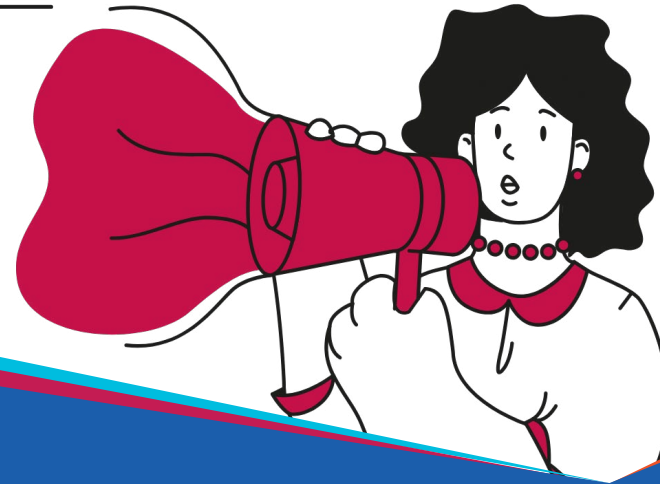
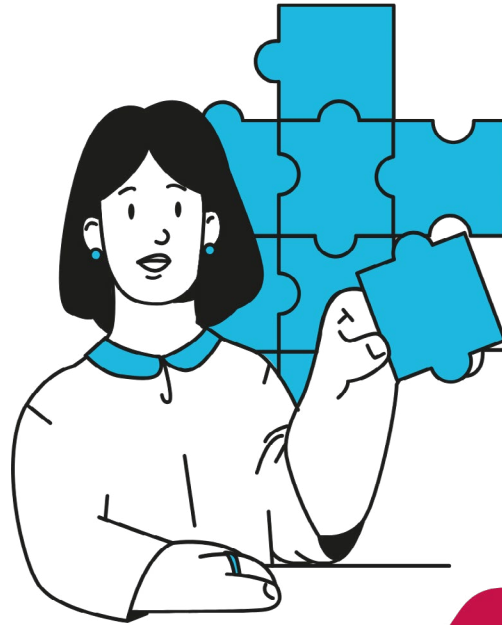


UK YOUTH



Connecting potential to opportunity:

The distinct roles of youth workers in employment support

Introduction

We know that youth workers play varied and vital roles in their support of young people.¹ In fact, young people with access to youth work grow up to be happier, healthier and wealthier adults.² Youth work supports young people's overall development, equipping them to understand their place in society and realise their full potential.

Economic analysis has shown that youth work provides at least £0.8bn of indirect economic value in England alone through increased youth employment and education.³ Youth work takes a unique approach that is relational, holistic and crucially a voluntary relationship with young people. It sits at a notable intersection between several sectors, able to support needs including education, health, and employment.

The recent interim report on Young People and Work from the Rt Hon Alan Milburn outlines the cracks of the existing employment support system.⁴ Those cracks are often exactly where youth workers are working – with young people who have been missed or excluded by the system.

At UK Youth we deliver [programmes](#) that offer a youth work approach to meeting young people's needs. In this report we look specifically at employability support for young people. But what does it really mean to 'take a youth work approach' to employment and employability? What roles are youth workers playing through their employability support for young people?

In this report we discuss four key employability-specific youth work roles that have emerged through our deep qualitative research with youth workers and young people over the last four years.

The roles we explore here include:

- Work mentor
- Employability educator
- Employer liaison
- Youth work champion

These four roles emerged as the strongest, clearest themes from the evidence. They are a snapshot. We hear concerns that the role of the youth worker is constantly expanding. In this report we do not argue that all youth workers should embody these roles; simply that, in the current landscape, youth workers are embodying these roles. We will continue to explore the varied roles youth workers play in employment support in discussion with the sector.

It is also important to note that these roles do not operate in isolation. Rather, they connect and complement each other – there is constant shifting between roles, combining roles and adapting roles as needed to flexibly meet young people's needs. Crucially too, youth workers do not work only as an 'employability youth worker' – they take a whole-person approach to respond to young people's broader priorities and challenges, which may involve mental health, housing, education and more.

Specifically, this document answers the following research questions:

- What are the unique roles that youth workers are playing to support young people's employability?
- What enables youth workers to fulfil these roles; ensuring that they have the capabilities, opportunities and motivations to offer?

How to use this resource

Young people

This resource presents options for how youth workers can support young people with their employment journey. They provide a kind of 'menu' for young people to identify what support they might need and what support they can expect from their youth worker.

