

Youth Matters for Nottingham

Research Briefing

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Contents

Introduction.....	4
Youth Matters priorities	4
East Midlands findings.....	4
What does the new National Youth Strategy mean for the young people of Nottingham?	5
What is hoped from the new Young Futures Hub and local investment?.....	6
What are the barriers to participation in Youth Services for young people?.....	7
Enacting Youth Matters outcomes locally	8
Shift 1: From National to Local	9
Shift 2: From Fragmented to Collaborative	11
Shift 3: From Excluded to Empowered.....	13
Themes emerging from the Youth Matters Engagement Event.....	15
Overview of the themes	15
Theme 1 - People and spaces in Nottingham.....	16
Theme 2 - Community in Nottingham	17
Theme 3 - Aspirations and education pathways for Young People.....	18
Theme 4 – Co-production, Youth Voice, and Governance Engagement	19
Theme 5 – Arts and creativity	20
Theme 6 - Employment, skills, and work experience.....	21
Theme 7 - Mental health and loneliness.....	22
Theme 8 – Social media	23
Conclusions	24
About the Authors	24

Introduction

On 12th June 2026, Nottingham Trent University hosted a regional engagement event on Youth Matters, the Government's new National Youth Strategy. The event brought together representatives from government, local authorities, youth organisations and community partners to discuss the strategy's priorities, review East Midlands findings, and explore local delivery through initiatives such as the Young Futures Hub and Local Youth Transformation Programme. Speakers highlighted the importance of partnership working, youth voice and sustainable local services.

The event also included an interactive Padlet session where stakeholders shared views on what the strategy means for young people in Nottingham, priorities for local investment, barriers facing young people, and how the strategy's outcomes can be delivered locally. Discussions were framed around the strategy's three key shifts: From National to Local, From Fragmented to Collaborative, and From Excluded to Empowered.

Youth Matters priorities

Youth Matters is the Government's first cross-departmental youth strategy in 15 years and sets out a ten-year vision for improving outcomes for young people by 2035. Developed with input from more than 14,000 young people, it aims to increase access to trusted adults, reduce inequalities in participation, strengthen local services and ensure young people have a greater role in decision-making. The strategy focuses on four outcomes: helping young people feel safe, connected, healthy, and able to access skills and opportunities.

The strategy is organised around ten action areas grouped under three themes: People Who Care, Places to Go and Things to Do, and Seen and Heard. Priorities include trusted adults, youth work, friendships, enrichment activities, employment and skills, safety, health and wellbeing, youth participation and accountability.

East Midlands findings

The East Midlands findings highlighted both strengths and challenges for young people. Friendships and social life (44%) were identified as the biggest day-to-day concern, while school and career-related issues (85%) emerged as the most significant overall area of concern. Despite this, 79% of young people felt able to access education and career guidance when needed.

Young people identified a need for more green spaces (12%), sports and exercise opportunities (11%), safer public spaces and affordable transport. Trust and reliability were considered the most important qualities in a trusted adult. The East Midlands also performed above the national average on measures of youth voice, with around 30% of young people feeling their views influence local decision-making and scored highly on access to support services and digital confidence.

Quotes through this report are taken from a workshop bringing together academics, practitioners and policy makers on the 12 June at Nottingham Trent University using an online (Padlet) and offline recording processes.

What does the new National Youth Strategy mean for the young people of Nottingham?

Stakeholders consistently described the new Youth Strategy as an opportunity to rebuild and strengthen Nottingham's youth ecosystem by creating safe, welcoming spaces where young people can access support, build relationships, and develop a sense of belonging. Across responses, the strongest theme was the importance of access to trusted adults, with many viewing this as the foundation for helping young people navigate challenges and build confidence for the future.

"Access to a safe space and to be able to speak to trusted adults about concerns or anything they need help and support with."

"It means a new hope for the future. It focuses on giving young people a trusted and safe space/person."

Participants also highlighted the potential for significantly increased opportunities. Respondents spoke about greater access to creative, sporting, educational, employment and community-based experiences, particularly where activities are affordable or free. The strategy was seen as a chance to improve life chances, develop skills, foster aspirations, and ensure that young people are connected to supportive networks beyond school and home.

"I hope it will open up new opportunities for young people to build friendships outside of school, connect with more trusted adults and that young people have more opportunities to pursue their interests - creative sessions and more!"

"Hopefully more access to services for young people. Hopefully more quality universal provision. Hopefully more qualified youth workers. Hopefully the reestablishment of youth work in the city. Hopefully an increase of understanding and appreciation of what youth work is and can do. And hopefully more young people supported with access to spaces to be. Hopefully access to youth work for yp from diverse backgrounds and demographics across the city. Hopefully the establishment of a long-term provision so that trust, reliability, relational work, suitability, development of local leaders, authentic participation can be developed. Because all of that takes time!"

Finally, many contributors emphasised the importance of youth voice and collaboration. There was strong support for services being designed with young people rather than for young people, alongside improved partnership working between organisations. Respondents hoped the strategy would create a more coordinated system that empowers young people, reduces isolation, strengthens communities, and provides sustained, long-term support across the city. The wider discussion also highlighted the importance of long-term investment and stable provision, recognising that trust, participation and meaningful relationships take time to build and sustain.

"Greater collaboration between partners to provide cohesive support and services (since we all have the same aims). Better support for young people, with young people rather than to them."

"Real opportunities for local services designed by and for young people that evolve as knowledge, understanding and young people themselves grow and develop."

What is hoped from the new Young Futures Hub and local investment?

The strongest message was that the Hub should be a safe, accessible and welcoming space where young people can build trusted relationships and receive practical support. Participants called for mentoring, mental health support, non-judgemental advice, pathways into services, and opportunities to connect with relatable adults and peers who have lived experience. There was significant demand for opportunities that improve life skills and employment prospects. Respondents highlighted careers advice, apprenticeships, work experience, entrepreneurship support, money management, cooking skills, interview preparation, and stronger links with employers. Many stressed the importance of paid opportunities and long-term progression routes.

