

# Tackling unemployment among disadvantaged young people

## Research for Centrepoint

Jonathan Buzzeo, Rosa Marvell, Clare Everett and Becci Newton

# Institute for Employment Studies

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Institute for Employment Studies  
City Gate  
185 Dyke Road  
Brighton BN3 1TL  
UK

Telephone: +44 (0)1273 763400  
Email: [askIES@employment-studies.co.uk](mailto:askIES@employment-studies.co.uk)  
Website: [www.employment-studies.co.uk](http://www.employment-studies.co.uk)

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## Executive Summary

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In spite of the recent economic recovery, levels of youth unemployment remain high, relative to other age groups. Young people, aged 16 to 24, are almost three times as likely to be unemployed as all other age groups combined. Disadvantaged young people, such as those who have experienced homelessness are particularly likely to be unemployed. Due to the multiple and complex barriers that this group faces when finding a route into employment they are more often not in education, employment or training (classified as NEET) compared with other 16 to 24 year olds. These barriers can include:

- Poor educational experiences and low attainment
- Lack of labour market experience and high competition for job vacancies
- Lack of a permanent address
- Financial pressures
- Low confidence and personal motivation
- Mental health and substance misuse problems
- History of institutional care
- Financial barriers to travelling

In July 2015, as part of their strategy to tackle youth unemployment, the Government announced a statutory commitment to achieve three million new apprenticeships by 2020. This will be introduced alongside the Youth Obligation, which will provide young claimants with access to a new three week intensive programme of support around employability skills in order to get them 'work-ready'. After six months, claimants will be expected to apply for an apprenticeship or traineeship, gain work-based skills, undertake a mandatory work placement or face losing their benefit. In announcing these policies, the Government was explicit that it expects all young people to be earning or learning in future and that it intends to create a 'no excuses' culture in addressing youth unemployment and long-term welfare dependency.

Vocational training and work experience opportunities have the potential to provide long-term pathways out of unemployment. However, there is concern that these new policy measures will not create opportunities that are appropriate and accessible for the most vulnerable or disadvantaged groups, given the barriers to employment they experience.

Centrepoint commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) to explore the possible implications of these two initiatives for disadvantaged young people.

The research began with qualitative in-depth interviews with third sector practitioners and education and training providers that have experience of working with and offering support to disadvantaged young people. It also included interviews with employers of varying sizes, which currently deliver apprenticeship and/or pre-apprenticeship programmes, and a Group Training Association. The research also includes focus groups with 24 young people, the majority of whom were currently living in supported accommodation, exploring their experiences of accessing employment or training opportunities.

The results of these qualitative interviews were compared to the results of a short quantitative survey of 500 employers, completed as part of a wider business omnibus conducted by IFF Research.

The findings of this research enable Centrepoint to offer constructive advice on how new policies on youth employment should be implemented to ensure they make a meaningful contribution towards helping the hardest to reach enter sustained employment.

## **Access to apprenticeships among disadvantaged young people**

This research considered the current level of access that disadvantaged young people have to apprenticeships. It also considered the specific barriers that disadvantaged young people face to engaging with training and employment programmes. Similarly, it also explored the factors that prevent those involved in apprenticeship delivery – including employers, training providers and some third sector practitioners – from offering more opportunities and support to disadvantaged groups.

This will help to establish whether an increase in the number of apprenticeship starts will successfully help disadvantaged young people to access employment.

### **Access to apprenticeships**

The proportion of 16 to 18 year olds accessing apprenticeships is persistently low, with the take-up of apprenticeship provision among the most vulnerable young people being particularly limited. A survey of 815 homeless young people receiving Centrepoint support showed that only four per cent have ever started an apprenticeship (Centrepoint, 2015). Despite low participation rates, a larger proportion (22 per cent) of young people would consider undertaking an apprenticeship as the next step in their career.

Findings from the survey of employers showed that most do not target their employment and training opportunities towards disadvantaged young people, with micro enterprises and sole traders the least likely to do so. Employers reported that the workplace exposure they did offer tended to be less formal, with work experience and voluntary placements being more common than apprenticeships. However, a significant minority of businesses (42 per cent) explained that they would like to offer more opportunities to this group. The barriers that businesses and disadvantaged young people face in providing and accessing apprenticeships are explored below.

## Barriers for disadvantaged young people

Financial barriers clearly restricted access to apprenticeships for disadvantaged young people. Training providers and practitioners highlighted that when a young person starts an apprenticeship, a household's entitlement to benefits reduces, which can drive the young person to withdraw from the apprenticeship. In addition, young people in supported accommodation felt that apprenticeship pay, which has a lower national minimum wage rate, is not enough for them to be financially self-sufficient. As such, entering full-time paid work was a more attractive prospect for some. This suggests that, because of financial barriers, disadvantaged young people are often not in a position to make a choice between earning or learning. They therefore may become further disadvantaged because of pressures to focus on short-term financial outcomes, rather than the longer-term benefit of undertaking an apprenticeship.

Entry requirements presented another barrier to access. Employers with limited vacancies are more likely to choose the most highly qualified and/or most experienced candidate. Training providers and practitioners argued that qualifications should be removed as an entry requirement for apprenticeships, but some employers were reluctant to do this as they saw qualifications as a sign of a necessary level of competence. Given that employers value qualifications as an entry requirement, interviewees emphasised that it is crucial to place equal value on vocational and academic qualifications. To overcome these barriers to apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeship pathways such as traineeships were also seen as important as they can provide young people with the chance to gain work experience and improve their attainment in maths and English.

In interviews, larger employers stressed that behaviours play a central role in their recruitment processes. Training providers and practitioners confirmed that disadvantaged young people can be less prepared for work in terms of 'soft' skills such as presentation, attendance and punctuality, which is of concern to businesses. Traineeships and lower-level learning opportunities were therefore again promoted by interviewees as a way to establish the required workplace behaviours, build young people's confidence and assist them to become work-ready.

Despite being reasonably aware of apprenticeships, young people (particularly those with a 'work first' mentality) did not consistently understand their value, including any contribution to future career and earnings potential. This was partly driven by their first-hand experiences of low-quality apprenticeship provision. Training providers, practitioners and stakeholders drew attention to how the absence of consistent, high quality careers guidance, limited promotion of vocational pathways and varying levels of workplace exposure when at school further compound the issue.

Even where disadvantaged groups are able to access training opportunities in the workplace, their continued engagement is not guaranteed. Training providers explained that careful matching of employer and young person is essential to avoid relationship breakdown and ensure that appropriate support is in place. They outlined the need to set expectations for both parties by being clear with employers about the circumstances of the young person joining the company, and by being clear with learners about how they will be expected to behave in the workplace.

Practitioners and training providers alike spoke of the need for employers to provide regular shifts, daily structures and where necessary financial support with additional costs such as travel, lunch expenses or buying a uniform. Practitioners' and providers' on-going support in the initial few weeks of a placement was also highlighted as being crucial to ensure that the young person remains engaged. This might include being there on the first day as a 'friendly face', regular catch-ups to check progress, and acting as an intermediary between the young person and employer if there are problems.

### **Barriers for training providers**

A number of obstacles limit the ability of training providers to increase access for the most disadvantaged young people. Firstly, they find it harder and more resource intensive to prepare young people or those outside of the labour market for entry into apprenticeships. As such, among non-specialist organisations, even with more apprenticeship starts, there may be a greater focus on providing apprenticeships for those who require less training, such as current employees. This is borne out by the fact that the majority of apprenticeships are currently provided to people over 25. This will create higher competition for the remaining vacancies available for younger age cohorts or those with less labour market experience, at the expense of widening access for disadvantaged groups.

Second, training providers described varying levels of knowledge about pre-apprenticeship provision among services supporting young people NEET. This includes traineeships, which have been shown to be effective in helping young people to progress to further training opportunities.

Third, they explained that statutory and third sector support (particularly for mental health needs) was diminishing due to financial pressures. This places an additional burden on providers to provide the support themselves.

Finally, training providers commented that the requirement for learners to attain their functional skills in maths and English as part of the lower level courses they offer (a condition of funding) provided them with limited flexibility in terms of how they could shape the course content to best engage learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Training providers explained that forcing young people whose prior experience of education may be largely negative to return to this before they had the opportunity to build confidence through vocationally-orientated learning, can cause them to disengage.

To increase success, training environments must foster a supportive culture. Interviewees cited examples of best practice including robust pastoral care monitoring and reporting systems, opportunities for peer-to-peer support and learning, small class sizes and using external expertise for wider support where available.

### **Barriers for employers**

Four out of five (82 per cent) employers felt that there are barriers to them providing more apprenticeships or work experience to disadvantaged young people. Of those that identified barriers, 15 per cent reported that the financial costs made it difficult to employ a disadvantaged young person. A further 12 per cent stated that they do not require any

more staff at this point, while over one in ten (11 per cent) felt that a lack of skills and experience among this group was a barrier to offering them opportunities.

However, overall, respondents showed enthusiasm to work more with disadvantaged groups; 42 per cent agreed that they would like to offer more provision in this area. Furthermore, 44 per cent say that they do not need any extra incentives to increase their provision. However the findings indicate a lack of awareness about how the opportunities they currently offer may be better targeted or how greater engagement can benefit the business, with 76 per cent of employers not targeting any of their apprenticeship or training opportunities towards disadvantaged young people.

Training providers and practitioners discussed their role in raising awareness among employers around the realities of offering placements to disadvantaged young people and the returns that can be derived. They emphasised that increased opportunities for employers to meet with disadvantaged young people (for example, through 'business breakfasts') would allow them to better understand young people's support needs and therefore increase engagement and prevent placements from falling through.

### **How to incentivise employers**

For smaller organisations with fewer than 50 employees, the largest barriers to offering more apprenticeships to disadvantaged young people are financial. Greater support with the costs of training an apprentice may help these companies to increase the opportunities they offer. This suggests that the additional monies that could be available through the Apprenticeship Levy will be effective in this regard, providing small businesses are able to access these funds.

However, for larger organisations where the costs of providing opportunities can be less of a concern, support could be provided to assist employers to see ways in which existing roles in their organisation can be made more suitable for less experienced employees.

