



**Department of Work & Pensions call for evidence -
*Young people and work***

**Unite the Union
Response**

February 2026

About You

Unite is the UK's largest trade union with over 1.2 million members across all sectors of the economy, including health, transport, manufacturing, financial services, food and agriculture, information technology, service industries, construction, energy and utilities, local government and the not-for-profit sector. Unite also organises in the community, enabling those not in employment to be part of our union.

Equality is a pivotal element of Unite's comprehensive agenda, which encompasses job security, equitable pay, and favourable working conditions. To ensure these values are actively promoted and upheld, we have established a dedicated equality department. This department oversees multiple Equality Committees, each designed to address the specific needs and challenges faced by various groups, including women, individuals with disabilities, members of the LGBT+ committee, Black and Asian Ethnic Minorities (BAEM) groups, and young workers. These committees play an essential role in advocating for inclusive practices and fostering an environment where every member can thrive, thereby enhancing the overall integrity and fairness of our organisation.

Unite has consistently championed equal opportunities, striving to eliminate barriers in the workplace and across all facets of society. **As part of our commitment to this mission, we have conducted a thorough consultation process to gather comprehensive insights and concerns from young member activists representing Unite's 114.294 young members.** Through this effort, we aim to amplify the voices and intersectional concerns of this group and ensure their experiences shape our advocacy in this call for evidence.

Unite's response to this call for evidence has drawn together comprehensive insights and is grounded in policies passed at previous Unite Young Members conferences. Our submission examines current challenges, best practices, and recommendations to improve young people's employment and training prospects.

Contact

This document is submitted on behalf of Unite the Union.

For further information about this response, please contact Irina Do Carmo (Equality Research Officer)

Unite the Union question responses

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

In 2025, Unite surveyed young members across all sectors of our membership to gather their views, concerns, and experiences of employment practices, working conditions, mental health, and the biggest issues affecting their socio-economic development. The survey received 4,033 responses.

The survey results indicate that the main barriers to participation in employment, education and training are structural rather than individual.

Table 1 Unite Young Members Survey 2025 - Barriers to employment and training

Rank	Barrier	% rating as a major barrier	Number
1	Rates of pay	70%	2,857
1	Workplace discrimination due to ethnicity	42.7%	1,721
2	Lack of apprenticeships	41.0%	1,655
3	Health & safety concerns	38.2%	1,539
4	Lack of family-friendly policies	34.7%	1,398
5	Workplace discrimination due to age	34.2%	1,379
6	Lack of knowledge of apprentices' legal rights	31.0%	1,251
7	Precarious employment (zero-hours, temp, gig)	23.8%	958
8	Barriers to skills & further education	18.5%	746
9	Mental health	16.0%	645
10	Lack of knowledge of employment rights	13.3%	536
11	Lack of employment / development opportunities	13.1%	530

Structural exclusion and discrimination

Discrimination was identified as the single strongest barrier to participation. This suggests that young people are being actively excluded rather than voluntarily disengaging.

- **42.7% (1,721)** say **ethnic discrimination** is a major barrier
- **34.2% (1,379)** say **age discrimination** is a major barrier

A key factor in workplace age discrimination are age rates imposed by the National Minimum Wage (NMW). Most young people work in low-paid jobs with insecure contracts and poor employment standards. In our evidence to the Low Pay Commission, Unite has consistently raised concerns that age-related rates in the NMW/NLW continue to suppress pay and deter young workers from entering the labour market.

In the hospitality industry, we have heard from young members who work as managers and supervisors are yet paid at the NMW/NLW age rate, which means they earn significantly less than the adult workers they manage.

Unite believes the UK should move towards a position where workers are not discriminated against on the basis of age and are paid the rate for the job. Unite calls for the rate of pay for all workers to be set at £15 per hour now. In 2022, Unite commissioned independent research from Landman Economics to examine the economic impact of a bolder increase in the NMW/NLW (appended). The Landman Economics report analysed the economic impact of introducing a £15 per hour NMW/NLW, using data from the UK Family Resources Survey [FRS] to identify the number of people in the UK who would be directly affected by an increase in the current rates of the NMW and their characteristics. The report analysed three years of FRS data (2017/18, 2018/19 and 2019/20) pooled together, enabling detailed analysis of the impact of increasing the NMW by gender, age, ethnicity, industrial sector, migrant workers and temporary jobs.

