

# **NCS submission to APPG for Youth Employment Inquiry on Mental Health:**

**How is mental health affecting  
young people accessing the  
labour market and quality work?**



In December 2022, NCS Trust submitted a response to the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Youth Employment's inquiry on mental health. More than 700,000 young people have taken part in NCS over the last decade, and NCS programmes have been demonstrated to have a positive impact on young people's wellbeing. Our response included an evidence review and insights from our services on young people's skills for life and work, young people's mental health and wellbeing, and enrichment in education. The purpose of this inquiry is to better understand the impact of mental health on young people accessing the labour market and quality work. This submission was incorporated into an [Inquiry Report](#), led by Youth Employment UK, published on 24th January 2023.



## Executive Summary

### **Mental health conditions and a lack of opportunities to develop skills for life and work are key barriers to youth employment, with long term health and economic impacts**

- There are currently 724,000 young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) in the UK.<sup>1</sup> Disadvantaged young people are twice as likely to fall into this category than their better-off peers.<sup>2</sup> Yet, almost half a million NEET young people are able and want to work, signalling a huge missed opportunity and untapped potential<sup>3</sup>
- An increase in mental health conditions and low self-confidence are key factors preventing young people from entering employment.<sup>4</sup> Just 22% of young people say they feel confident in their future career, and 24% worry that they do not have the skills for the jobs that are available to them<sup>5</sup>
- This feeling is also shared by UK employers - an estimated 80% believe that graduates do not have the skills they need to be work ready.<sup>6</sup> The UK skills deficit will cost the country £120 billion by 2030<sup>7</sup>
- Mental health issues are both a barrier to, and a consequence of, youth unemployment.<sup>8</sup> The effect of youth unemployment on mental health can also continue into adulthood, independent of later employment experiences<sup>9</sup>

### **An enriched education system can increase access to opportunities for young people to develop skills for life and work, and improve their mental health outcomes**

- Non-formal learning has consistently been found to improve young peoples' mental health. There is robust evidence of a causal link between skills interventions and improved social and emotional wellbeing in young people, and prevention of negative behaviours.<sup>10</sup> Extracurricular activities can increase feelings of optimism and peer belonging, which can help to improve overall mental health outcomes among young people<sup>11</sup>
- In 2019, 92% of talent professionals and hiring managers agreed that candidates with strong 'soft' skills are increasingly important.<sup>12</sup> Ensuring all young people have access to a variety of quality enrichment and skills development activities, as part of a broad and balanced education, can facilitate successful transitions into further education, training, and employment
- There are significant disparities in enrichment provision and participation across the UK. Determining factors include the schools that children and young people attend, the areas they grow up in, and their socio-economic background.<sup>13</sup> Increasing opportunities for young people from all backgrounds to develop skills for life and work can be a catalyst for social mobility (Sutton Trust, 2017). Investing in young people's skills for life and work can address both challenges of youth mental health and unemployment

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<sup>1</sup> ONS Dataset (November 2022) [Young people not in education, employment or training \(NEET\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> Impetus and Youth Jobs Gap (2019) [Research briefing 6: The long-term NEET population](#).

<sup>3</sup> The Learning and Work Institute and The Prince's Trust (2022) [The Power of Potential](#)

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> The Prince's Trust (2021) [Confidence Crossroads: The Path Ahead for Young People](#).

<sup>6</sup> TechRadar (2022) [Industry and academia can close the UK's digital skills gap](#).

<sup>7</sup> The Learning and Work Institute (2021) [Local Skills Deficit and Spare Capacity](#).

<sup>8</sup> The Learning and Work Institute and The Prince's Trust (2022) [The Power of Potential: Supporting the future of 'NEET' young people](#).

<sup>9</sup> Strandh M, Winefield A, Nilsson K, et al. (2014) [Unemployment and mental health scarring during the life course](#). Eur J Public Health 2014;24:440-5. doi:10.1093/eurpub/cku005

<sup>10</sup> SkillsBuilder Partnership and The Centre for Education and Youth (2021) [How do essential skills influence life outcomes?](#) Evidence Review.

<sup>11</sup> Oberle, E., Xuejun, R.J., Kerai, S., Guhn, M., Schonert-Reichl, K.A., & Gadermann, A.M. (2020). [Screen time and extracurricular activities as risk and protective factors for mental health in adolescence: A population-level study](#). Preventive Medicine, 141.

<sup>12</sup> Lobosco, M. (2019). [LinkedIn Report: These 4 Ideas Are Shaping the Future of HR and Hiring](#) [Blog Post].

<sup>13</sup> The Social Mobility Commission (2019) [An Unequal Playing Field: Extra-Curricular Activities, Soft Skills, and Social Mobility](#). Department for Education and Institute for Policy Research, University of Bath.



