THE CAREERS & ENTERPRISE COMPANY

Insight briefing

Learner career readiness in 2025/26

What more than half a million learner responses tell us about how career readiness develops, how this turns into action, and why a common measure matters.

FOREWORDS

Richard Parker, Mayor of West Midlands Combined Authority



Every young person deserves the best possible start in life. As Mayor of the West Midlands I am proud to champion a region rich in talent and ambition.

When I launched our Youth Employment Plan in 2024, I committed over my mayoral term to creating 20,000 new work experience opportunities, training placements and apprenticeships in partnership with businesses across the region. I delivered on that ambition with half my mayoral term remaining.

I am also helping to improve access to high-quality careers support and guidance and creating clearer pathways into meaningful jobs and good future prospects.

Work experience helps young people identify their strengths and get ready for the world of work while helping employers find talent. These opportunities not only help young people achieve their full potential but speed up economic growth, create more jobs, and help our communities flourish.

Youth unemployment is one of the biggest challenges facing our region. By working together in this way, we've created thousands of real opportunities for our young people, helping to give them the best possible start in life.

I want to reach every young person as early as possible, making sure that no one is left behind.

And to do this we must listen to young people: understand their aspirations, how confident they feel about achieving them, and the barriers standing in their way. Crucially, we must act on what they tell us, particularly for those facing the greatest barriers to opportunity.

This report offers us valuable insight into the work readiness skills and confidence young people need to develop, with views from almost 25,000 students in the West Midlands.

The findings, alongside the recommendations from the Young People and Work report, are vital to what we do next by informing us where to target support to be able to make the greatest difference.

I am determined to ensure that every young person in our region and across our country can access the opportunities they need to build a positive future – we simply cannot afford to waste the potential of a generation.

Foreword by CEC's Youth Leadership Team



Board Members Rylie Sweeney and Ava Haymonds, and Youth Advisory Group Chair Jonathan Opoku-Anokye

An unprecedented half a million young people across England have shared their experiences of careers education, their ambitions for the future and the support they need to achieve them.

The findings reinforce a fundamental truth: talent exists everywhere, but opportunity does not. While overall levels of career readiness may appear similar across different areas, the challenges young people face vary significantly according to their backgrounds, circumstances and access to support. These disparities underline the vital role of careers education as a force for social mobility, helping to ensure that every young person can fulfil their potential.

Our message to policymakers, employers and educators is simple: listen to young people and act on what you hear. The lessons are clear.

There is an evident gap between young people's ambitions and their understanding of how to achieve them. Although many begin thinking about their futures early, awareness of pathways such as apprenticeships, T Levels and vocational qualifications remains uneven. Confidence, workplace skills and access to professional networks are similarly unequal.

Career readiness should not begin at 16 or 18, nor can it be achieved through a single conversation. It is an ongoing process of learning, exploration and discovery that must start early and be embedded throughout education. Every pathway must be understood, accessible and valued.

Meaningful interventions, including work experience, can strengthen the connection between education and the world of work. However, access must be inclusive, and opportunities must be designed to make a genuine difference. Work experience should benefit every young person, not just those who already have the networks and confidence to access it.

For policymakers, this means recognising young people not simply as recipients of careers education, but as active partners in shaping it. Our generation is capable, ambitious and ready to help shape its future. Our voices must be heard, valued and reflected in the decisions that affect us.

As you read this report, we encourage you to look beyond the statistics to the young people behind them. Every figure represents an individual with ambitions, ideas and potential. Every finding presents an opportunity to make a meaningful difference.

Half a million voices driving the place-based careers system

Data-led targeting of continuous improvement

Tees Valley Careers Hub analysed FSQ feedback from 11,000 learners over two years. This showed a need to build learner interview confidence, understanding of modern recruitment processes and ability to make a good impression. The Careers Hub used the insight to commission a pilot employability programme for 4 schools, using the data to target to each school's requirements.

Identifying individual needs to support progression

Somerset Careers Hub are part of the Future Ready Fund programme and use FSQ data to pinpoint where learners reported gaps in their essential skills and tailor work experience. They also use insights on learner understanding to challenge perceptions of low apprenticeship understanding (understanding of apprenticeships is higher than A Levels locally).

Placing youth voice at the heart of local skills strategies

The Greater London Authority (GLA) economics team has compared FSQ data on learner sector aspirations with median earnings, vacancy trends over time, and generative AI exposure. The four London Careers Hubs and the GLA Skills and Employment team are using it to focus their resources on helping London learners make informed choices, while supporting the capital's future workforce and skills needs.

A growing national evidence base on learner career readiness

The Future Skills Questionnaire (FSQ) is The Careers & Enterprise Company's (CEC) national learner survey of career readiness. It offers an extensive evidence base on how learners in secondary education settings understand the world of work and are preparing for their next steps.

In 2025/26, 527,700 learners from 1,977 secondary education settings across England completed FSQ. This includes 514,102 responses from learners in mainstream schools and 13,598 responses to the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) version.[1] Participation overall is 59% up on 2024/25 and more than double the 2023/24 total.



1 The full question set is here. The SEND-version figure does not represent all learners with SEND: learners with SEND whose needs are suited to the mainstream questionnaire also complete that version.

2025/26 responses in numbers:

527,700
learners

1,977
education settings

+59%
more responses than 2024/25

79,026
repeat respondents from 2024/25

The scale of the dataset makes FSQ an increasingly useful source of learner voice, allowing deeper analysis by year group, learner characteristic and place.

The questionnaire is sent out to learners by Careers Leaders in schools and participation is voluntary. Learners reflect on their careers thinking through a standardised set of questions. The resulting data sample is not designed to be nationally representative and the methodology and interpretation section at the end of the briefing considers the implications.

This briefing offers a national analysis of the data, set in the wider policy and research context, to answer three questions:

- Are learners starting secondary education with strong enough levels of career-related knowledge and skills?
- Do growing knowledge and skills throughout secondary education translate into confidence and action?
- What does a standard measure of work readiness tell us about different learner needs – nationally and locally?

A short summary of what young people are telling us and question level national responses by year group are also available on the CEC website.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A standard career readiness measure to support national and local targeting

Overall career readiness develops over the course of the school journey, but the Year 7 starting point appears to be too low.

Understanding of some pathways develops too late, planning is more widespread than employer contact or confidence in next steps.

Similar headline scores from different learners can conceal different individual profiles.

These patterns show why career readiness is important as both a national benchmark and a local targeting measure.

Structure and content of the Future Skills Questionnaire

- **Part 1: Career knowledge and skills***
  Key Stage-related questions on knowledge of local labour market, jobs and employers, pathways, networks, confidence, plans and skills for transition after school.

- **Part 1a: Work experience and employer encounters**
  Focused questions (new in 2025/26) on whether learners have met an employer, had an experience of a workplace, and the impact these experiences are having on their future plans.

- **Part 2: Industry and career interests**
  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.[2]

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

2 Skills Builder Universal Framework 2.0

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Three themes from this year's analysis

Each theme answers one part of the central question in this report: What do half a million learners tell us about when support is needed, where knowledge is not yet translating into action and the gaps between learners in different places and with different characteristics and needs?

Theme 1

Build career readiness earlier

1.1 Career readiness starts too low, leaving substantial headroom

Career ideas are already forming, practical career knowledge is less developed.