The Landman Economics report also examines extending this rate to younger age groups (18-22). The report found that **raising the NMW, and 2019/20), pooled together, enabling detailed analysis of the impact of increasing the NMW by gender, age, ethnicity, industrial sector, migrant workers, NMW to £15 per hour for workers aged 18-22 would result in an average gain in net income per worker of just over £5,100 per year.** Unite is confident that increasing the NMW to £15 per hour for workers aged between 18 and 22 would result in an **increase in gross wages of almost £12.4 billion in total.** The estimated improvement in public finances from **raising the NMW to £15 per hour for these younger workers is just over £3.5 billion.** Increasing the NLW and NMW to £15 per hour is a progressive policy in distributional terms, with the largest percentage increases in net household income for households in the poorest decile.

Unite strongly opposes age-related rates in the NMW; we firmly believe they have consistently undermined young people's living standards and their right to equal treatment. In Unite's experience in the hospitality sector, age-related differentials in the NMW have led employers to recruit younger, less experienced workers so they can pay a lower NLW/NMW rate. Where this happens, Unite has noticed a reduction in output and increased pressure on older workers who are having to supervise groups of younger workers.

Case study – Wage rates particularly affect the gender pay gap

In June 2024, Unite successfully challenged a 4-star UK hotel chain over age-related pay rates, which the union found also affected the gender pay gap. This involved F&B (food and beverage) workers at a Glasgow hotel, part of a 33-unit chain. All workers under the age of 21 were paid £8.60 - the legal minimum, but those aged 21 and over were paid 25% more for doing the same job with the same title and responsibilities.

Following a collective grievance and an on-site Unite fair pay campaign, all young workers not only won a 20% uplift to £10.42, £1.82 above the minimum wage, but also had it backdated to 2021, with some workers winning more than £1500. At appeal, the workers also persuaded the company to cover all tax and NI, meaning some workers received a further £665 in bonus to cover tax. Workers will now be pushing for equal pay and the real living wage across this site.

In areas where youth rates have been abolished through negotiation, there is no evidence that this has led to a decrease in employment. Many companies are prepared to abolish youth rates because they aid recruitment, retention, motivation and productivity. Where Unite is organised, part of our bargaining strategy is to abolish youth rates where they apply.

Unite continues to see examples of employers in the hospitality sector targeting workers on the adult NMW rate for redundancy. Unite can only assume this is intended to reduce wage bills.

“Retail are keen to recruit this age group for temporary positions as they are cheaper” – Unite regional officer – Food retail sector

Unite is also aware of many cases where younger workers who have worked for the same employer for a number of years at a lower wage rate are promoted to a supervisory role but remain on the NMW age rate. For example, a worker turns 21 and is suddenly promoted to a supervisor, given additional duties and a pay uplift at the NMW rate for 21-22 year olds.

Unite continues to hear about the experiences of our low-paid younger workers, who work excessively long hours just to ‘get by’. Paying workers substantially less for the same job solely because of their age is neither fair nor justifiable.

“Young workers in our union and beyond deserve a pay rate equal to that of their counterparts doing the same work. Our bills and our basic right to survive don’t cost us less because of our age.”

– Unite Young Member speaking at the 2025 Unite Young Members Conference

Entry routes into work are broken

Survey evidence from Unite's young members indicates that apprenticeships are failing as a reliable pathway into employment because young people face a double barrier: insufficient access to entry-level opportunities and weak protection once in them.

- **41.0% (1,655)** say **lack of apprenticeships** is a major barrier
- **31.0% (1,251)** say **lack of knowledge of apprentices’ rights** is a major barrier

This is supported by national data showing a sharp decline in apprenticeship starts for under-19s and at Level 2, alongside an increase in the use of apprenticeships for existing adult employees. Research by the Low Pay Commission and the Institute for Fiscal Studies highlights higher rates of underpayment and non-completion among younger apprentices^{1,2}, while National Audit Office findings point to weak enforcement of employment standards³. Together, this evidence shows that apprenticeships are increasingly perceived by young people as insecure and high-risk, undermining their role as a meaningful route into work.

Furthermore, according to official data from the Department for Education, apprenticeship starts for under-19s have fallen by over one third since 2015, with the sharpest decline seen in Level 2 apprenticeships (the main entry route for young people without higher qualifications)⁴. Growth in apprenticeships has been concentrated among the over-25s, existing employees and higher-level apprenticeships⁵.

Unite firmly believes that apprenticeships are increasingly functioning as in-work training for adults rather than an entry route for young people, and thus young people without a work history are locked out before they can even start.

