

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE: *Uncovered*

Youth, Skills and Employment

Shining a spotlight on our county of contrast

 *Heart of Bucks*
COMMUNITY FOUNDATION



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Foreword

With a rapidly changing job landscape, the education system under pressure, rising unemployment and youth universal credit claimant count rates in recent years, it is clear Buckinghamshire's youth population is not immune to challenges.

Despite a strong economic and business-focused track record, there are underlying skills challenges facing many children and young people. This report seeks to understand the key obstacles facing Buckinghamshire's future workforce. By sharing key statistics and spotlights on successful local initiatives, we hope this insight will inform decisions and highlight these areas.

Introduction

Developing core employment skills throughout school and early adulthood has a proven positive impact on outcomes for Children and Young People (CYP). Currently however, there is an uneven playing field regarding access to employment skills opportunities and outcomes for young people in Buckinghamshire based upon location, education, and socio-economic situation.

At Heart of Bucks, we are aware that ours is a county of contrast. Despite a strong history of educational and business attainment, there are numerous real challenges and pockets of significant deprivation that risk falling victim to this historic image. Buckinghamshire has historically performed well in youth employment and education rankings across the 38 Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). However, this average can mask pockets of inequality within the county, potentially isolating these communities through lack of representation.

From analysis of local data, further barriers to youth skills and employment include the landscape around apprenticeships and work experience. There is also a disconnect between youth aspirations and skills demand, gaps in careers guidance and the increasing importance of digital skills.

Key Statistics



137,443

Children and Young People
in Buckinghamshire (2021)
(vs South East average 114,861)



7%

of Bucks 16-17-year-olds are Not in
Education, Employment or Training
(vs. a national average of 2.4%)



25.5%

of Bucks' Universal Credit
Claimants were aged 18-29
(February 2024)



8%

of young working-age people (18-24)
in Aylesbury North-West ward claimed
Universal Credit as of March 2022
(vs. national average of 5.1%)



13%

of Bucks employers offered
apprenticeships in 2022/23
(vs national average 20%)

Key Statistics



86.7%

of state-funded schools in Bucks were rated 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted in 2024
(vs national average 89.7%)



77.6%

Educational Deprivation in Aylesbury North West Ward
(vs. national average 19.8%)



32.8%

of children in Booker, Cressex & Castlefield are growing up in absolute low-income households
(vs. national average 15.4%)



up to 1/3

of Bucks employers have struggled to fill vacancies due to applicants lacking required digital skills



41.9%

of pupils eligible for Free School Meals were persistently absent from school in Bucks

Skills Shortage

Many young people feel that they aren't well-prepared for work. Young employees speak about the practical 'culture shock' of moving from education to work:

"You have to unlearn a lot of school learning and behaviour in the workplace. Basic things like the general culture of work are so different, and you're left to figure it out on your own."

Employers often seek essential skills such as literacy, numeracy, communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. With the advance of automation and digitisation, there is increasing demand for digital literacy, data skills, and creative thinking. Vocational skills are also in high demand in certain sectors within Buckinghamshire, especially in key growth sectors like Motor Engineering (Silverstone Technology Cluster), Health (Stoke Mandeville Digital Health Cluster), Space (Westcott Space Cluster), and Film/TV (West of London Screen Cluster).



"The one lesson schools miss out is on 'real life'."

Employers are increasingly concerned about the work-readiness of young people leaving education. During the pandemic, young people faced significant disruption not just to schooling but to developing and accessing work experience and social experiences. Young people have frequently found it challenging to 'catch up' on learning, life experience, and work skills lost during this period. Disadvantaged children were disproportionately impacted, falling as much as twice as far behind as the average student against numeracy and literacy standards.

Students from marginalised groups were less likely to receive online learning resources and classes, as well as having higher absence rates during this period. In 2019, 28% of job vacancies in Buckinghamshire were due to skills shortages. This suggests that the issue of young people lacking skills upon entering the workforce is not new – but has undoubtedly been worsened by the legacy of COVID-19.





Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships are a vital way for many young people to enter the workplace. However, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) often find it more difficult to engage in the national 'skills system' due to more limited resources and competition with larger organisations for funding and access to skills development programmes.

28,430 businesses in Bucks (91.1%) are micro-enterprises with 0-9 employees.

Only 13% of Buckinghamshire employers offered apprenticeships in 2022/23, falling far behind the national average of 20%.



Bucks' apprenticeship programme starts and achievements per 100,000 people were below the national average for the academic year of 2022/23.

806 people per 100,000 started an apprenticeship in Buckinghamshire (national average 947 per 100,000).

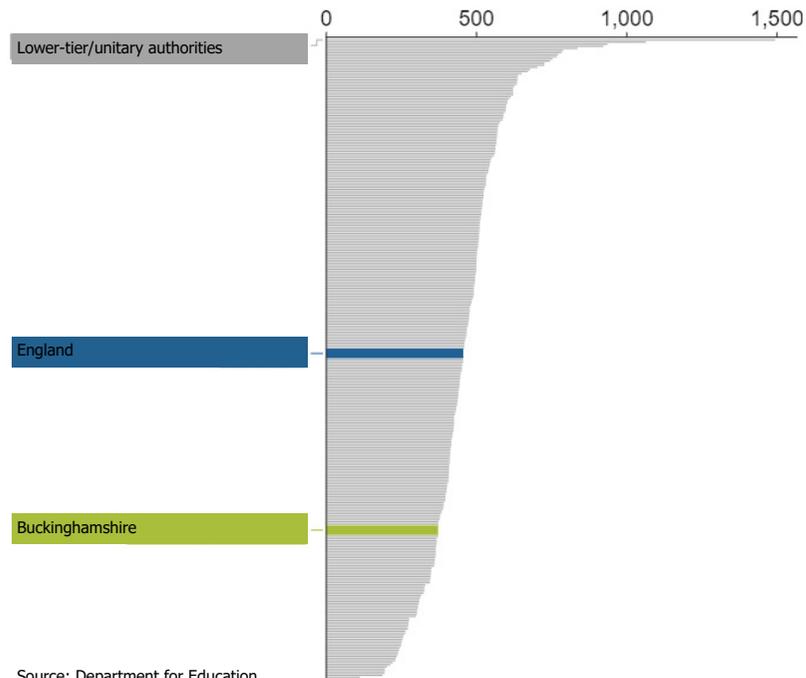
Achievements: Bucks – 372 per 100,000 (national average – 456 per 100,000).

Apprenticeship achievements do vary regionally, with the Midlands, North, and Southwest seeing much higher numbers per 100,000 people. Yet Bucks also falls behind surrounding counties like Oxfordshire, Central Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, West Berkshire, and West Northamptonshire.

