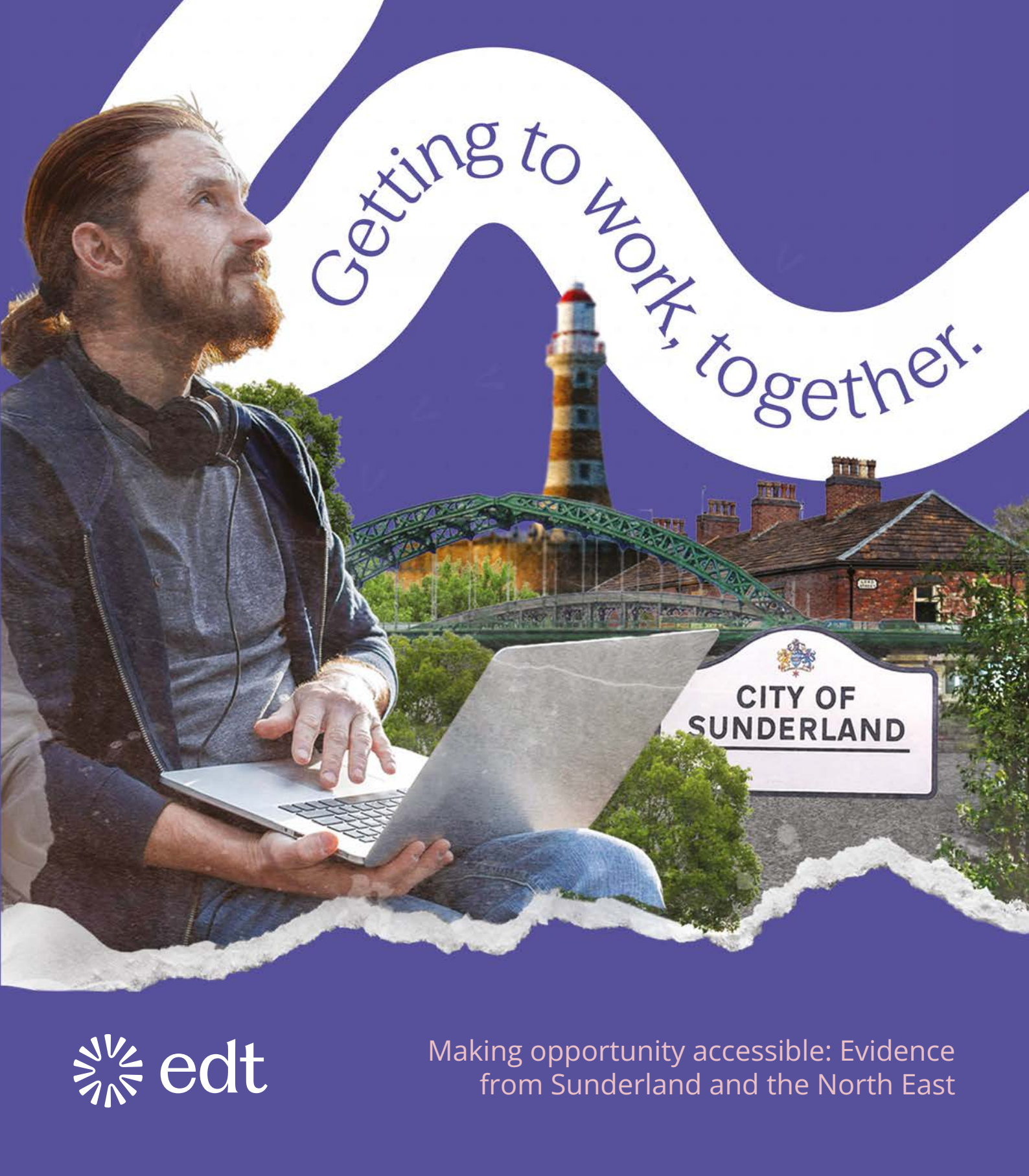


A man with a beard and headphones is shown in profile, looking upwards and to the right while working on a laptop. The background is a collage of Sunderland landmarks, including the Green Bridge, the lighthouse, and a brick building. A white banner with a wavy border contains the text "Getting to work, together." in a blue serif font. A white sign with a crest and the text "CITY OF SUNDERLAND" is also visible.

