

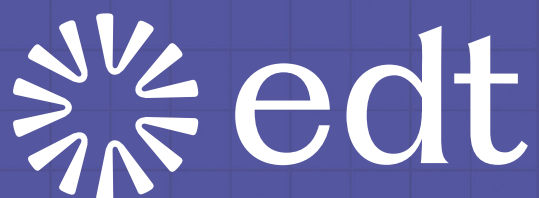


Research

What works in adult employability and careers support?

Insights from the North East

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Executive summary

This report examines how adult employability and careers support is experienced and delivered in Sunderland and the wider North East, drawing on practitioner interviews, participant focus groups, and regional labour market evidence. It explores who is accessing support, the barriers they face, the factors that enable positive outcomes, and where current systems are not aligned with participants' needs.

Context

The North East faces a combination of labour market, economic, and health challenges that shape demand for employability support. Employment rates remain below national averages, economic inactivity is comparatively high, and the region records lower household incomes than anywhere else in England. Sunderland also experiences higher levels of child poverty, poorer health outcomes, and lower healthy life expectancy than the national average. Educational indicators, including GCSE attainment, persistent absence, and rates of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET), suggest some young people face disadvantage before entering the labour market.

Who is accessing support?

Adults accessing employability and careers services are characterised less by distinct demographic groups and more by

overlapping barriers to participation and progression. Participants commonly engage with services following periods of disruption, including unemployment, ill health, caring responsibilities, migration, redundancy, or low confidence. Many experience multiple challenges simultaneously, requiring more intensive and longer-term support. Progression is often non-linear, with individuals moving between employment, training, and periods outside the labour market rather than following a straightforward route into work. Practitioners identified several groups for whom barriers can be particularly acute, including young people, people with disabilities and long-term health conditions, carers and former carers, care-experienced young people, older adults, migrants and refugees, those experiencing transport barriers, and individuals who are employed but financially constrained through low pay or insufficient working hours.

What enables effective support?

Practitioners consistently identified relational, person-centred practice as the foundation of effective support. Building trust, understanding individual circumstances, adapting provision to participants' needs, and maintaining sustained engagement were all viewed as essential. Support was most effective when practitioners could combine empathy and strong guidance skills with local labour market knowledge and employer relationships.

Effective delivery also relies on flexibility. Practitioners described adapting materials, communication styles, appointment formats and delivery settings to support individuals with varying levels of confidence, literacy, language proficiency, and additional needs. Employer engagement and work experience opportunities were identified as particularly valuable in helping participants bridge the gap between guidance and employment.

The role of wider systems and partnerships

Participants' employability journeys are shaped by factors that extend beyond careers support itself. Health, housing, transport, childcare, financial pressures, and access to other services all influence readiness for work and the likelihood of sustained progression. Practitioners therefore emphasised the importance of collaboration with health services, Jobcentre Plus, training providers, community organisations, and employers. Joined-up approaches were viewed as essential for addressing complex and interconnected barriers.

Key challenges

Despite examples of strong practice, practitioners identified several systemic constraints. Many programmes remain structured around short-term, target-driven interventions, limiting opportunities to build trust and support longer-term progression. Participants with complex needs often require repeated interactions and flexible support over extended periods, yet services are frequently constrained by appointment limits, funding requirements and narrow outcome measures.

Additional barriers include language and translation challenges, administrative burdens, insufficient outcome tracking, and limited ability to respond flexibly to participants' changing circumstances. Practitioners also highlighted the tension between standardised delivery models and the personalised support required for individuals who are furthest from the labour market.

Implications

The findings suggest that effective employability and careers support depends less on delivering isolated interventions and more on creating the conditions that enable sustained progression. This requires services that are flexible, relationship-based, and responsive to individual circumstances. It also requires stronger integration with health, community, and support services, greater use of employer-linked opportunities, and recognition that progression often involves incremental steps rather than immediate movement into employment. Policymakers and commissioners should prioritise longer-term engagement, differentiated support, and improved outcome tracking to better reflect the realities of participants' lives and labour market journeys.

Introduction

Across the North East, labour market participation remains below the national average.

ONS data for 2023 showed a regional employment rate of around 74.6%, compared with 75.7% nationally, while the region's economic inactivity rate stood at approximately 24.2%, above the UK average of 21.3% (ONS, 2026a). These figures reflect wider structural challenges across the region, including long-term health conditions, skills mismatches and barriers to accessing employment opportunities.

Within this context, Sunderland's labour market reflects many of the challenges facing employability and careers services across the North East and the wider UK. Although employment in Sunderland has increased in recent years, it remains below the national average, with 72.4% of working-age adults in employment in 2023 compared with around 75% nationally. Economic inactivity also remains a significant challenge. Nearly one quarter (24.8%) of Sunderland's working-age population were neither in work nor actively seeking employment in 2023, a higher proportion than both the regional and national averages. This highlights the continued need for targeted support to help people access, sustain, and progress in employment.

Figure 1: Economic inactivity rate, 2011-2023



Source: ONS (2026a).

These headline figures mask considerable variation in people's circumstances. Adults accessing employability and careers services may be seeking support following redundancy, ill health, caring responsibilities, migration, low confidence, skills gaps, or prolonged periods out of work. Many experience multiple and overlapping barriers that affect both their readiness to engage and the type of support they require. Research suggests that employment transitions are often non-linear, with individuals moving between employment, unemployment, education, and training throughout their lives rather than following a straightforward pathway into work (Bimrose et al., 2008; Milburn, 2026).

Within this context, employability and careers support plays an important role in helping people navigate labour market transitions. Evidence suggests that personalised guidance can support progression into learning and employment, particularly when it is tailored to individual circumstances and delivered by skilled practitioners (Neary et al., 2015). However, wider evidence also demonstrates that employment outcomes are shaped by factors beyond careers support itself, including health, caring responsibilities, transport, childcare, local labour market conditions, and access to wider services (OECD, 2021; House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 2024).

This report explores how adult employability and careers support is delivered in practice, drawing on interviews with practitioners working across the UK. Particular attention is given to issues that are highly relevant

to Sunderland and the wider North East, including economic inactivity, health-related barriers, caring responsibilities, transport challenges, progression for those furthest from the labour market, and the need for flexible, person-centred support. By combining practitioner insights with programme data and existing evidence, the report identifies what enables effective delivery and where current systems could better respond to the realities of people's lives.

24.8%

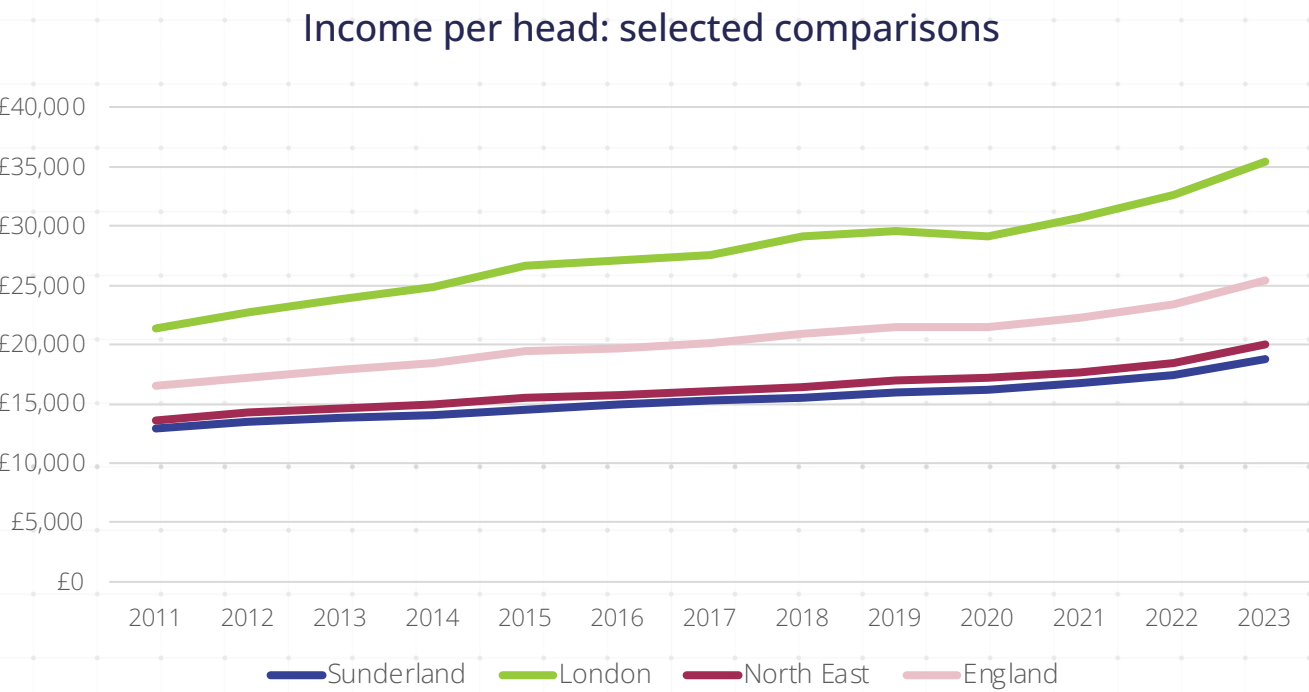
of Sunderland's working-age population were neither in work nor actively seeking employment in 2023.

North East in numbers

Household incomes in Sunderland and the wider North East remain below national averages, highlighting the financial constraints that may affect both participation in the labour market and opportunities for progression. In 2023, the North East recorded the lowest Gross Disposable Household Income (GDHI) per head of any English region at £19,977, compared with an England average of £25,425. Sunderland's GDHI per head was lower still at £18,751, sitting £6,674 below the national average and £1,226 below the regional average (ONS, 2025a). These income disparities provide important context for participants' experiences of financial insecurity, even when employed.

