

Breaking Down Barriers:
Working Towards
Birmingham's Future

*Supporting Younger People
Into Employment*

July 2021

The Cabinet Office, Birmingham City Council

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Executive Summary

The case for change

In February 2020, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, 6.3% of young people aged 18-24 in Birmingham and 6.1% in the West Midlands were unemployed. By March 2021, this had risen to 11.6% in Birmingham and 11.5% in the West Midlands – an increase of over 5%. When we remove economically inactive young people who are not currently seeking employment, such as students, youth unemployment in the city rose to approximately 20% as of April 2021. Almost one in five young people in Birmingham are now out of work - substantially greater than the current UK average of 13.5% for 18 to 24 youth unemployment.

Young people have been uniquely exposed to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Facing widespread disruption to their education, and more likely to be employed in those sectors closed during lockdown, many young people across Birmingham have had their plans for the future put in doubt. The evidence suggests that young people will also face an increasingly tough job economy once the furlough scheme is withdrawn and may find themselves competing for jobs against a much more experienced workforce.

As the youngest city in Europe, with almost 40% of our population aged under 25, an urgent policy response from partners across Birmingham is required – both to safeguard the city's recovery from Covid-19, and to prevent a new 'crisis cohort' of young people facing long-term damage to their careers and lives.

Methodology

In developing this report and recommendations, we spoke to almost 2000 young people across the city, 300 businesses, and a range of stakeholders from across education and front-line services. We deliberately adopted a 'bottom-up' approach to understanding the challenges being faced on the ground in Birmingham, across all parts of an increasingly complicated employment and skills landscape.

Despite the ongoing challenges posed by the pandemic, we have sought to engage with young people directly, to explore their lived experiences and perspectives of Covid-19 as well as their continued hopes for the future. While we cannot hope to fully capture the experiences of all young people in the city, we are confident that our research reflects the wider trends and issues affecting young people seeking work experience or employment in Birmingham.

Key Findings

Finding One: Covid-19 has not created new barriers to employment and work experience for young people. Instead, it has exposed and exacerbated inequalities that already existed prior to the pandemic.

Over the course of our research, the people we spoke to were clear that Covid-19 has not created new barriers to employment. Instead, it had exposed the issues and inequalities that already existed

prior to the pandemic – and, in many cases, made them worse. Wider socioeconomic factors, such as household income, ethnicity, experience of care, and mental health, play an important role not only in determining employability, but in young people’s experience of the pandemic and the extent to which Covid-19 has impacted on their aspirations and future plans.

Finding Two: Not all young people are struggling. In fact, there is a significant cohort of young people whose employment and career prospects do not seem to have been significantly negatively impacted by Covid-19.

A key emerging theme over the course of our research was that of contrast – a city separated into the ‘haves and have-nots’, where some young people found themselves homeless and relying on food banks while others reported few (if any) negative effects from the pandemic. Within this latter group, a range of social, economic and personality protective factors can be identified, helping us to understand what enables young people to succeed in the workplace and in life. Higher levels of household income, family stability, and extensive social networks have all played a key role in helping some young people to survive – and even thrive – during the pandemic.

Finding Three: The pandemic has negatively affected the mental health of young people of all backgrounds, with decreasing confidence levels having a significant impact on the ability of many to find work experience or paid work.

While the focus of our research was on employment and work experience, we found evidence that the mental health of young people is under increasing pressure as a result of the pandemic, with young people from all backgrounds feeling the strain. Evidence came from both young people themselves and the services who worked with them, and demonstrated a clear negative impact on both the motivation and ability of young people to engage in job-seeking activities in the aftermath of the pandemic. Timely access to mental health services is clearly important to help young people who find themselves struggling; however, there is also a role for schools and education providers to play in boosting the resilience and confidence of young people and safeguarding their mental health in the long-term.

Finding Four: Young people need access to the right technology to succeed in a post-Covid world – as well as the space and time to use it.

Most of the barriers to employment we explored during our research pre-existed Covid-19, despite becoming more visible or widespread in the wake of the pandemic. There was one exception to this rule – access to technology and the internet. The rapid shift to remote working across a range of sectors means that having access to a laptop (or other internet-enabled devices) has become a necessity for young people seeking employment and work experience opportunities. Inequities in access to technology between different groups of young people, and other environmental factors affecting the ability to work remotely, will be a key factor in tackling widening employment inequalities post-Covid.

Finding Five: Work experience is a major source of anxiety for young people, who are struggling to find the right opportunities to build their CV and demonstrate their value to employers.

Work experience is a vitally important factor in employability for many young people, giving them the opportunity to develop skills, experience a variety of different working environments, and enabling them to make better decisions about their future career. In the face of macro-economic trends such as the increase in zero-hours contracts and the rise of the gig economy, and a corresponding decline in traditional part-time jobs, young people often rely on work experience to build their CV and demonstrate their value to employers. The decline in work experience opportunities as a result of Covid-19, and the transition to virtual work experience placements, is a major source of anxiety for many young people and a barrier to employment for those from the most disadvantaged groups.

Finding Six: There are major concerns that careers advice services are not providing young people with the skills and knowledge that they need to succeed in the modern world of employment.

Formal careers advice, as one of the main ways in which young people learn about their post-16 options and all the opportunities available to them, is a significant factor in future employment success. While we found numerous examples of best practice careers services in Birmingham, we also heard from a range of stakeholders across education and business who are concerned about the variable quality of careers advice provided to young people across the city. It is not clear that current service models are fully equipping young people with the skills and knowledge that they need to succeed in the modern world, with potential gaps around developing transferable or entrepreneurial skills and engagement with employers.

Finding Seven: There is a significant communications gap between young people and employers, which is in danger of damaging young people's long-term prospects and the economic recovery from Covid-19.

One of the most significant discoveries over the course of our research was that of a major communications failure between young people looking for employment, and the businesses seeking to employ them. This operated across a number of levels, from young people having an unrealistically pessimistic view of their employment prospects, to business struggling to identify the right channels and language to engage with young people, all the way up to a fundamental gap in how both sides understand and assess skills. This communications gap is having a significant negative impact on both the employability of young people and the recruitment practices of businesses, threatening not only young people's future career prospects but also the wider recovery of businesses post-Covid.

Finding Eight: Businesses, especially small and medium sized enterprises, currently face a number of barriers to employing young people or offering them work experience.

Businesses are clear that employing young people is a priority - not just to ensure a pipeline of future talent for their organisations, but to 'build back' a stronger and more resilient West Midlands economy after the pandemic. Despite this enthusiasm, however, they continue to face a number of significant barriers to offering young people paid work or work experience. Some of these barriers, such as social distancing restrictions and reduced cashflow, are directly related to Covid-19 and might be expected to naturally ease over the course of the recovery period. Other issues, however, represent longer-term barriers to youth employment and may require special intervention as part of Covid-19 economic recovery planning. These include internal resourcing and capacity, and low awareness of the schemes specifically designed to help young people in employment.

Finding Nine: There are concerns that the employment and skills landscape is overly complicated and difficult to navigate, for both young people and businesses.

The current employment and skills landscape is complex and difficult to navigate even for 'experts', with a wide range of different initiatives, support organisations and funding sources. Businesses perceived the current system as excessively complicated, especially for micro or SME businesses, and often struggled to know where to go for up-to-date comprehensive information and advice. The challenge facing businesses was reflected in their low levels of awareness of both specific youth unemployment initiatives and the organisations that provide youth employment support and advice. To help tackle this issue and cut through the complicated landscape, there was a great deal of support for the development of a 'one stop shop' central hub to help build networks, share best practice, and advertise opportunities for young people.

Finding Ten: Businesses have mixed opinions of the effectiveness of existing youth employment schemes, including the new Kickstart scheme. There are a number of issues with the design of Kickstart that are likely to reduce its effectiveness in tackling youth unemployment as part of Covid recovery.

A range of initiatives already exist to help support young people into employment, ranging from paid schemes such as graduate schemes and apprenticeships to unpaid development opportunities including work experience and volunteering. Businesses have mixed views on the effectiveness of these schemes, including the new Kickstart scheme launched in autumn 2020. Employers identified a number of issues with the design and implementation of Kickstart that are affecting its ability to deliver the right number and quality of candidates to businesses. Without intervention to address these issues, we found that Kickstart is unlikely to play an effective role in reducing youth employment as part of the Covid recovery.

Recommendations

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, Birmingham was a city on the cusp of great things, with the 2022 Commonwealth Games projected to kick off a transformational decade of investment and growth. The longer-term economic benefits of the Games, alongside the arrival of HS2 and the development of a series of key employment and housing generating sites across Birmingham, will create an unprecedented series of 'once in a lifetime' opportunities for the United Kingdom's second city, launching us onto the international stage. These opportunities must be carefully leveraged to maximise the local benefit for local citizens and communities, including young people, if we are to truly make the most of the future that collectively awaits us.

The recommendations in this report will feed into the delivery of Birmingham City Council's Economic Recovery Strategy, including the work of the new Birmingham Employment Taskforce. Working together with stakeholders from across the city, the Taskforce will oversee the policy response to youth unemployment and the development of a new Employment Strategy, informed by the findings of this report and an extensive ongoing programme of engagement with young people themselves.

Recommendation One: Reduce the cost of public transport for 16 to 18 year olds

Work should take place with partners to explore how the cost of travel could be reduced further for young people in this age group, building upon existing concessionary schemes and seeking to join up coverage where young people fall between the gaps of schemes. Work should also be undertaken to review the concessionary fares available to those aged 11 to 16, with options developed to reduce these further.

Recommendation Two: Support young people's mental health

It is recommended that greater access to general mental health support within schools, education providers and workplaces is made available to support young people. We also recommend that partners locally review existing strategies relating to young people's mental health in light of the challenges posed by the pandemic, and where appropriate make representations to Government for further funding.

Recommendation Three: Support young people to build confidence and resilience

We recommend that further work is undertaken to explore how resilience and confidence-building activities can be built in across the wider school curriculum at all ages, but with a particular focus on preparing young people for adult life. Examples of best practice, including work already carried out by specialist youth support services, should be highlighted and options considered for expansion of the offer to ensure equal access across the city.

Recommendation Four: Develop a comprehensive city-wide mentoring scheme

Work should be undertaken to develop an easily accessible, city-wide mentoring scheme to connect young people with mentors from across the world of business, including entrepreneurs and the self-employed. Consideration should be given to the idea of 'peer mentors', linking young people in with successful people from similar ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds. Care should be taken to ensure that such a scheme does not duplicate existing provision, instead existing to link up and coordinate the offer across the city.

Recommendation Five: Facilitate accessible work experience opportunities

A city-wide system should be created for the facilitation of work experience placements, both to ensure that all young people have an equal opportunity to gain experience and skills, and to support businesses (of all sizes) to identify and recruit the talent that they need. This is likely to include two elements: the creation of a single database of education and training providers seeking work experience opportunities for students, and support for businesses seeking to offer placements (especially micro-enterprises and SMEs).

Recommendation Six: Design and implement a city-wide Digital Inclusion Strategy

Birmingham should develop a city-wide approach to digital inclusion, linked to existing regional aspirations (including the West Midlands Digital Inclusion Coalition) and underpinned by a robust partnership framework for action bringing together the public sector, voluntary and community

organisations, and businesses. Consideration should also be given to the provision of secure, comfortable and accessible space for young people to use the internet and internet-enabled devices.

Recommendation Seven: Give young people a voice through the 'Brum Talks Festival'

We recommend the establishment of an annual 'Brum Talks Festival', celebrating the achievements of young people in Birmingham and providing a high-profile platform for them to raise issues of concern directly with representatives from the public, community and voluntary, education and business sectors. This event should be delivered as part of an enhanced package of investment into youth participation and engagement services across Birmingham.

Recommendation Eight: Reshape careers advice and guidance services

Careers services across Birmingham should be improved to ensure that all young people are being equipped with the skills and knowledge that they need to succeed in the modern world. This should include:

- A focus on developing the behaviours, attitudes and skills (both soft and hard skills) that are required to support long-term career success and employability, as opposed to simply 'getting a job'.
- The supply of more comprehensive insight and intelligence in relation to growth sectors in the local economy.
- Advice and guidance on the range of careers options and qualification pathways that could lead to employment in said growth sectors.
- Ensuring a more central role for local businesses in the design, development and delivery of careers services.
- Support to help young people identify, package and 'sell' their skills to employers.

Recommendation Nine: Create a 'one stop shop' in the form of an online hub

We recommend the creation of a 'one stop shop' in the form of an online hub, showcasing opportunities for 16-24 year olds looking for work experience and employment opportunities. The functionality of such a hub would need to go beyond simply advertising vacancies or matching candidates to opportunities, but would need to function as a central source for careers advice, sharing best practice, and facilitating network building between education providers, Birmingham City Council, business membership organisations and local businesses (including large organisations, micro-businesses, and SMEs). The hub could also host a city-wide work experience system, as suggested in Recommendation Five.

Recommendation Ten: Deliver a locally designed scheme of employment support for young people and businesses

Considering the feedback received in relation to the deficiencies of nationally devised support schemes such as Kickstart, and in line with the Government's commitment to 'level up', it is recommended that partners across Birmingham seek the support of national government to design and implement a local scheme of youth employment support.

1. Foreword

The Covid-19 pandemic has created some of the most serious challenges facing the UK and the city of Birmingham since the Second World War.

In addition to the human tragedy, substantial damage has been caused to the local economy with unemployment as of May 2021 standing at 14.9%, well above the national average.

As we shift our focus from the immediacy of pandemic ‘response’ to that of economic and social ‘recovery’, it is vital that we act to tackle the long-standing inequalities that existed pre-Covid and have been exacerbated during 18 months of lockdown. We can only do that by ensuring that the benefit of future economic growth is felt by all parts of our City and each one of our communities.

The opportunities available to Birmingham over the next few years are significant with the Commonwealth Games less than 12 months away, the imminent arrival of HS2, the planned regeneration of strategic employment and housing sites across the City and the drive towards decarbonisation.

The focus of this report is upon young people and specifically how the Council and key partners can support them to gain meaningful experience of training and employment.

They have been one of the groups hardest hit by the pandemic with youth employment in Birmingham currently at just under 20%. We have engaged with thousands of young people across the city and key partners in the education and business sectors with the aim of identifying the barriers to employment and training and devising practical solutions to overcome them (as set out in the recommendations section).

We have deliberately adopted a ‘bottom-up’ approach to understand the challenges being faced ‘on the ground’ and in the case of younger people to hear directly about their lived experience. The recommendations in this report will feed into a broader strategy which is being devised by the Council’s new Employment Taskforce in conjunction with key stakeholders from across the City.

As the Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member with responsibility for Education and Skills we are proud to sponsor this piece of work. It is an area close to both of our hearts. As one of the youngest cities in the country we need to take immediate action to support younger people through these difficult times by helping them to fulfil their potential and enjoy a prosperous future.

Councillor Brigid Jones

Deputy Leader of the Council

Councillor Jayne Francis

Cabinet Member for Education, Skills & Culture

2. Introduction

The purpose of this research is to identify the key barriers facing younger people in accessing education, training and employment opportunities.

Youth employment is a significant issue in the City, with approximately 1 in 5 younger people out of work, a situation that has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Prior to the pandemic, the City was on the cusp of great things and remains so: the Commonwealth Games and associated long term economic benefits; the arrival of HS2; the area with the highest levels of foreign direct investment in the UK (after London) and a pipeline of employment and housing generating sites located across Birmingham that are ripe for development.

The City, therefore, has the ability to offer significant opportunities to younger people to boost their experience, skills and gain employment.

Following extensive engagement with 2000 young people, 300 businesses and key stakeholders across the education and skills sector, a set of practical recommendations have been produced which if implemented, could assist in providing greater access to employment and training arising from the opportunities (and others) referred to above.

Youth Unemployment in Birmingham – The Covid-19 context

As set out in Table 1 below, nationally approximately 63% (437,000) of those who lost their jobs during the pandemic were under 25, while a further 25% were aged 25 to 34 (174,000). Those in older age groups accounted for just over 16% of the figure, with 109,000 35 to 49-year-olds and 5,000 over 65s losing their jobs.¹ In addition, as of 31 March 2021, 761,900 jobs held by those aged 24 or under are currently furloughed through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme ('furlough scheme', representing 21% of eligible jobs. This suggests that the severity of youth unemployment in the UK may be masked until the furlough scheme ends.²

Age Ranges	Jobs lost during the Pandemic
Less than 25	437,000
25 to 34	174,000
35 to 49	109,000
65 or More	5,000

Table 1 – Jobs lost during the pandemic

The higher rates of youth unemployment correlate with those industries that have also been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, most of which sit within hospitality. Customer facing roles in hotels, pubs and restaurants have all been severely impacted as well as roles in creative industries.³ Prior to the pandemic, 22% of young people worked in sectors that were essentially shut down for large periods of time during lockdown. In contrast, the share of all UK employees working in these sectors was lower at 16%, emphasising the disproportionate impact of the pandemic upon young people.⁴

¹ [Politics Home](#)

² [Youth Unemployment Statistics](#) – Research Briefing; House of Commons

³ [ONS - The impact of the coronavirus so far: the industries that struggled or recovered](#)

⁴ [COVID 19 and the career prospects of young people](#)

In the West Midlands from November 2019 to January 2020, the unemployment rate stood at 4.5%.⁵ From December 2020 to February 2021, the unemployment rate had risen to 5.5%, a rise of 1%.⁶

In February 2020, 6.3% of all young people aged 18-24 in Birmingham and 6.1% in the West Midlands were unemployed. By March 2021, this had risen to 11.6% in Birmingham and 11.5% in the West Midlands - an increase of over 5%. When we remove economically inactive young people (i.e. young people in full-time education that are not actively seeking employment) youth unemployment in the city rises to approximately 20% (as of April 2021). This means that approximately 1 in 5 economically active younger people in Birmingham are unemployed. This is substantially greater than the current UK average of 13.5% for 18 to 24 youth unemployment.⁷ Birmingham is one of the most impacted regions in the UK with the highest unemployment rate of the UK's core cities.

The economic impact on young people has been significant, as has the related impact on their wellbeing. In a survey carried out by the charity Prince's Trust, 24% of young people felt the pandemic had destroyed their career hopes whilst 23% of young people aren't confident about their future career, rising to 40% for NEET young people (Not in Education, Employment or Training).⁸ This theme is further developed in the Key Findings to this research.

The evidence suggests that young people will also face an increasingly tough job economy once the furlough scheme is withdrawn and may find themselves competing for jobs against a much more experienced workforce. At the end of January 2021, 68,200 Birmingham workers were furloughed which is 16% of eligible employees in the city.⁹ Many of these workers will be vulnerable to unemployment when the scheme is withdrawn as businesses ability to employ and pay workers is by no means guaranteed as Government support starts to be withdrawn.¹⁰ There are also worrying discrepancies between the Government's unemployment figure and other data sources such as tax records and benefit claimant counts, suggesting that the true unemployment figure is much higher.¹¹

A major feature of this project has been collaboration. We have engaged with key stakeholders both internal and external to ensure that this research is relevant and tailored to the city of Birmingham. The 'bottom up' approach that has been adopted has meant that we have been able to collate feedback based upon stakeholder's experience 'on the ground' of what works and where there are gaps.

This spirit of partnership and collaboration will also be required as we look to deliver potential solutions to the challenges identified in this report.

In terms of the structure of this report, we will first look at the methodology utilised to undertake this research followed by a detailed analysis of the key themes and findings. We will then present the recommendations.

⁵ [Labour market in the regions of the UK: March 2020](#)

⁶ [Labour market in the regions of the UK: April 2021](#)

⁷ [NOMIS – Labour Market Statistics](#)

⁸ [Princes Trust Tesco Youth Index 2021](#)

⁹ [Birmingham City Council – Economic Recovery Strategy](#)

¹⁰ [COVID-19 in the United Kingdom: Assessing jobs at risk and the impact on people and places](#)

¹¹ [300,000 UK jobless hidden by official figures](#) – The Guardian

3. Methodology

In this section, we set out our research methodology – how we designed and carried out the research that has informed this report and our recommendations. This includes how we structured the project, the different research and data collection activities that took place, and how we ensured that we were building an accurate picture of the challenges facing young people in Birmingham today.

Our research approach

Throughout this project, we have been guided by a number of key design principles:

Bottom-Up

Seeking out every opportunity to understand the immediate challenges ‘on the ground’ in Birmingham, listening directly to the lived experiences of young people.

Collaborative

Working together with partners and front-line organisations across Birmingham to understand the factors affecting youth unemployment, sharing information and listening to different perspectives on the issues.

Covid-safe

Keeping everyone safe by making use of new and innovative research methods to collect data, including WhatsApp Diaries, virtual roundtables and online surveys. Working in this way meant that we could continue with our research and keep pace even in the face of changing restrictions.

Evidence-led

Exploring issues with an open mind, allowing the evidence and emerging findings to guide the project and inform our key lines of enquiry rather than sticking to pre-conceived ideas about what we would find.

Holistic

Understanding that a wide range of different factors affect the employment prospects of young people, including (but not limited to): mental health, household deprivation or poverty, physical health, geography, and access to education. We also recognise that some groups of young people are likely to face additional challenges due to longstanding structural inequalities, linked to protected characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or disability status.

Iterative

Taking every opportunity to test our findings and emerging themes as we went along, constantly refining our key lines of enquiry and deepening our understanding of the issues over the course of the project.

Mixed methods

Balancing detailed insight from qualitative research methods such as interviews and focus groups with the use of broader quantitative data collection methods such as surveys.

Research design

Our work on this project took place in three phases:

Phase One – Mapping and Evidence Review

July 2020 – November 2020

- Formation of an initial multidisciplinary Officers Working Group from across Birmingham City Council, mapping existing education, employment and training services in Birmingham pre- and post-pandemic.
- Review of pre-pandemic data on youth unemployment, and emerging evidence of the impact of Covid-19 on young people in Birmingham, the West Midlands and the United Kingdom.
- Leading on from the evidence review, identification and exploration of some of the key factors impacting on the employability of young people, including ethnicity, economic background, and gender. Many of these factors are also more likely to make some groups of young people more vulnerable to the impact of Covid-19.

Phase Two – Research and Data Collection

December 2020 – May 2021

Data collection in this phase took place across three main strands:

- **Young People**

Qualitative interviews

Between November and December 2020, we commissioned BeatFreaks to carry out a series of in-depth interviews and WhatsApp diaries with 6 young people from across the city, including young people from traditionally underrepresented groups such as young people with experience of care and young people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities.

Quantitative survey

Between 2nd and 18th February 2021, we worked with One Black Bear to survey 1733 young people across Birmingham to explore their experiences of the pandemic in three areas: financial/economic, mental health, and seeking employment or work experience.

- **Businesses and employers**

Roundtables

Working with the Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce, we held two roundtables with employers from across the city on 19th March and 27th April 2021. Across these two events, we directly spoke to twenty three representatives from a range of different businesses and sectors, all the way from micro-employers with less than twenty employees to major public sector anchor institutions.

Quantitative survey

Between 29th March and 23rd April 2021, our commissioned survey from the Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce reached 238 businesses. Questions included topics such as the barriers facing young people seeking employment or work experience, how well current initiatives were working, and how we could all work better together to improve opportunities for young people across Birmingham.

- **Education stakeholders**

Roundtable

On 11th May 2021, we held a virtual roundtable with 8 senior representatives from across the education and training landscape in Birmingham, including representatives from secondary schools, colleges, universities and independent training providers.

Quantitative survey

Between 28th April and 11th May 2021, we surveyed eighteen education providers across Birmingham, seeking their views on the impact of the pandemic on young people, barriers to employment and work experience, and what could be done to enhance careers services in the city.

Phase Three – Analysis and Development of Recommendations

May 2021 – June 2021

- Additional engagement exercises on 2nd June and 15th June 2021 to understand the experience of care-experienced young people in Birmingham, including representatives from Birmingham Children's Trust, Job Centre Plus and independent support providers.
- Analysis of data, including emerging themes.
- Development of final recommendations.

Stakeholder and sector engagement

Over the course of this research, and at every stage, we have constantly sought to engage with a wide range of stakeholders involved in education, employment and training across Birmingham. This includes colleagues from within Birmingham City Council, as well as representatives from public sector partners, universities, schools and independent training providers. Where possible, we have tried to talk to subject matter experts and those with front-line experience of delivering services, as well as strategic and systems leaders from across the city. We have found this engagement to be invaluable, not just in strengthening our own knowledge of the landscape but to ensure that this research, and the final recommendations, feel like something everyone can take ownership of.

