is that nowadays a competitive job applicant needs much more than a university degree on their CV.

*“Sometimes you can leave university with a degree, but still no chance afterwards.” Newport*

*“I feel like it’s more stressful for (young people) these days, because they look up to people that they’ve known, like if they’ve had a good job, they want to go and follow in those footsteps. But realistically now you need more qualifications...more than just the basic degree.” Newcastle*

Reflecting once again on the value of a university degree, many participants are not convinced that they are getting good value for money. In a time when money is tight, alternative options that do not require extensive and ever-growing student loans are

increasingly appealing. That being said, many participants said there was confusion and a lack of information when it comes to alternative (non-university) post-school options (see Section 2.3 Enablers and Barriers).

*“I finished my A Levels and I always had it in my mind that I was going to university, but then you start to think, okay – this is money and a loan I’m going to have that is going to impact me later in life as well. I so ended up trying a nursing degree apprenticeship and then I went into a few random jobs. Now, I’m still not sure, so it’s kind of confusing in all the options, which is a good thing but there’s not a lot of guidance when it comes to that.”* Middlesbrough

Several participants said that they would like to see a shift in older generations’ attitudes towards apprenticeships, which many see as brilliant opportunities to start earning early in this time of financial hardship.

*“My parents just didn’t see where I was coming from. They held a massively high bar on going to uni. I tried to explain that with an apprenticeship, you get a great qualification and then immediately am into a job, but they don’t get it.”* Newport

### **The cost of living crisis severely limits opportunity**

Participants feel that their journeys from education to work are more constricted by the financial climate compared to older generations. They feel uninspired by the prospect that even with a lifetime of hard, full-time work, their earnings will not go far.

*“I can do the maths. I can work a normal job for the rest of my life – a normal working job – and I still won’t be able to retire until I am 70. I still won’t be able to afford a house – which is just a normal necessity – do you know what I mean? It’s pointless, it seems sometimes.”* Newport

In light of this, participants spoke about planning to have a main job and then several “side hustles” to supplement their income. Some shared their concerns that often the ‘side hustles’ young people are drawn into can be dangerous or illegal.

It is in this context that many participants are reconsidering the cost/benefit of attending university. Several also reflected on how the cost of living restricted the realistic opportunities to move away from home for university; this also dictates the kinds of careers young people can pursue (see Section 2.4 – place). Indeed, for many the only way to live off early career salaries is to live at home with parents/carers, which is not an option for all young people. Participants contrasted this with an impression that older generations - especially before the UK left the EU - had more freedom to live and work where they wanted.

### **A wider variety of opportunities are available in theory, and this can be overwhelming**

Participants think that older generations over-estimate the amount of opportunity and choice young people have today when it comes to starting work. As mentioned above, they feel that the current financial climate rules out many opportunities, whether this is as a result of not attending university or not being able to move to a new location for work. They also want older generations to understand that whilst new technology can help to create opportunities, it can also strip them away. For example, participants are frustrated with how AI is increasingly being used in place of people and thus reducing

the number of jobs available. They are also frustrated at how AI is being used in hiring processes, as well as the possibility that they will be competing for a job with a bot at some point in their journey from education into work.

*“I do programming and AI is a big problem. I can spend years at college learning and someone just walked up and did the exact same thing in 2 seconds – just typed it in.”* Newport

Reflecting further on older generations’ impression that access to the internet makes anything possible, participants spoke about feeling overwhelmed by knowing what they *could* be doing. Some spoke about how social media and influencer culture romanticises entrepreneurship and making large amount of money in your twenties. Exposure to this has left some participants feeling behind and not successful whilst navigating their own journeys from education into work.