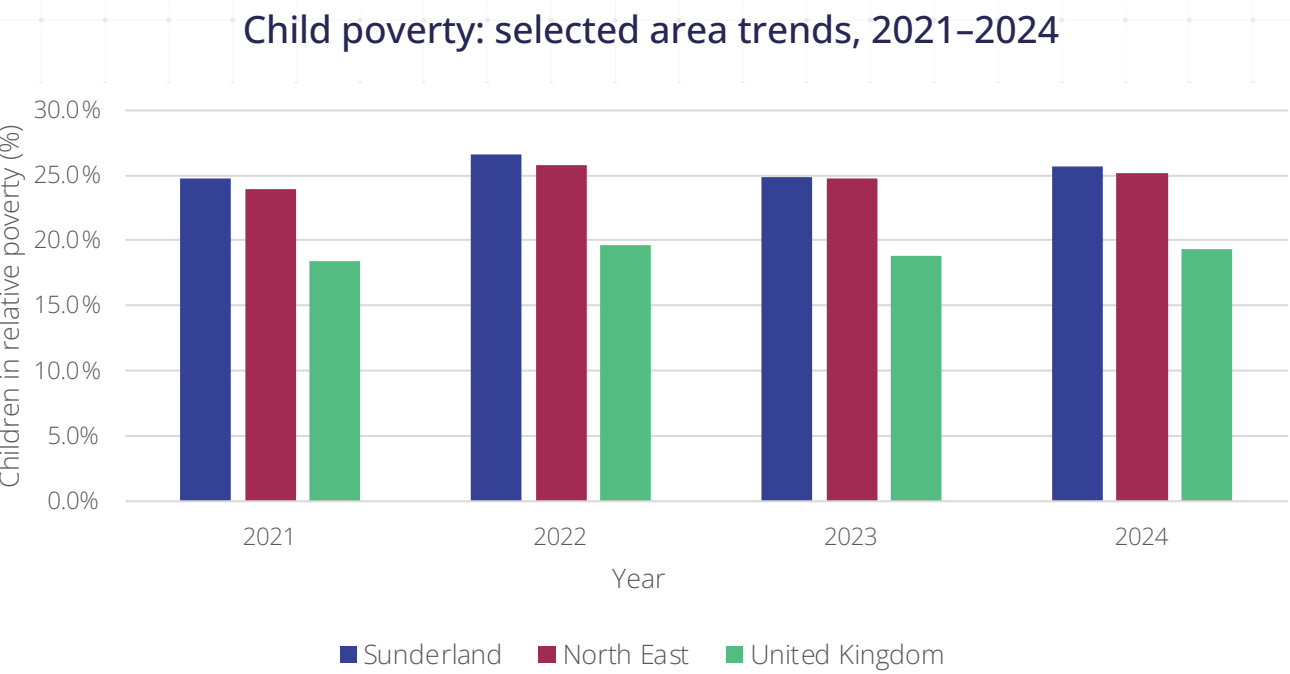
Child poverty remains a significant challenge in Sunderland and the wider North East. In 2024, 25.7% of children in Sunderland were living in poverty, compared with 19.3% across the UK, and slightly above the North East average of 25.1% (ONS, 2026b). These figures suggest that many families are navigating employment, caring, and financial pressures within a context of persistent economic disadvantage.

Figure 2: Income per head, 2011-2023



Source: ONS (2025a).

Figure 3: Child poverty: selected area trends, 2021–2024

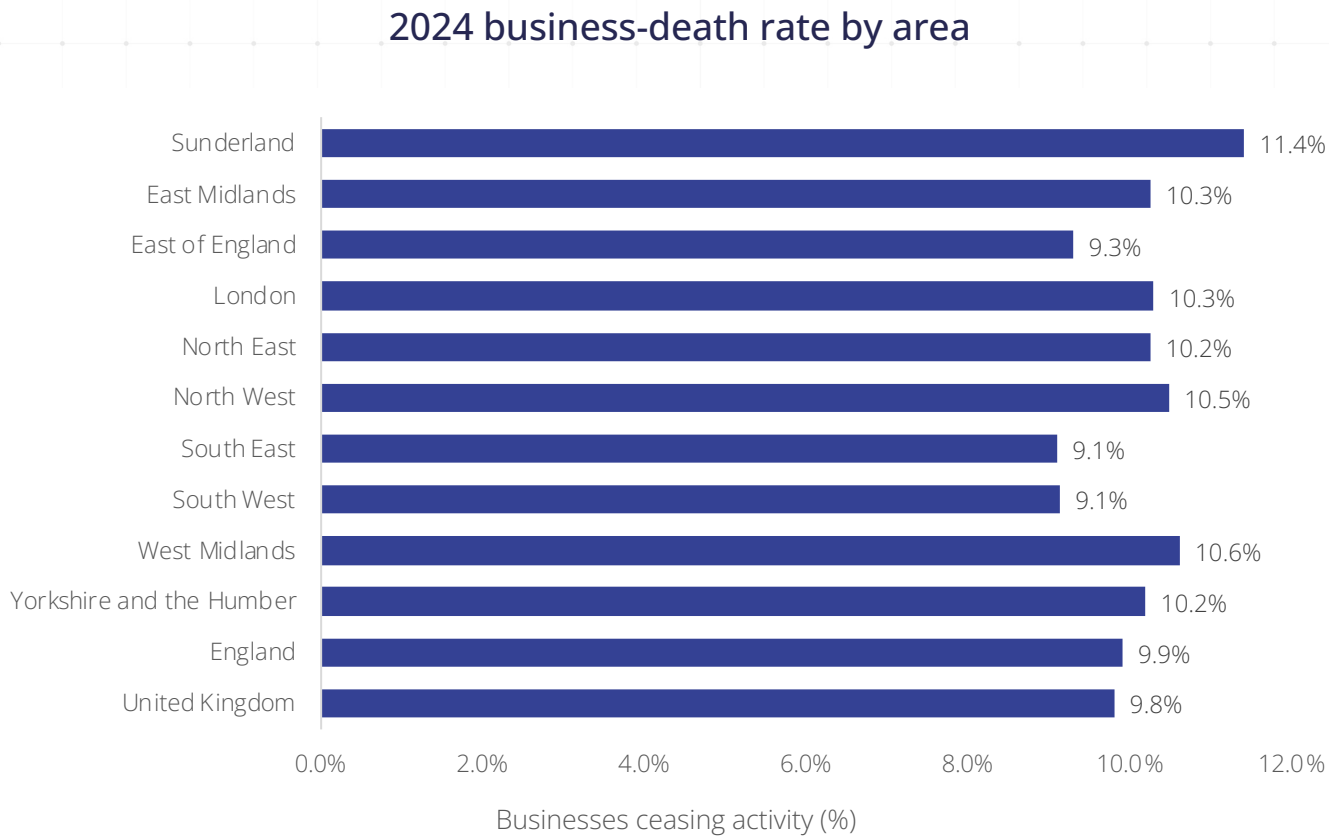


Source: ONS (2026b).

The local economic environment has also experienced ongoing pressures in recent years. Although business closure rates declined after peaking in 2021-22, Sunderland's business death rate remained above both the England and UK averages in 2024. At 11.4%, the rate was 1.5 percentage points higher than England and 1.6 points higher than the UK, despite improving from 2023 (ONS, 2025b). This may indicate continued challenges within the local business environment, with potential implications for job creation and employment opportunities.

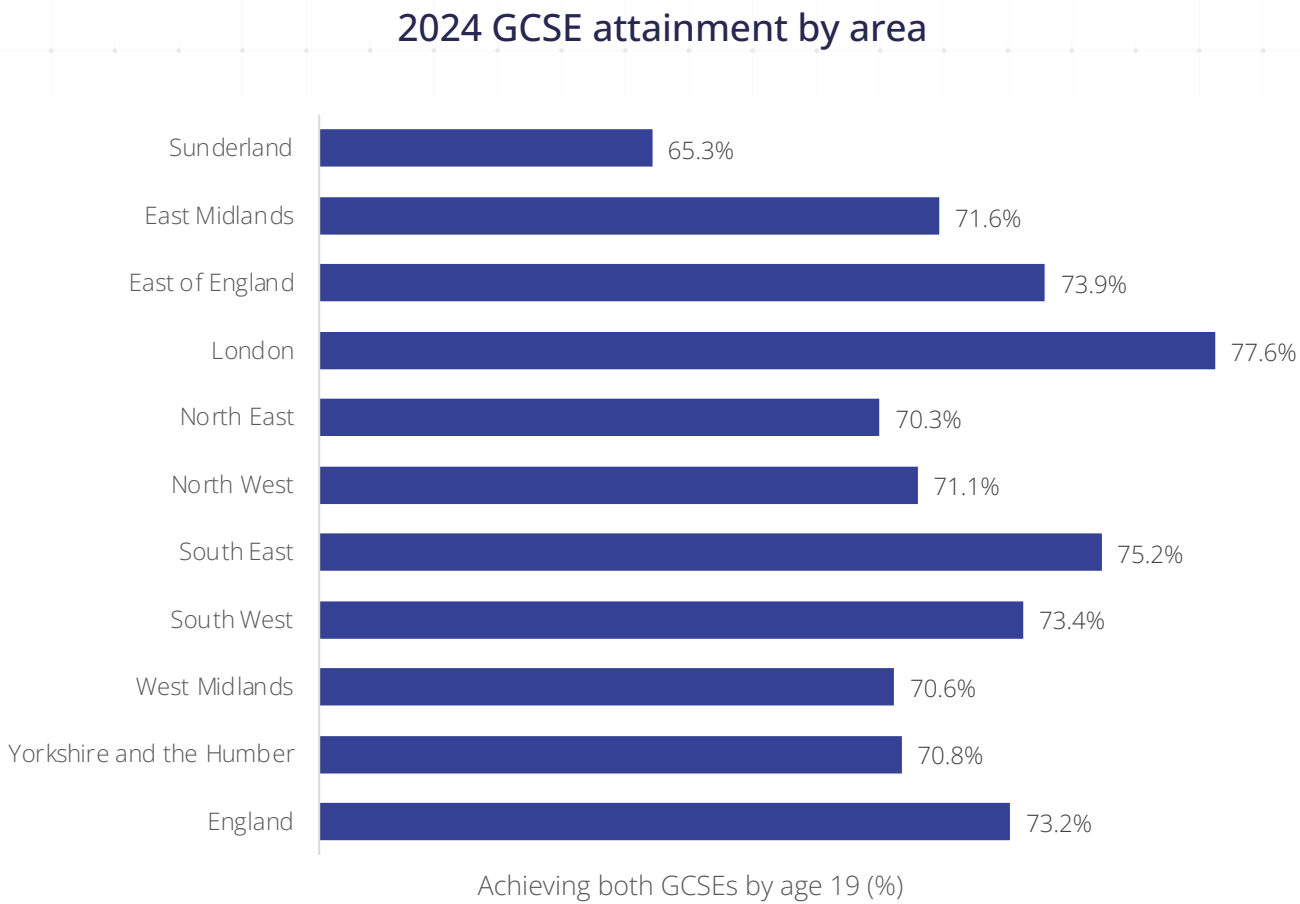
Educational attainment in Sunderland also remains below regional and national averages. In 2024, 65.3% of pupils achieved grade 4 or above in English and mathematics GCSEs, compared with 73.2% across England and 70.3% across the North East. The North East recorded the lowest attainment of any English region, while Sunderland's performance was lower still (ONS, 2026c). These patterns may have implications for later employment, training, and progression opportunities, particularly for young people facing additional barriers to labour market participation.