We recognise that there are a great many people across Birmingham doing a great deal of excellent and innovative work to support and empower young people – before, during and after the pandemic. One thing that we have never doubted is the commitment, passion and enthusiasm of service providers. This research is intended to identify, strengthen and build on the best practice that is already present in many areas, adding rather than duplicating value.

Need for future research

Throughout this project, we have worked hard to ensure that the data we collect is accurate, inclusive and representative of broader trends across Birmingham, the West Midlands and the United Kingdom. We do not claim, however, that our research is exhaustive. There is a clear need for further research exploring the experiences of young people seeking employment and work experience, and the longer-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the city. Other groups, such as young people with special educational needs or disabilities, those with experience of the justice system, or young carers, are also likely to face unique barriers to the workplace. We hope that this report, and the data that underpins it, encourages others to carry out their own research and build on what we have learned. We would particularly encourage further research involving young people directly, either as co-producers or youth researchers.

4. Key Findings

In this section of the report, we summarise the main findings and emerging themes from our research. Throughout, we have tried to bring together statistics and direct quotes from research participants – exploring not only the broad social and economic trends affecting young people, but also the reality of their individual lived experiences during Covid-19.

We also identify some areas where further research would be useful, either to explore a specific issue in more depth or to follow up how things may change over time.

Finding One: Covid-19 has not created new barriers to employment and work experience for young people. Instead, it has exposed and exacerbated inequalities that already existed prior to the pandemic.

Over the course of our research, the people we spoke to were clear that Covid-19 has not created new barriers to employment. Instead, it had exposed the issues and inequalities that already existed prior to the pandemic – and, in many cases, made them worse.

“The pandemic has done nothing but amplify the issues that were already present. For example, poverty. The government assumes that food poverty has increased due to COVID, when in actuality the levels have increased very slightly, it’s just that now the stigmas around accessing support are starting to be broken down.”

Black/Black British Female (23), Young People’s Survey

Across Birmingham and the United Kingdom, there are longstanding differences in employment outcomes between different groups of young people. Employability – the set of skills, personal attributes, and ‘cultural know-how’ that makes someone more likely to gain and retain employment – is affected by a wide range of cultural and economic factors. Household income, housing suitability, mental health and physical health status are just a few of the wider social determinants that impact on the ability of a young person to succeed in the workplace. Certain groups of young people, including care-leavers and young people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities, already face additional barriers to employment compared to their peers, and the pandemic is in danger of widening these equality gaps substantially.

“All the barriers that have been there beforehand have been amplified through the pandemic. So you’re working on what was, and all the new ones... Those seem to be the barriers for us, the existing ones, which have just been compounded by Covid.”

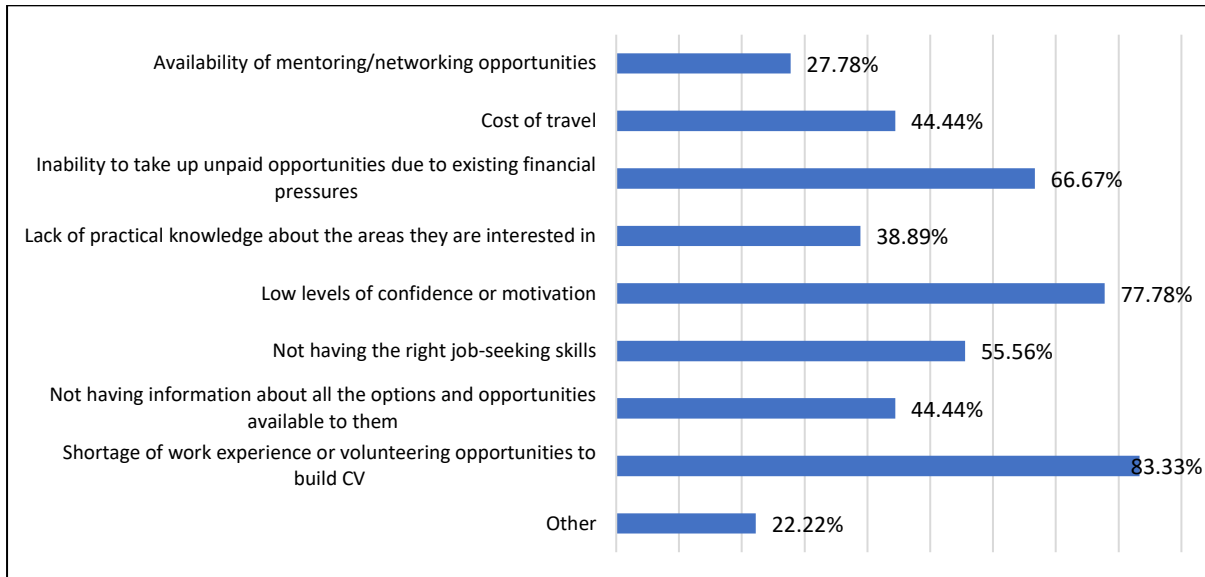
University representative, Education Roundtable

What the education sector told us

Education stakeholders, both in our survey and roundtable discussion, identified a wide range of potential barriers to employment and training for young people in the wake of Covid-19. These ranged from the practical (not having access to the internet or internet-capable devices, the cost of

travel, not having information about all the options available to them) to the personal (low levels of confidence or motivation, a lack of aspiration). Many of the barriers identified were linked to wider social and economic factors that extended beyond the young person’s control, such as the need to balance employment with other caring or financial responsibilities, or not having the right family connections or ‘know-how’ to seek out opportunities.

‘In general, what do you think are the main barriers for young people when seeking employment and/or work experience?’



Source: Education Stakeholders Survey, 2021

There was general agreement from education representatives that young people furthest from work were likely to be facing a number of different barriers to success, rather than one major barrier in isolation. The best services are those which are able to provide holistic, individually tailored support to young people seeking employment, working across the range of different intersectional factors affecting employability.

“We say this about our students, and it’s true for all age groups, they have a lot of complexity in their lives, a lot of caring responsibilities, which they just manage in a non-Covid world, but the Covid pandemic has really brought to the fore and just shown us that we have to work differently.”

University representative, Education Roundtable

Aside from the increasing importance of technology and internet access (which is covered in Finding Four), all the major barriers identified pre-existed the pandemic.

Among the education institutions we spoke to, there was a growing awareness of the ways in which the on-site facilities that they provided, such as communal study areas and computer rooms, had helped to mask the extent of inequalities among their students prior to Covid-19. It was only during the pandemic, when restrictions forced the closure of campuses and other free-to-access services such as public libraries, that they became aware of how many people did not have either the space, time or equipment to successfully work and study from home. Examples like these demonstrate how

the pandemic has on the whole not created new barriers to employment - merely exposed those that already existed.

“So there’s all those things added in, which have just become more acute through the pandemic. And obviously as an institution, we’ve been supporting students and giving them...we’ve discovered all these additional barriers that we hadn’t fully appreciated, because of course they’ve come to campus to use our resources and all that one-to-one sort of thing.”

University representative, Education Roundtable

Many identified barriers to employment were seen as disproportionately affecting young people from our groups of interest. To the extent that the pandemic has exacerbated these pre-existing issues, it is also in danger of widening employment gaps between different groups of young people.

What young people told us

The majority of young people that we spoke to, both in interviews and surveys, were still living in the family home. 87.8% of respondents to our survey stated that they were living with parents or other family members, with only 2.7% living on their own. Living with family members could be a double-edged sword. Where the family environment was stable and supportive, it could act as a protective factor during the pandemic, helping to reduce feelings of isolation and provide a financial ‘buffer’ where young people had lost their jobs or other sources of income. For other young people, however, living in the family home could become a source of stress in its own right, with many research participants stating that they had taken on additional financial or other responsibilities during the pandemic. In our survey of education providers, 67% of respondents identified existing or additional financial responsibilities as a major barrier to employment, preventing young people from taking up unpaid or lesser paid work opportunities that would have a positive long-term impact on their careers.

In our Young People’s Survey, the financial status of respondents was closely aligned to that of their family. While the majority of young people felt that their personal and family finances had remained the same over the course of the pandemic, over a third of respondents had seen their own financial status (39.7%) or their family’s financial status (46.5%) get worse during the Covid-19 period. A significant proportion of young people responding to our survey (14.86%) stated that they had been forced to start contributing to the household bills as a result of the pandemic, and we heard from a number of young people who were struggling with the weight of their increased responsibilities over the last year. Where parents or other ‘adult’ family members had lost jobs, had their hours reduced, or been put on furlough, young people often had to step in to fill the gap.

“I lost my job, from a young age me and my brother relied on our jobs to help our Mum who is a single parent. Me losing my job has had an impact on us all, because they’ve had to cover what I usually contribute towards and it was already a struggle as it was. My brother has had to work overtime and I barely get to see him because we wouldn’t be able to afford anything if he stops. I’ve had to use all of my savings and I’m now struggling. I have no idea what you can do to help young people and their futures but please think of something.”

Asian Female (20), Young People’s Survey

“I have not been eating the greatest as my family is struggling to provide because they're unemployed. I have lost a significant amount of weight due to not having 3 meals a day. I only manage to eat one meal which is around the evening time and sleep throughout the day so I don't feel hungry. I start my day without energy and finish it with even less, this means I'm always tired and don't have the energy to do anything and leaves me less motivated and not caring about everything. This puts me in a state of depression because during this pandemic I have also stopped communicating with my friends and I feel very isolated and I feel very alone in this. I sometimes cry in the night thinking about when this will all be normal.”

Asian Male (17), Young People's Survey

Our survey data suggests that young people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities were both more likely to come from lower income households prior to the pandemic, and to have seen their family income decrease as a result of Covid-19. Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic respondents were significantly more likely to come from lower income families compared to their white peers (65.35% versus 41.3%) and significantly less likely to feel financially comfortable (18.47% versus 30.47%). Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic respondents were also more likely to have seen their family's financial status get worse as a result of the pandemic (48% versus 34%).

In our survey, we heard from 10 young people who had been made homeless over the course of the pandemic. Of these young people, 90% were from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic backgrounds and 90% were women (the remaining respondent declined to provide their ethnicity and gave their gender as 'Other'). Conflict within the family was the most cited reason for being made homeless.

Young women, especially those from minority ethnic backgrounds or living in households with extended family, were much more likely to be holding informal elder care or childcare responsibilities that impact on their ability to take up employment or work experience opportunities outside the home. At the height of Covid restrictions, when movement outside the home was restricted, these caring responsibilities had increased even further, and absorbed new aspects such as the supervision of schoolwork for younger siblings.

“We've also found that [...] in terms of the BAME sector, their attendance has taken a hit. Lots of parents holding on to their children to ensure that they're staying at home to look after other siblings. We've been trying a blended learning approach where people can dive in on Teams or Zoom, but it's a catch-22 situation where they're looking after their siblings at the same time and not having the correct resources.”

Independent training provider representative, Education Roundtable

One respondent to our Young People's Survey was a new mother who had given birth during the pandemic; with restrictions affecting her ability to find childcare and find work, she reported a severe impact on her mental health. Further research may be required to explore the impact of the pandemic on new or young mothers, who are likely to have seen their employment options significantly reduced over the past eighteen months.

“I wanted to start training to become a midwife this year; however we don’t have the money and I don’t have the time as my daughter’s full-time carer [...] I would have been able to leave her with my family...but with my family being either key workers or vulnerable I was unable. I have had no chances to go out and start training or anything. My 1 year old daughter has never interacted with a baby of her age in her life. It breaks my heart and is severely affecting my mental health.”

White/White British Female (21), Young People’s Survey

Care-leavers, or young people with experience of care, already faced a number of additional barriers to employment prior to the pandemic. This was reflected in our Young People’s Survey, with care-experienced respondents being twice as likely as other respondents to be unemployed (16.5% versus 8.4%), more likely to have no formal qualifications and more likely to come from the lowest socio-economic segments of society.

Our survey indicates a broad widening of inequalities between care-leavers and their peers over the last eighteen months, with care-experienced young people more likely to have experienced a number of negative consequences as a result of the pandemic. We found that young people with experience of care were more likely to have been made homeless compared to their peers (3% versus 0.4%), more likely to have taken on debt (9% versus 4%), and more likely to have used food banks as a consequence of Covid-19 (11% versus 3%).

“During the first lockdown I think I was dealing with a lot of things personally and emotionally. And in my personal life, I was going to look for work, I wasn't really sure about where I was going to live because I've been away from my placement for so long. And the reason I couldn't return home is because my foster carer and her partner were both in the vulnerable category, so it wasn't really safe for me to move back. And I didn't really know what I was going to do, I kind of felt like I was in limbo. So there was a lot more instability during the first lockdown.”

Black/Black British Female (20), WhatsApp Diary

“Over the pandemic I have really struggled both financially and mentally. Due to the small amount of furlough I’ve received from my part time job [as a student] I had to rely on food banks. I am a care leaver and had nowhere else to go during the June 2020 - September 2020 summer vacation...so I had to stay in university accommodation. Because I had no income, just the £100 [in furlough payments] I could not buy food and could not pay rent. I have a debt to accommodation that I just cannot pay. Nor do I have any savings of my own...my part-time job was in hospitality and I only receive £100 a month. The pandemic has been really hard on me, as a postgraduate student as I do not receive a student finance maintenance loan to cover living costs. The student finance I do receive for the 2 year course isn't enough to cover my rent for the two years and over the summer, and now I can't work the hours that I need to pay off this debt/rent.

I feel very much alone.”

White/White British Female (23), Young People’s Survey

Where young care-leavers have struggled as a result of the pandemic, they often lack the wider family and social networks that other young people have access to. According to our Young People's Survey, while young people with experience of care were more likely to struggle financially or become homeless as a result of the pandemic, they were also less likely to have moved back into the family home – lacking the 'safety net' that many young people rely on.

What employers told us

Employers painted a similar situation when it came to the impact of Covid-19 on barriers to youth employment. While they did face some barriers to employing young people specifically as a result of the pandemic, the majority of the issues they identified pre-existed Covid-19. Often, the pandemic had merely sped up or exacerbated existing trends when it came to employment and recruitment.

Excess bureaucracy associated with specialist employment schemes, insufficient internal management capacity, and a general lack of awareness about employment and support schemes were identified as the top three barriers preventing businesses in Birmingham from recruiting more young people. All of these issues pre-exist the pandemic (and are covered in more detail as part of Findings Eight and Nine). What has changed, however, is the urgency with which businesses want to come together to tackle the problem – with the fallout from the pandemic strengthening the need to secure a steady pipeline of future talent and build a strong regional economy.

“Early engagement with the next generation workforce is imperative, and inclusive choices for all abilities and demographics is important to maintain skills in industry.”

Senior manager of a large professional services organisation, Business Engagement Exercise

“It's something companies can be proud of...investing in the future of young people.”

Senior manager of a micro services sector business, Business Engagement Exercise

There is clear evidence that, without urgent intervention from Birmingham City Council and our partners across the city, we will see further widening and entrenching of the social and economic inequalities among young people that already existed prior to Covid-19. With the pandemic having a significant impact across a whole range of areas that affect employability – financial, social, personal and physical – this is highly likely to be accompanied by increased inequality in employment outcomes among young people.

Finding Two: Not all young people are struggling. In fact, there is a significant cohort of young people whose employment and career prospects do not seem to have been significantly negatively impacted by Covid-19.

A key emerging theme over the course of our research was that of contrast – a city separated into the ‘haves and have-nots’, where some young people found themselves homeless and relying on food banks while others reported few (if any) negative effects from the pandemic. Within this latter group, a range of social, economic and personality protective factors can be identified, helping us to understand what enables young people to succeed in the workplace and in life.

“If you’re from a rich background, you’ve got a dad, he’s a doctor or a lawyer or something, you’ve already got people who can help you, give you references and refer you to people. If you’re rich, you definitely got options, money wise, and you’ve got people who can get you into places.”

Black/British British Female (17), Interview

In our Young People’s Survey, we asked young people across Birmingham a range of questions about their hopes for their lives, their perception of their employment and career prospects, and how Covid-19 had affected their plans for the future. As covered in Finding Three, the majority of respondents demonstrated high levels of anxiety, reporting feeling hopeless or unenthusiastic about their futures, and feeling a deep sense of loss for all the experiences they felt they had missed out on as a result of the pandemic. However, there was a small but persistent group of young people who remained confident about their future plans, reporting little or no negative impact on their lives from Covid-19 and choosing to focus instead on the positive things that they had gained or learned over the last eighteen months.

Positive attitudes towards seeking employment

Of those who intended to look for jobs over the next twelve months, 30.3% were either extremely or somewhat confident about their ability to find paid employment. For some, this was because they had already secured opportunities such as apprenticeships or graduate training schemes and felt that they were on the right life trajectory. Others were about to qualify in perceived ‘high demand’ careers such as medicine, teaching or social care, and were secure that they and their skills would be in demand, boosting their confidence and self-esteem.

Already having a job, having a strong CV with lots of work experience, or knowing that they were going into a growth sector career were strong predictors of young people feeling confident about their future employment prospects.

“I am a skilled person with lots of confidence and experience in the field I want to work in.”

White/White British Female (24), Young People’s Survey

“I am currently in a job that is helping me understand my strengths and develop my skills, giving me confidence that I can articulate my abilities to the next employer.”

Black/Black British Female (22), Young People’s Survey

“I feel confident as I have the relevant qualities required in a workplace as well as possessing a good educational background.”

Asian Male (20), Young People’s Survey

Positive attitudes towards seeking work experience

Of those who intended to look for work experience over the next twelve months, 27.6% of respondents were again extremely or somewhat confident that they would find the right opportunity. A running theme through many responses was their reliance on personal or family connections, and confidence that they could use these to secure the right work experience opportunities.

“My family have connections and lots of family friends who would love for me to stay with them for a few days.”

Asian/Asian British Female (16), Young People’s Survey

“My school have good connections so will find me somewhere at least, even if it's not in my preferred area.”

White/White British Female (16), Young People’s Survey

15.6% of respondents to our Young People’s Survey said that their future plans had not changed because of Covid-19. For many, especially those under 18, this was because they were still in education for the foreseeable future. Other talked about the support they had received from employers or education providers, helping them to understand their options – or emphasised their own sense of confidence and self-belief, demonstrating a high level of personal empowerment and perceived ‘control’ over their lives.

“I still have the passion and desire in reaching my goals and achieving my qualifications and being able to achieve the career and job role I want.”

Black/Black British Female (18), Young People’s Survey

“Because my goals are the same so how I reach them is all down to my own actions. I want to be able to achieve the same goals, no matter if there are external factors affecting that.”

Mixed Race Male (18), Young People’s Survey

Positive experiences of the pandemic

While most young people spoke about Covid-19 and lockdown restrictions in negative terms, there was a significant minority of research participants who spoke about the last eighteen months in neutral or even positive terms. For some young people, the pandemic period had been a welcome opportunity to slow down, re-evaluate their lives and priorities, and develop new skills to add to their CV. This was made possible by a range of protective factors including supportive family networks, minimal negative impact on family finances from the pandemic, and a stable housing situation.

“I also noticed during lockdown, due to the fact I had a lot more free time, I noticed my general mood increase: I was able to spend time with family a lot more doing different stuff; I could continue with my school work when necessary and do the things I enjoyed as well as going to see family also just having time to sit out and reflect on things was really important...overall I think I found a better sense of purpose and my health, thankfully, didn't deteriorate as much as I had first thought.”

Asian/Asian British Male (16), WhatsApp Diary

“I've always been interested in pursuing a career in medicine and being in a lockdown has given me the time to do research and extra-curricular activities.”

Asian/Asian British Female (16), Young People's Survey

Coming from a more affluent family or higher socioeconomic class was strongly associated with positive or neutral experiences of the pandemic, and higher hopes for the future. In our Young People's Survey, respondents from wealthier backgrounds were significantly more likely to have seen a positive financial impact on their family finances (13.9% versus 5.3%) and less likely to have experienced negative life events during the pandemic (such as being made homeless or using a food bank). Young people from affluent families were also more likely to feel confident about their prospects in finding work experience (31.2% versus 25.4%) or paid employment (33.6% versus 28%) compared to their less wealthy peers.

The takeaway from these young people's divergent experiences of the pandemic is not that career success depends on having a positive mental attitude, or that individual motivation and enthusiasm outweighs wider social determinants of employability. It is, however, a necessary reminder that 'young people' are not a monolith – just as different groups of young people faced different barriers to employment prior to Covid-19, they will have had a range of experiences during the pandemic and present with differing employment support needs in the recovery period. Exploring young people's different experiences of the pandemic, and the potential reasons for these, provides valuable insight into the factors that continue to affect employability and wider career success.

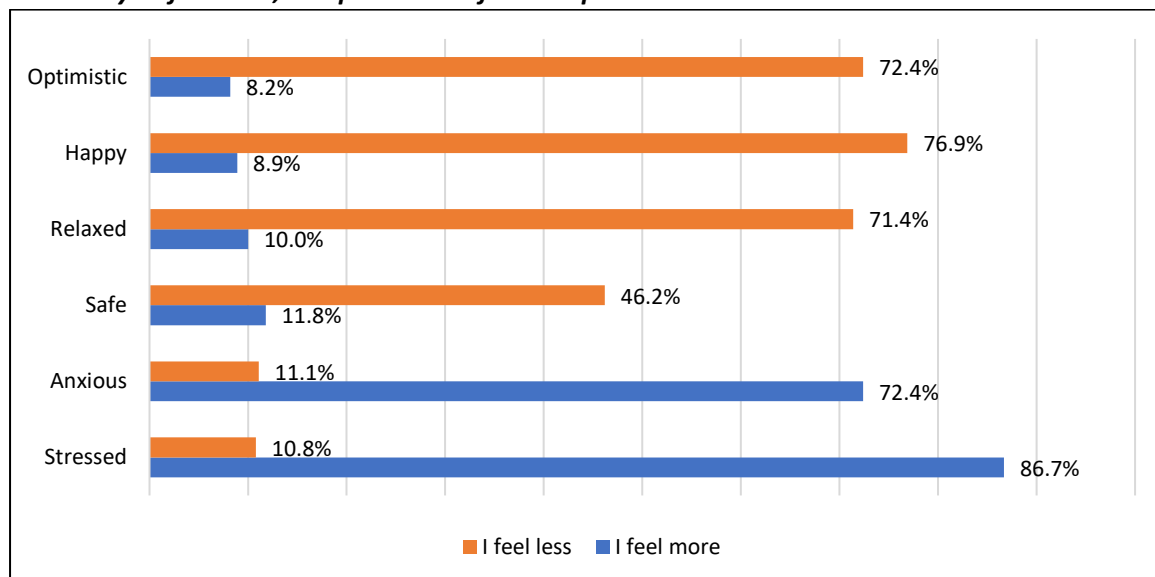
Finding Three: The pandemic has negatively affected the mental health of young people of all backgrounds, with decreasing confidence levels having a significant impact on the ability of many to find work experience or paid work.

While the focus of our research was on employment and work experience, we found evidence that the mental health of young people is under increasing pressure as a result of the pandemic, with young people from all backgrounds feeling the strain. Evidence came from both young people themselves and the services who worked with them, and demonstrated a clear negative impact on both the motivation and ability of young people to engage in job-seeking activities in the aftermath of the pandemic. Timely access to mental health services is clearly important to help young people who find themselves struggling; however, there is also a role for schools and education providers to play in boosting the resilience and confidence of young people and safeguarding their mental health in the long-term.

General mental health impact of the pandemic

In our Young People’s Survey, we asked young people a series of questions about the mental health impact of Covid-19, and how this had affected both their current activities and their hopes for the future. The feedback was overwhelming. Over three quarters of respondents (76.6%) believe that their mental health has either significantly or slightly deteriorated over the course of the pandemic. This expressed itself in a number of different emotions, with young people feeling more stressed (86.7%), more anxious (72.4%), less happy (76.9%) and less optimistic (72.4%) since the pandemic started.

‘How do you feel now, compared to before the pandemic?’



Source: Young People’s Survey, 2021

For some young people, their mental health had deteriorated even more seriously, and they reported an increase in self-harming and suicidal ideation, using the survey as an opportunity to ‘cry for help’ while they struggled to access mental health services.