Apprenticeships Statistics

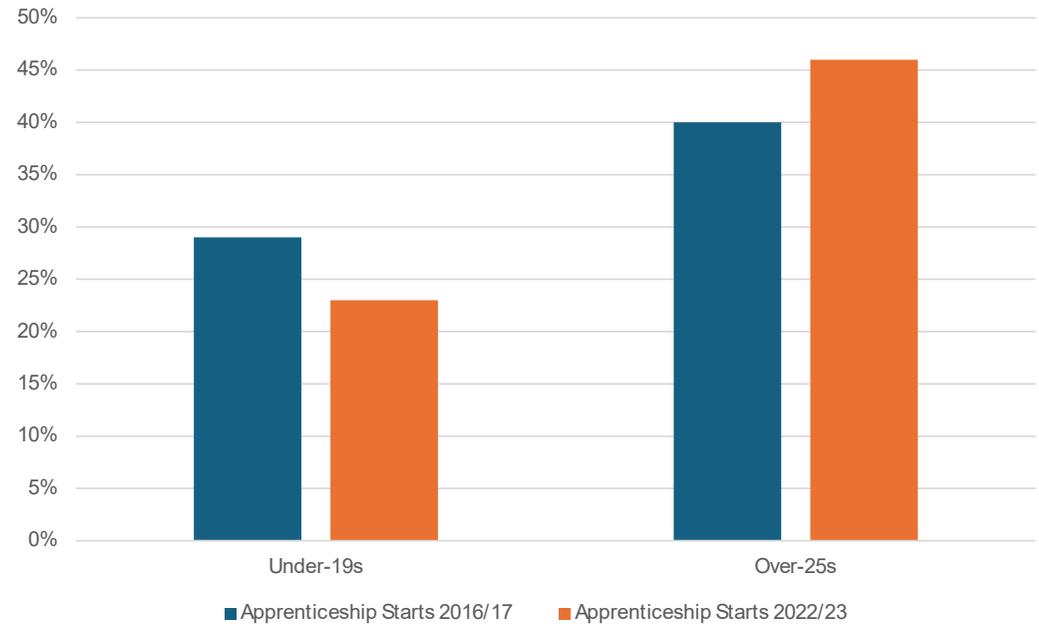
Apprenticeship achievements

Apprenticeship programme achievements by people aged 16 or above, per 100,000 people (2022-23)



Source: Department for Education

Buckinghamshire Apprenticeship Starts By Age





Perceptions of apprenticeships, which have historically been more negative than other routes, continue to be a barrier as well:

“At school it’s still very much ‘university or nothing’. Other paths are discouraged, despite uni not always being the best route to take.” – Bucks Sixth Form Student

This view is also still mirrored by many parents:

“Parents often don’t see apprenticeships as a quality offer. When compared to a degree it’s seen as a lesser option, and they can dissuade young people from pursuing them.” – Tomas Pukalski, Framework Digital CEO



Apprenticeships: Opportunities

In April 2024, the government announced it would fully fund all apprenticeships for small businesses, reducing the cost and resource burden of offering apprenticeships to anyone up to 21 years old. This is intended to encourage more small businesses to engage with the national framework, and it is hoped this will also help realign apprenticeships offered specifically for younger individuals within Bucks.

Bucks Skills Hub utilise their partnerships across all 50 secondary schools in Bucks to inform and educate students, teachers and parents about the opportunities that apprenticeships can offer. Whilst it has been a challenge, Under-19 Skills Lead Marina Jackson notes the impact of degree-level apprenticeships on starting a shift in perception:

“Beforehand you couldn’t get into some schools to talk about apprenticeships. Now that you can get a degree while getting paid and avoiding debt, a lot of students and their parents are starting to recognise the benefits.”

Case Study

framework
digital



A large, light blue, stylized quote icon consisting of two overlapping speech bubble shapes.

An apprenticeship is a mutually beneficial partnership, and learning goes both ways. Youth generations are increasingly digitally native, giving them a strong platform to develop advanced digital skills.

Training new hires requires time, money, and resources, whereas apprenticeship programmes are delivered by external providers, and 95% or 100% of the costs are covered. Even considering that an apprentice spends 1 out of 5 working days on learning, this teaching does not use other employees' time, which would be paid if training is provided internally.

To make the most of the process:

- Make sure you do your research on apprenticeship providers and look beyond the sales pitch.
- When recruiting an apprentice, look for the right attitude rather than grades.
- Get your current employees involved in the recruitment process and later in training and mentoring.
- Take the opportunity that employing an apprentice brings!

Tomas Pukalski, Director Framework Digital





“An apprenticeship can enhance your employability not only from industry experience but your professional behaviour such as organisation and communication.”

Framework’s current apprentice, Amy Norfolk, gives her advice for young people considering an apprenticeship:

“Choosing what path you take after finishing school can be a tough decision. I was considering either going to university or doing an apprenticeship, which is a common decision that school leavers face. When deciding which option was right for me, I asked myself three questions:

1. Does the industry I want to go into require going to university? Schools usually push the idea of going to university, but consider what other options are out there and if they would be more effective at getting you where you want to be.



2. What is the quickest route to reach my career goal?

With an apprenticeship, I can simultaneously gain a qualification, get experience, earn a wage, and get the opportunity to network with people who can potentially accelerate my career.

3. What type of learner am I? Not everyone is suited to the same types of learning. I learn better practically; an apprenticeship was perfect for me as I got the opportunity to apply the theory instantly into my role.

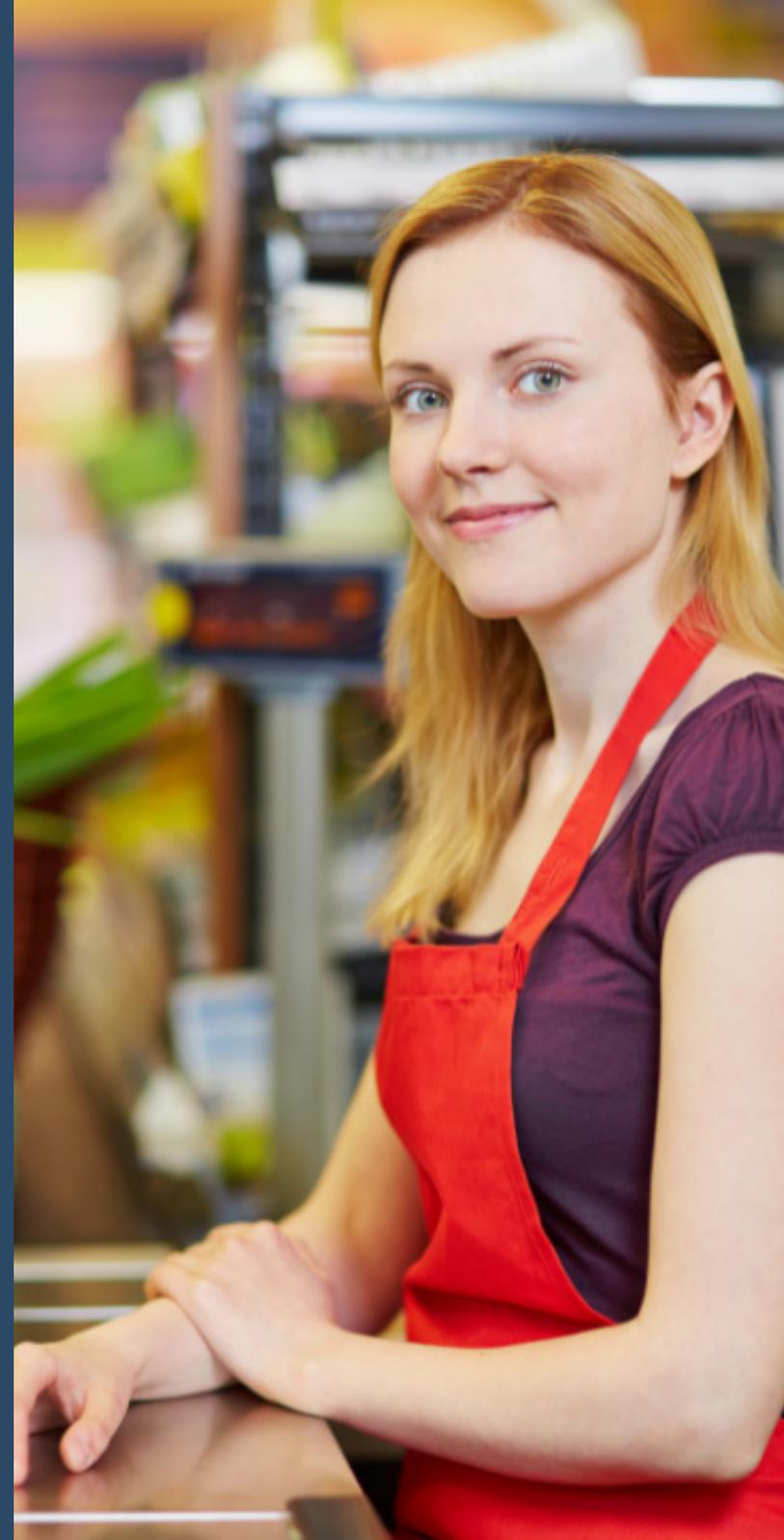
An apprenticeship can enhance your employability not only from industry experience but your professional behaviour such as organisation and communication. Building these foundations at a young age is the perfect way to start your career and it's one of the main reasons why I chose to do an apprenticeship."