Figure 4: Business death rate by area, 2024



Source: ONS (2025b).

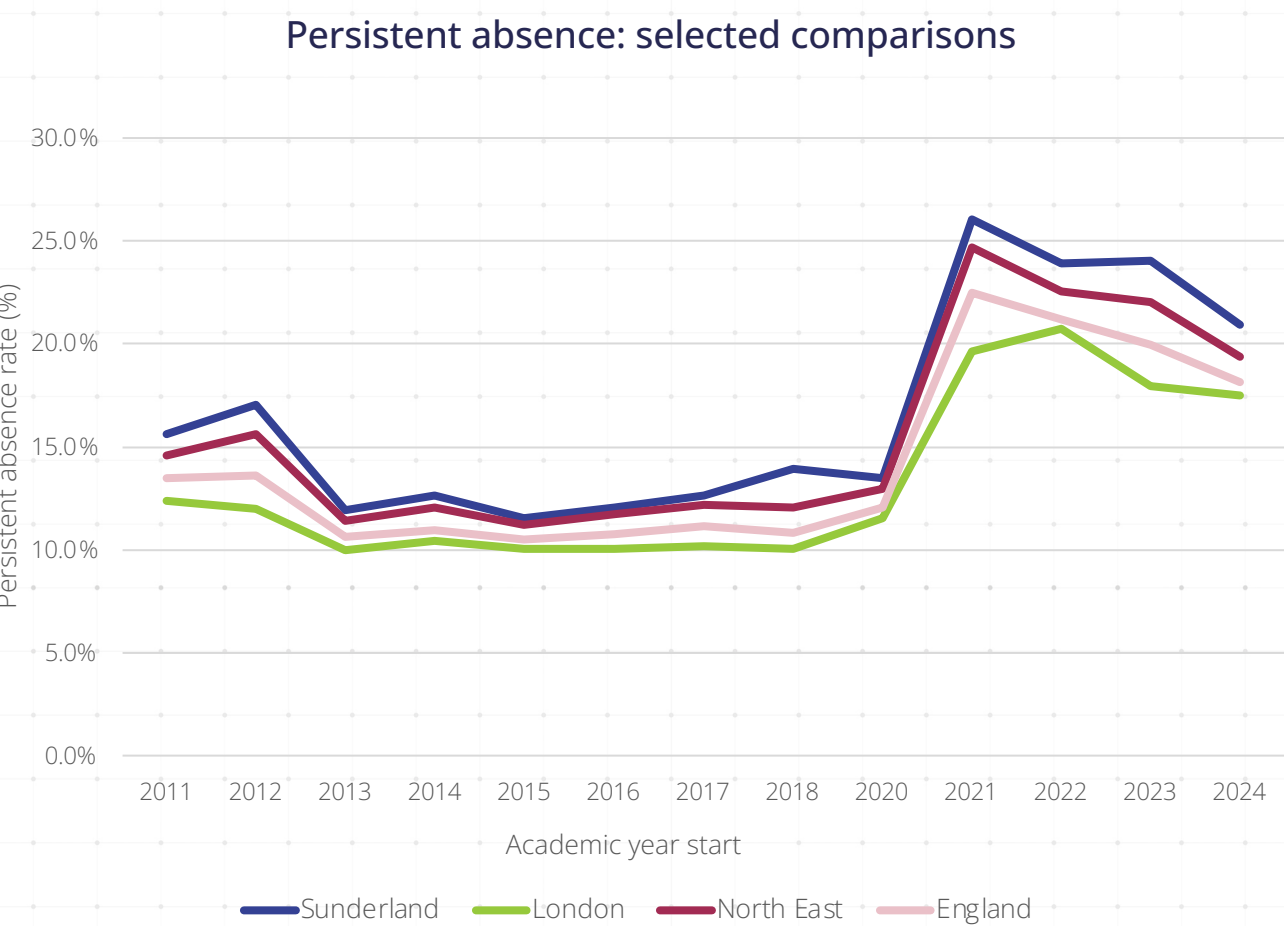
Figure 5: GCSE attainment by area, 2024



Source: ONS (2026c).

School attendance patterns provide further context for understanding the challenges facing some young people in the region. Persistent absence increased sharply following the COVID-19 pandemic and remained above pre-pandemic levels in 2024. Sunderland recorded a persistent absence rate of 20.9% in 2024, compared with 18.1% nationally and 19.4% across the North East. The North East had the highest rate of persistent absence of any English region in 2024 (ONS, 2026d). Persistent absence is associated with poorer educational outcomes and an increased risk of becoming NEET, suggesting that some young people may encounter barriers to labour market participation before they leave education.

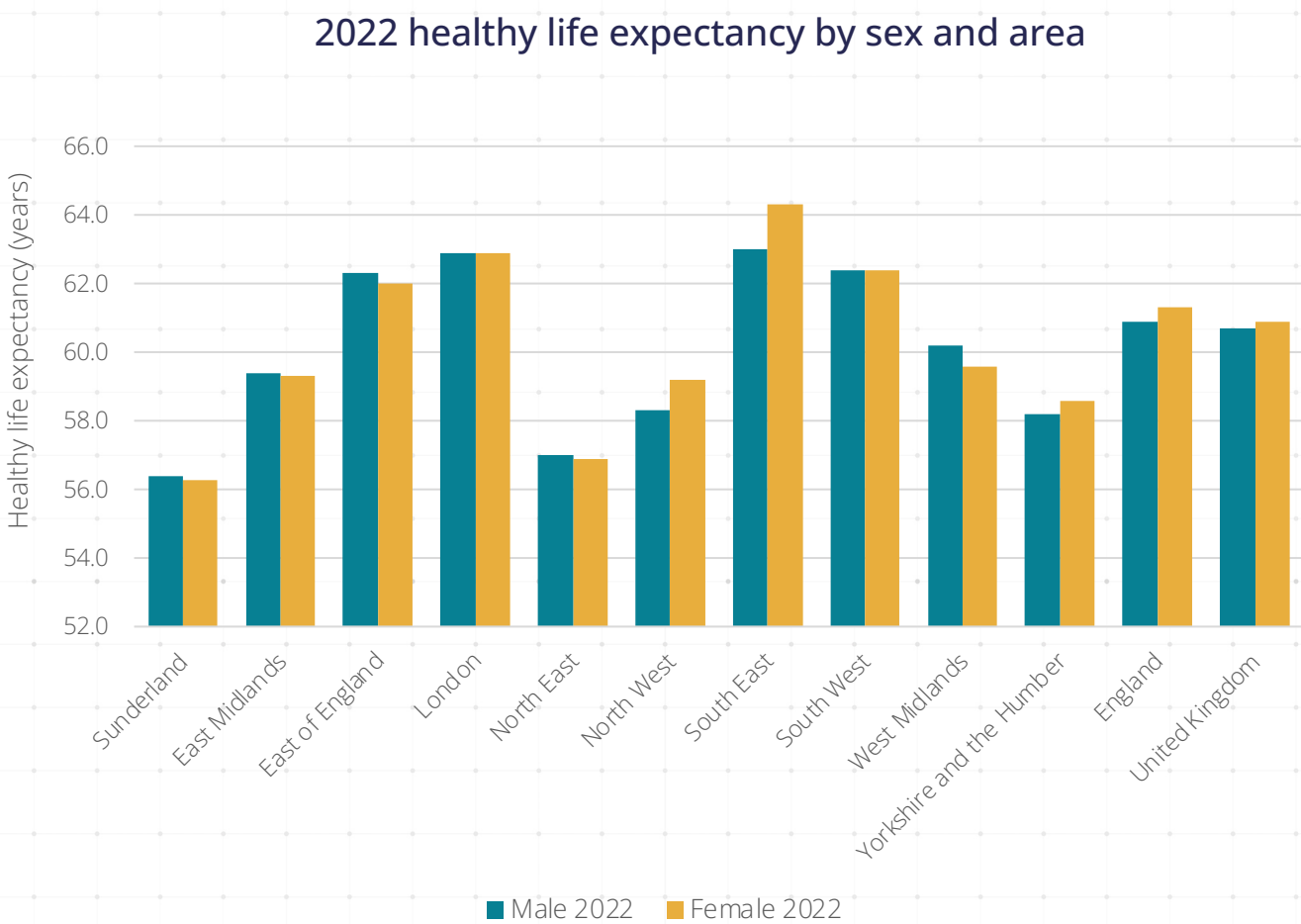
Figure 6: Persistent absence: selected comparisons, 2011-2024



Source: ONS (2026d).

Health outcomes provide important context for understanding the barriers identified by participants and practitioners. In 2022, healthy life expectancy in Sunderland was 56.4 years for males and 56.3 years for females, around 4.5 and 5.0 years lower than the England averages respectively. The North East recorded the lowest healthy life expectancy of any English region (ONS, 2026e). These disparities are likely to influence labour market participation and may help explain the prominence of issues relating to disability, long-term health conditions, wellbeing and readiness for work throughout this report.

Figure 7: Healthy life expectancy by sex and area, 2022



Source: ONS (2026e).

Methodology

This report combines qualitative evidence from adults accessing employability, careers and employment support services in Sunderland with practitioner insights and wider North East labour market evidence. Practitioner interviews were conducted with individuals delivering employability and careers support across a range of roles, programmes, and settings, exploring how support is delivered in practice, what enables effective provision, and where constraints or gaps remain.

