

Work that Works for the Next Generation

The role of job quality in tackling youth
inactivity

ABOUT TIMEWISE

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We undertake research, campaigns and policy work to highlight the social and business benefits of good quality and flexible work that provides predictability and control for workers. We offer bespoke solutions, training and innovation programmes to improve job design, scheduling and work organisation. We specialise in developing frameworks of good practice and tailored solutions for frontline sectors that face operational barriers to change, such as education, health, social care, retail, childcare and construction. We also work with industry leaders, government and other partners to support change at scale.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Timewise would like to thank the Trades Union Congress for funding this piece of work, and particularly Nicola Smith and Alice Arkwright for their comments. We would also like to thank Paul Bivand for producing the original analysis of inactivity flows and costs for this report.

ABOUT THE ANALYSIS

The analysis of sectoral and occupational flows into inactivity is based on data from the Annual Population Survey three-year dataset between January 2022 and December 2024, weighted to 2022 based population estimates. The inactive, long term sick group is identified from people who were out of work being asked if they were looking for work, and if not, why not. The analysis on the last sector or occupation they worked in comes from a question asking about this within the last 8 years. The cost analysis uses data from the post-pandemic longitudinal Labour Force Surveys on pay and earnings, applied to the numbers of people moving to long term inactivity due to ill-health identified through the Annual Population Survey.

INTRODUCTION

The need to strengthen the transition from school to work in the UK is becoming increasingly urgent – with young people at risk from recent increases in unemployment alongside a longer-term structural rise in economic inactivity largely driven by worsening mental ill-health.

Nearly one million young people - approximately one in eight young people aged 16 to 24 - are not in education, employment or training (NEET), with over a quarter citing long-term sickness or disability as a barrier to participation, compared to just 12 per cent in 2013-14.ⁱ

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Pat McFadden MP, has described preventing “wasted potential” among young people as his top priority. The Government’s flagship employment programme is a new Youth Guarantee to ensure all 18-to 21-year-olds are earning or learning. Over the next three years, the £820m package is expected to establish Youth Hubs across Great Britain; create 350,000 new training or workplace opportunities in sectors such as construction, hospitality and social care for unemployed young people; and provide 55,000 guaranteed six-month paid work placements for those who are on Universal Credit and looking for a job for more than 18 months. Alongside this support, the Government has proposed restricting health benefits for young people and signalled that those that do not engage could face sanctions.

This briefing explores the role of job quality in tackling economic inactivity among young people. Based on analysis carried out by Timewise for the Trades Union Congress, we look at the nature of the sectors and roles young people work in and find that these are heavily associated with flows into economic inactivity.

These findings support wider evidence highlighting the role of rising economic precarity as a contributing factor to poor employment outcomes for young people. Our findings suggest that measures to strengthen job security and other aspects of job quality in key sectors where high numbers of young people work could lead to improvements to labour market participation with knock-on economic benefits.

We highlight the important role that could be played by effective implementation of the Employment Rights Act, particularly the measures to strengthen flexible working rights and tackle job insecurity. In the debate on supporting young people not in education, employment or training back into work, we argue that insufficient emphasis has been placed on the importance of ensuring good quality jobs with decent prospects. The Employment Rights Act has a vital role to play in achieving this, as the government’s own analysis suggests, in both improving the quality of work in low wage sectors and in increasing the range of jobs and working patterns that are attractive to workers.