“My family [members] suffer from mental health and ADHD, Autism and PDA [Pathological Demand Avoidance]. Over lockdown mine and their mental health has deteriorated. My brother attends special schools but they cannot meet his needs, my sister tried to commit suicide, my other brother is supposed to be sitting his GCSEs this year and I have been trying to support him as much as I can but it's not practical, because it's affected my mental health also. I consistently cry over my job, if it's safe and where I want to be, my family suffering as I'm one of six.”

White/White British Female (24), Young People's Survey

“I don't know whether it's the right place to speak about it but I feel like there's a major decrease within mental health support. I've felt suicidal and I have referred myself to Forward Thinking a week ago to this date and I have had no response. I have had to use emergency services and I either can't get through or the quality of care isn't the same.”

Mixed Race Female (21), Young People's Survey

There were a number of key themes that came up again and again when discussing the negative mental health impact of the pandemic.

Feelings of loss

A significant number of young people talked about Covid-19 in terms of loss and bereavement – not just the deaths caused by the virus, but a wider sense of missing out on formative life experiences and ‘rites of passage’ as a result of the pandemic and lockdown restrictions. Young people were acutely aware that this was an important time in their lives, and felt strongly that they had been denied many of the experiences that traditionally mark the transition from childhood to adulthood, such as learning to drive, having their first romantic relationships and going on nights out or holidays with friends.

“Today I am feeling nostalgic for the year I could have had. As I make movements towards starting uni next year and prepare to sit my exams...I feel like I lost out on one of the best years of my life. It's almost as if the not knowing what the year could have looked like is causing me the most upset.”

Black/Black British Female (17), WhatsApp Diary

Feelings of isolation and missing out

Linked to this experience of loss, many research participants spoke of feeling like their emotional and mental development had been stunted in some way, leaving them less well prepared for adulthood. They felt like the past eighteen months had been spent in a state of limbo, unable to develop or gain additional life experience, missing out on chances to build their skills or fully explore all the opportunities available to them.

Sometimes this directly related to employment opportunities, with young people distressed that they had lost opportunities to do work experience or build their CV, or take their first steps towards financial independence.

“Well, it feels bad, to be honest. It's money. And everything's tight and you stay all the time to get food at lunch and things like that. It feels bad, I guess, not being financially independent myself in that degree when you're young, when you're 18 years old.”

Asian/Asian British Male (16), WhatsApp Diary

Lockdown and social restrictions had largely separated young people from their friends and peer networks, increasing feelings of loneliness and isolation. Many of the normal activities that young people would usually use to manage their mental health and wellbeing – socialising with friends, going to the gym or playing sports, or seeking support from teachers or other front-line workers – were no longer available.

“But because I was inside, I was cooped up. And I couldn't release all of these feelings because the world was closed, the whole globe was closed. So there was nowhere for me to release these or even go out with my friend and talk about these things.

Black/Black British Female (17), WhatsApp Diary

The impact of social media

Social media was a recurrent theme through many responses. Sometimes social media was seen as a good thing – helping young people to keep in touch with their friends and social networks, allowing them to explore employment and work experience options, or providing an additional route of accessing mental health support. But for other young people, social media became an almost overwhelming source of news and information, providing a constant stream of disturbing images and stories that could be difficult to process on their own. Other major concurrent news stories, such as Black Lives Matter protests and the climate emergency, increased their feelings of anxiety and helplessness.

“And potentially, social media negatively affected my mental health in that respect because I was reading things about the virus and fake news and things like that, which negatively impacted how I felt about the situation, and how likely I thought that there would be a good way that we could get out of it. And it was quite sad because I was in my room, in my house and I was just in the middle of all of this. And we were all just in the middle of everything that was happening.”

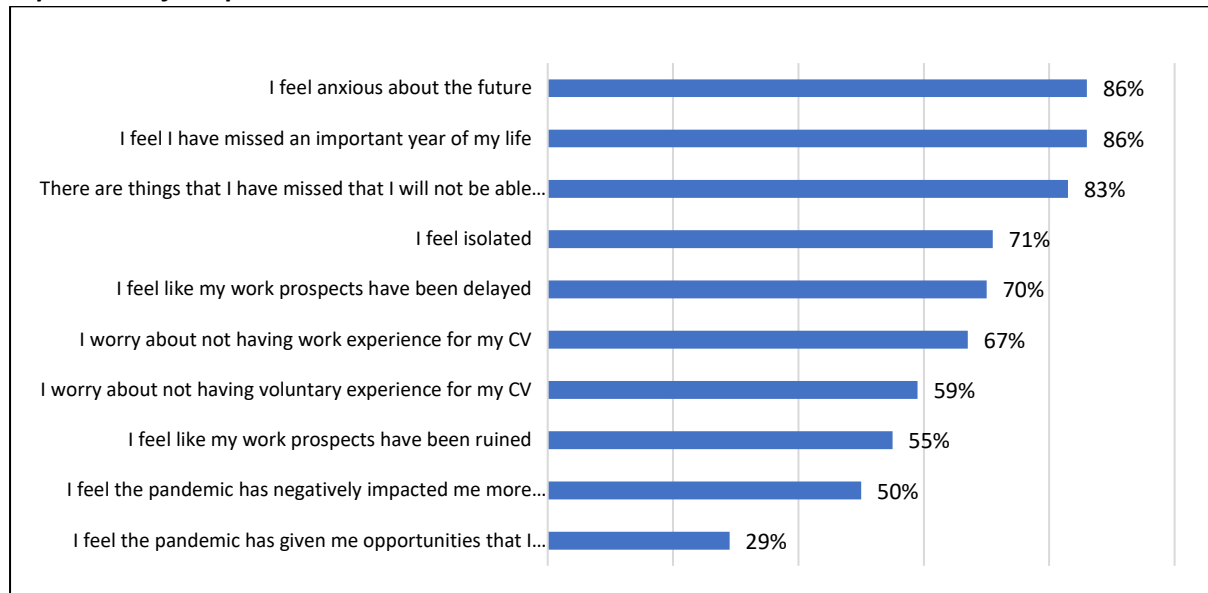
Black/Black British Female (17), WhatsApp Diary

Anxiety and the ‘vicious cycle’ of job-seeking

Finally, a majority of the young people we heard from were overwhelmed with feelings of anxiety. Anxiety over employment and their career prospects, anxiety about having missed out on key life experiences, anxiety about the future in general – this seemed to be a common response to the

upheaval caused by the pandemic, and a world in which many of the things young people had previously taken for granted were gone.

'Looking at the following statements, do you agree that they reflect your thoughts, feelings and experience of the pandemic?'



Source: *Young People's Survey, 2021*

These feelings of anxiety had a direct negative impact on job-seeking behaviours and the attitudes of young people towards employment and work experience. Many young people demonstrated low levels of enthusiasm and motivation with regards to employment, with a lack of confidence in their ability to secure employment or work experience, and a general belief that there were not enough opportunities available for everyone. In our Young People's Survey, almost half (40.2%) of job-seeking respondents said that they were somewhat or very unconfident about their ability to find paid employment. Their lack of confidence centred around three perceived 'barriers' to employment – a belief that job opportunities were scarce, that competition would be high, and that their lack of experience would work against them compared to older candidates. Many young people seemed to have found themselves caught in a 'vicious cycle' of demotivation and negative reinforcement, with every rejected job application or unsuccessful job search compounding their beliefs and further damaging their confidence.

There is a common perception among young people that most employers are not taking on new staff due to the financial impact of the pandemic, making job seeking that much harder. Where there are opportunities, respondents overwhelmingly believed that employers would prefer to hire older, more experienced candidates over young people.

"There are very few opportunities and nothing that is truly entry level. Places are demanding years of experience for minimum wage and part time jobs, and any job that entry level candidates are eligible for is being taken by over-experienced candidates that have lost their jobs. Even retail jobs don't exist now. Companies don't care about graduates or investing in entry level hires."

White/White British Female (21), Young People's Survey

“I have been looking for employment for many months now, and have been completely unsuccessful. I have noticed there has been a flood of people better qualified than me (in terms of qualifications and/or experience) after summer 2020 which I can only assume is due to those people losing their employment because of the pandemic.”

White/White British Female (17), Young People’s Survey

We saw similar figures for work experience. Of those respondents who intended to look for work experience within the next year, almost 40% (39.8%) said that they were somewhat or very unconfident about their ability to succeed. Again, young people saw themselves as being a ‘low priority’ for employers, with work experience opportunities reduced due to Covid-restrictions and little sign that they would be increasing again.

“Placements are limited with huge competition from other graduates/ students and are constantly cancelled due to changes in covid restrictions. There is no certainty that the placement will go ahead even if I do secure one, and there is even less chance of a job at the end of a placement.”

White/White British Female (22), Young People’s Survey

“Students have been neglected and evidently are also put last. My guess is that work experience opportunities will be overlooked.”

Asian/Asian British Male (18), Young People’s Survey

This is covered in more detail as part of Finding Seven.

Hopeless and voiceless?

The negative mental health impact of the pandemic, coupled with the perception that there are fewer jobs and work experience opportunities available, has led to many young people stating that they feel hopeless about the future. These feelings of hopelessness, disempowerment, and helplessness are further exacerbated by difficulties in accessing mental health services, with a number of our survey respondents stating that they are struggling to get the help that they need.

“I just want to feel like there’s a chance for the future, that life will get better. That this isn’t what life will be like forever...that I will be able to achieve the things I could have done without the pandemic.”

White/White British Male (16), Young People’s Survey

The theme of being ‘voiceless’, or generally not listened to, recurred throughout our research and seems to be a major concern for young people who feel that they are generally a low priority for employers, education providers, local services and national government. There is a building sense of anger among some young people against institutions, especially against universities and schools that are perceived to have failed to provide certainty, value for money or clear lines of communication.

“Please listen to us. Our mental health has been failing since March 2020. We all just want to be heard.”

Asian/Asian British Female (16), Young People’s Survey

We saw a general decline in mental health across all segments of young people, although there are slight variances in the extent of this decline between some groups.

Mental health and affluence

Surprisingly, despite clear evidence that young people from affluent backgrounds are less likely to have suffered negative impacts due to the pandemic, they were just as likely as other young people to report a deterioration in mental health. What did change slightly was the strength of feeling, with young people from wealthier families more likely to feel that their mental health had deteriorated ‘slightly’ rather than ‘significantly’ (compared to young people from less well-off families).

Mental health and gender

In our Young People’s Survey, we found a striking difference between the mental health impact on young women compared to young men. Overall, male respondents were more likely to have experienced a range of negative employment events as a result of Covid-19 – being more likely to have lost a job (15.5% versus 9.62%), more likely to have been made redundant (5.26% versus 2.57%) and more likely to have been furloughed (15.79% versus 10.08%). However, despite these disparities, the mental health impact of the pandemic on female respondents seemed more severe, with 39.68% of young women reporting that their mental health had deteriorated significantly (compared to 28.32% of young men). Young women also seemed to experience anxiety to a greater degree than men, and were significantly more likely to feel anxious about the future (56.75% versus 46.07%), to feel more stressed (84.3% versus 69.21%), and to feel more anxious in general (76.46% versus 58.61%).

These findings suggest that, while young men are more likely to have experienced an actual negative employment event as a result of Covid-19, young women are more like to be experiencing a rise in employment-related anxiety and loss of confidence.

Education sector perceptions of young people’s mental health

Our research with education providers reinforced the negative mental health impact of the pandemic on young people. 100% of respondents to our Education Stakeholders Survey believed that Covid-19 had a very negative or slightly negative impact on the mental health of the young people they worked with, and additionally raised concerns about decreased morale and confidence among their students.

“There is a general feeling of hopelessness and low morale amongst the people we work with coupled with an increased fear for their future. Many also report concerns about mixing with people due to lowering of confidence.”

Independent Training Provider Representative, Education Stakeholders Survey

In our roundtable discussion with education representatives, participants went into more detail about the negative mental health effects of the pandemic on their students and pupils. Research participants noted previously successful and high-performing students beginning to demonstrate acute signs of anxiety and stress, affecting their success in both study and job-seeking activities. Often there was no obvious direct cause for this anxiety, which seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. There was a general consensus among education stakeholders that early intervention and mental health support was key, to stop anxiety becoming a 'self-fulfilling prophecy' and prevent longer-term damage to the educational and career prospects of young people.

Building resilience and confidence

"I question, in a changing world, whether we're really supporting young people in the right way, giving them the resilience skills, the communication and confidence skills, that they need to survive in this world. From a practical point of view, we need to think about how do we actually give those skills to those young people, at as early an age as we can. Because the world is going to get faster and harder and tougher, it's not going to get simpler."

Independent Training Provider Representative, Education Roundtable

"And it's what people might think of as a 'soft' mental health issue, but actually unless you develop confidence and resilience to cope with little bits of stress and pressure, that is going to have an impact on people gaining employment as well. It goes with you."

Secondary School Representative, Education Roundtable

Building on concerns about the developing mental health crisis among young people, stakeholders from across business and education sectors felt that there was a role for schools and education providers in supporting young people to build their resilience, confidence and self-belief. While no one could have predicted the Covid-19 pandemic, they felt that the crisis had exposed a major failing in current careers services, revealing the fragility of young people's mental health and self-esteem.

"We've worked with over 600 students in the last three years, and there's a recurring theme coming through that this particular group, seem to feel the pressures of either their home expectations, expectations from school, expectations coming from life, and it's having a huge impact on them and I think Covid has made it worse... we're finding the biggest impact we're having is just building that confidence and that self-belief, and giving them the opportunity to show it to an employer."

Independent Training Provider Representative, Education Roundtable

While it is unlikely that young people will ever face another crisis on the same scale as Covid-19, they do need to be adequately equipped to handle the 'everyday crises' of employment, such as redundancy, conflict in the workplace, and organisational restructuring.

“This experience is so removed from any expectations we have from life it is hard to accept. Especially as someone just entering adulthood there is a feeling that you are completely unprepared and unequipped for this kind of challenge.”

White/White British Female (20), Young People’s Survey

Hand in hand with resilience, many research participants identified confidence as an important protective factor for young people’s mental health. Employers and education stakeholders talked about a growing ‘crisis of confidence’ among young people, existing prior to the pandemic but certainly exacerbated by the current situation. Lack of confidence was seen as a major barrier to employment for many young people, who underestimated their value to an employer and ‘underaspired’ when job-hunting, de-selecting themselves from many available opportunities.

“As well as those physical barriers, there has also certainly been an increase in a lack of confidence. As those interactions have lessened, those students, finalists and graduates, have had less opportunity to develop some of those skills through, not even necessarily work experience, but just those physical interactions and contact that they’ve missed.”

College Representative, Education Roundtable

“Students and graduates have been unable to access work experiences, part-time work and graduate level jobs in the same way. This has affected their confidence, resilience and skills development. This will have a lasting impact on their ability to secure work in the future.”

University Representative, Education Stakeholder Survey

Businesses were clear that they saw confidence as one of the biggest employment barriers for young people. They felt that both education providers and careers services had a vitally important role to play in showing young people how to package and ‘sell’ their skills to employers, bolstering their confidence and overcoming their anxiety around a potential or perceived lack of experience. Many of the employers we spoke to felt that young people were often unable to accurately self-assess their own skills and abilities, and even where they had a good grasp of their skillset, they were not always being taught how to match this to job requirements or the wider needs of employers. This was especially true for newer or ‘non-traditional’ skills. For example, businesses referenced the exceptional skills of many young people when it came to social media or games development/coding – skills which were rarely recognised by careers services or referenced on job applications, and therefore became ‘invisible’.

Interestingly, businesses linked this lack of confidence with a lack of diversity in job applicants. Confidence and self-belief were seen as a major employability issue for young people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities, as well as young people from less affluent backgrounds, including care-leavers. To counteract this, employers emphasised the importance of building diversity within organisations at all levels to ensure that young people felt welcome, and identifying ‘role models’ or ‘career champions’ to reassure and inspire young people from different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. They also felt strongly that the effectiveness of careers

advice would be increased if it was delivered through a 'peer to peer' model, with advisors reflecting the ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds of local areas.

The importance of good quality careers advice, and potential gaps in the current model, is covered in more detail as part of Finding Seven.

"Young people in Birmingham need to see that the organisations are as diverse as the city or they will know their 'face won't fit' and they won't apply."

CEO or Director of a micro marketing/media business, Business Engagement Exercise

Finding Four: Young people need access to the right technology to succeed in a post-Covid world – as well as the space and time to use it.

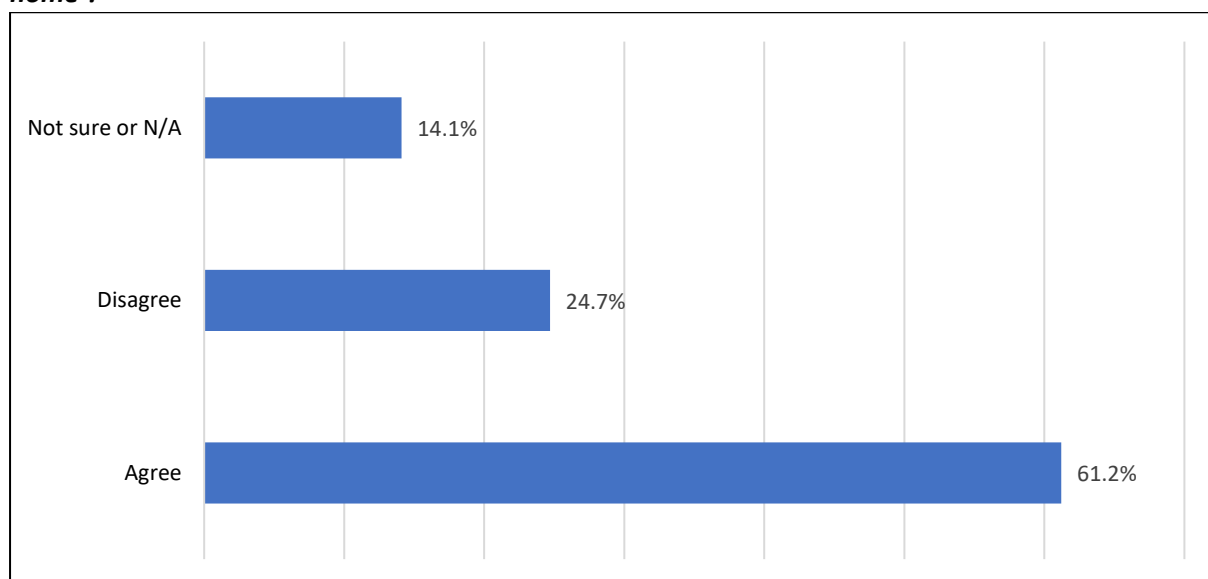
Most of the barriers to employment we explored during our research pre-existed Covid-19, despite becoming more visible or widespread in the wake of the pandemic. There was one exception to this rule – access to technology and the internet. The rapid shift to remote working across a range of sectors means that having access to a laptop (or other internet-enabled devices) has become a necessity for young people seeking employment and work experience opportunities. Inequities in access to technology between different groups of young people, and other environmental factors affecting the ability to work remotely, will be a key factor in tackling widening employment inequalities post-Covid.

Young people and access to technology

We asked a number of questions in our Young People’s Survey relating to technology and access to the internet, as well as other contributing factors affecting their ability to work and study from home.

Just 61.2% of the young people that we surveyed agreed that they had the equipment they needed to work or learn from home.

‘How far do you agree with the statement ‘I have the equipment I need to work/learn from home’?’



Source: Young People’s Survey, 2021

Access to technology was also identified by education stakeholders as one of the biggest barriers to employment and work experience for young people in Birmingham. 89% of respondents to our Education Stakeholder Survey agreed that not having access to the right equipment had been a major barrier to students learning and working from home during the pandemic. At our Education Roundtable event, representatives from all education institutions – from local secondary schools all the way up to internationally recognised research universities – went into more detail about how

many of their students didn't have access to the right equipment, and the challenges that they had faced as a result of digital exclusion.

"We're trying to address digital poverty. If young people are already being disadvantaged at every level before they even get to university, because they can't access certain ...the world is going to be moving to more virtual internships or short work placements and they can't access them...then they're disadvantaged."

University Representative, Education Roundtable

Having recognised a substantial gap in access to technology, many of the education institutions that we spoke to had put laptop loan schemes or similar equipment schemes in place for students in need, directly supplying equipment to digitally excluded young people. This in itself had become a challenge, with some schools and other education providers struggling to procure enough laptops to meet the level of demand, and becoming increasingly frustrated at the lack of funding available to support these schemes.

"One of the things that we've found really challenging is the access to equipment. I know this is going to be consistently banging the drum, but we really have struggled, as an independent training provider to access funds to get on to people, to get laptops etc."

University Representative, Education Roundtable

Other factors affecting the use of technology

While having access to technology is an important contributor to employability, it is not the only factor affecting the ability of young people to work remotely. We discovered a range of psychological and physical conditions for success that significantly impacted on young people's ability to make use of technology when working from home or in other environments outside the workplace.

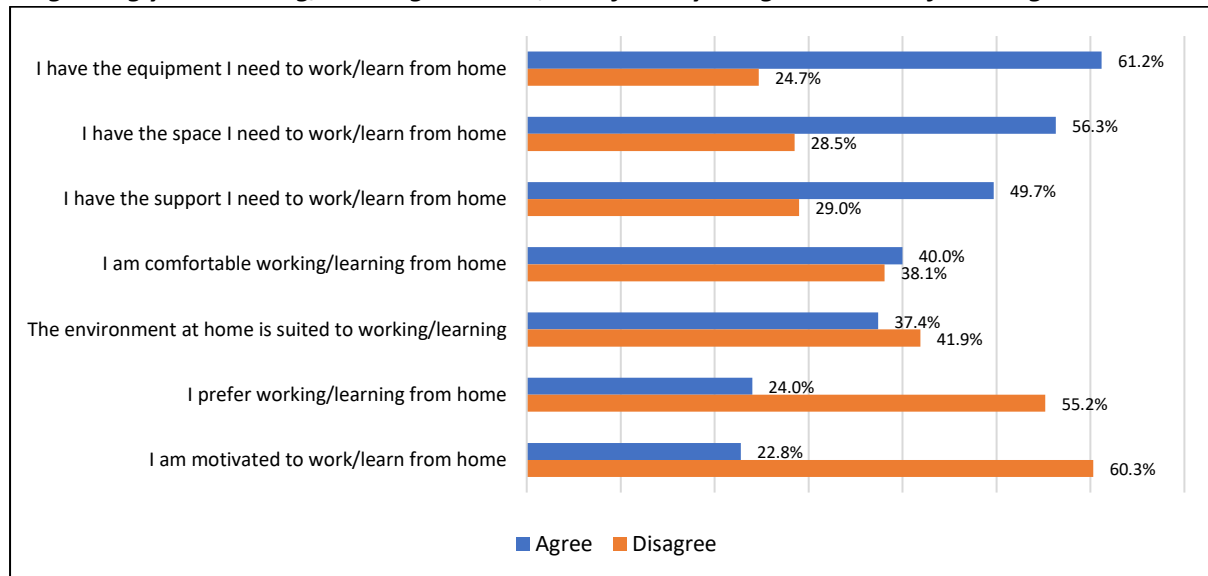
Perhaps not surprisingly, considering the clear evidence of negative mental health trends among young people, we found that motivation and enthusiasm played a key role in young people's ability to work remotely. In our Young People's Survey, 60.3% of young people stated that they were not motivated to work or learn from home, and only 40% said that they were comfortable working or learning from home.

Often, this lack of motivation was explicitly linked to the wider mental health impacts of the pandemic. Young people who generally felt hopeless or pessimistic about their future understandably felt that there was 'no point' in studying or job-seeking online, with all the usual 'rewards' for hard work – exam success, entrance to a good university, getting a good job – slipping further and further out of reach.

Other young people seemed to have more practical issues with working remotely, struggling to develop the organisational and time management skills they needed, or finding that remote teaching clashed with their personal learning styles. Many young teenagers, especially those still at

school, were rushing to ‘catch-up’ and develop the independent study skills of older workers and university students.

‘Regarding your working/learning situation, how far do you agree with the following statements?’



Source: Young People’s Survey, 2021

Finally, even where young people had the equipment, the skills and the motivation to work remotely, some still faced practical and environmental barriers such as a lack of desk space, noisy or overcrowded homes, or otherwise unsuitable working environments. Just 56.3% of respondents to our Young People’s Survey agreed that they had the space they needed to work or learn from home. Less than half of young people stated that they had the support they needed to work from home (49.7%), and even fewer felt that their home environment was suited to remote working (37.4%).