Service user evidence was gathered through small in-person focus groups with adults participating in employability-linked training and support in Sunderland. Discussions explored participants’ experiences of seeking work, accessing support, and navigating barriers to employment. While findings are primarily illustrated through participant experiences in Sunderland, they are situated within the wider North East context and supplemented by practitioner perspectives and regional evidence to identify themes that may have broader relevance across the region.

Practitioners reflected on their experiences of supporting adults with a wide range of needs and circumstances, including young people who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET), people with disabilities and long-term health conditions, adults aged 50 and over, carers, parents, and refugees and newly arrived migrants. Participants in the Sunderland focus groups described diverse

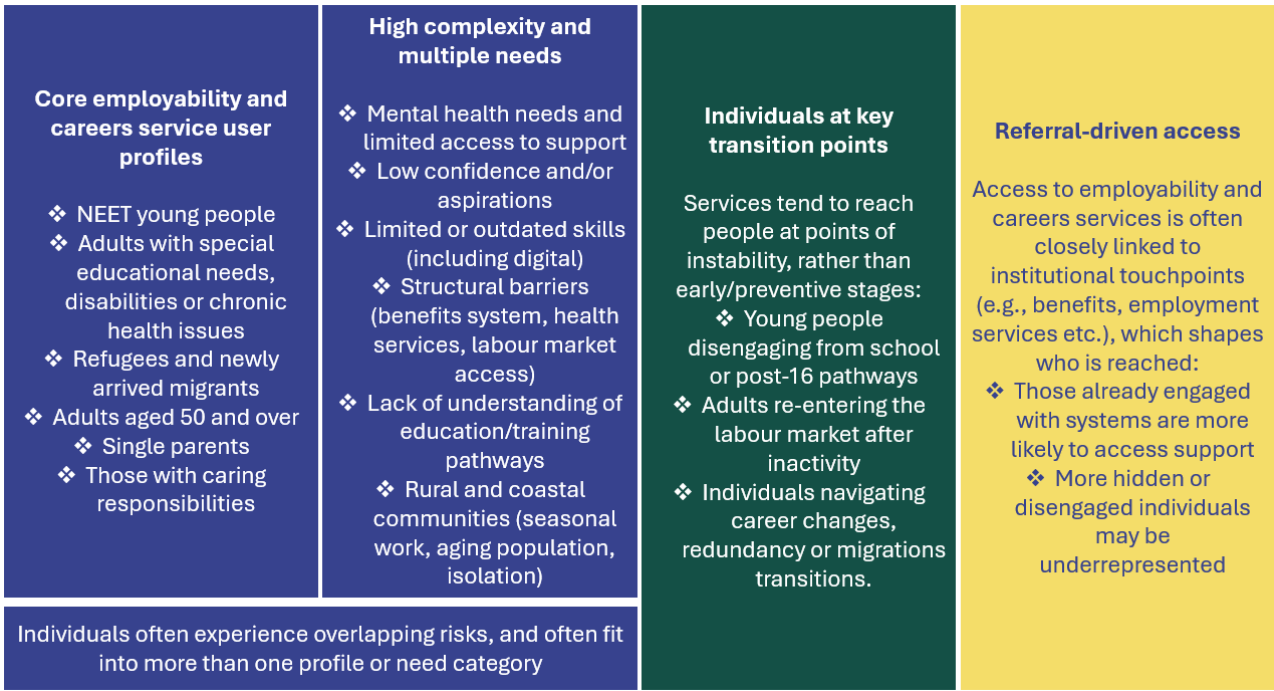
employment, health, financial, and personal circumstances, providing first-hand insight into the realities of seeking work, accessing support, and navigating labour market transitions.

The findings demonstrate how employability and careers support is shaped by individuals’ wider circumstances, including health, confidence, wellbeing, caring responsibilities, housing, communication needs, and readiness to engage. By combining participant experiences from Sunderland with practitioner perspectives and wider North East evidence, the report identifies key enablers of effective provision, emerging and under-recognised participant groups, patterns of collaboration, and structural challenges within adult employability services. Findings are contextualised using regional and national evidence to consider their implications for policy, practice, and future research.

Key findings

Who are the adults accessing employability and careers support?

Figure 8: Overview of adults accessing employability and careers support



Adults accessing employability and careers services are characterised less by discrete categories than by complex and interrelated barriers to participation and progression. Participants typically engage at points of disruption – such as unemployment, ill health, caring responsibilities, or migration – and often present with multiple factors that shape both their readiness to engage and their pathways into work.

This reflects wider evidence, including the interim Milburn review (2026), which highlights that transitions into employment are frequently non-linear and shaped by both structural and personal factors, rather than resolved through short-term or single interventions. Understanding adult employability, therefore, requires a focus not only on participant characteristics, but on distance from the labour market and the intensity of support required.

Post-pandemic emotional and mental health needs

Many practitioners observed a rise in younger adults presenting with mental health challenges – higher levels of anxiety, reduced confidence, and social difficulties – often linked to COVID-19’s disruption of education and early work experience. One practitioner reported seeing “a higher number of young people that are coming through with more health conditions that are proving a barrier to work or ones where they’ve missed out maybe on education, whether that’s COVID-related or health barriers or SEND barriers.” These individuals may be classified as NEET or unemployed, but their emotional and mental health needs are a distinctive barrier requiring careful attention.

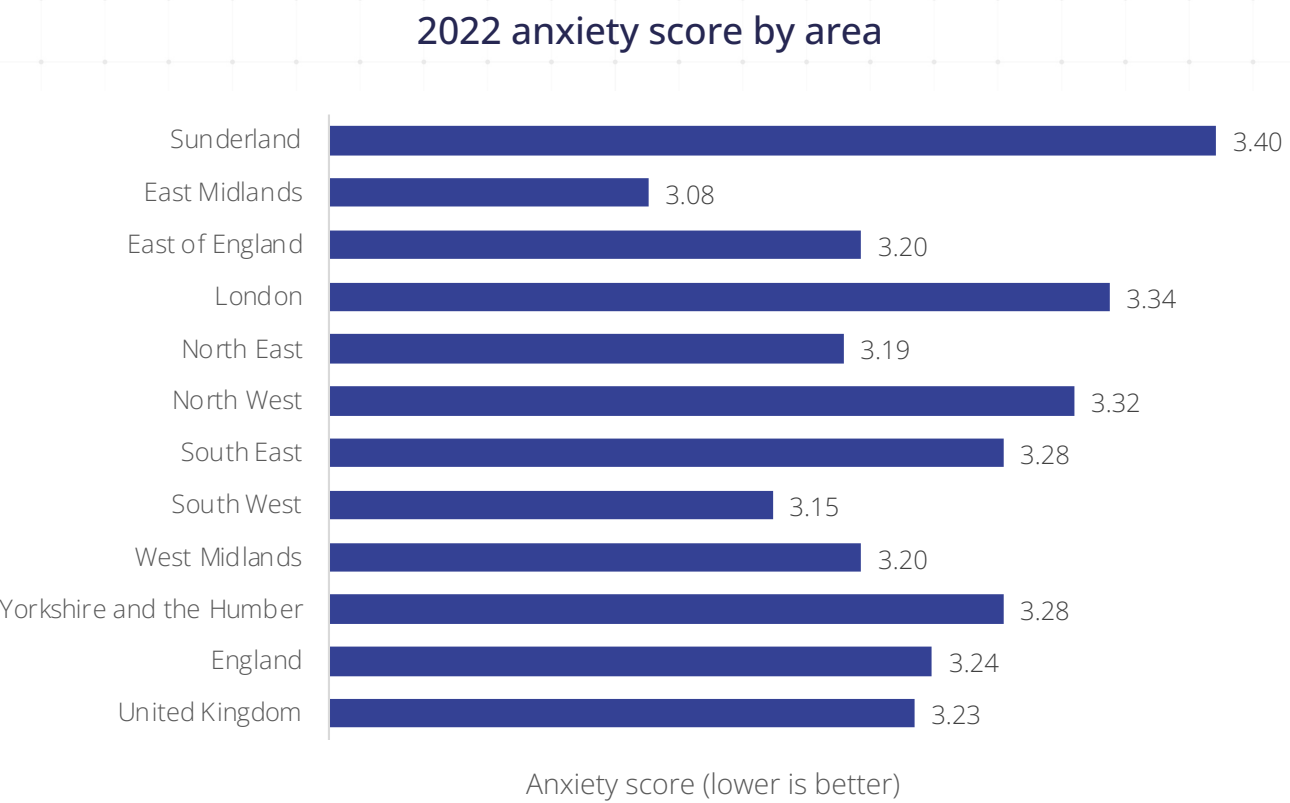
Participant accounts illustrate how repeated unsuccessful applications can affect confidence and motivation. One participant described applying for work and receiving “total radio silence”, saying it felt like “throwing yourself against a brick wall” and was “soul crushing and demoralising”. Another linked their lack of confidence to feeling “three years behind” peers who had gone straight into work rather than following an academic route.

Personal wellbeing data (which combines ONS’s life satisfaction, feeling worthwhile, and happiness scores), also suggests a weaker wellbeing position in the North East than nationally, with the latest personal wellbeing score at 29.97, compared with 30.07 for England (ONS, 2023a). Sunderland records a lower score still, at 29.80, alongside a reported anxiety score of 3.40, which is higher than both regional and national averages. This reinforces practitioners’ accounts that anxiety, low confidence, and wider mental health challenges are important barriers to education, employment, and sustained labour market participation among both adults and young adults (ONS, 2023a).

29.97

North East wellbeing score compared with 30.07 for England.

Figure 9: Anxiety score by area, 2022



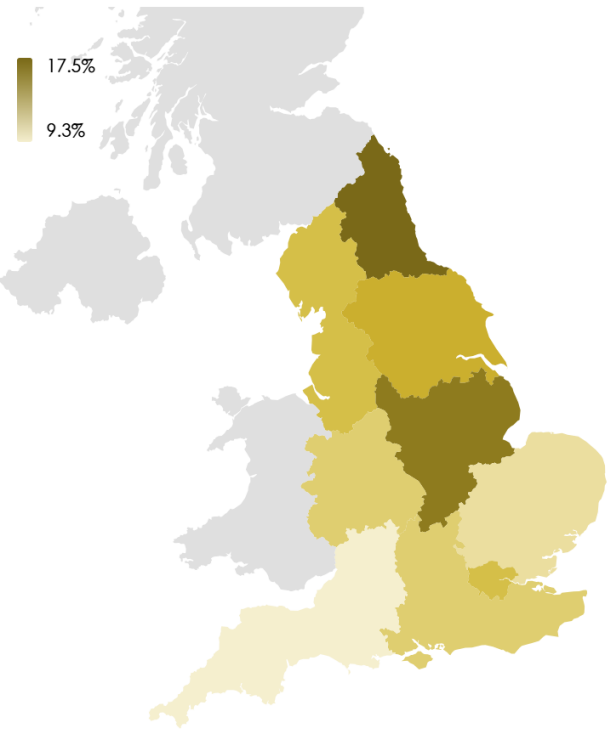
Source: ONS (2023a).