We set out the potential benefits of further measures to tackle job quality issues in the sectors where young people work – and recommendations for what this could look like.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- **We find that the three sectors that account for the highest volumes of workers moving into economic inactivity due to ill-health are also the sectors where young people are most likely to work:** wholesale and retail, food and accommodation and health and social care.
- These sectors also have high rates of workers moving to long term sickness, ranking in the top six of 19 sectors. Food and accommodation tops the list: for every thousand workers in this sector, an estimated 17 will become economically inactive due to ill-health, compared to an average of seven across all sectors (based on data responses between 2022 and 2024).
- Similarly, elementary occupations, caring, leisure and other service occupations and sales and customer service occupations are disproportionately likely to be done by young people (with higher proportions of under 25s than other age groups) and **all feature in the top four occupations ranked by the volume of workers flowing into economic inactivity** due to ill-health (alongside skilled trades). These three occupational categories make up 49 per cent of all young people's employment (60 per cent with skilled trades).
- As is to be expected, both the volume and the rates of workers becoming long term sick (across all sectors) are higher among older people, but **over a quarter (27 per cent) of workers who are economically inactive due to sickness are 16- to 39-year-olds** (compared to 33 per cent aged 40 to 54 and 40 per cent aged 55 to 64). Nearly half (46 per cent) of economically inactive people whose last job was in an elementary occupation are aged under 40.
- These sectors and occupations are associated with high rates of low pay and job insecurity – factors that wider evidence suggests are contributing factors to economic inactivity generally and specifically the rise in mental distress and economic inactivity among young people.
- Overall this suggests that measures to improve job quality in the sectors where most young people work will be important in supporting labour market participation among young people, in addition to targeted employment support and the creation of stronger pathways into good jobs in other sectors.
- There are economic benefits to action on economic inactivity. Only 2.5% of people of all ages return to work from inactivity each year. Of these, around half only sustain jobs for four months or less. Our analysis suggests that supporting people at risk of inactivity due to ill-health to sustain work at 21 hours a week, rather than dropping to 8.5 hours a week as many do, could result in up to £4 billion in higher economic output annually. Even if just half of the young people moving from work into economic inactivity due to sickness were supported to work 21 hours, this would represent £540 million in higher economic output annually. Total savings would also be higher once additional tax revenues and lower benefits spending were included.
- This evidence supports analysis suggesting that the Employment Rights Act measures to tackle insecurity could have positive impacts on the economy as well as individuals. We make a case for further, sector-specific action to support effective implementation in the frontline sectors that the government is targeting for Youth Guarantee placements.

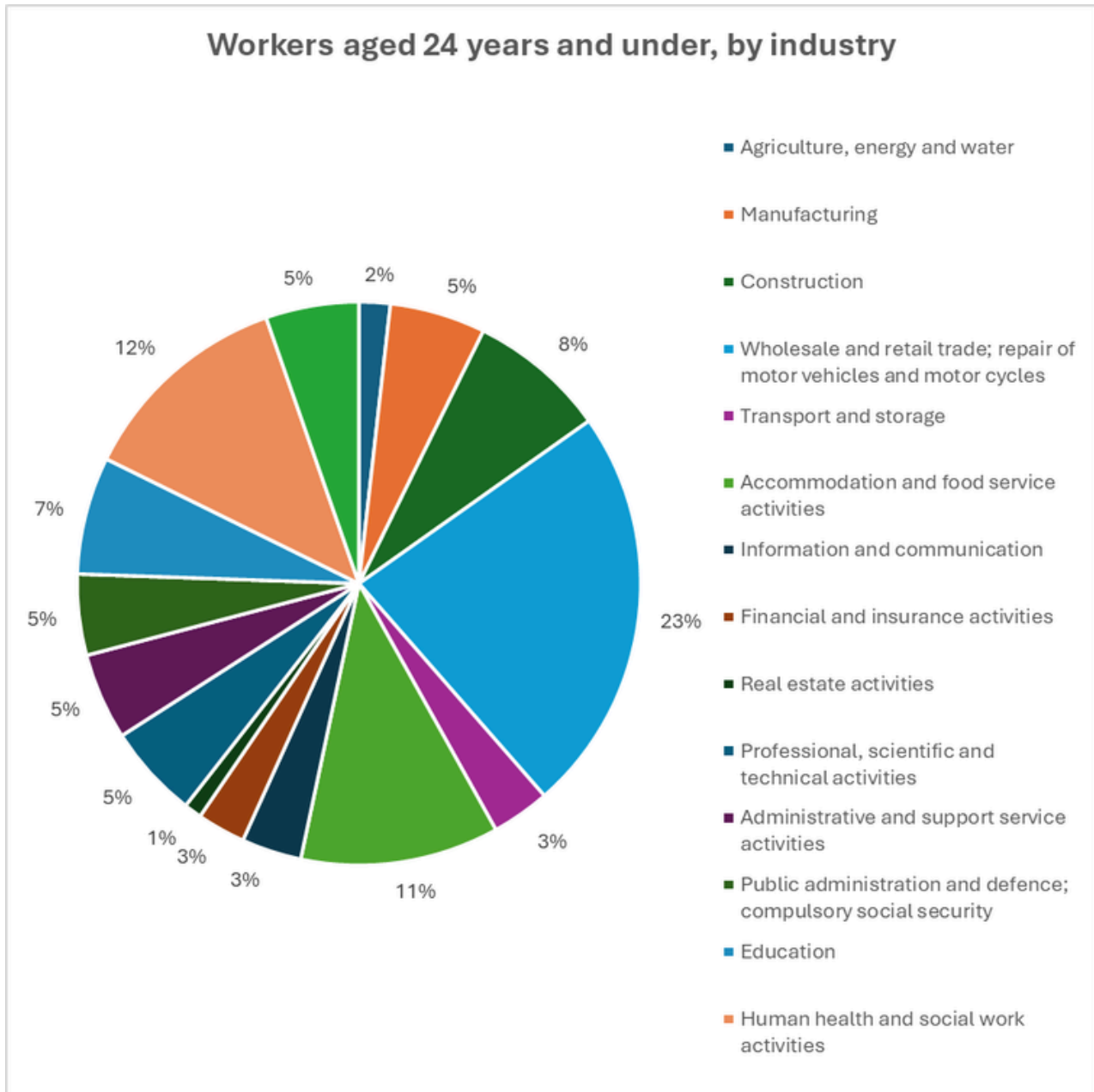
1. Young people are concentrated in certain sectors and occupations.