“I mostly get distracted because I’m in bed. I don’t really have anywhere else that I can study. Sometimes I go downstairs to our living room. But mostly, I stay in my room.”

Black/Black British Female (17), Interview

The importance of these wider physical and environmental factors was also emphasised by education stakeholders. Attendees at our Education Roundtable spoke of multiple challenges faced by young people trying to work or study remotely, where even those with the right technology struggled to find a quiet space to work in the family home.

“So it’s things like – if you say to people, you can do a virtual internship, it presupposes that one, you have the space in which you can actually do your job, and secondly that you’re not minding other children or being a carer for somebody else. And also that you have the tech, and it works, when actually you might be sharing with some of your younger siblings.”

University Representative, Education Roundtable

For one university, a laptop loan scheme had only limited success until it was combined with the provision of communal (and Covid-safe) working spaces on campus, allowing young people to book

time to come on-site and working in a quiet, secure and professional setting. Young people used these spaces in a variety of ways linked to education and employment – to study or revise for exams, to prepare job applications, to take part in video interviews, and even to engage in online work experience. This was identified as a simple and straightforward way that education providers could support young people into employment and work experience, helping to tackle wider employment inequalities.

Inequalities in access to technology

Our Young People’s Survey found clear evidence of inequalities in access to equipment among different groups of young people, indicating that technology is likely to play an increasingly important role in wider employment inequalities in the wake of Covid-19.

Care-experienced young people were far less likely than their peers to have access to the equipment that they needed to work or study from home – just 49.1% of care-leavers in our survey agreed that they had the technology they needed, compared to 61.2% of respondents as a whole. They were also less likely to have the space that they needed to work effectively from home (48.1% versus 55.6%). This is in line with our findings that care-experienced young people were more likely to be struggling financially compared to their peers, and more likely to be experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness as a result of the pandemic.

We also found significant differences in access to technology linked to ethnicity among young people. Compared to White/White British young people, respondents from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities were less likely to have access to the right equipment to work from home (59% versus 67%) and less likely to report a suitable working environment at home (34% versus 43%).

“Just to build on that, our first response when we identified digital poverty as being an issue was to get the laptops, to get them out there, until we realised as I said earlier that actually, it didn’t help because they had nowhere to study. So we needed to open up campus in a Covid secure way in order to give them those opportunities, and have those conversations about what would work. For care-leavers...because we have a lot of care-leavers...students from Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic communities...it was about having quiet space, and having it open at different times of the day, and that included at night, because they have a lot of other responsibilities.”

University Representative, Education Roundtable

While we found no gender disparities in access to equipment or space to work from home, we did find that young women were slightly less motivated to work and learn from home. Compared to males, female respondents to our survey were significantly less likely to strongly agree that they were motivated to work/learn from home – just 5.95% of young women, compared to 13.51% of young men. This is likely to be linked to wider trends in worsening mental health among young women compared to their male counterparts.

Finally, and not surprisingly, we found a very strong correlation between family economic background and access to technology. In our Young People’s Survey, respondents from wealthier families were significantly more likely to have the equipment they needed (71.23% versus 53.37%),

adequate space to work from home (64.65% versus 48.55%) and an overall good home environment for learning and working (45.11% versus 31.50%) compared to their peers from less affluent backgrounds. Despite this, however, their motivation to work from home was only marginally better than that of their peers (24.34% versus 21.6%).

“My dad can work from home and same with my mum. My sister as well...I think if we were in the old house, that was slightly cramped. But we have enough...we have spacious rooms and we don't get in each other's way because of the design of our house.”

Black/Black British Male (18), Interview

Finding Five: Work experience is a major source of anxiety for young people, who are struggling to find the right opportunities to build their CV and demonstrate their value to employers.

Work experience is a vitally important factor in employability for many young people, giving them the opportunity to develop skills, experience a variety of different working environments, and enabling them to make better decisions about their future career. In the face of macro-economic trends such as the increase in zero-hours contracts and the rise of the gig economy, and a corresponding decline in traditional part-time jobs, young people often rely on work experience to build their CV and demonstrate their value to employers. The decline in work experience opportunities as a result of Covid-19, and the transition to virtual work experience placements, is a major source of anxiety for many young people and a barrier to employment for those from the most disadvantaged groups.

Young people looking for work experience do not show up on unemployment statistics, and are often invisible to policy-makers focusing on wider employment and economic trends. For young people themselves, however, work experience is viewed as a vitally important ‘first step’ in their future careers, and a key route to developing transferable skills, acclimatising to a professional working environment, and building their CV for future paid job applications. In our Young People’s Survey, young people saw their lack of experience as their biggest weakness compared to other, older job applicants, and relied on work experience as the most direct route of addressing this gap.

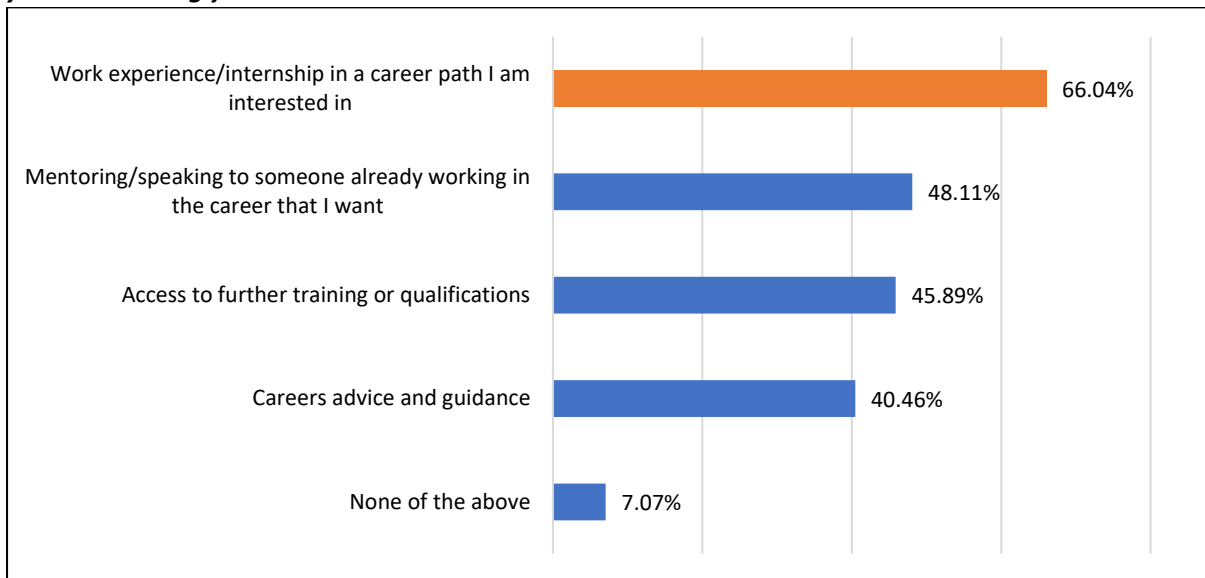
“Jobs are so competitive and with the pandemic, jobs are even more sparse. Businesses want people with lots of experience and while I’m trying to build my experience it just won’t be enough. One of the reasons I had to take a volunteer role was because I kept getting rejected, job after job, even jobs I am overqualified for.”

White/White British Female (23), Young People’s Survey

In our Young People’s Survey, respondents were overwhelmingly positive about the idea of work experience and the value that it could add to their careers. Given the option of a range of different employment interventions, 66.04% of young people would welcome the chance to have work experience or an internship in a career path that they are interested in. 55.33% of young people believed that work experience was the intervention that would have the single most positive impact on their CV.

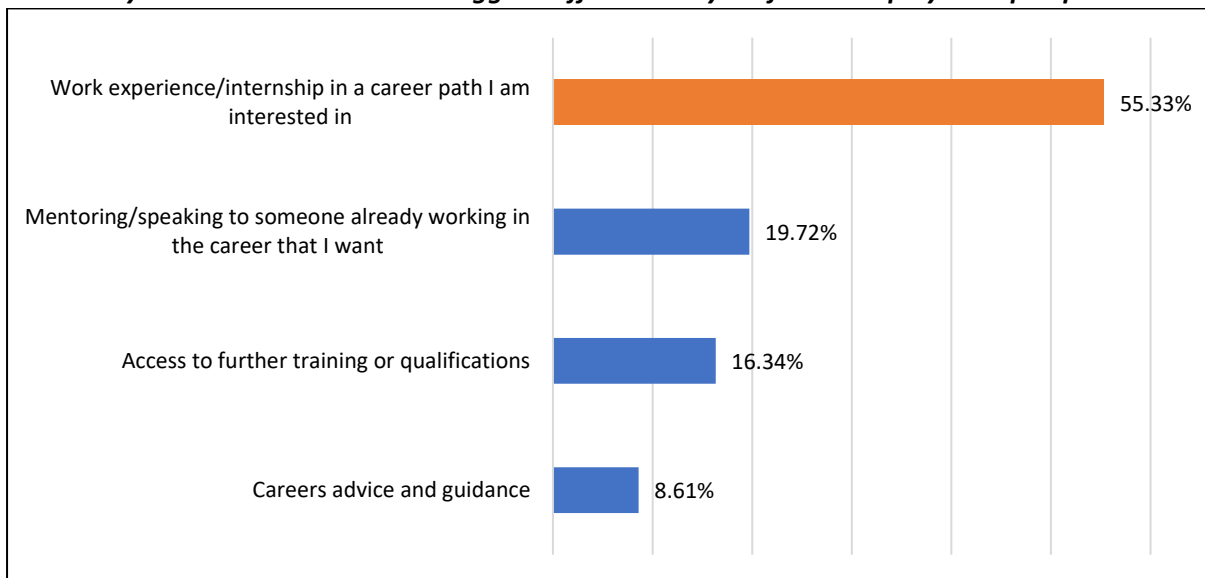
The importance of work experience is also recognised by youth employment and careers services, and highlighted as a priority in the national government’s 2017 Careers Strategy. For those young people who are furthest away from the ‘goal’ of full-time paid employment, including young people from groups who face additional barriers to employment, work experience is a vitally important introduction to the world of work, and often acts as a stepping-stone to more formal employment arrangements. Through work experience, especially placements brokered through youth employment services, young people can be supported to develop the good ‘work hygiene’ habits and transferable skills that make them attractive to employers.

‘Thinking about your future employment prospects, which of the following would be helpful for you in achieving your ambitions?’



Source: Young People’s Survey, 2021

‘What do you think would make the biggest difference to your future employment prospects?’

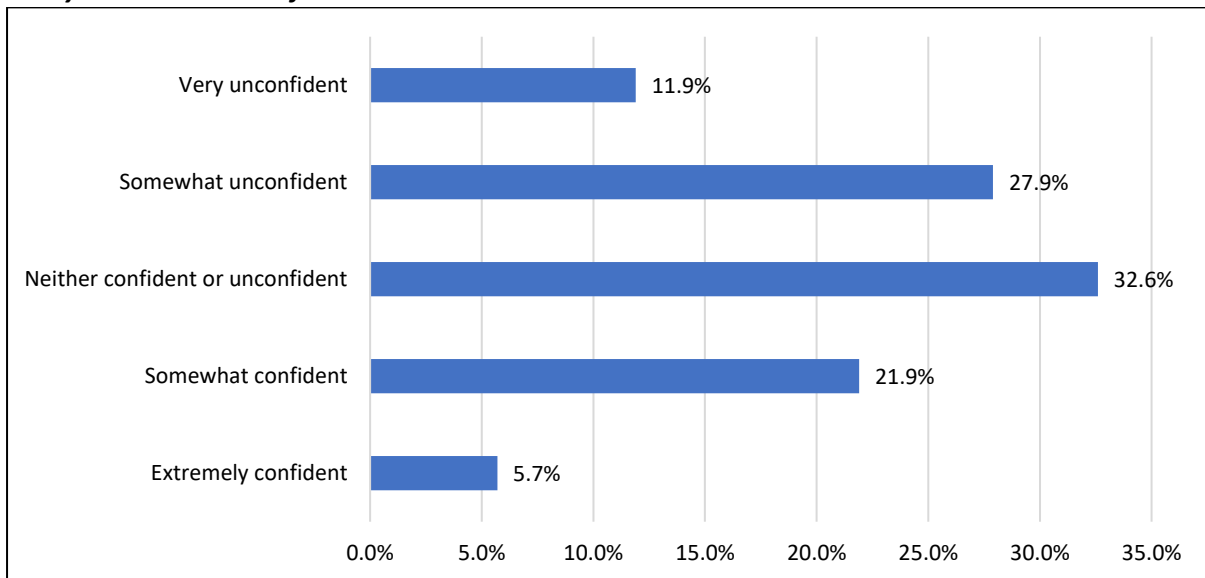


Source: Young People’s Survey, 2021

The impact of Covid-19 on work experience

In the wake of Covid-19, many of the young people we spoke to were pessimistic about their chances of securing work experience. In our Young People’s Survey, 39.8% of young people looking for work experience were somewhat or very unconfident that they would be successful.

‘Thinking about looking for work experience in the next twelve months, how confident do you feel that you will be successful?’



Source: *Young People’s Survey, 2021*

Many young people perceived that Covid-19 had negatively impacted on businesses’ ability to offer work experience placements, either due to financial constraints or ongoing lockdown/social distancing restrictions. They felt that work experience was ‘low on the priority’ list for employers during the crisis, and unsure about what was being done by businesses, national government, and other institutions to support them. This often linked into a wider sense of hopelessness and a feeling of being left behind.

“Students have been neglected and evidently are also put last. My guess is that work experience opportunities will be overlooked.”

Asian/Asian British Male (18), Young People’s Survey

A number of young people who had already arranged work experience had seen their placements cancelled due to the pandemic, with no alternative arrangements in place. This further added to their sense of pessimism, and discouraged them from applying for new opportunities. With so much disruption already caused by Covid-19, young people often seemed to be desperate for stability, and having no work experience might have felt preferable to arranging work experience that could fall through at any moment.

“Placements are limited with huge competition from other graduates/ students and are constantly cancelled due to changes in Covid restrictions. There is no certainty that the placement will go ahead even if I do secure one, and there is even less chance of a job at the end of a placement.”

White/White British Female (22), Young People’s Survey

The impact of Covid-19 on work experience was also raised by many of the education stakeholders we spoke to. With normal school calendars and careers services disrupted by lockdown restrictions,

many students had missed out on the usual work experience placements arranged by schools and education providers. This was a particular issue for students on vocational courses or university 'sandwich courses' that usually included a year's placement in industry, who were missing out on a vital element of their education.

"Due to the pandemic many companies would not increase their staff numbers by taking students on work experience. We had a work experience week planned in May for our Year 12 but many companies were reluctant to commit as they were unable to increase their numbers on site. In the end we had to cancel Work Experience Week and students completed virtual work experience offered by various organisations online at home."

Academies Trust Representative, Education Stakeholder Survey

Attendees at our Education Roundtable raised concerns about the potential consequences of young people missing out on work experience. In addition to generally worrying about the impact on employability and the development of transferable skills, there was also a concern that young people would be less able to make the best choices about their post-16 options, having less experience upon which to base their decisions. This could lead to a rise in the drop-out rate over the next few years.

"During the pandemic, there's a whole cohort or two that have missed out on advice and guidance, and opportunities. Things like work experience and all the things that go along with that....my concern is their transition from where they are now to their post-16 options, are they lacking certain things, will there be a higher level of drop-out or changing ideas due to the lack of advice and experience they've had?"

College representative, Education Roundtable

Personal networks and work experience

With many of the usual routes for arranging work experience disrupted due to the pandemic, personal and family connections are becoming increasingly important in identifying and securing work experience opportunities. There is evidence of a growing divide between two groups of young people – those who are able to leverage their personal networks to design their own informal work experience opportunities, and those who are 'stuck' unsuccessfully and repeatedly applying through formal recruitment processes.

While many young people are pessimistic about their ability to find a work experience placement, there was a small cohort of respondents to our Young People's Survey who remained confident about finding and securing opportunities. A common theme in their responses was their reliance on personal and family networks to 'get their foot in the door'.

"I have family and friends who can help me to work in their profession for work experience."

Asian/Asian British Female (19), Young People's Survey

“I feel confident because my cousin work as a nurse, so i can ask her to find me work experience in a hospital setting.”

Asian/Asian British Female (17), Young People’s Survey

Young people from more affluent families were also, on the whole, more confident about their ability to secure work experience compared to their less well-off peers (31.2% versus 25.4%).

Without intervention, and in the absence of the usual services that usually ‘level the playing field’, there is a real risk that young people from less wealthy families and those without extensive personal or family networks will be put at a significant disadvantage in finding work experience.

The transition to virtual work experience

The shift towards remote working and learning, including the rapid growth of virtual work experience opportunities, is one of the biggest changes to the employment landscape of the past few decades. It is impossible to overestimate the potential impact of this shift on the future careers of young people, opening up a potentially limitless number of employment and work experience opportunities across both national and international boundaries. While we will see many people return to physical workplaces as part of the Covid-19 recovery, it is unlikely that we will ever fully return to the traditional, office-based ‘9 to 5’ lifestyle that many young people associate with paid work.

In some very limited circumstances, for example for young people with physical disabilities, the shift to online and remote working could help to break down traditional barriers to employment. Considering the longstanding low employment rate for young people with disabilities or other special educational needs, this could be a welcome catalyst towards equality in some areas.

However, in our research we found more evidence to suggest that the shift towards virtual work experience would have a negative impact on employment gaps between different groups of young people, widening inequalities and pushing many even further away from employment. As covered in Finding Four, both care-leavers and young people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities are less likely to have the equipment, space and home environment required to engage in remote learning and working. With these groups already facing additional barriers to employment, the rise in virtual work experience has the potential to have a significant negative impact on their ability to seek and retain employment.

We also heard from many young people who were unable to engage in virtual work experience due to their sector of interest. For young people looking to build careers in hospitality, personal care (including nursing and childcare), or manufacturing/construction, virtual work experience was not a viable option.

A rise in unpaid work experience?

Although this was not a major theme, we did receive feedback from some people in the education sector that they were seeing signs of a rise in unpaid work experience opportunities, reigniting a

longstanding debate over fair compensation and the exploitation of young people looking for experience. This may be linked to the shift towards virtual work experience.

“[We have seen] an increase in unpaid work experience is impacting on the opportunities young people are able to engage in. There has also been a decrease in the volume of work experience and placements available which has impacted on the amount of students that have been able to further develop both their technical and soft skills.

University Representative, Education Stakeholder Survey

“One of the other things that came through is an increase in the number of employers who’ve been engaging students and graduates in unpaid work experience [...] We can understand why from a pragmatic perspective, but that could certainly limit and add another layer to whether those target groups can even consider accessing those opportunities.

University Representative, Education Roundtable

When examining this issue, it is important to distinguish between different types of work experience. For clearly labelled volunteer roles, or for short-term work experience placements for younger people still in full-time education, it is entirely appropriate not to offer payment (although organisations may wish to reimburse travel expenses). However, for longer-term ‘internship’ style work experience placements, where young people are expected to make a significant time commitment over several months, best practice remains that employers pay fair compensation for their time.

Employers should not regard virtual work experience as somehow less intensive or demanding, and therefore less worthy of payment, than in-person work experience. While virtual work experience can often be done from home, avoiding additional travel or subsistence costs, it still incurs many of the same opportunity costs as traditional work experience – preventing young people from taking paid employment, for example, or interfering with informal caring responsibilities at home. For young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, including care-leavers, a rise in unpaid work experience could create a substantial new barrier to employment.

Further research may be required to understand whether there has been a growth in unpaid work experience opportunities, and whether this is linked to the pandemic or the shift towards virtual work experience.

Finding Six: There are major concerns that careers advice services are not providing young people with the skills and knowledge that they need to succeed in the modern world of employment.

Formal careers advice, as one of the main ways in which young people learn about their post-16 options and all the opportunities available to them, is a significant factor in future employment success. The National Government 2017 Careers Strategy recognised and underlined the importance of good quality careers guidance for young people, highlighting it as one of the key levers by which wider inequalities might be reduced and committing all education providers to achievement of the Gatsby Benchmarks for careers services.

While we found numerous examples of best practice careers services in Birmingham, we also heard from a range of stakeholders across education and business who are concerned about the variable quality of careers advice provided to young people across the city. It is not clear that current service models are fully equipping young people with the skills and knowledge that they need to succeed in the modern world, with potential gaps around developing transferable or entrepreneurial skills and engagement with employers.

The importance of careers guidance to young people

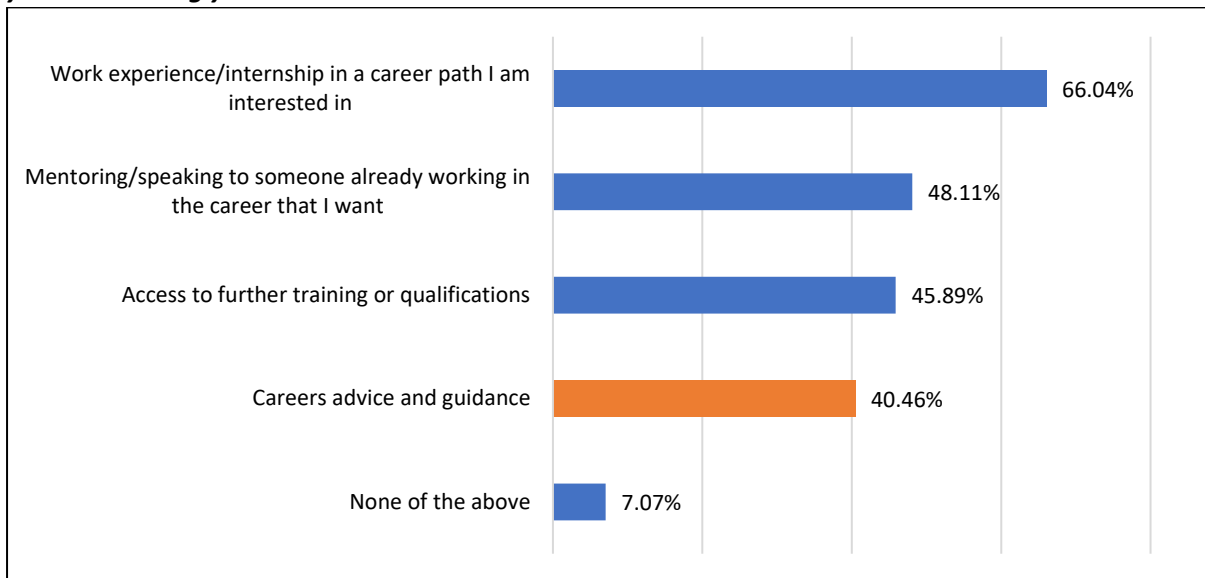
“I feel quite clueless about what’s going on and how it’ll affect my future. It makes me feel quite anxious so advice might help. I haven’t been given any advice or guidance about the uni that I’ve applied for this September and I feel like guidance into what happens will help and make me feel less anxious about it all. I haven’t been able to visit my uni or ask anyone questions about uni in general.”

White/White British Female (17), Young People’s Survey

In our Young People’s Survey, young people recognised the importance of good quality careers guidance and the impact that it could have on their lives. 40.46% of respondents said that they would welcome careers advice and guidance from businesses, schools or colleges, and 8.61% believed that careers advice and guidance was the intervention that could have the single biggest positive impact on their futures. Linking to our other findings around mental health and anxiety, and overwhelming evidence that young people are feeling unsure about their futures, it makes sense that they would be receptive to good quality advice and guidance from someone that they trust.

