

Kickstarting futures:

How sport and the Premier League Foundation is supporting young people into employment, education, and training



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About us

The Centre for Young Lives

The Centre for Young Lives, founded by Baroness Anne Longfield CBE in February 2024, is an independent think tank and delivery organisation working to improve the lives of children, young people, and families across the UK - with a particular focus on those facing the greatest challenges.

Our team combines decades of experience in Westminster, Whitehall and beyond with a relentless commitment and drive to breaking down the barriers that hold back some children, and to ensuring that every child and young person can thrive. We use high - quality research and evidence to advocate and campaign for innovative solutions and new models that improve the lives of children, young people and their families.

The Premier League Foundation

The Premier League Foundation (PL Foundation) is one of the biggest sport charities in the world. Established in 2010 to create positive sporting, health, personal and education opportunities for children, young people and the wider community, the independent charity distributes Premier League and partner funding to over 90 professional club charities across the Premier League, English Football League and National League.

Since it was founded 16 years ago, the Premier League's annual investment via the Premier League Foundation has almost quadrupled, committing more than £450 million

since its formation in 2010 up to 2028. In the 2024/25 season alone, more than £34 million was invested in football club charities. Today, over 7,500 people are employed by these charities, many of whom deliver Premier League-supported programmes that have reached more than 2.5 million people to date.

Executive Summary

More than one million young people are not in education, employment or training (NEET), reflecting a combination of challenges including poor mental health, educational disengagement, unmet additional needs, and fragmented support systems. Recent government reforms, including the Youth Guarantee, Young Futures Hubs, and the ongoing Milburn Review, signal growing recognition that preventing disengagement requires earlier intervention and more joined-up local support

Across England and Wales, football club charities supported by the Premier League Foundation are already helping young people overcome these barriers by combining trusted relationships, local knowledge, and practical support with pathways into education, employment and training. They are engaging young people who may be reluctant to access traditional services, helping to improve attendance, build confidence and skills, strengthen aspirations, and create routes into work and learning

With the Milburn Review expected soon, as well as the Government's response, there is an opportunity to strengthen the role of trusted, community-based organisations in preventing young people from becoming disengaged from education, employment and training. This means placing greater emphasis on early intervention that helps young people build the skills, confidence and aspirations needed to navigate key transitions successfully, as well as ensuring that locally embedded organisations are fully integrated into emerging devolved systems of employment, skills and youth support.

Similarly, as combined authorities and regional partnerships take on greater responsibility, football club charities can bring valuable insight, trusted relationships and proven engagement with young people facing complex barriers, helping local leaders design more effective and responsive support pathways.

Introduction

Over one million 16-24-year-olds are not in education, employment or training (NEET), reflecting deep-rooted challenges that extend far beyond the labour market. Educational disengagement, poor mental health, unmet special educational needs, limited access to careers guidance, and a lack of opportunities to build confidence and skills all contribute to young people falling out of learning and work. The interim findings

of the Milburn Review underline the scale and complexity of this challenge,¹ highlighting that many young people face multiple, overlapping barriers and that more joined-up, locally delivered support is needed to prevent long-term disengagement.

This finding is despite the government's recent steps to understand and address the scale of the challenge, such as extending the Youth Guarantee and rolling out Young Futures Hubs. The Prime Minister also recently pledged to further investing in apprenticeships, technical excellence colleges, and special educational needs, so that every young person has a guarantee of a job, training, or work placement. There is now an opportunity to ensure these national ambitions are delivered through locally tailored approaches that reflect the circumstances, priorities, and opportunities of different places.

Sport - and football in particular - has a unique role to play in bringing these programmes and services together into a less fragmented system. As the country's most popular sport, football has a presence in almost every community and a cultural significance that few other institutions can match. For many young people, football clubs are a source of identity, pride, and belonging. The club provides a brand and connection that young people recognise and trust even if they feel alienated from school, statutory services, or their community. This makes football a powerful entry point for engagement, particularly for young people who might otherwise be reluctant to seek help or take part in structured provision.

Even for those with little or no interest in football itself, club charities are still able to engage them through their varied offer as mentors, youth workers, educators, and careers advisers. For some, football is the hook - but it is the charities' deep roots in their communities, and the trusted relationships they build, that allows them to reach and engage so many young people.

By combining sport with mentoring, skills development, education support, and pathways into employment and training, club charities are reaching young people most at risk of becoming NEET and helping them rebuild confidence, aspiration, and direction. They also act as effective local delivery partners for national initiatives - providing a trusted setting to host and deliver programmes such as DWP Youth Hubs, and helping to bring more joined-up support directly to young people in their communities.