Youth practitioners, service designers and sector leaders

The role cards help practitioners and youth work leaders explain youth work's contribution to employment support to trustees, funders, and external audiences. They can also be used within youth organisations to design or adapt provision, guide reflective practice and inform strategic planning and recruitment.

Youth employment and employability researchers and evaluators

The role cards offer a stimulus for exploring the varied roles youth work plays in young people's lives and what is needed to facilitate these roles, helping to identify outcomes, enablers and learning questions that can be explored through research and evaluation.

Statutory and community employment service providers

The role cards make visible the specific activities youth workers undertake and the outcomes they aim to achieve in supporting young people's employability. By clarifying these roles, they can help build mutual understanding and collaboration between youth work and statutory or community employment services, supporting more joined-up and responsive provision.

Funders and policymakers

The role cards draw on participatory research and wider literature to illustrate, in an employability context:

- the strengths of youth work and the case for investment
- the unique ways it supports young people,
- the gaps it fills in the wider system (from prevention to early intervention), and
- how it complements statutory services.

They highlight where targeted investment in youth work within community infrastructures can have the greatest impact on young people's employability and make a strong case for government to invest in youth work across departments.

Journalists and communications professionals

The role cards set out what youth work looks like in practice, articulating the mechanisms that make youth work such an effective support for young people who are not currently in education, employment or training (NEET). This is accompanied by a short narrative bringing to life what employability youth work feels like for young people receiving this support.



Glossary

Employability

The skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make finding and sustaining employment possible.

Employment

To have a paid job; being paid to work for a company, organisation or oneself (i.e. self-employment).

Youth work

A practice that supports the personal, social, emotional and educational development of young people to help them to realise their full potential. It takes a relational, informal, voluntary and rights-based approach to working with young people.

Youth worker

Someone who uses rights-based, person-centred relationships to engage young people and support their personal, social, emotional and educational development.

Fieldwork

The role profiles are grounded in a strong evidence base informed by qualitative research undertaken across UK Youth's employability programmes between 2023 and 2026.

Research activities undertaken through UK Youth programmes ([Building Connections](#), [Building Aspirations](#) and [Hatch](#)) include interviews and focus groups with youth workers and surveys with young people. In total, the role profiles draw on conversations with 33 youth workers involving 25 interviews and 5 focus groups. Qualitative data from approximately 570 young people through survey responses and 48 young people via qualitative feedback in other formats such as message boards and case studies has also informed the profiles.

Additionally, anecdotal evidence and feedback from youth workers in our [UK Youth Network](#) via peer learning sessions, informal conversations and an employability webinar has informed our thinking. Evidence has also surfaced through informal discussions with UK Youth delivery staff and youth workers. Much of the research drawn on to inform the role profiles did not specifically seek to explore the role of youth workers; however, there was much data on this topic to draw from.

The COM-B Model

These role profiles use the [COM-B model](#) as a framework for exploring what these roles will look like in practice. It helps us to articulate what youth workers will need to make these roles a reality. The framework explores the capabilities (C), opportunities (O) and motivations (M) that drive behaviour (B).

- Capability – here this refers to the knowledge, skills and abilities needed to engage in a behaviour. What would we include in a job description for this role?
- Opportunity – here this refers to the external factors that make it possible to engage in a behaviour. What resources and conditions do we need in place for this role to succeed?
- Motivation – here this refers to the internal processes that make a behaviour appealing. What are the key qualities and mindsets that would keep this role going on hard days?

If these three 'levers' are successfully pulled, then a particular behaviour is possible. This framework is generally used to explore behaviour change; however, it is also helpful for facilitating existing behaviours and this is the framing we have adopted.

We have also considered the [National Occupational Standards](#) for youth work to inform the identification of required and desired capabilities, opportunities and motivations for each role.

WORK MENTOR

When acting as a work mentor, youth workers support, advise and guide young people with their employability. A mentoring role usually engages a young person in a longer-term relationship over weeks, months or years. Mentoring often expands beyond simply 'work'-related challenges to provide holistic support with challenges and barriers the young person is facing in their wider life, which inevitably impact their ability to seek or sustain work. This might include mental ill health, housing, benefits, past or current abuse or leaving care.



"One, we're role models. Two, when I work with young people ... it's about empowering them to be able to make those life choices for themselves." – youth worker

What does this role offer young people?