"Access to trusted adults, activities and opportunities designed and led by young people, positive routes and pathways that support the transition to adulthood, access to outdoor spaces and opportunities that young people want but could not otherwise access."

Creative, cultural and recreational opportunities featured heavily. Stakeholders wanted access to arts, music, theatre, sport, gaming, outdoor learning, leadership programmes and community projects. A recurring theme was that young people must shape the offer themselves through ongoing participation and co-design. One participant also suggested gardening to connect to nature and environmental responsibility.

"Outdoor places with gardening and ways for them to grow planets and food."

Respondents also emphasised the need for multiple local hubs, strong accessibility, inclusion, and practical support such as free meals, laundry facilities and hygiene products where required.

"Hopefully safe space to access basics like shower, laundry, food. And that will only come with trusted adult."

Stakeholders also highlighted the importance of intergenerational opportunities, youth leadership and governance, and services that actively support young people into participation rather than expecting them to attend independently. Contributors called for stronger relationships between services through "human handovers" and open-access relational youth work.

"Providing pathways and signposting with a human handover to build trust and take up of existing services. We can't do it all under one roof but need to build the web of connections around it."

Digital detox opportunities were also mentioned as crucial to reduce screen dependency. Finally, participants highlighted the importance of consistent local spaces that foster identity, ownership and a sense of belonging.

"Trust & ownership - feeling like the space is there for them, that they can have a say in how it is run, and that it's not something forced upon them but built with them." "Young people feeling ownership of the space - and helping young people be decision makers about activities/materials/people coming in."

What are the barriers to participation in Youth Services for young people?

The most frequently identified barrier was transport and accessibility. Participants repeatedly highlighted travel costs, long journey times, poor public transport connections, and the challenge of accessing opportunities located outside young people's local neighbourhoods.

A second major theme was trust and confidence. Many young people are perceived as having low trust in services, professionals and institutions, often due to previous negative experiences. Respondents also highlighted anxiety, social isolation, lack of confidence, fear of new environments, and reluctance to engage in unfamiliar settings.

"Trust is super low. They don't trust services to stick around, to listen to them, to take them seriously."

"Young people struggling to trust adults. A lot of them may have been let down in the past and so building up the trust may be hard for them."

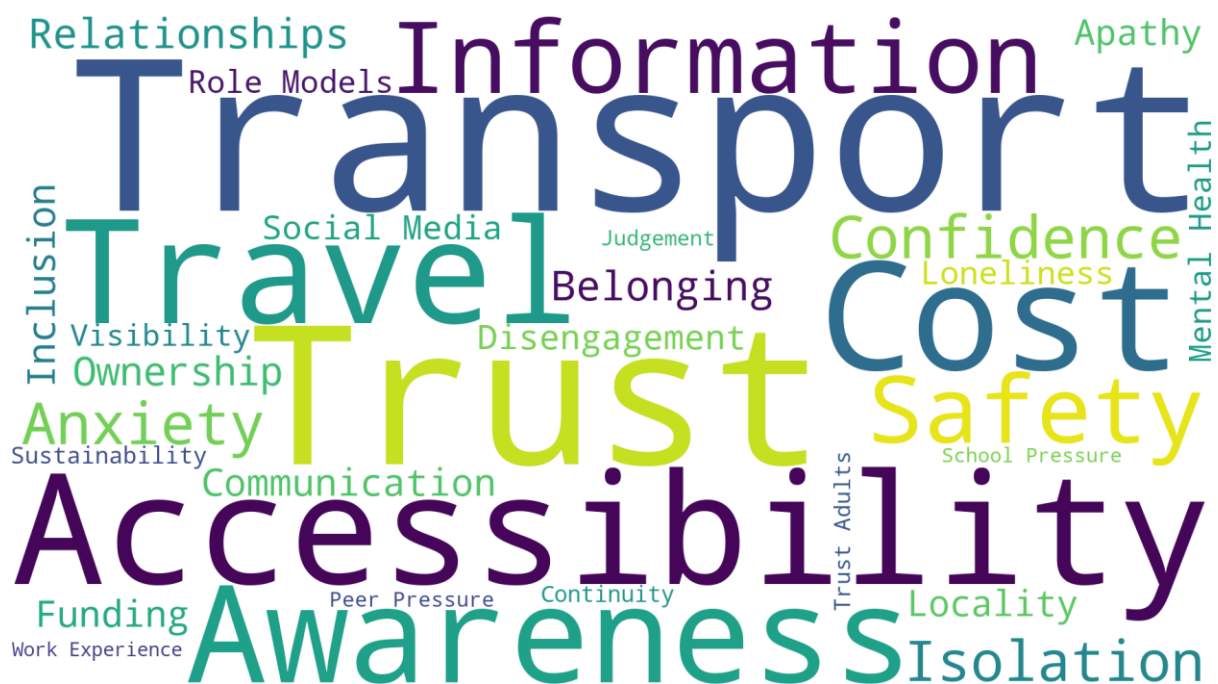


Figure 1: Wordcloud of responses summarising key barriers to young people's engagement in youth services

Other significant barriers included lack of awareness about available opportunities, financial pressures, social media dependency, family circumstances, limited role models, safety concerns, insufficient youth-led provision, and uncertainty that services will be sustained over the long term.

Respondents also identified apathy, disengagement and disenfranchisement as growing barriers. However, contributors often linked these challenges to wider issues of trust, belonging and confidence rather than viewing them simply as individual attitudes. Several respondents suggested that young people may question whether their voices will be heard or whether participation leads to

meaningful change. Feelings of “*embarrassment*”, fear of judgement, uncertainty about inclusion and concerns that opportunities are not “*for them*” were also identified as barriers to engagement. School pressures, social media use and a lack of connection to community were cited as contributing factors. These findings may also be considered within a broader context of social change affecting young people, including the longer-term impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, reductions in youth provision and wider financial pressures affecting many families and communities.