Working young people are particularly likely to work in the ‘distribution, hotels and restaurants’ sector. This broad category employs over a third (35 per cent) of workers aged 24 and under, followed by the ‘public administration, education and health’ sector, which employs nearly a quarter of all young workers.

Table 1. Age of worker, breakdown by industry – Office for National Statistics (based on the 2021 Census)

Industry	Aged 24 years and under	Aged 25 to 34 years	Aged 35 to 49 years	Aged 50 to 64 years	Aged 65 years and over
Agriculture, energy and water	2%	2%	2%	3%	5%
Manufacturing	5%	7%	7%	8%	7%
Construction	8%	8%	9%	9%	9%
Distribution, hotels and restaurants	35%	20%	17%	18%	19%
Transport and communication	7%	10%	11%	9%	8%
Financial, real estate, professional and administrative activities	14%	19%	18%	16%	18%
Public administration, education and health	24%	30%	32%	33%	27%
Other	5%	5%	4%	4%	6%

Broken down further, we can see that young people are concentrated in the wholesale and retail, accommodation and food service, health and social work sectors – with nearly half (46 per cent) of all working young people in these sectors. Retail and hospitality have long been associated with jobs for young people starting out in work. Health and social care are projected to grow and have sought to attract more young people (as well as migrant workers) to fill persistent vacancies, particularly in adult social care where more granular data suggests young people make up a smaller proportion of the overall workforce.ⁱⁱ



The roles that young people work in reflect this sector bias as well as their lack of experience relative to older workers, with half (49 per cent) of young people working in elementary occupations (19 per cent), sales and customer service occupations (18 per cent) and caring, leisure and other services (12 per cent). In all these three sectors, people aged 24 and under make up a higher proportion than any other age group.

Table 2. Age of worker, by occupation – Office for National Statistics (based on 2021 Census)

Occupation	Aged 24 years and under	Aged 25 to 34 years	Aged 35 to 49 years	Aged 50 to 64 years	Aged 65 years and over
Managers, directors and senior officials	3%	10%	15%	15%	17%
Professional occupations	11%	25%	23%	17%	15%
Associate professional and technical occupations	13%	16%	14%	11%	9%
Administrative and secretarial occupations	8%	8%	9%	11%	11%
Skilled trades occupations	11%	10%	10%	11%	13%
Caring, leisure and other service occupations	12%	9%	9%	10%	8%
Sales and customer service occupations	18%	7%	5%	6%	7%
Process, plant and machine operatives	4%	6%	7%	9%	9%
Elementary occupations	19%	9%	9%	10%	11%

2. The sectors and occupations that young people work in are associated with high levels of economic inactivity.

Our new analysis explores the connection between the sectoral and occupational concentration of young people and economic inactivity. The data is based on analysis of responses to the Annual Population Survey between January 2022 and December 2024.