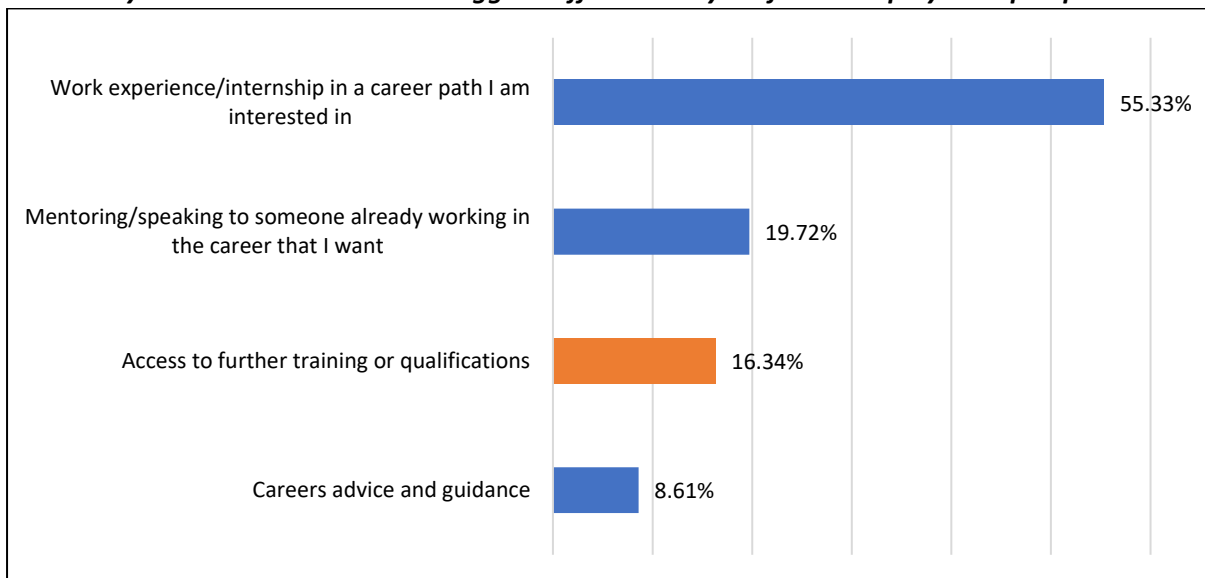
Not surprisingly, considering the importance that young people place on work experience, they seem especially appreciative of the role that careers services can play in setting up work experience opportunities. Among the 27.9% of respondents who were confident about finding work experience in the next twelve months, many cited their university, college or school as a helping factor.

‘Thinking about your future employment prospects, which of the following would be helpful for you in achieving your ambitions?’



Source: Young People’s Survey, 2021

‘What do you think would make the biggest difference to your future employment prospects?’



Source: Young People’s Survey, 2021

Interestingly, we did not find this replicated for young people intending to seek work in the next twelve months. In contrast, the 30.3% of young people who were confident about finding paid employment were more likely to talk about their qualifications, their prior experience or their own self-belief as contributing factors rather than the role of careers services.

Despite recognising the importance of careers advice in general, we received mixed feedback from young people about the support they had received during the current crisis. Many of the young people we spoke to were unsure about what support was available, either from schools, universities or independent services, and unclear about where to go for information and advice. This provided helpful context to the feedback we received from some education institutions that services were still available, but were not being accessed.

“I feel that students and recent graduates have been all but forgotten by our universities and the government, and we have not been able to access much support (financial, educational, career advice). I especially felt cheated by the university who expected high levels of lenience from its students in its handling of the pandemic, but gave almost no concessions to students who were struggling to complete work. I am more apathetic towards the government now than before the pandemic and distrust its abilities to run the country and to help someone like me.

White/White British Female (22), Young People’s Survey

“I feel the opportunities for careers advice and training have been there, but have not been accessed. We have found it incredibly difficult to contact young people during lockdown.”

Private Independent Training Provider Representative, Education Stakeholder Survey

Some young people explicitly referenced seeking careers advice and guidance from other, more informal sources instead, including their family and friends.

“There's a careers adviser at my college but I've never really spoken to them. I probably will just ask my sister because she's gone through it. Or ask my dad or my mum. Or look online.”

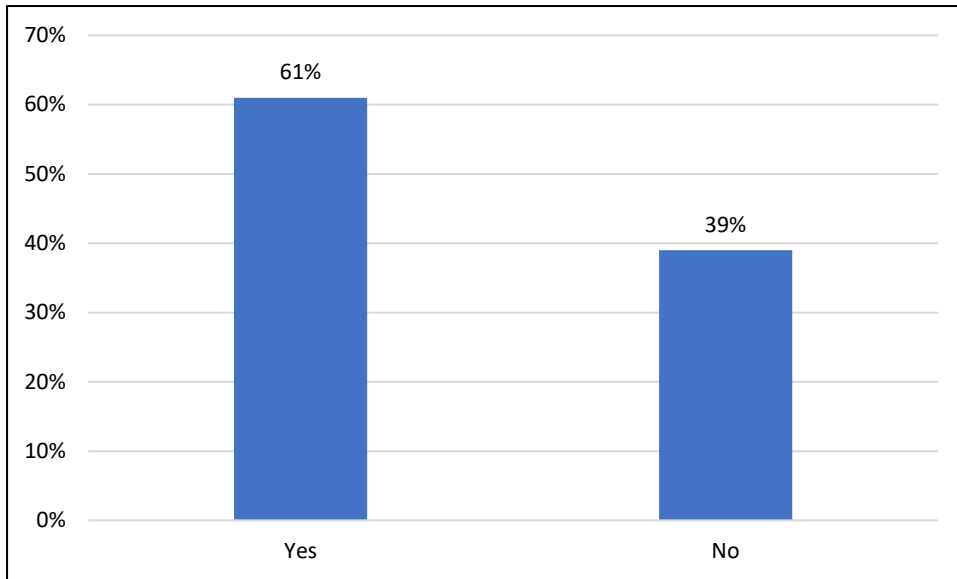
Black/Black British Female (17), Interview

Developing ‘soft’ skills

Feedback from the business community and education stakeholders presented a mixed picture of current careers advice. While they recognised that there were many examples of best practice careers services in Birmingham, they also raised concerns that the quality of provision was variable across the city. Even where best practice standards were being met, there was a general feeling that the design of services somehow ‘missed the mark’, failing to equip young people with the full range of skills, behaviours and knowledge required to survive in the modern world.

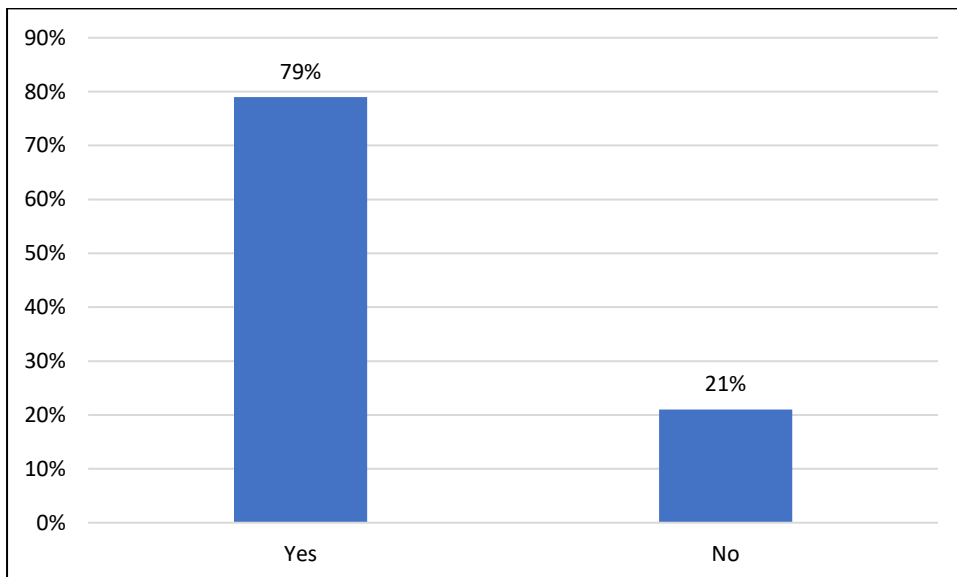
On the whole, businesses seemed unconcerned about identifying specific skills shortages or gaps among young people in Birmingham. In our Business Survey, 61% of respondents agreed that they were able to access the technical and specialist skills that they needed for their business within the current cohort. Respondents were even more confident about the future skills pipeline, with 79% of respondents projecting that they would be able to access the right skills and talent for their businesses over the next 5-10 years.

'Do you feel that your business is currently able to access the talent and the skills you need among 16-24 year olds?'



Source: Business Engagement Survey, 2021

'Looking ahead to the next 5-10 years, are you confident that you will be able to access the skills and talent that your organisation needs in Birmingham?'



Source: Business Engagement Survey, 2021

Instead, employers and education stakeholders focused on the development of transferable or 'soft skills' among young people, identifying this as a major gap in current careers advice. There was a strong feeling among research participants that, for most jobs, young people could learn the specific technical skills 'on the job' as part of the usual induction and training process. What was much more difficult for employers to teach were soft skills (such as communication, problem-solving, and the ability to work as part of a team) and basic work 'hygiene' habits (such as punctuality, personal grooming, and professional manner).

“Project management, time management, Excel, Microsoft, communication skills (verbal & written) are all just as important as the actual technical skills to do a job.”

Senior manager of a small manufacturer of electronic/IT goods, Business Engagement Exercise

Where young people lacked these skills and habits, this became a major barrier to employment and placed an additional supervisory and managerial burden on businesses. This is covered in more detail as part of Finding Eight.

There are indications that this will become especially important with the rise in virtual working, as new starters are expected to be more self-sufficient and work for long periods of time with minimal management supervision.

“Focus on modern skills such as technology as Covid-19 has changed the way a lot of businesses operate - large focus on working from home/remote working which means people need the ability to be self-sufficient as they may not have resources (IT support, direct managerial input) that they may have in an office environment.”

Experienced employee of a public/voluntary sector business, Business Engagement Exercise

“Most companies and employees seem to be moving towards a hybrid system with employees spending less time in an office environment. The impact on recruiting new starters in general, supervision, training etc. has yet to be realised. It looks as if it will be even harder to properly supervise young people, apprentices etc. if the place of work is remote.”

CEO/Director of a small retailing/wholesaling business, Business Engagement Exercise

Education stakeholders recognised the importance of encouraging soft skills among the young people that they worked with. Often this was closely linked to the concept of ‘entrepreneurialism’ and encouraging an entrepreneurial mindset among students, ensuring that they had a range of essential business skills such as leadership, critical thinking and decision-making.

The provision of ‘entrepreneurship education’ is recognised as a critical component of good quality careers advice, referenced within both the National Government 2017 Careers Strategy and underpinning the Gatsby Benchmarks for careers services. Despite this, only 50% of the institutions surveyed in our Education Stakeholder Survey said that they engaged with any specific initiatives or schemes to encourage entrepreneurialism among their students.

Underpinning all the feedback we received was a general sense that careers advice services remained too narrowly focused on getting young people onto the pathway for a specific qualification, training route or job as soon as possible – rather than providing them with the transferable skills to move between different roles or effectively manage their career over time. As one participant in our Education Stakeholder Roundtable put it, the support we currently offer young people feels more like ‘job advice’ than ‘career advice’.

“There’s a difference between giving someone careers advice and giving someone job advice. They’re completely different things, and I do wonder whether we need to close that gap. You may need a technical qualification to get a job, but you’re also going to need a whole load of tactical qualifications, experiences, to be able to demonstrate that you’re good enough for that job. I’m not sure that we’ve tied those two things together.”

Independent Training Provider Representative, Education Roundtable

“I think there is a huge gap for helpful careers advice. I don't think it is offered anywhere. Children need support from an early age to understand the different career choices that are out there and what qualifications they will need so that they don't close off careers too early on. This should encompass information about where there are opportunities (as not enough people qualified), through to different levels of job satisfaction in different careers as well as what you can earn. It should cover off some of the less well known careers that perhaps are being forgotten about (e.g. farriers). It should match people's skills, interests, values etc. and help them see the possibilities that are out there. And then ideally get people in from those jobs to talk to them and let them hear from someone doing the job what it is really like.”

Senior manager of a small marketing/media business, Business Engagement Exercise

Engagement with employers

Everyone we spoke to agreed that building links between businesses and education providers was vital for the provision of good quality careers advice. Direct engagement with businesses (and potential employers) helps keep careers services up to date with changes in a rapidly changing employment landscape; it provides a source of insight into local business need and growth sectors, and ensures that advisors are aware of the breadth of opportunities available to young people. For the young people themselves, direct engagement with businesses helps them to develop a realistic view of the modern world of work, gives them opportunities to ask questions and explore different options, and widens their horizons so that they fully understand all the opportunities available to them.

Despite this consensus, many of the employers that we spoke to felt insufficiently engaged with careers services. They worried that young people were missing out on all the information about their options, and at risk of developing unrealistic expectations about employment and what it took to get a job. The main barrier that they identified was capacity – it was not that education providers didn’t want to engage with businesses, but that they often did not have the time or internal resources to develop the long-term, reciprocal relationships that work best. Instead, engagement with businesses often relied on individual contacts, with businesses reaching out to local schools and colleges directly, and one-off events such as open days and job fairs.

Several respondents also called for education providers to engage more with SMEs and local businesses, rather than just large employers, and work with a broader range of sectors including manufacturing.

“Engagement with businesses needs to be done better. SME’s need to be engaged with and not just the big companies.”

Manager at a medium-sized manufacturer of electronic/IT goods, Business Engagement Exercise

There were, of course, some examples of very good engagement between businesses and their local education providers. Utilising a network-based approach, with regular dialogue between a business and a school, proved highly successful for some employers.

Many of the businesses we spoke to expressed interest in the development of a central ‘hub’ where businesses could be matched with education providers to develop a programme of regular engagement, as well as receive information and support around best practice engagement.

Education stakeholders presented a more positive view of their engagement with businesses. In our Education Stakeholder Survey, 89% of the respondents had built partnerships with individual companies or specific sectors as part of their careers services offer. 78% of institutions offered networking opportunities and events, and 78% promoted work and volunteering opportunities with a range of different employers through job fairs and open days. They did acknowledge that Covid-19 had impacted on their normal engagement activities with employers, but felt that this would resume once restrictions had lifted.

“Before COVID we offered Employability Days to our students where employers come into college and participate in a variety of workshops. Due to lockdown we have not been able to do this but will do this again once we are able to.”

College Representative, Education Stakeholder Survey

“We’ve had a lack of engagement probably across the city due to people not being able to come out like they normally would and do careers presentations.”

Secondary School Representative, Education Roundtable

Potential barriers to expanding careers services

“I would say, the vast majority of schools are very good at this, which is giving all of their young people the necessary information on post-16 options. But I still think that there are some schools who really need support or encouragement to do that.”

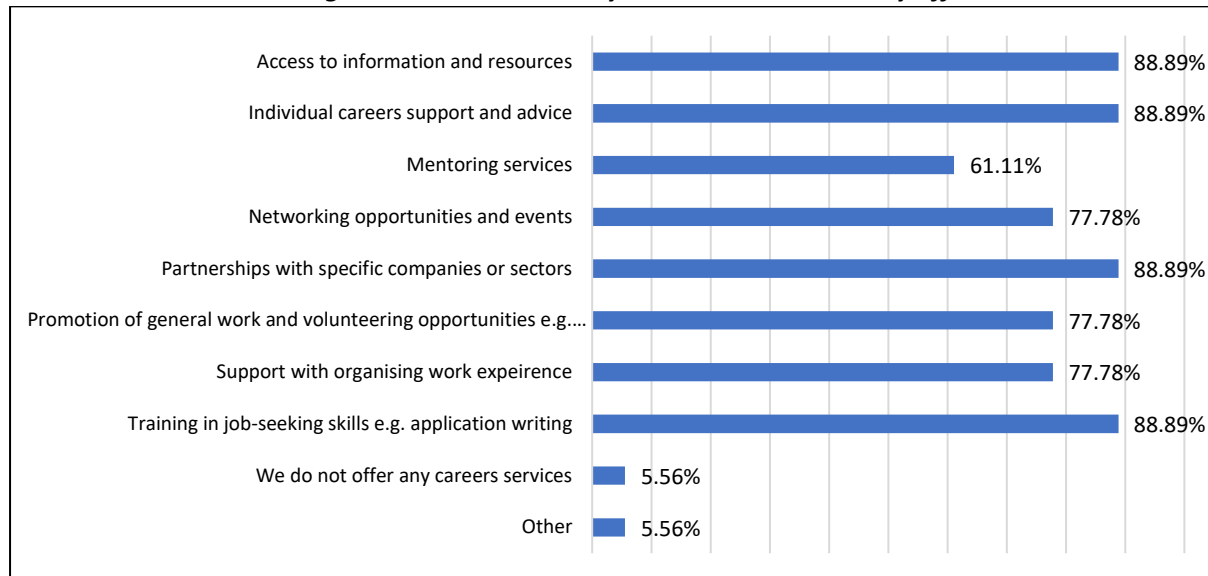
College Representative, Education Roundtable

In our Education Stakeholder Survey we asked a number of questions about careers advice and guidance services, both in terms of current provision and the opportunities for enhancing services.

The vast majority of education institutions we spoke to provided some form of careers advice to their students. (The only exceptions were some institutions working with young people with profound learning or physical disabilities, where formal paid employment was not a realistic

prospect.) The service offer varied between different education providers, with the most common services including access to information and resources (89%), individual careers support and advice (89%), and training in job-seeking skills such as CV writing (89%).

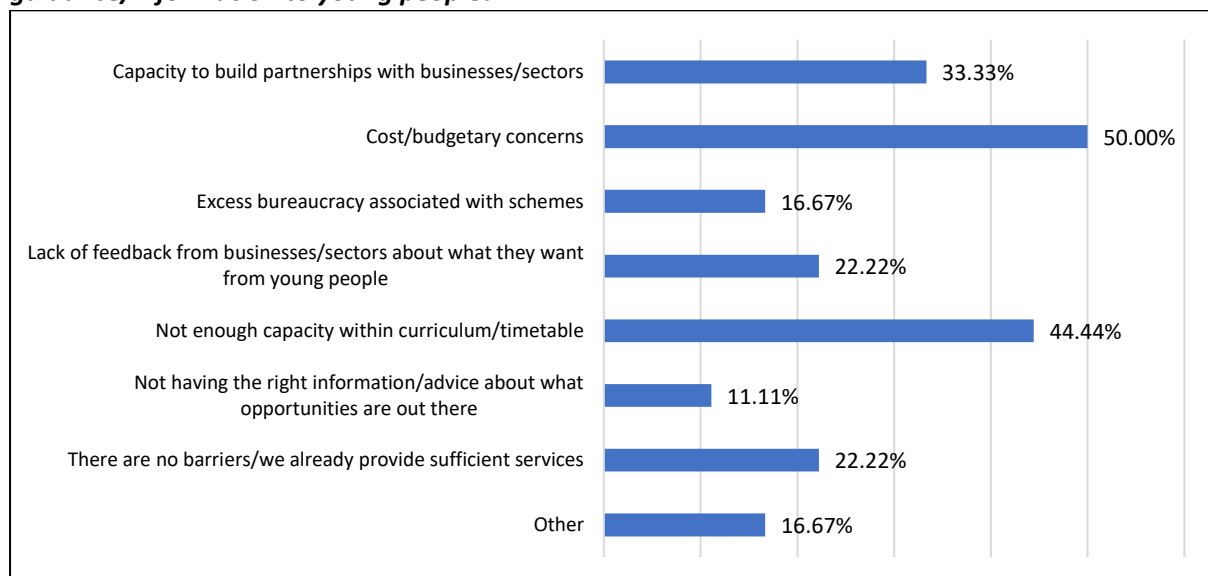
‘What careers advice and guidance services does your institution currently offer?’



Source: Education Stakeholder Survey, 2021

When asked about expanding careers services, 22% of the respondents to our survey stated that their institution already provided sufficient services and there was no need for expansion. Among the remaining institutions, the biggest identified barriers to expanding services were cost and budgetary concerns (50%) or a lack of capacity within timetables and the current curriculum (44%).

‘What are the main barriers that prevent your institution from providing more careers guidance/information to young people?’



Source: Education Stakeholder Survey, 2021

We found a contradiction when it came to the availability of information about current opportunities and business growth sectors. When asked directly, the majority of respondents to our

survey (61%) said that there was not enough information available for young people and education providers. Despite this, however, only 11% of respondents felt that lack of information was a barrier to providing additional careers advice services.

“I think there is a lot of information available but it can be difficult to navigate what is available within the region and how best to access it.”

University Representative, Education Stakeholder Survey

“I feel there is sufficient information for education providers however we are restricted on how we can get that information to our young people in an engaging way at the moment.”

Independent Training Provider Representative, Education Stakeholder Survey

There was a concern, expressed by some representatives from Further and Higher Education institutions, that careers advice services in schools were struggling to keep up with the pace of policy changes and the introduction of new qualification routes such as T-Levels. This may impact on the take-up of new qualifications and training routes, which rely on pupils being informed of all their options some years in advance.

“There’s a lot of change happening in the Further Education sector at the moment which will continue for the next few years. One of my concerns is, when I speak to schools, I don’t know whether the learners coming through will know about it.”

College Representative, Education Stakeholder Survey

We found a widespread acknowledgement of the impact of Covid-19 on careers services. With students off-site and learning from home, and teachers under immense pressure to deliver lessons remotely and adapt to new technologies, careers advice had become less of a priority during the pandemic. Careers services had also been negatively impacted by Covid restrictions and social distancing measures, leading to a reduction in work experience placements and the cancellation of traditional engagement events such as open days. Entire cohorts of young people, including those in ‘critical’ decision-making years, had missed out on much of the standard careers advice offer.

“During the pandemic, there’s a whole cohort or two that have missed out on advice and guidance, and opportunities. Things like work experience and all the things that go along with that. For example, current Year 11, who are sixteen years old now and planning to go on to post-16 options – at the end of Year 10 when they would have had all these experiences to help make their minds up, didn’t have any of that. That’s all gone.”

College Representative, Education Roundtable

Most of the people we spoke to were optimistic that careers services would resume as usual after the pandemic, albeit with increased online provision. There is a danger, however, that the rush to ‘catch-up’ students and make up for lost learning time will take focus away from careers advice just

when young people need it most. With a lack of resources and capacity already identified as the main limiting factors to careers advice, it is vital that education providers at all levels at least maintain current levels of careers services, supporting young people into employment as part of the wider Covid-19 recovery.

Finding Seven: There is a significant communications gap between young people and employers, which is in danger of damaging young people's long-term prospects and the economic recovery from Covid-19.

One of the most significant discoveries over the course of our research was that of a major communications failure between young people looking for employment, and the businesses seeking to employ them. This operated across a number of levels, from young people having an unrealistically pessimistic view of their employment prospects, to business struggling to identify the right channels and language to engage with young people, all the way up to a fundamental gap in how both sides understand and assess skills. This communications gap is having a significant negative impact on both the employability of young people and the recruitment practices of businesses, threatening not only young people's future career prospects but also the wider recovery of businesses post-Covid.

The 'optimism gap'

As explored in Finding Three, our research uncovered evidence of a major mental health crisis among young people of all backgrounds. This manifested itself in a number of ways, from increased levels of anxiety to drop in motivation and enthusiasm, but was having a major impact on the job-seeking behaviours and attitudes of most of the young people we spoke to. There is a widespread belief among many young people that they are a 'low priority' for businesses compared to older and more experienced candidates, demonstrated by a severe shortage of suitable work experience and paid employment opportunities.

"I don't feel confident since there have been many people who have been made redundant or lost their jobs during this pandemic. The economy is suffering greatly, we are going through Brexit and the benefit system is being relied upon heavily. Therefore, I feel as if the situation is only going to get worse for young people as so my businesses are closing down which means less jobs are available - making it very hard for people to find stable employment."

Asian/Asian British Female (17), Young People's Survey

"A lot of people will be fighting for the same/ similar jobs. People who have lost their jobs because of Covid will have more experience and more/higher qualifications, so they'll get the jobs before college students."

White/White British Female (17), Young People's Survey

Not everything about this assessment of the labour market is incorrect. It is true that businesses face major barriers to employing young people, ranging from a lack of internal resource to the bureaucratic burden of many youth employment initiatives. The pandemic has also introduced additional barriers to youth employment, including social distancing restrictions and a drop in cashflow, which is affecting the availability of work experience placements for young people. These are covered in more detail as part of Finding Eight.

The employers we spoke to, however, were clear that the recruitment of young people remained a key strategic priority – not only to secure a future pipeline of talent for their organisation, but to

ensure the recovery and resilience of the West Midlands economy post Covid-19. Some of this optimism is linked to upcoming transformative projects and events, such as HS2 and the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games.

“Like many hospitality businesses we are currently forecasting/planning for full reopening. We hope to engage younger people in social media. Also we are a centre for apprentice training in hospitality. We are seeing if we can offer traineeships/apprenticeships focussed at disadvantaged communities, particularly individuals who see themselves as food entrepreneurs.”