Work Experience

Long before they leave school, Children and Young People (CYP) are developing employment skills through education. Work experience is one of the key ways in which these skills can be advanced. However, there is uneven access to quality work experience via schools across Bucks, based upon schools' relationships with local businesses.

T-Levels – two-year vocational qualifications for 16-19-year-olds, and equivalent to 3 A-levels – require students to complete 45 days' placement in the workplace. Many employers feel this is too great a resource investment, and there is no financial incentive. Other logistical issues like insurance limits can prevent companies from participating, making them unable to viably allow young people to regularly attend their workplaces for extended periods of time.

Companies find it increasingly difficult to offer work experience that requires significant supervision and in-person oversight with larger proportions of people working from home or on flexible schedules.

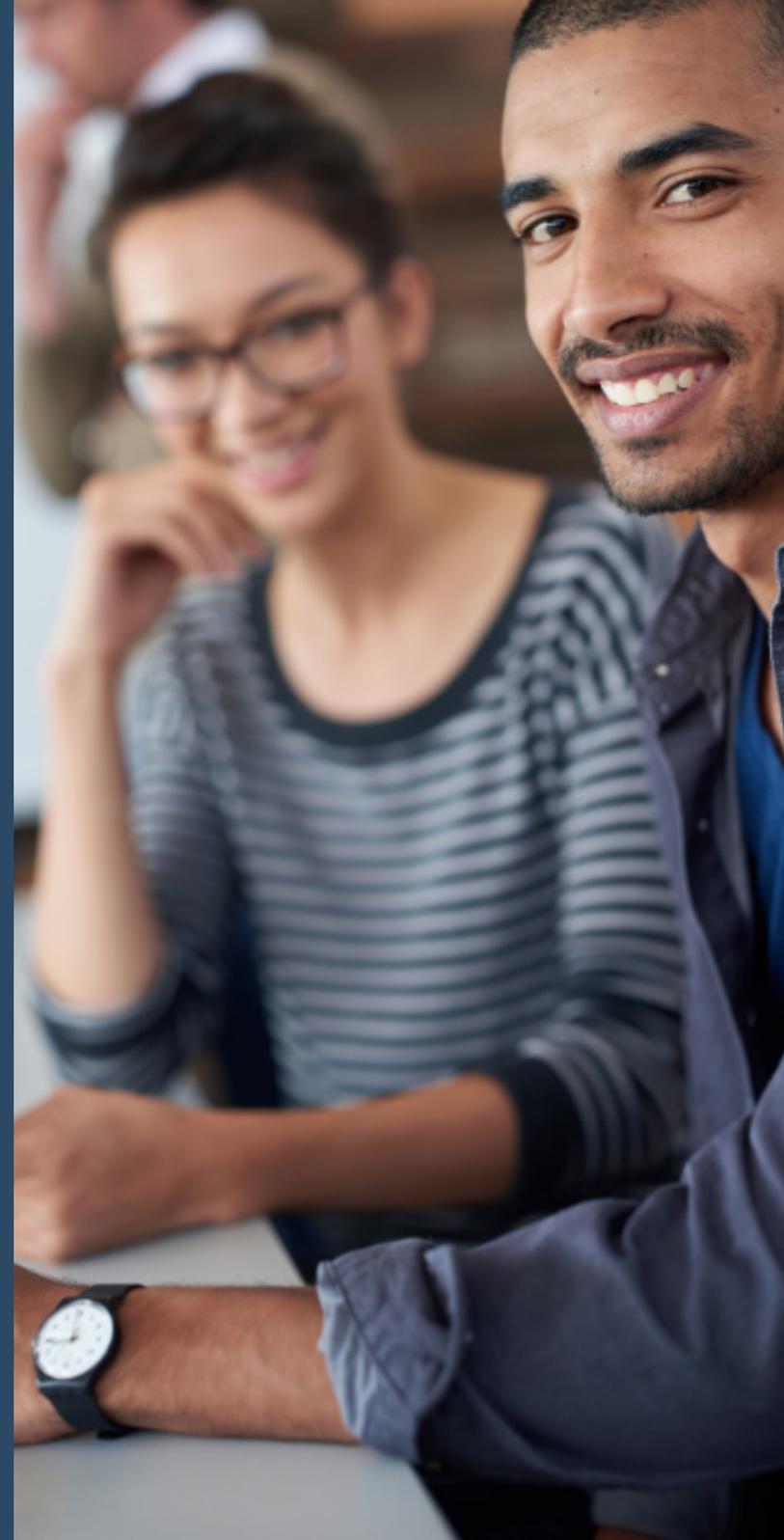


Traditional work experience programmes are also not always useful. Many young people find themselves relegated to making cups of tea whilst employers scramble to find menial tasks for them to complete.

Businesses also express frustration at multiple schools timing work experience placements simultaneously. With the large proportion of small businesses across the county, this strain can be felt more acutely.

Opportunities

Bucks Skills Hub are exploring better options for implementing work experience and helping young people across the county make informed decisions about their futures. For example, a young person trying to decide what direction to take may find it much more useful to interact with a variety of local companies, spending a shorter amount of time with each to understand the roles they have on offer. Such alternative approaches also play to the strengths of the county's SME-dominated business landscape.



Buckinghamshire boasts numerous growth industries with vast expertise. To harness this, the Skills Hub run a wide variety of programmes to engage businesses with schools. From delivering the annual Bucks Skills Show to partnering schools with local businesses to work on green solutions, the goal is to expose young people to as wide a range of options as possible.

The Skills Hub produces resources for schools, arranges talks, and informs young people about industry trends and opportunities within the county. Using the Gatsby Benchmarks (a national, 8-point framework for delivering careers guidance in schools), they ensure that all secondary schools in Bucks have a named careers leader for businesses to make contact with, team up local business leaders with schools as Enterprise Advisors, and get teachers out into the workplace to learn industry-ready skills that they can take back to the classroom.





Youth Aspiration & Careers Guidance

Buckinghamshire Council has noted lower levels of career aspiration in sectors such as health and social care, agriculture, hospitality, and construction. Likewise, the Bucks Skills Hub observes a greater-than-average disparity between aspiration and actual demand for skills and work within the county. This can be damaging to young people if their goals don't work out, especially when these aspirations are often held with extreme certainty and consistency without any backup plans.