Young people (aged 16–24)

Practitioners cautioned against viewing young adults as a single, homogeneous group. While some young people accessing support experience significant disadvantage, others are highly qualified but struggle to gain a foothold in the labour market. Practitioners highlighted recent graduates and university-educated young adults who do not present with traditional employability barriers, but nevertheless encounter difficulties securing entry-level roles because employers frequently require previous workplace experience. This suggests that challenges for some young adults are less about qualifications and more about translating educational achievement into employment opportunities, highlighting the importance of work experience (including placements), and employer engagement as part of progression pathways.

Youth NEET rates in the North East are the highest in England (January-March 2026) at 17.5%, compared to a national rate of 13.5%.

Figure 10: Regional NEET rates among 16 to 24-year-olds in England, January–March 2026 (%)



Source: Youth Futures Foundation (2026) NEET Data Dashboard, based on Annual Population Survey data

People with disabilities and long-term health conditions

Health-related barriers may be particularly significant within the North East. Census data shows that the North East has the highest proportion of disabled people of any English region, with 21.2% of residents classified as disabled compared with 17.7% nationally (ONS, 2023c). Among the working-age population, around 28.0% report a disability, compared with 25.3% across England excluding London. Sunderland also records a relatively high prevalence of disability, with 23.1% of residents reporting a disability in Census 2021, compared with 17.8% across England and Wales. Higher rates of disability, alongside elevated levels of economic inactivity linked to long-term health conditions, suggest that health and wellbeing barriers are likely to play an important role in shaping participation in education, training, and employment across both the North East and Sunderland.

Service user evidence also shows how health barriers can become embedded within wider material circumstances. One focus group participant linked their current health issue to leaving work and described housing as exacerbating the problem, while also being unable to move without first securing employment. This illustrates the circular relationship between health, housing, and work readiness.

Parental and caring responsibilities

Caring responsibilities represent an important but sometimes overlooked barrier to employment across the North East. Census 2021 data shows that the North East has the highest proportion of unpaid carers of any English region, with 10.1% of residents providing unpaid care compared with 8.9% nationally. The region also has the highest proportion of residents providing 50 hours or more of unpaid care per week, indicating that many carers face substantial demands on their time and availability (ONS, 2023b). These responsibilities can restrict participation in education, training, and employment, particularly where flexible working arrangements, affordable care provision, or local support services are unavailable.

These challenges can be particularly acute for parents caring for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) or additional medical needs. Practitioners interviewed highlighted that childcare responsibilities, combined with their own or their children’s support needs, often require a level of flexibility that many employers do not offer. As one practitioner explained, parents of children with neurodiverse needs can struggle to gain employment “because they need employers who can offer some flexibility or an option to work from home”.

Evidence from the North of East supports these findings. Research conducted by Health Equity North, Newcastle University, and the

University of Manchester found that many parents struggled to access childcare that met their family's needs, with consequences for employment, wellbeing, and financial security. The study identified barriers relating to affordability, availability, and the inflexibility of childcare provision, all of which affected parents' ability to obtain and sustain employment. The research further highlighted that gaps in childcare provision were particularly damaging for families with SEND and medical needs, who often experienced additional difficulties finding suitable support (Bennett, Crowe, and Scott, 2025; Health Equity North, 2025).

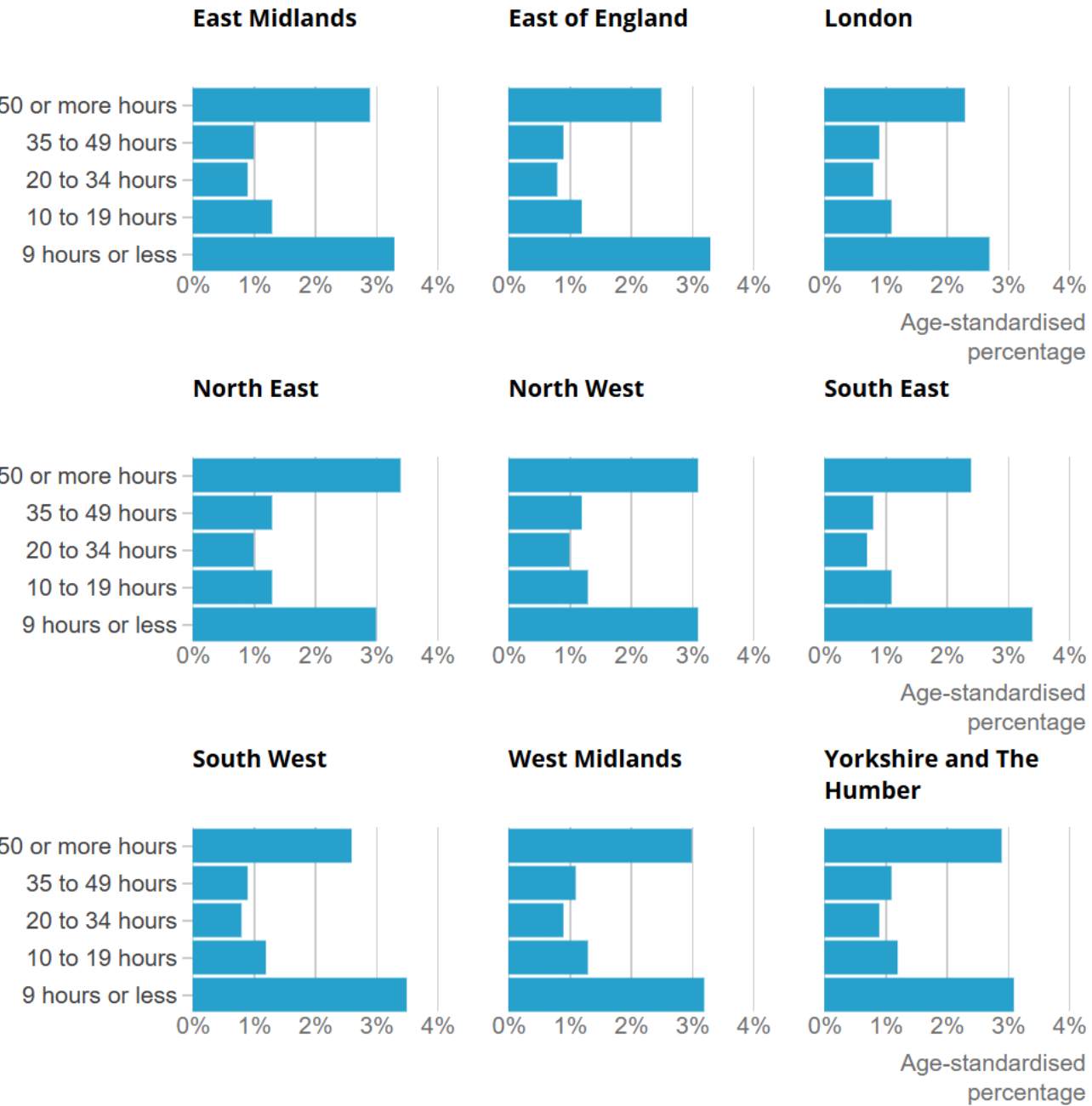
This reflects wider evidence that parents of disabled children frequently reduce their working hours, move into lower-paid employment, or leave the labour market altogether due to difficulties securing suitable childcare and flexible working arrangements (Working Families, 2012). Local evidence also suggests that caring responsibilities can constrain employment opportunities and aspirations if appropriate support and flexibility are not available. Sunderland Carers Centre reports that 45% of carers in the city combine paid work with caring responsibilities, while Sunderland's Carers Strategy recognises the need to support carers to fulfil their employment and educational aspirations alongside their caring role (Sunderland Carers Centre, 2024; Sunderland City Council, 2022).

Without accessible part-time, flexible, or home-based employment opportunities, alongside appropriate childcare and support services, many parent-carers are likely to face ongoing barriers to re-engaging with work, training, and progression opportunities.

10.1%

of residents are providing unpaid care. The North East has the highest proportion of unpaid carers of any English region

Figure 11: Unpaid caring responsibilities in the North East compared with England and Wales



Source: ONS (2023b).

Former carers returning to employment

Former carers may represent an under-recognised group within adult employability provision. While caring responsibilities are often considered a barrier while they are actively being undertaken, practitioners highlighted that the effects can persist long after caring has ended.

Individuals returning to the labour market following extended periods of caring may experience reduced confidence, outdated knowledge of recruitment processes, gaps in employment history, and weakened professional networks. Practitioners noted the importance of understanding whether previous caring responsibilities continue to affect an individual's confidence, aspirations, and employment prospects when tailoring support. Many former carers may also be navigating a significant personal transition, rebuilding routines, social contacts, and career aspirations after years spent outside paid employment. As a result, they may require support that goes beyond job search activities alone, including confidence-building, skills refreshment, guidance on communicating employment gaps to employers, and opportunities to reconnect with labour market and professional networks. Employability and careers services should therefore recognise that distance from the labour market may be influenced not only by current caring responsibilities, but also by the longer-term legacy of unpaid caring roles.

Family, social capital and support networks

Practitioners highlighted that barriers to employment are not solely shaped by skills, qualifications, or labour market conditions, but also by the extent of individuals' social and support networks. Several contributors identified adults who lack friends, family members, or wider social connections able to provide advice, encouragement, practical support, or help navigating employment opportunities. Practitioners also emphasised the importance of understanding an individual's wider support network, including family, friends, and engagement with other services, before meaningful support can be provided. For some participants, employability support therefore serves a broader function than career guidance alone, compensating

for the absence of informal networks that can provide feedback on applications, share labour market information, identify opportunities, or offer practical and emotional support during periods of unemployment. Practitioners further noted that not everyone has access to family or social networks capable of providing practical or financial assistance, and highlighted the role of social capital in helping people access opportunities. This suggests that employability and careers support should not only focus on individual employability skills, but also recognise the importance of social connections, trusted relationships, and community-based support in enabling progression into work.