Respondent from a micro tourism/hotels/catering business, Business Engagement Exercise

In our business survey, 30% of respondents stated that they had specifically tried to recruit young people aged 16-24 in the preceding six months. This was higher among services sector businesses (35%) than manufacturers (24%), and significantly higher among large businesses than micro or SME businesses. While some businesses expressed frustration at being unable to recruit the right young people for roles, other employers talked about their success with different types of youth employment schemes, including apprenticeships and graduate schemes.

“For our business (engineering professional services), degree-apprenticeships and graduate programmes are the right avenue for us in order to find candidates with the right interest and academic background in engineering. Engagement with local colleges and universities to facilitate these schemes/recruitment has been excellent.”

Senior manager of a small professional services business, Business Engagement Exercise

“We have developed some brilliant talent through our apprenticeship and graduate schemes.”

Senior manager of a medium-sized services sector business, Business Engagement Exercise

Young people themselves gave a number of reasons for their pessimistic attitude to job-hunting. These ranged from internal factors, such as lack of confidence and poor mental health, to practical considerations such as lack of experience, to the perceived bias of businesses against young people. Employers, however, placed much more importance on negative media narratives around youth employment and business closures, believing that these were reinforcing young people’s pessimistic beliefs and drowning out more positive messaging around reopening and recruitment.

In our engagement with young people, we did find some signs that negative media narratives were affecting their perceptions of the job market. While they were more likely to talk about the negative impact of social media on their mental health, we found examples of young people explicitly referencing negative stories in traditional media and linking this to their inability to find work experience or paid employment.

"I have also only seen negative things in the news about the rate of unemployment growing, and so it feels like there's even more competition for jobs than before. Sometimes it feels impossible."

White/White British Female (24), Young People's Survey

Businesses expressed frustration about negative media narratives, believing that they were having a negative impact on their ability to recruit and ultimately damaging young people's employment prospects. Some employers expressed the need for a media or awareness campaign to counter negative media narratives, making it clear that Birmingham's businesses are reopening, recruiting, and looking to hire young people.

The communications divide

We heard about a communications failure between businesses and young people, even prior to the pandemic. Many of the businesses that we spoke to said that they struggled to effectively engage with young people through traditional communication and recruitment routes, and to advertise themselves as potential employers. Just as young people need to make themselves attractive as job candidates, the majority of research participants agreed that businesses also need to ensure that they are attractive to the young talent they need to secure the future of their organisations.

In today's rapidly developing world, many businesses felt that they were failing to make effective use of new communications channels and digital resources. They recognised the need to reach young people 'where they are' and tailor their messaging to address the changing priorities of a new generation of potential employees.

"Young people are using technology for that sort of stuff, we need to find out where they're accessing all their information so we can put things there."

College Representative, Education Roundtable

Businesses had a number of suggestions for how they might improve communications with younger people aged 16-24.

Some employers reiterated the importance of reaching out to young people through non-traditional forms of media. Participants gave examples of successfully using social media platforms such as Snapchat to advertise their latest traineeship programmes, and many felt that other platforms such as TikTok or Instagram could be effective in reaching out and engaging with a wider mix of 16-24 year olds.

Other businesses, especially micro and SME organisations, said that they would welcome specialist support and advice from organisations that provide youth employment support, such as Birmingham City Council.

“Could do with more information with simple, straightforward messages about options for support and ways of engaging this age range in our team.”

CEO/Director of a small professional services business, Business Engagement Exercise

There was also a high level of support among businesses for the establishment of an online ‘opportunities hub’, where young people could access the latest information about schemes and opportunities in the local area and employers could advertise vacancies and directly engage with prospective candidates. This idea is explored in more detail as part of Finding Nine.

“Often pro-active people of this age have to write into companies to get experience. Businesses should offer more dedicated channels for young people to contact companies, with having more structured communication channels on handling the funnel of enquires, and ultimately maintaining that relationship with the person, whatever the outcome.”

CEO/Director of a micro business, Business Engagement Exercise

The communications gap between young people and businesses is linked to the need to ensure that organisations feel ‘welcoming’ to younger candidates. Moral and social justice values, such as diversity, sustainability and mental health awareness, are increasingly important to today’s young people, and the onus is often on employers to demonstrate that these values are shared. For some of the organisations that we spoke to, outdated perceptions of their organisation or sector seemed like the biggest barrier to effective recruitment.

“Address the misconceptions surrounding manufacturing which is such an important sector to Birmingham and the West Midlands. No longer is it a dirty labour intensive sector. Mum, dad and teachers alike need to be made aware that modern engineering is clean and an excellent career path.”

Respondent from a small manufacturing business, Business Engagement Exercise

There appears to be a natural fit between businesses that need specialist support to successfully appeal to younger job candidates, and young people desperately seeking opportunities for work experience. In our focus groups, businesses themselves suggested that they might benefit from working directly with young people to develop and expand their recruitment methods, using innovative techniques such as collaborative engagement work or reverse mentoring schemes.

“There is a communications issue, in that the employers and the students and education providers are talking slightly different languages, and therefore we’re missing the opportunities to align them.”

Independent Training Provider Representative, Education Roundtable

“We’re a tiny team already stretched and have had mixed experiences with young people working with us. It’s a capacity and a financial issue for us. We have a young Board member who is supporting us to review strategies.”

CEO/Director of a micro cultural/creative sector business, Business Engagement Exercise

‘Invisible’ skills

At the most extreme end of the spectrum, the communications gap between employers and young people leaves many businesses struggling to identify the right candidates with the skills and experience needed to fill roles. This is perhaps the central paradox that underpins much of youth unemployment – on the one hand, employers failing to fill vacancies and perceiving that no one has the skills they need, and on the other hand, young people failing to demonstrate their value to employer and feeling that the system is unfairly biased against them.

This is linked to Finding Three, and the potential gap in careers advice around teaching young people how to effectively identify, package and ‘sell’ their skills to employers.

“When I talk to employers, they say that they’re frustrated because they can’t find the skills and capabilities they’re looking for to fill their jobs. But when I talk to young people, they’re frustrated because they can’t get the opportunities to gain the experience to demonstrate the skills and capabilities to apply for the jobs.”

Independent Training Provider Representative, Education Roundtable

A number of businesses, particularly micro and SME organisations with limited HR or management capacity, find themselves overly reliant on traditional qualifications and strict person specifications to identify the right candidates for roles. This ‘risk averse’ approach to recruitment makes sense, especially in smaller organisations where each new starter represents a significant investment of resource and management capacity. However, for those young people furthest away from work – those with less formal work experience, or fewer professional qualifications – this represents a significant barrier to employment.

“It can be a gamble taking on young people without experience.”

CEO/Director of a medium sized business, Business Engagement Exercise

“A lot of these young people seem to have low personal value, and don’t aspire to the jobs that may be available to them. And employers don’t look for those people because actually they’re looking for people with the standard qualification matrix, which in itself I believe creates inequality. So if you don’t have the qualifications, you don’t even get looked at.”

Independent Training Provider Representative, Education Roundtable

A number of practical solutions were suggested by research participants to help bridge this divide. Sometimes, these were as simple as reviewing job descriptions to ensure that they were written in simple language that was easy for young people to understand, or providing practical examples of what skills looked like in practice. This suggestion was supported by our conversations with stakeholders from Birmingham Children's Trust, who felt that this would particularly help care-leavers.

For some of the other stakeholders we spoke to, this issue was merely the symptom of a much wider problem – a lack of management capacity and capability within the SME sector. They felt that this, and many of the other barriers to employing young people identified in Finding Eight, could be tackled by increased investment into management training and development for small businesses. Increased funding or other forms of capacity building, such as a management training fund, might help to improve recruitment practices in smaller firms and more broadly ensure that young people are getting more meaningful and positive experiences within businesses once they are hired.

Finding Eight: Businesses, especially small and medium sized enterprises, currently face a number of barriers to employing young people or offering them work experience.

Businesses are clear that employing young people is a priority - not just to ensure a pipeline of future talent for their organisations, but to 'build back' a stronger and more resilient West Midlands economy after the pandemic. Despite this enthusiasm, however, they continue to face a number of significant barriers to offering young people paid work or work experience. Some of these barriers, such as social distancing restrictions and reduced cashflow, are directly related to Covid-19 and might be expected to naturally ease over the course of the recovery period. Other issues, however, represent longer-term barriers to youth employment and may require special intervention as part of Covid-19 economic recovery planning. These include internal resourcing and capacity, and low awareness of the schemes specifically designed to help young people in employment.

Our business engagement exercises identified three major barriers for businesses when recruiting young people aged 16-24, for both work experience and paid roles. These were: excess bureaucracy associated with youth employment schemes, a lack of internal resource within businesses, and a general lack of awareness of the organisations and initiatives supporting youth employment. These barriers, along with the specific challenges posed by the pandemic, are covered in this section and in Finding Nine.

Social distancing restrictions

The businesses we spoke to identified a number of areas where the pandemic had created barriers to youth employment. One of the most significant, and most visible, challenges was caused by Covid-19 social distancing restrictions and the closure of businesses during lockdown.

At the most extreme end of the scale, where businesses had either been closed by restrictions or had their operations severely curtailed, this had an obvious and immediate negative impact on the recruitment of young people. As well as a reduction in new opportunities, many young people found themselves made redundant, furloughed, or put on reduced hours. This issue was exacerbated by the fact that many of the sectors most likely to close as a result of Covid-19, such as hospitality, leisure, and non-essential retail, were also likely to disproportionately employ young people prior to the pandemic.

“COVID has had a large impact on placements and it is not clear when everything will open up again in order for me to be able to get work experience.”

Asian/Asian British Female (16), Young People's Placement

“The challenge at the moment is bringing non-essential workers or individuals into the workplace during a pandemic when half your team are working from home to reduce the risk of possible Covid transmission.”

Senior manager of a medium retailing/wholesaling business, Business Engagement Exercise

Even where businesses remained open, they often found themselves operating with reduced staff capacity due to social distancing restrictions. In these conditions, where businesses were struggling to accommodate even essential paid employees, they understandably struggled to find space for work experience placements or new starters that would themselves require additional supervision.

While social distancing and lockdown restrictions have had a dramatic impact on the number and kind of opportunities available to young people, we can reasonably expect these barriers to ease as we move through the recovery period.

Funding

A more serious, and potentially longer-term, barrier to employing young people came from the financial impact of the pandemic on businesses, many of whom saw an immediate and dramatic decrease in cashflow as a result of restrictions.

“We’ve been massively affected by Covid and don’t have the finances or spare capacity to support new roles.”

Senior manager of a small marketing/media business, Business Engagement Exercise

In a study conducted by the British Chamber of Commerce in 2020, 42% of businesses reported taking on debt during the Covid-19 crisis, with more than one in four saying that they would need to scale down operations to meet debt repayments. In this context, many of the businesses we spoke to found themselves caught between short-term survival and long-term strategic considerations, feeling that they simply did not have the money to invest in recruiting, developing or training young people. Unless a clear financial case could be made for investment in new starters, recruitment became low priority for businesses. This was especially true for SMEs, who experienced particular issues around cashflow, and closed sectors such as hospitality, leisure and non-essential retail.

The financial impact of the pandemic on businesses may be linked to the possible rise in unpaid work experience explored in Finding Five.

“I think one of the biggest barriers is financial with employers. Especially the lower end of the scale, the hospitality and service industries, the ones that have been closed for a minimum of six months over the last twelve. They just haven’t got the cashflow to employ people.”

Independent Training Provider Representative, Education Roundtable

While this factor was exacerbated by the pandemic, we heard from businesses that cost had long been a barrier in the recruitment of young people. This included both the direct cost of recruitment and the indirect costs that came from taking on less experienced new starters, such as the impact on the productivity of supervising managers. Even work experience placements, which in many ways are low cost and low risk for businesses, involved a high indirect cost due to the need for supervision.

For those young people who are furthest away from employment, such as those lacking transferable skills or basic work ‘hygiene’ habits, the need for increased supervision also meant an increase in

indirect cost to the organisation. This acts as a direct disincentive to taking on these ‘low employability’ candidates.

“We took on an apprentice through a college scheme, but you do put a lot of effort in, but the actual person themselves would use it as a stepping stone. So a bit wary, we are investing a lot, when ultimately nothing is guaranteed.”

Experienced member of staff at a large manufacturer of electronic/IT goods, Business

“Where there is funding available, it is a massive help and incentive.”

Senior manager at a small services business, Business Engagement Exercise

The businesses that we spoke to were receptive to the idea of additional grant funding to help facilitate the recruitment of young people, and agreed that this could go a long way towards reducing this specific barrier. It was felt that SMEs, especially, would benefit from additional financial support to employ young people, whether this came in the form of direct grant funding or additional investment into management capacity.

However, our research participants were also clear that simply providing financial support is not enough – the mechanisms to access this support must be carefully designed to avoid simply replacing one barrier with another. Many existing grant schemes and youth employment initiatives are perceived to involve an excessive level of bureaucracy which then becomes a barrier to youth employment in its own right. This is covered in more detail below.

The ‘bureaucratic burden’ of employing young people

One of the largest, and most cited, barriers to employing young people is the ‘bureaucratic burden’: the administrative and managerial resource required to take on younger or less experienced members of staff.

We found two separate facets to this issue. In general, employing young people – or less experienced people of any kind – requires a higher level of supervisory resource, both as part of the initial onboarding and training process, and then to provide additional development and support over the course of their employment contract. The businesses we spoke to were well aware that young people might require additional assistance to survive and thrive in employment, and had no desire to recruit new starters only to have them fail later on due to a lack of support.

This concern was especially acute for young people furthest away from employment – those with less work experience, a lack of transferable skills, or with additional complex needs such as poor mental health or insecure housing. The additional managerial capacity required to successfully support these young people often presents a barrier in its own right.

Managerial capacity considerations were especially acute for micro or SME businesses, who often have very small HR functions and are unable to benefit from the same economies of scale as larger businesses.

Businesses suggested two potential options to tackle this lack of capacity. Increased investment into management training and development, potentially in the form of grant funding or a management training fund, would help to build capacity in businesses across Birmingham and the West Midlands, especially in SMEs. Alternatively, businesses might be indirectly supported to employ young people through the provision of external management or administrative support from organisations such as Birmingham City Council.

“If the administrative burden of supervision/management could be held by an outside party that would be helpful as we run a very skinny back office operation.”

CEO/Director of a small professional services business, Business Engagement Exercise

“Reduce paperwork and make it easier for employers to access talent.”

CEO/Director of a micro marketing/media business, Business Engagement Exercise

The second aspect of this issue was related to youth employment schemes. Businesses felt strongly that many existing initiatives to tackle youth unemployment, such as apprenticeships or traineeships, involved an unreasonable amount of ‘red tape’ and bureaucracy. The commitment of resource that was required to participate in such schemes, both in terms of managerial time and office/HR administration, was a barrier to involvement for many businesses. SMEs in particular often felt unable to engage in such schemes, lacking the strategic and legal knowledge to properly navigate the sign-up process or understand the implications for their businesses.

The bureaucratic barrier was often raised specifically in relation to the Kickstart scheme (covered in Finding Ten).

“My general feeling on it is that they are too hard to access, and excess paperwork which puts business off.”

CEO/Director of a small marketing/media business, Business Engagement Exercise

“There’s some frustration with employers because there have been a number of government incentives put out there for them to take on apprentices, but there’s so many clauses and loopholes in those, that you know, your micro-employer with two or three employees, just hasn’t got the patience or the wherewithal to sign up to these government accounts or check all these loopholes.”

Independent Training Provider Representative, Education Roundtable

Finding Nine: There are concerns that the employment and skills landscape is overly complicated and difficult to navigate, for both young people and businesses.

As we discovered over the course of our research, the current employment and skills landscape is complex and difficult to navigate even for 'experts', with a wide range of different initiatives, support organisations and funding sources. Businesses perceived the current system as excessively complicated, especially for micro or SME businesses, and often struggled to know where to go for up-to-date comprehensive information and advice. The challenge facing businesses was reflected in their low levels of awareness of both specific youth unemployment initiatives and the organisations that provide youth employment support and advice. To help tackle this issue and cut through the complicated landscape, there was a great deal of support for the development of a 'one stop shop' central hub to help build networks, share best practice, and advertise opportunities for young people.

"I think there are too many places and options, therefore people don't know where to turn to, and it can all get complicated for the employer and the young person."

CEO/Director of a small manufacturing business, Business Engagement Exercise

Among the businesses we spoke to, a lack of awareness of how to utilise and engage with youth employment support mechanisms was one of the top three barriers to youth employment. This included both a lack of awareness of specific youth employment schemes, and a lack of understanding of the role of different organisations such as Birmingham City Council. Businesses seemed overwhelmed by all the options available to them, encountering many of them for the first time through our research, and struggled to identify definitive sources for information, support and best practice. This was especially true for micro and SME businesses, who have reduced managerial and HR capacity to keep up with developments in the employment and skills landscape.

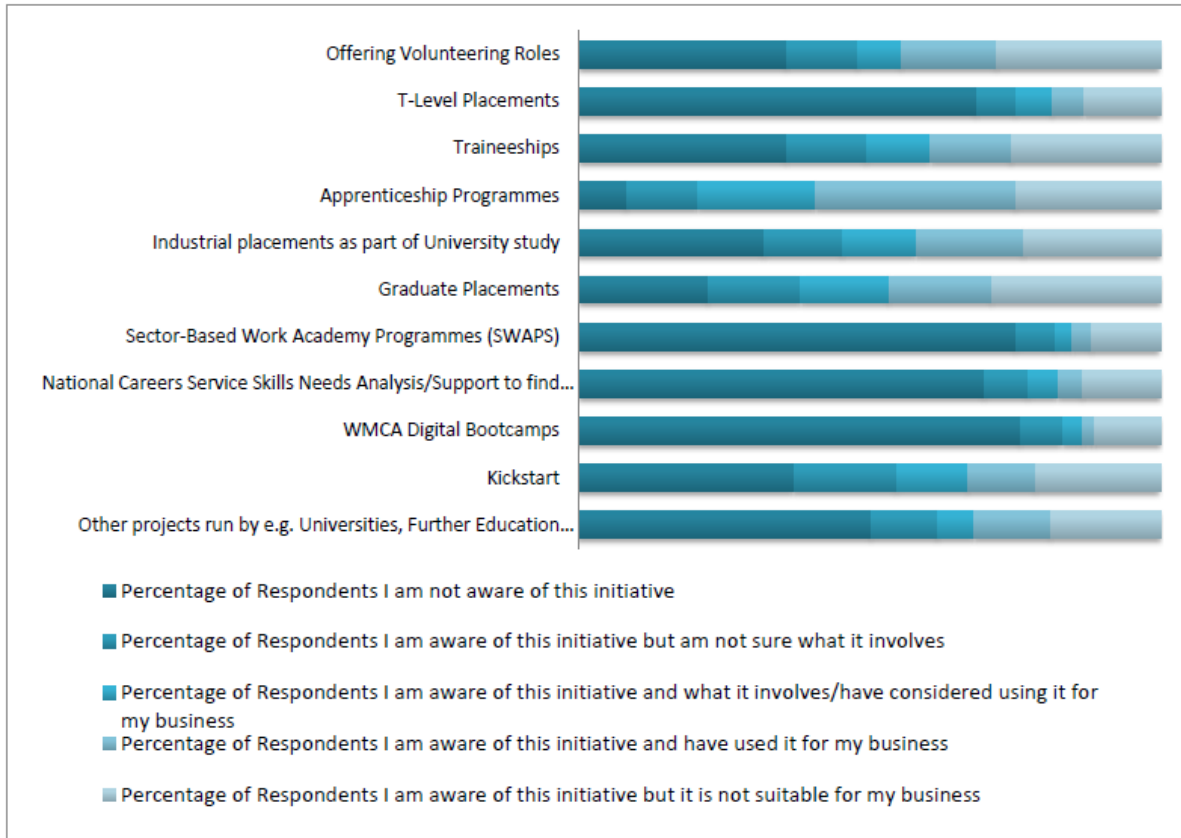
Awareness of youth employment initiatives

In our Business Survey, we asked a number of questions to explore businesses' understanding of the youth employment and skills landscape. We found that many businesses, especially smaller businesses, are unaware of many existing initiatives to help young people into work experience and employment.

While we found a significant lack of awareness or understanding of all mechanisms listed, respondents were most frequently unaware of or unsure of what was involved in WMCA Digital Bootcamps (83%), Sector-Based Work Academy Programmes (SWAPs) (82%) and National Careers Service (NCS) activities (77%).

Businesses were most frequently aware of, and had considered apprenticeship programmes (79%), graduate placements (62%) and industrial placements as part of university study (55%). This was the case across micro and SMEs, as well as large businesses.

'A number of existing mechanisms are in place to help businesses recruit 16-24 year olds for work experience and employment. Which of these initiatives are you aware of, and which have you used in order to recruit 16-24 year-olds over the last six months?'



Source: Business Survey, 2021

Across the board, large businesses were more likely to be aware of, and have considered, every listed support mechanism (compared to micro or SME businesses). They were also significantly more likely to have utilised each mechanism.

“First, I wasn't aware of many of the options. As a restaurant during the pandemic, together with the uncertainty of this time, meant I mainly need staff for less hours together with flexibility, which meant zero hour contract was something that I was aware of and it fit the bill. Did not think there are other options that would be flexible.”

CEO/Director of a small tourism/hotels/catering business, Business Engagement Exercise

“We are a relatively small business with a small HR team, so not aware of lots of these initiatives and how we could work them in to recruiting.”

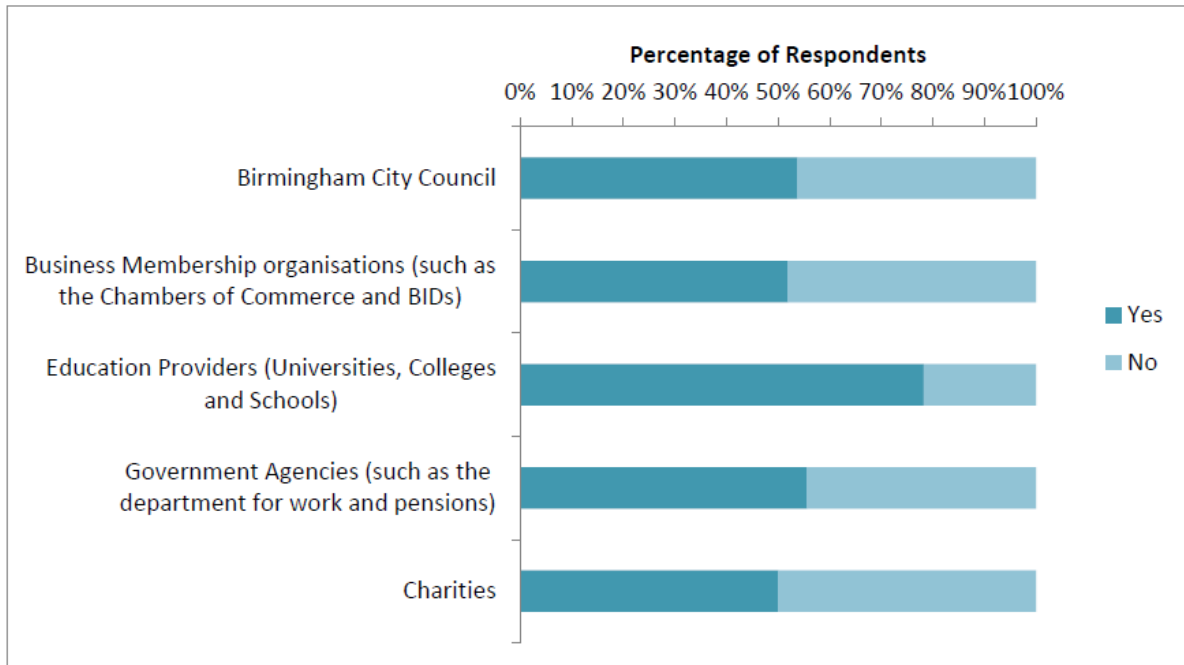
Intermediate manager at medium-sized retailing/wholesaling business, Business Engagement

Awareness of support organisations

Our survey showed not only a low level of awareness of specific youth employment initiatives, but also a low level of awareness of the organisations that provided youth employment activities.