Schools must play a vital role by providing careers learning at all stages of education, as career aspirations can be set as early as age eight. The lack of career support and varied role models can either lead students to have extremely limited career aspirations or extremely unrealistic or unsupportable ones.



The impact of external factors on a young person's aspirations must be considered. Both positive and negative role models throughout family, social circles and social media can influence the goals of young people for the better – or for the worse.

As the socio-economic landscape continues to evolve, young people's aspirations naturally change. For example, the second-ranked career aspiration given by boys surveyed by Education and Employers in 2020 was Social Media and Gaming. Social and cultural capital are key influencers on young people's career goals, with social media now playing a significant role in these aspirations.

Becoming a social media influencer or YouTube streamer now often outranks aspirations of becoming a 'traditional' celebrity or sportsperson. This change is not inherently negative or positive; it must be contextualised to allow young people to be pragmatically informed about what such career paths entail.



Opportunities

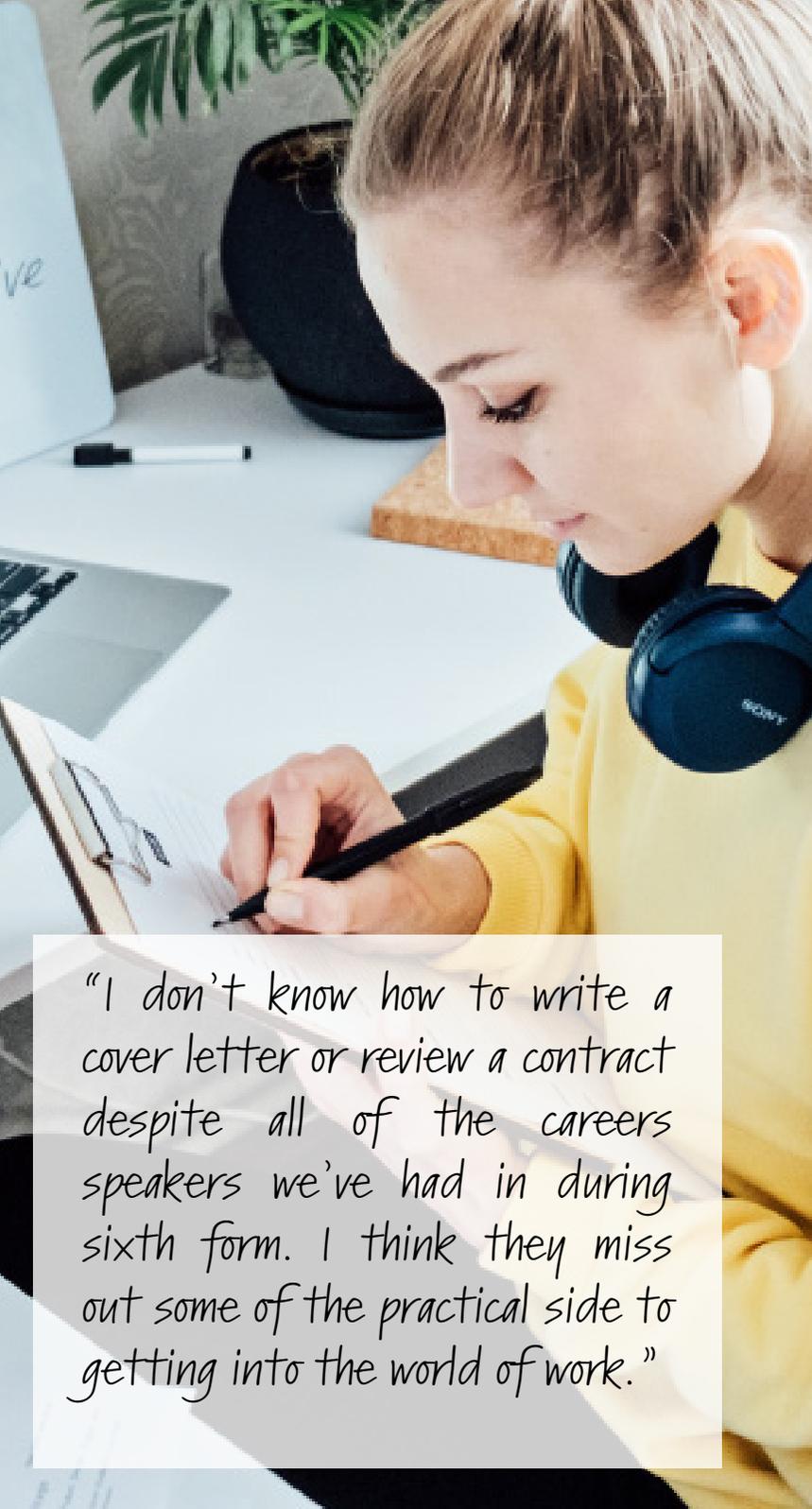
National surveys show that young people have a real desire for better insights into work, timely careers advice, and role models who 'look like them.'

1 in 4 young people want more careers guidance

30% of young people feel a need for more or better opportunities for qualifications and training

One Bucks sixth-form student feels that their schools' careers advice is too narrow:

"At our school it's almost exclusively medicine, finance and law. They'll direct careers advice to the outcomes that look the best for the school. All the external speakers we've had have been in finance. It can really hurt the aspirations of students who don't want to take those career paths, they think it's not an option."



"I don't know how to write a cover letter or review a contract despite all of the careers speakers we've had in during sixth form. I think they miss out some of the practical side to getting into the world of work."

Careers support should be about more than just aspiration. Bucks' young people want practical advice about the world of employment and the actual realities of things like application processes.

However, they often view schools as 'out of touch and out of date on careers', especially minority groups and disadvantaged students who find a lack of role models that look like them in school.

In this sense, the work of extra-curricular youth charities and voluntary organisations becomes even more important. These organisations can engage young people who are less likely to engage in school.

For example, one 2022 survey found that young Black, African, Black British, or Caribbean people were three times more likely to feel less welcome in school, making it much harder to engage with available skills opportunities.

Case Study





Aylesbury-based charity Youth Concern have recently employed a careers advisor in response to the needs and requests of the young people they work with. The charity offers holistic support to 13-25 year-olds including a youth food bank, counselling team and homelessness prevention. CEO Hannah Asquith describes the positive impact of careers advice on one such young person:

"Sam* is a regular visitor to Youth Concern's Drop-in Centre but first met Kath, the charity's newly appointed Careers Youth Worker in April 2024. With experience of working as an events steward and a door person, Sam was keen to explore more permanent and consistent roles.

Sam gets great job satisfaction from their security role. In exploring the ways in which Sam's autism and ADHD affected their ability to work, Kath explored the option of an operational support role within HM Prisons. Sam loved the idea and together, they completed the application form, discussing the benefits of ticking the 'reasonable adjustments' box.

*name has been changed to protect anonymity.





Sam had a second appointment with Kath for interview practice. Sam returned to share their interview experience with Kath. They were proud of how the interview had gone and had gained very positive feedback, especially in the way they had disclosed her reasonable adjustment needs. Sam is now in HMP's 'talent pool', waiting to progress to the next stage.

Trust is growing between Sam and Kath. Sam shared that they are a young carer for her dad and sister. With money concerns causing stress, Kath and Sam are looking for short-term paid opportunities whilst benefitting from Youth Concern's youth food bank and signposting to other services locally.

Sam's experience is not atypical of the 13–25-year-olds Youth Concern supports. Young people are presenting with increasingly complex needs. Having an experienced Careers Youth Worker has been a boon to Aylesbury Vale's young people who benefit from help with CV and application writing, identifying jobs, interview practice and support once in role.