### **Effective employment and training support for young people**

In order to offer recommendations on how the Youth Obligation should be delivered, this research examined the elements of support that are effective in moving disadvantaged young people towards employment, education or training opportunities. Practitioners and training providers identified several key principles that are necessary for packages of support to be effective. These principles focus on practitioners developing goals and plans in partnership with the young person and offering young people adequate emotional support and encouragement.

Firstly, models of re-engagement are most effective when practitioners assess a young person's aspirations, goals and support needs shortly after coming into contact with them. Secondly, for support to be effective, practitioners should set clear goals with the young people, which are linked to their aspirations and interests.

Models of re-engagement also ideally need to include holistic, personalised action plans, based on each young person's educational or employment goals. Support models that do not include personalised action plans, may fail to meet young people's needs and



increase the likelihood that the young person will disengage from a programme or not make progress.

It is also crucial that practitioners and employers provide a young person with an adequate support network while they work or train; putting the young person in a position where they are going to succeed. This helps to build their confidence and lower the risk that they will disengage.

Finally, effective models of support need to be designed so that young people are able to take responsibility for their own progression. Young people need to understand that practitioners expect something back from them in return for the flexibility and support they give them.

## Views of the Youth Obligation

In light of the evidence on what works in helping disadvantaged groups move closer towards education, employment or training, interviewees were asked for their views on the proposed Youth Obligation for young jobseekers. Participants were generally supportive of the principle underpinning the Youth Obligation. They did believe that it is unacceptable for young people to become and stay NEET. However, they also raised several concerns regarding how the policy would work in practice.

Firstly, while practitioners welcomed the period of intensive activity at the start of a young person's claim, they also stated that Jobcentre Plus support needs to be delivered in a way that it is not too challenging for disadvantaged young people and does not knock their self-confidence any further.

Given the expectation that claimants apply for employment or training opportunities after six months, practitioners and training providers were concerned that disadvantaged groups could be pushed into provision that does not meet their support needs or match their career goals.

Disadvantaged young people could face further damage to their self-confidence and ability to take-up employment and training opportunities if they do not receive tailored support, to help address their complex barriers to engagement.

Some providers also felt that the most disadvantaged young people would not be ready to engage in formal employment or apprenticeships after six months under the Youth Obligation. Practitioners felt that six months would not be long enough for some individuals to enter employment without an intensive and holistic package of support. They therefore felt that a hard deadline of six months within the Youth Obligation would not work for those furthest away from the labour market.

## Conclusion and recommendations

Vulnerable young people are not widely accessing apprenticeships due to the range of barriers faced by prospective learners, employers and training providers outlined above. The Government's commitment to achieving three million new apprenticeship starts by 2020 is thereby unlikely to improve access to employment and training for the most disadvantaged young people, unless these other barriers can also be overcome.

There is also a real risk that rather than benefitting from the Youth Obligation, disadvantaged young people who face complex barriers to engagement will instead be unfairly penalised as a result of the policy. The evidence gathered shows that not all groups of young people can and will be ready to engage in employment, education or training within six months. To effectively support disadvantaged groups, a more holistic and prolonged package of support is required than is currently being proposed.

This research presents recommendations for how the apprenticeship policy and the Youth Obligation should be structured to ensure that disadvantaged young people are able to make progress towards accessing sustainable employment opportunities and thereby reduce their long-term welfare dependency.

#### **The Department for Education should:**

- Extend careers guidance in schools to include earlier promotion of apprenticeships, as well as pathways into them. This must also apply to services supporting young people who are not in formal education or training
- Strengthen and extend work experience for all 14 to 19 year olds and ensure that training providers and employers are provided with appropriate support to help deliver quality assured schemes

#### **The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills should:**

- Ensure that funds raised via the Apprenticeship Levy are available to SMEs as well as those organisations paying into it
- Incentivise all employers to provide apprenticeships for disadvantaged young people by including disadvantaged young people aged 16-24 as a group who would attract an additional incentive payment in the new funding model
- Allocate a proportion of the Apprenticeship Levy to create a support fund for disadvantaged young people, allowing employers to provide access to specialist support where required
- Make additional funds available through the Skills Funding Agency to finance traineeships
- Ensure that the Institute of Apprenticeships, Ofsted, Ofqual and the Quality Assurance Agency have the power to maintain and improve the quality of apprenticeships and are able to close apprenticeship programmes which do not meet minimum standards

#### **The Department for Work & Pensions should:**

- Include early assessment of a claimant's circumstances under the Youth Obligation and match claimants to employment and training opportunities that are consistent with their career aspirations

- Allow an extension of the six month period under the Youth Obligation if vulnerable young people are not yet work ready, but are showing acceptable progress towards work
- Ensure that the benefits system is not a disincentive to young people taking up an apprenticeship because of the impact on their or their family's income

**Employers should:**

- Play a greater role in careers guidance services for young people to improve their knowledge of different job roles and pathways into employment
- Coordinate with a young person's support provider throughout a placement to ensure the employer has a full understanding of their support needs

# 1 Introduction

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## 1.1 The Government's strategy to tackle youth unemployment

In spite of the recent economic recovery levels of youth unemployment in the UK remain relatively high.<sup>1</sup> Those aged 16-24 are almost three times as likely to be unemployed as all other aged groups combined. The proportion of young people not in education, employment or training (classified as NEET) has also remained relatively static over the past seven years, and is particularly high for those over the age of 18 (ONS, 2015). The quality of data collection and the number of young people classified as 'unknown' in the official statistics suggest that the proportion NEET is likely to be even higher than that which is reported (Fabian Society, 2014). The UK Audit Commission (Coles et al., 2010) has shown that the cost to the public purse of young people being unemployed or inactive is potentially huge.<sup>2</sup>

In response to these issues, the Government made two far reaching policy announcements in the summer of 2015 both of which aimed to increase the number young people in employment or training, and ultimately to reduce levels of youth unemployment. The Government introduced a statutory commitment to achieve **three million new apprenticeship starts** by 2020 and also announced the **Youth Obligation** for young jobseekers (HM Treasury, 2015). The rhetoric that surrounded these policy announcements was staunch: by 2017, the Government expects all young people to be either earning or learning. Ministers indicated that they wanted to create a 'no excuses' culture in terms of how they address youth unemployment and long-term welfare dependency (Cabinet Office, 2015).

### What is the Youth Obligation?

From April 2017, young people aged 18-21 in receipt of Universal Credit will participate in a three week intensive programme of support from day one of their benefit claim. After six months they will be expected to apply for an apprenticeship or traineeship, gain

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<sup>1</sup> In September-November 2015, 13.7 per cent of 16-24 year olds were unemployed. The rate for those aged 16 and over stood at 5.1 per cent (ONS, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> This research estimated that the lifetime cost to the public purse of the 208,196 young people aged between 16 and 18 who were unemployed or inactive at the end of 2008 would be close to £12 billion (Coles et al., 2010).

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work-based skills, or undertake a mandatory work placement to give them the skills they need to move into sustainable employment (HM Treasury, 2015).

While vocational training and work experience opportunities have the potential to provide long-term pathways out of unemployment, third sector organisations that work with vulnerable or disadvantaged groups are concerned about whether these policies will create opportunities that are appropriate and accessible for those they support.

With regards to the expansion of the apprenticeship programme, previous research has shown that take-up among disadvantaged groups, such as those who have experienced homelessness, is relatively low (Centrepoin, 2015). More generally, despite the number of apprenticeship starts more than doubling over the last ten years, this growth has been largely driven by increased take-up among those aged 25 and over, and the number of 16-18 year olds starting an apprenticeship has remained more or less unchanged over this period (SFA, 2016a; House of Commons Library, 2015).<sup>3</sup> In expanding the programme yet further, Government therefore need to ensure that more of the vacancies created are available to these younger age cohorts in order to help close the youth unemployment gap.

Third sector organisations have also called for the Government to ensure that the new apprenticeship opportunities that will result from this statutory commitment are of a high-quality and will lead to sustained employment. Ofsted are the latest body to raise serious concerns about the quality of existing provision in their 2014/15 review of apprenticeship programmes in England. Ofsted judged almost half of all schemes to be less than good. Inspectors found that, *'too many low-skilled roles were being classed as apprenticeships and used to accredit the established skills of employees who had been on the job for some time'*. This is linked to the increased take-up among the 25 plus age group, since many apprentices within this age band are existing employees of the company offering the training opportunity. In light of such issues, the Government has taken steps to improve the apprenticeship offer in England, for instance, through the introduction of employer-led Trailblazers in several sectors, which have sought to develop new apprenticeship standards around a set of core principles of quality (HM Government, 2015), though delivery is still small-scale.<sup>4</sup>

Turning to the Youth Obligation, the Government has not yet published any further detail on how this policy would operate. Nonetheless, commentators have raised a number of issues regarding its potential suitability for vulnerable young people. This largely stems from how disadvantaged groups have previously experienced mandatory programmes implemented through Jobcentre Plus. For instance, research on the experiences of homeless people on the Work Programme, the Government's flagship welfare to work

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<sup>3</sup> Despite a small rise in participation in 2014/15, 16-18 year olds still make up around a quarter of all apprentices.

<sup>4</sup> By October 2015, 187 Standards had been published by apprenticeship Trailblazers and more than 160 new Standards were in development (SFA, 2015). The new apprenticeships were in a number of sectors ranging from intermediate to higher levels with the majority of developments being at Level 3 (Advanced) and above. The new Higher and Degree Apprenticeships range from Level 4 (e.g. Foundation Degree or Higher National Diploma) to Level 7 (e.g. Master's degree and postgraduate certificate and diploma).

policy, shows that Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme providers were poor at identifying the circumstances and barriers to employment faced by this group (Homeless Link, St Mungo's, Crisis, 2012). The lack of individualised, specialist and intensive support for some homeless people that followed was touted as a possible explanation for why large proportions did not feel more optimistic about finding work as a result of taking part.

Poor assessments of Jobcentre Plus customers' needs and circumstances, as well as a failure to take these into account when individuals do not comply with the terms of their claim, have also been put forward as reasons why homeless people, and young homeless people in particular, are disproportionately affected by benefit sanctions compared to the claimant population as a whole. A survey of homeless service providers showed that the majority reported clients' circumstances worsening as a result of sanctions, with some pushed into debt, food poverty and survival crime as a result (Homeless Link, 2013). Only a minority reported their clients as feeling motivated to find employment due to the threat of their benefit being cut if they did not.

