THE CAREERS & ENTERPRISE COMPANY

Insight briefing:

Learner career readiness in 2024/25

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Foreword

Rylie Sweeney

Youth Board Member,
The Careers & Enterprise Company

As a young person, I know how powerful it feels when your voice is listened to. That's why I'm proud to introduce this year's Future Skills Questionnaire findings – the nation's largest annual study of career-readiness, with over 330,000 young people taking part. This scale means something important: young people across England are being heard, and together we are building a clearer picture than ever before of how ready we are for the future of work.

For me, this is personal. At school, I was at real risk of becoming NEET – Not in Education, Employment or Training. The choices available to me didn't reflect my interests or strengths, and I felt my options were closing before they'd even begun. Everything changed when I joined a University Technical College. Suddenly, the doors opened. I was offered meaningful work experiences and found the right pathway through an apprenticeship in construction. Those opportunities didn't just help me discover what I was capable of – they changed how I saw myself, and what my future could look like. That's why I'm passionate about keeping those doors open for the next generation.

This year's findings give us reasons to be encouraged. We can see that career readiness is improving as young people move through school, especially at the big transition points, which shows how important it is to start careers education early and keep building on it. It's also clear that our aspirations are lining up with the world of work — more of us are interested in sectors like health, construction, engineering, and digital, which are vital for the future. At the same time, we know that some groups of young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, still face barriers when it comes to confidence and skills. But the data also shows us where progress is uneven. Disadvantaged young people and those in the North East, where I'm from, are still being left behind. That gap needs to close – and it's a challenge for all of us.

If my story shows anything, it's that the right opportunities can transform lives. But transformation doesn't happen by accident. It takes commitment, collaboration, and a willingness to listen – really listen – to what young people say. The Future Skills Questionnaire is a powerful tool for that, not just because of the numbers it generates, but because it captures the real experiences, hopes, and challenges of hundreds of thousands of young people across the country.

So, as you read this year's results, I encourage you to see them not just as statistics, but as voices – our voices. They tell us where we're making progress, and where we need to act with renewed focus. Closing the gap for disadvantaged young people in every region is not just a responsibility, it's an opportunity: to unlock talent, to build stronger communities, and to give every young person the chance to take their best next step.

I believe that when young people are heard, supported, and given real opportunities, the future is brighter for all of us. That's the message at the heart of this report, and it's one I'll continue to champion – not just for my generation, but for the ones that follow.

Introduction

During the 2024/25 academic year, close to one third of a million learners from 1,425 schools across 44 Careers Hubs completed the Future Skills Questionnaire (FSQ).[1] This represents the largest ever dataset on learner career readiness and essential employability skills in England.

The FSQ was developed in partnership with young people, and young people have been consulted in developing this year's report. We would like to thank members of our Youth Advisory Group, and learners across the country for feeding into this report with their self-assessments, quotes, and case studies.

What began as an emerging tool is now firmly established in the mainstream of secondary education. Operating at scale, the FSQ is giving us unprecedented insight into the views of individual learners.

Through the survey, learners are asked questions about their awareness of the labour market, ability to seek guidance and plan next steps, and the knowledge and skills needed for transitions into further study or work. Those completing the mainstream version of the questionnaire are asked about the job/career and industry/sector they would like to work in.[2] They are then asked to self-assess against the eight essential employability skills, as defined by the Skills Builder Universal Framework.[3]

Aggregated across schools, specialist settings, alternative provision and sixth form colleges, the data offers important national insight, comparing results by education key stage, learner demographics, institution type and place. The 2024/25 sample covers 331,075 learners aged between 11 and 19, representing a range of backgrounds and regions across a variety of educational institutions. Over a quarter of responses came from Year 7 learners (26%), highlighting a promising focus on early intervention in careers education.

The continued growth in participation – over 42% more learners and 28% more institutions used the tool compared to 2023/24 – reflects increasing engagement of Careers Leaders with digital tools and data-driven practice. Almost half of participating schools (39%) were new to FSQ this year, demonstrating widening adoption and use across the system.

This briefing highlights what young people are telling us about their readiness for the future — insights that are sharper, more detailed, and more representative than ever before.

1 The FSQ, launched by The Careers & Enterprise Company in 2021, is a free self-assessment tool within Compass+ for state-funded schools, special schools and alternative provision across England. It tracks learners' career readiness at Key Stages, aligns with international benchmarks, and supports both school-level planning and system-wide evaluation.

2 As of the 2025/26 academic year, job/career and industry/sector questions will be available in the SEND questionnaire.

3 See Appendix 2.

Executive Summary

High-quality careers education depends on listening to young people. Nationally, the FSQ offers a unique insight into how prepared learners feel for their next steps. The results can be analysed by year group, gender, socio-economic background, ethnicity, and region. Locally, Careers Leaders use the findings to plan, target, and evaluate careers programmes in their settings. At a system level, the growing dataset is being used to monitor gaps in career readiness, track alignment with emerging labour market needs, triangulate findings with institutions and employers, and inform policy on how to equip young people with the skills they will need to adapt and thrive in the changing future economy.

In 2024/25, 331,075 learners from 1,425 institutions across 44 Careers Hubs completed the FSQ – the largest dataset of its kind in England. Participation has grown significantly, with 42% more learners and 28% more institutions compared to 2023/24, showing growing demand for learner feedback in developing careers programmes.

What do we mean by career readiness?

The FSQ is a survey taken at key transition points during secondary education that measures learners' career readiness - how well young people understand the world of work and how prepared they feel for their next step. The FSQ brings together three components: Career Knowledge and Skills, Essential Skills and Industry and Career interests.

Career readiness involves understanding available pathways, recognising and articulating skills, and having the confidence and knowledge to navigate an evolving labour market. Through the FSQ, learners reflect on their aspirations, confidence in decision-making, and awareness of the world of work beyond their immediate networks – for example, hearing from people in different jobs and learning about local employers and sectors. They consider how to access these opportunities, whether through A-levels, an apprenticeship, a T-level or another vocational route, and how to identify and develop the skills employers need.

Fig. 1: Structure and content of the Future Skills Questionnaire

Part 1: Career Knowledge and Skills

Between 17-23 Key Stage-related questions on knowledge of local labour market, jobs and employers, pathways, networks, confidence, plans and skills relating to transition after school

Part 2: Industry and Careers Interest

Optional question to select industries and jobs the learner is interested in, using standard categories to allow for analysis

Part 3: Essential Skills for Work and Life

Self-assessment against the 8 essential workplace skills for each age stage: speaking, listening, teamwork, leadership, problem solving, creativity, planning and adapting (maps to the Skills Builder Universal Framework)

Career readiness = positive responses to Part 1 questions, as a % of total responses to Part 1 questions

The headlines in numbers

331k Learners from 1,425 institutions in 44 Careers Hubs completed the FSQ in 2024/25 academic year

83% Learners in Year 11 have thought about which pathway might be right for them

82% Learners in Year 11 have a plan for their next step

79% Learners in Year 11 know what skills employers need, (64% in Year 7)

x2 Learners in Year 11 nearly twice as likely to understand apprenticeships compared to learners in Year 7 (almost on a par with A-levels [79% vs 83%])

68% Average career readiness (positive responses across questions) for Year 11 learners (level with 2023/24)

12%pts Young people show the strongest growth in Creativity (+12%pts) and Problem Solving (+6%pts) skills between Year 7 and 11

11%pts Year 11 White working-class (FSM) boys score themselves 11%pts lower on Problem Solving skills than non-FSM white boys

16%pts Difference between male (19%) and female (3%) interest in a career in Construction

IS-8 Young people show strong interest in careers related to Industrial Strategy 8 sectors, including in Health, Digital, Engineering, Construction and Creative

26% Over ¼ of responses came from Year 7 learners, showing an ongoing focus on early identification and intervention in careers education

The insights from this year's analysis cover 3 themes:

The case for starting early with careers education

The opportunity to boost alignment with the labour market and place

The need for targeted, sustained support for key groups of learners

Theme 1: The case for starting early with careers education

Career readiness improves with age…

- Career readiness improves from 49% in Y7 to 68% in Y11; the biggest jumps are at key transition points.
- Learners with SEND in specialist settings show higher initial career readiness than their peers in mainstream settings but experience a dip at Year 12.