This paper explores how the Premier League Foundation and football club charities are harnessing the power of football to support young people's transitions into education, employment and training, and how this trusted, locally-embedded delivery can play a bigger role in tackling the NEET challenge nationally.

¹ DWP (2026) [Young people and work: interim report](#)

Premier League Foundation and football club charities

Football club charities are independent organisations delivering programmes and support for people of all ages, supported by multiple funds from the PL Foundation. Three of these funds support the delivery of Premier League programmes – Premier League Kicks, Premier League Primary Stars, and Premier League Inspires – which are specifically targeted at children and young people, using the power of football to inspire and engage young people and provide opportunities to improve their future life chances.

Alongside funding, football club charities benefit from a strong national network supported by the PL Foundation. This includes access to unique, once-in-a-lifetime opportunities for children and young people, such as national competitions hosted at Premier League stadiums, as well as the opportunity for club charities to share learning and best practice through regular networking and training events.

Understanding the scale and drivers of young people who are NEET

The number of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET) has been identified as a key priority for the Government, manifesting itself in the ongoing Milburn Review. This is a welcome step: not only is the problem of significant concern because it is directly limiting the life chances of a generation of young people, but it also symbolises many of the underlying, systemic failures that young people face, from educational disengagement to a mental health crisis.

Over one million young people aged 16-24 are NEET, accounting for 13.5% of that population.² The majority of young people who are NEET - over 600,000 - are economically inactive, which means they are not seeking work, while a further 400,000 young people are seeking work but are unemployed.³

The Milburn Review's interim report - a diagnostic report which sets out the drivers of the UK's "chronic NEET problem"⁴ - highlights the challenges holding young people back and adds to a substantial evidence base of the risk factors of becoming NEET.⁵

Mental health

The recent rise in economic inactivity among young people is primarily due to long-term sickness or disability. One-in-five young people who are NEET have a mental health

² Office for National Statistics (2026) [Young people not in education, employment or training](#)

³ Ibid.

⁴ DWP (2026) [Young people and work: interim report](#)

⁵ Department for Education (2026) [Risk factors for becoming NEET: a statistical analysis using linked data](#)

condition, over two and a half times the rate of that in 2012.⁶ Mental health challenges in particular are the leading cause of these work-limiting health conditions, reflecting wider mental health trends among young people, with one-in-four 16-24-year-olds experiencing a probable mental health condition.⁷

Educational disengagement

Educational disengagement is also a key risk factor. Persistent absence – which was at 18.1% in 2024/25 and refers to children missing 10% or more of school – is associated with 3.9 times greater risk of being NEET and 6.3 times greater risk of being persistently NEET.⁸ School absence and exclusion can lead to lower levels of attainment, which in turn creates further likelihood of being NEET. Those with low levels of qualifications (fewer than five Grade 4 passes at GCSE) are 75% more likely to be NEET than the average.⁹

Social media

The growing influence of screens and social media is increasingly shaping young people's day-to-day lives in ways that have profound implications for their development and transitions into adulthood. While these platforms can offer opportunities for connection, creativity and information-sharing, they can also displace time spent in face-to-face interaction and reduce opportunities to build confidence, communication skills, and real-world relationships. For some young people, particularly those already at risk of disengagement, heavy reliance on digital environments can make it harder to maintain routines, sustain motivation, and develop the interpersonal skills needed for education, training and employment. Over time, this shift in how young people socialise and spend their time has contributed to challenges in relationship-building, resilience, and engagement beyond the online world.

Covid-19

The grip of social media and smartphones was exacerbated by the pandemic, as lockdowns significantly increased young people's reliance on digital environments for learning, socialising and entertainment. While Covid-19 did not create the NEET crisis, it intensified existing trends, including rising mental health challenges and growing educational disengagement. Prolonged periods outside formal education disrupted routines and reduced access to the structures, relationships and support systems that help keep young people connected. For many, this meant fewer opportunities to develop communication skills, build peer networks, and engage consistently with

⁶ Department for Education (2026) [NEET age 16 to 24](#)

⁷ NHS England (2025) [Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey: Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, England, 2023/4](#)

⁸ Vulnerability & Policing Futures Research Centre (2024) School absence and Not in Education, Employment or Training

⁹ Impetus (2025) Youth Jobs Gap: Exploring compound disadvantage

learning at a critical stage of their development. These combined effects have had lasting consequences, contributing to ongoing challenges in re-engaging some young people in education, training and work.

Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

Young people with SEND also face persistent barriers to both education and the labour market, and are approximately 80% more likely to be NEET than their peers.¹⁰ They are also more likely to have poorer educational outcomes in terms of attainment and attendance which increase the likelihood of becoming NEET.¹¹

Compounding risk factors

Mental health challenges, educational disengagement, and SEND consistently emerge as some of the most pervasive barriers to young people being in education, employment or training. However, while these are among the most significant risk factors for young people being NEET, they are not the only drivers. A wide range of additional risks – including, caring responsibilities, involvement in the care system, family instability, and local labour market conditions – all have an impact.¹² The recent cost of living crisis has also led to concerns among young people about their future ability to secure a job, and some are de-incentivised by a lower minimum wage for young people combined with higher living costs.¹³

Disadvantage also acts as a compounding risk factor, amplifying the impact of other barriers and increasing the likelihood that multiple challenges are experienced simultaneously.¹⁴ Again, this is not experienced equally: some ethnic minority groups, including Black Caribbean, and Mixed White and Black Caribbean young people, have higher NEET rates regardless of background.¹⁵ The highest levels of risk occur where multiple disadvantages intersect.

Young men are also more likely to be NEET.¹⁶ The reasons for this are complex, but include higher levels of health-related inactivity, the erosion of traditional entry-level employment routes, and widening gaps in educational attainment.

¹⁰ Impetus (2025) [Youth Jobs Gap: Exploring compound disadvantage](#)

¹¹ University College London (2026) [Post-16 transitions and destinations](#)

¹² Department for Education (2025) [Identify and support young people at risk of being NEET](#)

¹³ British Youth Council Youth Select Committee (2024) [The impact of the cost of living crisis on young people](#)

¹⁴ Impetus (2025) [Youth Jobs Gap: Exploring compound disadvantage](#)

¹⁵ Impetus (2025) [Youth Jobs Gap: Exploring compound disadvantage](#)

¹⁶ Office for National Statistics (2026) [Young people not in education, employment or training](#)

An evolving policy landscape – but still an incomplete system

In response to rising levels of young people not in education, employment or training, the Government has increasingly recognised the need for a more coordinated and preventative approach. This reflects a growing understanding that NEET status is often the end point of earlier disadvantages, rather than a sudden or isolated outcome, and that action must therefore extend beyond short-term labour market interventions. Recent policy developments reflect this direction of travel.

Recent policy changes

Jobcentre Plus

The DWP funds over 600 Jobcentre Plus offices which support people of working age to find employment. They offer job search support, training and skills development, access to vacancies and opportunities, and financial support through benefits while people are looking for work.¹⁷

The Jobcentre plus system has been characterised by its strong emphasis on monitoring job search activity and moving people quickly into work, often at the expense of longer-term skills development and progression. Support is typically delivered through short, infrequent appointments, limiting the ability to provide personalised, tailored guidance - particularly for those with more complex or additional needs. Provision can be inconsistent, with a focus on compliance rather than identifying individuals' strengths, aspirations, and barriers to work.

The Government has committed to reform through the Get Britain Working White Paper, including shifting work coach roles towards more meaningful, personalised employment support, increasing the length and quality of interactions, and integrating Jobcentres more closely with the National Careers Service to strengthen the focus on careers, skills, and progression pathways.

Youth Guarantee

The Department for Work & Pensions has introduced measures to tackle economic inactivity, through the Youth Guarantee, which sets out “a vision to ensure all young people aged 18 to 21 are learning or earning.” Eight Youth Guarantee Trailblazers have also been established to develop ways to identify, engage and sustain contact with young people most at risk of falling out of education, employment or training. The Premier League has already agreed a Youth Guarantee partnership with the Department

¹⁷ Youth Employment UK. [Jobcentre Plus Help & Support for Young People.](#)

for Work & Pensions, demonstrating the power of football in supporting young people into training and employment and breaking down barriers to opportunity.

Youth Employment Hubs are local centres, established in 2020, where DWP work coaches collaborate with local authorities, charities, training providers, and other partners to deliver more joined-up employment support outside of traditional Jobcentre settings. They provide a more holistic offer under one roof, combining job search support, careers advice, skills and training opportunities, and access to wider services such as mental health and wellbeing support.