“In my opinion one of the biggest barriers to young people is APATHY and disenfranchisement. young people I speak to sound tired and don't want to engage in more things (e.g. school overload) I think a lack of trust in adults, authority, schools' councils and politicians. I think that dependencies on social media and screens creates lack of connection and desire to be out connecting in the real world. “

Several contributors felt that some young people are becoming disconnected from services and institutions, questioning whether their voices will be listened to or whether participation leads to meaningful change. School pressures, social media use and a lack of connection to community were all cited as contributing factors.

Trust was closely linked to continuity. Participants highlighted concerns about short-term projects and temporary funding, suggesting that young people may be reluctant to build relationships if they believe services will not be sustained. Long-term relational youth work and visible commitment to communities were therefore seen as important enablers of participation.

“What's the point in building a relationship when this is temporary?”

“It takes years to fully make a long-term impact and fully provide young people with the support they need.”

Enacting Youth Matters outcomes locally

The following section uses Padlet data – collected during the regional engagement event (June 2026) – in alignment with the Youth Matters national strategy shifts:

- From National to Local
- From Fragmented to Collaborative
- From Excluded to Empowered

The tables document the stakeholder responses, local needs, recommendations and possible stakeholder actions alongside NTU research and collaboration opportunities. These have been developed to ensure new ways of working and momentum following the event.

Shift 1: From National to Local

Move from national ambitions and generic provision towards neighbourhood-based, accessible opportunities that reflect the realities of Nottingham's young people and communities.

Stakeholders' considerations were grouped in four main themes: Communication, Transition, Accessibility & Mobility, and Workforce. Responses showed a need for clear and accessible information about available services. They also called for improved transition pathways and links between education and employment, with core training available nationally but delivered locally. Finally, the importance of reducing practical barriers to participation – including transport – was highlighted. Alternative provision such as localised or digital hubs were suggested as a strategy to overcome persistent limitations.

Theme	Local need	Recommendations & Stakeholder Actions	NTU Research Opportunities
Communication	- Better visibility and communication of local opportunities. - Shared learning and coordination across the sector. - Evidence-based implementation - Learning from good practice	- Understand and showcase where opportunities exist across the city. - Identify who holds information on local opportunities and whether it is up to date. - Connect and share information already held by partners rather than undertaking a new mapping exercise. - Share learning and good practice from organisations already implementing similar approaches. - Invest in networks and partnerships	- Connect existing knowledge across partnerships. - Explore how young people access information about local opportunities. - Support knowledge exchange and shared learning. - NTU as a facilitator for bringing partners together. - Explore how partnerships can collaborate effectively within a competitive funding environment.
Transition	Stronger progression routes into employment, apprenticeships and further education.	- Better understand how young people access information about apprenticeships, education and employment opportunities. - Consider whether barriers reflect a lack of opportunities or a lack of awareness of opportunities ("perception versus reality"). - Explore concerns about declining employment opportunities and understand which groups are accessing available jobs and why. - Showcase apprenticeship pathways and progression routes available within the city.	- Draw on findings from the Milburn Review. - Map apprenticeship pathways and progression opportunities. - Collaborate with EMCCA around the Opportunity Escalator initiative.
Accessibility & mobility	- Flexible and inclusive access. - Reduced practical, travel, and geographic barriers to participation.	- Localise national resources to better meet local needs. - Deliver provision through both digital and locally accessible community-based models, including digital hubs - Consider transport infrastructure and how young people move around the city. - Explore a hub-and-spoke model of provision. - Revisit detached youth work and expand outreach approaches into communities.	- Understand what young people want from localised services. - Explore effective models of accessible and flexible provision. - Understand travel times, movement patterns and perceptions of travel across the city. - Evaluate detached youth work programmes. - Draw on existing evidence, including the YEF evidence matrix.
Workforce	- Skilled workforce. - Long-term investment and continuity of provision. - Consistent quality in training and local responsiveness - Evaluation and impact measurement - Core costs funded	- Consider how core workforce training can be delivered within local contexts. - Explore how alternative provision is managed and supported. - Improve evaluation and impact measurement. - Link into It's in Nottingham work on long-term investment, CSR and corporate funding. - Better demonstrate and communicate the impact of existing youth work and provision.	- NTU Youth Worker Apprenticeship. - MA in Youth Work Leadership and Practice. - NTU as a knowledge exchange and evaluation partner. - NTU to convene discussions through the YPPN. - Review international evidence on sustainable youth service models.