1.2 Key essential skills for the workplace are not developing early enough

Self-reported confidence in different skills rises, dips and recovers at different rates.

1.3 Technical pathway understanding develops too late

By Year 9, 62% understand Apprenticeships and 59% A Levels, compared with 20% T Levels and 25% other vocational routes.

Theme 2

Turn understanding into action

2.1 Plans develop faster than the confidence and connections to act on them

84% of Year 11 learners have a plan, 44% have contacted someone working in a job that interests them.

2.2 Career ideas form early, but the jobs and sectors learners consider change substantially

Most Year 7 learners already have a career idea, sectors and occupations selected change substantially by Year 11.

2.3 Workplace exposure does not always shape ideas about jobs and next steps

84% of Year 11 learners report a workplace experience, 65% say it helped shape their next steps.

Theme 3

Use a common measure to target support

3.1 Similar levels of career readiness mask different local challenges

London, the North East and South West have similar overall scores but different levels of pathway knowledge, support and employer connection.

3.2 White British FSM learners report lower readiness on selected measures

White British FSM learners show particularly large gaps in some areas of pathway understanding.

3.3 SEN and disadvantage can combine to widen readiness gaps

Among Year 11 learners, those with SEN who are also eligible for FSM report lower levels of pathway understanding and confidence across several measures than peers without SEN.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The headlines in numbers

53% → 71%

Career readiness rises from Year 7 to Year 11 - but the low Year 7 starting point leaves substantial headroom

17%pts difference

A level understanding is 70% for White British FSM learners and 87% for non-White British non-FSM learners

62% vs 20%

By Year 9, 62% understand Apprenticeships compared with just 20% who understand T Levels

15%pts difference

Year 11 understanding of T Levels ranges from 42% in London to 57% in the North West of England

84% vs 44%

Year 11 learners have a plan for their next step (84%), but fewer have contacted someone in a job that interests them (44%)

84% vs 65%

Year 11 learners report a workplace experience (84%), compared with 65% saying it helped shape their next steps

7%pts increase

Year 11 learners who have thought about how jobs and careers may change in the future increased from 71% in 2024/25 to 78% in 2025/26

79,026

Learners completed FSQ in both 2024/25 and 2025/26

Source: Future Skills Questionnaire data, 2025/26. Year 11 N=62,383; total mainstream responses for all age N=514,102. Workplace experience proportions are among learners reporting having had an experience of a workplace.

THEME 1: BUILD CAREER READINESS EARLIER

Career readiness starts too low, leaving substantial headroom

Career readiness is a measure of a young person's knowledge, skills and confidence. Learners in later year groups report stronger career knowledge and confidence, but career ideas are already forming before practical knowledge is fully developed.

The average career readiness score (positive responses across all Part 1. questions) is 53% in Year 7, 54% in Year 8, 71% in Year 11 and 81% by Year 13. The largest increase takes place between Years 10 and 11, a rise of 9%pts (Fig. 1).

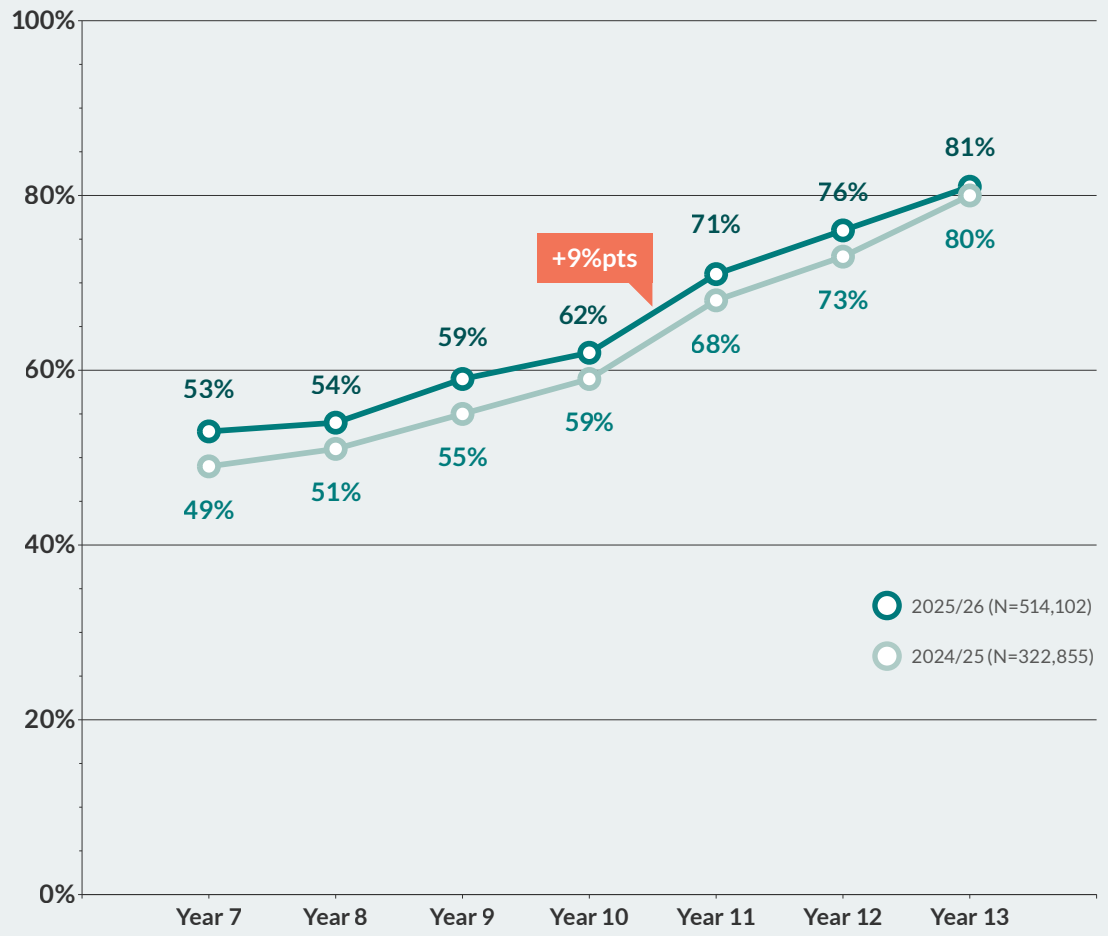
Scores this year are higher than in 2024/25 across all year groups. Response options were improved in 2025/26 to make the questions more accessible. Some individual question responses have shown encouraging increase: the proportion of Year 11 learners who have thought about how jobs and careers may change in the future increased from 71% in 2024/25 to 78% in 2025/26.

The Year 7 and 8 starting point is important. FSQ begins in Year 7, so it cannot show what learners experienced in primary school, but a relatively low starting position in Key Stage 3 raises a question about how much learners should know and be able to do as they enter secondary education.

Career ideas are already common at the start of secondary school: 81% of Year 7 learners have ideas about a future job or career. Practical knowledge is less developed: just 36% know a trustworthy careers website, approximately half (55%) are aware of local businesses and employers, and two-thirds (59%) know how to find information about how much they can earn. Aspirations therefore form before the information and skills needed to explore them are fully established.