Their potential lies in demonstrating a more integrated, place-based model of employment support, enabling stronger partnerships, more personalised engagement, and a greater focus on confidence-building and long-term outcomes. As an established and expanding network, they offer a strong foundation for future reforms, including scaling more coordinated, locally tailored approaches and supporting the delivery of wider government ambitions on employment and opportunity.

Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper

Published in November 2025, the Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper was jointly published by the Secretaries of State for Education, Work and Pensions, and Science, Innovation and Technology. The paper introduces major reforms, including the Growth and Skills Levy, Foundation Apprenticeships, expanded vocational pathways, and guaranteed college places for 16–17-year-olds without a plan.

Young people aged 16 or 17 who do not have a post-16 study plan will be automatically allocated a place at a local college or further education provider. Foundation apprenticeships will be available for young people aged 16-21 – and up to age 24 in some cases - reaching up to 30,000 young people.

Young Futures Hubs

The Young Futures programme is made up of Prevention Partnerships – led by the Home Office – and Hubs – led by DCMS. Young Futures Hubs are new, community hubs bringing together support, activities, and trusted adults for young people. One of three core aims of the hubs is to widen access to opportunities, such as careers support. Eight early adopter hubs are currently operational, with a further 42 hubs opening before the end of this Parliament.

Plans are currently being developed to ensure that Young Futures Hubs align with existing services, such as DWP Youth Hubs. This offers a key opportunity to improve coordination between education, employment, and mental health support, reduce duplication, and ensure that young people - particularly those most at risk of becoming NEET - are able to access the right help in the right place, at the right time.

Growth and Skills Levy

The Growth and Skills Levy is intended to fund employer investment in training and apprenticeships, supporting workforce development and productivity. The levy replaces the apprenticeships levy, which was historically viewed as complex and inflexible, and as not enabling employers or providers to deliver the wraparound employability support that many young people require. As a result, funding was disproportionately used for existing, often older employees and higher-level qualifications, rather than creating entry-level opportunities for young people starting out in the labour market.

Recent reforms to the Growth and Skills Levy are intended to rebalance participation towards younger people and shorter, more flexible training courses. At the same time, increased flexibility for employers and providers may broaden how the Levy is used. These changes represent important progress, but their impact on improving opportunities for young people remains uncertain and will depend on how effectively they are implemented and sustained over time.

Schools White Paper

The recent Schools White Paper sets out an ambition to halve the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers, as well as creating new frameworks for enrichment and pupil engagement. These are among the steps to improve attainment and reduce the number of children missing education, both of which are NEET risk factors.

Gaps in support remain

Taken together, these reforms represent an important shift. However, support for young people is currently characterised by inconsistency and fragmentation, particularly at key transition stages such as ages 11, 16, and 18. This reflects both geographical disparities where access to provision such as Young Futures Hubs or DWP Hubs is not universal, and wider challenges of systemic join-up across services.

In December, the DWP announced the Millburn Review, led by former Health Secretary Alan Milburn, to address the “lost generation of young people not earning or learning”.¹⁸ Crucially, the review intends to uncover the underlying reasons for why so many young people have been left behind. This, alongside the separate prevalence review into mental health, ADHD, and autism services, highlights the role of worsening mental health in driving youth unemployment and inactivity.

The interim “diagnostic” report finds that there is a deep “participation crisis”, with many young people becoming detached from the labour market altogether - often

¹⁸ Department for Work and Pensions. [Press Release: Alan Milburn calls for a 'movement' to address lost generation of young people not earning or learning as investigation opens.](#)

linked to rising mental health conditions, fewer entry-level opportunities, and weakening transitions from education into work.

“Britain has institutions for young people, but it does not have a participation system that is capable of taking young people from the world of education into the world of work.” [Milburn Review, interim report]

The interim report concludes that this is a whole-system failure: education, health, welfare and the labour market are not working together to support sustained participation, and are often structured in ways that reinforce disengagement rather than prevent it. It calls for a fundamental shift from fragmented, programme-based responses towards a coherent participation system that focuses on early intervention, coordinated support, and enabling all young people to move successfully into work or learning.

This lack of join-up, particularly at transition stages, is most apparent among those who are not in contact with formal systems. Around half a million young people are not claiming benefits, meaning they have limited interaction with employment or support services. As a result, they are both harder to identify and harder to support, despite often facing significant barriers.

“A system serious about preventing disengagement would know who its disengaged young people are, where they are, how long they have been outside learning and work, and which institution is responsible for supporting them. The current architecture cannot do any of that.” [Milburn Review, interim report]

The role of the Premier League Foundation and football club charities

Embedded in communities and already engaging hundreds of thousands of young people each week, football club charities are uniquely placed to reach young people who are least likely to engage with traditional services. Their trusted brand and informal, relationship-based approach allow them to engage young people at an earlier stage, including those experiencing disengagement from education, poor mental health, or instability at home.