Getting to work, together.


**CITY OF
SUNDERLAND**



Making opportunity accessible: Evidence
from Sunderland and the North East

Opportunity exists. Access is the challenge.

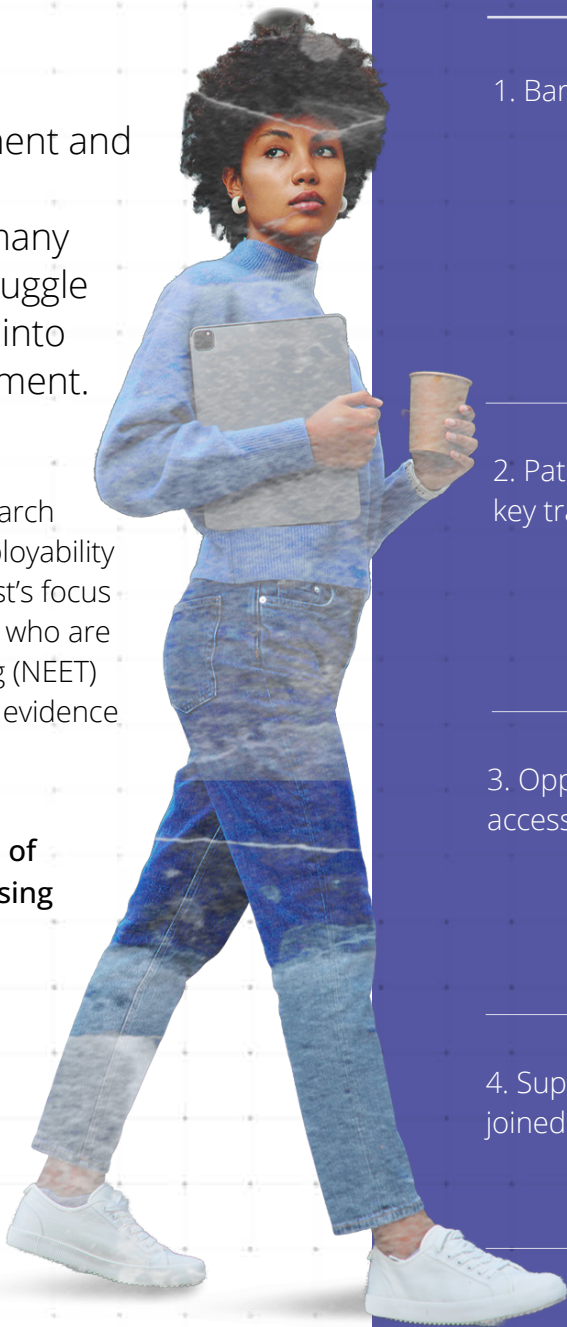
Across the North East, employment and training opportunities exist and investment is growing. Yet too many young people and adults still struggle to access and sustain pathways into education, training, and employment.

This briefing brings together two complementary perspectives: EDT's research with adults and practitioners across employability services in the North East, and Public First's focus groups with young people aged 17 to 23 who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) in Sunderland and the wider region. The evidence points to an important conclusion:

The challenge is often not the absence of opportunity, but the difficulty of accessing and sustaining it.

Find out more about our research, visit:

 pathways.edt.org



What the evidence shows

Key insight

1. Barriers overlap

What the evidence tells us

One of the clearest themes emerging from the research is that people rarely face a single barrier in isolation. People often lose momentum when barriers combine and support falls away at critical moments. Health, caring responsibilities, confidence and financial pressures often combine and can be difficult to address through any single intervention.

2. Pathways break down at key transition points

The research draws attention to the points at which people move between education, training, employment and support. What emerged most clearly was a sense that support had often fallen away at a critical moment.

3. Opportunity is not always accessible

Geography has a strong influence on labour market participation. A job may exist but still be out of reach because of practical constraints such as travel times, or transport connections combined with shift patterns.