Teamwork and Listening dip after Year 7…

- Using the new Skills Builder Framework categories, we can see that Teamwork (-14%pts) and Listening (-7%pts) decline during Years 8/9 and never recover to KS3 levels.

Reinforcing the case for early intervention both at primary level and in KS3 …

- Starting careers education early broadens horizons, reduces stereotypes and builds essential skills.
- The new approach to modern work experience being rolled out across the careers system starts early in Key Stage 3 and prioritises young people who are missing out.

Theme 2: The opportunity to boost alignment with the labour market and place

Learners show strong interest in key Industrial Strategy sectors and are making aligned subject choices …

- The most popular careers by Y11 align with national priorities: Health, Construction, Engineering, Digital and Creative are all in the top 10 most popular sectors.
- More young people are choosing STEM-related A-Level subjects, such as Further Maths, Maths and Physics.

Essential employability skill development and pathway understanding varies by learner sector interest …

- Young people interested in a career in Health have well-developed essential skills across the board
- Those interested in Engineering, Creative and Construction careers lag in developing teamwork, leadership and communication skills.

Interest in professional and high-status roles varies by region …

- London learners report stronger interest in professional and high-status roles (e.g. finance, law, doctor, creative), while peers in the North East are more likely to aspire to engineering, trades and vocational pathways.
- Year 11 learners in the North East show lower confidence in creativity, listening and adapting than London peers.

Theme 3: The need for targeted, sustained support for key groups of learners

Despite improved provision, disadvantage continues to limit essential skill development…

- FSM learners score lower across all essential skills scores than their non-FSM peers. The gap narrows progressively across year groups, reaching its smallest point in Year 12.
- Girls achieve higher essential skills scores than boys; this is similarly true for FSM girls as compared with FSM boys.

Intersectional disadvantage shapes gaps in career readiness and skills…

- White working-class pupils show lower career readiness and essential skills than their peers, with profound gender gaps.
- Black and Pakistani learners show stronger pathway understanding but those eligible for FSM report lower confidence in their next steps.

Early identification and targeted support strengthen transitions into education, employment and training …

- CEC's ongoing work to identify and mitigate the risk of young people becoming NEET is having an impact.
- Last year, nearly 6,000 young people avoided becoming NEET post-18 as a result of work in schools to drive up standards in careers education, saving the Treasury £300m in return on investment each year.

Theme 1: The case for starting early with careers education

Early intervention builds lasting foundations for career readiness and essential skills, helping all learners prepare for key transition points

Career readiness improves with age…

Career readiness involves understanding available pathways, recognising and articulating skills, and having the confidence and knowledge to navigate a changing labour market. Through the FSQ, learners reflect on their aspirations, confidence in decision-making, and awareness of the world of work beyond their immediate networks.

By Year 11, 81% of learners say they have heard from people in different careers beyond their family or carers, compared with 68% in Year 7. Over the same time at school, awareness of local employers increases from 51% to 64%.

Learners also consider how to access opportunities through a range of pathways – understanding of apprenticeships grows sharply from 38% in Year 7 to 79% in Year 11, and awareness of T-levels increases from 11% to 46%. Knowledge of the skills employers need improves from 64% to 79%, and young people's optimism when thinking about their future career increases from 63% to 68% over the same period. By Year 11, 61% feel confident talking about their skills in an interview.

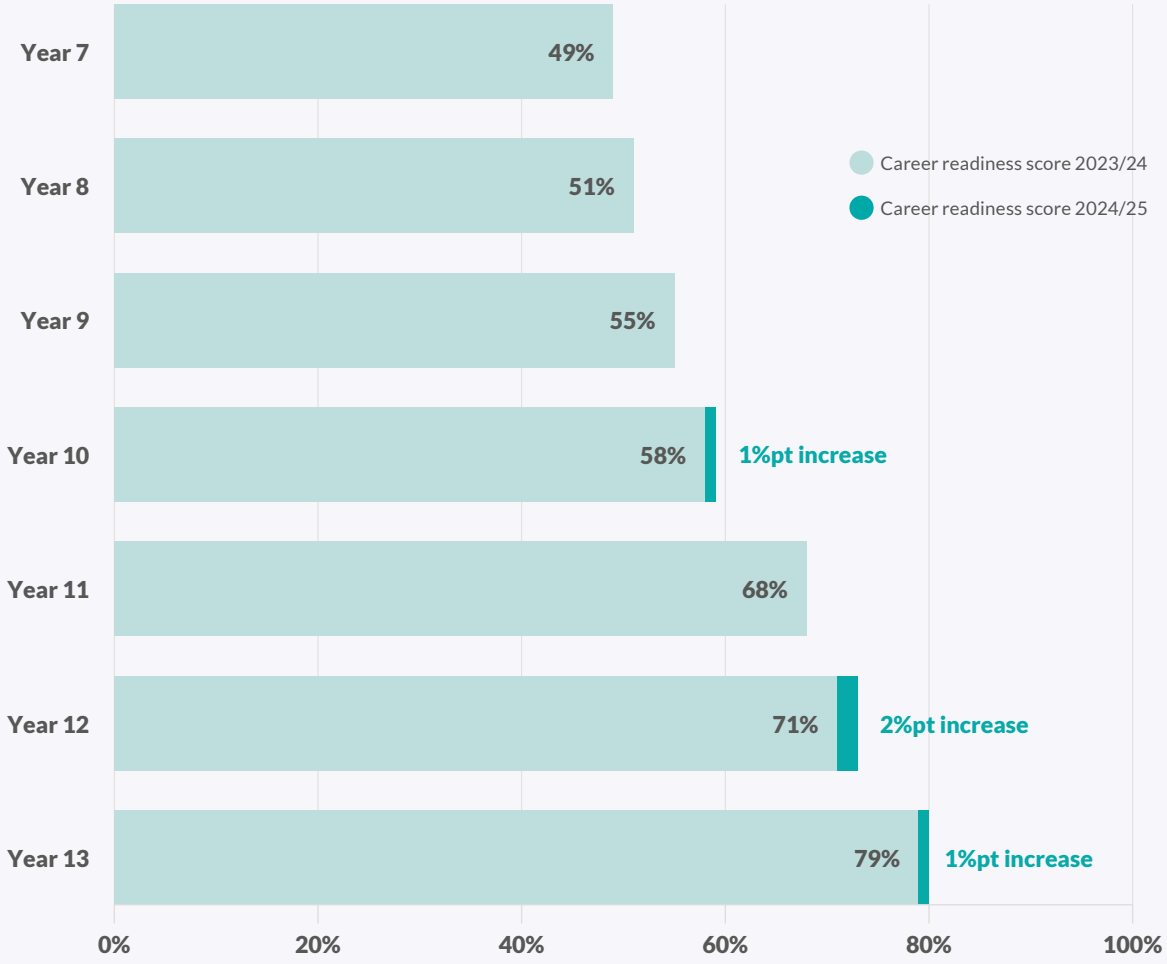
Taken together as an indicator of career readiness, the data shows that young people feel more career ready through their school journey, increasing from 49% in Year 7 to 68% by Year 11 on average, with the biggest increases occurring at key transition points. For context, the OECD[5] reports that 53% of teenagers in the United Kingdom feel well-prepared for their future path after compulsory education, compared with 40% of teenagers from Korea and 43% from Germany.

Despite an increase of 90,000 learner responses over last year, learner career readiness scores remained broadly consistent with 2023/24 academic year, with an encouraging 1%pt increase for Year 10, 2%pts for Year 12 and 1%pt for Year 13. Like last year, the largest increase is seen at Year 11 (+9%pts), as learners transition to post-16 destinations (Fig. 2).