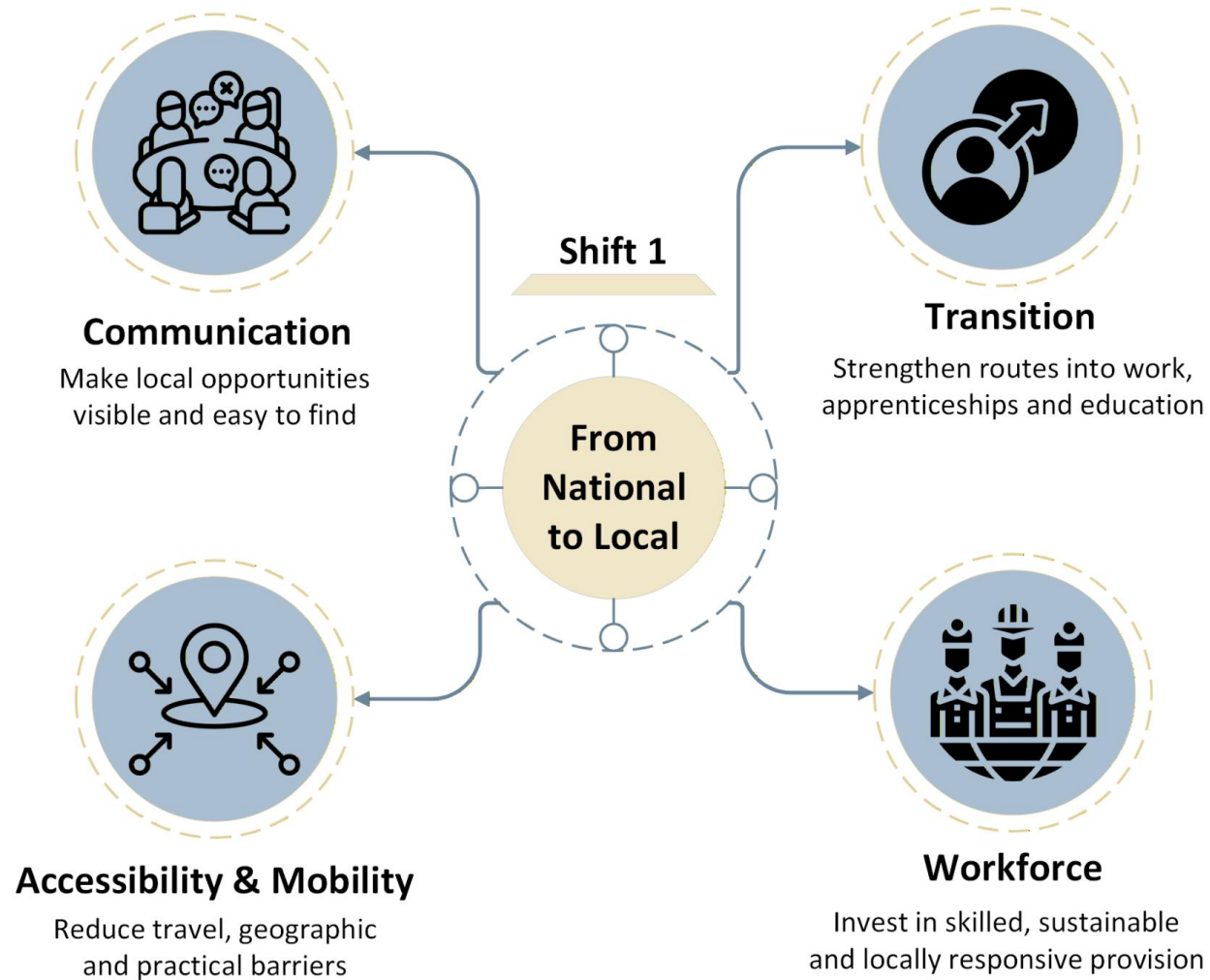


Figure 2: Key actions in the shift from National to Local

Shift 2: From Fragmented to Collaborative

Move from disconnected services and duplicated provision towards a coordinated city-wide youth ecosystem built around shared outcomes.

Stakeholder responses were grouped into three main themes: Communication, Partnership Working, and Networking. Responses highlighted the need for better coordination across Nottingham's youth sector, including a clearer understanding of existing provision and stronger communication between organisations to reduce duplication. Participants also called for more meaningful partnership working, emphasising the importance of sharing resources, knowledge and expertise, whilst recognising that collaboration requires sufficient resources and support to be effective. There was strong support for inclusive partnership models that value the contribution of grassroots organisations, which are often the trusted adults building relationships within communities. Finally, stakeholders highlighted the importance of networking and joint delivery, advocating for organisations of all sizes to work together to create opportunities for young people and contribute towards a more connected local youth ecosystem.

Theme	Local need	Recommendations & Stakeholder Actions	NTU Research Opportunities
Communication	• Better alignment of provision, geography and target groups. • Clarity around organisational roles and strengths.	• Learning from each other and mapping provision. • Exploring how to create a shared identity and approach. • Recognising the challenges created by a competitive funding landscape.	• Explore how youth provision can be brought together through a shared strategic direction. • Use the strategy as a coordination vehicle to identify who provides what across the city.
Partnership working	• Dedicated capacity for collaboration. • Mechanisms for collective working. • More inclusive partnership structures and collaborative approaches. • Sustainable and meaningful partnership arrangements. • Shared accountability and vision.	• Consider whose role it is to coordinate partnerships. • Promote and showcase the existing offer across the city. • Explore quality assurance arrangements. • Link to existing initiatives such as Child Friendly City and Local Cultural Education Partnerships (LCEPs). • Focus on knowledge exchange rather than competition. • Develop a locally-led partnership agreement and shared theory of change.	• Local Youth Transformation Fund findings and showcasing of emerging practice. • YPPN as a mechanism for collaboration. • Hub-and-spoke commissioning models. • NCC to host and update a youth work register annually. • Explore shared values, goals and city-level messaging. • Investigate whether the partnership approach aligns with Child Friendly City ambitions. • Explore what young people need from a coordinated local system. • Examine the opportunities for collaboration created by the Youth Strategy.
Networking	• Relationship-building. • Joint planning. • Shared delivery.	• Consider who holds the convening role. • Support organisations to actively network and create opportunities together.	• Consultation, engagement and discussion activities. • The role of youth work communities as self-organising networks.