In order to further consider the possible implications of the new policy environment for disadvantaged groups and to offer constructive advice on what would ensure that these measures can make a meaningful contribution to improving their life-chances, Centrepoin commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) in September 2015 to further explore:

- The support needs and barriers to engagement faced by disadvantaged young people.
- Whether apprenticeships and the pathways to them (such as traineeships) are currently being accessed by the most vulnerable groups.
- What more could be done by stakeholders involved in delivery, and by specialist support organisations, to help more disadvantaged young people access these opportunities.
- Based on examples of good practice, what support will need to be offered through the Youth Obligation to ensure that those furthest from the labour market, such as homeless young people, are able to access good quality opportunities that will help them find sustainable employment.

## 1.2 Methodology

This report is based on both quantitative and qualitative research. In this study, young people are seen to be disadvantaged compared to their peers if they have experience of poverty, homelessness, disability, physical or mental illness, substance misuse or institutional care.

### Desk-research/Literature review

A brief and focused literature review was conducted in order to provide a broader context for the research, by examining, for instance, national rates of youth unemployment, NEET status and educational attainment and comparing these to the outcomes of disadvantaged groups, captured by surveys of service users conducted by third sector

organisations. This review also provided information on the age and prior educational attainment of those currently accessing employment opportunities with training, such as apprenticeships, some of the barriers to access and general lessons around the support that disadvantaged young people will require if these are to be overcome.

### Qualitative interviews

A series of in-depth interviews were conducted with:

- Ten local and national based third sector practitioners with experience of working with and offering support to disadvantaged young people (i.e. those aged 16-25) and/or individuals experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness.
- Twelve education and training providers the vast majority of which specialise in supporting learners from vulnerable backgrounds and in providing vocational training opportunities.
- Nine employers of varying sizes, which are currently involved in the delivery of apprenticeship and/or pre-apprenticeship programmes (i.e. traineeships) and a Group Training Association.

Six mini-focus groups were also conducted, which involved 24 young people. Four of these groups were conducted in Centrepoint Foyers in London and Yorkshire and the Humber, while another two were conducted with service users at Banbury Youth Homelessness Project.

### Employer omnibus

Centrepoint commissioned a short-survey of 500 employers as part of a wider business omnibus conducted by IFF Research. The survey posed four questions concerning whether employers currently offer employment, training or work opportunities to disadvantaged young people, whether they would like to provide more of these opportunities and what would incentivise them to do this, as well as the current barriers they face to increasing the representation of disadvantaged young people within the workforce.

## 1.3 Structure of this report

Looking first at the Government's statutory commitment to increasing the number of apprenticeships, section 2 of this report will consider disadvantaged young people's current level of access to these and other workplace training opportunities, the barriers that limit engagement and what incentives may encourage employers to do more in this area.

Section 3 will then consider what models of support are currently effective in moving disadvantaged young people closer towards engaging in employment, education or training opportunities and overcoming any personal barriers that they face. This is followed by a discussion of interviewee's views on the Youth Obligation, and whether it will be suitable for disadvantaged groups given their support needs.

Finally, drawing from this evidence base, section 4 will present a number of recommendations for how the Government's strategy for tackling youth unemployment (including the commitment to three million new apprenticeship starts and the Youth Obligation) should be implemented to ensure they are effective helping disadvantaged young people enter sustained employment.

However, first it is salient to consider the effects of disadvantage and homelessness on the experience of young people. In the following section, evidence from the literature review and from the research with stakeholders as well as young people who took part in the focus groups is considered. Young people's perceptions of what constitutes their greatest labour market barriers are used as an organising framework for this section.

## 1.4 Young people's experiences of homelessness and their barriers to employment

Young people who experience homelessness are significantly more likely to be NEET than the rest of the youth population. Recent research by Centrepoin (2015), showed that just under half of their service users (48 per cent) are NEET, compared with 11.7 per cent of the national population (ONS, 2015). Practitioners confirmed this, stating that large shares of their clients are NEET upon arrival. The barriers that disadvantaged young people face to finding a route into employment are complex, interacting and varied, and practitioners and training providers emphasised that their clients cannot be treated as a homogenous group.

Some of the most common issues identified through this research, however, included: prior educational experiences and poor attainment; lack of labour market experience and high competition for job vacancies; lack of a permanent address and financial pressures; low confidence, self-esteem, and personal motivation; mental health and substance misuse problems; history of institutional care; and cultural and financial barriers to travelling. Each of these challenges is discussed in turn. The work goals and aspirations of the young people interviewed for this study are then explored including whether and how they believed these will be achieved.

### 1.4.1 Prior educational experiences

Underachievement in education and disaffection from the education system, along with family disadvantage and poverty are key drivers of NEET and non-participation in education and training post-16 (SEU, 1999). Reflecting this, many of the young people who participated in the focus groups had disrupted educational experiences, particularly during secondary school, and had gained few (if any) qualifications.<sup>5</sup> Some had got into fights or experienced bullying, which affected their attendance. Others were influenced by the poor behaviour of some of their peers and got into a habit of missing lessons. A few said that they did not receive the one-to-one support they needed which affected their attainment and self-confidence.

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<sup>5</sup> This chimes with findings from an earlier study, which reported that 51 per cent of young homeless people have been suspended or excluded from school (Crisis, 2012).



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Amongst those who progressed to college some preferred the structure of learning which they found more engaging than school. However, others said they had changed and/or dropped out of courses because they encountered the same issues: they had continued to get into fights, experienced bullying, mixed with the wrong groups or did not receive the personal support they required.

Those who left school or college with few or no qualifications expressed regret. They now understood that this was a major barrier to finding employment. Many believed that if they had their current mind-set and maturity then they would have done better in education.

*'Now I have the mind-set to stick things out, like the courses I was doing [...] but I was 16, I was just thinking about getting mad with it at weekends.'*

Nick, 23

### 1.4.2 Lack of labour market experience and high competition for vacancies

At a general level, young people are disadvantaged in the labour market by their relative lack of work experience and work-related skills compared to older adults (Hasluck, 1998). More specifically, young people with low skill levels, few or no qualifications, and little tangible work experience, face labour market competition from older, more experienced and often better qualified people (Atkinson and Williams, 2003). Accordingly, some young people in the focus groups were despondent about their chances of finding work due to their lack of experience and qualifications. Their accounts suggested that this was perceived as particularly acute for disadvantaged groups, such as those living in supported accommodation.

Many felt frustrated and that they were in a catch-22 situation: they were unable to find work due to a lack of experience, but could not acquire the experience they needed without first getting a job. Some had undertaken work experience placements but found that this was not sufficient in the eyes of employers. Others identified that they were unable to provide references given that the few jobs they had held were cash in hand. Even those who had quite a bit of work experience felt that what prevented them gaining employment was a lack of appropriate opportunities in the local labour market, and high competition for the few positions that are available.

Young people taking part in the research said that they still applied for jobs in order to receive their welfare benefit but that their motivation was diminished by their lack of results. Some practitioners agreed, noting that, *'it's an employer's market'* and businesses will always prefer the more experienced candidate. Further, a few young people believed they were stereotyped by employers as well as wider society. They commented that they had been advised by their key workers to leave their address off their CV as employers would be biased against those living in supported accommodation.

### 1.4.3 Low confidence, self-esteem and personal motivation

Low confidence and self-esteem are barriers to progress for many. Practitioners noted that the majority of young people they deal with *'think they are good for nothing'* with

family circumstances, prior educational experiences and their ability to participate in the labour market contributing to this mind set.

Young people also reported that getting into a negative routine whilst staying in supported accommodation can also be a barrier to getting into and maintaining employment. For instance, young people in this situation who participated in the focus groups commented that they had irregular sleeping patterns, ate unhealthily and generally lacked discipline. This resulted in poor time keeping and attendance. They reflected that although they would like to move out of supported accommodation as soon as possible, these types of behaviours and this negative routine do not get them into a mind-set where they are actively thinking about getting into a job or training on a day-to-day basis.

#### 1.4.4 Housing problems and financial pressures

Once homeless, a vicious cycle begins of being unable to secure a job due to the lack of a permanent address. Where people can find accommodation, providing an initial deposit prevents many from taking this up. For others, low wages or being in education or training leaves them without the funds to pay for high rents and utilities. Many lack the family support and the financial buffer this might provide.

As a result some homeless young people turn to supported housing. While this can help to break the cycle of homelessness - providing them with the stability and support necessary to complete their education or training, or find work – supported accommodation can present its own barriers. In addition to the negative routine of 'hostel life', some focus group participants highlighted the large increase in rent/service charges that residents have to pay to when they enter employment. This created a disincentive to find a job as it did not allow them to save money, find their own place and move out.

The welfare system can cause additional financial pressures. As noted, young homeless people are disproportionately affected by benefit sanctions compared to the rest of the claimant population, which can result in rent arrears and (further) debt. A number of practitioners commented that Jobcentre Plus services can be poor when dealing with disadvantaged groups: they generally seem to fail to take the time to find out about individuals' circumstances, identify their support needs and barriers to work, and to suggest appropriate strategies to address these. Focus group participants echoed this view and felt the Jobcentre Plus was just there to serve a bureaucratic function and did not care about supporting them into employment.

*'All they do is see what you've done on Universal Jobmatch and go, 'yeah, you've done enough' and you're on your way. It's like, 'so you're not even going to check that those jobs are real?' [...] You're just a number on a sheet at the end of the day.'*

George, 22

#### 1.4.5 Mental health and substance misuse issues

Previous research has shown that the support needs of young homeless people are very high. Forty-one per cent have mental health problems and 30 per cent sometimes self-harm. Further, around a third are dependent on alcohol and almost 40 per cent dependent

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on drugs (Crisis, 2012). These issues can prevent young people from being able to commit to and focus on education and training or to maintain a job.

Anger management issues could also prevent disadvantaged groups from being able to complete training and maintain employment due to aggressive, violent and unpredictable behaviour. Several focus group participants noted that they had lost jobs or been excluded from school for this reason. Some practitioners felt that the issue was most prevalent among former youth offenders.