5 OECD (2025). Teenage Career Readiness. Online, available at: OECD, Teenage Career Readiness.

Fig. 2: Career readiness scores for learners completing the mainstream FSQ improve across their school journey, and are slightly higher than last year in Years 10, 12 and 13

Average career readiness score, calculated as the average % of questions learners responded positively to



Source: Futures Skills Questionnaire data, end of July 2025 (N=331,075)

The SEND version of the Future Skills Questionnaire was designed for learners with Special Educational Needs in SEND Group 1 (those who typically will not take Level 2 Qualifications / GCSEs). The group who respond may encompass a diverse range of learners with varied learning needs.[7] Unlike the mainstream versions of the questionnaire, the SEND version is not tailored to key stage.

Learners with a Special Educational Needs (SEN) diagnosis completing the SEND version of the questionnaire begin Year 7 with a comparatively high level of career readiness[8] (53%), increasing to 63% by Year 11. By contrast, SEN learners completing the mainstream version of the questionnaire begin Year 7 with a comparatively lower level of career readiness (47%) but converging by Year 11 at 64% (Fig. 3). Notably, in Year 12, SEN learners completing the SEND survey experience a drop in career readiness (-2%pts to 61%), suggesting that the transition to post-16 education is a critical pressure point for those in specialist settings.

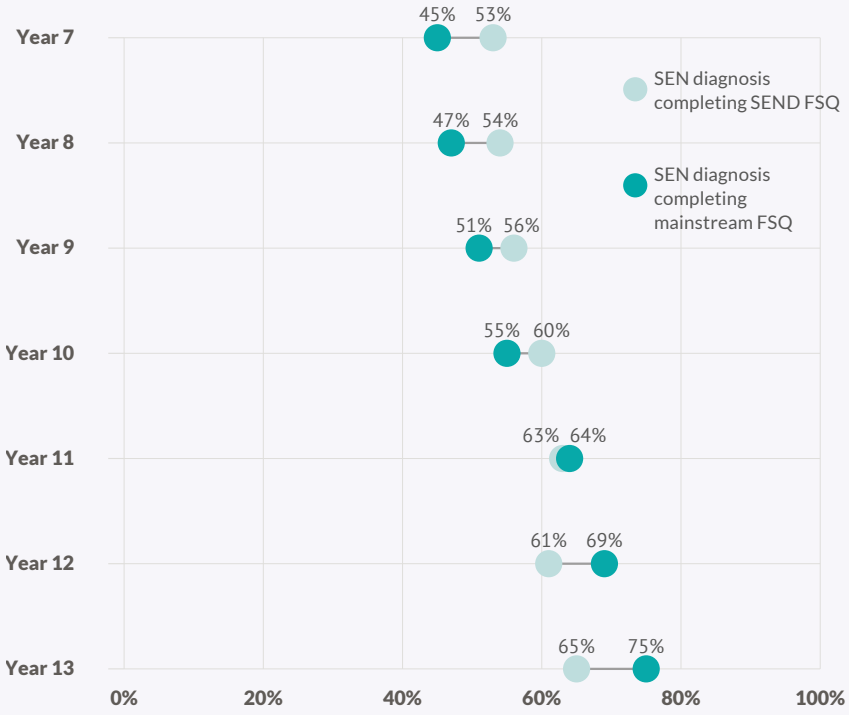
Ensuring inclusivity in the evidence base is crucial … it challenges the idea that careers education is "one size fits all" … and recognises that young people approach careers in different ways.

By representing more SEND learners, the dataset enables Career Leaders … to tailor provision to a wider range of needs. This not only levels the playing field but also moves away from a default neurotypical, able-bodied model of careers education … making careers learning more accessible for SEND learners and helping build their confidence in preparing for the world of work.

Layla, Youth Advisory Group Member

Fig. 3: Learners with SENs' career readiness scores improve across their school journey. Those completing the SEND-specific questionnaire score higher than those with a SEN diagnosis completing the mainstream version up to Year 10

Average career readiness score calculated as the average % of questions learners responded positively to



Source: Futures Skills Questionnaire data, end of July 2025 (SEN learners completing the SEND version of the FSQ, N=6,907; SEN learners completing the mainstream version of the FSQ, N=42,193)

7 Learners with a Special Educational Needs (SEN) diagnosis in Group 2 (expected to complete GCSEs) are able to complete the Mainstream version of the questionnaire. Guidance is available online at: Future Skills Questionnaire for learners with SEND – The Careers & Enterprise Company.

8 In the context of the SEND questionnaire, 'career readiness' represents a shorthand for career knowledge and skills and pathways awareness of young people who would typically be part of SEND Group 1 (those who typically will not take Level 2 Qualifications / GCSEs).

… but essential skills, particularly Teamwork and Listening, dip after Year 7…

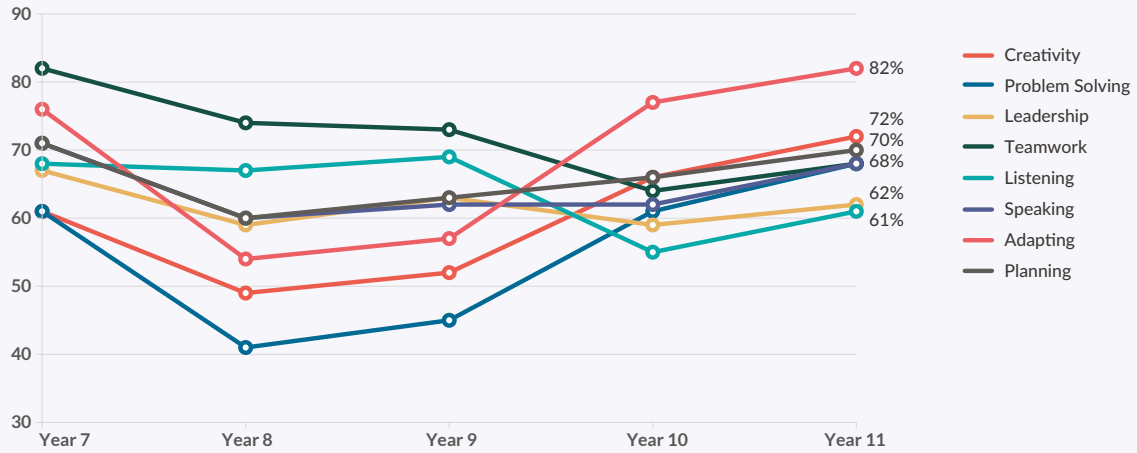
Young people's essential skills typically dip on starting secondary and then improve by the transition to post-16. Creativity and Problem Solving show the strongest growth between Years 7 and 11 (improving by 12%pts and 6%pts respectively), reflecting the expected development in higher-order cognitive skills.

By contrast, Leadership, Speaking, Adapting and Planning do recover to KS3 levels, though more modestly. Both Teamwork (-14%pts) and Listening (-7%pts) decline after Year 7 and fail to return to KS3 levels (Fig. 4).

This year's results are broadly consistent with last year, showing a dip in essential skills during the early years of secondary, with most recovering by Year 11. Creativity and Problem Solving again show the strongest gains by the end of KS4, while Teamwork and Listening remain weaker areas that do not return to Year 7 levels. Overall, the year-on-year picture is stable, with only small shifts in the balance of gains and losses across different skills.

Fig. 4: Proportion of learners meeting the expected age-based skill level typically dips after Year 7 and rises by Year 11, particularly on skills relating to Creativity, Problem Solving and Adapting

Essential skills score is calculated as the % of the questions learners responded positively to



Source: Futures Skills Questionnaire data, end of July 2025 (SEN learners completing the SEND version of the FSQ, N=6,907; SEN learners completing the mainstream version of the FSQ, N=42,193)

Research shows that demand for transferrable workplace skills – especially collaboration, communication, and adaptability is increasing.[9] If young people are not supported early in their journey to develop these skills throughout secondary education, they will be less ready to take key decisions (such as subject option choices) and transition to their next steps. Similar to last year, the dip in essential skills is a concern, especially in relation to communcation and collaboration skills. This persistent trend may reflect shifts in young people's understanding of what skill achievement involves, alongside changes in self-awareness, confidence, and actual skill development as they mature.