¹ https://www.gov.uk/government/news/low-pay-commission-urges-action-on-illegal-underpayment-of-apprentices?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

² https://ifs.org.uk/articles/what-happened-youth-apprenticeships?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

³ https://www.nao.org.uk/press-releases/the-apprenticeships-programme/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

⁴ https://www.cipd.org/en/about/press-releases/apprenticeship-levy-press-release/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

⁵ https://www.cipd.org/en/about/press-releases/apprenticeship-levy-press-release/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

Regarding the reported ***lack of knowledge of apprentices' rights***, identified as a major barrier in our survey, national evidence suggests this is not solely due to a lack of awareness, but rather to real risks and weak enforcement. For example, analysis by the Low Pay Commission⁶ has consistently found that young apprentices are the group most likely to be paid incorrectly:

- Apprentices are **more likely than other workers** to be:
 - Underpaid
 - Paid below legal entitlement
 - Unpaid for training time

It is therefore likely that young people are making a rational decision to avoid apprenticeships, which carry financial risk and offer limited protection.

Unite is particularly concerned about skills and labour shortages in the construction sector, which have a knock-on effect on the wider economy and the housing crisis. The construction industry needs to be attractive to retain and develop its existing skilled workforce and to attract new talent and prospective apprentices, in a tight UK labour market.

The labour market intelligence clearly shows that we need immediate action to increase training and apprenticeships. Unite is represented on several Construction Leadership Council (CLC) groups and has campaigned to ensure that the CLC's adopted skills plan addresses skill needs, shortages and gaps through high-quality training and apprenticeships.

Unite submitted a response to the ILO on a global framework for quality apprenticeships. The union is campaigning for the framework to deliver high-quality apprenticeships and traineeships across all sectors of the economy. Unite calls for robust procurement interventions to increase both the number and quality of apprenticeships.

Unite strongly believes that the low wages many apprentices receive amount to exploitation, and we have raised these concerns in our previous submissions to the Low Pay Commission. Good employers, who rightly invest in apprenticeships and training and pay a fair wage to their apprentices, are undercut by unscrupulous bosses who exploit the apprenticeship system and fail to pay the statutory minimum.

Unite believes the apprenticeship rate in the NMW/NLW should be abolished altogether; £6.40 per hour is not good enough for a 16-year-old, let alone for an older apprentice. As such, Unite is of the view that all apprenticeship rates should be at least set at the age

⁶ https://www.gov.uk/government/news/low-pay-commission-urges-action-on-illegal-underpayment-of-apprentices?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

rates for the NLW/NMW, with our continued call for the abolition of age differentials in the NMW/NLW.

Unite calls on the Government to close a loophole in the apprenticeship levy that has allowed some employment agencies and other unscrupulous operators to pass the levy on to their workforces. Many apprentices are left with non-transferable qualifications. Unite strongly believes that, as part of overall quality control and auditing of an apprenticeship, there should be a statutory obligation on the training provider to check that apprentices receive at least the statutory minimum remuneration.

Many of Unite's young members are time-served apprentices and have experienced the drop in quality firsthand. In 2015/16, the apprenticeship achievement rate was 67%, yet 7 years later it had fallen to 54.6%. Unite understands that the main reasons for this drop include a lack of suitable learning time, poor-quality training, and poorly organised apprenticeships.

A shift to higher apprenticeship standards has meant that younger age groups have not benefited. The number of apprenticeships for under-19s declined by 41%, representing almost 54,000. Simply put, the current Apprenticeship Levy is not fit for purpose.

Unite has developed an Apprenticeship Charter. Unite the Union believes that apprentices are the future of our industries. Apprentices must be supported, valued, and treated fairly at every stage of their training and employment. This Charter sets out the standards Unite expects for every apprentice:

1. Fair Treatment and Respect

- Apprentices will be treated with dignity and respect in the workplace at all times.
- There will be zero tolerance of bullying, harassment, or discrimination of any kind.
- Apprentices will have equal access to grievance and disciplinary procedures.

2. Pay and Employment Rights

- Employers will guarantee that apprentices are paid fairly and not limited to the legal minimum. Unite campaigns for apprentices to receive at least the Real Living Wage.
- Apprentices will have the same basic employment rights as other employees, including entitlement to pay, bonuses, holiday pay, rest breaks, sick pay, and pension contributions.
- Apprentices' pay will increase in line with demonstrated skills, experience, and progression throughout the apprenticeship programme.