Most commonly, work mentors are building young people's confidence, signposting to other services and supporting young people to set and stay on track with their goals. This usually involves regular catch ups with active listening and coaching techniques. They keep track of young people's journeys, checking in regularly and following up to hear about the outcomes of job applications, interviews or starting work. Mentors work on the building blocks of employability – confidence, self-esteem, mindset and aspirations – to make accessing work possible and hopeful.

Overall, young people supported by a work mentor should feel heard, confident and in control of their employability journey.



Intended outcomes

- Young people have increased confidence in finding and sustaining meaningful work and other areas of life.
- Young people demonstrate improved resilience and a more positive mindset.
- Young people experience a reduction in the impact of additional barriers and challenges on their progress towards meaningful employment.
- Young people feel able to set goals and continually progress towards these.
- Young people have greater clarity on what kind of job might suit them.



Activities

- 1:1 sessions for conversation and practical activities.
- Supporting specific tasks (e.g. job application or CV writing).
- Facilitating peer-to-peer support.



Capabilities

- Knowledge of local support services and employability pathways, including jobs, training routes and recruitment opportunities.
- Coaching and mentoring skills, such as active listening, goal setting and using coaching models.
- Understanding of complex barriers affecting young people such as mental health challenges, care experience and housing instability.
- Relationship building and communication skills including demonstrating empathy and patience paired with healthy professional distance.



Opportunities

- Time with young people – weeks or months to build trust and understanding and a manageable workload to facilitate consistent touchpoints and relationship building.
- High-quality resources and tools that can be used 'out of the box' with minimal set up time.
- A bank of referral pathways and contacts with trusted service providers who will support young people effectively.
- A supportive organisational culture that values relationship-based and person-centred approaches.
- Emotional support from colleagues and managers including reflective spaces to share and decompress. Therapeutic support may also be needed.



Motivations

- Commitment to supporting young people's long-term development, wider wellbeing and career aspirations, not just immediate job outcomes.
- Firm belief in everyone's right to access work and faith in young people's potential and abilities, especially those facing multiple barriers.
- Professional identity as a youth worker, which includes a mentoring/nurturing role.
- Empathy and compassion for young people's lived experiences.
- Emotional resilience when supporting young people through setbacks.
- Intrinsic satisfaction from seeing young people build confidence and achieve goals.

EMPLOYABILITY EDUCATOR

When acting as an employability educator, youth workers share practical information about real-world employment and employability with young people. This role requires sound knowledge of employment services, job sectors and the real-world workings of hiring practices and workplace expectations. Connections with employers are also vital in order to make learning practical and engaging for young people through conversations with employers, workers and site visits. Employability educators keep learning creative, engaging and accessible, avoiding formal classroom-style or one-size-fits-all approaches.



“In our roles... [we give] practical tools and guidance... giving them [young people] those different directions to go in, giving them the information that they just don’t have about different routes and the different pathways, the practical skills” – youth worker

What does this role offer young people?

Employability educators are widening young people's employment horizons. They introduce jobs and sectors that young people may not have heard of or had initially dismissed as unattainable or uninteresting, and outline clear steps to access relevant pathways. Youth workers dispel myths and misconceptions about work and job seeking, such as what 'kind of people' work in which sectors, and how many applications it takes to land an interview. Additionally, the employability educator role supports young people to develop key skills necessary for accessing work, including social and emotional skills such as communication, teamwork and problem solving, and more employability-specific skills such as CV writing, interviewing and networking. Employability educators achieve this by engaging – through informal, hands-on learning – young people who may never have felt comfortable in a classroom.

Overall, young people should have greater clarity about the world of work and the options available to them, and feel equipped to succeed in work.



Intended outcomes

- Young people have increased knowledge of available jobs, job seeking and the world of work, with common myths and misconceptions addressed.
- Young people have improved social and emotional skills (e.g. communication, teamwork, problem solving).
- Young people have improved employment-specific skills (e.g. CV writing, interviewing, networking).
- Young people have positive associations with work and have improved personal aspirations.



Activities

- Curriculum-based informal learning.
- Group sessions, workshops and trips that provide space for developing social and emotional skills.
- Exposure to the world of work through employer talks, site visits and 'experience days'.



Capabilities

- Knowledge of the diversity of job sectors and jobs available, including entry routes and required qualifications.
- Knowledge of recruitment processes, workplace practices and employer priorities.
- Skills in research and self-directed learning to continue to expand employability knowledge.
- Skills in engaging, interactive and informal teaching of employability information and relevant skills.
- Skills in creative facilitation to provide engaging, accessible spaces for young people.
- Competence in digital tools for teaching and knowledge of digital tools relevant to employment, e.g. virtual interviews, online assessment centres.