The findings show that the three sectors that young people are most likely to work in are also those associated with the highest volumes of workers becoming economically inactive. The table below shows the top seven (out of 19) sectors with the highest flows to economic inactivity due to ill-health.

Together these seven sectors account for 75 per cent of all flows from work into economic inactivity due to ill-health. Nearly half (46 per cent) of all workers who are inactive due to ill-health previously worked in the health and social work, wholesale, retail and repair, and accommodation and food services sectors. Accommodation and food services also has the highest rate of flow to long term sickness and inactivity: out of every thousand workers, an estimated 17 will become economically inactive due to ill-health, compared to an average of seven across all sectors. Wholesale, retail and repair also have high rates of inactivity per thousand workers, ranking fourth and sixth respectively out of 19 sectors.

Table 3. Top seven sectors: volume and rate of workers inactive due to ill-health by former industry

Last sector of work	Number of people who are long term sick by previous sector, rounded	Proportion of people who are long term sick that previously worked in the sector	Rank	Number per thousand workers moving to long term sickness from the sector (rate of flow)	Rate of flow rank
Health and social work	36,000	18%	1	9	6
Wholesale, retail, repair of vehicles	33,000	16%	2	10	4
Accommodation and food services	24,000	12%	3	17	1
Manufacturing	18,000	9%	4	7	7
Construction	16,000	8%	5	12	2
Transport and storage	14,000	7%	6	9	5
Admin and support services	12,000	6%	7	11	3
All other industries	51,000	25%	-	-	-
TOTAL	204,000	100%	-	7	-

Similarly, the occupations that young people are concentrated in are associated with high numbers of people moving into long term sickness and worklessness. Table 4, below, ranks the top five occupational categories (of nine) that together make up 71 per cent of all moves to inactivity due to long term-sickness. A fifth (20 per cent) of all workers who are economically inactive due to ill-health previously worked in an elementary occupation – the highest volume of any occupational category. Caring, leisure and other service occupations and sales and customer services occupations have the second and fourth highest volumes of people moving into long term sickness respectively, with skilled trades narrowly coming third.

The same occupational categories are in the top five when considering the rate of flow per thousand workers to long-term sickness, but in a different order, given that the numbers of workers in a category differ substantially. Process, plant and machine operatives have a marginally higher flow rate to long-term sickness than elementary occupations, but there are very many more workers in the elementary occupations group, meaning that it accounts for a greater proportion overall of the costs associated with people moving into economic inactivity due to ill-health.

Table 4. Top five occupations: volume and rate of workers inactive due to ill-health by former occupation

Last occupation of work	Number of people who are long term sick by previous occupation, rounded	Proportion of people who are term sick that previously worked in the occupation	Rank	Number per thousand workers moving to long term sickness from the sector (rate of flow)	Rate of flow rank
Elementary Occupations	41,000	20%	1	16	2
Caring, Leisure And Other Service Occupations	31,000	15%	2	12	5
Skilled Trades Occupations	26,000	12%	3	14	3
Sales And Customer Service Occupations	25,000	12%	4	14	4
Process, Plant And Machine Operatives	23,000	11%	5	16	1
All other occupations	61,000	29%	-	-	-
TOTAL	207,000	100%	-	7	-

Broken down at a more granular level, it is those performing personal care, cleaning, frontline sales and ‘other elementary services’ roles that are most at risk of long-term inactivity due to sickness, alongside road transport drivers. The ‘Other Elementary Services Occupations’ include hospital porters, kitchen and catering assistants, waiters, bar staff, coffee shop workers, and leisure and theme park attendants, among others.

