

More than employability: Learning from a place-based programme to support young people into work

Tot Foster, Senior Research Associate; Karen Gray, Research Fellow, University of Bristol

Locally delivered Youth Guarantee model translates national ambition into real outcomes for young people.

About the research

It is estimated that nearly one in eight young people in England are currently not in education, employment or training. Many of these will be poorly served by existing employment or benefits support, not due to a lack of provision, but because of a mismatch between how support is designed and the realities of their lives. For those experiencing poor mental or physical health, disrupted education, or other forms of disadvantage, pathways into work can be complex, requiring personalised approaches that take account of individual circumstances, strengths and aspirations.

This policy brief draws on an independent qualitative evaluation of [South Bristol Youth Guarantee \(SBYG\)](#), a place-based employability programme led by Bristol City Council as part of the UK Government-funded [West of England Youth Guarantee Trailblazer](#). The programme supports young people aged 17-21 not in education, employment or training, through one-to-one coaching, group activities and tailored work placements; helping them move towards 'earning or learning'. The research was conducted between October 2025 and March 2026 by the University of Bristol, using participatory youth-centred methods and interviews with young people, employers and delivery staff.

The evaluation explores why young people engaged, how they experienced the support offered, and the impacts of participation. It focuses on outcomes that move young people closer to work but are not typically captured in monitoring frameworks, including wellbeing, confidence, motivation and social connection.

SBYG was delivered in a local context where young people face place-based barriers including limited transport, constrained access to opportunities and weak employment networks. These conditions shape how young people engage with support and underline the importance of approaches that respond to different starting points rather than assuming work-readiness.

This research is directly relevant to current policy priorities. UK Government investment in the Youth Guarantee Trailblazers aimed to test what works in supporting young people across different contexts ahead of the programme's national roll-out. Findings from South Bristol therefore offer insight for policymakers, commissioners and providers seeking more effective approaches across the UK.



Policy recommendations

The recommendations that follow are grounded in the Bristol context but intended to inform wider policy and practice. They highlight key principles for the commissioning and delivery of employability support that can be adapted in other localities.

- 1. Fund relational support as a core intervention.** National and regional funders and commissioners of employability programmes should commission for sustained one-to-one support, including manageable caseloads and continuity of staff. Treat relationship-building as essential infrastructure for engagement, not an optional enhancement. Anything else risks failing those with poor mental health or special educational needs, disrupted routines, or negative prior experiences of services.
- 2. Recognise wellbeing and confidence as legitimate outcomes.** Employability programmes should be designed to build wellbeing, motivation, confidence and social connection, with these outcomes embedded within commissioning frameworks and monitoring. Avoid narrow success measures that prioritise rapid job entry over sustainable progression, instead include intermediate outcomes around readiness for future steps. Recognising and supporting this progression is critical; not only for helping young people move into and sustain employment, but also for its potential to reduce the longer-term social and economic costs associated with disengagement, and to make more effective use of public investment.
- 3. Design for different starting points, not assumed readiness.** Young people benefit from having multiple entry points and flexible routes through provision. Programme designers and funders should avoid linear models that assume uniform work-readiness and risk excluding young people who need extra time and support to engage.
- 4. Commission employability support as an end-to-end journey.** Commissioners and programme leads should fund and plan provision that offers continuity from referral right through to placements and next steps. If support is delivered by multiple providers, ensure responsibility for coordination across stages is clearly owned and resourced, so young people do not disengage at transition points or experience gaps in support.
- 5. Strengthen access to employer networks.** Commissioners and local delivery partnerships should keep high-quality tailored work placements central, while also supporting additional low-pressure employer contacts, such as workplace visits or informal conversations that can help young people build confidence, familiarity and networks.

Key findings

Young people were motivated to engage, but not by jobs alone. Many joined the programme to rebuild routine, confidence and purpose after periods of isolation, anxiety or low mood, recognising these as barriers preventing them moving forward. While long term goals such as independence and financial stability were important, immediate financial incentives offered through the programme were not a primary driver of engagement.

“For me, the motivation was just getting out the house and being able to put myself to something...” (SBYG participant)

Trusted relationships were central to sustained engagement and emotional stability. One-to-one support from consistent and trusted staff helped young people manage anxiety, build confidence and cope with the uncertainty of next steps, particularly where previous experiences of services or education had been negative.

Work tasters were most impactful when they were well-timed and tailored. For many participants, these placements represented their first meaningful encounter with an employer, expanding horizons, challenging assumptions about work and, in some cases, leading directly to employment or apprenticeships.

"Sometimes it feels nice to actually be useful to somebody." (SBYG participant)

Place mattered. Geographic isolation, limited transport options and weak employment networks constrained access to opportunities and shaped what young people saw as possible. Standard classroom-based employability support did not suit everyone; practical, hands-on activities and direct contact with employers supported engagement more effectively.

Mental health and wellbeing outcomes were meaningful in their own right. Reduced isolation, improved confidence and increased social connection contributed directly to young people's wellbeing, helping some to re-establish routines, feel less anxious and become more open to future opportunities.

"It definitely helped me more mentally... [to] not see myself in a negative light." (SBYG participant)

Further information

Foster, T. & Gray, K. (2026) South Bristol Youth Guarantee Evaluation Report

The evaluation report, along with short films created by young people taking part in SBYG, are available on request from the contacts below.

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Contact the researchers

Tot Foster, Senior Research Associate, University of Bristol

tot.foster@bristol.ac.uk

[Karen Gray](#), Research Fellow, University of Bristol

karen.gray@bristol.ac.uk

South Bristol Youth Guarantee: YG@bristol.gov.uk