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Jobs Foundation

Youth worklessness and the Pledge

FOCALDATA

Key Findings

Youth worklessness is seen as one of Britain's most serious problems. Nine in ten (91%) say the one million young people not in work, education or training is a big problem for Britain. Of the eight issues tested, only the cost of living (95%) ranks higher, putting youth worklessness ahead of NHS waiting lists (89%), housing (88%), crime (86%) and immigration (77%). For half the public (50%) it is a very big problem, putting it level with NHS waiting lists and immigration. The public also links it to the economy: a third (33%) name it as one of the three biggest barriers to economic growth, behind only energy costs and taxes. For many it is personal, too, as almost half (46%) know a young person who is currently struggling to find work, rising to 82% of 18–24 year olds.

The public underestimate how much young people want to work. On average, the public think around 6 in 10 (6.3) young people out of work want a job or training. The Milburn review's interim findings suggest the true figure is over 8 in 10. This gap sits alongside some critical views: two-thirds (67%) think young people have a weaker work ethic than previous generations, and over half (56%) think many would rather claim benefits than work. However, these views are far from universal and the data suggests direct contact challenges negative assumptions as these are much less common among young people themselves, and people who personally know a young person struggling to find work give noticeably higher estimates (6.7, against 5.9 among those who don't).

There is a clear public mandate for employers to act. The public sees getting young people into work as a shared responsibility, and employers are firmly part of it. 84% say employers have a responsibility to help and as does the Government (81%). Most (86%) agree young people need employers to give them a first chance to build experience, and only 2% disagree. The most common explanation for youth worklessness is employers wanting experience that young people can't get (38%). Every practical step we asked about, things employers could do to help young people into work, is backed by at least seven in ten people, with opposition at 10% or less. That includes offering work experience placements (82%), partnering with schools, colleges and Jobcentres (81%), telling every applicant the outcome of their application (80%) and guaranteeing an interview to young applicants who meet the basic requirements (74%). When asked what the Milburn review should prioritise, the public's top choices also rely on employers: more apprenticeships and entry-level training (51%) and employers offering more first jobs and work experience (40%).

Businesses that make a public commitment would be rewarded by the public. If a company publicly committed to giving young people a first job and supporting them to progress, three-quarters (75%) would view it more favourably. Around seven in ten would trust it more (69%) or recommend it to friends and family (69%). The benefits are commercial as well as reputational: six in ten would be more likely to buy from the company (60%) or want to work for it (60%). There is almost no downside, with no more than 5% saying it would make them less likely to do any of these things. For employers, this means a commitment to young people can strengthen their brand with customers and with the talent they want to recruit.

Managers are open to hiring young people but face real barriers to doing so. 85% of managers and hirers say they are open to taking on young people with little or no work experience, and 71% say their team has done so in the last two years. For other groups facing barriers to work, openness is often not matched by action. For example, 78% are open to hiring someone who has experienced homelessness, but only 31% have done so. Managers' main concerns about hiring young people with little prior experience are about work-readiness: reliability or attitude (33%), basic workplace skills such as timekeeping and communication (32%), and worries that they won't stay (29%). Cost matters too as two-thirds (66%) say rising employment costs, such as employer National Insurance and minimum wage increases, hold their team back, and the public at large (83%) is even more likely to see this as a barrier. Nevertheless, managers can point to some potential solutions: mentoring for new starters (38%), funding for training (37%) and candidates who have completed pre-employment training (34%). Only a small minority (6%) says nothing would make them more likely to hire inexperienced young people.

There is a strong appetite for the Pledge. After reading a short description of the Pledge, 75% of people in work said they would like their organisation to sign up. That rises to 78% among managers and hirers, the people best placed to make it happen. Support is consistent across the political spectrum (from 72% of 2024 Reform voters to 80% of Labour voters). The commitments people most want their organisation to make – removing unnecessary barriers to entry (39%) and building partnerships with schools, charities and Jobcentres (38%) – map directly onto the Pledge's Recruitment and Outreach strands. Most also see the Pledge as practical as well as symbolic: 82% of managers and hirers say their team could offer at least one extra job or work experience placement to a young person under the Pledge, including 41% who say that could include a job. A majority (57%) thinks following the Pledge would make it easier to hire young people with little experience.

About the research

The survey explored how the public sees youth worklessness, who it thinks should help young people into work, how young people who are out of work are viewed, and what employers should do to help. A dedicated section asked people in work about the Pledge, and a further section asked managers and people involved in hiring about their own experience of taking on young people.

The results are weighted so that the sample of 2,035 UK adults, including 921 managers and hirers matches the UK adult population by age, gender, region, education, ethnicity and how people voted at the 2024 general election. This means the figures in this report can be read as representative of UK adults as a whole, rather than just the people who took part.