Reinforcing the case for early intervention both at primary level and in KS3

Taken together, the relatively lower career readiness of learners before Year 11 and the dip in essential skills in early secondary both make a case for early intervention. Starting careers education early builds stronger foundations – broadening horizons, reducing stereotypes and embedding essential skills, meaning learners enter secondary school more confident and prepared for their next steps.

Evidence from the Start Small; Dream Big primary careers pilot demonstrates the transformative impact of embedding careers education from the earliest stages of schooling. Pupils' career horizons broadened, awareness of jobs beyond family increased by 8%, and interest in sectors such as business and construction rose markedly, while gender stereotypes narrowed.

The new approach to modern work experience (equalex) being rolled out across the careers system starts early in Key Stage 3 and prioritises young people who are missing out. This is underpinned by the government's vision for two weeks' worth of work experience, to include the equivalent of 5 days in Key Stage 3. In line with the equalex framework, work experience programmes should include experiences that are informed by the expressed interests of young people, and should be underpinned by learning outcomes, to ensure a progressive, high-quality approach. The FSQ offers a standardised way for Careers Leaders to track both interests and learning outcomes over time.

9 NFER (2023). An analysis of the demand for skills in the labour market in 2035: Working Paper 3. Online, available at: The Skills Imperative 2035: An analysis of the demand for skills in the labour market in 2035 | NFER and Nuffield Foundation.

Theme 2: The opportunity to boost alignment with labour market and place

Young people's aspirations increasingly align with labour market needs such as health, construction and digital, but essential skills gaps and regional differences show where support is needed

Learners show strong interest in key Industrial Strategy sectors and are making aligned subject choices

As young people progress through secondary education, they make more Industrial Strategy (IS-8) sector -aligned choices[10], showing greater connection with the labour market and local and national needs. For the first time this year, we asked young people about both the industry and occupation they are interested in, to understand motivation and broaden perception and horizons.

By Year 11 learners' interests align closely with national priorities, including careers in Health (16% reporting interest), Construction (11%), Engineering (16%), Digital (9%) and Creative (20%), all linked to IS-8 sectors.

Encouragingly, subject choices are beginning to reflect this demand: A-level entries in STEM subjects have grown overall, with Further Mathematics up by 7.2%, Mathematics by 4.4% and Physics by 4.3% in 2025 compared to the previous year. Since 2017, overall STEM entries have risen by more than 21%.

Evidence also highlights the importance of GCSE pathways: learners taking Triple Science are nearly four times more likely to continue with science post-16 than those on the Double Science route, with particularly strong effects for Physics, Chemistry, and Biology.

However, access and opportunity remain uneven. Regional differences in industry interests highlight the importance of a place-based strategy to strengthen progression routes into IS-8 sectors. Gender gaps persist within sectors: for example, 19% of boys and 3% of girls state an interest in construction. Ensuring equitable access to a range of subject choices, including Triple Science, alongside targeted development of essential skills, will be critical to realising the full potential of young people's aspirations. Without this, the growing alignment between learner interests and labour market needs risks being undermined by structural barriers.

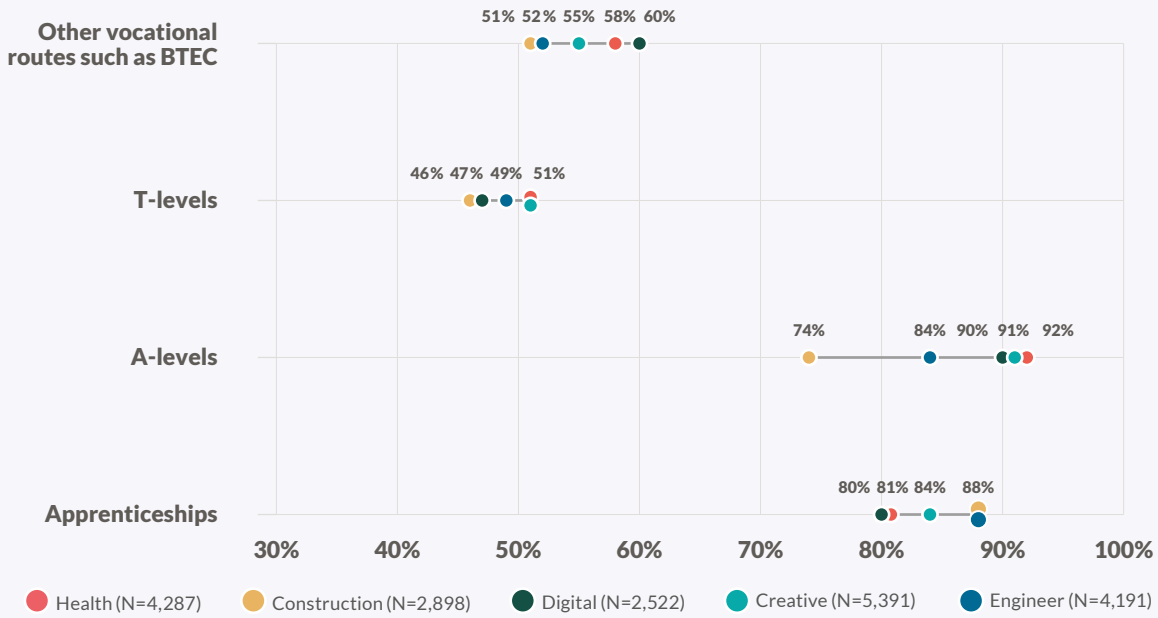
10 Department for Business & Trade (2025). The UK's Modern Industrial Strategy. Online, available at: Policy paper - Industrial Strategy,

Essential employability skill development and pathway understanding varies by learner sector interest…

Across five priority sectors (Construction, Health, Engineering, Digital and Creative among the IS-8 sectors)[10], learner aspirations show strong alignment with labour market needs — but progression routes and skill development vary. Those interested in Construction and Engineering careers are more apprenticeship-focused but have less well-developed broader pathway awareness and essential skills. Those interested in Health careers have higher all-round essential skills and strong A-level/T-level awareness, though career choices remain concentrated on frontline roles (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5: Pathway understanding by interest in sector or career

% of learners reporting understanding of each pathway by the sector or career in which they are interested, Year 11