#### 1.4.6 Experience of institutional care

Homeless Link found that 14 per cent of clients had an offending history, within homelessness services surveyed (Homeless Link, 2015). Youth offending can be a significant barrier for young people trying to gain employment because of the stigma associated with having a criminal record or because of safeguarding concerns. Further, almost a third of young homeless people have been in care (Crisis, 2012). This may suggest that the care system is not adequately equipping young people, in some cases, with the independence and associated life skills necessary to make an effective transition into adulthood. For instance, Homeless Link (2012) found that 61 per cent of young homeless people who have experience of care or chaotic home lives, lack independent living skills: a necessary pre-cursor to providing the stability required for entering education, employment or training.

#### 1.4.7 Transport issues

Travel to work and/or education is another barrier preventing vulnerable young people from accessing EET opportunities, although less prominent than the factors detailed above. Training providers and practitioners believed that the young people they work often need help to travel, both financially to help cover the cost, but also in tackling cultural barriers and confidence issues that prevent them from travelling away from home. Young people in focus groups also highlighted travel as an obstacle to accessing potential training opportunities for the same reasons.

*'It was less about getting them into activities and courses and things and at that stage and more about tackling things like getting them out of their estate and helping them with public transport, building their confidence in using the bus, opening their mind to going to provision outside of their local area.'*

Provider, third sector

#### 1.4.8 Goals and aspirations

The goals and aspirations of the homeless young people participating in this research varied. Some had a 'work first' mentality and were solely focused on having a regular income so they could live independently. Others had more specific aspirations about the sector or role they wanted to work in based on their interests and perceived abilities. A few individuals from the latter group said that they were currently working towards this goal by undertaking relevant education and training opportunities, including vocational college courses, apprenticeships and degree-level courses. They spoke of the importance

of the support and guidance of key workers in helping them to plan a pathway towards work, identify and undertake these opportunities.<sup>6</sup>

However, many of the young people who had specific goals in mind were unclear about the pathways that would lead to their chosen career. Some were aware of mainstream educational pathways they could follow – such as studying for A-levels, which would allow them to progress to a relevant University course - but did not believe that these were accessible to them based on their previous attainment as well as their age (all participants were over 18), which meant that limited funding opportunities were available. Others did not believe that their career goals, such as those in the creative media sectors, could necessarily be achieved through mainstream education. This group wanted further advice from industry professionals about the approaches they had taken to find work in this area and the practical steps that they themselves could take to further their goals.

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<sup>6</sup> Specifically, key workers had assisted them in: completing application forms and putting together personal statements; considering the transferable skills that they could gain from certain programmes and roles, finding out more about the roles/industries they were considering through work experience and exposure to employers.

## 2 Access to Apprenticeships among disadvantaged young people

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In considering whether the Government's statutory commitment to significantly increase the number of apprenticeship starts by 2020 will be successful in tackling unemployment among disadvantaged young people, it is necessary to look first at their current level of access and the specific barriers they face to engaging with these programmes. Further, the factors that currently prevent those involved in apprenticeship delivery - including employers, training providers and some third sector practitioners - from offering more opportunities and support to disadvantaged groups in this area, must also be examined. Throughout the section examples of best practice are highlighted, which suggest approaches to overcome some of the key barriers blocking access for the most disadvantaged young people.

### 2.1 Access to apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeship training

Ofsted (2015) recently noted that the number of learners accessing apprenticeships aged 16-18 has remained consistently low. Within this broader picture, the take-up of apprenticeship provision amongst the most vulnerable young people appears particularly limited. Centrepoint data showed that of 815 surveyed young people receiving their support; only four per cent have ever started an apprenticeship (Centrepoint, 2015).<sup>7</sup> Qualitative findings from the current research mirror these trends. Training providers and practitioners indicated that despite good further education (FE) participation rates for disadvantaged groups at an aggregate level, these learners are most frequently engaged with lower-level vocational training (particularly Entry Level and Level 1), and to a lesser extent, traineeships. Similarly, young people in focus groups had for the most part accessed some college or FE provision, but this had primarily been to undertake other vocational qualifications, resit GCSEs or enrol on A-level courses rather than apprenticeship provision.

Considerably more of the young people receiving support from Centrepoint were interested in apprenticeship training than had gained an apprenticeship (22 per cent compared to four per cent) (Centrepoint, 2015). However, there remained 78 per cent of

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<sup>7</sup> Although of this minority suggested attrition rates were low at around six per cent.

Also note that low levels of qualification amongst the sample may account, at least in part, for their lack of access to apprenticeships (see section 2.2.2 below)

the sample who did not express such an interest. Nonetheless, all the young people taking part in the focus groups for this research were well aware of what an apprenticeship is (i.e. a form of employment with training). Furthermore, some indicated that vocational and practical forms of learning were in line with their interests, strengths and needs.

*'It would be good to see more apprenticeship type things where you're doing the work and seeing it for yourself for two to three days and then you go to college and you learn about it. It would be more interesting if that was an option. But for me to go back to college and study full-time, that's a bit off putting.'*

Tiyanna, 21

Demand side issues are highlighted through the results of the business omnibus. This showed that the majority of employers (76 per cent) do not target the training or work opportunities that they offer young people towards disadvantaged groups. However, there are significant variations according to company size. For instance, only a small minority (4 per cent) of large companies (i.e. over 250 employees) do not provide any opportunities to disadvantage young people, while less than a fifth of medium and small companies do not offer any opportunities to these groups. The data indicate that small businesses struggle most in providing employment, training or voluntary opportunities to these individuals, with almost half (46 per cent) of micro enterprises (i.e. one to nine employees) and the vast majority of sole traders (87 per cent) stating that they do not currently have any provision in this area.

Despite having limited provision for disadvantaged young people across the board, a significant minority (42 per cent) of the companies surveyed agreed that they would like to increase the number of targeted positions they offer. Compared to organisations of other sizes, higher proportions of small and micro enterprises as well as sole traders strongly agreed with this statement. This perhaps shows that smaller organisations would like to address their current low levels of provision in this area.

Where employers do provide opportunities to disadvantaged young people, 15 per cent offer work placements and 13 per cent offer voluntary positions; just seven per cent knowingly provide apprenticeship placements to disadvantaged young people and four per cent traineeships. In terms of the types of opportunities available to disadvantaged groups by sector, more businesses in the areas of transport, retail and distribution provide apprenticeship opportunities than other sectors (10 per cent), while companies in the primary, manufacturing and construction industries are more likely to provide access to work experience placements (20 per cent) and undertake outreach in schools (12 per cent) with disadvantaged groups.

Some young people in focus groups felt that their age was a barrier to them starting an apprenticeship - *'You'd have a hard time getting an apprenticeship aged 23'*. They believed that apprenticeships were more open to those aged 16-18 than for those aged 19-24 and had a vague impression that younger apprentices attract higher rates of funding. These individuals lamented *'missed opportunities'* and commented that it would have been better if they had managed to enter an apprenticeship straight from school, reflecting that they would probably be in a well-paid job now had they done so. While large numbers of apprenticeships currently go to those over the age of 25, many of these individuals are current employees of the company offering the training opportunity. For

older applicants outside of the labour market, entrance to an apprenticeship may therefore appear to be more difficult without an employer's financial backing. This indicates that the funding landscape is unclear and can be difficult to navigate for some young people. This in turn suggests the need for the provision of independent and impartial careers advice in order that they can make more effective transitions.

In light of these views, the young people that participated in the research for this study thereby broadly welcomed the Government's commitment to increase the number of vacancies available and achieve three million new apprenticeship starts by 2020. Some perceived that it would help to reduce the current high competition for vacancies.

## 2.2 Barriers for disadvantaged young people

There are a number of supply-side issues which act as barriers to apprenticeship or FE participation, particularly for vulnerable young people. In particular, low traineeship volumes (which could bridge the school-apprenticeship gap), low-quality careers guidance and lack of apprenticeship promotion within schools have been identified as blocking greater take-up (Ofsted, 2015a; 2015b). From the qualitative research, several specific barriers were noted that confirm and elaborate on these points. Some of these overlap with the general barriers identified to engaging in education, employment and training (EET) opportunities and include: financial issues, entry requirements, attitudinal/behavioural preparedness for work, the perceived value of apprenticeships and a lack of support in workplace transitions. Taken together, these factors may go some way to explain why the take-up of apprenticeships is markedly low among these groups.

### 2.2.1 Benefit entitlement and financial issues

Ofsted have highlighted that child benefit for young people aged 16 to 18 is currently available to parents whose child continues in full-time education or vocational training, but not where they become an apprentice (Ofsted, 2015). Whilst traineeships or work experience can be undertaken without a reduction in benefits, when a young person enrolls on an apprenticeship this can have the effect of reducing the household income. Training providers and practitioners emphasised that young people from backgrounds where there is welfare dependency can withdraw for this reason, sometimes as a result of family pressure. The impact of undertaking an apprenticeship on the finances of disadvantaged households that access the benefit system can thereby act as a disincentive for some young people to remain in these programmes.

Training providers and practitioners also highlighted that the future proposed welfare changes that will remove housing benefit entitlement for 18 to 21 year olds may make it financially unviable for some individuals to undertake an apprenticeship, given that national minimum wage for learners on these programmes is lower than for other employees. While the Government has promised to exempt vulnerable groups from the housing benefit measure, they have not yet provided any further detail of who will be covered by these exemptions (HM Treasury, 2015).

Pay is another prominent financial barrier for disadvantaged groups. Several practitioners noted that paid work is a major incentive for young people they support, and that debt can often be a concern. One noted that the most common reason for a young person to leave

a course was because they want to earn money and they cannot do that at college or in training. The opportunity for vulnerable young people to make a truly free personal choice between earning and learning is thereby limited by the need for financial self-sufficiency. As such, disadvantaged young people may be forced to disengage in anything other than paid, full-time work, and miss the opportunity to up-skill and acquire further qualifications. This in turn may affect their long-term career prospects and opportunities for progression.

