AdviceUK Submission - Young People and Work Report: Call for Evidence

Introduction

AdviceUK is the UK's largest support network for independent advice services, representing almost 700 organisations across England, Wales, and Scotland. Our members provided advice to around 2.8 million people last year on issues such as welfare benefits, debt, employment rights, immigration, and health. These organisations are embedded in communities, often acting as the first point of contact for people experiencing multiple disadvantages. Young people aged 16–24 are a key part of this client group, particularly those not in employment, education or training (NEET) who face complex barriers and require sustained support. Data from AdvicePro, a case management software used by advice services, shows that since April 2024 there have been over 27,000 advice cases involving young people in this age group, illustrating a wide range of challenges linked to financial insecurity, health, and access to support.

A substantial share (12%) of these cases relate to health and disability, including mental health conditions, long-term illness and learning disabilities, while around a third (34%) concern welfare benefits and welfare rights. This pattern highlights that for many young people, disengagement from work or education is driven by unmet health needs and insufficient income stability. Our submission draws on this evidence, alongside the experiences of our members, to demonstrate that many young people who are NEET require sustained, holistic support that prioritises health, financial security and stability before meaningful engagement with work or training can be achieved.

The Milburn Review is a welcome opportunity to examine the rising number of young people who are economically inactive and to design practical responses. AdviceUK and its members support the principle that every young person should have the opportunity to thrive but achieving this requires a clear-eyed understanding of the underlying barriers to participation. Our core message is that advice services are a crucial part of the infrastructure required to support NEET young people. These services must be recognised, integrated into national strategies and properly funded if the Government is serious about tackling this issue.

Advice services help young people to stabilise their income, challenge benefit decisions, access health and social care, and navigate complex systems. These interventions are often the precondition to engaging in employment, education or training. Our members tell us that many young clients are not NEET by choice but because they are trapped in cycles of crisis. They may be surviving on inadequate benefits, have caring responsibilities or dealing with unresolved mental health issues. The support offered by advice agencies enables these individuals to get to a place where they can make informed, realistic decisions about their future.

However, despite the essential nature of their work, advice agencies are consistently underfunded, often reliant on insecure grants, and operating with limited capacity. This is demonstrated by our Member Survey Report 2025 which shows the breakdown of different funding streams for the independent advice sector.[1] Public sector sources make up only roughly a third of the funding streams relied upon by advice services. Whereas almost half of funding sources are derived from charitable trusts and foundations, corporate sponsorship, academic institutions and individual giving.

Furthermore, services report being overwhelmed by demand and unable to support everyone who needs help. Our Advice Saves Report 2024 found that 55% of services are not confident they can meet demand.[2] Without investment in this sector, many young people will remain unsupported, and the ambitions of any national strategy will be undermined.

To address these issues and ensure that the independent advice sector, essential infrastructure that supports vulnerable young people, is fully supported, we are calling on the Government to fund and lead a National Advice Workforce Strategy. The average agency has lost three staff or volunteers in the past year and needs three more advisers to meet demand.[3] Developing a workforce strategy would not only help give advice services the confidence and resources to continue delivering lifesaving support, but it would also develop a route into employment for skilled young people.

We also want to highlight the potential of the advice sector to support young people who are NEET into work. With the right investment and coordination in government, advice services could offer structured training, supported work placements, SWAPs and clear progression pathways, building on their experience working with young people facing complex barriers. This would both expand employment opportunities for young people and strengthen the long-term sustainability of the advice workforce.

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

Young people become NEET for a range of reasons, but several structural barriers consistently emerge from the experiences of our members. One of the most significant is poverty. Many young people are attempting to survive on benefit rates that fall well below the minimum income standard.

This is reflected clearly in AdvicePro data. Since April 2024, over 45,000 cases involving young people aged 16–25 have related to welfare and benefits issues, including more than 27,000 welfare rights cases, around 13,000 welfare benefits cases, and the remainder linked to Universal Credit. These figures highlight the scale of financial

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[1] AdviceUK Member Survey Report 2025.
[2] Advice Saves Report 2024.
[3] Advice Works Report 2025.

insecurity facing young people and the extent to which income support dominates their interactions with advice services. This level of financial precarity makes it significantly harder for young people to seek employment or engage in education and training, as they struggle to cover essential costs such as food, travel, and housing.