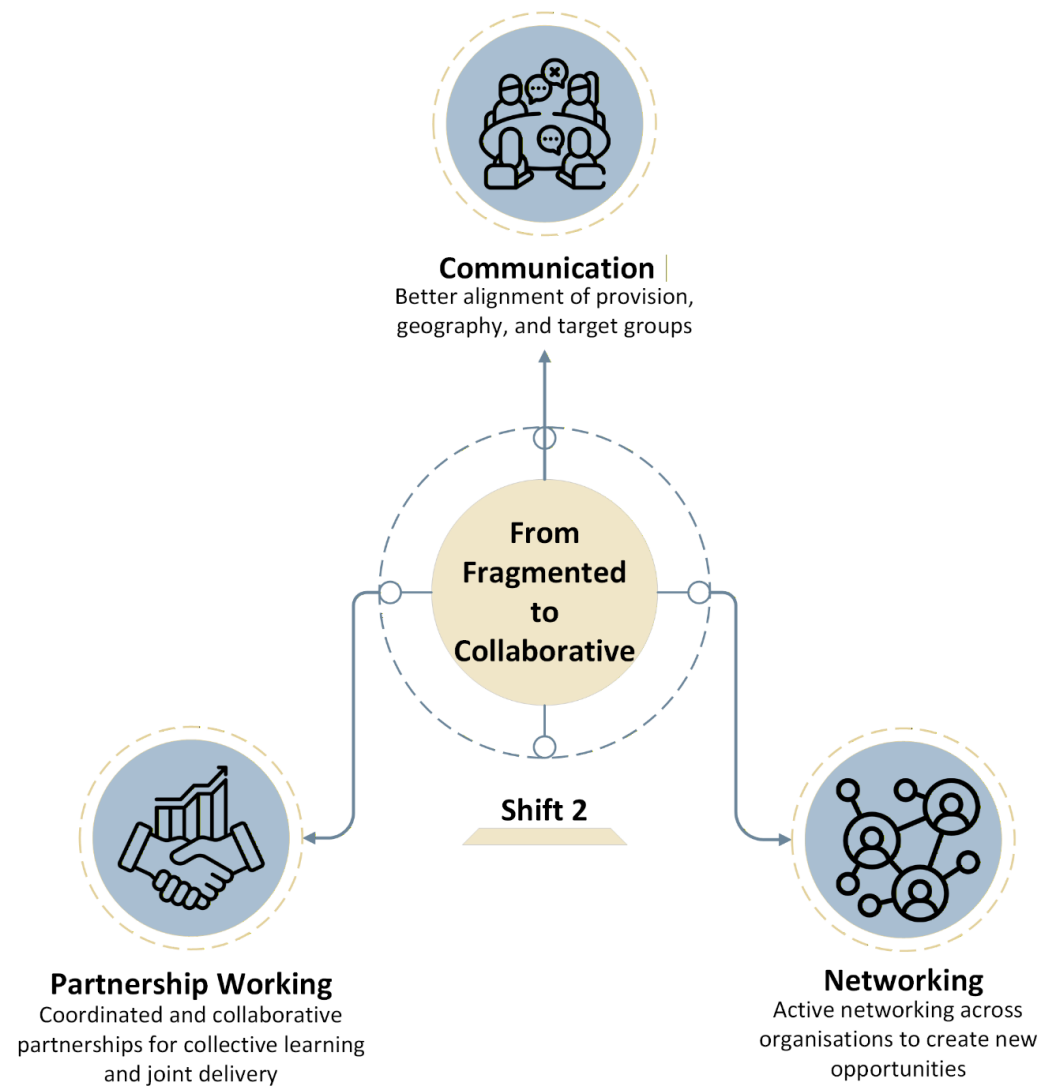


Figure 3: Key actions in the shift from Fragmented to Collective

Shift 3: From Excluded to Empowered

Move from services being designed for young people towards young people actively shaping, leading and influencing decisions at every level.

Stakeholder responses were grouped into three main themes: Co-production, Youth Leadership, and Maximising Opportunities for Young People.

Responses highlighted the importance of moving beyond one-off consultation towards meaningful and ongoing involvement of young people in shaping services, spaces and decision-making. Participants emphasised that services should be designed with and for young people, and that participation opportunities should include NEET and less-heard groups. There were also calls for stronger youth leadership pathways, including ambassador, governance and commissioning roles that enable young people to influence decisions and take on visible leadership positions within their communities. Finally, stakeholders highlighted the importance of trusted relationships, supportive introductions to new opportunities, and strengths-based approaches that recognise young people's potential rather than focusing solely on challenges or deficits.

Theme	Local need	Recommendations & Stakeholder Actions	NTU Research Opportunities
Co-production	• Continuous participation. • Young people determining priorities and activities. • Genuine ownership and influence. • Inclusive engagement and representative participation, including NEET and less-heard groups. • Pride, ownership and belonging.	• Develop mechanisms with NCC for consultation and explore how these can become more embedded. • Consider the role young people play within the Youth Council. • Explore opportunities through neighbourhood development boards. • Support young people to shape environments and how spaces feel.	• Youth participation models. • Explore how organisations can improve co-production approaches and develop guidance/audit tools. • Child Friendly City research. • Lessons from Urban Rooms, planning projects and urban design initiatives such as Green Heart and Skatespot.
Youth leadership	• Leadership and paid participation opportunities. • Leadership pathways. • Economic empowerment and community ownership. • Formal influence, ongoing participation and decision-making power.	• Showcase examples of organisations already delivering youth leadership opportunities. • Build on existing structures such as the Mayor's Youth Board and Youth Parliament. • Consider questions around representation and inclusion. • Explore opportunities linked to the Youth Guarantee and social enterprise activity.	• Develop a set of recommendations for best practice. • Produce an evidence-informed resource for decision makers. • DWP follow-up opportunities. • DEC enterprise initiatives.
Maximising opportunities for YP	• Trust, belonging and voice. • Supported introductions, confidence-building and reduced anxiety. • Asset-based approaches and positive youth development. • Community-level assets and recognition.	• Mentorship and access to trusted adults. • Support young people to attend opportunities for the first time. • Embed a culture shift within youth services towards strengths-based approaches. • Explore different frameworks for measuring outcomes and assets.	• YMCA Developmental Assets framework. • Policy shifts towards strengths-based approaches. • Frances Howard's research on positive youth development and youth participation.