3. Training and Development

- Apprenticeships must be real jobs with meaningful training, not a source of cheap labour. Apprentices should be offered permanent employment on completion of their apprenticeship.
 - Apprentices must receive high-quality, structured training both on and off the job, including interview preparation and self-advocacy skills.
 - Training time must be protected and must not be sacrificed to meet production targets.
 - Every apprentice will have access to a trained mentor or workplace supervisor who is suitably skilled, willing, and supported to carry out the role.
 - Apprentices must not be required to carry out tasks beyond their level of training.
 - Any work outside an apprentice's training level must be fully supervised. Apprentices in the learning phase must undertake supervised work only.
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4. Health, Safety, and Welfare

- Employers must provide free Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and comprehensive health and safety training.
 - Apprentices must never be required to carry out unsafe work or tasks beyond their training or competence.
 - Employers must ensure apprentices have access to appropriate welfare facilities and wellbeing support.
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5. Progression and Opportunities

- Apprentices will be given clear information about progression routes from the start of their apprenticeship.
 - On completion of their training programme, apprentices should be given priority consideration for permanent employment.
 - Apprentices must have equal access to further training, upskilling, and development opportunities.
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6. Voice and Representation

- Every apprentice has the right to join Unite the Union.
 - Unite representatives will be available to support apprentices in the workplace.
 - Apprentices will be consulted on workplace changes that affect them.
 - Regular feedback and reviews will be provided to support development and allow apprentices to raise workplace issues.
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7. Responsibilities of Apprentices

- Apprentices commit to fully engaging with their training, education, and work duties.

- Apprentices will work safely, respect colleagues, and uphold professional standards.
- Apprentices will contribute positively to their workplace and industry.
- Apprentices must complete required portfolios before any wage progression is applied.

Apprenticeships are vital for young people and the trade union movement. They provide a critical pathway to work and further education, launching young people into skilled careers and introducing them to trade unions, thereby providing the union with longevity through a steady flow of skilled labour and increased membership. Young people need a strategy to support those currently in poor-quality apprenticeships and to encourage employers to deliver higher-quality apprenticeships.

C. Work is unsafe, insecure, and incompatible with life

Evidence from Unite's young members shows that unsafe and insecure work is a major barrier to participation in employment. Unite has repeatedly raised concerns about young workers' exposure to unsafe working practices, sexual harassment, and lack of dignity at work policies, particularly in insecure and customer-facing roles in the hospitality and social care sectors. These risks do not end at the workplace door: transport poverty and unsafe journeys home after late shifts further limit participation, especially for young women, as highlighted by Unite's Get Me Home Safely campaign⁷. Without secure contracts, enforceable health and safety standards, family-friendly and domestic abuse policies, and employer responsibility for safe travel, many young people cannot safely or sustainably remain in work.

- **38.2% (1,539)** cite **health & safety concerns** as a major issue.
- **34.7% (1,398)** cite **lack of family-friendly policies**.
- **Nearly one in four (958)** highlighted **precarious employment**.

For a large share of young people, work is not something they can safely or sustainably remain in. The barrier is not a lack of willingness to work, but rather whether work is compatible with health, caring responsibilities, personal safety, and basic stability.

Unite has consistently highlighted that young workers face **heightened exposure to:**

- Unsafe working practices
- Excessive hours

⁷ <https://www.unitetheunion.org/campaigns/get-me-home-safely>

- Inadequate risk assessments
- A culture where raising concerns risks loss of work
- Low-paid, customer-facing roles
- Insecure or temporary contracts
- Sectors with weaker health and safety enforcement

Unite has repeatedly raised concerns about **sexual harassment and abuse of young workers**, particularly young women and LGBT+ workers, in sectors such as hospitality, retail, transport and care⁸.

Key issues include:

- Normalisation of harassment as “part of the job”
- Lack of clear reporting mechanisms
- Fear of retaliation or loss of shifts in insecure roles

This contributes directly to:

- Mental ill-health
- Withdrawal from work or training
- Reduced participation among young women in particular

Data from Unite’s young member survey shows that women and LGBT+ respondents are over-represented in employment concerns, reinforcing Unite’s position that dignity at work policies are not optional add-ons but essential to recruiting and retaining young people for careers, not just jobs.

Unite is clear that employee safety does not end at the workplace door, but rather that workplace safety extends beyond the workplace, particularly for young workers.

- Late shifts
- Early mornings
- In areas with poor public transport

Transport poverty means many young workers are isolated from jobs, cannot afford taxis home at late and unsociable hours, and thus face long, unsafe journeys home, where they are often exposed to harassment, violence or isolation.

⁸ <https://www.politicshome.com/ugc-1/1/36/0/Unite%20response%20to%20Home%20Office%20Public.pdf>

This is the basis of Unite's Get Me Home Safely campaign, which calls on employers to take responsibility for:

- Safe transport home after late shifts
- Employer-funded transportation where public transport is unavailable
- Roster design that does not place workers at risk

For young workers, particularly women, as well as workers with protected characteristics, the decision to take up or remain in work is often shaped by whether they can get home safely.