*‘All these individuals want is to find employment and to start earning money.’*

Practitioner, Nationally-based

All the young people interviewed were aware that apprenticeships could be quite low paid, and that they could pay less than the standard minimum wage.<sup>8</sup> A few discussed their belief that they could find better paid work quite easily - for instance, via recruitment agencies – if it were not for other barriers such as the large increase in service charges they would have to pay if they entered employment. They recounted the experiences of friends who had undertaken an apprenticeship who were seen to be working a lot of hours for little pay. They asserted that friends had been able to cope with an apprentice wage as they had lived with their parents, and that this was not currently an option for them given their circumstances. This suggests that the ‘terms and conditions’ of apprenticeships can be inappropriate for vulnerable groups of young people. Practitioners therefore emphasised the importance of supporting subsistence and maintenance costs (for example, stationary or a work uniform), but noted that funds are not always available to do this, which can further disincentivise disadvantaged young people.

## 2.2.2 Entry requirements

The minimum entry requirements for many further training, education and employment opportunities, is five GCSEs at A\* to C (Centrepoint, 2015). The 2015 national average achieving these grades stood at 53.8 per cent including English and maths and 69 per cent overall, whilst 38 per cent of young people which Centrepoint supports have fewer than five A\* to C GCSEs (DfE, 2016; Centrepoint, 2015).<sup>9</sup> Three-quarters of apprentices report their highest educational qualification as Level 2, whilst only 11 per cent were qualified to Level 1, suggesting young people who fail to gain up to five GCSEs at A\*-C will struggle to access these opportunities (Centrepoint, 2015).<sup>10</sup>

Further, when employers have limited vacancies to fill they may be more likely to choose the highest qualified and candidates with the most skills and experience. This idea was reflected in the business omnibus to some degree, with 11 per cent of employers stating that a lack of skills and/or experience prevented them from offering more opportunities to disadvantaged groups. A further 12 per cent of employers stated that the main barrier to employing disadvantaged young people was that they don’t currently require any more

<sup>8</sup> Although some were aware this could vary, and that some employers are willing to pay more.

<sup>9</sup> English and maths qualifications that are equivalent to an A\* to C grade at GCSE are common entry requirements for a number of apprenticeship vacancies

<sup>10</sup> Qualifications at level 1 include: GCSEs graded D-G, Foundation Diplomas. Qualifications at level 2 include: GCSEs graded A\*-C, Intermediate level apprenticeships, Higher Diplomas.



staff. This reinforces the point that employers are able to be selective when they fill limited vacancies. One provider noted there have been ‘a few’ cases where they persuaded an employer to take on a young person that they had not initially selected but this has been ‘a leap of faith’ for the employer.

However, some employers felt that they had a strong rationale behind asking for young people to be qualified to a GCSE level, or equivalent:

*‘So if they’ve studied to an equivalent level, say they completely flunked GCSEs because life was in turmoil, and they’d gone down the college route, got something technical to a Level 2 and done functional skills... we wouldn’t discount them... [but] you do need to have a certain level of understanding.’*

Large employer

Giving vocational and academic qualifications equal recognition does provide greater inclusiveness for young people who have followed ‘atypical’ learning journeys and was welcomed. However, training providers’ and practitioners’ suggestion to get rid of entry requirements based on qualifications altogether (to reduce inherent structural inequalities) was met with resistance from employers. Those employers offering apprenticeships in traditional sectors such as engineering further elaborated on this point by stating that they have a strong union input regarding the minimum entry requirements for the vacancies they advertise and that they therefore have limited flexibility in terms of what they ask for from applicants.

Practitioners also noted that the young people they work with can have limited literacy and numeracy skills, and that they need to gain a basic foundation before they can move towards more formal qualifications. These young people frequently come in at Entry Level standard (below GCSE level), and are therefore unlikely to be ready for work opportunities until they have gained literacy and numeracy skills that employers are likely to require.

Therefore a major barrier to disadvantaged young people accessing apprenticeships and other work opportunities is that employers are usually looking for a minimum level of formal qualifications which disadvantaged young people may not possess. Employers feel that there are objective reasons for using qualifications as an entry requirement when they are filling a limited number of vacancies or when these requirements are stipulated by an external body, such as a trade union.

Traineeships may be one way to bridge this gap. These programmes, which can last up to 6 months, help 16 to 24 years olds to prepare for entry into work or an apprenticeship by providing them with the chance to gain work experience while also improving their attainment in maths and English if required. The first year process evaluation of traineeships suggests that, of surveyed trainees, *‘half (50 per cent) of the trainees who had left or completed the traineeship were either on an apprenticeship (22 per cent) or in work (28 per cent). A further 17 per cent were in training or education’* (Coleman et al, 2015). Therefore, 67 per cent of those who left or completed a traineeship were said to have a positive outcome.

### 2.2.3 Attitudes/behaviours towards work

Alongside the role qualifications play in accessing apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeship pathways, employers also stressed the importance of having the ‘right’ attitudes and behaviours for work. Some of the larger employers interviewed gave particular emphasis to a young person’s behaviours, as part of their recruitment processes.

Practitioners and training providers confirmed that disadvantaged young people can initially be ill-prepared for entry into employment. A few commented that the physical nature of work and long-hours could come as a shock for some young people, and entering a new and unfamiliar environment could be unsettling. Disadvantaged young people can also be unaware of the expectations of employers, for instance, with regards to how they present themselves, attendance, and punctuality. One provider noted that for disadvantaged learners they had to undertake a lot of work on social communication.

*‘It’s not just about the lack of skills, it’s about the attitude and behaviour behind that and then all the other issues tend to be amplified.’*

Provider, third sector

#### Best practice: Using lower-level and unaccredited learning to build work-readiness

Traineeships are a good starting point for young people to acquire work-related habits and behaviours, e.g. time-keeping. In addition these can allow learners to gain qualifications which can help them move into an apprenticeship.

*‘[From doing a lower-level course] the young person straight away has got a qualification in basic skills and it just spurs them on, you know, to go for something else and it really boosts their confidence.’*

Practitioner, Nationally-based

Some training providers who specialise in supporting hard-to-reach groups stated that they start learners on low-intensity, part-time courses and then gradually seek to increase their hours, so that by the end of their programme learners are attending centres for around 30 hours per week. This helps to ensure that young people gain the routine and work ethic needed to make a successful transition to opportunities in the workplace.

Training providers and practitioners further emphasised that it was not just familiarity with work-related behaviours that could pose a problem. Young people’s self-belief in their ability to work was low as a result of the educational, social and labour market barriers they had experienced (see section 1). This in turn could reduce motivation to engage in support programmes. Practitioners and training providers therefore have to work with young people to address the importance of work and to raise their aspirations.

#### Best practice: Using lower-level and unaccredited learning to build self-belief

Lower-level learning more broadly helps to build young people’s self-confidence, self-efficacy and their belief in their ability to study further. Unaccredited, short-term courses and informal

support can also play a role; learning need not take the form of a set programme of activities and could involve informal conversations to praise achievements and boost self-belief. This in turn can lead to progression into and in employment, and in education.

This highlights that young people's behaviour and self-confidence often need to be improved, through working with training providers, before they are likely to be able to access work opportunities.

#### 2.2.4 Awareness of the value of apprenticeship provision

Among young people, while there was a general awareness of what apprenticeships are, there was a lack of knowledge around their potential value. This included their contribution to future career and earning opportunities and tended to be concentrated among a few individuals who had the 'work first' mentality. Members of one focus group had generally negative experiences of apprenticeships which compounded this. They questioned the quality of the off-the-job training they received, which was non-existent in some cases. Further, in one instance, the work placement just re-confirmed the apprentice's existing skills and there was little room for development. This made them hesitant to engage in similar programmes in future, although the opportunity to gain work experience if nothing else was seen to be of value for future job applications. Therefore in some cases, young people may be justified in perceiving apprenticeships to be of little benefit to them, because sometimes they have very poor personal experiences of the quality of these schemes. This highlights the need for the overall quality of apprenticeship provision to improve (Ofsted, 2015a).

The lack of awareness among young people about the potential value of apprenticeships may be linked to the level of careers guidance which young people receive. Providers, practitioners, employers and young people all emphasised that the restructuring of careers guidance within secondary schools was having a clear impact on the ability of vulnerable young people to make informed decisions about their careers. This includes the removal of a statutory duty to delivery work experience, which '*enhances the postcode lottery as some schools buy into the idea and others do not*'.<sup>11</sup> Some young people are therefore denied the opportunity to draw on high quality first-hand information to challenge stereotypes or navigate their education or career.

*'Personally I don't think careers advice in school is the best... I think depending on the school it's hit and miss what you get, really. Some are well prepared, others don't have a clue.'*

Large employer

Further barriers in this area included the raising of the participation age (RPA) to 18 years from 2015, which some training providers felt may incentivise more young people to remain in education, linked to the perceived dearth of independent and impartial careers information, advice and guidance following the national restructuring of these services

<sup>11</sup> Although provision of work experience is recommended by Government and is a criteria of Ofsted assessment.

and the disbanding of the national Connexions service.<sup>12</sup> The results of the employer omnibus also show that only a small minority of businesses are currently undertaking any outreach in schools, which may further restrict young people's awareness of non-academic educational pathways post-16.

### **Best practice: Provision of high-quality, realistic careers advice to increase the take-up of apprenticeships**

Reintroducing high-quality careers information, advice and guidance can heighten awareness and support informed career decision making of vulnerable young people, ensuring that (vocational) opportunities are not restricted at an early age. Discussions with training providers, practitioners, employers and other stakeholders suggest that effective practice involves:

- Promotion of vocational pathways on an equal footing with academic routes;
- Detailed and practical information about applying and completing an apprenticeship, including the intersection with other qualifications;
- Realistic information about what it will be like to enter work or further learning;
- Embedding employability skills within pre-apprenticeship provision and lower-level learning;
- Provision of high quality workplace and work-related exposure for young people; and
- Direct employer engagement with young people's careers advice to provide real life, applied information about job roles, industries and entry pathways.

*'It's about having the support to know which route to take. Loads of people know that they want to be technicians or builders for example, but they don't know [what it would involve]. Maybe having somebody there to guide you on the best way to do it, or someone who has actually done it before and can advise on what worked for them.'*

Abigail, 19

It is clear that young people are not receiving the information and careers advices that they need to be able to make informed decisions about education and vocational options. This means that a further barrier to young people accessing apprenticeships between the ages of 16 and 18 is that they are unaware of the options available to them, other than staying in further education.

