

Employer Focus Group Report

Economic Inactivity Trailblazer: Amplifying Young Voices and Employment

1. Introduction

This report summarises the key themes and insights from an employer focus group discussion held as part of the Trailblazers project, funded by the North East Combined Authority and delivered through NE Youth's peer ambassador model. The session brought together young peer ambassadors, employers, practitioners, youth sector representatives and public sector professionals to explore the barriers facing young people aged 18–25 in accessing and sustaining employment.

The focus group formed part of a wider effort to ensure that young people with lived experience of economic inactivity are not only consulted, but are actively shaping the conversation about employment, opportunity and system change.

2. Background to the Project

The Amplifying Young Voices and Employment project was developed to place young people with lived experience at the centre of employment research and engagement. Through NE Youth's peer ambassador approach, young people were employed over a three-month period to speak to peers, gather evidence, and identify the real-life barriers that prevent young people from entering and sustaining work.

As the peer ambassadors explained at the start of the session, the purpose of the project is to:

- make things better for the youth of their generation
- understand why young people are not getting employed
- use lived experience to help shape solutions
- identify barriers to both education and employment

The model builds on previous learning from peer action research and reflects a belief that young people are best placed to speak honestly and credibly about the realities they face.

3. Purpose of the Focus Group

The focus group was designed to gather feedback from employers, support organisations and young people themselves on:

- the most significant challenges around employing 18–25-year-olds
- the factors affecting retention and progression, not just recruitment
- which groups of young people face the greatest barriers
- how systems, employers and education providers could respond more effectively

4. Participants

The discussion included contributions from:

- peer ambassadors involved in the Trailblazers project
- young adult participants with direct experience of barriers to work
- employers from sectors including construction, financial services and research
- representatives from youth work, cultural education, violence reduction, disability employment support, and local authority services

This mix of voices created a rich discussion grounded in both lived experience and professional insight.

5. Key Findings

5.1 Young people's lived experience must be central

One of the clearest messages from the session was that young people should not simply be passive recipients of employability support. The Trailblazers model demonstrates the value of employing young people as peer ambassadors, giving them paid roles, real responsibility and a platform to lead conversations.

This approach was shown to have direct benefits. The young ambassadors described positive next steps arising from the programme, including an IT apprenticeship, progression towards the Navy, and an extended role beyond the original contract period. This highlights that meaningful employment opportunities can build confidence, aspiration and progression.

5.2 Barriers to employment are systemic, not individual

The discussion strongly challenged the idea that unemployment among young people is mainly caused by lack of motivation or poor attitude. Instead, participants described a web of systemic barriers including:

- inflexible recruitment practices
- lack of accessible work experience opportunities

- transport difficulties
- low apprenticeship wages
- employer assumptions and bias
- patchy careers education
- over-reliance on qualifications
- a mismatch between school preparation and workplace expectations

Participants repeatedly emphasised that young people are often navigating pressures beyond employment itself, including poverty, unstable home lives, caring responsibilities, poor mental health, and unequal access to networks and opportunities.

5.3 The transition from education to employment is poorly supported

A major theme was the disconnect between school and work. Young people and professionals described an education system heavily focused on exams, compliance and academic performance, with too little emphasis on:

- creativity
- problem-solving
- practical employability skills
- confidence building
- navigating workplaces
- understanding career pathways

Young people are often expected to leave school knowing what career they want and how to pursue it, despite limited exposure to real workplaces or alternative routes such as freelancing, vocational careers or self-employment.

Participants highlighted that creativity and different ways of thinking are often undervalued in school, yet these qualities are highly relevant to employment across many sectors.

5.4 Recruitment processes are often exclusionary

Many participants described recruitment systems as one of the biggest barriers to inclusion. Standard application forms, formal interviews and rigid job descriptions often disadvantage young people who may have the skills to succeed but struggle to present themselves in conventional ways.

This was particularly evident for:

- neurodivergent young people
- disabled young people

- care experienced young people
- those with fractured education histories
- young people with low confidence or little prior work experience

There was a strong sense that employers often want to be fair but interpret fairness as treating everyone the same. In practice, this can reinforce exclusion. Participants argued that more inclusive recruitment should include:

- simpler application processes
- alternative interview formats
- clearer information in advance
- more relational and conversational approaches
- greater flexibility around essential criteria

5.5 Hidden skills and transferable skills are often overlooked

Participants noted that many young people already have valuable strengths, but do not recognise them as employability skills. Through youth work, caring roles, peer support, research, volunteering, creativity and lived experience, young people may have developed:

- communication skills
- resilience
- relationship-building
- adaptability
- problem-solving
- research and analysis
- teamwork
- digital and social media skills

However, they are not always supported to identify, articulate or evidence these capabilities in job applications or interviews. Employers may also fail to see potential beyond formal qualifications or previous job titles.