## **Innovative employability interventions, such as UK Year of Service, support employers and young people to help them get work ready and world ready**

- Interventions that prevent young people from becoming NEET in the first instance should be prioritised, to avert this vicious cycle. UK Year of Service, an NCS pilot initiative, is one example of a programme that can have a positive impact in this space: transforming young people's lives through employment, training and social cohesion, whilst also filling skills gaps in the economy
- UK Year of Service's 9-12 month programmes include paid work placements of 30-35 hours per week, transferable employability skills training, enrichment both within and beyond placement, and support for exit routes into further education or employment. Networking is a key aspect of the UK Year of Service national training offer. Young people receive coaching to develop their networking skills, and also benefit from long-term career benefits and opportunities of networking in practice. An expanded professional network provides social connection and common ground with peers, helping to tackle feelings of isolation and loneliness among young people post COVID-19
- By engaging young people in a way that is compelling, and supporting employers and technical training providers to develop underlying essential skills to support them, UK Year of Service ensures that young people not only access, but also stick with, long term employment and technical skills development

## **Enrichment and NFL: equipping young people with skills for life and work so that they feel confident and prepared for life beyond education**

Young people with mental health difficulties are more likely to experience lower educational attainment, and be persistently absent from school.<sup>14</sup> Gender, deprivation, child in need status, ethnicity and age are all associated with increased risk of mental health difficulties.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, schools and other learning environments can be important sites to identify and offer support for young people's mental health. However, young people need more than good grades to successfully transition into further education, employment, or training. In addition to better links between learning environments and mental health services and providers, improving equity of access to high quality enrichment provision should be prioritised, equipping young people with skills for life and work, so that they feel confident and prepared for life beyond education.<sup>16</sup>

## **Enrichment and extracurricular activities have a positive impact on young people's mental health and wellbeing**

Non-formal learning has consistently been found to improve young peoples' mental health. There is robust evidence of a causal link between skills interventions and improved social and emotional wellbeing in young people, as well as the prevention of negative behaviours.<sup>17</sup> Extracurricular activities have shown to increase feelings of optimism and peer belonging, which can help to improve overall mental health outcomes among young people.<sup>18</sup> Annual evaluations of the NCS programme have found positive

<sup>14</sup> Lereya, S. T., Patel, M., dos Santos, J.P.G.A., & Deighton, J. (2019). *Mental health difficulties, attainment and attendance: a cross-sectional study*. European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, doi: 10.1007/s00787-018-01273-6.

<sup>15</sup> Deighton, J., Lereya, T. L., Casey, P., Patalay, P., Humphrey, N., & Wolpert, M. (2019). *Prevalence of mental health problems in schools: poverty and other risk factors amongst 28,000 adolescents in England*. British Journal of Psychiatry, doi: 10.1192/bjp.2019.19.

<sup>16</sup> Non-formal learning includes a wide range of extra-curricular activities, outdoor pursuits and trips away from home, music and drama lessons, debating and public speaking, attending a youth club and engaging with a youth worker. This can often be referred to as "enrichment" in an education context.

<sup>17</sup> SkillsBuilder Partnership and The Centre for Education and Youth (2021) *How do essential skills influence life outcomes? Evidence Review*. The Centre for Education and Youth with National Citizen Service Trust (2021) *Enriching Education Recovery*: The role of non-formal learning, extra-curricular and enrichment activities in driving a transformational catch-up experience for children and young people.

<sup>18</sup> Oberle, E., Xuejun, R.J., Kerai, S., Guhn, M., Schonert-Reichl, K.A., & Gadermann, A.M. (2020). *Screen time and extracurricular activities as risk and protective factors for mental health in adolescence: A population-level study*. Preventive Medicine, 141.

impacts for young people's wellbeing, including life satisfaction, happiness and anxiety levels.<sup>19</sup> This is particularly important in the context of the mental health emergency young people are currently facing. 51% of young people looking for work thought anxiety was the biggest barrier to accessing work, and a continued lack of basic support, skills development opportunities, and career confidence among young people.<sup>20</sup>



### **Enrichment and non-formal learning can equip young people with the skills they need for life and work**

Young people's social connections also continue to be impacted following the pandemic, with implications for their mental health, confidence, and ability to access social networks. 77% of young people spend most of their free time at home, and 41% of young people do not have opportunities to meet new people or make new friends.<sup>21</sup> Non-formal learning has an important role to play in tackling loneliness and isolation among young people, creating opportunities to build new relationships and engage with their wider community. The skills that can be developed through non-

formal learning and enrichment activities (including confidence, interpersonal, and communication skills) are important not only in addressing loneliness and isolation among young people, but are also highly valued by employers.<sup>22</sup> In 2019, 92% of talent professionals and hiring managers agreed that candidates with strong 'soft' skills are increasingly important.<sup>23</sup>

High quality enrichment programmes, delivered in partnership with the youth sector as part of a broad and balanced education, can improve young people's mental health and wellbeing, whilst also equipping young people with the skills they need for life and work, facilitating their transition into further education and meaningful employment.