Unite has also argued that **domestic violence and abuse policies are essential workplace protections**, particularly for young workers who may:

- Be economically dependent
- Lack secure housing
- Need flexibility to escape abusive situations

Unite has developed domestic violence and abuse guidance for members, highlighting that this is a workplace issue that can affect employment through lower productivity, absenteeism, and, in some cases, acts of violence in the workplace. Domestic violence and abuse is a significant but often hidden barrier to young people's participation in employment, education and training. While domestic abuse affects people of all ages, young workers face distinct risks due to economic insecurity, housing precarity and limited access to support.

A TUC survey found that over 40% of respondents who had experienced domestic violence said it affected their ability to get to work, including through abusers withholding car keys or money for public transport. For young workers, who are more likely to rely on public transport, have limited financial independence, and be employed in insecure roles, these barriers are often intensified. Without access to flexible working, paid leave, clear domestic abuse workplace policies and secure contracts, young people experiencing abuse are at heightened risk of losing employment or withdrawing from education or training altogether.

The reported lack of family-friendly policies, identified as a barrier in our survey, reinforces Unite's position that domestic abuse policies are a core employment protection, not a fringe issue.

Without clear domestic abuse workplace policies, paid leave for victims of abuse, flexible working arrangements, employer understanding and confidentiality, young people are often forced to choose between personal safety and continued employment.

For young people in insecure or low-paid roles, domestic violence is particularly destabilising. Zero-hours contracts, agency work and casual employment offer little flexibility or protection when workers need time off, changes to hours, or confidentiality.

Furthermore, precarious employment undermines safety, dignity and stability.

Nearly one in four (23.8%) respondents to Unite’s young members’ survey identified precarious employment as a major barrier.

Unite has consistently opposed the expansion of:

- Zero-hours contracts
- Bogus self-employment
- Agency and platform work

Because insecure work discourages reporting of safety or harassment concerns, undermines income stability, and makes planning childcare, education, or training impossible. Precarity compounds all other barriers, including health, safety, mental health, and caring responsibilities, and is fundamentally incompatible with sustained participation.

Taken together, this evidence shows that young people disengage from work when it is unsafe, insecure, or incompatible with their lives, not because they lack aspiration.

Participation will only increase if young people can access safe, dignified, predictable, and supported work, including protection on the journey to and from work.

D. Mental health as a participation barrier

Evidence from Unite’s young members shows that mental health is a significant barrier to participation, with 16% of respondents identifying it as a major issue. This concern sits alongside high levels of insecurity, unsafe working conditions and discrimination, reinforcing findings from Unite and the TUC that poor mental health among young people is often caused or exacerbated by poor-quality work⁹.

Mental health barriers to participation must also be understood in the context of neurodiversity and long-term conditions, particularly among young people. Poor mental health is not only a short-term issue but also often overlaps with autism, ADHD, learning differences, anxiety disorders, depression and other long-term or fluctuating conditions.

⁹ **Trades Union Congress (2022)**

Keep Britain Working: An independent review into the role of employers in supporting health and disability
This report finds that insecure work, lack of flexibility, and poor job quality significantly harm mental health and exacerbate long-term conditions. It highlights that many workers with mental ill-health or fluctuating conditions are pushed out of employment due to inadequate workplace support and fear of disclosure.

Unite and the Trades Union Congress have consistently argued that these conditions become disabling because of how work is organised, not because young people are unwilling or unable to participate¹⁰. Unite is aware that neurodivergent young people are disproportionately excluded by poor job design, such as:

- Noisy, overstimulating or unsafe environments
- Rigid working hours and inflexible scheduling
- Inconsistent management and unpredictable demands

Young workers are disproportionately employed in insecure roles with unpredictable hours, low pay and limited control, and are more likely to experience harassment and discrimination. Fear of job loss or reduced hours can prevent disclosure or early support, allowing mental ill-health to escalate until participation becomes unsustainable. This shows that improving mental health outcomes for young people requires improving job quality, security and workplace protections, rather than focusing solely on individual resilience.

Unite has repeatedly highlighted that precarious employment is particularly damaging for workers with long-term health conditions, including mental ill-health and neurodevelopmental conditions¹¹.

For young people, insecure work:

- Prevents routine, which many neurodivergent people rely on.
- Makes it harder to manage energy levels and symptoms.
- Discourages disclosure due to fear of losing shifts or work.