Table 5. Top five (of 91) detailed occupational categories: volume and rate of workers inactive due to ill-health by former occupation

Last occupation of work (detailed)	Number of people who are long term sick by previous occupation, rounded	Proportion of people who are long term sick that previously worked in the occupation	Rank	Number per thousand workers moving to long term sickness from the sector (rate of flow)	Rate of flow rank
Caring Personal Services	22,000	11%	1	17	3
Elementary Cleaning Occupations	13,000	6%	2	29	1
Other Elementary Services Occupations	13,000	6%	3	13	4
Road Transport Drivers	12,000	6%	4	21	2
Sales Assistants and Retail Cashiers	11,000	6%	5	10	5

As would be expected, both the volume and the rates of workers becoming economically inactive due to ill-health are higher among older groups. However, over a quarter (27 per cent) of workers who are economically inactive because of sickness are under 40 years old (compared to 33 per cent aged 40 to 54 and 40 per cent aged 55 to 64). The sample sizes are too small to enable robust age analysis by sector and for most occupations except elementary occupations, where young people are overrepresented relative to other age groups. Nearly half (46 per cent) of long-term sick economically inactive people whose last job was in an elementary occupation are aged under 40.

3. Wider evidence suggests that job quality issues in these sectors and occupations are a contributing factor to economic inactivity.

Timewise has previously highlighted the job quality issues associated with frontline sectors that can drive or exacerbate economic inactivity, including a mismatch between the work people with health conditions, impairments and disabilities say they want to do and the work they are most likely to move into.ⁱⁱⁱ

A recent survey found that the jobs that people who claim health and disability benefits feel least able to do are those that involve standing up all or most of the day, working shifts that cannot be changed or commuting or travelling as part of the job. The majority want to work part-time, in flexible roles, with the option of working from home.^{iv} Timewise analysis has shown that a very small proportion of people make it back into work out of inactivity due to long-term sickness or disability in any given year (2.5 per cent). Those who do are most likely to be working in precarious and demanding jobs in frontline low wage service sectors, including retail, health and care, leisure and hospitality, transport and logistics and construction. Of the 2.5 per cent who do find work, for just over half this work lasts for fewer than four months.^v

Wider evidence suggests that economic precarity and affordability issues are important exacerbating factors in the rise in mental distress and economic inactivity among young people, alongside reductions in youth services and the use of social media. This evidence has challenged assumptions in the public debate that inactivity is driven by lower levels of resilience among today's generation, with access to good work with secure hours and income emerging as a priority for young people.^{vi}

Increases in the national minimum wage rates have reduced the proportion of workers that are paid below two-thirds of median hourly pay significantly over the last decade, but low pay is still common among young people. Over a fifth of young workers are paid below two-thirds of the median and hospitality industries such as hotels and restaurants consistently have the greatest proportion of workers in low pay.^{vii} Recent analysis by the Living Wage Foundation of employee jobs paid below the real Living Wage^{viii} showed that wholesale and retail, hospitality and health and social care account for the highest volumes of low paid jobs overall in 2024:

- The wholesale and retail sector had the highest number of low-paid jobs (one million), accounting for nearly a quarter (23.4 per cent) of all jobs paid below the real Living Wage in 2024 and 30 per cent of all jobs in the sector.
- Hospitality followed, with 776,000 jobs falling below this wage threshold, representing over half (53.6 per cent) of all hospitality jobs.
- The human health and social work sector also had a significant number of low paid jobs, with 677,000 of jobs paid less than the real Living Wage, representing 14.9 per cent of all jobs in the sector.

In contrast to low pay, there has been little progress in addressing high levels of insecurity at work. Insecure and irregular work is heavily associated with the sectors and occupations young people are more likely to work in, particularly those relating to hospitality:

- Over two-fifths (41 per cent) of all workers in the accommodation and food services sector are on insecure working arrangements – including those who are underemployed, on casual, agency, seasonal or zero-hours contracts and low paid self-employed, second only to agriculture, forestry and fishing (53 per cent).^{ix}
- Accommodation and food services has the highest incidence of zero-hours contracts of any sector, with nearly a third (29.8 per cent) of all workers in this sector on a zero-hours contract.^x