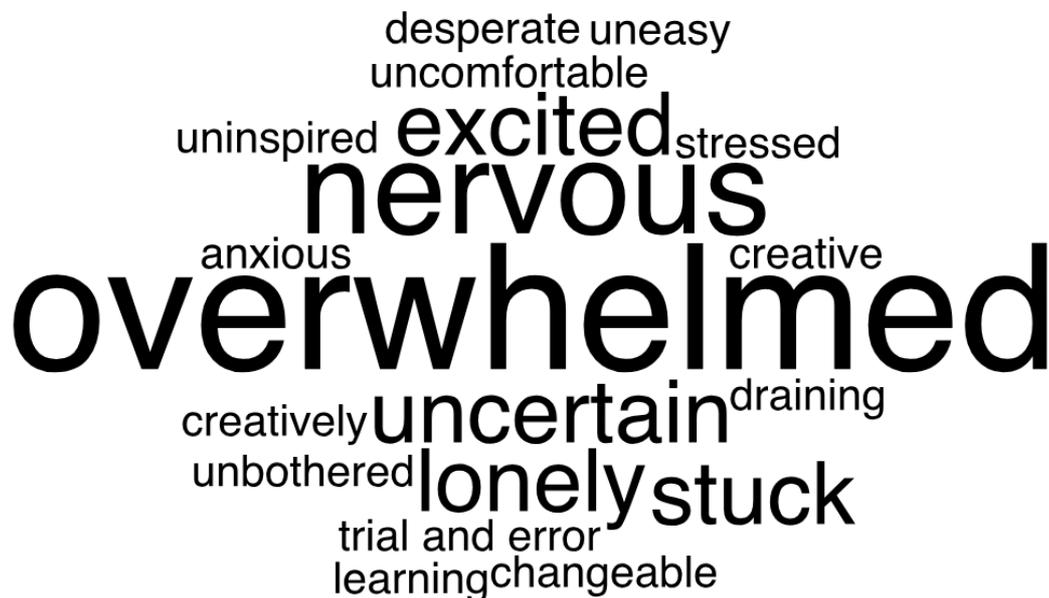
That being said, several participants are excited about pursuing careers in the tech space, whether this is as a social media influencer, software developer or anti-cybercrime specialist. Many are grateful that compared to their parents’ generation there is less of an expectation that certain jobs are just for men or women.

*“I know my dad wanted to go into art, but at the time that wasn’t really an option, and he was...he was telling me about how he wanted to study typing and textiles like my mum but that wasn’t what boys would study. He was pushed into more mechanical stuff. I think there is less of this pressure now.”* Newcastle

*“There are jobs that didn’t exist back in the day. More variety and roles if that makes sense. There’s more men doing traditionally women’s jobs. That’s something I find quite cool. I’ve seen loads of female bricklayers and stuff like that...more male teachers and youth workers. Quite cool.”* Newport

### In this context, today's transition from education to work feels daunting

When asked how they feel about their transition from education to work, the language participants use reflects how challenging they find the process.



**Figure 2:** A word cloud showing how DDW participants feel about their education to work journey

### 2.3 Enablers and barriers: what shapes young peoples' pathways

As the word cloud in Figure 2 shows, many young people feel uncertain about their pathways and overwhelmed by the options open to them. Participants say that applying for jobs advertised online is not bringing success, and casual roles participants can access in their local area offer them little progression. In this context, where there is a perception of overwhelming choice, but a challenging job market, participants' pathways often end up being shaped by chance and serendipity. Several participants have a clear idea of their goals and their direction, but for many, opportunities are determined by the context they find themselves in. Family and social capital are particularly influential, as is what their school or college does or does not offer in the way of careers guidance and work experience. Participants can see potential in building their in-person communities, networks, and relationships as this is where they are finding success.

*"I'm doing a panic Master's because I didn't know what else to do. All my friends graduated last year and they're all doing wildly different things and it's really hard not to compare yourself to them. That's when social media comes in - you see something on TikTok and you think, "that looks amazing, should I be doing that?" It's that constant, questioning your life and actually what you want to do. So much of it feels like finding something through fluke and so many of the solutions I've found I have just stumbled upon. I feel so much like there's no set kind of backup to help you. And so much of it is dependent on your family and your own support network, which I think a lot of people fall through the gaps of." Newcastle*

## Family and friends have the greatest influence over pathways

Familiarity with a particular job, industry or way of working like self-employment, leads many young people to follow in the footsteps of family members. Many participants talked about how much they value the advice and support of their families, and how useful and reassuring it is to hear real-world stories of their parents' own journeys. Family life is where many participants learn skills or figure out what they enjoy. Connections and introductions have been fruitful for many, which underlines the importance of trust and in-person contact.