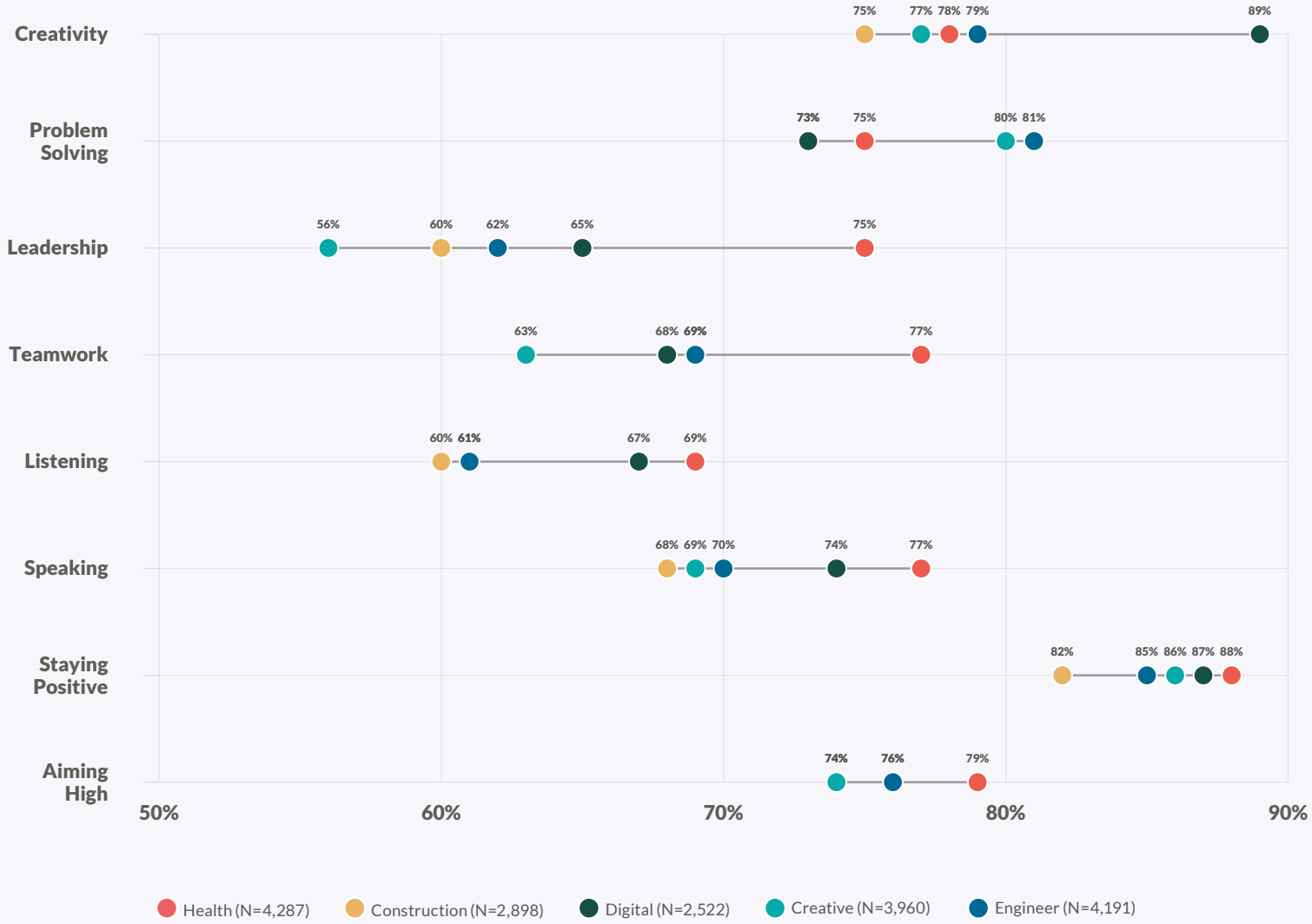


Source: Future Skills Questionnaire data, end of July 2025 (Year 11, interested in 5 key IS-8 sectors, N=14,974)

Those interested in Digital and Creative careers demonstrate sector-specific skill strengths (problem solving, creativity) but are less confident in collaboration and teamwork, with gender gaps most pronounced in team-based and human-facing essential skills (Fig. 6). This suggests that, while aspirations are moving in line with labour market needs, additional support is needed to ensure young people build the rounded skillsets employers need.

Fig. 6: Essential skills by interest in sector or career

% of learners reporting proficiency in each essential skill by the sector or career in which they are interested, Year 11



Source: Future Skills Questionnaire data, end of July 2025 (Year 11, interested in 5 key IS-8 sectors, N=17,858)

Isobel,
Youth Advisory Group member

When I examine this year's insights from 330,000 young people on career readiness, a few things really stand out to me. Interest in construction and manufacturing is encouragingly high. Among those of us who are drawn to construction, understanding of apprenticeships is also strong – I find this really encouraging, as I was not aware of all of the types of apprenticeships available until I started applying!

The data also shows the challenges. The lack of diversity in construction is striking – 19% of boys are interested compared with just 3% of girls. That imbalance, alongside the skills gaps across large parts of the industry, often comes down to a shallow understanding of the range of roles available. There is a long-standing stereotype of construction, one that I might not necessarily fit, but there are pathways into everything from management trainee roles like mine to high-demand occupations like software developers, carpenters and joiners. The skills and opportunities are wide-reaching, but many young people don't see that full picture.

Another challenge is skills. The data shows that young people interested in construction often present less well-developed essential skills than their peers in other industries. A lot of young people are taught essential skills in a classroom environment, through a presentation, rather than through applying and developing the skill in a practical application. At school, I was motivated to pursue an apprenticeship, but turning that interest into real opportunities was daunting with limited guidance. Applying for apprenticeships can feel like a minefield, with schools often unable to give the same level of support you might get for university applications. Without more consistency and guidance, many young people struggle to take the next step.

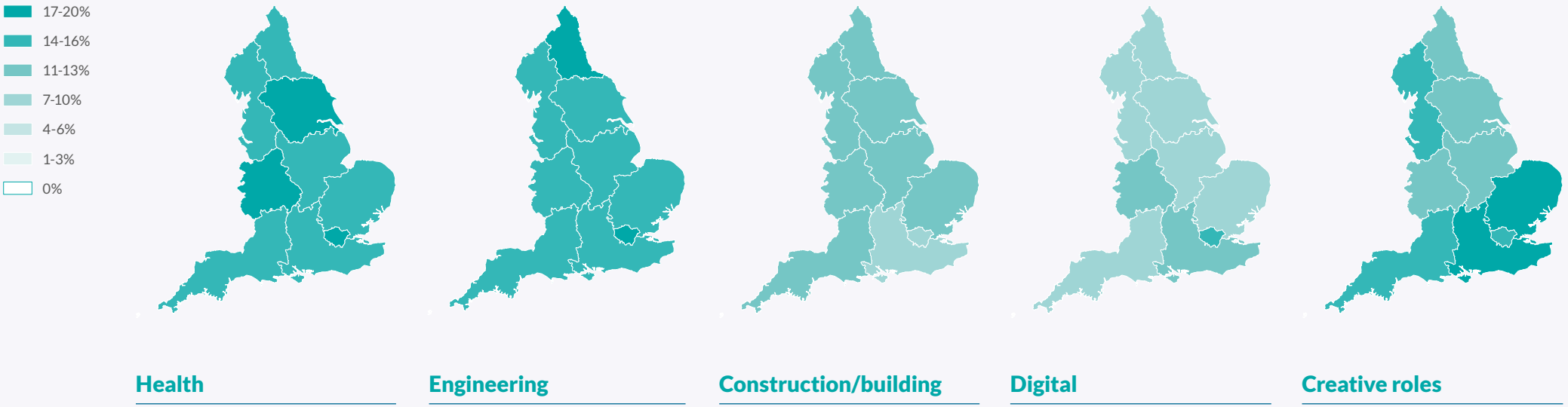
That's why I'm passionate about what I do now at Ibstock PLC, working closely with the Leicester and Leicestershire Careers Hub and schools local to me in Sussex. I spend time in schools raising awareness of the sector, delivering innovative workplace experiences that help young people explore pathways they may never have considered, and even linking curriculum learning to real-world examples – like setting ecological projects for GCSE geography learners. By putting skills development into context, we can help young people see where their ambitions might take them.

Done well, this kind of engagement has the power to make a difference. If every young person is equipped with the skills, confidence and knowledge to pursue the career they would like, then we will not only meet the needs of our industries, but we will provide opportunities for thousands of young people to thrive.

Interest in professional and high-status roles varies by region

Fig. 7: Learner interest in key industrial strategy sectors varies by region

% young people in Year 11 interested in each industry, by region



Source: Future Skills Questionnaire data, end of July 2025 (Year 11, interested in 5 key IS-8 sectors, N=17,858)

Interest in IS-8 sectors varies considerably by region (Fig. 7). Two of the bottom five constituencies in the Sutton Trust's Opportunity Index are in the North East of England (Cramlington and Killingworth and Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West). While 18% of learners eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) from London are in the top 20% of earners at age 28, only 7% of FSM learners from the North East are. Earnings at age 28 for young people in Cramlington and Newcastle average £15,094.50, and sustained employment at age 28 is 49.5%.