While legal protections exist, Unite and the TUC have consistently raised concerns that young workers¹²:

- Are less likely to know their right to reasonable adjustments.
- Are more likely to be told adjustments are “not possible”.

¹⁰ **Trades Union Congress (2023)**

Advancing neurodiversity rights in the workplace

TUC Congress motion calling for stronger protections for neurodivergent workers, including accessible recruitment, reasonable adjustments, inclusive job design and improved workplace cultures. The motion explicitly recognises that workplace structures and practices create barriers to participation for neurodivergent people, rather than individual capability.

¹¹ TUC (2025) — Research on disabled workers’ access to reasonable adjustments, showing fear of asking and low implementation rates.

¹² TUC (2025) — Research on disabled workers’ access to reasonable adjustments, showing fear of asking and low implementation rates.

- Fear of being labelled “difficult” or losing work.

Without adjustments, young people are often unnecessarily forced out of work or education.

E. Skills mismatch is systemic, not individual

Evidence from Unite’s young survey respondents shows that barriers to skills development and progression are a significant obstacle to participation in employment, education and training.

- **18.5% (746)** cite **barriers to skills / further education**
- **13.1% (530)** cite **lack of development opportunities**

Nearly one in five respondents cited barriers to skills or further education, while a further 13% identified a lack of development opportunities at work. This reflects a wider systemic problem in which young people are expected to be “work-ready” while employer investment in training has declined, entry-level roles offer little progression, and education pathways are poorly aligned with labour market demand.

Insecure employment further undermines skills development by discouraging training and trapping young people in low-skill roles. Addressing young people’s participation in employment, education, and training, therefore, requires rebuilding structured, paid pathways that enable them to gain skills through work and progress into sustainable employment.

It is unrealistic to expect young people to be “work-ready” when training opportunities are reduced, entry-level roles offer no progression, and education and training pathways are poorly aligned with employer demand.

Entry-level jobs no longer train

Unite and the Trades Union Congress have consistently highlighted that many entry-level roles now require prior experience, offer minimal on-the-job training and focus on short-term productivity rather than skills development. The 2023 **TUC report: ‘A Future that Works’**, identified that investment in workforce training has stagnated or fallen, particularly in lower-paid sectors where young employees are concentrated, with employers increasingly using short-term contracts and casual roles with *minimal training opportunities*¹³.

Unite is concerned that young people are increasingly expected to arrive at work already trained, while employers reduce investment in training, particularly in low-paid sectors

¹³ Trades Union Congress (2023). *A Future That Works: Reimagining work and skills in the UK*. Available at: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/future-works>.

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2024). *Learning and skills at work*. Available at: <https://www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/skills>

where young workers are concentrated. There has been a shift from **on-the-job skill development** toward reliance on prior qualifications or experience; the routes that once allowed young people to gain skills *through work* have been eroded.

This is corroborated by CIPD research, which identifies a decline in employer investment in training and requiring prior experience for entry-level roles. Over recent years, the research also found that organisations are less likely to offer structured early-career development or apprenticeships, particularly at lower levels¹⁴.

(ii) Lack of progression traps young people in low-skill work

Analysis of Unite’s young members survey found **13.1% of respondents cite lack of development opportunities** points to a wider structural issue: many young workers are trapped in roles with **no clear progression pathway**.

Unite identifies that young workers are concentrated in sectors with high turnover, flat job structures, casual contracts and minimal training is supported by analysis from the Trades Union Congress, which finds that insecure, low-progression jobs are prevalent among younger workers and are associated with reduced access to skills development¹⁵. Additional research by the CIPD confirms that reliance on casual and temporary contracts is linked to less employer investment in structured training and progression pathways¹⁶, and analysis from the Resolution Foundation shows that young workers are more likely to be in low-skill jobs with limited development opportunities¹⁷.

In Unite’s experience, young workers are disproportionately employed in sectors characterised by:

- High staff turnover
- Flat job structures
- Casual or temporary contracts

In these roles we find:

- Training is minimal
- Progression is informal or unavailable
- Skills gained are not recognised or portable

As a result, young people can remain in work while still being locked out of progression, leading to disengagement or repeated job churn.

¹⁴ Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2024). *Learning and skills at work*.

¹⁵ Trades Union Congress (2023). *A Future That Works: Reimagining work and skills in the UK*.

¹⁶ Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2024). *Learning and skills at work*.

¹⁷ Resolution Foundation (2024). *Low Pay Britain*.