- Wholesale and retail and health and social work have the third and fourth highest volumes of zero-hours contracts respectively, after the ‘transport, arts and other services’ sector.^{xi}
- Recent increases in the numbers of people classified as being in ‘severely insecure work’¹ have been concentrated in the wholesale and retail, health and social care, and food and accommodation sectors.^{xii}
- Low paid elementary service occupations (including kitchen and bar assistants), caring, leisure and sales roles are all associated with relatively high levels of job insecurity, based on the proportion of workers with insecure contracts and pay volatility and/or insufficient hours.^{xiii}

Younger people are far more likely to be on insecure working arrangements than older workers:

- Over a quarter (27.9 per cent) of 20- to 24-year-olds and 46 per cent of 16- to 19-year-olds are on insecure working arrangements².^{xiv}
- One in eight young workers are on a zero-hour contract, compared to less than one in 40 older workers.^{xv}
- Of those in work, nearly three in ten (29 per cent) employees aged 18 to 20 years old report experiencing multiple negative aspects of job quality, measured as low levels of pay, job security, wellbeing, satisfaction and autonomy.^{xvi}

These issues have a long-term ‘scarring’ impact on young people’s employment prospects. Historical analysis suggests that a high percentage of those working in low paid jobs do not progress to better paid jobs^{xvii} and that periods of worklessness when you are young has a long-term impact on earnings.^{xviii} There is also growing concern about the impact of insecurity on long term health and employment outcomes. Research from the US for example has shown that volatile and variable work schedules when you are young results in a higher likelihood of reporting poor health and depressive symptoms at age 50 than for those with stable standard work schedules.^{xix}

¹ Defined as sectors where two or more heavily weighted forms of insecure work come together, including underemployment, a lack of guaranteed hours or work, low or unpredictable pay, and a lack of employment protections.

² Defined as people in non-permanent work (casual, seasonal jobs, fixed-term and agency) excluding anyone who said they did not want a permanent job; people who report working less than 16 hours a week but want to work more; people who self-report volatile pay or hours while being below median income; people on zero-hours contracts and low paid self-employed people.

4. Tackling job quality issues in these sectors has wider economic benefits.

Our findings suggest that at least part of the answer to the youth employment and mental health crises is the shape of the labour market and job quality issues – and not simply the cost of employing young people or a decline in ‘resilience’ in the next generation, as some commentators have suggested.^{xx} The scarring effect of job insecurity points to the long-term benefits of taking preventative action to address job quality as a root cause of youth unemployment and inactivity.

Effective action could also have wider economic benefits due to the positive impact on labour market participation. Analysis by the Youth Futures Foundation for example shows that, if the UK could match the lowest NEET rate in the OECD, held by the Dutch, we could see an additional 500,000 young people in employment and an increase to UK GDP of £69 billion.^{xxi}

Our new analysis supports this economic case. We looked at the hours typically worked by people who are returning to work from inactivity due to long-term sickness in the top seven sectors with the highest flows to inactivity due to long-term sickness. We assume that young people have similar work patterns to all ages returning from inactivity due to long term sickness, given data limitations, and therefore:

- Those moving out of inactivity back into work in frontline sectors start out working at an average (mean) of 21 hours per week.
- For those who are about to leave work to cycle back into inactivity, mean hours drop to 8.5 hours per week.
- The lost economic output (per hour annualised) from employers failing to adapt jobs or prevent this reduction in hours is £4 billion, with £2.7 billion output at 8.5 hours and £6.7 billion at 21 hours.³ Even if just half of those young people were able to maintain work at 21 hours, this would represent £540 million in higher economic output annually. Total savings would also be higher once additional tax revenues and lower benefits spending were included.

Most importantly, these changes would represent a significant wage increase for young people. Increasing hours from 8.5 to 21 hours a week provides an additional £159 a week, or £8,262 a year, based on the Government minimum wage rate for over 21-year-olds from April 2026. Those aged 18 to 20 who are paid the lower minimum wage rate for young people would gain an additional £6,500 a year.