*"I was building a shed with my dad and my grandma and I just fell in love with working with my hands. That's how I got into joinery, and my dad was self-employed." Middlesbrough*

*"My job currently, my mum worked for the company, so I literally had the foot in the door and I just went up to the boss. "Here's my CV," and he turned around and went, "Right, in the restaurant. We're having a meeting now". And I got the job instantly." Newcastle*

*"My mum went through loads of jobs, like, name a job, she's done it. So it's good to hear from her because it's just, like, gaining that experience, that kind of trial and error, if you don't like it, that's fine, that's normal, move on, like, it's not going to kind of be overnight and it is a process." Newcastle*

Participants were very aware of the significance of 'who you know', and some think they lack useful connections in their circles, either to progress with work, or to navigate university life if they are the first in their families to apply. A few participants also talked about being held back by outdated family expectations, such as being encouraged to go to university when it's no longer affordable, or overly protective attitudes discouraging them from moving away or taking on challenging work.

Some of the care experienced workshop participants described being held back by a lack of safety, support, consistency or positive examples to follow, with family members living from benefits long-term, selling drugs or involved in other illegal activity. Some said that family or social connections had put them at risk, or given them a bad reputation.

The importance of positive friendship groups, and not being in with the 'wrong crowd' is essential for the care experienced young people in particular, in terms of safety, but also ambition and outlook. Participants from all groups emphasised the importance of their peers to share ideas and find out about different pathways, to navigate systems like university or apprenticeship applications, but most of all for emotional support when they were feeling lost or unsure.

*"When I was looking for a uni, my friend told me that I could do an apprenticeship, and that was how I dived in. If I hadn't had that then, I wouldn't have known, and I have somebody who has done it before, so it was easier for me to get through the whole process." Middlesbrough*

Several participants suggested that building local professional networks, or communities of driven young people, could be a fruitful and motivating way to share

experiences and make professional connections. (See section 2.4 on the Influence of place)

### **Provision and uptake of careers guidance varies widely**

In the care experienced group, participants gave examples of careers guidance they had found very effective. There was agreement within the group that it often works well when based on an ongoing relationship with a teacher or careers adviser, and evolves over time alongside the student.

*“I meet up with my careers teacher and he runs through... 'What's new?' 'What's going on?' 'Has the plan changed?' And then we do stuff like... When we go to university, how you'd finance things, and how you'd go about applying to get a job, or interviews and stuff.”* Newport

Careers guidance also seems helpful and straightforward when the student has a clear idea of what they want to do; practical advice on pathways has been instrumental for some participants.

*“I was a bit nervous to talk to them, but I told her what I wanted to do, and she found me an apprenticeship in bricklaying and I applied to that and I got accepted.”* Newcastle

However, participants in all groups talked about barriers to seeking advice, or perceived limits to its usefulness. Because it is often optional, and provided by staff that don't always know the students, some participants said that they find it difficult to make the approach. Others struggle to see how an adviser could help, especially given the overwhelming range of options they might be considering. There is a perception amongst many participants - which may be rooted in their own or their peers' experiences of careers guidance - that its purpose is to provide answers, rather than to give young people the tools to find their own paths. In the absence of consistent guidance, many older participants reflect that they were left to figure things out on their own.

*“At Uni, they did offer loads of careers meetings, but I just thought it would be a waste of time. It's quite personal, only you really know what you want to do, someone can't sit there and tell you.”* Middlesbrough

A sentiment shared by many participants is that education at any stage is a busy and often stressful time, and they lack the time or bandwidth to think about future plans outside of their packed timetables. In all groups, younger participants talked about feeling under pressure to make important decisions too early. They said they need the time and freedom to try things out, make mistakes and potentially change course. In contrast to reassuring, real-life stories of meandering pathways from family and friends, some participants found careers advice overly simplistic and directive, with sporadic sessions that didn't come at the right time.

*“In my school we had a careers person, I spoke to her once but I never saw her again. She told me to become a sign-language museum interpreter! I was like: 'I don't want to do that.' I now know I stay calm in a crisis, I could be a tree surgeon and climb up high with a giant chainsaw. Or an emergency responder. But, I*

*have no real clue how I could get there, I don't know who to go to. Getting the right role models was really difficult.” Newport*

Some participants suggested that careers advice should be mandatory, and provided regularly within school time or in lessons. Some also alluded to the value of an exploratory approach where students are given time to figure out what they are good at and what they enjoy, before a more directive stage where practical advice can be given about how to achieve their goals.