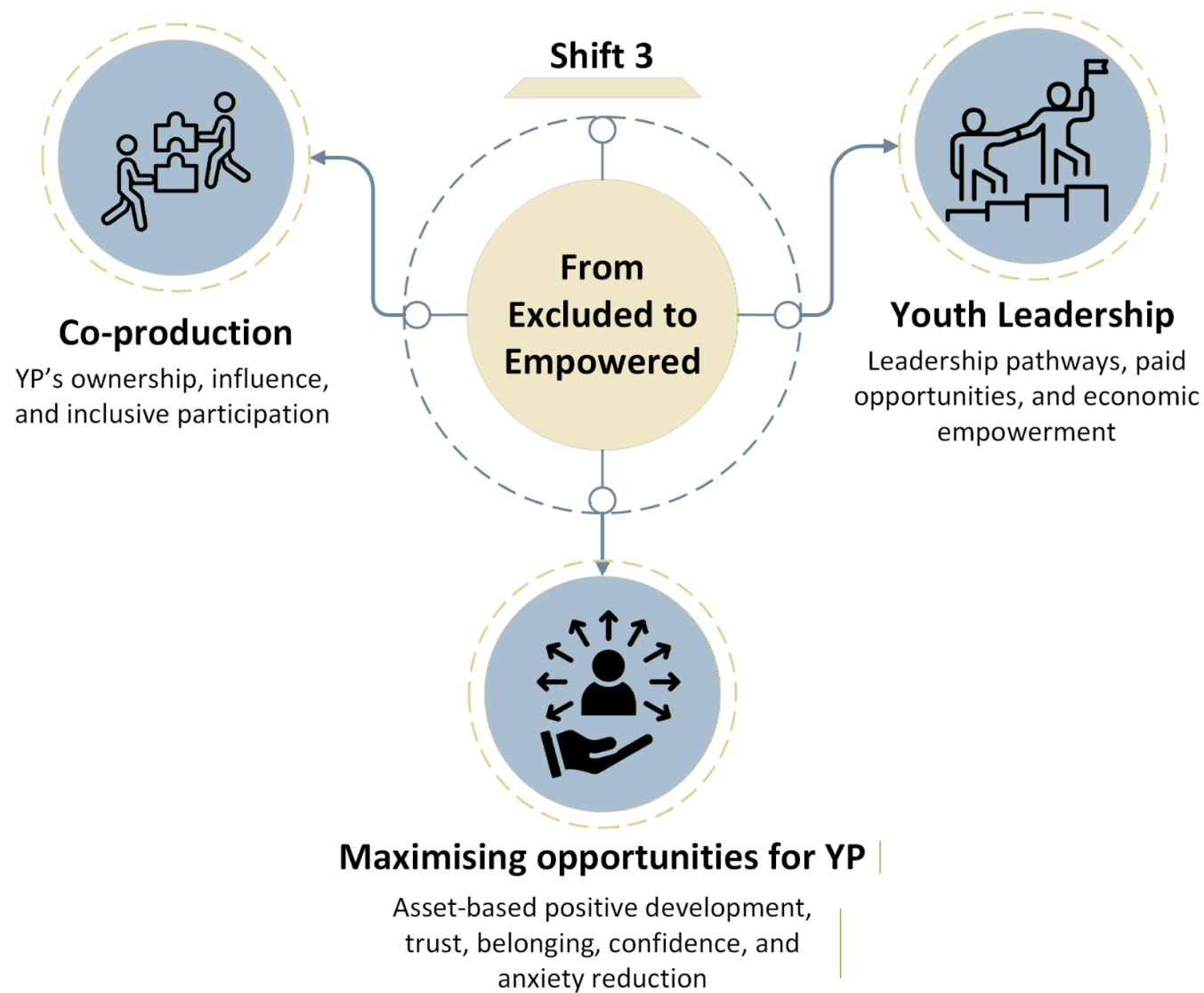


Figure 4: Key actions in the shift from Excluded to Empowered

Themes emerging from the Youth Matters Engagement Event

The following themes were developed from discussions held during the Youth Matters regional engagement event hosted by Nottingham Trent University on 12th June 2026. Alongside presentations on the National Youth Strategy, regional findings and local delivery plans, participants contributed to an interactive Padlet exercise and facilitated group discussions exploring the opportunities, challenges and priorities facing young people in Nottingham.

Responses were collected in relation to the National Youth Strategy, future aspirations for the Young Futures Hub, barriers facing young people, and the three strategic shifts underpinning the strategy: From National to Local, From Fragmented to Collaborative, and From Excluded to Empowered. Contributions were subsequently reviewed and grouped into a series of interconnected research themes that reflect both the priorities identified by stakeholders and the wider evidence base relating to young people's lives.

Each theme page combines:

- Stakeholder perspectives and quotations drawn from the Padlet discussions.
- Relevant national evidence and policy context.
- Related research from Nottingham Trent University.

Overview of the themes

Theme	Key Issues Raised	Recommendations and Stakeholder Actions
People and Spaces in Nottingham	Trusted adults, safe spaces, safeguarding and multi-agency support	Accessibility & Mobility, Workforce, Partnership Working
Community in Nottingham	Family relationships, trust, role models and intergenerational connections	Partnership Working, Networking, Community-Based Delivery
Aspirations and Education Pathways	Education, aspiration, progression routes and transitions	Transition, Communication, Workforce
Co-production, Youth Voice, and Governance Engagement	Participation, leadership, influence and decision-making	Co-production, Youth Leadership, Maximising Opportunities
Arts and Creativity	Self-expression, belonging and creative opportunities	Accessibility & Mobility, Maximising Opportunities
Employment, Skills, and Work Experience	Careers advice, work experience, apprenticeships and employability	Transition, Workforce
Mental Health and Loneliness	Wellbeing, anxiety, belonging and social connection	Maximising Opportunities, Accessibility & Mobility
Social Media	Screen use, online harms, social connection and digital resilience	Co-production, Maximising Opportunities

Theme 1 - People and spaces in Nottingham: trusted adults, safe spaces, and a multi-agency approach

Across the responses from the event, stakeholders consistently highlighted the importance of trusted adults, safe and welcoming spaces for young people, and stronger multi-agency working. Participants described these elements as interconnected foundations for wellbeing, belonging and participation, emphasising the need for trusted relationships alongside coordinated support that helps young people navigate services, opportunities and transitions into adulthood.

"Happier, healthier, empowered young people connected to their community. Engaging in safe spaces with access to trusted adults."