(iii) Misalignment between education and employer demand

The Unite young member survey findings align with long-standing evidence that the education and training system is poorly aligned with the realities of the labour market, creating structural barriers to participation rather than individual ones.

Young people consistently report that qualifications do not guarantee access to skilled or secure work, that employers prioritise prior experience over credentials, and that the training available to them does not match the skills required in the jobs that are actually accessible.

Analysis by the Trades Union Congress has repeatedly shown that employers increasingly expect workers to arrive “job-ready”, while reducing investment in entry-level training and development. This shift places the burden of acquiring skills on individuals, despite limited opportunities to gain experience outside of work. The TUC has highlighted that this disproportionately disadvantages young people, particularly those entering the labour market for the first time, as well as those employed in low-paid sectors where structured training and progression are least available¹⁸.

Research by the CIPD similarly finds that many employers report skills shortages while offering few genuine entry-level roles with training attached. CIPD analysis shows that so-called “entry-level” jobs frequently require prior experience and offer minimal development, undermining the idea that education alone can provide a smooth transition into skilled employment. This contributes to a cycle in which young people move between low-paid roles without acquiring transferable or recognised skills¹⁹.

The impact of this misalignment is not evenly distributed. Evidence from the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the TUC shows that young people without family or social networks in employment are particularly affected, as informal recruitment and work experience play an increasingly important role in access to better jobs. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as young people balancing work with caring responsibilities, disability or long-term health conditions, face additional barriers when education pathways do not translate into realistic employment opportunities²⁰.

Taken together, this evidence supports the conclusion that the problem is not a lack of skills or aspiration among young people, but a lack of credible transition pathways that link education, training and employment. Without paid, supported routes that allow young people to gain experience and progress in work, increasing participation will remain difficult regardless of individual effort or qualifications.

¹⁸ Trades Union Congress (2023), *A Future That Works: Reimagining work and skills in the UK*.

¹⁹ Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2024), *Learning and skills at work*.

²⁰ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2023), *What has happened to youth employment and progression?*

This constitutes a systemic policy failure in which successive governments have permitted employers to withdraw from training and progression responsibilities through weak apprenticeship design, a levy system that incentivises rebadging existing roles rather than creating entry-level opportunities, conditionality regimes that place pressure on young people rather than on job quality, and public procurement rules that fail to require training and progression, resulting in young people being blamed for skills gaps that are in fact produced by employer underinvestment and inadequate regulatory oversight.

For Q2: What would make the biggest difference to support more young people to participate?

Taken together, Unite’s survey evidence and policy experience show that participation will only increase if young people can access safe, inclusive, secure work with clear entry routes and progression opportunities. The barriers identified in Question 1 are structural and, therefore, require system-level interventions, not increased pressure on individuals. our evidence shows that participation will only increase if young people can **access safe, inclusive, secure work with clear entry routes and progression opportunities.**

Based on this evidence, Unite identifies **five high-impact interventions** that would make the biggest difference to supporting young people to participate in employment, education and training:

1. Enforce anti-discrimination in youth labour markets

Because over 4 in 10 young people experience discrimination as a major barrier.

The single most effective intervention would be stronger enforcement of equality and anti-discrimination protections for young people at work. Over 42% of young respondents identified ethnic discrimination as a major barrier, and 34% identified age discrimination, demonstrating that exclusion within the labour market itself is preventing participation.

Discrimination does not stop at the workplace door: young people from ethnic minority backgrounds, disabled young people, care leavers and those with caring responsibilities often face additional scrutiny, conditionality and sanction risk when interacting with the benefits system. Stronger enforcement of equality protections is essential not only in recruitment and employment, but also across the benefits system and transition points into work and training.

Government policy must move beyond awareness-raising and place enforceable obligations on employers to prevent discrimination in recruitment, pay, progression and dismissal. This includes addressing age-based pay discrimination through the National Minimum Wage framework, which continues to legitimise unequal treatment and suppress young people's earnings. As Unite's evidence shows, age-based pay rates discourage participation, undermine retention, and contribute to inequality, particularly among young women and ethnic minority workers.

To support participation, government must ensure that:

- Employment support and conditionality do not reproduce racial, age-based or disability discrimination.
- Care leavers and young people with EHCPs receive tailored, non-punitive support into work and training.
- Young people are not penalised for rejecting unsafe, discriminatory or unsuitable work.
- Abolish age rates in the NMW/NLW.

Participation cannot be achieved if young people are pushed into poor-quality work through discriminatory systems that prioritise compliance over sustainability. **Without credible enforcement and accountability, young people will continue to face exclusion regardless of their willingness to work or train.**

2. Rebuild apprenticeships as a protected entry route

Because 41% say they cannot access them and 31% do not understand their rights within them.