### **Opportunities to increase equity of access to high quality enrichment provision, leading to positive outcomes for young people's mental health and employability**

Despite the many positive benefits of enrichment for young people's mental health and wellbeing, and the development of important skills for life and work, there are significant disparities in enrichment provision and participation across the UK. There is a wealth of experience and infrastructure in the youth and education sectors to provide high quality enrichment - from established national organisations like NCS, The Duke of Edinburgh's Award (DofE), or Scouts reaching hundreds of thousands of young people per year, to small grassroots youth clubs closely connected to local schools and communities.

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<sup>19</sup> Kantar for DCMS. (2021). [National Citizen Service 2019 Summer Evaluation: Main report](#). DCMS.

<sup>20</sup> Youth Employment UK (2022) [Youth Voice Census 2022](#).

<sup>21</sup> OnSide (2022) [Generation Isolation](#). OnSide Youth Research November 2022.

<sup>22</sup> The Social Mobility Commission (2019) [An Unequal Playing Field: Extra-Curricular Activities, Soft Skills, and Social Mobility](#). Department for Education and Institute for Policy Research, University of Bath.

<sup>23</sup> Lobosco, M. (2019). [LinkedIn Report: These 4 Ideas Are Shaping the Future of HR and Hiring](#) [Blog Post].

However, opportunities are not distributed equally. Determining factors include the schools that young people attend, the areas they grow up in, and their socio-economic background. This results in unequal access to opportunities for young people to benefit from the potentially transformative impacts of enrichment for their mental health and wellbeing, skills and employability.<sup>24</sup>

### **Employability interventions to help young people get work ready and world ready**

New analysis by the Learning and Work Institute and The Prince's Trust finds that an increase in mental health conditions and low self-confidence are key factors preventing young people from entering employment.<sup>25</sup> Youth unemployment has also been found to lead to an increase in mental health issues, signifying a negatively reinforcing relationship. The effect of youth unemployment on mental health can also continue into adulthood, independent of later employment experiences.<sup>26</sup>

As such, interventions that prevent young people from becoming NEET in the first instance could be prioritised, averting long-term mental health issues that may continue to exclude young people from entering the labour force. UK Year of Service, an NCS pilot initiative, is one example of a programme that can have a positive impact in this space: transforming young people's lives through employment, training and social cohesion, whilst also filling gaps in skills shortages in certain areas of the economy.

Almost half a million (484,000) NEET young people are able to and want to work,<sup>27</sup> signalling a huge missed opportunity and untapped potential impacting the UK economy, health services, and labour market productivity. With the right support, young people can be supported into quality employment.



### **An example of innovative provision: UK Year of Service, an NCS initiative**

UK Year of Service is a unique employability programme that helps young people aged 18-24 get work ready and world ready. UK Year of Service's 9-12 month programmes have three core elements:

1. Paid work placements of 30-35 hours per week
2. Essential skills training
3. Enrichment both within and beyond placement, and support for exit routes into further education or employment

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<sup>24</sup> The Social Mobility Commission (2019) *An Unequal Playing Field: Extra-Curricular Activities, Soft Skills, and Social Mobility*. Department for Education and Institute for Policy Research, University of Bath.

<sup>25</sup> The Centre for Education and Youth with National Citizen Service Trust (2021) *Enriching Education Recovery: The role of non-formal learning, extra-curricular and enrichment activities in driving a transformational catch-up experience for children and young people*.

NCS Trust and Scouts (2021) *Enriching Education Recovery: Summary of new polling with children and young people, parents and teachers*.

<sup>26</sup> The Times Education Commission (2022) *Bringing Out the Best: How to transform education and unleash the potential of every child*. Final report

<sup>27</sup> The Learning and Work Institute and The Prince's Trust (2022) *The Power of Potential: Supporting the future of 'NEET' young people*.

The service placements are diverse, inclusive and accessible to all young people. They are embedded in the local community, focusing on the healthcare, public service, and green sectors. By engaging young people in a way that is compelling, and supporting employers and technical training providers to develop underlying essential skills, UK Year of Service ensures that young people not only access, but also stick with, long term employment and technical skills development.

This is achieved through delivering national cross-employer training and events that support young people and help them develop their personal and social skills, and by providing support directly to employers looking to engage and develop their young talent pipelines. This in turn delivers a triple benefit: personal and professional skills development for young people; increased engagement and talent retention for employers; and social and economic benefit back to society.