The youth sector is increasingly recognised as an essential partner in [Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements \(MASA\)](#). Because young people spend [85% of their time outside of school](#), youth workers act as "privileged witnesses" to their social reality, often identifying risks that statutory services might miss.

A [trusted adult](#) is defined as a figure "independently chosen by a young person to be a safe presence who listens without judgment, agenda, or expectation". In a support system with a critical "[missing link](#)" with young people that are disconnected from mainstream services, trusted adults (such as youth workers, mentors, and practitioners) operating in safe spaces become critical "[interlockers](#)".

Trusted adults are viewed as a "[first line of defence](#)", providing emotional support that can help [mitigate the effects](#) of abuse, trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). However, access is not universal. Whilst [82% of young people aged 13-17 report having a trusted adult](#) outside their family, around one in five do not. An estimated [3.5% of 10-15-year-olds report having no trusted adult](#) in their life at all, with boys more than twice as likely as girls to report this. The availability of trusted adults may also be affected by wider reductions in youth support infrastructure, with the number of full-time youth workers in England [having fallen by one-third since 2012](#).

[Findings from the Youth Matters: State of the Nation report](#), based on more than 14,000 young people aged 10-25, highlight the continued importance of trusted relationships and welcoming community spaces. The report found that 16% of young people feel unsafe in their local area, 44% regularly experience loneliness, and many expressed a desire for more trusted adults and affordable, safe places to spend time with friends and access support.

Dr [Gabriella Kofi](#) and colleagues have worked on the evaluation of the Family Support and Safeguarding Team (FSST) pilot in Newark and Sherwood (please contact Dr Kofi for further details of this work). The study assessed a multi-agency approach that integrated social workers with specialists in mental health, substance misuse, and domestic abuse. This multi-disciplinary team (MDT) model facilitates significantly faster service access – often reducing response times from weeks to mere days – and fosters improved inter-professional collaboration through physical co-location, which staff identified as a critical "safe space" for building relationships and sharing expertise. This piece of research also showed how this team could function as trusted adults for families, noting how the personalised and kind support made them feel secure enough to engage in services that they might have otherwise feared.

Theme 2 - Community in Nottingham: family, trust, and intergenerational connections

Stakeholders highlighted the important role that families, communities and intergenerational relationships play in shaping young people's experiences and opportunities. Responses reflected concerns about access to positive role models, the influence of wider family and community circumstances, and the need to strengthen trust and understanding between generations. Participants emphasised the value of supportive communities that foster belonging, aspiration and connection.

"Chances to interact across generations. There are no spaces left for young people to interact with older adults. That leads to mutual mistrust."

[Research in Nottingham City and Nottinghamshire](#) indicates that a lack of trust in adults is a pervasive issue for young people, often fuelled by negative experiences with authority figures in schools and the police. This intergenerational mistrust can be deep-seated, with [some families viewing agencies as threats](#) rather than support systems, particularly in areas of high social deprivation where poverty intersects with systemic neglect. Conversely, strong familial and peer relationships are essential for [promoting emotional well-being](#) and preventing the isolation that often makes young people vulnerable to exploitation.

The importance of family, trust and community connections must be understood within the wider social and economic context facing many young people in Nottingham. Nottingham continues to experience significant levels of deprivation and inequality, with [80% of families living in the lowest council tax bands and statutory homelessness rates almost double](#) the national average. Nationally, [31% of children were living in relative poverty in 2024/25](#), highlighting the pressures facing many families and communities. These challenges can affect the stability of support networks, opportunities available to young people, and the resources communities have to invest in positive relationships and activities. [A reduction of 69% in local youth service funding](#) since 2010 has further reduced opportunities for young people to build social connections, access trusted role models and participate in community life.

[Prof. Geraldine Brady's research](#) highlights the importance of stable and supportive relationships within families and communities. Her work identifies how economic hardship, parental mental ill health, substance use and instability in the family home can increase vulnerability, particularly where young people lack access to reliable sources of support. Brady argues that trusted and consistent relationships can act as a "safe haven" for young people, particularly during key transitions into adulthood when formal support may reduce. This reinforces the importance of strengthening social capital, trust and intergenerational relationships within Nottingham's communities.

Theme 3 - Aspirations and education pathways for Young People

Throughout the event, youth provision was repeatedly linked to raising aspirations, improving access to education, supporting transitions into employment, and helping young people imagine positive futures for themselves. Responses emphasised the importance of careers advice, work experience, apprenticeships, skills development, mentoring and exposure to opportunities that many young people may not otherwise encounter. Contributors also highlighted concerns around intergenerational unemployment, a lack of role models, and the need to support young people in building confidence, ambition and belief in their future potential.

“I hope that it means that young people will have real access to services that prevent them from harm, give them opportunity to develop skills, be creative, get support and raise their hope, aspirations for their personal and collective futures.”

The aspirations and employment challenges identified by stakeholders reflect wider national trends. Educational attainment and progression continue to vary significantly by gender and socio-economic background, with an estimated [half a million fewer young men](#) entering higher education over the last decade and particularly low progression rates among groups such as white working-class British boys eligible for free school meals. At the same time, almost [one million young people aged 16-24 are currently classified as NEET](#), with increasing numbers reporting health-related barriers to participation in education and employment. [Research](#) also highlights the growing challenges young people face when entering the labour market, including reduced access to entry-level work experience, the decline of traditional part-time employment opportunities, and recruitment processes that can disadvantage those with limited experience or confidence. While [young women generally outperform young men](#) educationally, research suggests that educational success [does not always translate into equal opportunities](#). Studies of [aspiration](#) and social class show that many young women continue to face economic insecurity, with those from working-class backgrounds often experiencing greater uncertainty when navigating transitions into higher education, employment and adulthood despite strong academic achievement. Following the 2008 financial crisis, [young people experienced a 12.5% reduction in median real-term pay](#), highlighting the wider economic pressures facing the current generation as they move from education into work.