<sup>12</sup> The RPA policy requires that young people remain in some form of education or training up to the age of 18. As such, apprenticeships and part-time study alongside work or volunteering are permissible. However, this may not be well understood and it may be easier for pre-16 providers to assist young people to progress in education rather than support them into the labour market.

## 2.2.5 Unsupported workplace transitions

Another barrier for learners successfully accessing work opportunities is that if they transition into the workplace without support there is a risk of relationship breakdown or disengagement between employers and learners. Firstly, if training providers do not carefully match employers and young people in placements, this can endanger the young person's engagement and ability to sustain their position. This relates both to aligning a young person's aspirations with a particular vocation but also ensuring that they are placed with staff that understand their situation and can offer appropriate support.

Additionally, providers and practitioners described how a lack of wraparound support during the initial stages of workplace exposure heightened the likelihood of attrition/drop out. It was stated that work placements may be at greatest risk of breakdown during the first six weeks as young people struggle to adjust to new routines, requirements and responsibilities. It was widely accepted that vulnerable groups thereby require additional support and advocacy during the first few weeks of their placement to iron out any issues that they experience. This underlines the importance of clearly setting the expectations of both employers and young people. Employers need to be aware of the learner's circumstances so that they can offer the right support and learners need to be explicitly told what is expected of them in a workplace environment.

*'Those that come from chaotic families, they still carry those issues with them.'*

Provider, third sector

Without the external support of training provider or practitioners, who can act as intermediaries between the young person and an employer and as an advocate for the former, it can be hard to overcome any relationship breakdown that occurs during a placement. For example, if a young person has an issue or has not turned up to work one day, without the encouragement or intervention of an assessor, they may be reluctant to return to the employer because they are worried about potential repercussions. Likewise, without neutral support within the workplace, it may be harder for young people to raise and have addressed any concerns they have, leading them to disengage.

Where placements lack clear instructions or forward planning, or require variable shift patterns, this can make it harder for young people to structure their life around day to day realities of work without extensive labour market experience to fall back on. Financial outgoings (for example, paying for lunch or for uniforms) can be an additional obstacle in the early stages of a placement that may lead young people without disposable income or familial financial support to disengage.

### Best Practice: Supporting young people during their workplace transition(s)

#### Training providers and practitioners

Where a young person is already familiar with an assessor or tutor, having a presence at the workplace or being escorted there on their first day provides a friendly face that can help overcome the initial shock of transition.

Moving forward, provision of on-going support from training providers and practitioners can help to maintain momentum, self-confidence and engagement. This can take many forms: regular visits to the workplace, monthly meetings, regular telephone catch-ups or use of texts and WhatsApp. In addition, when issues of workplace conflict arise, a means to arrange mediation and keep channels of communication open is already available.

Further into a placement, learners can be 'weaned off' this support gradually as they become more self-sufficient, in such a way that it does not put the placement at risk.

### Employers

Clear instructions and carefully planned schedules during the initial phases can help young people to adjust and familiarise themselves with new routines and workplace behaviours, increasing the likelihood of successful sustained engagement.

Arranging staff support structures outside of line management – such as peer mentors, or Occupational Health services – provides new staff with a more neutral space to discuss issues they face and work towards addressing these.

*'Say they're struggling at home or their parents are getting divorced, it's a very difficult time, they've had bereavement, whatever it may be, we've got a free an confidential helpline that gives them counselling, advice on whatever they need.'*

Large employer

This highlights that disadvantaged young people require extra support during transitions to training or employment, and that these additional requirements need to be clearly articulated to the employer they are being placed with.

## 2.3 Barriers for training providers and practitioners

Evidence from the literature highlighted a number of barriers for training providers and practitioners which inhibit volumes of EET opportunities for young people. Firstly, considerably more 16 to 18 year olds apply for apprenticeships than those aged 25 and over, but far fewer become apprentices as, *'meeting recruitment targets was often the priority for providers'* and, *'providers preferred to recruit an employee who required little training onto an apprenticeship'* (Ofsted, 2015a). This mirrors the experience of some young people in focus groups who were outside of the labour market, who felt that being aged 19 and over made it harder to access apprenticeships (see section 2.1).

Other studies have shown how training providers can find it hard to source work experience opportunities for all of their study programme learners (Ofsted 2015c). The qualitative research supported this finding, with some providers commenting that employers could be reluctant to provide unpaid opportunities within their organisation due to the negative press that has surrounded such placements in the past. For instance, interviewees described employers' fear that placements could be perceived as supplying cheap labour for the organisation while offering little benefit to the young person in terms of gaining valuable experience and skills.

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Interviews with training providers and practitioners highlighted a number of further barriers. One particular component is the lack of knowledge about pre-apprenticeship pathways amongst support organisations. This results in both insufficient careers guidance for young people and limited referrals. Some interviewees emphasised that within both statutory and non-statutory bodies staff need to be more knowledgeable about opportunities (including traineeships), eligibility criteria and benefit entitlement.<sup>13</sup> Key workers in supported accommodation were also identified as sometimes lacking this knowledge. It was felt it would be helpful if they had greater awareness of local provision and were also challenging their young people more and enforcing some sort of discipline, for instance, by asking, *'why aren't you in school today'*.

#### **Best Practice: Capitalising on pre-apprenticeship provision to up-skill young people**

Training providers recognised that pre-apprenticeship programmes can provide young people with the experience and motivation necessary to progress in training whilst also still receiving all of their welfare benefits. Traineeships (and by extension, other work-based learning) were seen to provide young people with a chance to make an impression on the employer and potentially be kept on. This underlines the importance of better awareness of these options.

Training providers also noted that statutory and third sector support (particularly in mental health and careers guidance services) was diminishing due to financial pressures and lack of funding which put additional pressure on their time, resources and expertise. It was suggested that educational and community funding authorities were not targeting funds towards these local needs. The support needs of learners therefore fell to training providers to address; some larger, non-specialist organisations commented that they felt ill-equipped to deal with these requirements.

Likewise, limited flexibility in the functional skills requirement of most entry level provision in the FE sector (i.e. the 16-19 study programmes) made it difficult to engage young people who may have previously had negative educational experiences. Maths and/or English could be subjects that young people recalled with particular anxiety or displeasure. Providers explained that obliging young people to revisit these formal components early in their journey before they had the opportunity to build self-belief and confidence in learning could cause them to disengage. The current scarcity of more flexible provision – for instance, such as that provided through the European Social Fund - was seen to further compound the problem.

#### **Best Practice: Provision of supportive training environments**

Training providers and practitioners must provide supportive training environments, both for pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programmes in order to support disadvantaged young people to achieve their potential. This can involve a number of different elements:

- Robust absence monitoring systems;

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<sup>13</sup> Including but not limited to Jobcentre Plus, young offending teams, Local Authority personal advisors and voluntary sector organisations

- Clear protocols for staff and students to flag concerns and have these escalated, if appropriate;
- Breakfast clubs, lunchtime sessions or other opportunities for learners to develop relationships with peers and tutors;
- Small class sizes, for example a tutor ratio of no more than five-to-one;
- Opportunities for peer-learning, peer support and personalised tutor support for each young person;
- Allowing for extra time in the classroom or 1-2-1 time with a tutor if needed;
- Capitalising on professional expertise and the information provided about learners from support services e.g. mental health or emotional wellbeing specialists;
- A culture of emotional support so young people feel confident to share with staff the problems they face

## 2.4 Barriers for employers

The results of the omnibus showed that almost a fifth of respondents do not believe there are any barriers to them providing more opportunities for disadvantaged young people in particular, and a significant minority (44 per cent) stated that they do not need any extra incentives to increase provision for these groups. However, as highlighted earlier, too few opportunities are still being knowingly offered to disadvantaged young people nationally, with 76 per cent of employers not specifically targeting opportunities at disadvantaged groups. Given that respondents showed enthusiasm to work more with these groups, with 42 per cent agreeing that as a company they would like to offer more provision in this area, these findings perhaps indicate a lack of awareness among businesses about how the opportunities they currently offer may be better targeted, why this is an important social issue and/or how greater engagement can benefit the business.

Of those that did identify barriers in delivering apprenticeships and other provision, these relate to some of the obstacles faced in delivering work or training opportunities more generally. For instance, the most commonly cited barriers were a lack of funding to support more positions (15 per cent) and that the organisation does not require any more staff (12 per cent): demand-side issues that are not specifically related to the circumstances or background of those that apply.

Time constraints on small businesses as well as lack of staff to support learners/apprentices was reported in the literature to be the main barrier preventing small and medium enterprises (SMEs) from providing work experience and apprenticeships (Ofsted, 2015c). Findings from the business omnibus indicated that that pressure on company resources is a more common barrier for SMEs than for larger companies. However, smaller employers within the omnibus were more likely to report the up-front financial costs of providing these opportunities and a perceived lack of skills and experience among disadvantaged young people as barriers to increasing provision.



Training providers similarly agreed that these barriers are particularly prevalent amongst SMEs in general and micro businesses and sole traders in particular. Whilst they may be aware of apprenticeships and keen to deliver a programme, a lack of familiarity with the process and an absence of forward planning can make it hard for smaller employers to deliver and sustain apprenticeships and work experience placements.

The literature further suggested that SMEs can find it hard to identify the business benefits deriving from delivering apprenticeships and/or work placements. During interviews with employers it was apparent that this can be an issue even amongst larger organisations:

*'It always takes a while for apprenticeships to be seen as really valuable.'*

Large employer

Other barriers that employers cited in interviews included where applicants possess a criminal record (although this might not necessarily deter them from offering a placement), a lack of specialist or relevant training provision, as well as the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy. On the latter point, one large employer stated that they had a finite budget for their apprenticeship provision. The additional financial contributions they would be required to make as part of the levy would come from this pre-existing budget. Given their desire to maintain the support facilities that they made available for apprentices – including, for instance, maintenance grants – they commented that they would thereby have to reduce the volumes of apprentices that they recruited each year. Other large companies stated, however, that the levy would act, as intended, as a monetary incentive for them to do more.