Fig. 1: Career readiness is higher among older learners; the largest secondary-school jump is between Years 10 and 11

Average career knowledge and skills score by year group, 2024/25 and 2025/26



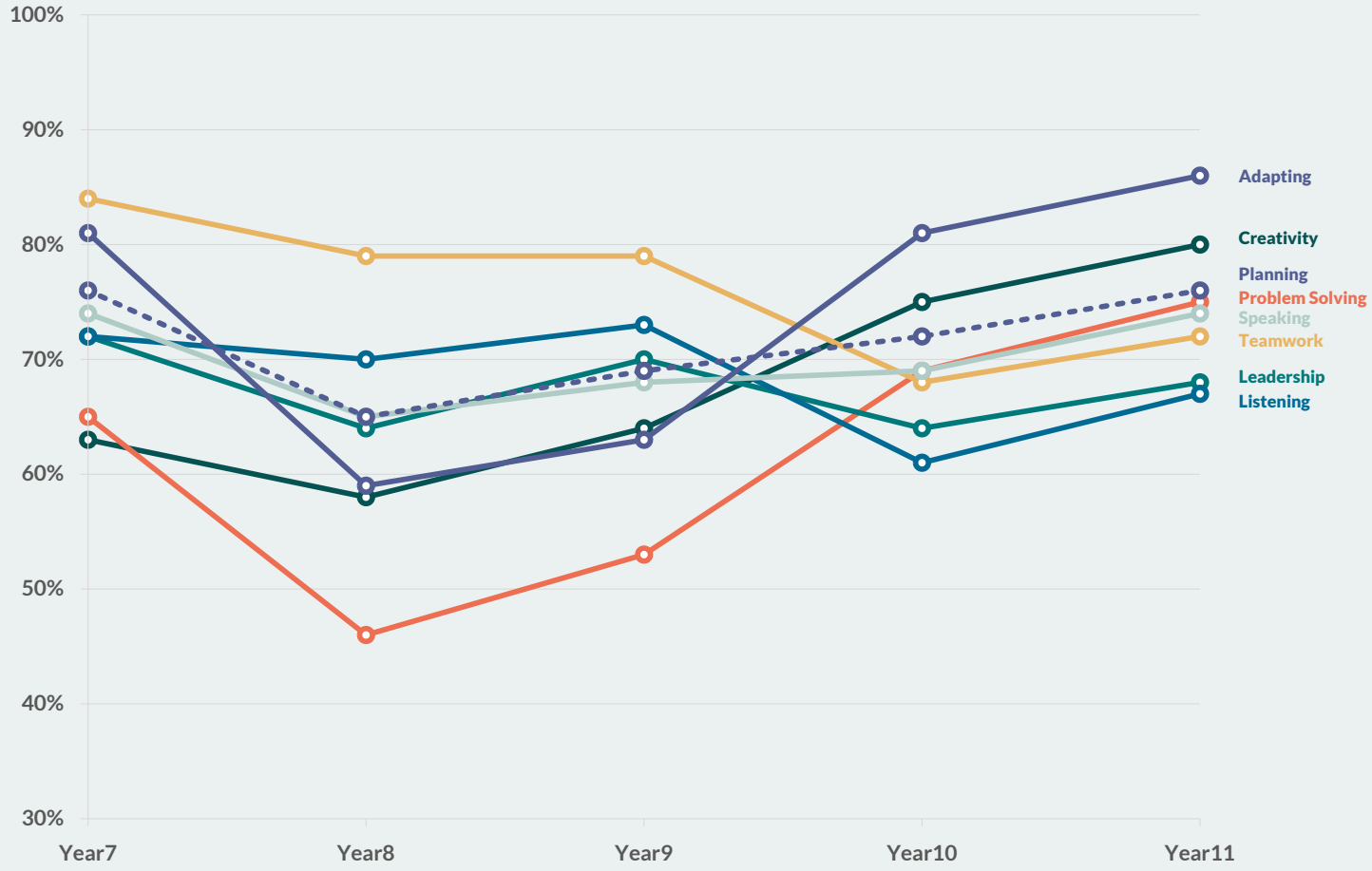
Source: Future Skills Questionnaire data, 2025/26. Mainstream responses N=514,102

THEME 1: BUILD CAREER READINESS EARLIER

Key essential skills for the workplace are not developing early enough

Fig. 2: Essential skills develop differently across the secondary learner journey

Self-reported confidence changes in different ways across the eight essential skills rather than strengthening uniformly with age.



Source: Future Skills Questionnaire data, 2025/26. Mainstream responses N=514,102.

Essential skills for work and life are measured through age-appropriate questions, using the Skills Builder Universal Framework.

Reported confidence dips in year 8 and the pattern differs by skill. Between Years 7 and 8, the largest falls are in problem solving (65% to 46%) and staying positive (81% to 59%). Creativity, leadership, speaking and aiming high also dip in Year 8, while teamwork and listening remain comparatively high (Fig. 2).

From Year 8 onwards, creativity and problem solving rise substantially, gaining 17%pts and 10%pts respectively by the end of Year 11. Staying positive rises to by 5%pts over the same period. However teamwork, listening and leadership are all lower in Year 11 than Year 7 (falls of 12%pts, 5%pts and 4%pts respectively)(Fig.3), suggesting that learners are not regaining the same age-appropriate level in these skills as they had in year 7. Speaking is level across both years (Fig. 3).

This suggests that as learners move through secondary education, confidence in key essential skills can dip. In some cases, it reaches its lowest as learners leave Key Stage 4. With the Department for Education's Enrichment Benchmarks underpinned by the development of age-appropriate skills, including teamwork, there is an opportunity to compound the impact of careers experiences with enrichment and extracurricular activity. This will help broaden horizons and build learners' confidence ahead of key transition points.

Skills Builder's Speaking and Listening at scale highlighted the need for strong speaking and listening skills. Oracy and communication have been identified as important skills for all pupils in the Curriculum and Assessment Review review final report.

Fig. 3: Some essential skills drop between Years 7 and 11

Self-reported confidence is higher in creativity and problem solving in Year 11, while teamwork and listening are lower than in Year 7.



Source: Future Skills Questionnaire data, 2025/26. Mainstream responses N=514,102.