Deprivation & Disadvantage

Buckinghamshire is a county of contrast. Educational deprivation and socio-economic disadvantage impact a sizeable proportion of its residents.

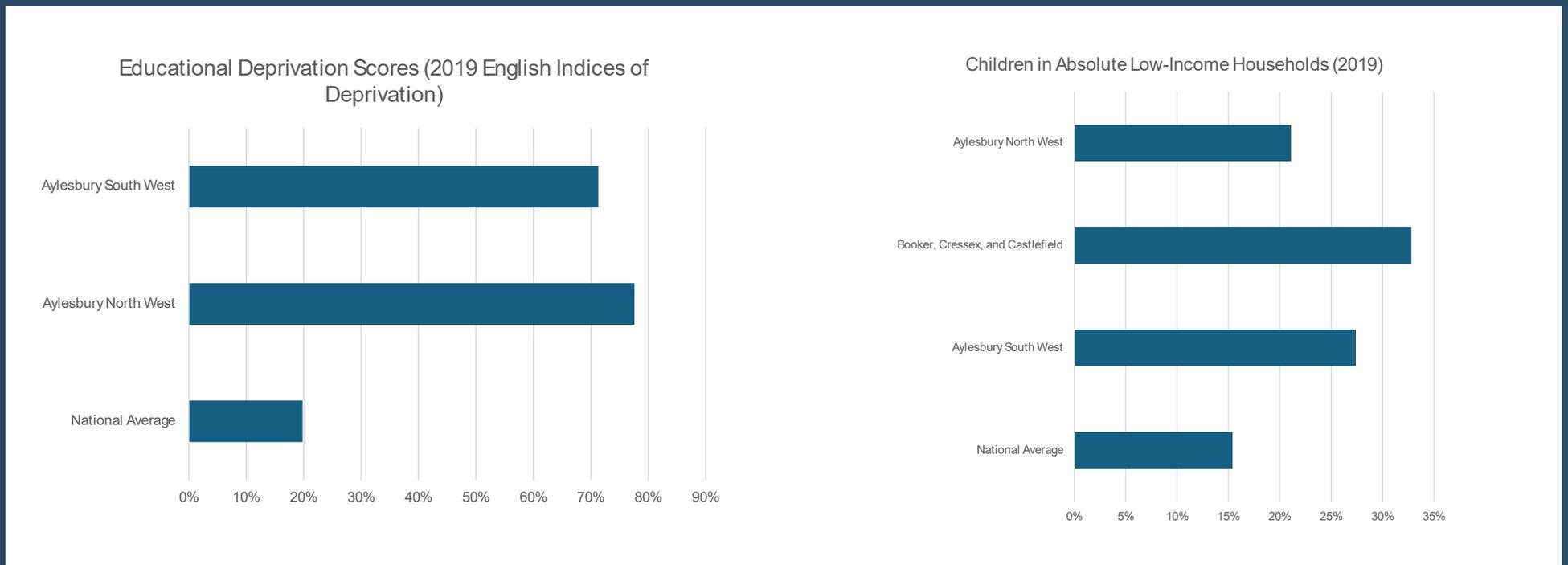
Several Buckinghamshire wards have notably elevated levels of educational deprivation (a measure of the lack of skills and attainment within the local population). With schools playing such a significant role in providing young people with the skills and opportunities they need to thrive in later life, this is certainly an area to be addressed.



Children growing up in poverty and low-income households could also face greater barriers to accessing effective employment skills support and training.

Bucks' absence data for 2022/23 shows that its disadvantaged pupils are much more likely than average to be absent for significant amounts of time across the school year. Bucks has the 4th highest percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) with persistent absence among England's lower-tier unitary authorities (41.9%). Attendance improvement must therefore remain a key target for moving forward Bucks' education and skills outcomes.

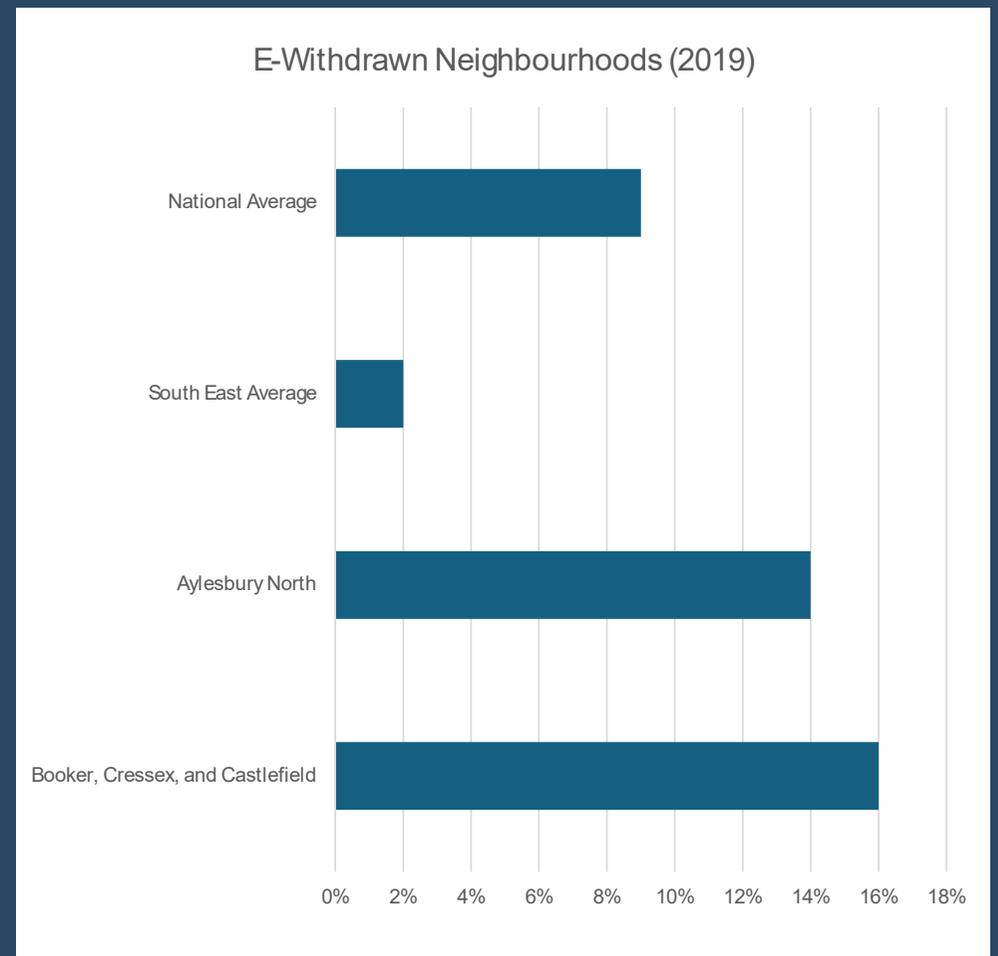
7% of 16–17-year-olds in the county are Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET) compared to a 2.4% national average. Of these, 31% are from vulnerable groups – significantly higher than the national average of 26%.



Vulnerable groups often face a matrix of barriers where basic needs and 'competing pressures' such as economic disadvantage, mental wellbeing, and exposure to crime take precedence over skills support. These groups are less likely to aspire to high-status occupations, and high-achieving students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to progress to higher education. They also often face limited exposure to networks or employer engagement through social connections outside school, making support from schools and charity organisations especially vital for disadvantaged groups.