For these reasons, young people who are currently in care (looked after by a local authority) or who have previous experience of the care system may face particularly significant barriers when navigating transitions into education, training and employment. Educational progression is substantially lower among looked-after children than among their peers. Nationally, only 13% of looked-after children progress to higher education by age 19, compared with 45% of other young people (Civitas, 2022). Evidence from the North East suggests participation in higher education may be lower still, with research reporting that only 4% of looked-after young people in the region progressed to higher education, compared with 33% of young people overall (Mazzoli Smith and Laing, 2014).

Poorer educational outcomes appear to continue into early adulthood. Department for Education statistics show that 31% of care leavers aged 22 in the North East were NEET, compared with 28% nationally (Department for Education, 2025). In Sunderland, 20% of care leavers aged 22 and 17% of those aged 23 were recorded as NEET, compared with 14% and 10% respectively who were in education, employment, or training. These figures should be regarded as conservative estimates, as a substantial proportion of care leavers were recorded as not in contact with local authority services and their education, employment, or training status was therefore unknown. The true proportion experiencing difficulties in education, employment, or training may therefore be higher than the published NEET rates suggest.

Although these figures are not directly comparable because they relate to different age groups and populations, only 13.3% of all 16 to 24-year-olds nationally were

NEET in 2025 (Office for National Statistics, 2025c), compared with 28% of care leavers aged 22 nationally and 31% in the North East. This suggests that care-experienced young people face a substantially greater risk of labour market disengagement than their peers. Taken together, these findings suggest that care-experienced young people in Sunderland and the wider North East face persistent disadvantages in navigating education and employment transitions. The evidence highlights the importance of sustained relationships, mentoring, practical support and access to wider social networks and opportunities in helping young people progress successfully into adulthood.

The role of social capital may also extend to housing security. Homelessness statistics highlight the importance of informal support networks. In England, the most common reason for households being owed a homelessness relief duty was that family or friends were no longer willing or able to accommodate them (MHCLG, 2025). These findings highlight how access to stable housing, employment, and wider opportunities can be influenced not only by individual skills and circumstances, but also by the availability of supportive relationships and practical assistance during periods of crisis.

Adults aged 50 and older

Older adults may represent an important priority group within the North East labour market. The region has an older age profile than many parts of England, with 33.4% of the working-age population aged 50 to 64, and almost half (49.7%) of all adults aged 50 or over (North East Evidence Hub, 2023b). Labour market outcomes for this group are comparatively weak. The employment rate for people aged 50 to 64 in the North East was 65.8%, the lowest among the eight Core City areas and 5.5 percentage points below the England excluding London rate. In addition, the employment rate for those aged 50 to 64 was 16.2 percentage points lower than for those aged 35 to 49, a larger age-related employment gap than observed across England excluding London (14.8 percentage points). These findings suggest that older adults face greater barriers to labour market participation within the North East than in many other parts of the country.

In work but financially constrained

Some participants are already in part-time work and not seeking a new job, but need extra hours or income due to benefits rules or cost-of-living pressures. This group often overlaps with other circumstances (they might also be carers, have health issues, etc.), but they share a common challenge: their current employers have no additional hours available, yet they are reluctant to leave roles they enjoy. One practitioner described these “really challenging” cases, quoting a service user recently seen: “I love my job. I don’t want another job. I just need an extra two hours a week but I can’t get that because my employer doesn’t have enough.”

Analysis of Office for National Statistics Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings data found that approximately 191,000 jobs in the North East were paid below the real Living Wage in 2025, representing 18.8% of jobs in the region, with the North East recording the highest rate of low pay in the UK (Living Wage Foundation, 2026).

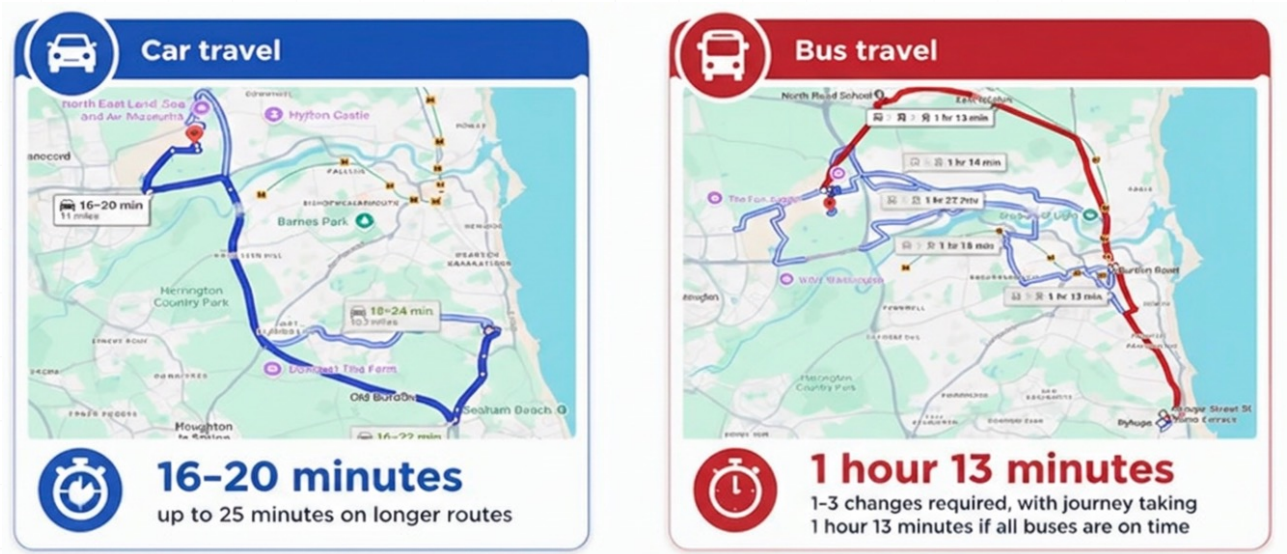
Transport-limited

Transport limitations can represent a significant barrier to employment, particularly in areas where job opportunities are geographically dispersed or poorly connected by public transport. Evidence from the North East Combined Authority shows substantial variation in access to employment centres across the region, with residents in some areas facing much longer journeys and fewer accessible employment opportunities than those living in urban centres (North East Evidence Hub, 2023a).

This was strongly reflected in focus group evidence. Participants described transport as narrowing the geography of realistic job search, particularly where opportunities were perceived to be in Washington or Newcastle rather than Sunderland. One participant said: “Transport is my biggest barrier. If I drove and had a car this would make it much easier to access vacancies in places like Washington”, while another noted that not driving made employment options more limited. These challenges may be compounded by the costs associated with driving lessons, vehicle ownership and fuel, which can place private transport beyond the reach of some jobseekers.

The difference between car travel and public transport is noted in the illustrative figure below.

Figure 12: Example comparison of car vs public transport travelling from Ryhope to Nissan factory for a 7am shift start



Source: Google Maps (accurate as of 13 August 2026)

Research commissioned by Tees Valley Combined Authority similarly highlights how transport costs, limited services, and poor connectivity can restrict access to work, education and training opportunities (Teesside University, 2026). These findings suggest that transport barriers can reduce the range of jobs that individuals are realistically able to access, particularly where opportunities are concentrated in locations that are difficult to reach without private transport.

Transport barriers are not limited to journey times and connectivity. Practitioners also highlighted the financial costs associated with taking up employment, particularly for people who are unemployed or on very low incomes. Even where suitable opportunities exist, some individuals may struggle to afford transport costs during the period between starting work and receiving their first wage. Practitioners identified financial assistance with initial travel costs and flexible participant support funds as important mechanisms for helping individuals make the transition into employment. These findings suggest that the affordability of accessing work can be as important as the physical availability of transport connections in determining whether job opportunities are realistically attainable.

Practitioners also highlighted the importance of hyper-local labour markets. Several noted that participants often searched for opportunities within a highly constrained geography, focusing on locations they could realistically access rather than considering a wider travel-to-work area. In some cases, participants were described as asking about opportunities within a specific neighbourhood or postcode rather than across Sunderland more broadly. Practitioners argued that support and employment opportunities are therefore most effective when delivered within local communities and linked to jobs that are realistically accessible from where people live. This suggests that labour market participation is shaped not only by the availability of jobs, but by the extent to which those jobs are perceived as geographically attainable.

Migrants, asylum seekers and refugees

Migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees represent a small but increasingly important component of the North East labour market, with specific needs when it comes to employability. The region has the lowest proportion of foreign-born residents in England, with around 8% of the working-age population born outside the UK compared with approximately 19% nationally (Migration Observatory, 2026). These figures, however, are higher in urban centres, at 17.4% in Newcastle and 12.3% in Middlesbrough, with all but one local authority in the North East exceeding the England national average of supported asylum seekers per 10,000 people. This has implications for employability and careers provision, particularly when taking into account the additional support required for individuals who are not proficient in English.