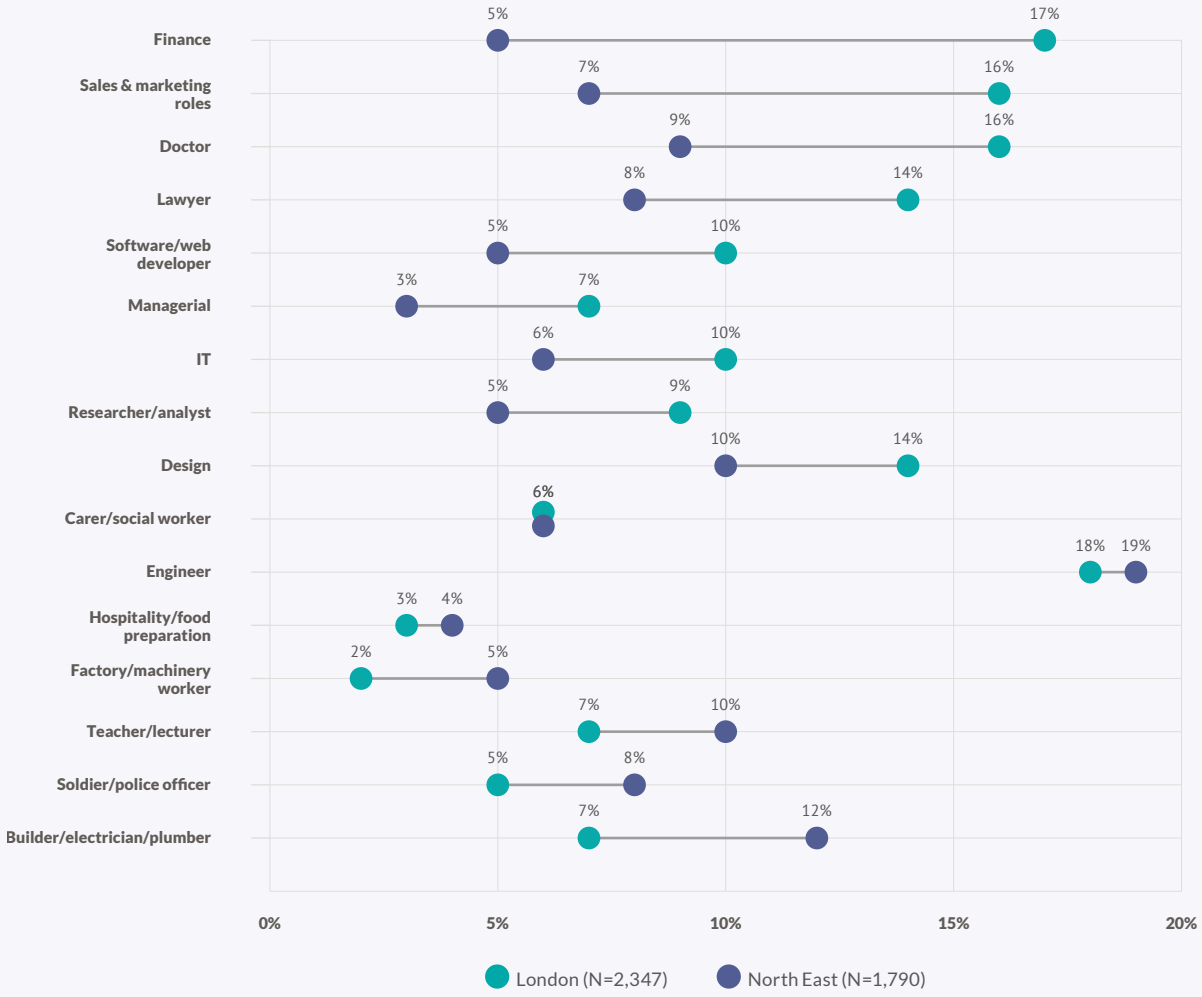
Our data show that Year 11 learners in the North East are less confident than their peers nationally in their skills relating to adapting (-4%pts), listening (-3%pts) and creativity (-3%pts). These young people are considerably less likely to understand A-levels (-8%pts), but more likely to understand apprenticeships (+3%pts).

Year 11 learners in the North East show stronger interest in engineering (+1%pt), building (+5%pts), and other practical or vocational pathways compared to their peers in London, who are more likely to aspire to roles such as finance (+12%pts), sales and marketing (+9%pts), and professions such as law (+4%pts) and doctor (16%) (Fig. 8).

These regional differences potentially reflect the influence of local labour markets and opportunity structures. Such disparities risk reinforcing regional inequalities, shaping the kinds of careers young people see as realistic and limiting aspiration and social mobility. Both identifying and understanding gaps like these gaps to inform targeted employer engagement is vital for ensuring that career aspirations align with individual potential and future workforce needs.

Fig. 8: Learner career aspirations differ between London and the North East, particularly in relation to professions and commercial roles

% of learners indicating interest in each role in London and the North East, Year 11



Source: Futures Skills Questionnaire data, end of July 2025 (Year 11, London N=2,347; North East, N=1,790)

High-quality careers provision in the North East is playing a critical role in supporting equitable outcomes for all young people. The North East Careers Hub has prioritised targeted interventions for disadvantaged and SEND cohorts, employing a dedicated staff member to lead this work. Through the JP Morgan Chase Foundation-funded Effective Transitions Fund, the Hub has supported SEND institutions and young people with EHCPs, while follow on funding from the DfE engaged 135 Year 11 learners from harder-to-reach groups with tailored transition support—resulting in 86% reporting greater confidence about their futures. Complementary work with SENCOs and professionals has enhanced capacity through CPD, including training to deliver tools such as the Buzz Careers Quiz.

To further extend its reach, the Hub has developed innovative outreach initiatives to engage those furthest from the labour market. The Youth Justice Service Mentoring Programme, delivered in partnership with South Tyneside Council, supported young people involved with the Youth Justice System or disengaged from mainstream education. By providing mentorship, individualised careers advice, and work experience opportunities, the project successfully challenged stigma, legitimised access to professional spaces, and offered sustained, person-centred support that met neurodiverse needs and rebuilt trust in systems of opportunity.

Theme 3: Need for targeted, sustained support for key groups of learners

Economically disadvantaged young people rate their essential skills and career readiness lower than their peers, but targeted, sustained careers provision helps narrow these gaps over time

Despite improved provision, early disadvantage continues to limit essential skill development…

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds face more limited life chances throughout their lives. This starts from early years, where they are already behind their more advantaged peers in terms of development upon school entry, and then throughout their schooling experiences, where gaps widen, particularly at secondary school.

Careers provision in schools serving the most disadvantaged young people has improved significantly, with average quality of careers provision on a par with the average mainstream school (6 Gatsby Benchmarks fully achieved). Learners in schools achieving more benchmarks progress faster in their career readiness and essential skills over time.