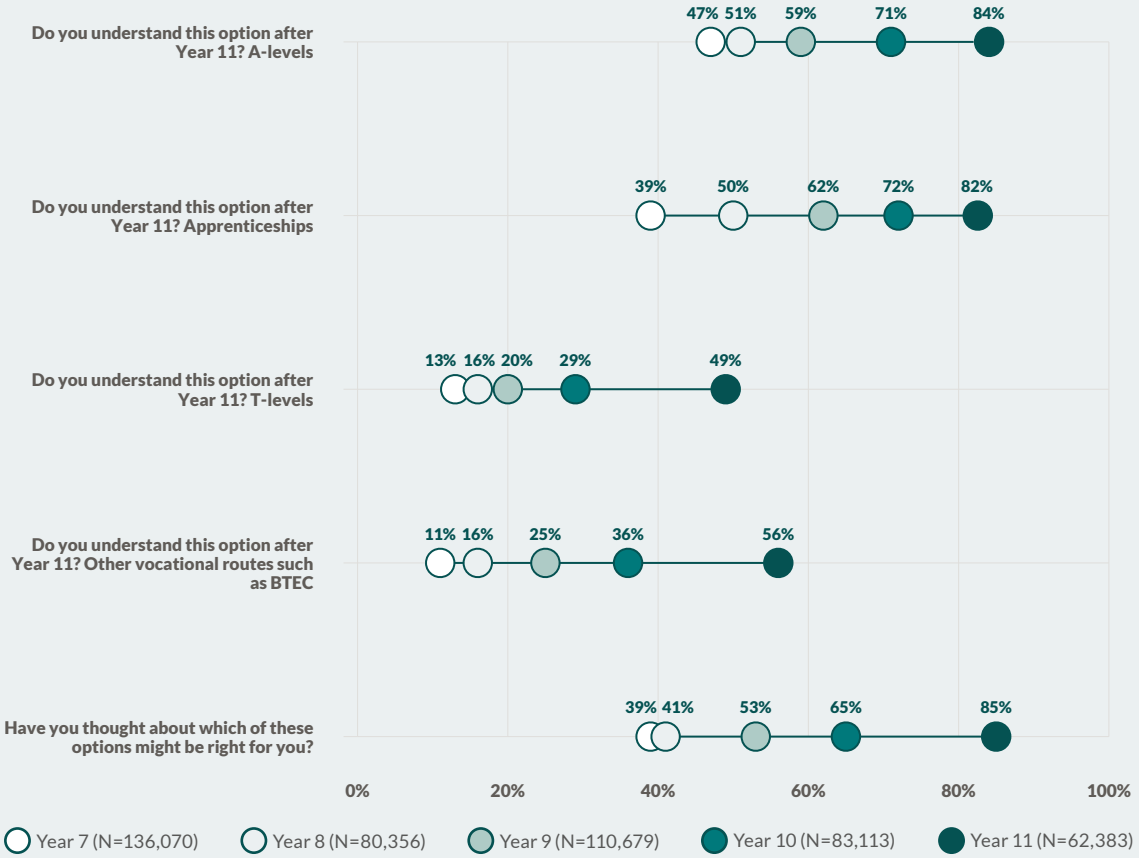
THEME 1: BUILD CAREER READINESS EARLIER

Technical pathway understanding develops too late

By Year 9, around six in ten learners understand A Levels and apprenticeships, compared with one in five for T Levels and one in four for other vocational routes.

Fig. 4: Pathway understanding increases by year group, but technical and vocational routes understanding develops most in Year 11

% of Year 7-11 learners who understand post-16 pathway options, 2025/26



Source: Future Skills Questionnaire data, 2025/26. Years 7-11 N=472,601; year-group bases shown above.

Understanding of a wide range of pathways is an important part of making informed careers choices. It is higher in later year groups across every pathway, but the development differs considerably. In Year 7, 47% understand A Levels and 39% apprenticeships, compared with 13% for T Levels and 11% for other vocational routes. By Year 9, A Level and apprenticeship understanding has risen to 59% and 62%, T Levels remain at 20% and other vocational routes at 25%.

In year 10 71% understand A levels and 72% apprenticeships, compared with 29% for T Levels and 36% for other vocational routes. The largest increases in understanding of both these technical and vocational options occur between Years 10 and 11, when both rise by 20%pts. T levels were introduced in 2020/21. More subjects came on line each year and availability varies across locations. This may influence the level of learner understanding and schools' focus within their careers programmes.

Learners' consideration of their own options develops alongside their knowledge. The proportion who have thought about which post-16 option might be right for them is 39% in Year 7, 41% in Year 8 and 53% in Year 9, before rising to 65% in Year 10 and 85% in Year 11.

Much of the reported understanding develops relatively late in secondary education to inform post-16 transition choices.

Recent Edge Foundation research on lessons from T Level implementation highlights the need for clarity of purpose, communication and coherent learner pathways as the qualification landscape changes. The implementation of new V Levels in 2026/27 and the Government's intention for new vocational GCSEs make it all the more important to ensure all learners are supported to consider the full range of pathways.

THEME 2: TURN UNDERSTANDING INTO ACTION

Plans develop faster than the confidence and connections to act on them

Most Year 11 learners have considered their next step, but employer contact and some forms of practical confidence are much less widespread.

By Year 11, 85% of learners say they have thought about which post-16 options might be right for them, 84% have a plan for their next step and 81% say they know what skills employers need. This suggests information and intent are relatively well developed for many learners.

However, action-oriented measures score lower. 44% of Year 11 learners have made contact with someone working in a job that interests them; 66% feel confident talking about their skills in an interview.

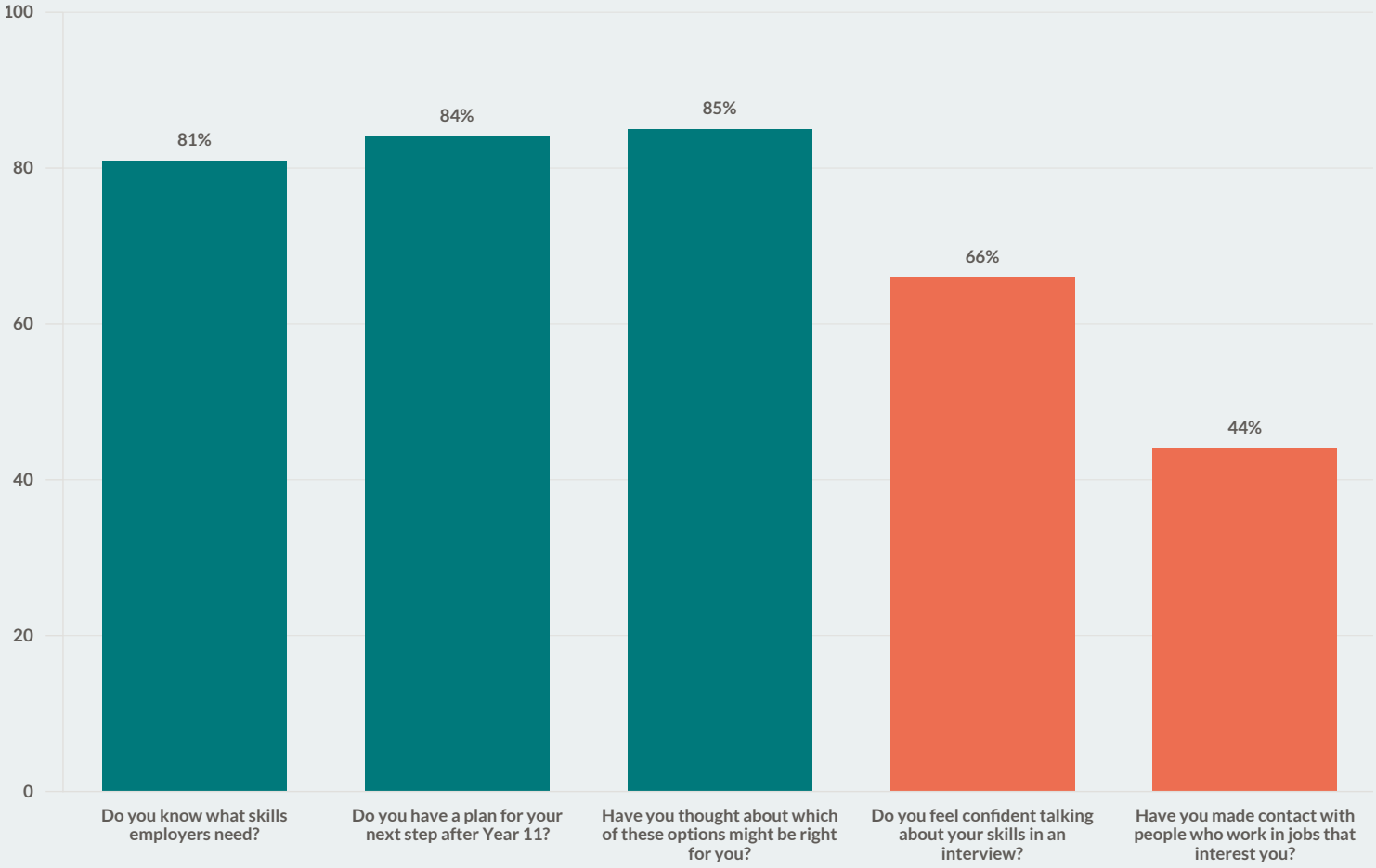
Youth Futures Foundation research on the English youth labour market reports that word of mouth and personal recommendations remain common recruitment routes for people under 25, highlighting the importance of personal networks and direct employer contact.