*“I think they should actually just book everyone in, like you should be allowed a timeslot with them where you've got to go and can talk to them about what you want to do, what your plans are, because otherwise they're sat there in the dark waiting for you to approach them, but that can be difficult sometimes.” Newcastle*

### **Careers fairs and insight days are useful for ideas if not connections**

Some participants think that insight days at school or careers fairs at university are useful to hear real-life stories about a range of jobs or industries, and meet people who could answer their questions directly. One participant talked about industry outreach programmes and site visits which helped inspire their path towards engineering. But these events do not tend to be a place where participants make connections which lead to opportunities in a more direct way. Experiences also varied widely, with several participants saying that the careers fairs and insights days they attended were of limited value, because they felt overcrowded and unstructured.

Several participants suggested that schools or colleges could play more of a role in building community. They said they would like their institution to be more directly connected with local employers, so that tangible pathways and opportunities could be offered to students.

### **There is a lack of careers support after education – when it is needed most**

Older participants often talked about feeling 'cut loose' from support on leaving school or university. They described this as the moment when finding a job becomes necessary, and (sometimes after a break to recover from the intensity of final exams or dissertations) when they have the space to set their minds to it. This is also the first time in their lives where they find themselves without the structure, support and peer groups provided by an institution. As a result, many felt that they had to make important decisions and find work from a relatively isolated and vulnerable position. This was particularly problematic for participants who left school suddenly during the pandemic.

### **Online resources, social media and AI are not commonly used for careers research**

For many participants, exploring career paths online is not something they have done spontaneously. It was striking that only one participant mentioned having used a careers focussed website, which was provided by their school.

Participants said that they are more likely to use social media like Facebook or LinkedIn at the stage of looking for particular jobs. Those moving towards self-employment or creative industries use Youtube or TikTok to learn new skills, build an online community or promote their work. Additionally, several participants talked about looking online to solve a specific problem related to education or employment.

*“If you’ve had a struggle, you can guarantee at least a few hundred people have had it before and you search on the internet and it’s full of tutorials and everything. I searched about my GCSEs and like to cope with it, and I got more videos.”* Middlesbrough

The same applies to AI. Participants said that young people tend not to have used it to help shape their career paths but find very useful in adjacent areas. Many participants talked about using ChatGPT or Copilot to brainstorm or prioritise ideas, research or fine tune essays, digest large amounts of information, or make decisions and plans. Just one participant said that she had used AI to speed up researching a company for a job interview.

*“My dissertation wouldn’t have been as good if ChatGPT didn’t exist, it really helps me day to day with decisions, and I do think it’s a very good piece of technology that gives me support.”* Newcastle

This suggests that students may benefit from a more facilitated use of online resources as part of careers guidance.

### **Work experience is highly valued, and much more is needed**

In all groups, participants talked about the value of work experience while they were in school, alternative provision or college. Participants explained that it gives young people the chance to learn and think in different ways, and experience different working environments, as well as trying their hand at new skills.

This is particularly valuable for neurodivergent young people, and participants who learn and work best outside the classroom. Participants equate classroom learning to an office environment. Many participants said they benefitted greatly from time and space outdoors, active learning, and practical hands-on tasks, which directly influenced their career path, for example in gardening, cooking, construction or childcare.

*“I found it easier to learn outside, where I wasn’t squished into a room full of people who were really distracting. Because of my neurodivergence and other issues, I can’t work in an office, so I prefer physical work. Some people work harder at doing different things. There should be more understanding, more flexibility. I was put into gardening as part of Inspire 2 Achieve. The teachers noticed that during my gardening phase I was a lot calmer. I felt safe outside. From gardening I learnt that I wanted to have a job in either agriculture or horticulture.”* Newport

However, not everyone had the chance to take part in proper work experience, and many said it was very short, between two and five days, because demand was high. Participants said that although it can serve the valuable function of broadening horizons, it would be ideal if work experience undertaken while at school or college could be substantial enough to be recognised by employers.

### **The ‘experience paradox’ has replaced learning on the job**

Many participants shared their frustrations about looking for work, saying that employers tend to ask for 3-5 years’ experience, whilst young people often leave education with minimal or no work experience which could count towards this. Participants find that answering online adverts for meaningful jobs is time consuming

and has not brought them success. They describe a situation where there seem to be very few entry-level roles where young people can learn on the job and work their way up.