³ This analysis is based on Labour Force Survey data (Annual Population Survey and longitudinal LFS) using the latest available data on earnings across the key sectors/occupations, using a methodology in line with the Treasury Green Book.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

The Government's new Youth Guarantee has a critical role to play in improving young people's employment prospects by engaging more employers to hire and train young people.

The Job Guarantee element, while relatively small and limited in scope, is designed based on successful programmes to support young people to access employment during periods of high unemployment, including the Labour Government's Future Jobs Fund in the wake of the global financial crisis and the Conservative Government's Kickstart programme in response to the economic issues faced by young people during the pandemic. TUC analysis has shown that such schemes, designed well and with quality experiences, pay for themselves over time, through tax and benefit dividends resulting from higher youth participation. The analysis suggested that a broader scheme, supporting 300,000 young people, would pay for itself within a decade and deliver over £8 billion of benefits.^{xxii}

This briefing has argued that the *quality* of jobs available to young people should be a key focus of the Youth Guarantee, as well as the quantity – particularly given the stated focus on entry routes to sectors such as hospitality, social care and construction, all of which are associated with high flows from work into long term sickness and inactivity. Timewise has previously argued that, without improvements in job quality within these and other frontline sectors, the government's return on investment in back-to-work support for the formerly inactive long-term sick will be disappointing.^{xxiii} The government should draw on evidence about which industries are driving or exacerbating long term sickness rates, and the different contributing factors, to inform its approach to tackling economic inactivity.

Existing employment support programmes do little to influence employer practices or behaviour to shape the nature of jobs available to jobseekers. Critics argue this has encouraged a focus on 'any job', regardless of its quality, with employment support providers given limited mandate, time or resources to work with employers to improve the quality of jobs. We have argued for government back to work schemes to shift away from a 'work first' approach and do more to directly influence employer practices and behaviour.^{xxiv} This is particularly critical for young people entering the labour market for the first time, who require support as they transition to work and responsible adulthood.

The government is taking action on job insecurity through the Employment Rights Act. This will introduce new rights to guaranteed-hours contracts, fair notice periods for shifts, and compensation for shifts that are cancelled at short notice, as well as stronger rights to request flexible working. Our analysis suggests that this should be seen as a key plank of efforts to increase labour market participation, including among young people. Despite concerns raised by some, the government's impact analysis finds that the risks to hiring and overall employment due to the introduction of the Act are low, and concludes that the Act will deliver net benefits to GDP and employment. The analysis suggests that it is likely to 'improve the quality of work' and 'increase the range of jobs and working patterns that are attractive to workers' in low-paid occupations, such as social care, hospitality and retail. As our analysis has demonstrated, these are all sectors with among the highest flows to long economic inactivity due to ill-health.^{xxv}

Wider evidence from the implementation of similar legislative measures in US cities and states suggests that the extent to which such measures ‘bite’ depends on awareness and engagement among employers, how the laws are interpreted, and the strength of enforcement landscape.^{xxvi} The US experience suggests that additional efforts are required to ensure effective implementation in the sectors associated with lower paid, insecure work – and to ensure that any employers participating in the Youth Guarantee meet not only legislative but also wider good practice standards that support an effective school-to-work transition.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. The Department for Work and Pensions should introduce selection criteria that includes job quality standards for employers offering training or work placements under the Youth Guarantee – with a particular focus on fair scheduling practices that minimise hours volatility and support workers to have some input into their shift patterns and access to flexible working options. These could be developed in line with the forthcoming new Employment Rights Act measures, which are due for implementation in 2027.
2. The Government’s Youth Trailblazers should aim to support and incentivise labour market intermediaries to help people to access good jobs that meet their needs, including through upskilling to enable job brokers to better engage and support employers to improve and adapt jobs to meet people’s needs for predictable and flexible work.
3. The Department for Business and Trade should introduce sectoral programmes to support awareness, implementation, monitoring and enforcement of key Employment Rights Act provisions in sectors associated with low pay and job insecurity – including the sectors that employ high numbers of young people and those that are targets for the Youth Guarantee (hospitality, social care, retail and construction). More broadly, the Government’s approach to economic policy should incorporate action in the sectors that are critical to employment, living standards and the provision of essential services, as well as those associated with national productivity gains.

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