Football club charities can also act as connectors within local systems, supporting the aims of initiatives such as DWP Youth Hubs or Young Futures Hubs by providing a bridge between young people and statutory services.

Crucially, their role aligns with the Government’s shift towards prevention and partnership. By integrating football club charities more systematically into local delivery models, there is an opportunity to strengthen early intervention, improve engagement, and create more cohesive pathways for young people, particularly those most at risk of becoming NEET.

Harnessing the power of sport to drive outcomes in employment, education, and training

The Premier League is already a key Youth Guarantee partner of the Department of Work and Pensions, committing to providing skills and opportunities and using its influence to reach and engage young people. This includes by expanding the Premier League Inspires offer to be delivered by 61 football club charities this season, up from 45 during the 2024/25 season.

Premier League Inspires

Premier League Inspires supports at-risk young people aged 11–18, helping them build personal skills and positive attitudes through targeted interventions, primarily in secondary schools. The Premier League has invested more than £16.2m into the programme, via the Premier League Foundation, with a further £11.8m committed over the next three years. Since the programme’s launch in 2019, more than 40,000 young people have received over 135,000 hours of targeted support across 1,000+ schools and educational facilities.

This support can be tailored to meet different needs, but takes the form of face-to-face group sessions, 1-to-1 mentoring, workshops, and social-action projects. Premier League Inspires is delivered by 61 club charities, with more than 170,000 unique participants engaged.

An independent evaluation of the programme, carried out by researchers at Sheffield Hallam University,¹⁹ found that of the schools which participate in the programme:

- **96%** say that it improves participants’ engagement in class
- **92%** believe that it improves behaviour
- **92%** say that it provides a service that they can’t offer themselves
- **79%** believe that it reduces absenteeism
- **71%** believe it has a positive impact on pupils’ perceived opportunities, future aspirations, and education

This is just one example of how trusted local delivery can be supported and scaled through national partnerships. Football club charities bring deep community roots, established relationships, and proven delivery models in their local areas, particularly in places where existing provision is limited or where young people benefit from more tailored, engaging support. By working with partners such as the Premier League to expand successful programmes nationally, government can help to replicate effective local practice at scale, strengthening the overall system of support for young people across the country.

¹⁹ Sheffield Hallam University (2025) [Premier League Inspires: Evaluation Report](#)

In the context of the Premier League Foundation and football club charities, the power of sport is already being harnessed across England and Wales to boost skills and confidence among young people and create pathways into education, employment, and training. Often, these football club charities and their work are filling gaps in support in young people's lives, which they wouldn't otherwise have access to.

The power of football

Football is uniquely placed to tackle the challenges facing children and young people because of its reach, accessibility, and influence in young people's lives. The Premier League and football club charities are able to harness the game's widespread popularity alongside their own established, trusted local brands, creating points of connection with young people that few other institutions can replicate.²⁰ While some young people are drawn in by their love of football, many others engage through the broader, non-sporting offer that football club charities provide, which extends far beyond activities on the pitch.

“Turf Moor and Burnley FC are very visible – the stadium can be seen from anywhere in the city and its colours are everywhere. When people see the badge they immediately trust you.” [Senior leader, Burnley FC in the Community]

This wider offer often includes volunteering and social action opportunities, education and employability support, mentoring and mental health provision, and creative activities such as music, drama and the arts. By offering programmes tailored to the needs and lived experiences of young people in their local communities, football club charities are able to reach a diverse constituency of young people, including those who may be disengaged from school or other formal services. Through relationships built on trust and familiarity with both people and place, these programmes are particularly effective at engaging young people at risk of becoming NEET, helping to rebuild aspirations, strengthen confidence and self-belief, and create tangible connections to education, training and employment opportunities.

Hosting DWP Hubs

Some football club charities host DWP Youth Hubs, demonstrating an impactful and scalable model for engaging young people who are at risk of becoming or are already NEET. By embedding DWP provision within trusted, community-based football settings, these hubs can overcome many of the barriers that prevent young people from accessing traditional Jobcentre Plus support.