Casual or seasonal employment is a way for young people to experience the world of work, but for many, this trial and error approach tells them what they *don't* want to do. Local or part-time opportunities open to young people seem to be limited to sectors like hospitality, nightlife, retail and cleaning, with few meaningful paths to progression, and often poor pay and working conditions.

### **Apprenticeships provide experience, but university is perceived to have higher value by others**

Several participants explained that an apprenticeship felt like the right choice; they would gain experience doing something they enjoy, and possibly get a foot in the door to work. Despite this, teachers and parents strongly encouraged them to go to university. Information or advice about apprenticeships was hard to come by for some young people, as schools seemed geared up to prepare students for university by default.

Many participants said that university no longer seemed like a wise choice for their generation, as they would graduate with massive debts, and still no work experience or contacts. Several said university would have been their first choice if it wasn't for the perceived financial risk, whilst others regretted going to university and wished they had been encouraged to try an apprenticeship.

*"I went to Uni, it's very like school but a bit harder and I don't learn well like that, so I'd say an apprenticeship was probably something I wish I'd just jumped straight into or tried to go down the line of working."* Newcastle

### **Low grades in English and Maths are experienced as a barrier to further training or work**

Several participants reflect that low scores in English and Maths not only limit the jobs open to them, but also limit their next steps into training or apprenticeships.

*"The thing that puts you off is English and Maths, because I didn't do well in school, so I only got threes. So I'm only doing a level 2 course, and I do food, but I'm trying to get a level 3, but I can't because I haven't got English and Maths. So I feel like that stops you from doing what you want to do. For apprenticeships, when you go on the government website, the first thing it says is you need this grade to get the apprenticeship. So because I've only got threes, if someone's got a better grade than me in English and Maths, then they're more likely to get the job. They could be really bad at it, but I couldn't get the job because I've got lower grades than they have."* Middlesbrough

Passing maths and English has been particularly challenging for young people who needed extra support, but missed out on it as a result of the pandemic and are now at a permanent disadvantage.

*"In my school, we had a separate class that just focused on a little group for English and maths, but because of Covid, we couldn't actually go and do that"*

*little group. I tried retaking, it didn't work, I kind of just gave up after the couple of attempts." Newcastle*

In addition to low grades, a few participants with dyslexia or English as a second language described leaving school feeling unprepared for jobs that involve writing or paperwork. They said that they don't feel they had received the right support at school to build their confidence, or find ways around their language difficulties.

### **Volunteering is a key pathway to work for care experienced young people**

Several care experienced participants volunteer for organisations that have supported them, and this often leads on to employment. The group in Newport were generally well connected with support systems, for example youth clubs, Inspire 2 Achieve and young offenders services. Many found the mentorship, role models, mental health support and volunteering opportunities they received to be life-changing. There is a strong desire amongst many care experienced participants to get involved in work that helps young people in a way that they themselves were supported. Their life experiences often become an asset in their pathways to work.

### **Mental health support is fundamental throughout the transition to work**

Participants in all groups emphasised the challenges of looking after their mental health at different stages of the transition to work, and how support (or a lack of it) as a young person can determine future pathways.

Many said that schools lack the capacity to provide personal support to help pupils who are struggling. Participants said that in higher and further education, mental health support is disjointed and difficult to navigate. Between education and work, when a lack of stability or a feeling of being in limbo is particularly anxiety inducing, participants said they didn't know where to turn. Employers can also lack understanding about mental health issues, and without support, some participants said they had to leave their jobs.

Some participants from the care experienced group expressed appreciation that they had received emotional support which helped them learn coping mechanisms for issues like anger, which could have become more serious, or held them back as working adults.

*"Mental health is a key thing that needs to be addressed, because I see everyone, all my friends the same age, they just keep struggling and there's no support network. I mean there is some out there, but it's just like one counsellor for a 600-person school who's in like two days a week and has a million appointments. Life becomes quite overwhelming and it's just really difficult to keep up with work and studies and just do things when your mind is absolutely dying on the inside. One rough patch of mental health could impact the rest of your life, so I think there needs to be a big support network in place".*

Middlesbrough

## **2.4 The influence of local context in Middlesbrough, Newcastle and Newport**

Where a young person lives is particularly significant in a context where career paths are determined by personal connections more than opportunities found online or within

the local labour market. Only a handful of participants mentioned remote working as an option, or something they were currently doing. The feelings towards place conveyed in all groups, revolve around decline, difficulty and a lack of community. There is a sense in all groups that the grass must be greener elsewhere.