Children in the most deprived wards often grow up in neighbourhoods with poorer internet access and lower levels of internet usage, limiting their positive exposure to digital skills. In Booker, Cressex, and Castlefield, 41% of surveyed neighbourhoods were identified as 'passive and uncommitted' internet users, defined by limited or no interaction with the internet.

This is more than double the national average of 20% and the South East average of 13%. This same area, alongside Aylesbury North, also contains significantly higher-than-average percentages of 'e-withdrawn' neighbourhoods - those least engaged with the internet, information seeking, and financial services.



Opportunities

The **Opportunity Bucks** initiative is Buckinghamshire Council's response to these challenges. The programme focuses on 10 wards across Aylesbury, High Wycombe and Chesham to improve opportunities and outcomes for those affected by hardship. The aspirations of the programme are for every individual in Bucks to have the same opportunities for achievement - including learning and skills attainment, safety and community connection, and physical wellbeing and good quality food.

As part of Opportunity Bucks, Buckinghamshire Council has implemented focused job and career fairs and a careers hub targeted at these areas. This includes partnering with Job Centre Plus for nine events across Aylesbury, High Wycombe, and Chesham. The new Buckinghamshire Careers Hub is similarly tailored to highlight opportunities within the Opportunity Bucks wards. In the current academic year, Buckinghamshire Council is providing personal careers and apprenticeship mentoring to 213 individuals from Opportunity Bucks wards who are currently attending college.



Photo:Flora SK

Positive engagement in disadvantaged areas is important to outcomes, including employment, even when it isn't specifically skills focused. The Southcourt and Walton Court Project focuses on children at risk of social exclusion due to living in areas of economic and social deprivation. The project provides opportunities for development of physical, mental, psychological health and wellbeing, and safe socialization. A wide variety of youth charities across Buckinghamshire similarly work to improve outcomes for young people and remove socio-economic barriers that often take precedence in a young person's life over and above skills attainment. These include, but are not limited to, Youth Concern, Action 4 Youth, One-Eighty, Community Youth Ventures, and Wycombe Youth Action.

With significant decreases in funding available for youth clubs and extra-curricular youth activities, the provision of such services by small local charities has become even more important for the rounded development of young people. Improving socialisation and access to safe spaces for building social and transferable skills while helping to reduce engagement in crime is a key focus area for both Chesham and Aylesbury North West Community Boards. Such action is vital in preparing Children and Young People (CYP) for the best possible outcomes as adults.



“Working on projects with a youth charity has taught me way more about interacting with colleagues and professional development than in school.”

Sixth Form Student

Case Study

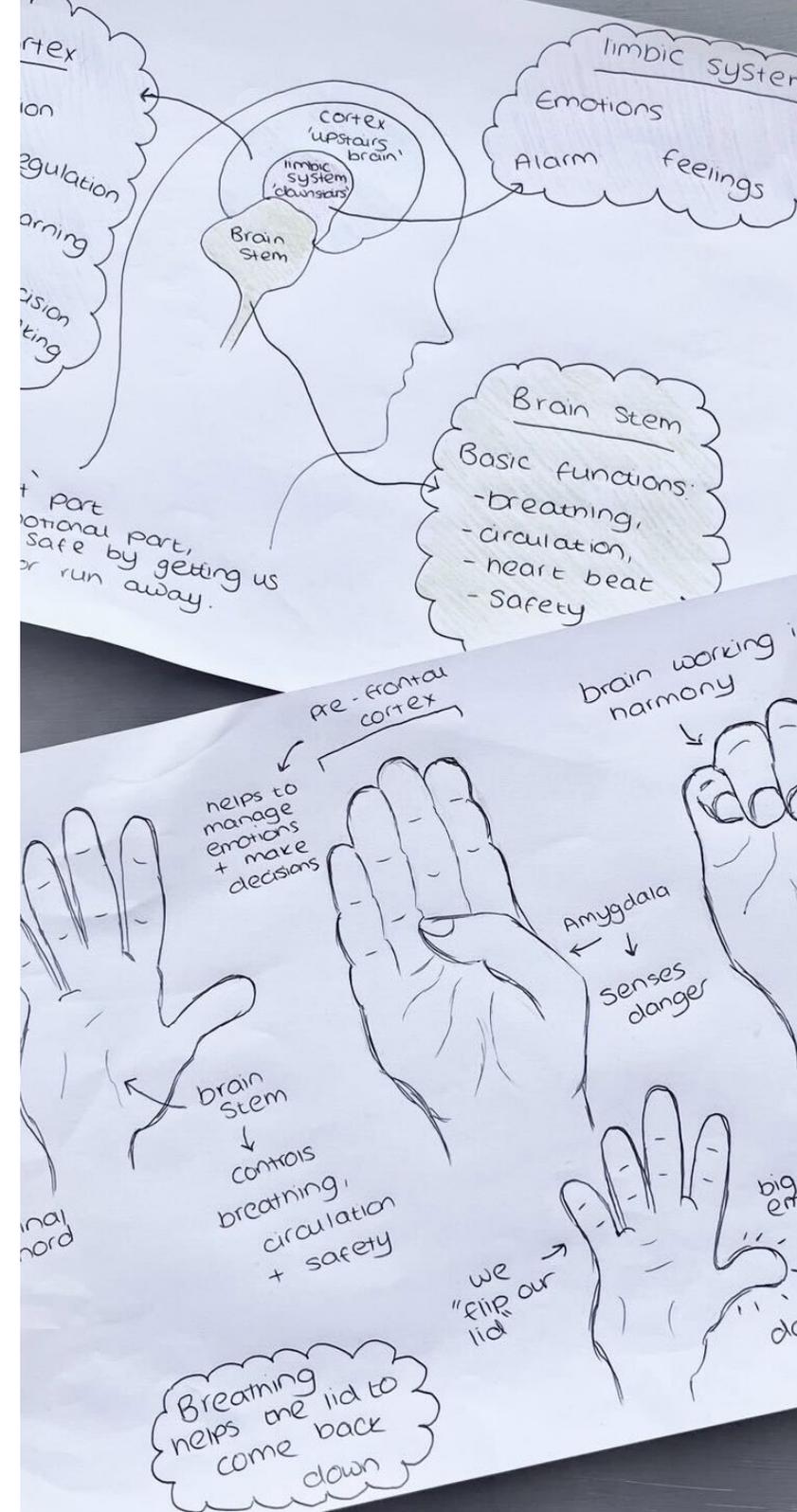
one-eighty
▶ **TURNING LIVES AROUND**

One-Eighty conduct considerable work with young people in Buckinghamshire. They provide pre-emptive in-school sessions as well as interventions with young people who have become disconnected from the education system, in order to guide them towards positive outcomes.

Carly*, aged 15, has disengaged from education. She hasn't attended school for a year and a half. She has found school difficult due to her learning needs and neurodiversity – she finds communication and language very challenging. As a result, she often gets frustrated, becoming dysregulated and showing physical aggression.

Growing up, home-life has been challenging. Her parents are not together, having had a volatile relationship; she has experienced domestic violence and neglect. Carly should be studying for her GCSEs but after not attending school for so long, she doesn't know how to find a way back.

*name has been changed to protect anonymity.



She prefers to hang out with her friends – they make her feel like she belongs. The group have regular contact with the police but this doesn't faze them. Professionals are worried that the group are at risk of exploitation.

At first Carly struggles to engage in our work. She has a lot of anxiety about her learning needs; avoidance and shutting down have become her way of coping. Her anxiety, combined with finding communication challenging, means she doesn't trust professionals to hear her. We persist and do not give up hope, finding different ways to maintain engagement. Gradually she starts to open up. Carly tells us she wants to return to education and achieve GCSEs so she can support herself, but doesn't know how.