Sunderland Youth Hub

²⁰ Centre for Young Lives (2025) [More than a Game: Football as a force for good in communities across England and Wales](#)

Sunderland's Youth Hub, located at its pioneering Beacon of Light community facility, was launched in June 2025. Two full-time DWP staff work alongside two full-time employability coaches from the football club's charity, the Foundation of Light, at the Hub. Since it opened its doors, the Hub has worked with 180 young people aged between 18 and 24, with DWP's annual target set at 200. Of those 180, by the most up-to-date information available, 40 have progressed into work, 63 have earned qualifications, 41 have had work experience and 11 are volunteering. A total of 173 have taken part in 'added value' opportunities, such as Kings Trust 12-week courses, Money Matters sessions or National Careers Service work preparation modules.

A young person, one of nearly 200 individuals supported by Foundation of Light and DWP personnel at Sunderland's Beacon of Light Youth Hub, faced a significant loss of confidence after several unsuccessful interviews and non-responses from prospective employers, despite prior experience at a SEND school and in retail. With support from DWP employability coaches, the young person developed a clear and structured plan of action, improving their interview technique and refining their CV. This support helped rebuild confidence and led to securing a role at the Beacon of Light's Yard Nine Café just three months after joining the Youth Hub. Their confidence and motivation have continued to grow, and they have since begun a finance course. This case highlights how Premier League Clubs, as trusted community assets, can work in partnership with Government to support young people and deliver meaningful, long-term outcomes.

A key strength of this model is trust and reach. Football club charities are often among the most visible and recognisable institutions in their local areas, with strong brands and deep-rooted relationships across communities. For many young people - particularly those who are disengaged from formal systems - these environments feel more accessible, less stigmatising, and more relevant than statutory services. Where DWP Youth Hubs are hosted in these settings, they can increase engagement among cohorts who are least likely to seek out support independently, including those with low confidence, poor prior experiences of education, or complex personal circumstances.

Football club charities are also well positioned to deliver jobs fairs. Clubs are able to convene local employers, training providers, and community organisations, using their brand and facilities to draw in both young people and employers. Job fairs hosted at stadiums or club venues can attract high levels of participation, providing informal, engaging entry points into the labour market while strengthening connections between employers and local young people.

Crucially, this model aligns with the broader ambition of the Youth Guarantee by meeting young people where they are and providing cohesive, place-based support. Rather than expecting young people to navigate fragmented systems, hosting DWP Youth Hubs in football club charities brings services together around the individual. It

builds on existing strengths within communities, scales proven delivery models, and creates more engaging pathways into education, employment, and training.

Boosting attainment and tackling school absence

School absence and low attainment are among the key risk factors for a young person becoming NEET. Absence often reflects wider challenges in a young person's life, such as unmet additional needs or mental health challenges. Over time, missing learning can lower attainment and weaken relationships with teachers and peers. Young people who leave school without strong qualifications are less likely to progress into further education or paid work.

Football club charities have an important role to play in interrupting this pathway. By working alongside schools, they are able to re-engage pupils who are persistently absent, at risk of exclusion, or struggling to access mainstream learning. For example, of schools participating in the Premier League Inspires programme, 75% state that it is better than other programmes they have tried to address attendance and behaviour, and 79% state that it has helped to reduce absenteeism.²¹ Using the draw of football as an initial hook, club charities deliver programmes which help young people rebuild attendance, resilience, and positive attitudes to learning. This can ultimately help to raise attainment and reduce the likelihood of educational disengagement translating into NEET status as they get older.

Careers advice

High-quality careers advice delivered during school can play an important role in reducing the likelihood that a young person becomes NEET. The Gatsby Benchmarks set out a nationally recognised framework for high-quality careers provision in secondary schools and colleges, and evidence shows that schools meeting more of the benchmarks are more effective at supporting students into positive post-16 destinations. Each additional benchmark achieved is associated with a 1.1% reduction in the likelihood of a young person becoming NEET.²²

However, funding shortfalls often prevent schools delivering a high-quality offer,²³ and as a result, in 2025, only 32% of students received face to face careers advice, a 40% drop from the previous year, and just 23% had an employer visit.²⁴

Reaching young people where they are

²¹ Sheffield Hallam University (2025) [Premier League Inspires: Evaluation Report](#)

²² Careers and Enterprise Company (2022) Ready for the Future; <https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/sites/cweb/files/y1vfabyd/cec-ready-for-the-future-2022.pdf>

²³ UK Parliament, Written Evidence from Speakers for Schools, committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/141064/pdf/

²⁴ Youth Employment (2025) Youth Voice Census 2025 Report; <https://www.youthemployment.org.uk/dev/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Youth-Voice-Census-2025-Results-Report.pdf>

Newcastle United Foundation operates a Careers Hub in Metrocentre, a large shopping complex in nearby Gateshead. As a space where many young people regularly spend time – as one NUF staff member told us, “all roads lead to the Metrocentre” – the Careers Hub removes physical barriers which can prevent disengaged young people from accessing support. The Careers Hub offer support for CV writing and job interviews, as well as site visits to businesses within the shopping centre. By situating provision in a familiar, accessible environment the hub is well placed to reach a substantial and diverse population of NEET young people across the city; in its first year of operation, the Hub supported more than 1,000 young people.