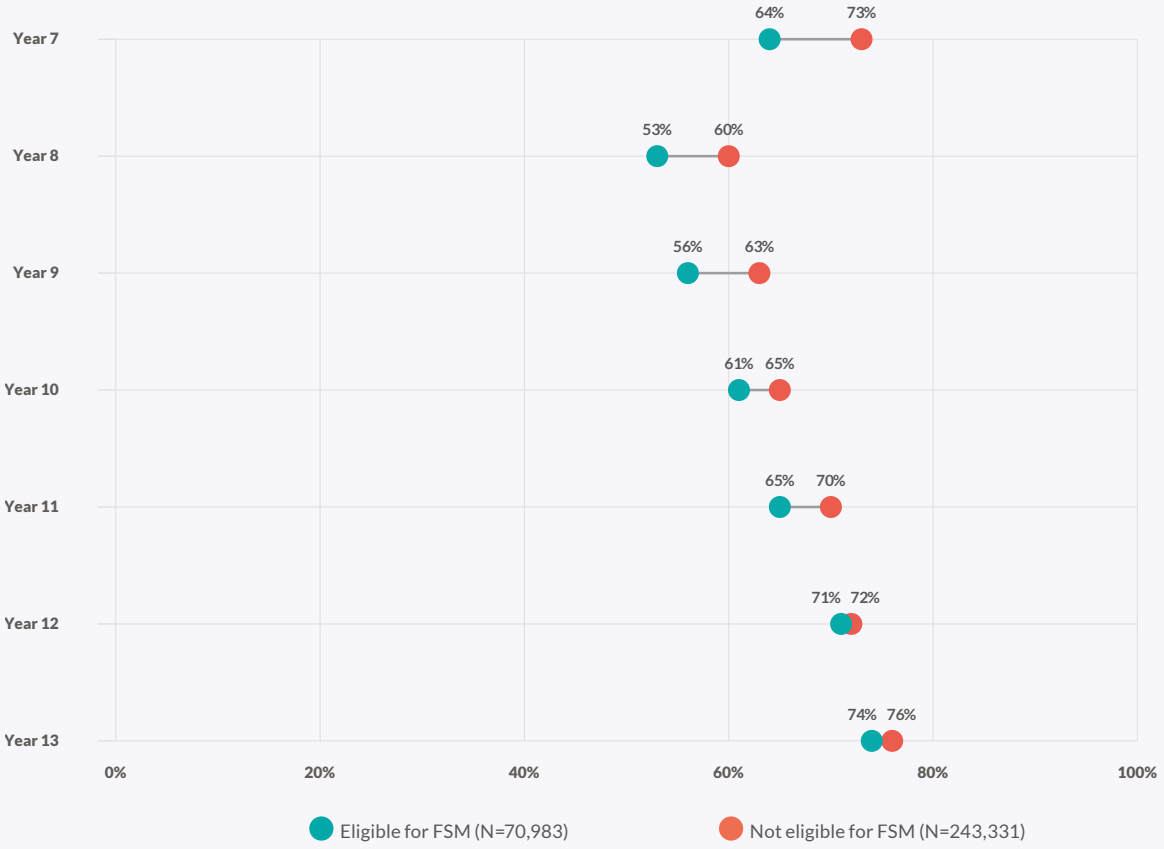
However, learners eligible for FSM consistently report lower career readiness and essential skill development. This suggests that improving provision alone is not enough to close disadvantage gaps. Other factors (local economy, family resources, social capital, networks, confidence, opportunity to practise skills) continue to influence how young people benefit from provision.

FSM learners are behind their peers in all essential skills. They consistently report lower confidence in skills such as speaking, listening and teamwork than their non-FSM peers, with the gap evident from Year 7 and persisting throughout secondary school (Fig. 9). While all learners show steady improvement over time, the disadvantage gap narrows only modestly, reducing in Years 12 and 13 (based on data for sixth form learners only). This pattern highlights the enduring challenges faced by disadvantaged learners in developing skills that are critical for progression into further education, employment and training. It also shows the importance of sustained, targeted interventions to build essential skills equity across all groups and prevent early gaps from crystallising into long-term inequalities in opportunity.

Together, the data highlights the need for targeted action: to broaden pathway understanding, strengthen team-based and human-facing essential skills for work and life, and tackle equity and stereotyping challenges relating to gender and disadvantage.

Fig. 9: FSM learners' essential skills scores remain consistently lower than non-FSM learners across Years 7 - 13

The essential skills score is calculated as the % of the questions learners responded positively to

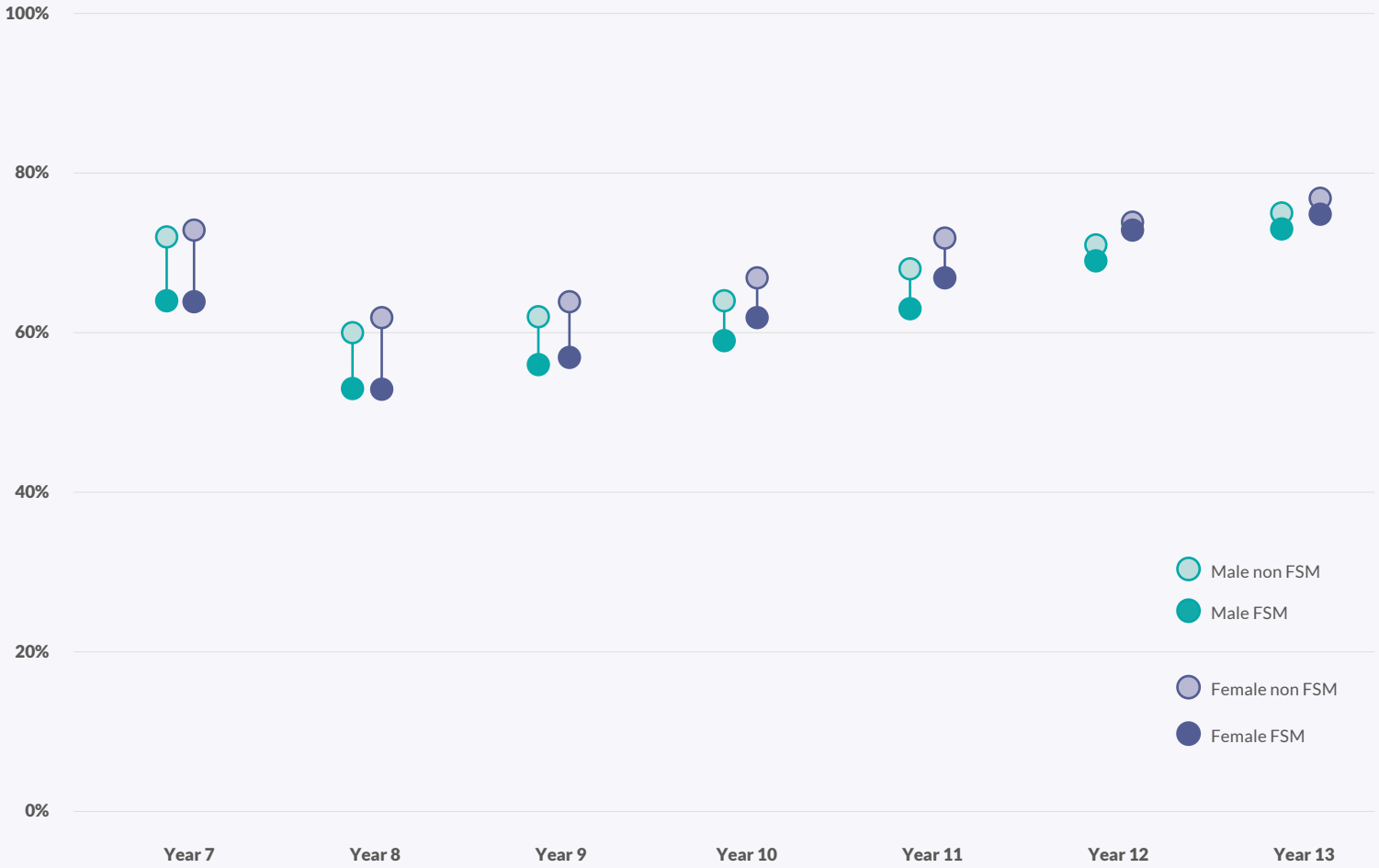


Source: Futures Skills Questionnaire data, end of July 2025 (Years 7-13, N=322,892)

Girls from all backgrounds consistently achieve higher essential skills scores than boys. In the early years of secondary education, FSM girls and boys perform at similar levels, but from Year 9 onwards, FSM girls begin to pull ahead, maintaining a lead of between 1 and 4%pts through to Year 13 (Fig. 10). This mirrors the gender gap seen in the wider learner population, with female learners reporting stronger development in areas such as communication, collaboration, and self-management. The findings highlight the importance of considering both disadvantage and gender when designing skills interventions, as girls appear to benefit differently from the same careers provision over time.

Fig. 10: Among FSM learners, girls "rate their essential skills similarly to boys in Years 7-8 and then pull ahead from Year 9 onwards"

The essential skills score is calculated as the % of the questions learners responded positively to



Source: Futures Skills Questionnaire data, end of July 2025 (N=331,075)

Intersectional disadvantage shapes gaps in career readiness and skills...