Taken together, the measures show a gap between learner information, intent and action. Understanding all aspects of career readiness is important: having a plan is not the same as having the contacts, recruitment knowledge or confidence to act on it.

Widening access to work experience in line with the Government guarantee should give learners the opportunities to speak to a range of employers.

Fig. 5: Plans are more widely reported than employer contact and practical confidence

% of Year 11 learners responding positively to selected career knowledge and skills questions, 2025/26



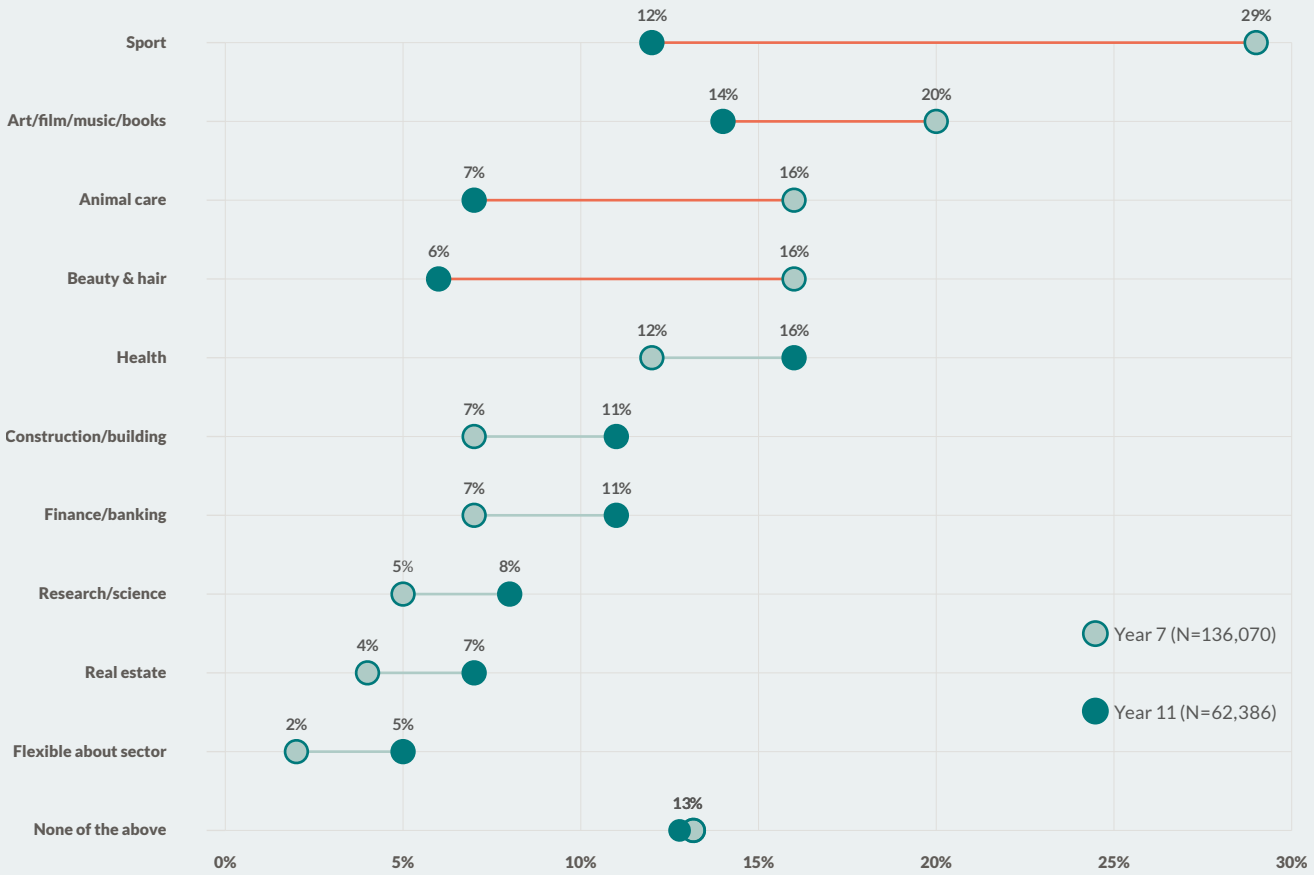
Source: Future Skills Questionnaire data, 2025/26. Year 11 N=62,383

Career ideas form early, but the jobs and sectors learners consider change substantially

Most learners already express a career idea in Year 7, but the sectors and occupations they select differ substantially by Year 11.

Fig. 6: Career interests differ substantially between Years 7 and 11

% of learners selecting each industry/sector of interest, Year 7 and Year 11, 2025/26; sectors with largest differences



Source: Future Skills Questionnaire data, 2025/26. Year 7 (N=136,070) and Year 11 (62,386) sector-interest questions.

Career ideas are already commonplace when learners start secondary school. In Year 7, 81% of learners express a career preference and 87% an industry preference (vs 84% and 87% in Year 11). The proportion of learners with an idea changes relatively little, but the focus of their interest changes substantially (Fig. 6).

In Year 7, some of the most commonly-selected sectors are sport (29%), art, film, music and books (20%), animal care (16%) and beauty and hair (16%). By Year 11, these are less common. Health (16%), construction (11%), finance (11%) and research and science (8%) are most popular. Occupation-level responses show a similar pattern. Interest in becoming a sports player is 27% in Year 7 and 9% in Year 11, while finance rises from 6% to 11% and researcher or analyst from 3% to 7%. CEC analysis shows how learners with higher career readiness are more likely to make labour-market aligned choices as well as the impact of high quality careers education on career readiness.

Evidence from the CEC's Start Small; Dream Big pilot of careers-related learning tells us ideas form before secondary school. The pilot aimed to broaden horizons and challenge stereotypes at an age when children are already developing assumptions about careers. Across the programme, pupils showed interest in a wider range of careers. Participating schools reported reductions in how much gender stereotypes constrained aspirations. The findings suggest career-related learning in primary can broaden the range of possibilities children consider before they arrive in Year 7.