Palace for Life Foundation

A young person, referred to Crystal Palace’s Palace for Life Foundation Youth Hub by Premier League partners Movement to Work, felt uncertain about their direction and career path. With the support and guidance of advisers at the Youth Hub, they discovered an enthusiasm and aptitude for customer service and administration. With renewed confidence, the young person began to deliver sessions at the Hub, further strengthening self-belief and developing communication and interpersonal skills. The support received through the Foundation’s Youth Hub, as part of Movement to Work, helped them secure a place on the reserve list for a DWP Administrative Officer role.

Work experience and volunteering opportunities

Work experience plays a crucial role in supporting the transition into employment. It provides opportunities to explore interests, build confidence, and develop practical skills, while also helping individuals gain real-world experience that strengthens future job or education applications.

However, opportunities to gain this vital experience are narrowing: just 26% of young people currently in education, from secondary school to University, undertook work experience in the year leading up to the Youth Voice Census 2025. A third of young people in that same survey undertook no extracurricular, volunteering, or social action opportunities.²⁵

Football club charities are well placed to help address this gap by offering accessible, credible routes into work experience, volunteering, and even entry-level employment. Drawing on their links to local employers and community organisations, they can provide structured placements across a wide range of sectors connected to football - including construction, hospitality, retail, health, and creative industries. This aligns with significant opportunities in priority sectors identified in the 2025 Industrial Strategy,

²⁵ Youth Employment UK (2025) Youth Voice Censuses 2025 Report

particularly in creative industries and digital and technology roles, helping young people access pathways into growing parts of the economy.²⁶

Skills for life

There is a growing body of evidence to show the gap in soft skills among young people – both identified by employers and young people themselves. A survey of employers found that 54% of organisations in England and 58% in Wales have a skills shortage, and that employers have identified a lack of work readiness among younger generations as a key factor exacerbating these shortages, highlighting deficits in areas such as communication, teamwork, and professional behaviours.

At the same time, some young people are unclear about what skills are needed for the workplace: 61% of Generation Z report that neither an employer nor a careers adviser has ever told them they are missing particular skills, leaving them with limited insight into how they are perceived or what they need to develop. This lack of feedback is compounded by confusion about employer expectations more broadly, with half of young people saying they do not know what employers are looking for when recruiting.

However, some young people are aware of particular skills that they lack confidence in. For young people who are NEET, many identify low confidence - particularly in their ability to communicate effectively and present themselves under the pressure of interviews or assessments - as a major barrier to entering work. Young people who are NEET, especially those who experience low confidence and wellbeing, commonly reflect on missed opportunities during school to build communication skills, self-confidence, and professional presentation. Together, this points to a systemic gap in support for developing soft skills, which are increasingly essential for successful transitions into employment.

Premier League Kicks

The Premier League's longest-standing community programme, which began in 2006, provides free weekly sessions in areas of high need, using football, multi-sport activities, mentoring, and educational workshops to help young people develop life skills and reach their potential.

The Premier League has invested more than £96 million into the programme - with a further £33 million committed over the next three years - which has delivered over 1 million hours of free sessions at more than 5,000 venues across England and Wales, reaching more than 600,000 young people. There are 93 football club charities currently delivering the programme.

²⁶ UK Government (2025) [The UK's Modern Industrial Strategy](#)

By creating a safe space in their communities, Premier League Kicks encourages a feeling of belonging in areas where young people may otherwise feel unwelcome or unsafe. Sessions are targeted in areas of high need - 60% of delivery is in the 30% most deprived communities in the UK. In 2024/25, there were over 104,000 participants in the programme across more than 63,000 free sessions.