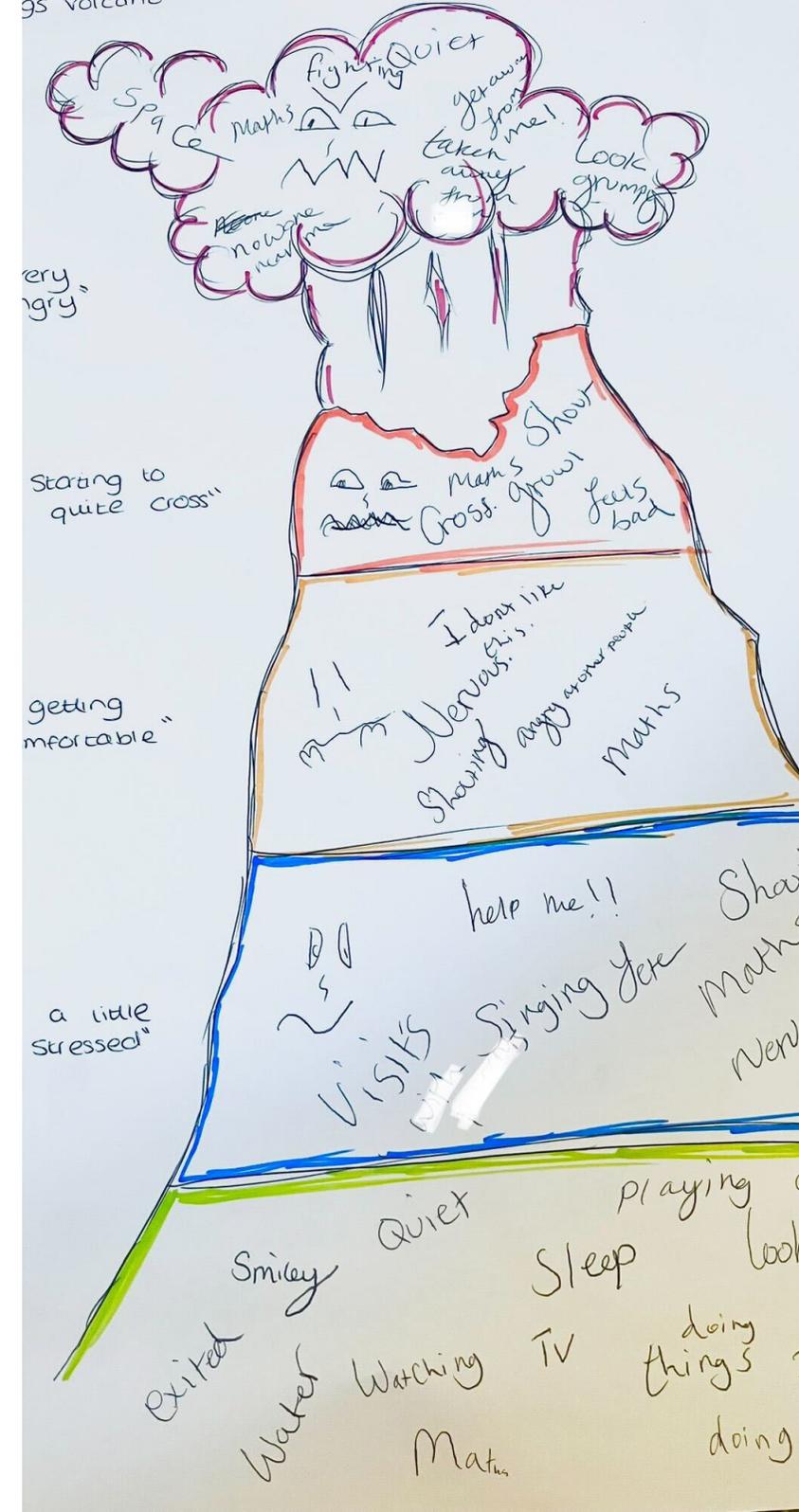
When we tell professionals this, they are surprised – they haven't been able to discuss these things with Carly before. We talk to Carly about different options for her future and help her to advocate for herself, facilitating discussions with other professionals about her goals. She opens up to them about her past experiences with education.

When we meet Carly again, we help her set very clear goals around positively engaging with professionals, exploring next steps for education, and better understanding her learning needs and neurodiversity. As a result of our persistence, her engagement increases again. She consistently participates in sessions and activities.

At the end of the intervention, Carly is positive. She had been set on getting GCSEs, but can now see other education pathways will give her the skills she needs to gain an apprenticeship in a more supportive environment. She now feels part of the decision-making and we notice a huge difference in her focus – she is motivated to achieve her longer-term goals.

She has engaged well with professionals becoming more relaxed and talkative over time. Those around Carly have seen real change. Her Mum can see she is more optimistic for the future. Professionals have noted many improvements – her attitude is more positive; her motivation high; she displays more confidence and self-awareness. She understands how her emotions can affect her behaviour, and how this influences others' view of her.

The last time we meet Carly, she is reflective. She no longer wants to be involved in her old life – she is proud of her progress and of not being in trouble with the police. She is focused on her future – it's boring being stuck at home all day!





Digital Skills

Digital access is now just as important for the development of children and young people. Access to reliable broadband enhances digital skills and improves employment outcomes. Buckinghamshire already notices this skills demand: a 2019 gov.uk Employer Skills Survey found that up to a third of Bucks employers struggled to fill vacancies due to applicants lacking the required digital skills.

This will only continue to become more relevant as digital and data skills demand grows. Almost half of Bucks employers expect the need for new digital skills in their businesses over the coming 12 months. With a looming 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' powered by AI, robotics, and the Internet of Things, basic data literacy will become a requirement for most of the UK workforce.

"Our organisation already uses AI extensively. For me, it was a steep learning curve on the job. I think schools need to start teaching these skills to set young people up to transition into work."

Young Bucks-based employee



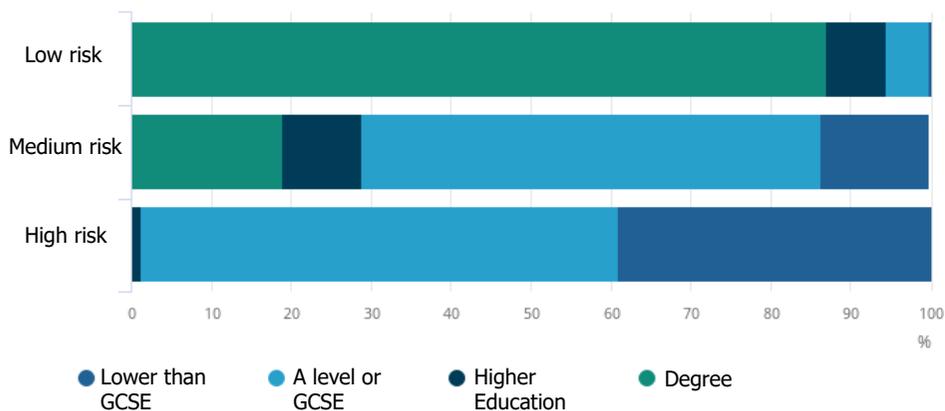
The types of jobs and skills required are expected to shift significantly, requiring resilience and adaptability in the young workforce. It is possible that up to two-thirds of the UK workforce will lack basic digital skills by 2030, suggesting that training and development are lacking not only in the current working population but also in the upcoming generation of workers.