THEME 2: TURN UNDERSTANDING INTO ACTION

Workplace exposure does not always shape ideas about jobs and next steps

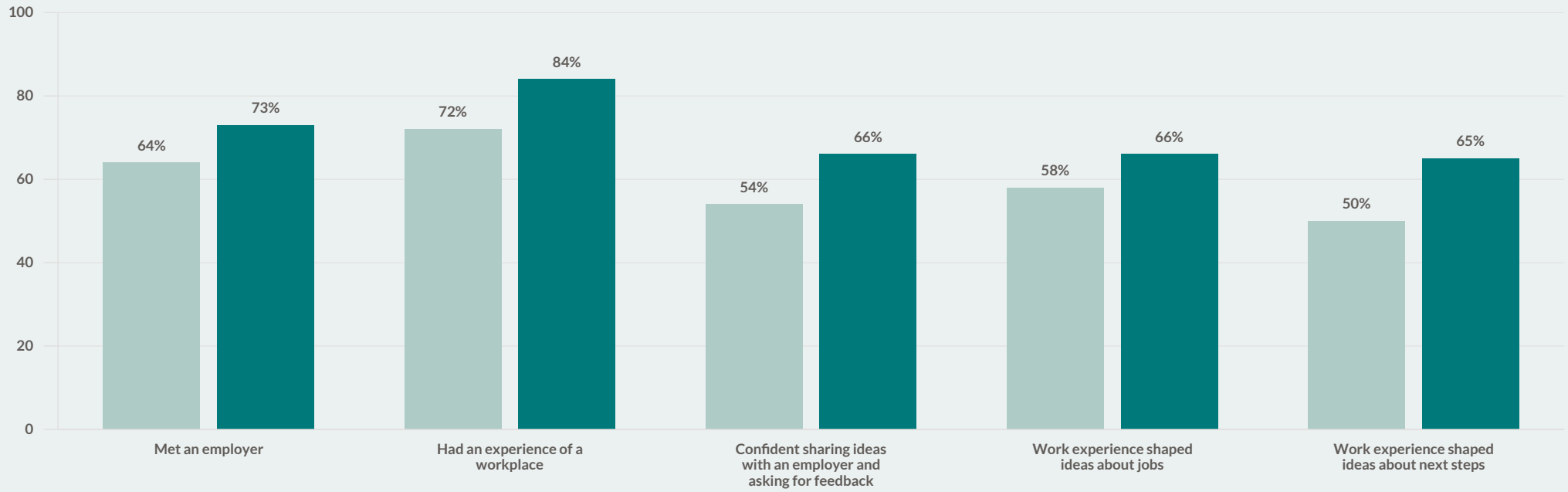
New questions this year on work experience distinguish participation from what learners say they took from employer and workplace experiences.

New questions were added to the survey this year on work experience. By Year 11, 84% of learners report having had an experience of a workplace, while 73% report having met an employer. Reported impact is lower: 66% of those that had an experience say it shaped their ideas about jobs, 65% say it shaped their next steps, and 66% of learners who have met an employer feel confident sharing ideas and asking for feedback (Fig. 7).

In Year 7, 72% already report having an experience of a workplace. Of those, 50% say it helped shape their thinking about next steps. As access to meaningful work experience expands in line with the Government's work experience guarantee, tracking what learners report taking from it offers an indicator of impact.

Fig. 7: Employer and workplace exposure is more common than reported influence on choices

% of learners responding positively after an employer encounter or workplace experience, Years 7 and 11, 2025/26



Source: Future Skills Questionnaire data, 2025/26, Year 7 (N=136,070) and Year 11 (N=62,383)

THEME 3: USE A COMMON MEASURE TO TARGET SUPPORT

Similar levels of career readiness can mask different local challenges

The South West, London and North East have similar overall Year 11 career readiness scores, but they have different profiles of pathway knowledge, support and connection to employers.

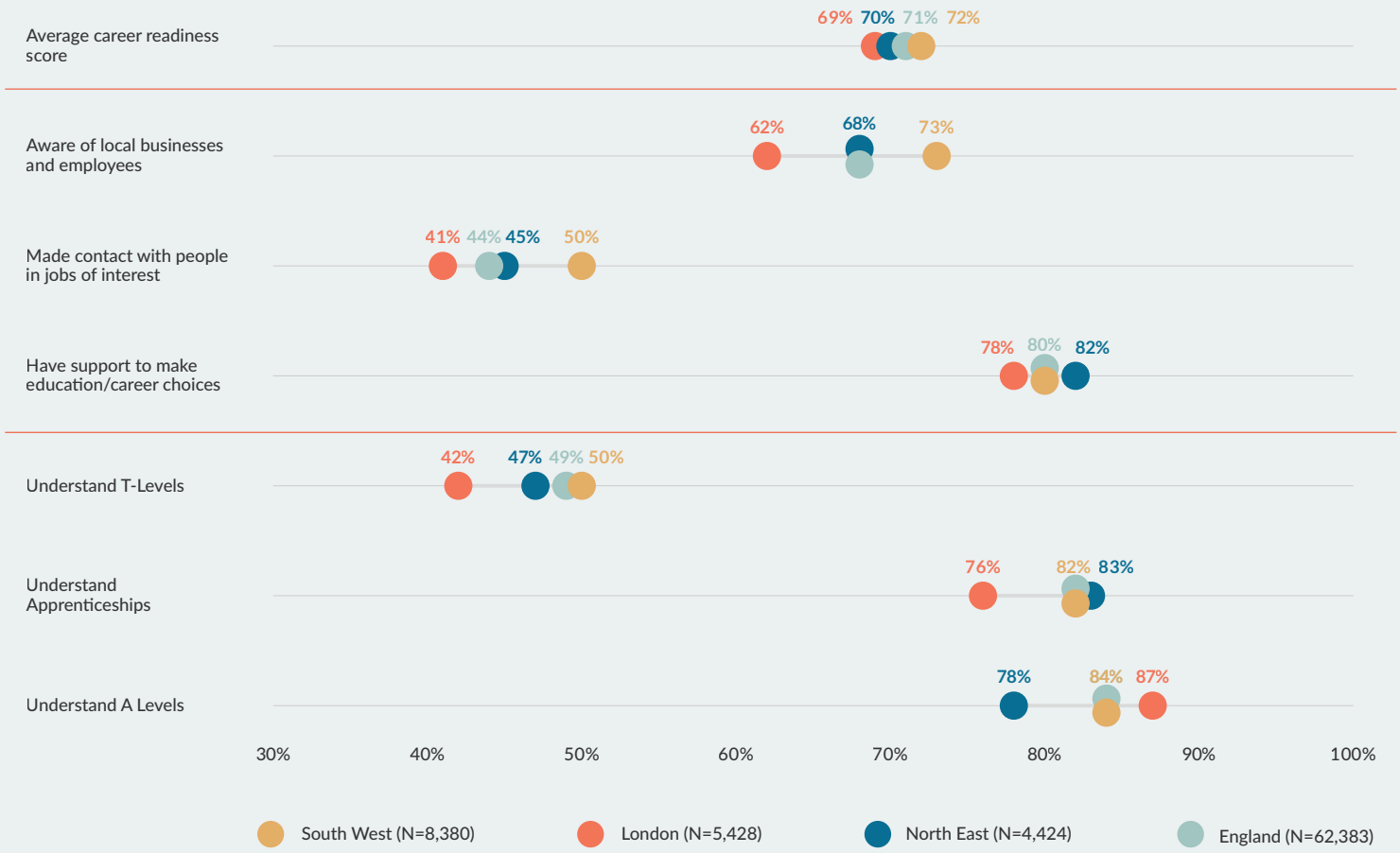
Beneath similar headline scores, regions have different challenges. The average Year 11 career readiness is 69% in London , 70% in the North East and 72% in the South West (close to the England average of 71%). London reports higher understanding of A levels (87% versus 78%); apprenticeship understanding is higher in the North East (83% versus 76%).