Analysis of almost a third of a million learners enables more targeted insight than before into how different groups experience careers education. Clear patterns emerge across gender, FSM status, and ethnicity, showing the barriers faced by learners from different backgrounds. For example, Year 11, 56% of girls from all backgrounds feel confident speaking about their skills in an interview compared with 66% of all boys.

White working-class learners[11] report lower career readiness in general compared to their non-working-class peers, beginning at lower levels in Year 7 (46%, -4%pts), with the gap growing to 5%pts by Year 11 (64%) with the gap growing by year 11 (64%, -5%pts). Within this group, there are clear gender differences on specific questions: White working-class boys are less likely to understand A-levels (68% compared with 81% for non-working-class White boys), while White working-class girls report lower confidence in speaking about their skills in interviews (52% vs 67% of non-working-class White boys), and are less likely to be confident in their next step after Year 11 (56% compared with 72% for non-working-class White boys). Both White working-class girls and boys are also less likely to know about recruitment processes (48% and 52% respectively compared with 60% of non-working-class White boys).

White working-class learners on average report lower confidence across all eight essential skills. In particular, they are 9%pts less likely to report confidence in Problem Solving and Creativity than their non-working-class White peers.

These gaps mirror what school leaders describe as "hidden disadvantage". White working-class girls often go under the radar: their underperformance is overshadowed by the more visible difficulties of boys, and their disengagement can be masked by compliance. Schools report that gender expectations at home, hidden caring responsibilities, and pressures from social media further compound their challenges. White working-class pupils are often marginalised within school and career-support structures and engage later and less decisively with higher education choices, frequently perceiving university as riskier and less economically valuable. These early disadvantages carry through into the labour market, where White working-class boys are 20% less likely to secure places on graduate programmes compared to peers from professional backgrounds, even with similar qualifications.

Other groups also face challenges. Black and Pakistani learners show relatively strong understanding of A-levels (84% for Black learners, 85% for Pakistani learners, compared with 83% for all learners). However, confidence in next steps is weaker for disadvantaged learners from these backgrounds: 57% of Black FSM learners and 61% of Pakistani FSM learners report being confident in their next step after Year 11, compared with 66% overall.

Faris, Youth Advisory Group member

Throughout my time in secondary education and sixth form, I was lucky enough to have an extremely high standard of careers education - one of the main reasons I have made it into a highly competitive apprenticeship, in a career that I love.

Getting inside knowledge into industry through work placements, employer encounters, or just simple site/office visits have been essential for my success. These not only looked appealing to employers on my CV but at the same time, opened my eyes to a large variety of career options and next steps, post-sixth form/college.

Constant interactions with potential employers within my industry kept me focused on my goals.

Prior to that careers support, I often misbehaved and fell behind in lessons. However, having constant interactions with potential employers within the industry kept me focused on my goals and allowed me to visualise what I was working for and to stay motivated with my learning. My experience taught me it's easy to say what path you want to go down, but without that consistency of interactive support, it's just as easy to lose motivation because they don't actually see that path.

11 White working-class has been defined by the Education Committee as White British pupils eligible for Free School Meals. The Department for Education publishes statistics with FSM-eligibility, and eligibility for the pupil premium, as criteria to measure the progress of disadvantaged children. Using FSM-eligibility is a proxy to address questions of working-class access and outcomes, given the availability and longevity of the data for CEC.

As previously reported, gender gaps pervade ethnicities and FSM status, with girls often reporting lower confidence in interviews while boys tend to be less clear on planning next steps. Interventions tailored to specific disadvantaged groups – particularly those facing compound disadvantage such as disability and ethnic minority background – are more effective in improving access to education and employment. Targeted interventions can help close these gaps: for example, Liverpool City Region's Effective Transitions Fund project paired disengaged White working-class boys at risk of NEET with mentors, who provided resilience training, employer connections, and positive role models. The programme boosted confidence and decision-making, enabling participants to adapt and commit to more appropriate post-16 destinations.

Early identification and targeted support strengthen transitions into education, employment and training

Stronger careers provision, measured through the Gatsby Benchmarks, is linked to better post-16 and post-18 destinations, preventing thousands of young people from falling out of education, employment or training. Updated analysis by the CEC shows that improvements in careers education over the past decade are delivering significant fiscal and social returns, saving the Treasury an estimated £300 million each year[12] by reducing the number of young people becoming NEET alone. In 2024/25, nearly 6,000 young people avoided NEET status thanks to improved provisions. These savings are in addition to the more informed choices and increased life chances that all learners have access to. High-quality careers education is not a peripheral add-on but a frontline investment. It improves life chances for disadvantaged learners, strengthens transitions into employment and training, and delivers long-term savings to the public purse.

Building on system-wide improvements, CEC has launched a Risk of NEET indicator (RONI) tool. Through using the existing data infrastructure, secondary schools are able to identify learners most at risk of disengagement earlier, ensuring earlier intervention and deeper support where needed.

For those furthest from opportunity, more targeted, sustained and in-depth programmes are also needed. Projects such as the Effective Transitions Fund and the newly launched Future Ready Fund, utilising the equalex framework, are utilising private investment to provide tailored mentoring, skills support, and employer engagement for disadvantaged young people.

12 Analysis forthcoming- based on a return on investment analysis

Appendix 1: Technical Note

This analysis is based on 331,075 learners from 1,425 institutions who completed the FSQ between September 2024 and July 2025. Of these 1,425 institutions, the majority were mainstream (N=1,281, 90%), with growing engagement from AP settings (N=43, 2%, an increase of 24 from last year) and from specialist settings (N=97, 7%, +28 from last year). Institutions spanned the country, with learners from 44 Careers Hubs represented in the data. 99% of institutions were part of a Careers Hub.

The sample includes the views of learners aged between 11 and 19 years of age. Over ¼ of these responses were from Year 7 learners, with learners in Key Stage 3 making up the majority of respondents (63%). Based on the learner level characteristics available, the sample was broadly representative of the national learner population. As with last year, a slightly higher proportion of female learners completed the FSQ (52% compared to 48% male). 15% of the sample were classified as having special educational needs (SEN), slightly higher than the national average and unchanged from 2023/24.18% of learners in the sample speak English as an additional language (EAL), slightly lower than the national average (21%) and unchanged from last year. The proportion of young people eligible for FSM was 23%, a slight increase from last year (22%), but 2%pts lower than the national average. 24% of learners in the sample are eligible for Pupil Premium, unchanged from last year.

Questionnaire version	Key Stage	Year Group	Number of responses	Proportion of responses
Starting Secondary	KS3	Year 7	86,991	26%
		Year 8	51,355	16%
		Year 9	71,689	22%
GCSE Years	KS4	Year 10	56,653	17%
		Year 11	36,468	11%
Post-16	KS5	Year 12	18,821	6%
		Year 13	8,978	3%
		Year 14	120	0%
SEND	SEND	Any year	8,183	2%
Total			**331,075**	**100%**

Appendix 2: Skills Builder Framework 2.0

The Skills Builder Framework is a universal framework that breaks down eight essential skills—such as teamwork, problem solving and communication—into teachable, measurable steps to support progression from childhood into employment.

Using clearer language, renamed and paired skills, and age-banded steps, the Skills Builder Universal Framework 2.0 makes essential skills easier to teach, track, and apply. The underlying assumptions and skill progression remain unchanged. Within the new framework, the eight Essential Skills are now shown as four paired clusters – Communication (Listening and Speaking), Creative Problem-Solving (Creativity and Problem Solving), Self-Management (Adapting and Planning) and Collaboration (Leadership and Teamwork). In order to benchmark against "expected age-based levels", results are now grouped into Getting Started, Intermediate, Advanced and Mastery, to give clearer age-based expectations.

The 8 Skills Builder categories map to the essential skills measured by the Future Skills Questionnaire in this report.

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Our Impact **Our Evidence**