Unfortunately, this could further increase the divide of inequality, especially in areas that may feel left behind due to uneven digital access and internet usage. Digital exclusion already affects one in seven people in the UK.

Average broadband download speeds in Totteridge and Bowerdean are 47.3 Mbit/s (vs. national average 73.4).

In West Wycombe, 143 premises (3.3% of households) had broadband speeds below the Universal Service Obligation as of 2019 (almost double the national average of 1.8%).

Proportion of main jobs at risk of automation by education (England, 2017)



Source: Annual Survey Population, UK Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) and Frey Osborne

As job automation continues to transform the work landscape, such communities could face further challenges due to the uneven risk posed by automation to different job roles. A 2017 ONS survey found that the lower the education level required for a job, the higher the risk of automation, resulting in double the risk to job roles requiring A Levels, GCSEs, or lower, compared to those requiring graduate-level education. Automation, therefore, has a higher chance of impacting those with fewer qualifications in the coming years.

Opportunities

Digital skills are highly sought after by young people who recognise their value both personally and professionally, however express frustration at provision in educational settings. Social media is now integrated into everyday life, and Bucks' youth also want to learn more about its benefits, not just its dangers. Students remarked:

"Problem-solving skills in technology are non-existent at our school... you have to learn it on your own."

"Most of the people I know in sixth form have a LinkedIn profile, but no one knows what to do with it or how to use the platform for networking."

"Social media is stigmatised, and we're told about all of the negative things about it. But when it comes to networking and finding work, we don't get much guidance."

AI is similarly a concern for young people who see its rapid impact on the world around them:

“AI is spoken about very negatively in school, and we’re banned from using it because of plagiarism worries. That’s understandable, even though the teachers use it for their own lessons, but nobody ever talks about the benefits of AI or how it can be used in the world of work – schools are definitely behind the curve on this.”

With strengths in space development, high-performance technology, and environmental engineering, Buckinghamshire’s economic growth is set to rely heavily on basic and advanced digital skills in the future workforce. However, if companies cannot invest in training their younger employees, young people are likely to look elsewhere or suffer from a lack of skills development compared to rising skills requirements.

Providing opportunities to develop advanced digital skills helps both employees and companies keep up with the rapid advancement of digital skills, enhancing company resilience and loyalty from young employees, and improving the ability of companies to fill high-skill roles in the long term. It is just as important for businesses, the Council, and the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector to participate in training children and young people through developing relationships with local schools and educational institutions.

Recommendations

A holistic approach is required to aim for the provision of a variety of well-structured pathways to skills development and employment for young people. This something-for-everyone approach needs to take into consideration place-based challenges, tailored provision for disadvantaged groups, and collaborative engagement between educational institutions, businesses, VCSE and government bodies.

Apprenticeships:

- It remains important for schools and providers to highlight the benefits of apprenticeships to employers, young people and indeed parents as viable routes into employment.
- Apprenticeships should stand alongside university and other further education options to strengthen the offer for young people, allowing them to choose the best option for their goals and situation.

Work Experience:

- Schools should communicate and collaborate on timing to prevent overloading local businesses.
- Guidance, advice, and support for SMEs to engage with the national skills system to offer apprenticeships, T levels and work experience placements would bolster these avenues as viable options for Buckinghamshire's CYP. With the vast wealth of experience in a wide range of sectors and the potential for agility and rapid adaptation within SMEs, the potential for providing quality experience and training to young people is considerable.





Aspiration and Careers Guidance:

- Careers advice is a key area which Bucks' young people see as an opportunity for improvement. This support is necessary at all levels of schooling, and adequate, varied, and timely guidance is proven to reduce the disconnect between aspiration and reality by up to 20%. Again, this requires collaboration and partnership between organisations and educational institutions, and a willingness to participate from a range of businesses and professionals.
- VCSE groups working with young people can play a pivotal role by directly and indirectly providing careers advice and aspirational guidance to Buckinghamshire's young people.
- They can also support the improvement work done by the likes of Bucks Skills Hub by focusing on the core challenges in their local communities and ensuring they make an effort to collaborate with the schools and educational institutions local to them.



Digital Skills:

- Digital skills are vital for the workforce of today and will only become more integral. Basic data literacy, AI, and social media skills are all important to Bucks' youth population; and they feel needs are not currently being met.
- There must also be a focus on flexibility, as skills requirements will continue to change over time.
- IT education provision in schools should be a more robust aspect of the curriculum.
- Digital exclusion must be tackled, partly by ensuring all communities have adequate access to broadband internet and the infrastructure required for today's digital world.



Deprivation and Disadvantage:

- Vulnerable and marginalised young people face specific barriers to accessibility of skills and employment. Focused engagement is needed to ensure they are able and willing to maintain school attendance levels, have extra-curricular opportunities for development, and access to a network of support and social capital.
- Engaging CYP eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) and young people with SEND is vital as they are disproportionately affected – schemes such as Buckinghamshire Council’s HAF (Holiday Activities and Food) project provide opportunities for socialisation and learning new skills in a supportive environment.
- From making careers fairs logistically and socially available to disadvantaged communities to enhanced signposting to support services, targeting the groups that require the greatest amount of support will likewise have the greatest payoff in improvement.



Further Considerations:

- There are undoubtedly other ongoing challenges with implications for young people on a county-wide and national scale.
- Nationally, 51% of young people over 19 surveyed by the Princes Trust felt that mental health was the single biggest challenge to work that they faced in 2023.
- Bucks has a fast-increasing number of young people with SEND and EHCPs, with over 2,000 students attending SEND educational settings in 2023/24.
- Further Bucks-focused research into these areas is highly recommended.



Funding

Many of the above considerations obviously require a financial element. Schools need additional funding to support implementation of robust careers guidance and skills education. Deprivation and disadvantage can only be adequately addressed with the funding to back social projects.

Alongside this, VCSE organisations can play a role in targeting both service delivery and funding for projects that benefit youth skills development and engagement.

As a Bucks-based community foundation and grant maker, Heart of Bucks recognise the value and potential of Buckinghamshire's young people. Our [Young Futures Fund](#) focuses specifically on funding charity projects working to improve outcomes and provide opportunities for young people in Bucks. The panel is itself made up of young people from around Bucks, ensuring that funding decisions are set in line with the real needs and priorities of young people in the county.

Heart of Bucks have also partnered with [SWEF CIC](#) to offer a specific fund to support young entrepreneurs (18-30) with a grant of up to £2,000 to get an early-stage business off the ground.

Our [Young People's Wellbeing Fund](#), in partnership with Buckinghamshire Council is dedicated to promoting positive emotional wellbeing and resilience in young people through out-of-school and non-school-time activities.



Final Thoughts

Whilst we hope this report has highlighted several key challenges and opportunities within the county, its scope is by nature limited and cannot cover every aspect affecting young people, skills and employment in detail.

Further research and engagement with Buckinghamshire's youth population is encouraged to ensure that policy, funding and support are adequate to tackle the barriers facing successful development and employment opportunities for the county's young people.

All of Buckinghamshire's young people deserve the opportunity to pursue meaningful and successful employment and skills development. Whilst there are indeed clear and challenging issues within the county, there is also substantial possibility – and there are many more examples of charity organisations, schools, businesses and the wider public sector carrying out positive work in this space. We can all take inspiration from this, to make our county a place of opportunity for all.

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Photo: Karen Livett

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Buckinghamshire: Uncovered
Shining a spotlight on our county of contrast

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