Another barrier is health. A significant proportion of young people who are NEET are living with mental health conditions, chronic illness, or disability, which directly limits their ability to engage in work or training. This is reflected in AdvicePro data, which shows that since 2024, 2,800 cases involving 1,767 young people aged 16–24 have been opened in relation to disability, long-term illness, mental health conditions, learning disabilities, or multiple impairments. Of these cases, nearly two-thirds (62%) relate to welfare benefits and welfare rights, underlining the extent to which young people with health conditions rely on income support to manage periods of ill health and limited capacity to work. This reflects not only the prevalence of health-related barriers, but also the central role the welfare system plays in providing stability for young people who are unable to work due to illness or disability.

Despite this, many young people continue to face significant challenges in accessing appropriate support. Long NHS waiting lists, lack of mental health provision, and the stigma attached to claiming benefits related to health conditions all contribute to isolation and inactivity. It is essential that the review acknowledges that not all young people can participate in the labour market, and that for some, stability, care and rest are necessary precursors to any future engagement.

The fragmentation of services is also limiting the potential of young people to enter work, education or training. Young people are often forced to navigate multiple agencies, DWP, housing services, colleges, health providers, without coordination or continuity. Those with complex needs fall through the gaps, repeating their stories without receiving joined-up support. Advice services frequently step in to fill this gap, but they cannot substitute for a properly integrated system. Many young people disengage altogether after negative experiences with services that appear punitive or indifferent. AdviceUK is calling for a National Advice Sector Strategy, modelled on the Welsh Government's Information Advice Sector Strategy, to ensure the services that vulnerable rely on are supported holistically.

Question 2) What would make the biggest difference to support more young people to participate?

As our Advice Works Report 2025 makes clear, the most significant step government can take is to fund advice services.[4] Advice services are on the frontline supporting young people and so understand their needs and concerns first-hand. By funding advice, government can ensure that young people who are NEET receive the best

[4] Ibid.

support possible. Our members tell us that some young people are ready and willing to engage in work or learning, but require help with housing, income, or health support first. Others are not ready and may not be for some time, if ever. In either case, the right response is not pressure or conditionality, but flexible, holistic support that meets people where they are.

Participation must be voluntary and supportive. Sanctions and rigid requirements do not address the real barriers to engagement. A compassionate system would enable young people to take steps at their own pace, without fear of financial penalty or navigating bureaucratic complexity. This means ensuring benefits are adequate and accessible, work is secure and inclusive, and training opportunities are aligned with individual needs and capacities. The Government has taken some positive steps in this space. For instance, reforming the disability scheme and the Keep Britain Working Review Vanguards may give disabled young people the confidence they can participate in inclusive workplaces. However, they need to be co-designed with disabled people.

Advice services are key to making this possible. They provide the practical support that enables young people to stabilise and take forward steps. AdviceUK urges the Government to embed advice provision within national and local youth strategies. For example, youth hubs and employment support programmes should include or partner with independent advice agencies. This would allow young people to receive holistic support in one place, not be bounced between siloed services.

For this to happen, the advice sector needs sustainable funding. Currently, many agencies rely on short-term project grants that limit their ability to plan, recruit or train staff. We recommend the establishment of a cross-government funding stream for advice services, with specific provision for youth-focused advice. This should include investment in workforce development, including training for advisers in trauma-informed practice and disability awareness, and the recruitment of young advisers with lived experience of the issues clients face.

Finally, government should work with the sector to improve integration between services. The aim should be to ensure that no young person falls through the cracks because services fail to communicate or coordinate.

Conclusion

Addressing youth economic inactivity requires more than employment programmes. It requires a systemic response to the realities that many young people face, such as poverty, health conditions and poor public sector support. If the government wants to reduce the number of young people who are NEET, it must invest in the advice infrastructure that makes participation possible. This means recognising advice agencies as essential, funding them sustainably, embedding them in service design and ensuring their expertise informs national policy.

If you would like to discuss our submission further, please contact willem.vandeven@adviceuk.org.uk.

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