



One million young people shut out of work: occupational health can help

Britain's youth inactivity crisis is increasingly a health crisis. Almost one million 16–24-year-olds are not in education, employment or training. Ill health—particularly mental ill health and neurodevelopmental conditions—is now a major barrier to work. Occupational health can bridge the gap between treatment and participation, giving young people and employers the specialist, work-focused support they need.

At a glance

981,000	44%	£125bn
young people were NEET in April–June 2026	report a work-limiting health condition	estimated cumulative annual economic cost
The policy opportunity: make occupational health a core part of the UK response to youth economic inactivity.		

What Government should do now

- Build occupational health into the Youth Guarantee and Keep Britain Working agenda, joining up health, education and employment support around each young person.
- Open access beyond large employers, with funded and practical routes for small and medium-sized organisations that lack occupational health, HR or mental health provision.
- Fund youth-specific evaluation through the Milburn review and the proposed Workplace Health Intelligence Unit, with results broken down by age and condition.
- Scale proven, work-focused support for mental health, neurodivergence, musculoskeletal conditions and return to work.

Government does not need to wait for perfect evidence. It can act now on a strong case, while commissioning the youth-specific research needed to target future investment.

Why this matters now

Almost one million 16–24-year-olds in the UK are not in education, employment or training (NEET). The total passed one million in early 2026 before easing to 981,000—13% of all young people—in April–June (Office for National Statistics, 2026). Alan Milburn's independent review calls this a “generational fault line” and puts the cumulative annual cost of the current NEET population at £125 billion (Milburn, 2026). Impetus estimates that each additional young person who becomes NEET costs the state an average of £244,000 over their lifetime (Impetus, 2026). The story has changed: young people who are NEET are now more likely to be economically inactive (57%) than unemployed (43%). Ill health is driving that reversal (Milburn, 2026):

- 44% of NEET young people report a work-limiting health condition, up from 26% in 2015.
- Among 18–24-year-olds who are NEET, the share inactive because of ill health rose from 12% in 2005 to 30% in 2025.
- Mental health is now the primary condition for 42.6% of disabled young people who are NEET, up from 24.3% in 2011.

- Health-related inactivity is persistent: almost eight in ten of those who became inactive because of health issues between 2017 and 2019 were still NEET more than two years later.

“Occupational health professionals are the missing link.” SOM President Professor Neil Greenberg has warned that managers cannot be expected to navigate complex mental health or neurodevelopmental conditions without specialist, healthcare-focused advice. Four in five young people claiming health-related Universal Credit cite a mental health or neurodevelopmental condition as their main barrier to employment (SOM, 2026).

How occupational health can change the picture

Bridge the gap between treatment and work

The Milburn review says the health system is “configured for treatment, not participation”: diagnosis and fit notes can become a route out of the labour market rather than back into it. Occupational health is designed to close that gap by translating clinical needs into practical workplace support.

Employers are already feeling the pressure. The Milburn review records a growing “pastoral burden”, while more than 40% of small and medium-sized employers report having no formal HR, occupational health or mental health provision (Mind, 2025). Without specialist support, both young recruits and their managers are being set up to struggle.

Occupational health can provide tailored support for mental health and neurodivergence, advise on adjustments, coordinate with existing services and help young people make the transition from education into working life. This directly supports Keep Britain Working’s ambition for a unified system of accessible, coordinated and work-focused support.

Back approaches that already show value

The wider evidence is encouraging. Just over half of surveyed employers say occupational health delivers a financial return. Reviews find that many workplace health interventions pay back within five to ten years, with particularly robust evidence for occupational health-led return-to-work and musculoskeletal interventions (Nicholson, 2022; Anselmi et al., 2025).

This evidence was not designed specifically around young people who are NEET, but it shows that work-focused health support can be effective. SOM and the Royal College of Psychiatrists are also developing WISE-QM, a quality mark to help employers implement evidence-based mental health support.

Use the strongest youth-specific signal

The clearest youth-specific evidence comes from Individual Placement and Support, which embeds employment support in health teams. A review of seven randomised trials found that 58.3% of young adults with mental health conditions receiving this support entered competitive employment, compared with 32.4% of controls (Bond et al., 2023). The model is not occupational health, but it demonstrates the power of early, integrated, work-focused health support.