Opportunities

- High quality resources and tools that can be used 'out of the box' with minimal set up time.
- Access to accurate and accessible information on job sectors, available jobs and employability evidence.
- Time for networking and research into local opportunities and services.
- Employers operating locally that are enthusiastic about - and capable of - offering support.
- Access to digital tools and platforms to perform online research, support teaching and support young people to practice online employability tasks.
- Learning opportunities to increase understanding of employment services, job seeking and job sectors.



Motivations

- Commitment to widening opportunities and aspirations for young people.
- Belief in the importance of early exposure to the world of work.
- Value placed on experiential and non-traditional learning to meet diverse needs and interests.
- Enthusiasm and creativity in delivering engaging and non-traditional learning to meet diverse needs and interests.
- Curiosity about industries, careers and emerging opportunities.

EMPLOYER LIAISON

When acting as an employer liaison, youth workers engage employers in youth employability activities and negotiate opportunities for young people. This role involves effective networking and outreach to make new connections with local organisations, followed by consistent, long-term follow-up to maintain and further develop relationships. Youth workers need some knowledge of business operations and employers' strategic priorities as well as strong people skills to demonstrate the mutual benefit of employer involvement in youth employment support. Creativity and on-the-spot thinking is needed to craft different offers and opportunities that are appealing and feasible for employers to take part in. Relationships with employers can range from one-off attendance at a careers fair to long-term partnerships involving co-producing programmes for young people and involve businesses from local SMEs to corporates. Youth workers who are able to recognise and engage a wide range of connections – including family, friends and community members as well as professional contacts – are particularly effective in securing opportunities for young people such as 'world of work' site visits, work experience or jobs.



"[It doesn't] matter what you do with young people to build their confidence and equip them for work if you don't have employers that are willing to meet the young people where they're at and create early careers opportunities."
– youth worker

What does this role offer young people?

Many young people have no clear understanding of what the world of work is like and this can create both anxiety about work as well as a misunderstanding of what employers are looking for in employees. Connecting with employers can make the world of work feel within reach for the first time, humanising and demystifying an unknown entity. Employers may be role models for young people, reflecting similar lived experiences and showcasing what can be achieved. When facilitated by a youth worker who understands young people's interests and needs and can facilitate a safe space for all, connecting with employers can open up new ideas, raise aspirations and offer tangible opportunities.

Overall, young people supported by an employer liaison should feel like they know people in work who reflect their own experiences and who want to help them succeed.



Intended outcomes

- Young people have increased understanding of the world of work through connections to employers.
- Young people have links to employers that can offer guidance, information and opportunities to experience or obtain work.
- Young people have improved employment aspirations.
- Employers have increased understanding of young people's needs at work through connections to young people.
- Youth workers have increased sustainable partnerships with employers



Activities

- Inviting employers to share their career journey or 'day in the life' with young people.
- Facilitating spaces for employers and young people to connect.
- Organising activities, trips and events that involve employers, such as site visits or careers fairs.
- Stewarding employer volunteers to co-produce events or programmes with young people.



Capabilities

- Understanding of employer needs and business operations, including workforce needs, recruitment challenges and strategic priorities.
- Knowledge of local labour markets and sectors with live opportunities for young people.
- Skills in networking and relationship building to establish and sustain employer partnerships.
- Skills in persuasion and influencing to raise employers' interest and motivation to connect with young people.
- Skills in creative problem-solving to manage employer limitations and young people's needs.
- Skills in convening and facilitating meetings and events with diverse stakeholders.
- Skills in event management and promotion including risk management, forward planning and marketing.



Opportunities

- Warm business contacts from infrastructure organisations and funders.
- Opportunities to connect with businesses (e.g. business breakfasts, networking events).
- Social media training and templates to celebrate work and attract employers.
- Digital tools for tracking relationships and opportunities such as CRM systems.
- Bank of standard opportunities for employer involvement across different levels of depth and frequency of participation.
- Access to low-cost or free, accessible venues.



Motivations

- Commitment to improving young people's access to real-world opportunities.
- Belief in the value of employer engagement in reducing barriers to work.
- Appreciation of the mutual benefits for both employers and young people of employer involvement in youth work.
- Professional identity as a convenor or 'bridge' between young people and employers.
- Confidence and proactivity in approaching and engaging employers.
- Persistence and tenacity in building relationships over time.