Apprenticeships must function as a genuine, safe entry route for young people, rather than primarily as in-work training for existing adult employees. Unite's survey shows that **41%** of young people cite lack of apprenticeships as a major barrier and **31%** cite lack of knowledge of apprentices' rights, reflecting both insufficient access and weak protection.

Rebuilding apprenticeships as a genuine entry route must include reform of how apprenticeships interact with the benefits system and education-to-work transitions. Unite's evidence shows that apprenticeships are often financially unviable for young people, particularly those without family support, including care leavers.

To increase participation, the government must:

- Ensure apprenticeships are financially viable without reliance on family support or benefits top-ups
- Remove barriers created by Universal Credit rules that make entering training risky
- Provide targeted support for care leavers and young people leaving education to access apprenticeships
- Guarantee continuity of income and housing during transitions into training
Without this, apprenticeships will remain inaccessible to the very young people they are intended to support.
- Increase the number of entry-level and Level 2 apprenticeships for under-19s.
- Close loopholes in the Apprenticeship Levy that incentivise rebadging existing roles.
- Strengthen enforcement of employment rights, pay and training standards in the apprenticeship system.

Without these reforms, apprenticeships will continue to be perceived as insecure and high-risk, particularly by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

3. Make work safe, secure, and predictable

Because over a third cite health & safety and family-friendly policies as major barriers.

Participation cannot be sustained where work is unsafe, insecure or incompatible with life. It is fundamentally shaped by whether work is compatible with safety, caring responsibilities and place. Unite's evidence shows that insecure work, unsafe workplaces and a lack of family-friendly policies all undermine participation, particularly for young people living in areas with poor transport and limited job opportunities.

To increase participation, the government must:

- Tackle insecure work, including zero-hours contracts with regular hour contracts and end bogus self-employment that also destabilises income and housing.
- Strengthen health and safety enforcement in sectors with high concentrations of young workers.
- Require employers to adopt dignity at work, sexual harassment and domestic abuse policies.
- Transport poverty as a barrier to employment, particularly for young people working unsocial hours. The policy must recognise that workplace safety includes safe travel to and from work, particularly for late and unsociable hours and support the initiatives of the Get Me Home Safely campaign.
- Require family-friendly policies as standard employment protections.

For many young people, particularly women, care leavers and those in rural or deprived areas, the decision to take or remain in work is shaped as much by whether they can get to and from work safely as by the job itself. Young people will not participate in work that places their safety, wellbeing or personal security at risk.

4. Treat mental health as a workplace issue

Because 1 in 6 young people say mental health blocks participation — driven by insecurity and exclusion.

Unite's evidence shows that mental health is a significant barrier to participation, driven by insecure work, unsafe environments and discrimination.

This is exacerbated by benefit conditionality that penalises young people during periods of ill-health, neurodivergence or transition. Mental ill-health should therefore be addressed as a job-quality issue, not as an individual failing.

Government policy should focus on:

- Improving job security and predictability.
- Ensuring access to reasonable adjustments for neurodivergent young people and those with long-term conditions.
- Ensure Access to Work and reasonable adjustments are available early, not only after a crisis occurs.
- Preventing punitive benefit conditionality that worsens mental ill-health and reforming conditionality to avoid sanctioning young people experiencing mental ill-health.
- Supporting early intervention through joined-up employment, health and education services.

- Join up employment, health and education services so young people are supported, not bounced between systems.
- Recognise that pushing young people into unsuitable work worsens mental health and reduces long-term participation.

A participation policy that ignores mental health realities will continue to push young people out of work rather than supporting them into it.

5. Fund real progression and skills development

Because nearly 1 in 5 cannot access the skills or education needed to move forward.

Finally, participation will only increase if young people can see a credible future in work. Unite’s evidence shows that young people are blocked by a lack of skills development, progression and opportunity, problems that are intensified by place-based inequality.

To support participation, the government must:

- Invest in local, place-based, supported pathways to employment and training opportunities, rather than unpaid or low-quality placements
- Align skills policy with job quality, labour-market demand, not just vacancies.
- Require employers benefiting from public funding or procurement to provide training and progression.
- Address housing and transport as core components of participation, not side issues.
- Reform conditionality so young people are supported, not penalised, when undertaking education or training

Expecting young people to be “work ready” without providing training, progression or security will continue to suppress participation. Young people cannot participate in work that does not exist in their area, cannot be reached affordably, or does not pay enough to sustain independent living.

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