Learners in the North East and South West report higher positive responses on having support to make education and career choices than those in London (82% and 80% vs 78%). Learners in the North East and South West are more likely to have made contact with someone working in a job of interest (45% and 50% vs 41%) and be aware of local businesses and employers (68% and 73% vs 62%).

Wider evidence helps explain why local context matters. Youth Futures Foundation and IPPR show substantial variation in youth labour-market opportunities between places, while Centre for London highlights the capital's particular transition challenges. A common national measure offers a benchmark; more granular analysis shines more light on the local challenge.

Fig. 8: Similar overall career readiness can mask different regional profiles

Selected Year 11 career knowledge and skills measures, London, South West, North East and England, 2025/26



Source: Future Skills Questionnaire data, 2025/26. Year 11 regional analysis.

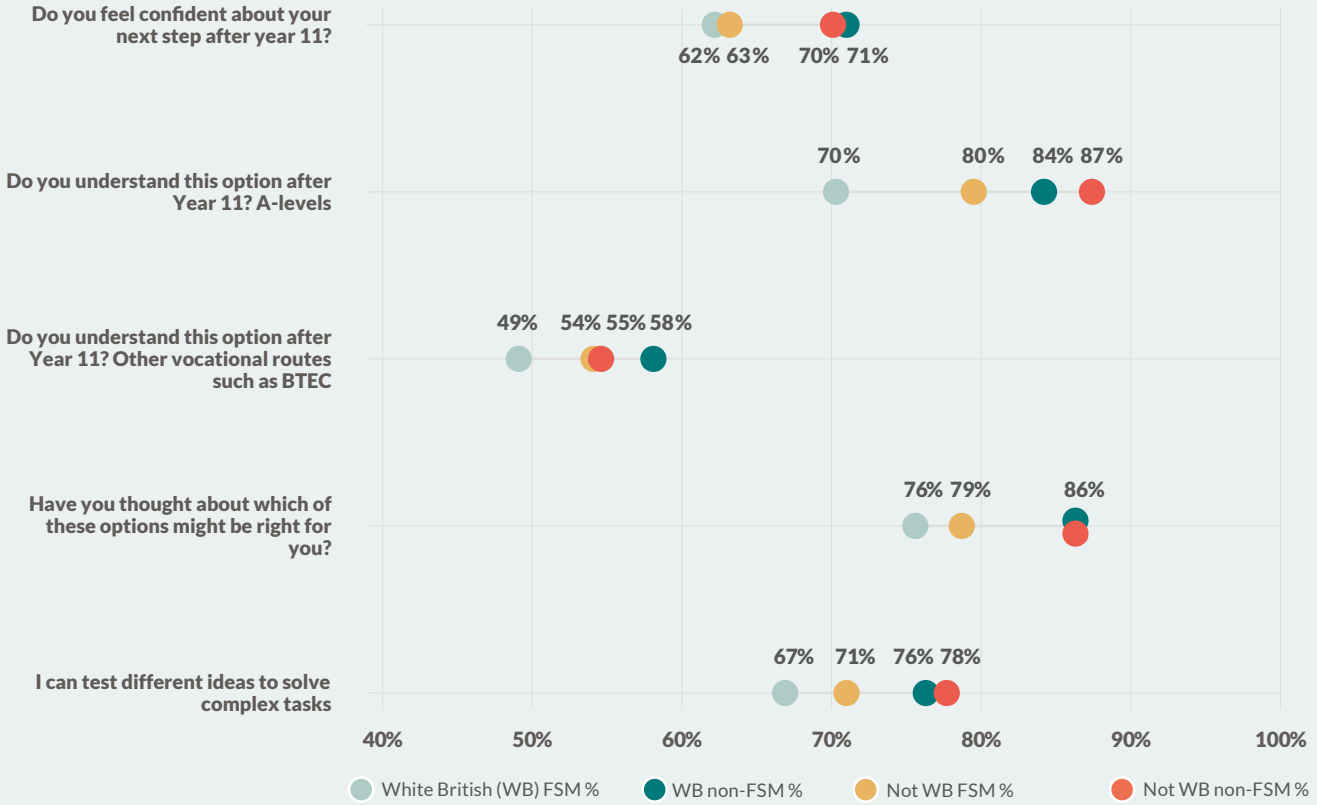
THEME 3: USE A COMMON MEASURE TO TARGET SUPPORT

White British FSM learners report lower readiness than broader comparison groups on several measures

Compared with White British non-FSM learners and aggregated non-White British groups, lower responses are visible across pathway understanding, problem solving and confidence about next steps.

Fig. 9: White British FSM learners report lower positive responses across the selected Year 11 measures

% of Year 11 learners responding positively to selected career readiness and essential skills measures, by ethnicity (grouped) and Free School Meals (FSM) status, 2025/26



Source: Future Skills Questionnaire data, 2025/26. Year 11 (62,383).

Last year we reported on how FSQ data can show gaps between reported learner outcomes with different backgrounds and characteristics, such as gender, SEN, ethnicity and place. This year's analysis goes deeper into an example.

White British learners represent 48% of learners eligible for FSM in the FSQ sample , and as such represent the largest subset of FSM learners. The White Working Class Inquiry into educational outcomes found this group disengaged and had lower educational attainment than other peer groupings. Using similar comparisons, FSQ also shows White Working Class learners reporting the lowest positive response rates across several career readiness and essential skills questions.[3]

For A Level understanding, 70% of White British FSM learners respond positively, compared with 84% of White British non-FSM learners and 87% of non-White British non-FSM learners. They also rate themselves lower on problem solving (67% versus 76% and 78%), having thought about the right post-16 option (76% versus 86% and 86%), and confidence about the next step after Year 11 (62% versus 71% and 70%) (Fig.9).

Further analysis of this data will be reported later this year in support of the White Working Class Inquiry's implementation phase.

3 For this analysis, non-White British respondents are grouped together. This masks variation within the group: some ethnic groups score lower than White British FSM learners on individual measures, such as Other Arab learners on awareness of local employers (50% vs 65%), Other Pakistani learners on contact with people in jobs of interest (31% vs 44%), and Black Caribbean learners on having a plan after Year 11 (73% vs 81%).

THEME 3: USE A COMMON MEASURE TO TARGET SUPPORT

Learners completing the SEND questionnaire have clear career ideas, but structured planning is much less common

Most Year 11 learners who completed the SEND version of FSQ report understanding their options and having career ideas; 39% report having a career plan or vocational profile. Analysis of data from SEND learners who took the mainstream questionnaire also show additional gaps where SEN and FSM overlap.

Learners with SEN have a very diverse range of needs. The SEND version of FSQ was developed primarily for learners with SEND who are not expected to take GCSEs or other Level 2 qualifications. Unlike the mainstream questionnaire, it is not age-staged, reflecting the diverse needs and pathways of learners using it.