YOUTH CHAMPION

When acting as a youth champion, youth workers are advocating on behalf of young people. This may be with employers – particularly when young people are taking part in work experience, volunteering or employment itself – and a challenge or risk emerges. Employers may want to offer work experience but have concerns about the level of support required. With youth workers on board, employers have reassurance that the young person is properly safeguarded and support needs will be communicated.

Additionally, the youth champion role can involve the youth worker supporting a young person with challenges relating to housing, benefits, healthcare or other support services. When working with job centres specifically, this may involve discussions with work coaches to outline how a young person is not currently able to look for work due to other challenges and so other services may be more suitable.



“We’ve had some young people referred from the Job Centre previously and they’ve been so low in confidence but the Job Centre’s like ‘Yeah, they’re not engaging. They’re not doing anything.’ But reality is, you’re not engaging with them, you’re not meeting them where they are”– youth worker

What does this role offer young people?

Where a youth champion is intervening to help a young person overcome an obstacle such as transport to work, explain a young person’s needs or negotiate a second chance, it can be the difference between a young person leaving or continuing with a life-changing opportunity. Young people can be removed from waiting lists or services if they do not keep up with certain requirements – youth workers as youth champions will advocate for service access to be reinstated or introduced. This keeps vital support in place for young people, helping them to navigate often bureaucratic services and making sure they have what they need to stay on track.

Overall, young people should feel like the services they use make sense and there is someone in their corner to support with their key challenges



Intended outcomes

- Young people have increased awareness of all available support and opportunities, including to facilitate accessing and sustaining work.
- Young people have increased awareness of their rights to access services and rights at work.
- Young people have increased capacity to make the most of available employment support and opportunities.
- Employers feel more equipped to provide opportunities for young people.
- Employers have an increased understanding of the whole young person, including strengths and challenges.
- Young people feel their barriers to accessible employment are reduced.



Activities

- Acting as a mediator or messenger between young people, employers and service providers.
- Training employers and service providers on working with young people.
- Working with young people to understand service requirements and expectations.



Capabilities

- Knowledge of relevant systems and available services including access pathways, requirements and limitations.
- Knowledge of young people’s rights and entitlements to support.
- Skills in active listening and communication to ‘translate’ where needed between young people and other professionals.
- Skills in advocacy and diplomacy to represent young people’s needs including in high-pressure circumstances.
- Skills in building and using key contacts in relevant services to streamline access and obtain desired outcomes for young people.



Opportunities

- Time and organisational support to advocate persistently and pursue complex casework.
- Clear referrals pathways with transparent criteria, required behaviour and limits of support.
- Digital tools to track young people’s needs and accessed services.
- Opportunities to connect and build relationships with staff at service providers.
- Employers and service providers who understand the wide-ranging benefits of working with youth workers.
- Strong existing partnerships with service providers held at an organisational level with a collaborative ethos.



Motivations

- Commitment to a rights-based approach to services, promoting equity and removing systemic barriers for young people.
- Sense of responsibility to safeguard and promote young people’s wellbeing.
- Professional identity as an advocate and ally for young people.

Roles to explore in the future

During our review of the evidence, other roles that youth workers embody during employability youth work also emerged. We will explore these roles in future publications, including the following preliminary role profiles:

SUPPORT WORKER

This relates to more of the holistic, wraparound support with housing, benefits etc. It may be too similar to advocacy role or mentor; however, it sits in between these two. The role of 'support worker' is more about what the youth worker can do to help with these broader challenges rather than simply the connections to other services.

In future iterations we may explore this role further or build any missing elements into existing roles.

WELLBEING PRACTITIONER/COUNSELLOR

Youth workers emphasise that supporting mental health is often the very first action they complete with young people who have been referred to them for employability support. As a result, work mentors, employability educators and youth champions are likely experienced in understanding mental health challenges, taking trauma-informed approaches and connecting with relevant clinical services.

As we know from the [Thriving Minds Role Profiles](#), mental health and wellbeing support from youth workers involves many intricate and unique roles. How these roles emerge in employability youth work and relate to the roles discussed in this report is something for us to explore in more depth in the future.

Conclusion

Youth workers are bringing transformational impact to youth employability and employment support. They are meeting young people's needs, facilitating dreams and making the world of work accessible to young people - often those who are not currently in education, employment or training (NEET).

Through our research, we have observed youth workers taking on the roles outlined in this report across settings; addressing gaps in services to provide holistic, practical, developmental support to young people that lays the foundation for employment.

The unique and vital roles that youth workers play in young people's journeys to employment have been overlooked and under-utilised. We must now back youth work as essential youth employment infrastructure. The future looks much brighter for a young person with a youth worker by their side.

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