### **Best Practice: Raising employer awareness of the realities and returns of offering opportunities to disadvantaged young people**

From a training provider perspective, appetite amongst employers to work with young people who face various forms of disadvantage was thought to be sufficient. Much of this links with Corporate Social Responsibility commitments; employers are often keen to work with and help mentor these groups and/or give something back to the community in which they are located. However, findings from the omnibus suggest there may be a lack of awareness among the business community more widely of how to provide these opportunities, or how to better target them towards disadvantaged young people. This may in part account for the experience of young people in focus groups who described a competitive marketplace with often unresponsive employers.

Specialist training providers, skilled in supporting vulnerable groups, offer one solution. Facilitating direct engagement between employers and disadvantaged groups can help highlight the challenges these young people face in terms of accessing employment opportunities and the social benefit of addressing these barriers. As highlighted earlier, increased exposure also helps in terms of articulating the needs and circumstances of disadvantaged groups to ensure employers are fully informed and placements are not at risk of falling through. 'Business breakfasts' and job fairs were found to be particularly effective ways of facilitating this direct interaction.

*'You'd be surprised actually how adaptable employers will be if you're honest with them... That's been a real learning curve, that the good will from employers is amazing.'*

Practitioner, Nationally-based

### 2.4.1 What more could be done to incentivise employers?

As highlighted, the most common barrier to employers providing more opportunities to disadvantaged young people identified in the business omnibus is a lack of funding (15 per cent). This was more frequently cited as a barrier among small companies than larger ones, which suggests that greater financial support - for instance, in the form of additional payments, incentives or grant funding - would be most effective at increasing provision if they were targeted at organisations of this size (i.e. with less than fifty employees).

In the qualitative research, employer views were mixed on the best way to route further funding to help them offer more opportunities. One employer believed that funding is going too often to small charitable enterprises, and that it would be more beneficial for it to go to employers because employers know where the skill gaps are and most would be happy to provide training if they had the funding to do it.<sup>14</sup> However, they recognised that they would still require advice on how to support disadvantaged groups from charitable organisations who have this expertise. Another employer likewise noted that providing funding direct to employers would allow them to provide more direct support such as mentoring. However, another firmly believed that providers should be the ones managing funding.

*'The fact that the Government thinks they're doing employer a favour by saying it will come into your control? Actually, if you speak to the employers I speak to, we don't want it, we want to leave it with the experts who know what they're doing and capitalise on the opportunities to drawn down funding.'*

Large employer

For larger organisations, different measures would be required. For instance, compared to organisations of other sizes, a higher proportion of large companies stated that a barrier to providing more opportunities to disadvantaged groups was the fact that the nature of the roles available in their organisation are not suitable for young employees. In order for some large businesses to increase the chances they offer, it may be that these organisations require more advice on how particular roles can be broken down into smaller discrete tasks, with some of the more routine functions being undertaken by less experienced employees. This so-called 'job carving' is already a strategy practiced by organisations that provide supported employment opportunities for those with learning difficulties or disabilities.

It was further suggested that a simplification of the training marketplace would make it easier for employers to engage with training programmes. For (smaller) employers without

<sup>14</sup> Under the current reforms, it is intended that the funding for apprenticeship training will be routed through employers.

a background in training or investing in skills, this was said to be a real minefield. Identifying the right training provider and recruiting and selecting the right candidate was characterised as a messy process with much to-ing and fro-ing. Furthermore, understanding the terminology and frameworks used within the skills system (e.g. the difference between a Level 1 and Level 2 qualification) can also make it hard for some organisations to interpret offers from training providers. Without a dedicated member of staff to keep on top of changes, the changing provider landscape may be hard to navigate. Employers suggested lessening the bureaucracy while keeping the standard and content of provision consistent. Exploring what practical steps could be taken to achieve this would be a useful area for future research.<sup>15</sup>

Some small to medium sized employers stated that they would be encouraged to provide more opportunities to disadvantaged groups if they were able to 'shout about' and market these activities. They stated that not only would it create a feel good factor within the organisation, it could also enhance their public image and potentially contribute towards winning more project work.

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<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that under the Train to Gain offer, which operated between 2008 and 2012, a skills brokerage service was made available to employers. However, training providers remained the key contacts for SMEs.

## 3 The Youth Obligation scheme and effective models to support re-engagement

As outlined in section 1, disadvantaged young people face a number of barriers to labour market participation and have a wide array of support needs. In exploring how the Youth Obligation should be implemented in order for the policy to be effective for the most vulnerable groups, the following section draws together data from the interviews conducted with practitioners, training providers and the focus groups with young people. This is used to outline **six key principles that underpin effective models of support for this cohort in terms of moving them closer towards engaging in EET opportunities**. It is important to highlight that the following principles were not discussed in isolation by practitioners; they were very much seen as supporting one another and were most effective when applied as part of a holistic package of support. In light of this knowledge of what works for disadvantaged groups, the views of participants on the proposed Youth Obligation are then presented.

### 3.1 Effective models to support re-engagement in EET

1. Several practitioners highlighted the need to **assess a client's support needs, goals and aspirations during an early stage** of their engagement with a young person and to **review these as they make progress**.

While allowing for referrals or signposting to relevant specialist support services to be made, an assessment of needs also helps to prompt young people to be self-reflective and consider where they see themselves in future. Interviewees commented that some of their clients have difficulties in thinking beyond their day-to-day lives and in seeing the long term pay-off of engaging in certain activities, such as education and training; many are very focused on acquiring a job, having an income and being self-sufficient, but are less clear about what will help them to achieve this goal.

An early assessment is therefore beneficial in beginning to change this mentality and in ensuring that young people are open to the prospect of education, training or work experience when they are better prepared to engage. If a young person is unclear about their long-term career goals, then this assessment can also help to determine where the young person's strengths and skills lie and prompt them to recognise these in order to help build their confidence.

Practitioners and providers described these initial assessments as typically being quite informal to ensure that their clients are relaxed and open about what it is they want to do. Particular elements are sometimes led by the young person themselves (e.g. self-assessing soft skills) to encourage greater self-reflection.

Support workers regularly review a young person's progress, see whether they have had any further conversations with other support staff about what their aspirations may be and provide the young person with feedback on how they are doing to increase their confidence further and again encourage them to be self-reflective.

2. From this assessment, and the regular reviews of a young person's progress, both practitioners and training providers stated that **clear goals should be agreed with the young person** - linked to the interests, strengths and skills they have helped to identify – and that **these goals should drive and inform all subsequent activities that they are encouraged to engage in.**

In practice, this means that an overarching long-term goal is agreed with a young person alongside short-term steps they can take towards achieving it. Interviewees commented that the less goal focused a young person is, the harder it is to move them on into employment or training. It is important that the conversation is always centred on preparing them for work so they are aware of and ready to make this transition.

Further, if the long-term gain of engaging in education, training or work experience is clear and tangible to the young person, they are more likely to sustain and complete these.

*'They need to be able to see the link between what they're doing and where they're going [...] if we can't explain [that] to a learner [...] and how it will help them get a job then they shouldn't be doing it.'*

Provider, third sector

Some interviewees stated that goal-setting can help prevent a young person becoming too settled in what should be seen as a supportive, but temporary environment.

3. The activities described – undertaking early assessments, goal-setting and conducting regular reviews – also contribute towards **the development of a holistic, personalised action plan for each young person.**

The purpose of developing a rounded, personalised plan for young people with complex and differing support needs was self-evident to many of the practitioners and training providers interviewed for this research. Unless the programme of activities they developed with a given individual was sufficiently tailored to their interests and circumstances, and responds to the issues presented during the initial assessment, their support needs would not be met and the young person would not make progress. Practitioners and training providers, as well as young people themselves highlighted how a one-size fits all approach, typified by their experience of mainstream education, had failed in this respect to enable them to achieve and leave secondary school or college with high attainment.

*'No two young people go on exactly the same plan or the same programme. It's genuinely tailored to individual needs. And it has to be because a young person who's presenting with low confidence/self-esteem vs. someone who's maybe coming through the youth justice system – both need support, but need support in totally different areas.'*

Practitioner, Nationally-based

Both practitioners and providers illustrated how this tailored approach should also inform support workers' daily interactions with each young person. They stated that this would help to ensure that any agreed programme of activities could be responsive to on-going developments in a young person's personal life, and that support workers or tutors could use their discretion and judge when the most appropriate time is to broach certain topics with the individual concerned. This would avoid putting undue pressure on young people, which may affect what they are able to gain from any agreed activities or even cause them to disengage.

This individualised plan and support also helps to increase the self-esteem of the young person as they can see their own progress. Practitioners and training providers commented that for many of their clients this is the first time that they have received this level of attention; the young people feel that their support workers care about them and want to see them succeed. Given their prior experiences of education and possibly even family breakdown, this is new for many. The focus groups with young people supported this view and showed that they valued being treated as an individual.

4. Linked to this point, practitioners and training providers stated that in their work with clients, it is crucial to **provide a young person with the support network that they may be lacking.**

Interviewees highlighted that constantly providing encouragement to the young people they support, even for undertaking small tasks or activities, is important in terms of building their confidence and developing their sense of self-worth. In providing this familial-type support, one practitioner was keen to point out that creating a nurturing environment is distinct from being overbearing and strict with the young people.

*'You give them support and encouragement, which I think a lot of young people would get from their families, but a lot of our young people don't get that sort of encouragement at home. So you're like a nurturing parent almost, which some of them have never had.'*

Practitioner, Locally-based

*'It's not about mothering; it's about nurturing rather than mothering.'*

Practitioner, Nationally-based

The young people taking part in focus group who had received this form of support – for instance, by undertaking an employability skills course at a small, specialist provider – reported these gains. As well as constant encouragement, another element that helped them to engage with the course was the sense that support staff or tutors cared and were

empathetic about their situation and wanted to achieve the same goal. They felt that staff were supporting them because they cared rather than because this was their duty.

*'They do actually care.'*

Laurie, 22

*'They're not out there for themselves.'*

Simon, 19

*'At school they just care about the mass [of pupils]. Here, they care about each and every one of us.'*

George, 22

Most of the support organisations interviewed for this research had several members of staff working with each young person in different areas of activity (e.g. learning and employment, accommodation). Many stressed that it is important to recognise which members of staff have the best relationship, having built rapport and established trust, with the young person, so these individuals can have a greater role in the support offer (e.g. conducting review/progress meetings).