What we know

Government’s diagnosis of the problem, the wider occupational health evidence and the results of closely related youth employment models all point in the same direction. The full Milburn report and the proposed Workplace Health Intelligence Unit should commission age-disaggregated evaluations of occupational health-led support for young people, tracking employment, retention, health and employer outcomes.

Britain cannot solve youth economic inactivity without tackling health barriers that keep young people out of work—and occupational health is the missing link between healthcare, employers and participation.

References

- Anselmi, L., Pattani, S., Greenberg, N. and Pahl, N. (2025) 'Occupational health: the case for return on investment', *Occupational Medicine*, 75(3–4), pp. 154–156. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/kgae098> (Accessed: 7 September 2026).
- Bond, G.R., Al-Abdulmunem, M., Marbacher, J., Christensen, T., Sveinsdottir, V. and Drake, R.E. (2023) 'A systematic review and meta-analysis of IPS supported employment for young adults with mental health conditions', *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 50, pp. 160–172. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-022-01228-9> (Accessed: 7 September 2026).
- Department for Work and Pensions (September 2026) *Correspondence: Keep Britain Working - a national growth opportunity, September 2026*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keep-britain-working-review-update-a-national-growth-opportunity-september-2026/keep-britain-working-a-national-growth-opportunity-september-2026>
- Diniz, J. and Murphy, L. (2025) *False Starts: What the UK's Growing NEETs Problem Really Looks Like, and How to Fix It*. London: Resolution Foundation, 21 October. Available at: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/false-starts/> (Accessed: 7 September 2026). [No fixed page numbers in the web version cited; the figures used appear in the 'Summary' section.]
- Impetus (2026) 'New Youth Jobs Gap research', 15 July [Webpage summarising the report Closing the Youth Jobs Gap]. Available at: <https://www.impetus.org.uk/news-and-views/new-youth-jobs-gap-research-july-2026> (Accessed: 7 September 2026).
- Milburn, A. (2026) *Young People and Work: Interim Report*. London: Department for Work and Pensions. Numbered paragraphs as cited in text; Chapter 5 ('Health – configured for treatment, not participation') referenced by heading where a specific paragraph is not cited. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/young-people-and-work-interim-report/young-people-and-work-interim-report> (Accessed: 7 September 2026).
- Mind (2025) Submission to the Keep Britain Working Review (Mayfield Review). The cited figure appears under the section addressing barriers limiting employer action on workplace mental health. Available at: https://www.mind.org.uk/media/wpiirlux/mind-submission_final_mayfield-review_keep-britain-working.pdf (Accessed: 7 September 2026).
- Nicholson, P.J. (2022) *Occupational Health: The Value Proposition*. London: Society of Occupational Medicine. Available at: https://www.som.org.uk/sites/som.org.uk/files/Occupational_Health_The_Value_Proposition_March_2022_0.pdf (Accessed: 7 September 2026).
- Office for National Statistics (2026) *Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), UK: May and August 2026*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneet/may2026> and <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneet/august2026> (Accessed: 7 September 2026). [Official statistics bulletin, continuously updated; no fixed page numbers.]
- Shaw, E., Nunns, M., Spicer, S.G., Lawal, H., Briscoe, S., Melendez-Torres, G.J., Garside, R., Liabo, K. and Thompson Coon, J. (2024) 'What is the volume, quality and characteristics of evidence relating to the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of multi-disciplinary occupational health interventions aiming to improve work-related outcomes for employed adults? An evidence and gap map of systematic reviews', *Campbell Systematic Reviews*. The cited detail (age range of included reviews) appears in Table 2, 'Characteristics of 30 systematic reviews prioritised for inclusion in EGM'. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1412> (Accessed: 7 September 2026).
- Society of Occupational Medicine (SOM) (2026) 'Young people do not lack ambition; it's the system failing them' [Press release], 27 May. Available at: <https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2026/05/27/3302454/0/en/Young-people-do-not-lack-ambition-it-s-the-system-failing-them.html> (Accessed: 7 September 2026).
- Sundstrup, E., Seeberg, K.G.V., Dyreborg, J., Clausen, T. and Andersen, L.L. (2025) 'Systematic review of workplace interventions to support young workers' safety, work environment and health', *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation*, 35(2), pp. 215–233. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10926-024-10186-y> (Accessed: 7 September 2026).