‘Are you aware that the following organisations undertake work to help firms offer work experience to and hire those aged between 16 and 24?’

1’ 2416



Source: Business Survey, 2021

Overall, businesses were by far most frequently aware of the work undertaken by education providers to help firms offer jobs or work experience to young people; 78% of businesses reported being aware of this activity. This was true across all sectors, and across micro, SME and large businesses.

However, there were notable differences between micro and SME and large organisations. Large businesses (67%) were significantly more likely than micro businesses and SMEs (52%) to be aware of the work undertaken by Birmingham City Council. Comparatively, while smaller organisations were more frequently aware of the work undertaken by government agencies than large businesses (57% versus 48%).

“They [organisations providing youth employment support] are more focused on large employers.”

Manager at a small consumer services business, Business Engagement Exercise

Businesses were supportive of the fact that the listed organisations were providing support for employing young people. Many appreciated organisations such as universities or colleges proactively reaching out to them to provide extensive support, but some nonetheless found the support landscape somewhat confusing or found difficulties with support from education providers revolving around the academic year. Charities were credited with listening more to the

businesses they engaged.

“From personal experience universities can provide extensive help and resources in putting students in touch with relevant contacts and providing support when seeking relevant work experience - with dedicated teams to follow up and monitor progress of placement schemes.”

Experienced employee of a large public/voluntary sector business, Business Engagement Exercise

When asked how these organisations could improve their support offer, businesses emphasised that communication should be improved, especially with SMEs. They felt that organisations could do more direct engagement to raise awareness of schemes, as well as reduce bureaucracy and complexity around schemes, and provide more grant funding (including funding for providing equipment to new staff and to cover the costs of work experience placements). One suggested that sharing success stories from other businesses and helping businesses to understand young people better could be beneficial.

“The main challenge will be making sure the companies have enough awareness of funding to be able to make the best out of these schemes. Also longer term funding to support long term employment of young people.”

CEO/Director of a micro marketing/media business, Business Engagement Exercise

“Webinars, sharing success stories, success stories specific to industry types would be good too, sharing what are the top things this age range are looking for in their new careers (regularly surveying this age range).”

CEO/Director of a small professional services business, Business Engagement Exercise

The establishment of a central hub

Across all fronts, businesses felt that anchor institutions such as Birmingham City Council should be taking a more proactive role in promoting schemes and support options to businesses. In particular, they showed strong support for the suggestion of establishing a central online hub to showcase opportunities for 16-24 year olds looking for work experience and employment opportunities. The functionality of the central hub would need to go beyond matching candidates to opportunities but would also need to be more of a “one stop shop” in offering, careers advice, sharing best practice and also facilitating network building between education providers, Birmingham City Council, business membership organisations and local businesses.

“A more central location to find out about these services would be beneficial, as we found these on our own accord!”

CEO/Director of a micro business, Business Engagement Exercise

Research participants were aware that this was not a new idea, and that similar ‘one stop shops’ have been set up in the past to varying degrees of success. Many previous schemes have failed as they lacked agility and speed in delivering the right candidate to the right opportunity. In recognition

of this, it was suggested that Birmingham City Council review existing hubs that have been established by private sector businesses, as well as similar public sector initiatives across the country. Any new initiatives should be developed with the involvement of young people themselves, in order to understand how young people of all experiences and backgrounds utilise online resources.

Businesses felt that the development of a 'one stop shop' online hub would tackle many of the issues underlying youth unemployment in Birmingham. This included the communications divide between employers and young people (Finding Seven), many of the gaps in current careers advice provision (Finding Six), and the difficulties that young people faced in trying to get work experience (Finding Five).

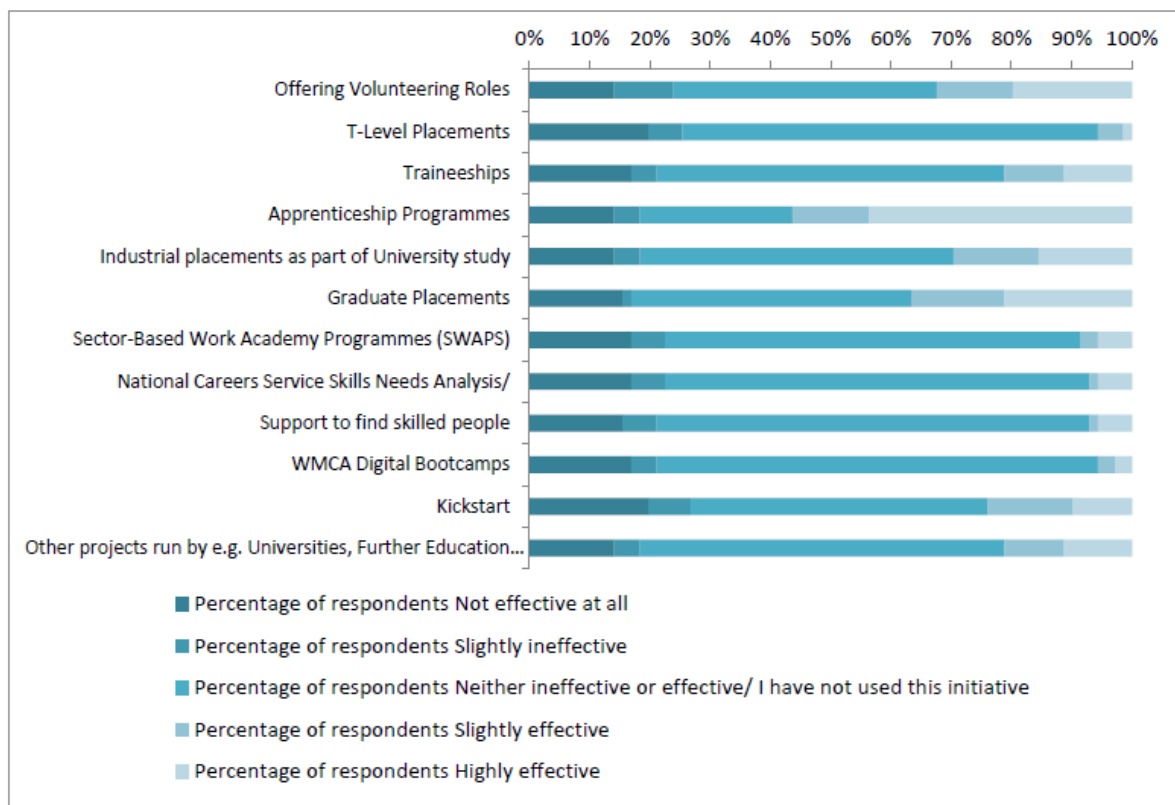
Finding Ten: Businesses have mixed opinions of the effectiveness of existing youth employment schemes, including the new Kickstart scheme. There are a number of issues with the design of Kickstart that are likely to reduce its effectiveness in tackling youth unemployment as part of Covid recovery.

A range of initiatives already exist to help support young people into employment, ranging from paid schemes such as graduate schemes and apprenticeships to unpaid development opportunities including work experience and volunteering. Businesses have mixed views on the effectiveness of these schemes, including the new Kickstart scheme launched in autumn 2020. Employers identified a number of issues with the design and implementation of Kickstart that are affecting its ability to deliver the right number and quality of candidates to businesses. Without intervention to address these issues, we found that Kickstart is unlikely to play an effective role in reducing youth employment as part of the Covid recovery.

Mixed feedback on youth employment schemes

The businesses that we spoke to had mixed views on the effectiveness of existing youth unemployment schemes.

‘How effective did you find the initiatives listed below in fulfilling your work experience or recruitment objectives in relation to candidates aged between 16-24?’



Source: Business Survey, 2021

In our Business Survey, respondents found the following schemes more effective (slightly or highly) than slightly or not effective at all: apprenticeship programmes (56% effective versus 18% ineffective), graduate placements (37% effective versus 17% ineffective), volunteering roles (32%

effective versus 24% ineffective), and industrial placements as part of university study (30% effective versus 18% ineffective).

Apprenticeship programmes were by far most frequently reported highly effective, reported as such by 44% of respondents, followed by graduate placements (21%) and offering volunteering roles (20%).

“We have developed some brilliant talent through our apprenticeship and graduate schemes.”

Manager at a medium-sized services sector business, Business Engagement Exercise

It was clear in written feedback that the effectiveness of schemes varied depending on the needs of specific businesses, with different employers having different requirements around skill level, flexibility, and pay. Having a range of different schemes is necessary to meet the needs of different businesses across the local employment and skills landscape, and there is no such thing as a ‘one size fits all’ scheme.

“All organisations are very keen to point out that an apprentice is cheap compared to a grown up adult, and we won't pay the apprentice rate. We believe it is wrong to pay so little, when they are learning and working/slave labour. It is unethical.”

CEO/Director of a large manufacturing business, Business Engagement Exercise

“Volunteering is good at giving us the opportunity to give young people experience they didn't have on CV, and then we go on to hire them. Similarly with apprenticeships. Kickstart doesn't have the same career focus for individuals.”

Manager at a large public/voluntary sector services organisation, Business Engagement Exercise

Traineeships were found equally effective and ineffective (21% effective versus 21% ineffective). Kickstart also received polarised responses (24% effective versus 27% ineffective).

All other initiatives were found to be more ineffective than effective, including: T-level placements (25% ineffective versus 6% effective), National Careers Service activities (23% ineffective versus 7% effective), and WMCA Digital Bootcamps (21% ineffective versus 6% effective).

Kickstart and T-Level Placements were most frequently reported to be ‘not effective at all,’ by 20% of respondents. Traineeships, SWAPs, NCS activities and WMCA Digital Bootcamps all closely followed, each reported as not effective at all by 17% of respondents.

Business impressions of Kickstart

The Kickstart scheme, launched in Autumn 2020, is the centrepiece of the national response to youth unemployment caused by Covid-19, and expected to play a key role in the economic recovery. With an initial cost of £2 billion, the scheme offers six month work placements to young people (aged 16-24) on Universal Credit. Kickstart placements are fully funded by national government, who provide 100% of the age-relevant National Minimum Wage, National Insurance and pension

contributions for 25 hours a week (employers are given the choice of topping wages or hours up, should they wish). Employers also receive a grant of £1500 for each young people they employ through Kickstart, to pay for support, training and onboarding costs such as uniforms.

Throughout our engagement with businesses, experiences and perceptions of Kickstart were highly polarised. In our Business Survey, 24% of businesses thought that the scheme was effective; a slightly higher 27% of businesses felt that it was ineffective. 20% of respondents felt that Kickstart was 'not effective at all'.

"Kickstart is poorly implemented and not working."

CEO/Director of a micro professional services sector business, Business Engagement Exercise

"We have had good people with great attitude [through Kickstart]. They have adapted well, and the 25 per hours week paid is really great and useful. The initial grant makes sure we can help them too."

Senior manager at a medium-sized manufacturer of goods, Business Engagement Exercise

"The Kickstart scheme is shockingly poor."

CEO/Director of a micro business, Business Engagement Exercise

"I think the financial support you gain is excellent, without that perhaps we wouldn't have gone down the Kickstart route."

Senior manager at a medium manufacturing business, Business Engagement Exercise

Through focus groups and qualitative feedback, we dug deeper into businesses' experiences of Kickstart. Criticisms of the scheme seemed to follow two main themes: firstly that it had failed to deliver the expected number of quality candidates to businesses, and secondly that the processes around the scheme are needlessly cumbersome and slow.

"Reduce the red tape - Kickstart sounds like a great idea until you understand the lengthy process of vetting CVs etc. Plus young people who aren't on UC cant apply so the fact they have actually found some form of paid work goes against them?! Not inclusive at all and penalises those who are trying to help themselves. Employers who find young unemployed people can't put them on Kickstart programmes unless they claim UC AND are at the mercy of work coaches who shortlist who THEY think is suitable for the vacancies. Needs a serious rethink how the initiative is managed."

Manager at a medium construction business, Business Engagement Exercise

Discussions in focus groups highlighted that Kickstart was frequently failing to provide enough candidates of the required quality to businesses. The design of the scheme is such that young people apply and are assessed through Job Centre Plus, rather than submitting applications to businesses

directly – this attracted a great deal of negative feedback from employers, who felt it to be a slow and cumbersome process. This, and the fact that businesses could not advertise Kickstart placements themselves, removes any employer oversight over the quality of applicants they receive, often leaving them feeling disenfranchised and removed from the recruitment process.

“Kickstart needs to be deployed properly with the appropriate level of resource. We need to be able to share the job adverts ourselves because they are currently only available at the job centre and not visible to the employer who is hiring! We need to reach young people better. With the unemployment in young people and employers trying to hire but with no success, there is a massive issue with matching jobs with people!”

CEO/Director of a micro professional services sector business, Business Engagement Exercise

Only young people claiming Universal Credit are eligible for the Kickstart scheme. This was criticised by many of the businesses we engaged, who felt it to be a ‘perverse incentive’ that encouraged young people to claim benefits rather than go out and find employment. A number of employers had been directly contacted by young people looking for paid work and had found themselves in the unenviable position of having to turn them away and redirect them to Job Centre Plus instead, hoping that they might come back again through Kickstart but having no control over the process.

“Reduce the administration on Kickstart and allow businesses to take the number of young people they need whether on Universal Credit or not. It penalises young people who temp or who can’t claim.”

Manager at a medium construction business, Business Engagement Exercise

As with other many other youth employment schemes, businesses also felt that the process of signing up to Kickstart was too complex and resource intensive, putting off many employers including micro and SME businesses. They wanted to see a simpler, more streamlined sign-up process, with clearer communication and requirements set out at the start.

“Make communication clearer, bullet point exactly your requirements. With Kickstart there is a course you have to do alongside it, and we don’t have the resource internally, but because we went through a trained provider (who take a small part of our grant, they were able to assist us).”

Senior manager at a medium manufacturing business, Business Engagement Exercise

Schemes such as Kickstart, with relatively complex application processes and a number of different ‘moving parts’, might benefit from mapping exercises to understand the ‘user journey’ from both employer and young people’s perspectives. This would help to identify areas of potential duplication or delay.

Businesses suggested a number of simple solutions to help solve the issues with Kickstart. Firstly, they felt strongly that the parameters of the scheme should be widened to include young people not claiming Universal Credit. They believed that this would not only increase the number of applications

from young people, but raise the quality of applicants by including those who already had some form of paid or part-time work.

Secondly, the businesses we spoke to wanted more control over the recruitment process, decentring Job Centre Plus and allowing employers to directly advertise vacancies and recruit young people themselves.

Finally, and most importantly, businesses want to be engaged in the development of youth employment schemes such as Kickstart from the beginning. As employers, playing a vital role in their local economies and possessing valuable insight into the communities and people they work alongside, businesses have a key role to play in helping to solve the issue of youth unemployment.

5. Recommendations

Our research has deliberately adopted a 'bottom-up' approach to understand the challenges being faced on the ground in Birmingham, across all parts of an increasingly complicated employment and skills landscape. Despite the ongoing challenges posed by the pandemic, we have sought to engage with young people directly, to explore their lived experiences and perspectives of Covid-19 as well as their continued hopes for the future. While we cannot hope to fully capture the experiences of all young people in the city, we are confident that our research reflects the wider trends and issues affecting young people seeking work experience or employment in Birmingham.

The recommendations in this report will feed into the delivery of Birmingham City Council's Economic Recovery Strategy, including the work of the new Birmingham Employment Taskforce. Working together with stakeholders from across the city, the Taskforce will oversee the policy response to youth unemployment and the development of a new Employment Strategy, informed by the findings of this report and an extensive ongoing programme of engagement with young people themselves.

It is not anticipated that delivery of the below recommendations should rest with one organisation or group. A collaborative approach should be adopted, working together with key stakeholders from the business community, education and skills providers, public sector partners, the Local Enterprise Partnership, our extensive voluntary, community and faith sector, national government bodies, and – of course – young people themselves.

While the scale of youth unemployment is partly an issue of supply and demand at any given moment in an economic cycle, our research has shown that the issue is far more complicated than simply balancing an equation. Employability – the package of skills, personal attributes, and 'cultural know-how' that makes someone more likely to gain and retain employment – is affected by a wide range of cultural and economic factors. Ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic status are just a few of the wider social determinants that can hold a young person back from fulfilling their potential. This was the case pre-pandemic, and it remains the case today - and in the middle, young people's experiences of Covid-19 have been fundamentally shaped by those same social determinants. Overwhelmingly, and with a very few exceptions, we have found that the pandemic did not create new barriers to employment or work experience for young people in Birmingham. Instead, Covid-19 has made existing inequalities more visible, accelerated wider economic and social trends that were developing prior to the pandemic, and increased the challenges facing those young people already furthest away from work.

At the time of publishing this report, youth unemployment in Birmingham stands at just under 20% - an already alarming figure which is likely to grow when current government support schemes, such as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme ('furlough scheme') end. Urgent action is required, both to prevent the overall youth unemployment rate from rising, and to stop pre-existing equality gaps between different groups of young people from widening further as a result of the pandemic. Our research has identified that meeting this challenge will require more than just increasing the supply of training, work experience, or employment opportunities within the local labour market. For a number of young people, this will require the provision of appropriate support to repair the damage caused to their mental health during the pandemic, rebuild their confidence, and support them to become more resilient in the longer-term. Meeting these emotional needs, and encouraging the

development of transferable or 'soft' skills, is just as important as ensuring the right mix of 'hard' or technical skills when it comes to securing the future of the Birmingham economy.

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, Birmingham was a city on the cusp of great things, with the 2022 Commonwealth Games projected to kick off a transformational decade of investment and growth. The longer-term economic benefits of the Games, alongside the arrival of HS2 and the development of a series of key employment and housing generating sites across Birmingham, will create an unprecedented series of 'once in a lifetime' opportunities for the United Kingdom's second city, launching us onto the international stage. We can already see the positive impact of the Commonwealth Games on both the wider Birmingham economy and local communities. An ambitious capital builds programme, including the redevelopment of Alexander Stadium and the construction of the Sandwell Aquatics Centre, has created over 50 jobs for Birmingham residents, as well as upskilling over 200 people through a mix of training and apprenticeships. The Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Collective volunteering programme, launched in June 2021, will offer further training and development opportunities for upwards of 13,000 people across the city over the next year. These opportunities must be carefully leveraged to maximise the local benefit for local citizens and communities, including young people, if we are to truly make the most of the future that collectively awaits us.

Many of the below recommendations, such as the development of a 'one stop shop' online hub, or a youth-led review of libraries and other public spaces, can be delivered within a relatively short timeframe, feeding into immediate Covid-19 recovery planning. Their impact, however, will be long-term, with the potential to improve life chances for successive generations of young people in Birmingham.

Recommendation One: Reduce the cost of public transport for 16 to 18 year olds.

Our research has identified that the cost of travel on public transport remains a significant barrier to accessing training, work experience and employment opportunities for many young people in Birmingham. This is especially true for young people from less well-off households, disproportionately affecting care-leavers and young people from many Black, Asian and Minority communities. Our findings have shown that many young people and their families have seen their financial situation deteriorate as a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic, forcing them to choose between short-term budgeting considerations and the opportunities that could propel them into a more secure and successful future.

Transport for West Midlands (TfWM) offers a number of different discounts for young people, including half-price travel for those under 18 (with a child or 16-18 photocard), young people in the first three months of an apprenticeship scheme, and those starting a new job or apprenticeship after being unemployed or made redundant. Student discount tickets are also available. However, the coverage of these discount schemes is patchy across the cohort and leaves large swathes of young people still paying full price for travel. Young people attending unpaid work experience or internship opportunities, for example, receive no travel discounts, with reimbursement of costs down to individual employers.

While many organisations and youth employment initiatives, including the Youth Promise Plus programme, can offer support with travel costs, young people told us that the lack of awareness of such support options and the existence of an application process are significant barriers to access.

It is recommended that work is undertaken with partners to explore how the cost of travel could be reduced further for young people in this age group, building upon existing concessionary schemes and seeking to join up coverage where young people fall between the gaps of schemes. Work should also be undertaken to review the concessionary fares available to those aged 11 to 16, with options developed to reduce these further. Potential barriers to the take-up of such schemes, including the need to submit photocard applications or documentation of employment status, should also be reviewed to see where they can be reduced or eliminated.

Improving the accessibility of public transport to all young people will also help to support the city's wider ambitions to reduce carbon emissions and improve air quality across Birmingham, preventing a new generation of young people from seeing private vehicles as the default option for travel.

Recommendation Two: Support young people's mental health

As detailed in Key Finding Two, the damage caused to the mental health of young people as a result of the pandemic is a significant and growing issue. There are indications from other research that this extends to younger teenagers and children too. An April 2021 survey by the Birmingham Youth City Board¹², carried out with 794 young people aged between 10 and 19, found that 65% of respondents were actively struggling with their mental health, 25.43% on a daily basis.

A range of mental health support provision, incorporating a mix of different settings and delivery methods, is required both to support young people that are already in crisis and intervene early where young people are first starting to struggle.

It is recommended that greater access to general mental health support within schools, education providers and workplaces is made available to support young people. Early access to support (potentially in the form of a Universal Offer) when a young person first starts to experience symptoms of anxiety or low mood is likely to reduce the severity of a poor mental health episode, as well as prevent any later relapse or recurrence of mental illness. The importance of mental health has been growing in visibility for some time, with a range of programmes and initiatives already in place across a number of education settings; however, the sheer scale of poor mental health suggests that the level of support for young people remains inadequate.

Kooth, commissioned through the Birmingham Children's Partnership in April 2020, provides online counselling, peer support and self-help resources, and is a valuable additional resource to support young people's mental health¹³. In the first quarter of operation, Kooth received 1900 registrations from young people, 45% of whom were from Black, Asian and Minority communities. New forms of online support such as Kooth are a welcome addition to the mental health landscape, but must be complemented by face-to-face support services to ensure mental health services remain inclusive for all young people.

¹² Birmingham Youth Service (April 2021). Young people's mental health services in Birmingham: Online consultation report.

¹³ <https://www.kooth.com/>

We recognise that for many employers, particularly micro-businesses and SMEs with reduced management capacity, providing even low levels of mental health support for young employees may be a significant ask. Schemes such as the West Midlands Thrive at Work employer accreditation scheme, designed specifically to support smaller businesses, are a good first step for businesses that wish to support employee health¹⁴. For larger businesses, established training schemes such as Mental Health First Aid represent a worthwhile investment to safeguard employee wellbeing.

It was also fed back during our engagement that young people in ‘crisis’ require much swifter access to more intensive forms of mental health support, often reporting long waiting times to access services. We understand that there is only a finite level of funding available within health services, especially in the Covid-19 context; however, given the scale of the problem and potential longer-term impacts for young people, we believe that expanding access to mental health support should be a priority in recovery planning for health. We recommend that partners locally review existing strategies relating to young people’s mental health in light of the challenges posed by the pandemic, and where appropriate make representations to Government for further funding.

Research from ACEVO¹⁵ suggests that prolonged periods of unemployment at a young age are likely to lead to longer than average periods of unemployment throughout adulthood. Investing in mental health services now may well save costs to the public purse in the long-term, reducing expenditure associated with long-term unemployment in the future.

One source of anxiety that was identified was uncertainty about the future. This was driven by a sense of futility arising from a perceived lack of available opportunities. One way of reducing this anxiety is by making information about training and work opportunities more readily accessible. This could be achieved via the creation of the ‘One-Stop-Shop’ as detailed in Recommendation Nine.

Recommendation Three: Support young people to build confidence and resilience

Key Finding Three identified a lack of confidence as a major barrier to employment for many young people across Birmingham. This was often linked to the need to support young people to build their emotional and psychological resilience, both to help them navigate the ‘everyday crises’ of modern life and employment, and as a necessary safeguard for good mental health.

The development of resilience – commonly understood as the ability to cope and ‘bounce back’ when things go wrong – is central to the emotional and mental development of young people, often naturally building over time as they experience many of the milestones of childhood and adolescence. Like many other aspects of development, it is often impacted on by wider social and environmental determinants such as socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity and physical health/disability. At an individual level, where young people have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) such as experiencing violence or neglect in the home, or an unstable family environment, resilience may be decreased. Not surprisingly, resilience is closely linked to mental health.