5. In assessing a young person's needs and interests, and in developing a tailored action plan that will help to meet these and provide clear goals for an individual to work towards, interviewees stressed that **a young person should be put in a position where they are going to succeed.**

For those young people that are some distance from the labour market, this involves agreeing small, easily obtainable goals at an early stage of their engagement with a support organisation, as well as supporting them throughout the transitions they might make as highlighted in the previous section. As has been highlighted, low self-confidence and self-efficacy is a prevailing barrier to accessing EET opportunities for socially and economically disadvantaged young people. Many have had negative educational experiences in the past, which has instilled a 'can't do' attitude that prevents them from engaging in similar activities in future. Setting the young person realistic goals that they can achieve within a short time frame and ensuring that prior negative experiences are not repeated is therefore important in helping to counteract these self-perceptions. It contributes towards building a young person's confidence that they are capable of progressing and of attaining the qualifications, experience and skills that will enable them to fulfil their longer term ambitions.

*'A lot of them have been told they're thick and stupid all the way through school and they just believe it [...] and basically that's where we start from and we get them to the stage where you know what? I am worth something, and I can do this and I will do this and I will get a job and I will get a flat and I will get a car and I will stay out of prison.'*

Practitioner, Nationally-based

The focus groups with young people confirmed that many are keen to make progress towards their long-term goals – such as finding work and becoming self-sufficient – quite quickly. Those who had been in support accommodation for some time and felt they were making slow progress towards this expressed frustration at their situation.

6. Finally, in delivering this package of support, several practitioners stated that in order for this approach to be effective, it is necessary to **get the young people to take responsibility for their own progression.**

Some interviewees stated that they make clear to the young person that they expect something back from them in return for the flexibility and support they've given them. They commented that they will never impose any activities on the young person, and characterised their approach as being a collaborative one. However, they do attempt to show the young person *'tough love'* on occasions and hold the young person to the actions that they agreed that they would undertake.

## 3.2 Views of the Youth Obligation

Many of the practitioners and training providers that participated in the research were supportive of the principle underpinning the Youth Obligation: namely a recognition that it is not acceptable for young people to become and stay NEET, and that there should be targeted national initiatives to help them to progress into positive destinations. However, given interviewees experience of working with disadvantaged young people, and their knowledge of what works for these groups, several concerns were raised regarding how the policy would work in practice:

- While the period of intensive activity at the start of a young person's claim was welcomed by some - recognising that many need support in developing their employability skills, such as how to draft a CV – interviewees stated that **Jobcentre Plus support needs to be delivered in such a way so that it is not too challenging for disadvantaged young people and does not knock their self-confidence any further.** They also observed that for the hardest to reach groups, many will require mentoring and emotional support in order to make progress, and that guidance around employability skills can therefore not be delivered in isolation.

*'Just employability support on its own won't help those hardest to reach.'*

Provider, third sector

- Regarding the expectation that young claimants apply for an apprenticeship or traineeship, gain work-based skills, or go on a mandatory work placement after six months, there was a **perceived risk that disadvantaged young people could be pushed into an opportunity that does not adequately address their support needs or match their career goals and aspirations.** It was felt that these groups could potentially face further damage to their perceived ability to undertake EET opportunities if they did not receive tailored support to help address their complex barriers to engagement. As highlighted in section 1, the costs to the public purse of failing to address the issues that cause young people to be unemployed or inactive at an early stage can be vast (Coles et al, 2010).



- There was also a concern that disadvantaged young people could be at greater risk of having their benefit sanctioned if they did not meet the terms of the obligation for these reasons, or because the opportunity in question was not linked to the career they wanted to pursue.

*'Get to know that person [...] find out what they want to do. If you're going to push people, at least push them in the right direction. Don't push them to rebel.'*

Jade, 19

- Some of the practitioners stated that the most effective strategy to motivating young people to engage in EET opportunities is to provide them with access to high quality schemes that they can see value in. The focus groups with young people supported this finding with participants stating that they would only be encouraged to engage if the opportunity is linked to what they want to do in future, or if it does not present other issues such as being too far to travel to or not providing sufficient pay. If the opportunity does not match these criteria, focus groups participants observed that many young people will simply disengage and stop claiming benefit with some potentially turning to black labour market activity if left with no other option.
- Some practitioners and training providers also **commented the six month period in which young people have to be ready to engage in an employment, education or training opportunity would not be long enough for some of their clients to overcome the barriers that they face** without an intensive package of support that even they themselves were unable to provide in some cases. They therefore felt that this aspect of the policy would not be appropriate for those furthest away from the labour market.

*'It's not going to work is my perspective [...] unless there's a huge amount of support and preparation put in prior to that [...] our experiences here clearly show that six months isn't long enough to get this cohort ready for that at all.'*

Practitioner, Nationally-based

*'If you're going to make something compulsory, there has to be a support structure in place. To enable it to be successful it has to acknowledge that there will be some vulnerable groups being mandated that require intensive support in order for their barriers to be overcome.'*

Practitioner, Nationally-based

## 4 Policy recommendations

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### 4.1 Areas for action

The findings from this research show that vulnerable groups of young people are not widely accessing apprenticeships due to the range of barriers faced by prospective learners, employers and training providers outlined in section 2. The impact of the Government's commitment to increasing the number of vacancies available and achieve three million new apprenticeship starts by 2020 is thereby likely to be limited in terms of improving access unless these issues are addressed.

These include a training provider marketplace and funding system that young people, employers and support organisations find confusing, difficult to navigate and lack knowledge of; limited and inflexible lower-level training provision that can provide a pathway to other training and work opportunities; and a lack of support services in some areas for learners with additional needs. Further, there appears to be a general lack of awareness among employers of why increasing provision for disadvantaged groups is important and/or how opportunities may be better targeted or additional posts created within their business. The financial costs of providing more opportunities are also a concern for employers: both small and micro enterprises have limited resources and large organisations will be subject to the Apprenticeship Levy, which may affect their current training offer.

The preparedness of young people to enter into apprenticeship opportunities was also highlighted as a barrier, as were issues around the perceived value of these programmes in terms of pay and how they would contribute towards a young person's long-term career prospects. Proposed welfare changes, the high degree of variability in the quality of local careers guidance services alongside the introduction of the RPA and the misperceptions of, and perverse incentives created by this policy were seen to risk restricting access still further.

In terms of the Youth Obligation, the evidence presented in the preceding sections suggests that not all groups of young people can and will be ready to engage in work, education or training within the stipulated six month period, and that those that present several complex barriers to engagement, such as homeless young people, may be unfairly sanctioned as a result of this policy.

This research therefore presents several recommendations for how these policies should be implemented in order to best support disadvantaged young people to make progress towards and access training and sustainable employment opportunities:

### **The Department for Education should:**

- Extend careers guidance in schools to include earlier promotion of apprenticeships, as well as pathways into them. This must also apply to services supporting young people who are not in formal education or training, such as Jobcentre Plus services, youth offending teams, Local Authority personal advisors and voluntary organisations.

Newly proposed legislation that will require schools to collaborate with colleges, university technical colleges and other training providers to ensure that young people are aware of non-academic routes post-16 is a welcome step forward in this regard.<sup>16</sup>

- Strengthen and extend work experience for all 14 to 19 year olds and ensure that training providers and employers are provided with appropriate support to help deliver quality assured schemes.

This would help ensure that young people have greater workplace exposure and are better prepared for entry into employment or employment with training.

### **The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills should:**

- Ensure that funds raised via the Apprenticeship Levy are available to SMEs as well as those organisations paying into it
- Incentivise all employers to provide apprenticeships for disadvantaged young people by including disadvantaged young people aged 16-24 as a group who would attract an additional incentive payment in the new funding model

These measures would help to ensure that employers, particularly small companies, receive greater financial support in order to help them cope with direct costs of providing more opportunities to disadvantaged young people: a barrier identified to increasing provision for these groups.

- Allocate a proportion of the Apprenticeship Levy to create a support fund for disadvantaged young people, allowing employers to provide access to specialist support where required

This would ensure that learners are able to remain in placements within the workplace, especially during the first six weeks when their engagement is most at risk.

- Make additional funds available through the Skills Funding Agency to finance traineeships

This would help to improve the pathways into employment that are available to disadvantaged groups. Early evidence suggests that traineeships can offer good rates of

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<sup>16</sup> For more information see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-law-will-end-outdated-snobbery-towards-apprenticeships>

progression into apprenticeship programmes as well as work. The length of the work placements completed as part of a traineeship can also be extended if learners are not ready to progress.

- Ensure that the Institute of Apprenticeships, Ofsted, Ofqual and the Quality Assurance Agency have the power to maintain and improve the quality of apprenticeships and are able to close apprenticeship programmes which do not meet minimum standards

This would help to ensure that those undertaking work experience placements are actually getting trained on- and off-the-job and can see the value of engaging in these programmes in terms enhancing their future career prospects.

#### **The Department for Work & Pensions should:**

- Include early assessment of a claimant's circumstances under the Youth Obligation and match claimants to employment and training opportunities that are consistent with their career aspirations

This would ensure that disadvantaged young people are recognised as such, and are enabled to maximise any additional support. It would also help make certain that they remain engaged with the employment or training opportunity they are matched to.

- Allow an extension of the six month period under the Youth Obligation if vulnerable young people are not yet work ready, but are showing acceptable progress towards work

This would allow young people who are identified as being quite distant from the labour market through an initial assessment to have more time in which to prepare for entry into an EET opportunity, if needed.

- Ensure that the benefits system is not a disincentive to young people taking up an apprenticeship because of the impact on their or their family's income

This may encourage greater participation and also help to address the perception among young people that they would be financially worse-off if they undertook an apprenticeship.

#### **Employers should:**

- Play a greater role in careers guidance services for young people to improve their knowledge of different job roles and pathways into employment

Employers that participated in this research viewed this activity as important and it was clearly valued by young people in learning about different job roles and potential pathways into employment.

- Coordinate with a young person's support provider throughout a placement to ensure the employer has a full understanding of their support needs

This would help to avoid relationship breakdown between the employer and young person, and ensure that appropriate support is put in place.

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