Table 1: Supported asylum seekers and English-language proficiency by local authority

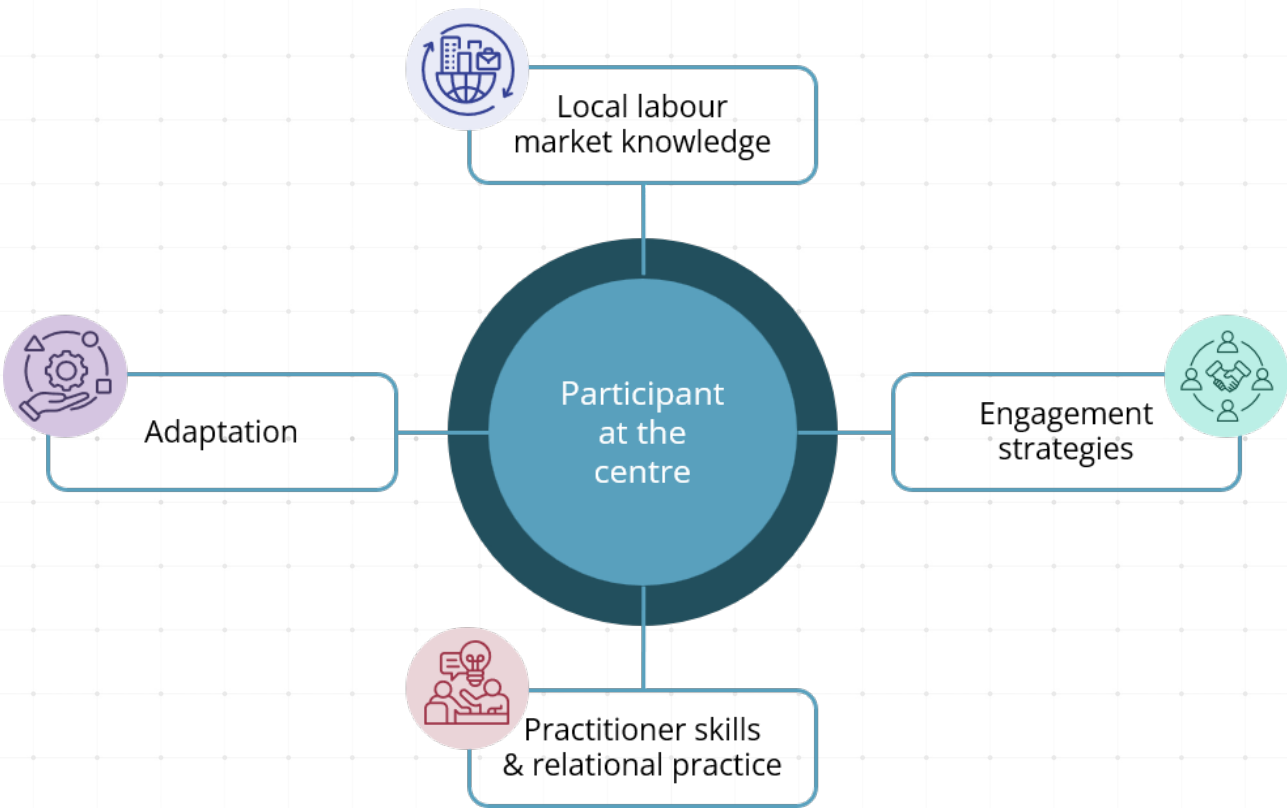
Local Authority	Supported asylum seekers per 10,000	Percentage of foreign-born population who do not have proficiency in English
County Durham	10	5.8%
Redcar and Cleveland	18	9.2%
Darlington	20	10.0%
Northumberland	20	5.9%
North Tyneside	21	8.4%
Sunderland	28	8.9%
Gateshead	33	12.5%
Newcastle-upon-Tyne	36	12.0%
Stockton-on-Tees	39	9.7%
South Tyneside	40	11.2%
Middlesbrough	43	14.4%
Hartlepool	44	14.3%
England	16	10%

Source: Migration Observatory, 2026

Enablers of successful delivery

Practitioners interviewed in the North East identified several critical enablers that underpin effective adult employability and careers support in the region. In particular, they pointed to the value of practitioners’ diverse backgrounds and experiences, strong practitioner skills with empathetic, person-centred practice, inclusive adaptations to materials and communication, and strategies to foster participant engagement, all rooted in local labour market awareness. These factors were seen as interdependent – with the participant at the centre – and essential for delivering meaningful outcomes in the North East’s varied local contexts (see Figure 13 below).

Figure 13: Enablers of effective delivery



Background and experience of practitioners

Many practitioners highlighted the importance of drawing on both professional and personal experiences to guide their practice. North East practitioners came from varied occupational backgrounds, including prior roles in education and training, leadership, employer engagement, public employment services, and other sectors such as healthcare, construction, or engineering. Some also described how their broader lived experiences – for example, having worked or lived abroad, managing long-term health conditions, or being older (for example, over 50) – helped them relate to participants of similar backgrounds. These diverse experiences were viewed as assets for understanding how participants engage with career support and for tailoring guidance to different needs. As a result, practitioners felt they could build rapport and credibility more easily, adjust their communication style, and adapt materials or methods based on what they knew from their own careers and lives.

Practitioner skills and practice

Effective adult careers support in the North East combines deep local insight with empathetic, flexible practice. Practitioners interviewed stressed that proactive local labour market knowledge is vital: they regularly research their area, build relationships with local employers

“Find out about the individual circumstances; you’re digging beneath the surface for relevant details so that you’re not treating every single client as a tick box or you’re not providing the same resources.”

and community organisations, and run community labour market information (LMI) workshops. This on-the-ground intelligence ensures they can connect participants with “hidden” jobs, training opportunities, or funding that fit local conditions. For example, North East teams actively maintain shared local databases of training providers and opportunities, with time set aside in team meetings to update local labour market intelligence.

One practitioner summarised it as “Empathy is huge. That’s a core skill, I think, for an employment specialist to be able to sit, listen, and like actually listen, not just hear”, which in turn helps the specialist to understand the participants’ “challenges and that everybody’s different”. They also reiterated that it is important to reconsider one’s own perspective on participants’ backgrounds, not to “pass pre-judgement on them and still treat them the same”, and to remember that every participant is “entitled to meaningful work”.

Another practitioner warned against treating guidance as a tick-box exercise and stressed that it is crucial to “find out about the individual circumstances; you’re digging beneath the surface for relevant details so that you’re not treating every single client as a tick box or you’re not providing the same resources.”

Adaptations for diverse needs

Practitioners consistently emphasised that effective employability and careers support depends on adapting delivery to meet diverse participant needs, particularly for those with disabilities, low literacy, or limited English. Practitioners described carefully tailoring materials and approaches to ensure accessibility and engagement.

Materials are often adapted to reduce barriers to understanding. This includes modifying fonts to support participants with dyslexia, simplifying action plans that contain too much text, and using visually oriented tools such as vocational profiles and smiley-face rating scales to make information easier to grasp. Practitioners also highlighted the value of incorporating interactive and multi-sensory elements – such as videos, visuals, and voice recordings – to reduce reliance on dense text and improve comprehension.

One practitioner described adapting a standard career interest quiz into more visual and engaging materials for participants with additional needs: “I adapted the buzz quiz...I just made things much more visual and gave them handouts. So at the end...if they were a koala, they had the koala handout sheet so that they had things to work on then with the tutors moving forward and thinking about their own skills and strengths.” This example illustrates how making content tangible and visual can improve understanding and provide materials that support participants beyond the session.

In addition, delivery environments and formats are adapted to meet participants’ needs. Rather than relying solely on formal

office-based settings, practitioners may offer meetings in more familiar or informal locations – such as libraries, community centres or cafés – to reduce anxiety and increase accessibility. Flexibility also extends to scheduling and structure: some practitioners reported that replacing a single longer appointment with multiple shorter sessions significantly improved engagement, particularly for participants with SEND or low confidence. Offering flexibility in where, how, and how often support is delivered helps to overcome practical barriers such as transport, caring responsibilities, and discomfort with formal settings.

Engaging participants

Practitioners interviewed consistently identified participant engagement and motivation as a decisive factor shaping outcomes. They observed clear differences between those who self-referred – typically more motivated – and those who were mandated or externally referred (for example, via Jobcentre Plus), who often showed less consistent engagement and were more likely to miss appointments or question the value of support. This variation directly shaped practitioners’ practice: with motivated participants, practitioners focused on guiding and channelling momentum, while with disengaged or sceptical individuals they prioritised trust-building and demonstrating the relevance of guidance.

“You get a lot of job satisfaction when you get those customers coming through for appointments where at the beginning of the appointment, they’re saying, you know, I don’t know why I’ve been referred, I don’t need support, work is not on the cards for me... And actually, at the end of the session, they’ll say, I’m so glad that we’ve had this conversation. I feel really motivated or I didn’t know that I had these options available to me.”

A central part of practitioners’ role involved reframing participants’ perceptions of work and opportunity. Practitioners described how many participants – particularly those facing multiple barriers – held narrow or pessimistic views about their options. Through dialogue, practitioners introduced alternative pathways, challenged assumptions, and helped participants recognise possibilities they had not previously considered. For example, older participants (aged 50 or older) were described as sometimes lacking confidence with online job searches or assuming certain roles were no longer open to them; practitioners responded by boosting confidence and suggesting upskilling or alternative strategies. Practitioners also spoke about gently challenging attitudes, including cases where participants expected

the practitioner to take full responsibility. This challenge was applied carefully, using questioning to encourage participants to reflect on their own goals and agency without alienation.

Practitioners interviewed highlighted the value of seeing attitudinal shifts during or after guidance interactions. One practitioner described the satisfaction of working with a reluctant participant who initially stated that support was unnecessary, but who – after rapport-building and discussion of options – left the session feeling motivated and newly aware of available pathways: “You get a lot of job satisfaction when you get those customers coming through for appointments where at the beginning of the appointment, they’re saying, you know, I don’t know why I’ve been referred, I don’t need support, work is not on the cards for me... And actually, at the end of the session, they’ll say, I’m so glad that we’ve had this conversation. I feel really motivated or I didn’t know that I had these options available to me.”

The importance of collaboration

Practitioners consistently emphasised that collaboration is central to effective adult employability and careers support, particularly given participants' complex needs and the constraints of programme structures. Practitioners described working across multiple levels: with external services and community organisations, closely with Jobcentre Plus, proactively with employers, and internally with colleagues to share expertise and resources.

Multi agency and community links

Practitioners interviewed reported actively engaging a wide network of organisations to support participants holistically. Practitioners connected individuals to local authorities, housing associations, family support workers, training providers, and colleges, including English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision, to enable progression into education or employment. Collaboration frequently extended to health and wellbeing services, such as GP surgeries, social prescribing, counselling, and NHS talking therapies, to address barriers that directly affected job search and readiness. Practitioners also worked with charities and community groups supporting ex-offenders, people in recovery, refugees and others

with complex needs, alongside signposting to Citizens Advice, Youth Hubs, and local employment initiatives.

Another example involved a practitioner based monthly in a GP surgery, where clinicians referred patients on long-term sick leave due to work-related stress. This approach enabled timely, health-informed careers conversations, and was expanded due to its success, illustrating how non-traditional delivery settings can extend the reach and relevance of adult employability and careers support. Collectively, these partnerships enabled access to practical and stabilising support that employability and careers support alone could not provide.