5.6 Sustaining employment is as important as getting a job

A recurring theme was that employment support must not stop at the point of recruitment. Participants stressed that retention and progression are just as important as initial access.

Young people may need support with:

- understanding workplace culture

- developing professional boundaries
- managing relationships with peers in work settings
- navigating new systems and expectations
- building confidence over time
- asking for help appropriately

Examples were shared of young people entering work successfully but facing challenges once in post, particularly where expectations were high and support reduced too quickly. Mentoring, phased induction and ongoing check-ins were all identified as important.

5.7 Practical barriers remain significant

Several practical barriers emerged strongly in the discussion.

Transport

Poor public transport was described as a major issue, especially for young people travelling across large or poorly connected areas such as County Durham. Late finishes, multiple buses and long journey times can make work unsustainable.

Pay

Low pay, particularly within apprenticeships, was seen as a real barrier. Some young people may be financially worse off entering work than remaining on benefits, especially where housing support is affected. This creates a structural disincentive, even where motivation is high.

Lack of early work opportunities

Participants also raised the disappearance of Saturday jobs and entry-level opportunities that once helped young people gain confidence, references and experience. Without these early steps, many young people are starting from scratch in a highly competitive labour market.

5.8 Perceptions of industries are limiting young people's choices

Employers from sectors such as construction, banking and the creative industries all described problems with public perception. Young people often only see a narrow or outdated version of what these sectors offer.

Examples included assumptions that:

- banking is just branch-based customer service
- construction is only manual labour
- creative careers are unrealistic or unstable

Participants highlighted the need to expose young people to the full range of roles within sectors, including behind-the-scenes, support, technical, freelance, digital and leadership opportunities.

5.9 Confidence, class and access to networks matter

The discussion highlighted that not all young people have equal access to the informal knowledge and relationships that make employment easier. Some young people know how to contact employers, ask questions, use networks and seek opportunities. Others do not feel entitled to do so or have never been shown how.

This was linked to:

- social class
- confidence
- family background
- prior exposure to professional environments
- lack of role models or encouragement

Participants noted that confidence is often treated as an individual issue, but in reality, it is shaped by wider social and structural factors.

6. Groups Facing Additional Barriers

Participants identified several groups who may experience greater difficulty entering and sustaining employment, including:

- care experienced young people
- disabled and neurodivergent young people
- young people with mental health challenges or anxiety
- young people with fractured school or college experiences
- unaccompanied asylum seekers and young people with language barriers
- young people experiencing poverty or low financial security
- young people who lack family or community networks into work

The conversation highlighted the need for more tailored, flexible and relational support for these groups.

7. Emerging Solutions

Although the focus group concentrated on barriers, several practical solutions emerged:

7.1 Peer-led and paid participation

Young people should be employed and supported as peer ambassadors, researchers and advisors, rather than only consulted informally.

7.2 More inclusive recruitment

Employers should review job descriptions, application systems and interviews to make them more accessible and strengths based.

7.3 Better transitions from education to work

Schools and colleges need to provide more meaningful careers education, practical employability preparation and exposure to different sectors and working styles.

7.4 Greater employer flexibility

Workplaces should consider phased induction, mentoring, reasonable adjustments, and more realistic expectations for young people entering employment for the first time.

7.5 Stronger partnerships

There is a clear role for collaboration between local authorities, voluntary sector organisations, employers and training providers to connect young people with real opportunities and wraparound support.

7.6 Recognition of non-traditional skills

Employers and support services should help young people identify and communicate the value of the skills they already have.

7.7 Addressing structural barriers

Transport, low wages and benefit disincentives need to be recognised as employment issues, not separate policy concerns.

8. Conclusion

This focus group reinforced a clear and consistent message: young people are not the problem. Many of the barriers preventing 18–25-year-olds from accessing and sustaining employment are embedded in systems, structures and assumptions that were not designed with their realities in mind.

At the same time, the discussion showed real optimism. Young people bring insight, creativity, resilience and ambition. Employers and practitioners are willing to do more. What is needed is a stronger bridge between these worlds: one that values lived experience,

designs more inclusive routes into work, and creates employment systems that young people can not only enter, but thrive within.

The Trailblazers project offers a strong example of what this can look like. By placing young people at the centre and paying them for their expertise, it demonstrates a practical and credible model for future youth employment work.

9. Suggested headline findings

For use in presentations or summary materials, the key headline findings are:

1. Young people want to work, but systems are not set up for them.
2. Barriers are structural, practical and cultural, not simply personal.
3. Inclusive recruitment and ongoing support are essential to retention.
4. Schools and employers need to better prepare young people for real working life.
5. Peer-led, paid models create both insight and progression.
6. Transport, pay and access to first opportunities remain major barriers.
7. Young people's hidden strengths and transferable skills are often overlooked.