¹⁴ <https://www.wmca.org.uk/what-we-do/thrive/thrive-at-work/>

¹⁵ <https://www.acevo.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Youth-Unemployment-the-crisis-we-cannot-afford.pdf>

Many of the people that we spoke to, including young people themselves, felt that the pandemic had directly adversely impacted on the confidence and resilience of young people as they missed out on common 'coming of age' experiences such as exams, first romantic relationships, or learning to drive. Other research participants, including stakeholders from education, identified a more general lack of resilience and confidence among young people that pre-existed the pandemic and made some groups of young people more vulnerable to its negative impacts.

Crucially, the need to support young people to develop confidence and resilience was identified independently by many businesses during engagement exercises, indicating that a lack of these qualities can pose a major barrier to employment. Having 'self-confidence' and being 'resilient' is not just a health and wellbeing issue – a lack of either can directly and significantly harm a young person's future career prospects.

Luckily, there are a range of different activities and interventions that can be used to increase resilience among young people, ranging in specificity from simple group activities undertaken as part of the wider school curriculum to focused workshops and individual coaching relationships. There are a range of services across Birmingham that currently work with young people in this area, including both the Birmingham City Council Youth Service and Youth Promise Plus employment service, which delivers a 121 mentoring service for young job-seekers.

It is recommended that further work is undertaken to explore how resilience and confidence-building activities can be built in across the wider school curriculum at all ages, but with a particular focus on preparing young people for adult life. Examples of best practice, including work already carried out by specialist youth support services, should be highlighted and options considered for expansion of the offer to ensure equal access across the city.

Recommendation Four: Develop a comprehensive city-wide mentoring scheme

Mentoring can take many different forms, but fundamentally its purpose is to inspire by broadening horizons. Over the course of our research, we found that many young people 'underaspire', failing to make the most of opportunities available to them – either because they have a poor understanding of their own skills and talents, or because they lack up-to-date information about their options. Where young people experience additional barriers to employment and work experience, including care-leavers, women, and people from some Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities, a lack of representation in workforces can put them off pursuing careers in certain sectors.

In Key Finding Six, we identified potential gaps in current careers services, in relation to providing young people with the necessary knowledge about potential career opportunities and how best to exploit them. For some young people, the provision of information and additional resources will be enough to fill this gap. For others, especially those furthest from employment, a more personalised approach may be needed to help them build confidence, develop a good understanding of their skills and talents, and understand all the careers options available to them. Many employment services in Birmingham already provide 121 mentoring as part of their wider support offer to young job-seekers and the newly employed.

It is recommended that work is undertaken to develop an easily accessible, city-wide mentoring scheme to connect young people with mentors from across the world of business, including

entrepreneurs and the self-employed. Consideration should be given to the idea of 'peer mentors', linking young people in with successful people from similar ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds. Care should be taken to ensure that such a scheme does not duplicate existing provision, instead existing to link up and coordinate the offer across the city.

Such a mentoring scheme would also help young people from all socioeconomic backgrounds to build their professional networks, helping to address the 'access gap' to work experience and other employment opportunities identified in Finding Five.

It is envisaged that one pathway into this scheme would be through the 'one-stop shop' referred to in Recommendation Nine.

Recommendation Five: Facilitate accessible work experience opportunities

One of the most significant findings from our research was the struggle that many young people face when looking for work experience or other opportunities to build professional experience and develop their skills. While some young people told us that they had struggled to find placements even before the pandemic, Covid-19 restrictions and the financial impact on businesses have made placements even harder to find. Even where placements had been arranged, they had often fallen through at the last moment due to changing restrictions and the uncertainty caused by the pandemic.

This was a source of a great deal of anxiety for many young people, who felt strongly that work experience would help them to build their CV, directly demonstrate their value to employers and explore potential career options at low risk. In the context of wider economic trends such as the increase in zero-hours contracts and the rise of the gig economy, and the long-term decline of traditional part-time jobs, work experience is an increasingly important source of experience and development for young people.

At the same time, we also heard from businesses who – despite wanting to recruit young people - were finding it hard to offer work experience placements and recruit the right talent into their organisations. They told us that they felt they lacked knowledge of how to engage with and communicate to young people, and were often put off by the prohibitive costs and 'bureaucratic burden' of facilitating work experience placements. These messages came through particularly strongly from micro-businesses and SMEs, who often operate with minimal management capacity.

It is therefore recommended that a city-wide system is created for the facilitation of work experience placements, both to ensure that all young people have an equal opportunity to gain experience and skills, and to support businesses (of all sizes) to identify and recruit the talent that they need. Such a system is likely to comprise two interrelated elements:

- The creation of a single, central database of education and training providers seeking work experience opportunities for their students, 'matchmaking' them with employers seeking to offer placements. This could be linked to the online 'one-stop shop' suggested in Recommendation Nine, with opportunities advertised online.

- Support for businesses seeking to offer work experience opportunities, especially micro-enterprises and SMEs who face more barriers to the recruitment of young people. This support could come in the form of financial incentives, training or managerial capacity building, or administrative support to deal with the practicalities surrounding work experienced placements.

The development of such a city-wide scheme could build on existing best practice across Birmingham, linking together larger organisations with established work experience systems and recruitment expertise with smaller employers. The involvement of anchor institutions, including partners in health, education, and local government, would open up a range of opportunities to young people who may be unaware of the breadth of careers available in these sectors.

As one of the largest employers in the city, Birmingham City Council has recently started a process to formalise and coordinate its work experience offer to young people, developing a variety of placement types ranging from shorter-term 'shadowing' opportunities to project-based placements lasting up to three months. The coordination of our work experience offer will ensure that all young people have an equal opportunity to gain experience at the Council, regardless of ethnicity or background, and in the longer-term help to build a workforce that represents the city it serves.

Recommendation Six: Develop and implement a city-wide Digital Inclusion Strategy

Digital inclusion, and ensuring access to both the internet and internet-enabled devices, has a key role to play in breaking down barriers to employment and work experience for young people.

8.6% of the population in Birmingham is currently classed as 'digitally excluded' (ONS 2020). While digital exclusion rates have generally declined across the city over the last decade, the pandemic has exposed the persistent digital divide as a significant axis of equality in Birmingham, with internet access now recognised as a necessity for full participation in modern life.

As highlighted in Finding Four, many young people still do not have access to the equipment they need to work or study from home, severely limiting their opportunities in the modern world of work. With the rise in both virtual work experience and remote working, accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a real danger that some groups of young people will face long-term negative impacts to their prospects as a result. This is an especially acute concern for care-leavers and young people from some Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities, who already face additional barriers to employment and are more likely to be digitally excluded than their peers. Urgent intervention is required by the city to prevent a widening in equality gaps and employment outcomes among young people.

It is recommended that a city-wide approach to digital inclusion is developed, linked to existing regional aspirations (including the West Midlands Digital Inclusion Coalition) and underpinned by a robust partnership framework for action bringing together the public sector, voluntary and community organisations, and businesses. This would build on the excellent work that is already being done in this area by many organisations across Birmingham, and act as a necessary enabler of many of the other recommendations from this report, particularly the development of a 'one-stop shop' as proposed in Recommendation Nine.

Birmingham City Council has prioritised digital inclusion activities as a core component of its response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Key activities include helping to establish the Digital Education Partnership to support vulnerable young schoolchildren with access to devices and data access,

working through existing Neighbourhood Networks to develop potential digital projects and support local communities, and undertaking a Digital Inclusion Landscape Review to better understand the persistence of digital exclusion across the city. In addition to these shorter-term, more tactical responses to the pandemic, the Council is currently developing a comprehensive Digital Inclusion Strategy for publication later in 2021.

Consideration should also be given to the provision of secure, comfortable and accessible space for young people to use the internet and internet-enabled devices. While a lack of suitable equipment is an obvious barrier to working and learning remotely, our research also highlighted the importance of other environmental barriers such as a lack of desk space, noisy or overcrowded homes, or otherwise distracting working environments. For young people especially, who are more likely to live within the family home and often have less direct control over their living circumstances, the provision of equipment alone does not fully solve the issue of digital exclusion. The accessibility and design of public spaces, such as libraries, should also be reviewed to ensure that they continue to meet the changing needs of young people across the city. Birmingham City Council will have an opportunity to do this in Autumn 2021, when a rescoping of library services is due to take place with input from the Birmingham Youth City Board. The Council and partners should consider the future use of existing vacant premises and assess the viability of converting them into 'Youth Study Centres' providing accessible learning space for those younger people that need it.

Recommendation Seven: Give young people a voice through the 'Brum Talks Festival'

Over the course of our research, young people consistently expressed the feeling that they lacked a 'voice', both individually and collectively, and consequently felt that they were not 'seen' or 'heard' by the very organisations that had the power and influence to help them in their current situation. While this sentiment was often expressed in relation to the immediate Covid-19 emergency response, many of the young people we spoke to felt that there would be a long-term negative impact on their relationships with key institutions including schools, universities, and public services across the city. Often young people felt that they were a low priority group in society, with little ability to influence the policy agenda, the design of public services or wider decision-making in Birmingham.

The employers, education stakeholders and front-line workers we spoke to all recognised the importance of working in partnership with young people to design services and develop policy solutions to the youth unemployment challenge. We know that there is a huge amount of activity being undertaken already to engage, consult and co-produce with young people across the city. Over the past year, the Birmingham Youth Service has expended considerable effort to refresh and enhance the youth participation offer in Birmingham, empowering young people to feed into a wide range of decision-making and engagement fora including Public Health theme groups, the Birmingham Police Youth Independent Advisory Group, and Youth Covid Champions. Birmingham Youth City Board in particular is an emerging example of best practice, working with 90 young people aged 11-18 to ensure that young people's voices are at the heart of policy development and strategy in the city, and feeding into the Birmingham City Board.

To complement this ongoing activity, we recommend that steps are taken to develop an annual 'Brum Talks Festival', celebrating the achievements of young people in Birmingham and providing a high-profile platform for them to raise issues of concern directly with representatives from the public, community and voluntary, education and business sectors. To maximise its impact, the event should be designed, curated and delivered by young people themselves, facilitated by key youth engagement partners already working in this space. This event is not intended to replace the activity that is already taking place to develop and enhance youth participation across the city. Instead, we

recommend that this event should be delivered as part of an enhanced package of investment into youth participation and engagement services across Birmingham.

While there are many examples of excellent youth engagement and co-production across the city, we also found areas where the 'client journey' for young people accessing support is either poorly understood or overly complex. Where this work has not already taken place, we further recommend that services undertake mapping exercises to understand the end-to-end process for young people seeking to access support. This is especially vital where services are targeted at those young people furthest away from work, who may already face additional barriers to accessing services including lack of internet access, having English as a second language, or lower levels of literacy. These mapping exercises should be carried out in consultation with young people themselves.

Recommendation Eight: Reshape careers advice and guidance services

As covered in Finding Six, our research uncovered general agreement amongst stakeholders that the design of careers advice and guidance services needs to change to meet both the current needs of young people and the future demands of the economy. While we found many examples of best practice careers services in Birmingham, including the Birmingham Careers Hub, we also heard from a range of stakeholders across education and business who are concerned about the variable quality of careers advice provided to young people across the city. It is not clear that existing service models are fully equipping young people with the skills and knowledge that they need to succeed in the modern world, with repeatedly identified gaps around the development of transferable skills, the encouragement of an 'entrepreneurial mindset', and engagement with employers.

There already exists a broad consensus about what constitutes 'good' careers advice and guidance; much of which is contained in the Government's 2017 Careers Strategy¹⁶. Many of our recommendations for the improvement of careers services in Birmingham align with this strategy, including:

- A focus on developing the behaviours, attitudes and skills (both soft and hard skills) that are required to support long-term career success and employability, as opposed to simply 'getting a job'. This should include the development of a so-called entrepreneurial mindset and related skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and decision-making.
- The supply of more comprehensive insight and intelligence in relation to growth sectors in the local economy, in an easily accessible format that both young people and service providers can understand.
- Advice and guidance on the range of careers options and qualification pathways that could lead to employment in said growth sectors.
- Ensuring a more central role for local businesses in the design, development and delivery of careers services, including facilitating direct engagement with young people and education providers to showcase their organisations and potential employment opportunities. Micro-businesses (less than 10 employees) and SMEs (between 10 and 49 employees) should be of

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/careers-strategy-making-the-most-of-everyones-skills-and-talents>

particular focus for careers services, comprising 96% of businesses in Birmingham (Birmingham Business Count, 2019).

- Support to help young people identify, package and ‘sell’ their skills to employers, helping to resolve the paradox whereby employers say that they cannot find the right young people due to a shortage of skills, but young people feel that they have the skills but are not given the right opportunities. Work also needs to be undertaken to articulate to younger people what skills they can expect to develop by following certain career paths.

More broadly, we found that careers services would benefit from increased levels of insight and data-driven research across the city, with a particular focus on equalities and wider socioeconomic determinants of employability. As with all the recommendations in this report, this should not be the responsibility of one organisation alone; instead, partners should work together to develop a collective understanding of the city and the challenges facing young people.

Birmingham City Council is currently scoping the remit of an internal audit of its careers services, to take place in the autumn of 2021; we recommend that the findings of this research, and the above recommendations, are fed into the design of this exercise.

Recommendation Nine: Create a ‘one stop shop’ in the form of an online hub

Across the breadth of our engagement with young people, education stakeholders, and businesses, we identified a widespread lack of awareness of both the services and specific initiatives that exist to support young people into employment. The employment, education and training landscape in Birmingham is complex; even for experts that work within the field, keeping up to date with policy developments and service activity can be difficult. The addition of a significant ‘communications gap’ of the kind found to exist between young people and employers makes the navigation of this landscape even more difficult for all parties.

For this reason, we recommend the creation of a ‘one stop shop’ in the form of an online hub, showcasing opportunities for 16-24 year olds looking for work experience and employment opportunities. The functionality of such a hub would need to go beyond simply advertising vacancies or matching candidates to opportunities, but would need to function as a central source for careers advice, sharing best practice, and facilitating network building between education providers, Birmingham City Council, business membership organisations and local businesses (including large organisations, micro-businesses, and SMEs). The hub could also host a city-wide work experience system, as suggested in Recommendation Five.

From our perspective, the development of such a hub would deliver value for all key stakeholders in the employment and skills landscape:

Businesses and employers

Finding Nine highlighted that businesses generally find the employment and skills landscape to be overly complicated and difficult to navigate, with low levels of awareness of many of the organisations and initiatives specifically designed to support youth employment. This became even more of a problem for micro-enterprises and SMEs, who simply do not have the capacity or resources to carry out their own research into the vast array of youth employment initiatives available, including lesser known schemes such as the Sector-Based Work Academy Programme (SWAP) or National Careers Service activities.

Placing information in a single online location could assist with breaking down some of these barriers and raising awareness of initiatives, especially for larger organisations. However, in the wake of the pandemic we have the opportunity to demonstrate a much higher level of ambition. We believe that a 'one stop shop' should also be utilised to allow organisations to advertise work experience and paid employment opportunities at limited or no cost, as well as receive tailored advice and support to more effectively engage with and recruit young people.

Education/training providers

As highlighted in Finding Six, education and training providers face a number of barriers when it comes to providing enhanced careers advice and guidance services to young people. Limited resources, a lack of funding, and decreasing capacity within existing timetables all impact on the provision of best practice careers services; the pandemic had made careers advice less of a priority for already stretched providers. There is a real risk that, in the rush to 'catch-up' young people and make up for lost learning time, focus will continue to be pulled away from careers advice and guidance services.

A 'one-stop shop' could help to address these barriers to the provision of effective services, with the potential to be used as a platform for offering careers advice to young people, providing the latest insight and intelligence into local economy growth sectors, and sharing 'in real time' local opportunities for young people. For schools with reduced capacity to develop long-term relationships with local businesses, the hub could facilitate effective network building between employers and education providers, 'matchmaking' careers services with businesses offering work experience placements in their area.

Young people

Our research uncovered a major 'communication gap' between young people looking for employment and work experience, and the employers looking to recruit them. This operates at a number of different levels, from young people having a unrealistically pessimistic view of their employment prospects and the opportunities available in the local labour market, to young people struggling to find the right work experience and employment opportunities to develop their career.

The development of a central hub, showcasing work experience and employment opportunities available to young people, might go a long way towards changing the pessimistic perceptions of young people about their prospects, making them aware of the breadth and number of opportunities available to them across a range of different sectors. For those young people furthest away from paid employment, the co-location of a city-wide work experience system and mentoring scheme on the hub would provide alternatives to traditional job-seeking activities. At its most ambitious, the 'one-stop shop' might also offer online training and development activities seeking to build resilience and confidence, tackling one of the root causes of persistent youth unemployment.

We are aware that similar ideas have been tried before. There are already a number of websites and less ambitious online 'youth offers' available to young people, education and employers in Birmingham; most recently, the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) and other local authorities have contributed to the development of a Youth Employment Platform for the West Midlands, hosted by Youth Employment UK. Our intention is not to duplicate existing services or saturate an already crowded market; what we recommend instead is both a consolidation of current efforts and a rise in our collective ambition. Where an existing site can be adapted to meet the recommendation set out here, this is both a viable and neat solution to the problem.

For this attempt at creating a truly inclusive, comprehensive ‘one-stop shop’ to be a success, its implementation should be accompanied by a robust communications and engagement campaign to raise awareness of the new resource among businesses, education and training providers, and young people. It must be co-produced with young people, giving them the opportunity to be involved and have their say at every stage of the process. It must also – crucially – be accompanied with sufficient and sustainable resource to ensure that information is regularly updated, to maximise both efficacy and usage among key groups.

Recommendation Ten: Deliver a locally designed scheme of employment support for young people and businesses

The Government has committed to a policy of ‘levelling up’, through which it will seek to decentralise power and work more closely with local communities, who it describes as being ‘*best placed to understand the needs of their local areas and more closely aligned to the local economic geographies to deliver quickly on the ground*’¹⁷.

Youth employment was a challenge prior to the pandemic, and it is likely to remain so in both the short and medium-term phases of the recovery period, creating the necessity for some form of ongoing subsidised job scheme. In that context, considering the feedback received in relation to the deficiencies of nationally devised support schemes such as Kickstart (detailed in Finding Ten), and in line with the Government’s commitment to ‘level up’, it is recommended that partners across Birmingham seek the support of national government to design and implement a local scheme of youth employment support.

Any locally devised scheme should consider the following:

- (i) The proposed objectives and intended outcomes of the scheme should be agreed between partners at the outset, with the focus on providing younger people with an opportunity to develop their skill set by undertaking meaningful training/or employment that meets their needs as well as potential employers.
- (ii) The terms of the local scheme should be co-produced with representatives of the business community and education and training providers. One of the critiques of Kickstart is that businesses were provided with candidates that were not suitable for the roles they had available, with employees having little control in relation to the recruitment process. Given the applicants had to be in receipt of Universal Credit, Job Centre Plus took a leading role in seeking to arrange working opportunities. This meant that businesses could not engage with younger people direct, slowing down the process.
- (iii) As part of any locally-devised scheme, provision should be made to support micro-enterprises and SMEs to deal with the administrative burden of offering an opportunity to a young person. This support could range from offering support in completing application forms to supporting smaller enterprises to develop their management and training capacity. Given that the overwhelming majority of businesses in Birmingham are micro-enterprises or SMEs, it is vital that any locally designed scheme is highly accessible to them and low on bureaucracy.

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/new-levelling-up-and-community-investments>

Appendix 1. Glossary

Apprenticeship

Schemes where people are employed to do a job while also studying for a formal qualification (usually for one day a week at a college or training centre). Apprenticeships are available across a range of sectors, with no age limit on who can become an apprentice. At the end of an apprenticeship, apprentices will gain a nationally-recognised qualification.

Business membership organisations (BMOs)

Business membership organisations, such as Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) or the Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce (GBCC), are non-governmental and not-for-profit organisations that represent the interests of member businesses. They often carry out lobbying activities on behalf of their members, as well as providing training and development opportunities. Members are required to pay a fee to join a BMO.

Care-experienced

Anyone who, at any stage of their life and for any period of time, has been in care. This includes both young people who are currently in care and those who have now left care. Care-experienced people can be any age. This is a slightly broader term than 'care leavers' as it includes young people currently in care.

Care leaver

This is legally defined in The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 as someone who has been in the care of a local authority for a period of 13 weeks or more spanning their 16th birthday. However, the term is usually used more broadly to refer to any person who has spent any time in care, at any stage of their life. Local authorities have a legal duty to provide specialist support to care leavers up to the age of 25.

Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme ('Furlough Scheme')

Established in March 2020 as part of emergency Covid legislation, the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme supports employers to pay their employee's wages if they are unable to work their full hours during the pandemic. Under this scheme, employers can claim a grant to help pay workers up to 80% of their usual wages (up to a total of £2,500 per month). Employees not currently working their full hours, but being paid through the scheme, are commonly referred to as being 'on furlough'.

From 1st July 2021, employers have been asked to make a bigger contributions towards the cost of furloughed workers. Employers must also pay pension and National Insurance contributions for their workers.

At the time of writing this report, the scheme is due to end on 30th September 2021.

Digital Bootcamp

Digital bootcamps are free practical courses delivered in partnership with employers, providers and local authorities to encourage people of any age to develop digital skills and boost employability. These are delivered in the West Midlands by the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA).

Employment rate

The proportion of people aged between 16 and 64 years old who do one hour or more of paid work per week, and those who have a job that they are temporarily away from (for example, due to holiday or being off sick).

Economic inactivity rate

The proportion of people aged between 16 and 64 years old who are economically inactive (not in the labour force). This includes students and early retirees.

Economically inactive

Economically inactive people are people aged between 16 and 64 who do not currently have a paid job but are also not actively seeking employment. Examples of economically inactive people include those in full-time education, such as university students, and people with disabilities that prohibit them from working.

Gatsby Benchmarks

The Gatsby Benchmarks are eight benchmarks providing a framework for best practice career guidance, developed by the Gatsby Foundation. These are referenced in the national government 2017 Careers Strategy.

Industrial placement

Industrial placements are an extended period of work experience undertaken by students to supplement their academic course with the development of professional and practical skills. They form a key part of the new T Level qualification.

Kickstart

The Kickstart Scheme, launched in September 2021, offers six-month work placements to young people aged between 16-24 and currently in receipt of Universal Credit. Under the scheme, national government fully funds the cost of each 'Kickstart job', including the National Minimum Wage, National Insurance, and pension contributions, for 25 hours per week. Employers are able to top up wages if they wish. Employers receive a grant of £1,500 for each placement they offer, intended to go towards support and training for young people on the scheme.

Micro-business/micro-enterprise

There is no official definition of a micro-business, but it is usually used to refer to any business employing fewer than 10 employees (or the full-time equivalent).

NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training)

Young people aged 16-24 who are not in education, employment or training.

Sector-based Work Academy Programme (SWAP)

Under this scheme, people receiving Universal Credit or other unemployment benefits are supported to develop skills and improve their employment prospects by linking them in directly with participating employers. Programmes last up to six weeks and include three main components: pre-employment training, a work experience placement, and a guaranteed job interview.

SME (Small and Medium Enterprises)

There is no official definition of an SME, but it is usually used in the UK to refer to any business employing fewer than 250 employees (or the full-time equivalent).

T Level

Launched in September 2020, T Levels are two year courses which follow GCSEs and are equivalent to three A Levels. They are available across a range of sectors, and offer students a mixture of classroom learning and 'on the job' experience through an industry placement of at least 315 hours (approximately 45 days).

Traineeship

A traineeship is a skills development programme that includes a work experience placement, intended to prepare people for an apprenticeship or paid employment. They can last from 6 weeks up to 1 year, although most traineeships last for less than 6 months. Traineeships are unpaid, although trainees may be able to claim expenses for food or travel.

Unemployed

People aged between 16 and 64 without a paid job who have been actively seeking work within the last four weeks, and are available to start work within the next two weeks. This does not include people who are economically inactive.

Unemployment rate

The proportion of the economically active population (those in work plus those seeking and available to work) aged between 16 and 64 years old who are unemployed. The unemployment rate is not the proportion of the total population who are unemployed, only those who are economically active.

Volunteering

Volunteering is any activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit an individual, community or cause. This can include formal activity undertaken through voluntary organisations as well as informal volunteering for a local cause in the community. Volunteering must be undertaken freely and by choice, and is separate from work experience.

Work experience

A period of time in which a person works for a company or organisation to get experience of a particular role, sector or environment. Work experience placements can vary in length of time, the type of duties performed, and the level of compensation/payment provided. Types of work experience include school work experience placements, shadowing, internships, and virtual work experience. Work experience is separate from volunteering.

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