

Response to the call for submission of evidence to Young People and Work Report (December 2025)

Spark is a youth-led, not-for-profit organisation based in Birkenhead, Wirral, working at the frontline of the transition between education, unemployment and work. Part funded by DWP and corporate fundraising, Spark offers place-based Youth Employment and Youth Enterprise Hubs. It provides practical, relationship-driven support that helps young people and builds confidence, develops skills and offers mentoring. Young people are consistently supported to connect directly with employers, training providers and entrepreneurial opportunities. Spark has 1,801 members from a broad demographic, ranging from 3rd generation unemployed to recent graduates. Over the last five years Spark has embedded itself into the business community, professional services and local SMEs. It creates impact because it is grounded in sustained, real-world delivery demonstrating what happens when trusted local intermediaries coordinate support across education, employment and wellbeing to re-engage young people.

Our findings have addressed the two questions from the call in the main part of this report, but we have summarised the critical points here;

- Systems are failing - not individual deficit
- Huge gaps between mental health demand and response
- Employers use outdated entry routes in a changing labour market
- Government benefits system constrains aspiration and is inflexible.
- First focus on confidence, belonging and opportunity over skills deficits
- Safe spaces are needed to transition from school-to-work
- Place-based trust and local intermediaries are essential
- Belonging and purpose by all involved will drive sustainable programmes

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

NEET is often the end point of system failure, not individual choice. We found that young people rarely “opt out” of work or learning and because they are often enrolled on a programme or are instructed to gain employment in an area of dis-interest this results in **weak retention and damaged aspirations**. Becoming NEET is not by choice and is typically the result of **repeated rejection or exclusion, unmet additional needs and systems that are not designed to flex** around complex lives that emerge through other

factors. Time and again we see **processes that take precedence over people**. By the time young people reach Spark, many have **lost trust in formal systems** and no longer believe those systems are “for people like them”. ***Spark insight: Re-engagement starts with the development of a relationship, rebuilding trust and identity, not compliance or conditionality.***

Mental health is a barrier, but the structures and systems response often don't meet demand. Mental health and neurodevelopmental conditions are highly prevalent among Spark participants. In our recent survey of 418, 54% (225) felt secure enough to disclose having a mental health condition. This is higher than average for disclosure in the workplace (CIPD). Young people describe **anxiety about workplace expectations, fear of sanctions or failure and long waits (c.2 years) for clinical support** but are expected to “be work-ready”. Spark sees the person and meets them where they are to ensure that progress happens alongside ongoing health support. This is essential to forming effective relationships but often a conflict of interest for different services – and manifests in claims of ‘dual accounting’. There is a need to join up these services. ***Spark insight: Work-related activity, purpose and belonging can be part of recovery, not something that is linear or should wait until recovery is complete.***

The **labour market is shifting, but entry routes/criteria have not**. Employers increasingly value pace, emotional resilience, prior experience but still use traditional methods to recruit (*we have always done it this way*). Entry-level roles often exclude the young people they are meant to serve. SMEs (97% of the UK business demographic) in particular, want to help but lack time / resource / capacity as well as confidence / knowledge base around HR and employment and lack the structures and resource to support wrap around care. Direct Line Motability is a local employer working in partnership with Spark. We ran 6 bespoke employer and young person sessions/workshops and DLM conducted 39 interviews. 14 were unsuccessful, 25 were offered a job and 1 declined. This is a conversion rate to employment of 64% with a current workplace retention of 90%. ***Spark insight: Young people need stepping-stone (positive role model) roles, and employers need trusted intermediaries to de-risk participation.***

The benefits system decreases aspirations. Many young people at Spark explain that a lack of opportunity is intensified by the limitations of benefits income, they are unable to go out and about to network, connect and develop a more resilient approach which impacts on mental health capacity. Some will be the 4th generation of unemployed families. This is compounded by restrictions surrounding activity, for example, DWP sanctions, 35 hours job search, mandatory attendance for interviews and being referred to un-fit compulsory programmes. This often leads to the avoidance of short-term opportunities that are presented and the reluctance to test work readiness. The system

seems to unintentionally reward inactivity over progression and aspiration. An embedded practice for several years. ***Spark insight: Progress is rarely linear; systems need to flex and tolerate false starts and learning periods. Young people's expectations often need to be managed. Opportunities are needed for young people to gain sector insight and confirm if this is or is not - the sector (not role) for them to pursue.***

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

Stop focusing on hard skills, developing confidence, belonging and opportunity will fill the gap and encourage participation and learning. Many young people have basic skills or qualifications, but do not often see themselves reflected in professional environments. Unsurprisingly, this creates a lack of social capital and positive networks. The main driver behind lack of confidence is the limited exposure to real workplaces and professional influences/experiences. Spark's enterprise and employability programmes demonstrates that confidence grows fastest when young people are able to work on 'real life' problems/projects, trusted with responsibility ("we'll do it with you, but not for you" approach) and can see tangible outcomes from their effort with a stepped approach (career ambition with a clear pathway). ***Spark insight: Employability is about identity and self-belief as well as skills acquisition. We immerse young people in local industries with wrap around support, arranging placements and volunteering opportunities to grow skills and confidence.***

Create flexible bridges - transitions between school and work are where young people can get lost. Spark understands that the most common transition points are often between school and FE, dropping out of FE and completion of skills programmes – the "what next?" moment. At these points accountability is unclear and young people often wait to be instructed of their next steps, therefore developing frustration when they feel support is moving away. Often young people don't know what they don't know and rightly or wrongly, they need to find their own pathway. Meaning they are expected to self-navigate complex systems, this is where Spark fills the gap to offer the wraparound support and insight. ***Spark insight: Transition support should be a defined function, not an assumed outcome. By building bridges between communities, corporates and young people, we navigate the unknown pathways and build the confidence levels of young people within the process.***

Place matters – local, trusted organisations are critical. Spark's local presence enables trusted relationships to be formed with the wider community and employers. There is a huge gap between a young person and their future employer and a flexible, human response to both is needed. National systems often struggle to reflect the opportunities that employers are able to provide, the local labour market skill set and

aligning these with aspiration, outcome and fundamentally community context. ***Spark insight: National reform will only succeed if it empowers strong local delivery infrastructure (i.e. Trailblazer) crucially listening to the voice of young people whose motivation is often ethically fuelled. Spark have formed a Youth Voice (Sparkling's) to ensure that the young persons perspective and voice is heard in decisions that affect their future.***

Everyone plays a role in creating sustainable participation. Young people benefit most from forming personalised, relationship-based support in a familiar and inclusive environment. Opportunities to further wraparound services often ensure gaps are closed and young people receive support from a trusted and consistent source (access to food, sexual health, citizens advice, legal, housing, etc.). Systems work best when employers, education, health and support services collaborate, as this prevents duplication of processes that can feel like wasted time. Putting the person first can allow outcomes to be defined beyond job entry (confidence, stability, progression). ***Spark Insight: Sustainable participation comes from belonging, purpose and progression, not pressure.***

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