### **Urban decline undermines community and opportunity at a local level**

A common theme in all areas was the hollowing out of high streets and city centres as local shops and businesses close down and are not replaced. This reduces local employment opportunities and contributes to an atmosphere of stagnation and limited prospects. Participants said that the jobs available to young people locally are limited to low wage, low status roles with no progression, such as cleaning work in hospitality, or serving in fast food chains, where some said they wouldn't want their friends to see them working.

Several participants suggested that building networks of ambitious young people at a local level, could help rebuild community and provide motivation and connections.

*"I think it would be good to have more of a community where people can speak to each other face to face, I know everything's online, but it's a bit isolating... a place specifically for people who are driven and really want to improve. It would be really nice to surround myself with people with a similar mindset, because there's a few people round me that are trying hard, and I don't feel like it's a particularly common thing round here, it would help things get better"*  
Middlesbrough

### **Life in the UK feels less hopeful and growing up here is more difficult now**

There was a shared sense of decline in the UK as a whole, which stems from participants' experiences of the cost of housing and food, unaffordable university fees, the difficulty of finding meaningful work, and Brexit limiting their mobility. All these factors make moving away from the family home more challenging.

*"I'm probably going to have to live with my parents for a good few years now. And when you get a job, you still can barely afford to feed yourself, so it's quite difficult."* Middlesbrough

### **Moving for a better life or staying near support networks is a dilemma**

Many participants would not hesitate to move away, either to a bigger UK city, or a more affordable country with better weather and a higher standard of living (Dubai, Australia and Thailand were all mentioned by several). But for others, the cost of housing and travel makes moving away challenging or impossible, and losing their support network of family and friends may not be worth the risk. In this context, participants would like to have more opportunities and support from within the education system to work or study abroad,

*"I've always thought it's a shame that there's not more educational options abroad. University would be a good way to get out of the country and see the world, which unless you've got a lot of money, it's quite hard. It would be a good way to find work elsewhere so you're not limited to just local areas."*  
Middlesbrough

### **The lack of functioning public transport severely limits opportunities**

Closer to home, participants from rural, suburban and urban areas, all described limited public transport routes and times, unreliable services, and expensive tickets. Even in a major transport hub like Newcastle, participants said if you don't live in the city centre, getting from one area to another can be time-consuming or impossible by public transport. In all groups, participants said many job opportunities are out of reach without a car, but learning to drive, buying a car and running it, is prohibitively expensive.

*"I worked at the airport, it was an hour bus journey, then I had to get the train, so it was about two hours. I was working 12-hour late shifts. But it was good money, and I struggle to work with crowds of people, so the job was good, I really didn't mind it. I started learning to drive but I had to stop because it was too expensive."* Newcastle

### **Participants regret that Middlesbrough lacks the dynamic reputation of other Northern cities**

Participants agreed that there is a tendency to be negative and pessimistic about Middlesbrough and the surrounding area, and a general lack of pride in the city. Several said there is not much to see and do, and a lack of access to nature. Some described being surrounded by people who lack direction or ambition, or live for a long time on benefits. They said this can either drag you down the same path, or motivate you to strive for something better. Many Middlesbrough participants see bigger Northern cities like Newcastle, Manchester or Liverpool as having more character, dynamism and opportunity.

There was general agreement that the extensive higher and further education opportunities in the Middlesbrough area do not match local job opportunities. Participants said that schools in Middlesbrough encourage students to go to university, and there is a high number of graduates in the area, but they have to move elsewhere to find work, as industry in the area has disappeared. Participants described modern new developments as part of university campuses, whilst other parts of the city are left to decay.