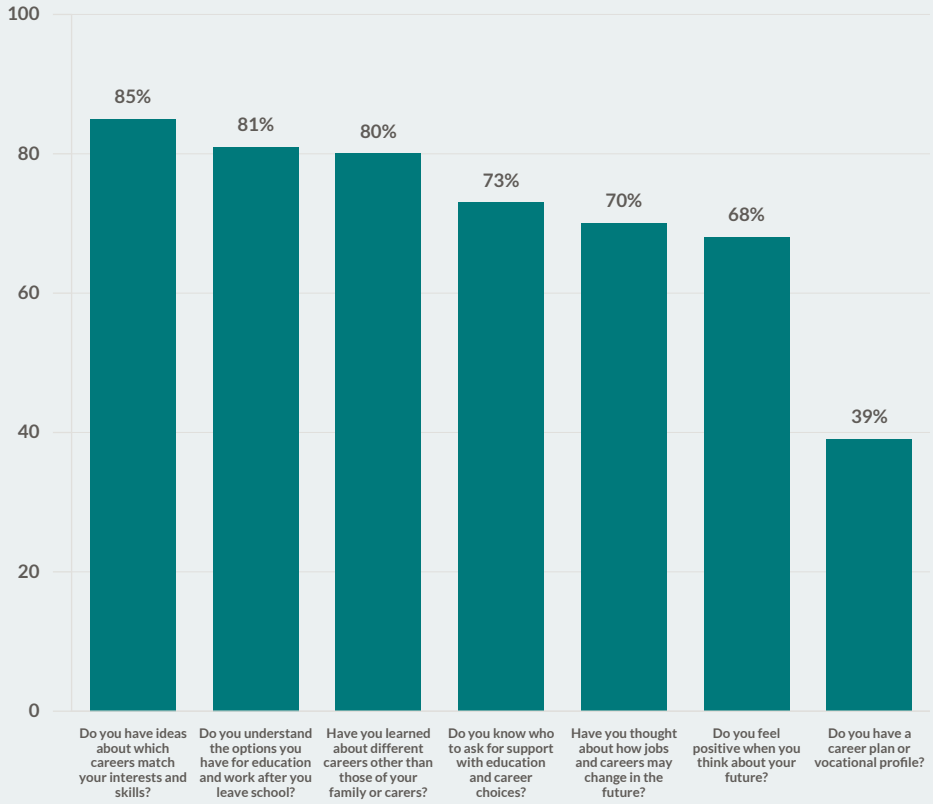
Practitioners are asked to use their professional judgement to decide whether the SEND or relevant Key Stage version is most appropriate for each learner.

In 2025/26, 13,598 learners completed the SEND version of FSQ, up from 8,183 in 2024/25. In addition 78,172 learners with SEN completed the mainstream version.

Among Year 11 learners completing the SEND version, 85% say they have ideas about careers that match their interests and skills, 81% understand their education and work options, 80% have learned about careers beyond their family or carers, and 79% report developing listening, teamwork and problem-solving skills. 73% know who to ask for support and 70% have ideas about future work. In contrast, 39% report having a career plan or vocational profile with actions to help achieve their goals (Fig. 10).

Fig. 10: Career ideas and option understanding are more common than having a structured plan

% of Year 11 learners responding positively to selected career knowledge and skills questions, SEND version, 2025/26



Source: Future Skills Questionnaire, SEND version, 2025/26. Year 11 N=2,217 for selected career knowledge and skills questions; N=1,702 for the question on careers matching interests and skills. Bases vary by question.

Within the mainstream questionnaire, the overlap with socioeconomic disadvantage is visible. Among White British FSM learners in Year 11, A Level understanding is 61% for those with SEN and 73% for those without SEN; 69% of those with SEN have thought about which post-16 option might be right for them, compared with 78% without SEN. A similar difference appears in self-reported problem solving: 60% of White British FSM learners with SEN respond positively, compared with 69% of White British FSM learners without SEN.

Recent Impetus analysis of Longitudinal Education Outcomes data also shows how socioeconomic disadvantage, SEND and qualification level can combine in later NEET risk. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who also have SEND and low qualifications are nearly three times more likely to be NEET than average. This wider evidence reinforces the value of looking at characteristics and needs together.

Implications For Policy And Practice

The findings in this briefing come at a time of significant national interest in work readiness and youth transitions, including the 2026 Young People and Work interim report, and updated statutory careers guidance on meaningful work experience.

Over half a million young people are telling us what they know, how confident they feel and whether they are able to act before transitions occur. The analysis shows why and how learner-reported career readiness, skills and confidence can complement joined-up local support and a focus on destinations.

There are 5 key implications for policy and practice:

1. Starting early matters

Career ideas are already widespread but wider pathway understanding is under-developed. The transition into secondary education is an important point for understanding what readiness learners already bring with them.

2. Knowledge needs to become intent and action

By Year 11, plans and option awareness are widespread, but employer contact and some confidence measures are lower. A career readiness measure is most useful when it can distinguish awareness, intent and action in detail rather than relying on a single headline.

3. Learner reported outcomes complement activity measures

Workplace exposure is widespread, but fewer learners say experiences shaped their next steps. Learner-reported impact therefore provides a useful outcomes measure alongside access and participation.

4. National comparison and local targeting can work together

Similar averages across regions mask different strengths, while subgroup analysis shows that readiness also varies by disadvantage and learner need. A common measure with the ability to disaggregate enables local areas to understand local need and target.

5. Longitudinal tracking can strengthen the evidence base

FSQ is now in its sixth year of rollout. This allows us to track the same learners across different stages of secondary education, including those completing the questionnaire in both Year 7 and Year 11. Through the data we can examine how individual learners career readiness, pathway knowledge and essential skills develop over time, including how this differs by learner characteristics or the careers provision they receive.

How to interpret the 2025/26 findings

The Future Skills Questionnaire is a feature within the Compass+ digital tool. It is freely available to state-funded secondary schools and specialist settings in England.

This briefing focuses on 514,102 responses to the mainstream versions and 13,598 SEND version responses. Learners with SEND can appear in either data set, depending on which questionnaire is appropriate for them.

A cohort of 79,026 individual learners completed FSQ in both 2024/25 and 2025/26. This report does not treat cross-sectional differences between year groups as individual progression; follow-up same-completer analysis will test how career readiness changes for the same learners over time.

Supporting data tables provide national question level comparisons by year group.

Key methodological considerations

- Participation is voluntary at education setting and learner level. The dataset is very large but should not be treated as a statistically representative national survey.
- The sample is weighted towards younger year groups. Year 7 and Year 9 account for almost half of responses, while post-16 samples are smaller.
- The respondent profile differs from the national learner population on some characteristics, so subgroup findings should be interpreted alongside sample composition.
- Response wording changed in 2025/26 from “to a great extent / to some extent / possibly” to “a lot / a little / maybe”. The respondent base expanded substantially. Year-on-year comparisons are used as context rather than as a significant measure of underlying change.
- Most comparisons between year groups are cross-sectional. They compare learners currently in different years and should not be presented as individual-level change.
- Employer and workplace experience questions are new in 2025/26.

For questions about this analysis, contact:
research@careersandenterprise.co.uk.

THE CAREERS & ENTERPRISE COMPANY

Our Impact **Our evidence**