Networking is a key aspect of the UK Year of Service national training offer. Young people receive coaching to develop their networking skills, and also benefit from long-term career benefits and opportunities of networking in practice. An expanded professional network provides social connection and common ground with peers, helping to tackle feelings of isolation and loneliness among young people post COVID-19.<sup>28</sup>

*"I have also gained so much confidence in myself over the months as I have been supported by an excellent team (...) It has provided me with a greater understanding of what I want to do in the future and has shown me to ignore my self-doubt"*  
- Ashleigh, Manchester

The first pilot stage placed 278 young professionals into environment, health and social care, and public sector roles. During recruitment, those who faced significant barriers to employability or specific sectors were prioritised. 53% of programme members were claiming government benefits before participating in the UK Year of Service programme. 67% were actively seeking employment before the programme, and 26% were from Black, Asian or Ethnic Minority backgrounds. Early outcome trends show around 70% of those leaving the programme are going directly into education, employment or training.

### **UK Year of Service case study - Luc, 22, Nottingham**

Luc signed up to UK Year of Service as it appealed to him as a brilliant opportunity to get experience in the charity sector and incorporate his passion around impacting the climate crisis. Luc felt he had missed out on work experience opportunities due to the restrictions during the pandemic and noted that connections with peers were hard to maintain during his second and third year at University.

During his UK Year of Service, Luc worked with the Youth Engagement Department with the British Red Cross. Throughout his placement, Luc delivered impact to the communities he worked with, designing and developing a structured programme to school aged children around climate change and environmentalism. Luc developed professionally throughout the programme; improving leadership, communication and problem solving skills as well as developing confidence.

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<sup>28</sup> OnSide Youth Zones (2022) Generation Isolation. Onside Youth Research November 2022.



## Here is what Luc had to say about his experience:

- **Do you think schemes like Kickstart/ UK Year of Service can help young people into employment?**  
“I think these schemes are very important as they give opportunities many businesses may not be willing to give, due to lack of education/ experience. It allows many underprivileged young people to gain valuable experience.”
- **What impact has the programme had on you?:**  
“It has given me experience and in-roads into the charity sector that may have been hard to gain without volunteering. It has given me the chance to work with and educate younger people.”
- **How has NCS helped you?**  
“NCS has provided training and brilliant events to connect and meet others on the scheme. NCS offered the perfect role for me personally, as the description was open, meaning I could follow my interests and incorporate them into my job role.”



## About NCS

Since its inception in 2009, NCS has been the country's flagship youth programme, available to all 16-17 year olds in England. The NCS Trust vision is 'a country of connected, confident, caring citizens where everyone feels at home'.

NCS is the government's public body for youth, with a variety of life-enhancing experiences for young people on the cusp of adulthood, helping them become world ready and work ready, complementing what they learn at school. The outcomes and impact of NCS can be measured by what it gives to young people - increased confidence and resilience, leadership and team skills, improved mental health and wellbeing and greater educational aspirations.

### How NCS is making an impact on young people's mental health, wellbeing, skills and employability - a brief evidence review.

- **Skills and employability:** Two years after doing the NCS programme, participants were still ahead of peers on key work skills like teamwork, communication and leadership.<sup>29</sup> Two in three NCS participants felt more confident about getting a job in the future as a result of participating in the programme<sup>30</sup>
- **Social mobility particularly for disadvantaged young people:** In the long-term, the entry rates for NCS graduates into higher education were, on average, 12% higher than for non-NCS graduates, and are significantly higher for those living in poorer areas<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Ipsos MORI (2017) National Citizen Service 2013 Evaluation – Two Years On: Main Report

<sup>30</sup> Kantar and London Economics for DCMS (2021) National Citizen Service 2019 Summer Evaluation: Main Report.

<sup>31</sup> Jump Projects LTD and Simetrica (2017) A wellbeing and human capital value for money analysis of the NCS 2015 programme.

- **Mental health and wellbeing:**  
Independent evaluations have shown that NCS has a positive impact on participants' wellbeing. There is evidence of improvements in life satisfaction, happiness and anxiety levels, and can show a social return on investment with every £1 spent generating an estimated economic 'wellbeing' benefit of £3.05<sup>32</sup>
- **Feeling positive about the future - new evidence from an evaluation of the 2021 NCS Summer programme:**  
74% of young people agreed that they saw there were more opportunities available to them as a result of participating in the programme. 67% stated that they now feel more confident about getting a job in the future and 67% felt more optimistic about the future. 84% of participants agreed they got a chance to develop skills that will be useful to them in the future, particularly teamwork (87%), speaking (64%) and problem-solving (60%)<sup>33</sup>



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<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> NCS Trust (2021) Summer 2021 Evaluation



**To see how UK Year of Service members  
found their experience, scan the QR code  
below and watch our short videos**



**2025**