*"In my sixth form, there's different unis coming in every week, explaining it. Round where we are, you get Teesside, Sunderland, all them. Uni is a lot more promoted than other stuff, but a lot of people just want to work."* Middlesbrough

### **Newcastle participants would like to see a greater variety of opportunities in the North East**

Similarly, Newcastle participants think that Manchester or London can offer a much wider variety of career opportunities than the North East, especially in creative industries and STEM sectors. The exception seems to be engineering, where participants say quality jobs and pathways to progression do exist. Some participants talked about an abundance of casual jobs in hospitality, retail or beauty. But, these jobs are often in areas without much housing, such as the city centre or industrial zones, so a lack of public transport can put them out of reach. Roles available to young people often involve shift work or late nights, such as work in the night time hospitality sector, so limited public transport in the evenings can lead to particularly long or unsafe commutes.

*“There’s so many hairdressers and takeaways. The only bigger things you can do are engineering based because there’s the Paper Mill and Thompson’s. Otherwise, you’ve got to go to Hexham which doesn’t even have that much, or come to town. No matter what you’ve got to be able to drive otherwise you’re bang out of luck.”* Newcastle

### **In Newport, care experienced participants explain that a job doesn’t mean a good living**

Participants in Newport said poor working conditions, a lack of security, and pay that fails to cover the basics, is demoralising and leads many local people to illegal activity and living from benefits long term. They described how low wages make life particularly difficult for young people who do not have family they can live with. Some said exploiting young people is easier in small towns or within small businesses, where checks are not made.

*“There’s other ways for people to make money, which isn’t good, so they don’t want to work a job. The ones that do work are treated like slaves - calling you up in the middle of the night: ‘Oh, some person’s just dropped out. We now expect you to come in.’ And if you’re not in, you’re not going to get any more hours.”*  
Newport

Several participants described local neighbourhoods where the drugs economy dominates, and gun and knife violence are commonplace. The ‘who you know’ in this context can put you in danger rather than bringing opportunity.

*“Everyone’s affected by drugs over here”* Newport

*“My experience is keep your nose out of other people’s business. Because if you get on the wrong person’s side, you’re going to have a knife put to your throat.”*  
Newport

In rural and suburban areas, it is particularly difficult to get around, or leave your neighbourhood, as only the bigger cities in Southwest Wales are well connected by public transport.

# Conclusion

This report explores how young people aged between 16 and 24 living in three different UK locations (Middlesbrough, Newcastle and Newport) experience the transition from education into work.

Section 2.1 focuses on participants hopes and aspirations when it comes to their working lives. Discussions explore the ambitions of many young people wishing to have fulfilling careers that benefit not only themselves, but wider society. It suggests that many young people want careers that give them space to be the best version of themselves, whether this is through embracing neurodiversity or providing them with a platform from which they can make an impact.

Despite these hopes and aspirations, Sections 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4 explore the reality that many young people are facing challenges unique to their generation, such as ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as systemic issues including insufficient career guidance and work experience, challenging recruitment practices, or a lack of functioning public transport. Many feel overwhelmed and uncertain about their journeys from education into work. For many, this uncertainty stems from their lived experience of employers' expectations significantly changing; this includes the diminishing value of a university degree and increasingly unrealistic work experience requirements. Substantial technological developments also bring uncertainty whilst social media contributes significantly to feelings of overwhelm and being 'behind'.

Young people want more dynamic support throughout their journeys from education to work. They think that the focus should be on harnessing the creativity and ambition many young people have when thinking about their working lives. For example, they would like to see more encouragement from careers advisers to pursue apprenticeships and work-based learning. Crucially, alongside this they also see a need for increasing availability of apprenticeship and work experience opportunities spanning a greater range of industries. The 'experience paradox' is a real concern for many young people who feel stuck and frustrated by the fact that employers seem to prioritise experience over education, despite the importance of education being emphasised throughout their lives up to this point. Dynamic support should also keep up with technological developments. Young people also want more support and guidance when it comes to building networks and social capital, beyond the influence of their own family and friends.

The findings in this report help to explain the rising rates of NEET and economic activity in the UK. Most young people are ambitious and excited about starting work but uncertain about how they can successfully navigate the complex and ever-changing journey from education to work. They simultaneously feel overwhelmed by the amount of options that exist and underwhelmed by their realistic chances of doing what they want. They do not feel that their experiences are comparable to older generations' and feel limited by their advice, which they often find outdated and unhelpful. They hope to see a shift in the education to work landscape where young people's individuality and ambition is recognised and embraced as a way of transforming society in the long term.



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