4. Support works best when it is joined up

The evidence shows that the most effective support was flexible, personalised and responsive to personal circumstances.

The North East at a glance

17.5%

17.5% of young people aged 16 to 24 in the North East were NEET, the highest regional rate in England, compared with 13.5% nationally (January to March 2026).

What young people are saying...

“We’re applying.
We’re just not getting
the chance.”

Young people spoke about frustration rather than a lack of ambition and effort. Many felt they were making genuine efforts to find work, training, or education opportunities but struggled to gain access to them.



What the evidence tells us...

1. Barriers overlap

People rarely face a single challenge in isolation.

Practitioners described supporting individuals facing combinations of ill health, caring responsibilities, financial pressure, housing insecurity, low confidence, and periods outside the labour market. These factors often reinforce one another and build over time, making participation more difficult and affecting confidence, aspirations, and long-term engagement with work and learning.

This was particularly evident among groups whose experiences are often less visible, including former carers returning to work, parents of children with additional needs, adults struggling with low pay or insufficient hours, and people with limited social or professional networks.

What does this tell us?

Employability challenges often begin long before employment itself becomes an issue.

Disconnection is rarely a single event. People often lose momentum when barriers combine and support falls away at critical moments.

2. Pathways break down at critical moments

Many participants could identify a specific moment when progress stalled: a course that failed to run. An apprenticeship that was oversubscribed. A job ended unexpectedly. Support came to an end before the next step had been secured. Young people consistently expressed a desire to work and progress, but many described frustrations when a pathway into education, training, or employment broke down.

The findings suggest that becoming disconnected is rarely the result of a single event or decision. More often, it happens when support falls away at critical moments.

What does this tell us?

Disengagement is often the result of interrupted journeys rather than a lack of ambition.

“Help arrives too late, or not at all.”

3. Opportunity is not always accessible

One particularly resonant finding from our research was the continuing influence of geography on labour market participation.

Transport emerged repeatedly in discussions with participants, though rarely as a simple question of connectivity. Cost, travel time, shift patterns and caring responsibilities all influenced whether opportunities felt realistic, especially for those without their own car. Practitioners described people limiting their job search to highly localised areas because employment opportunities elsewhere were difficult to reach or sustain.



The impact of transport

The journey from Ryhope to the Nissan factory can take around 16 to 20 minutes by car, compared with approximately 1 hour 13 minutes by public transport, potentially involving three changes.



16 - 20 mins



1 hour 13 mins

What does this tell us?

An available opportunity is not necessarily an accessible one.

4. Support works best when systems work together

Participants valued support that was flexible, personalised, and responsive to their circumstances.

Practitioners highlighted the importance of understanding wider life challenges and helping people navigate multiple systems. Effective support often involved collaboration between employers, colleges, health services, housing providers, community organisations, and specialist services.

Progress was most likely when support adapted to people's circumstances rather than expecting individuals to navigate complexity alone.

What does this tell us?

People make progress when services work together around their needs.

What needs to change?

The research highlights four priorities to make opportunity more accessible:

1. Strengthen transitions

Support people more effectively as they move between education, training, and employment.

2. Intervene earlier

Identify and address barriers before disengagement becomes entrenched.

3. Recognise progression

Value confidence, readiness, wellbeing, and sustained outcomes alongside immediate job entry.

4. Build stronger connections

Strengthen collaboration between employers, local services, education providers, and community organisations.

The challenge ahead

Creating opportunity remains essential. But creating opportunity alone is not enough. For Sunderland, and for places across the UK facing similar challenges, the task is not simply how we create opportunities. It is to ensure more people can access, navigate, and benefit from them.

When opportunity is accessible, participation follows.

To learn more about this research, our work in the North East, and how we support people to access education, skills and employment opportunities, please get in touch.

enquiries@edt.org

LinkedIn: edt

In partnership with

 **PUBLIC FIRST**
A SHGH Company
Deep insights. Straight advice. Real results.

 **edt.org**