Jobcentre partnership

Close working with Jobcentre Plus, particularly Jobcentre Work Coaches, was described as a core feature of adult provision. Regular contact supported alignment of messages, information-sharing about participant circumstances, and joint planning of next steps. Practitioners interviewed described practical coordination, including back-to-back appointments to reinforce continuity. These relationships also enabled access to additional resources, such as funding for training or travel and wider welfare support. Links with specialist Jobcentre staff – such as Employer Engagement Practitioners and Disability Employment Practitioners – were particularly valuable, and one practitioner noted that multilingual Work Coaches significantly improved engagement for refugees and ESOL learners. Overall, Jobcentre Plus partnerships were seen as enabling joined-up, responsive support.

Employer engagement

Practitioners highlighted the importance of proactive employer engagement, building relationships early rather than waiting for vacancies to arise. They described reaching out to employers to explore roles or placements, hosting workshops or pre-employment sessions, and actively promoting participants as prepared candidates. This engagement was framed as mutually beneficial, supporting employers' recruitment and inclusion goals while creating direct pathways into work. One practitioner

described developing a network of Disability Confident Employers, increasing inclusive opportunities while meeting local labour demand.

Practitioner and programme evidence points to the importance of structured work experience and volunteering as part of the progression pathway. Though from outside the North East, analysis from EDT's Pathways to Progress programme in the West Yorkshire Combined Authority found that participants who completed work experience were three times more likely to progress into employment than those who did not (24% compared with 8%), while participants who undertook volunteering were also substantially more likely to move into employment (23% compared with 8%). These forms of supported, real-world experience can provide an important bridge between employability support and labour market participation. This is particularly relevant for individuals who are furthest from the labour market, for whom progression is often less likely to occur through job search alone and instead depends on opportunities to build confidence, develop skills, gain experience, and re-engage with workplace environments.

Participant accounts underline why employer-linked placements and practical work experience matter. Several participants identified limited experience as a barrier to securing entry-level work, including one seeking logistics roles who reported that vacancies required experience, and another who felt that following an academic route had left them without the work experience employers expected.

Internal organisational collaboration

Practitioners also described internal collaboration as a key enabler. Rather than working in isolation, they shared labour market intelligence and resources across teams, consulted specialist colleagues, and jointly adapted tools and processes. One practitioner noted how goal-setting and action planning had become “more fluid rather than very fixed,” reflecting a shift towards more responsive practice. Much knowledge-sharing occurred informally through team meetings, conversations and messaging apps: “lots of it is probably unseen in terms of things get shared in team meetings, in conversations and in WhatsApp groups between teams of ‘what should I share for this kind of person’.” This collaborative culture supported continuous improvement and helped practitioners respond to complex cases.

Structural challenges

Alongside the enablers above, practitioners interviewed identified several systemic constraints that limit what adult employability and careers support can achieve. Key challenges include strict appointment limits, language and translation barriers, participants’ readiness issues, limited outcome tracking, and shifting labour market preferences.

Administrative and Bureaucratic Barriers

Practitioners highlighted that administrative requirements can create additional barriers to engagement, particularly for individuals experiencing low confidence, poor mental health, literacy challenges, or complex personal circumstances. Several contributors questioned whether services are always designed around participants’ needs, noting that lengthy forms, repeated information requests, and extensive paperwork can discourage people from accessing support. Practitioners suggested that simplifying administrative processes and enabling support to be accessed at times and locations that suit participants may improve engagement, particularly for those furthest from the labour market. These findings reinforce the importance of designing employability services around user experience as well as programme accountability requirements.

Appointment Limits

Some adult careers programmes restrict the number or length of careers guidance sessions. Some practitioners interviewed noted that certain models require a long gap (for example, 12 months) before a person can re-engage. When strict limits are in place, they can hinder continuity and trust-building. Practitioners found it especially challenging when working with participants who have complex or overlapping needs, because those individuals benefit from multiple interactions to explore issues in depth and develop tailored plans. Under such constraints, practitioners cannot provide iterative guidance – they struggle to accomplish tasks like thorough CV development or interview practice in one short sitting, and they cannot offer formal follow-up support if further sessions are not funded.

Language & Translation Barriers

Language differences pose a significant challenge in adult employability and careers support. Practitioners frequently support participants with limited English proficiency or low literacy, and this can severely limit effective engagement. Some participants can read but not write in English (or vice versa); others cannot fully follow spoken information or find it hard to use interpreters. Even a well-designed workshop may be inaccessible to someone with very basic English skills. Practitioners also face issues explaining the recognition of overseas qualifications. Language barriers mean participants might arrive without understanding the session’s purpose or struggle to act on advice. In response, practitioners often prioritised language support before proceeding with employability and careers support: for example, referring participants to ESOL classes and using plain English, visual aids, or bilingual resources to bridge gaps.

Readiness and Wellbeing Barriers

Some participants face unaddressed mental or physical health issues or acute personal circumstances that limit their readiness to engage with career support. Practitioners interviewed stressed that if individuals are dealing with untreated health problems, unstable housing, or serious family challenges, a careers intervention on its own may have little impact. In practice, practitioners often step back from immediate job-search coaching in such cases, focusing first on stabilising the participant’s situation – for example, by connecting them with healthcare, counselling, or other social support – and waiting until they are more ready. Similarly, participants who did not volunteer for guidance (for example, those mandated by another service) might remain unmotivated or anxious; practitioners spend extra time on trust-building and adjusting the pace for these individuals.

The focus groups also suggest that readiness is not fixed. One participant explained that they had known about a course the previous year but “just didn’t feel ready then”, while another initially presented transport and lack of experience as the main barriers but, through further discussion, identified

Limited Outcome Tracking & Feedback

Practitioners interviewed highlighted the lack of long-term outcome tracking as a barrier to continuous improvement and accountability. If a participant's formal engagement ends after a single meeting or a short series of sessions, practitioners and commissioners rarely have systematic information on what happens next. At most, practitioners might receive occasional anecdotal updates via personal contact or hear back from a handful of participants, but generally no formal system exists to monitor progress months later. This makes it difficult to know which approaches have lasting impact or to demonstrate the full value of guidance beyond immediate outcomes.

Recommendations for policy and practice

The findings demonstrate that adult employability and careers support is most effective when it is delivered as a flexible, relational, and person-centred process rather than as a discrete intervention.

Participants' experiences are shaped by a combination of labour market, health, financial, and social factors, meaning that progression into employment often occurs over an extended period and requires sustained support. Current models of provision do not always reflect this reality, particularly for individuals facing multiple barriers to employment.

Implications for Policy

Design services around progression rather than short-term outcomes

The evidence suggests that employability journeys are frequently non-linear and require multiple interactions over time. Participants with health conditions, caring responsibilities, low confidence, or extended periods out of work often need longer-term engagement than current programme structures allow. Policymakers and commissioners should therefore move away from models primarily focused on short-term employment outcomes and recognise intermediate outcomes such as increased confidence, wellbeing, work readiness, skills development, and sustained engagement as legitimate indicators of progress.

Strengthen integration between employability and wider support services

Many barriers identified by participants extended beyond employability itself, including health conditions, caring responsibilities, housing insecurity, transport limitations, and financial pressures. Effective employability support therefore depends on stronger alignment with health, community, welfare, and social support services. Policy should encourage integrated local delivery models that enable individuals to access coordinated support rather than navigating multiple systems independently.

Recognise the needs of under-served and emerging participant groups

The findings highlight several groups whose needs may not be fully reflected in existing programme design, including former carers returning to the labour market, care-experienced young people, adults aged 50 and over, parent-carers of children with SEND, migrants and refugees, and individuals experiencing social isolation or weak support networks. Policymakers should ensure that employability programmes are sufficiently flexible to respond to diverse participant circumstances rather than relying on broad participant categories alone.

Address structural barriers to labour market participation

Many challenges identified by participants were linked to wider structural factors, including transport costs, childcare availability, low pay, and health inequalities. While employability services play an important role in supporting individuals, policy responses should also recognise the wider conditions that shape labour market participation and progression. Greater attention to transport accessibility, flexible working, childcare provision and in-work progression may help reduce barriers that employability support alone cannot address.

Implications for Practice

Prioritise relationship-based support

Trust, empathy, and consistent engagement emerged as central features of effective practice. Practitioners should continue to prioritise relationship-building, particularly when working with individuals who have experienced repeated setbacks, low confidence, or poor prior experiences of support services. Participants were clear that feeling listened to, understood, and treated as an individual strongly influenced engagement and outcomes

Deliver flexible and differentiated support

The evidence demonstrates that a standardised approach is unlikely to meet the needs of all participants. Effective services adapt communication methods, materials, locations, and appointment structures to accommodate differing needs and circumstances. Provision should recognise variation in distance from the labour market and tailor support intensity accordingly, with greater flexibility for individuals experiencing more complex barriers.

Strengthen employer engagement and work-based opportunities

Employer engagement should extend beyond vacancy matching and include opportunities for participants to gain practical experience, build confidence, and develop workplace skills. Work experience, volunteering, and employer-led placements were identified as valuable progression routes, particularly for young people, those changing careers and individuals who have been out of work for extended periods. Employability services should continue to strengthen relationships with employers and expand opportunities for supported work-based learning.

Embed holistic approaches to employability

Practitioners frequently acted as connectors to other services, recognising that employment outcomes are affected by factors beyond careers guidance alone. Services should continue to adopt holistic approaches that consider health, wellbeing, caring responsibilities, financial circumstances, housing, transport, and social support networks alongside employment goals. Such approaches are particularly important for individuals facing multiple and overlapping barriers.

Improve outcome tracking and learning

Current systems often provide limited understanding of participants' longer-term outcomes once formal support has ended. Providers and commissioners should explore approaches to capturing medium- and longer-term progression, including movement towards employment, sustained employment, progression in work, and changes in confidence, wellbeing, and work readiness. Improved outcome tracking would strengthen understanding of what works and help ensure services are designed around participants' actual journeys rather than short-term measures alone.

Implications for future research

Further research should explore the experiences of groups that appear under-represented within current evidence, including former carers, care-experienced young people, adults experiencing social isolation, and individuals in low-paid or insecure work. There is also a need for greater understanding of long-term participant journeys, including the role of intermediate outcomes and the factors that support sustained progression over time. Research examining the interaction between employability support, health, transport, caring responsibilities, and wider social determinants could help inform more integrated approaches to policy and practice.

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