Outcomes from the programme include developing many of those essential 'soft skills' – such as communication and team-working - which are essential for young people to move into and stay in employment. A recent survey of alumni of the programme – which formed part of Leeds Beckett Universities' independent evaluation of the programme²⁷ – found that:

- **94%** felt more confident working in a team
- **91%** felt they had developed their problem-solving skills
- **88%** felt inspired to participate in community volunteering
- **86%** believed it had improved their career opportunities and choices
- **85%** felt more confident speaking in front of a group of people

Premier League Changemakers

Premier League Changemakers is a leadership activity for girls and young women participating on the Premier League Kicks and Premier League Inspires programmes, delivered by more than 40 football club charities and engaging more than 1,600 girls and young women.

The programme provides an opportunity for girls and young women aged 11-18 to participate in gender equality and mental health social action projects, increasing participants' confidence and developing vital life skills.

In 2025, a Premier League Changemakers celebration event brought girls and young women from 22 different football club charities together in Wolverhampton to explore ideas about gender equality and career opportunities for women within the football industry.

"My dream is completely different to football. I would love to be a singer... Being at an event like this helps build my confidence because I have done a lot of speaking. The biggest thing I'll take away is just how nice people were and how I felt like I have shared my thoughts and my experiences comfortably and safely." [Premier League Changemakers participant]

Pathways into work and volunteering

²⁷ Leeds Beckett University, Carnegie School of Sport (2025) [Premier League Kicks Evaluation Report](#)

Football club charities play a vital role in creating clear, credible pathways from early engagement into volunteering, employment and leadership, particularly for young people who may otherwise struggle to access these opportunities. By embedding employability routes within trusted youth programmes, they are able to offer more than short-term engagement, instead providing long-term progression.

Premier League programmes such as Premier League Kicks illustrate this approach in practice. The programme is designed not only to deliver positive outcomes for current participants, but also to create progression routes into volunteering roles, coaching qualifications, and paid employment within football club charities.

As a result, many staff working across the network today began their journey as participants themselves: 750 people in the club charity workforce are currently employed through Premier League Kicks, 310 of whom are former participants of the programme. Across the whole club charity workforce, more than 400 club charity staff are former participants of PL Foundation funded programmes or funds.

This demonstrates a deliberate, long-term model that supports young people to move from engagement, to responsibility, and ultimately into meaningful work and leadership roles. This model has additional benefits for delivery quality. Staff who have previously taken part in these programmes often bring a deep understanding of the challenges participants face, rooted in shared lived experience and local knowledge. This makes them highly relatable role models and enables them to build trust quickly, while motivating participants by showing that progression into employment is both realistic and achievable.

“Because I was a participant before, you’re from the area, you understand what they are going through and you can relate to them more” [Sessional coach, Arsenal in the Community]

Conclusion

Reducing the number of young people not in education, employment or training is an urgent social and economic challenge. The high and rising levels of NEET reflect overlapping failures across education, health, careers support, and the labour market, alongside widening inequalities linked to poverty, disability, and mental ill-health.

Recent government initiatives demonstrate welcome ambition to address both economic inactivity and the underlying risk factors that push young people out of education and work. However, progress will be quicker and go further if these programmes build on partnerships with trusted, community-based organisations, and if stronger links between these organisations and regional and local authorities are supported by government through more active coordination and convening.

Football club charities, supported by the Premier League Foundation, are already delivering positive outcomes for young people, through a model which combines the embedded local presence of football club charities with the reach and appeal of the Premier League brand and its national programmes, enabling large-scale engagement with young people and the consistent replication of best practice.

As a result, football club charities are highly effective at supporting young people through difficult transition periods when they are more likely to fall out of education, training, or employment, and provide the necessary early support to prevent them reaching this point. Through a consistent presence and trusted local delivery – which is driven by local need and insight - they fill gaps in provision which schools or other statutory services may not be able to offer themselves.

They also provide opportunities for work experience and pathways into work, and are well placed to support devolved approaches to employment and skills by helping local and regional leaders design and deliver services that respond to local needs, opportunities, and labour market priorities.

The publication of the Milburn Review and the Government's response provides an opportunity to rethink how support for young people is organised around the transitions that matter most. Too often, help arrives only after a young person has already disengaged. A more effective approach would place greater emphasis on identifying risk earlier, building confidence and employability alongside qualifications, and connecting young people to consistent sources of support in their communities

As responsibility for employment, skills and youth services increasingly shifts towards regional and local leaders, there is also an opportunity to draw more fully on organisations with strong local reach and credibility. Football club charities are already working with many of the young people least likely to engage with traditional services, offering insights into local needs and trusted routes into support. Harnessing this expertise within emerging devolved arrangements could help create more joined-up pathways into education, training and work.