Research at Nottingham Trent University highlights the importance of ensuring that educational pathways are both accessible and transparent for young people. Dr [Andrew Clapham](#) and colleagues identify [significant governance and information gaps](#) within the Alternative Provision (AP) sector, arguing that a lack of accessible information can create additional barriers for disadvantaged families attempting to navigate education and support systems. Similarly, Dr [Iryna Kushnir](#)'s research supports wider social goals, including social mobility, equality and access to decent work. These studies reinforce the importance of creating visible, accessible and inclusive pathways that enable all young people to access education, develop aspirations and successfully transition into adulthood; as a form of "soft governance" that supports wider social goals, including social mobility, equality and access to decent work. Their work argues that while education is increasingly positioned as a mechanism for addressing social and economic inequalities, its implementation must be clear, equitable and responsive to local needs.

Theme 4 – Co-production, Youth Voice, and Governance Engagement: how young people get involved in decision making

A strong theme throughout the Padlet discussions was the importance of actively involving Young People in designing, delivering and evaluating the services, spaces and decisions that affect them. Participants called for ongoing co-production rather than one-off consultation, alongside meaningful opportunities to influence governance, leadership and decision-making. There was also strong support for inclusive participation that reflects the views of less-heard groups, as well as creating a sense of ownership by enabling young people to contribute to both the activities on offer and the environments in which they take place.

“Young people's involvement needs to be active and ongoing – not just a youth panel at the start of the strategy.”

These views are reflected in a growing body of research on co-production and youth participation. [Co-production](#) is increasingly understood as [an approach to governance](#) that seeks to redistribute power and involve young people as experts in their own lived experiences. Research⁴ distinguishes between more limited forms of participation, where young people are consulted on particular issues, and more meaningful engagement, where they help to design, deliver and evaluate services and policies. Frameworks such as [Hart's Ladder of Participation](#) highlight the importance of avoiding tokenistic approaches and creating opportunities for genuine influence. Despite a clear desire among young people to be involved, many continue to [feel excluded from decision-making](#) processes. Nationally, [49% of young people report](#) that their voice does not matter in national decisions, while one-third do not know how to influence decisions in their local area. Participation opportunities are also not equally distributed, with [some groups reporting](#) fewer opportunities to share their views than others. In response, recent policy developments, including the [Youth Matters National Youth Strategy](#), place increasing emphasis on co-production, institutionalised youth voice and creating meaningful opportunities for young people to participate in governance and decision-making at local and national levels.

Research at Nottingham Trent University has also explored how citizens and communities can play a more active role in decision-making. Prof. [Matt Henn](#) and colleagues' work with Nottingham City Council on the [Carbon Neutral 2028 programme](#) identified a strong appetite for moving beyond consultation towards more participatory approaches, including citizens' assemblies and resident steering groups. This research also highlights the importance of ensuring that lesser-heard groups are represented within governance structures. Similarly, Dr [Ana Nunes](#)' work on [Legislative Theatre](#) demonstrates how creative and participatory approaches can enable citizens, including young people, to use their lived experiences to shape policy and influence decision makers. Through collaborative performance and dialogue, participants work alongside policymakers to identify solutions to community issues and develop practical policy proposals.

Theme 5 – Arts and creativity

Creative opportunities were widely regarded as an important part of young people's development, with stakeholders highlighting the role of arts and creative activities in supporting confidence, self-expression, social connection and skills development. Participants called for greater access to arts, music, theatre, dance and creative workshops, as well as stronger partnerships with local cultural organisations. Responses also emphasised the importance of providing opportunities that enable young people to explore their interests, develop new skills and build a sense of identity, belonging and local pride through creative participation.

“Creative projects with creative locals! Having something that the young people can all aim for together. Get freelancers in to do workshops: DJ sessions, clay/ceramics, theatre, creative writing and dance. Get them social and having fun together in person!”

On a national level, arts and creativity are increasingly recognised for their contribution to economic growth, educational development, and wider social outcomes. The UK's Creative Industries contribute [£124 billion to the economy and support 2.4 million jobs](#), having grown significantly faster than the wider economy since 2010. Alongside their economic importance, [arts and cultural participation have been linked to a range of positive outcomes](#) for young people, including improved wellbeing, increased self-esteem, stronger social networks and reduced involvement in offending behaviour. [Research](#) has shown that arts-based interventions can support personal development and social mobility, whilst providing pathways into growing industries such as music, performing arts, film, television, digital media and video games. However, [access remains uneven](#), with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds often facing greater barriers to participation. Recent government investment through programmes such as the [Arts Everywhere Fund](#), the [Creative Places Growth Fund](#) and the [Richer Young Lives Fund](#) reflects a renewed emphasis on ensuring that more young people can access high-quality creative opportunities and develop the skills needed for future creative careers.

Research led by Dr [Frances Howard](#) at Nottingham Trent University highlights the important role that arts-based youth work can play in supporting creativity, identity development and positive transitions into adulthood. [Howard's research](#) challenges deficit-based narratives that position young people as problems to be solved, instead emphasising their strengths, talents and cultural expertise. Working across youth work, informal education and arts-based practice, she identifies [four broad types of youth arts provision](#): art skills, event-oriented, entrepreneurial, and open access programmes, each offering different opportunities and challenges for young people. [Research on music production and youth arts programmes](#) further demonstrates how creative spaces can function as communities of practice, where young people develop confidence, build social networks, acquire professional skills and cultivate aspirations for future education and employment. Howard's work highlights how arts participation can support self-expression, belonging and [creative career development](#), whilst also cautioning against approaches that prioritise behaviour change, funding requirements or economic outcomes at the expense of meaningful artistic engagement. Central to her research is the concept of youth transitions as a [process of "becoming"](#), whereby creative spaces provide opportunities for young people to negotiate adulthood, develop future aspirations, and build relationships of care, solidarity and community.

Theme 6 - Employment, skills, and work experience

Preparing young people for future education, employment and independent adulthood was a consistent theme throughout the discussions. Stakeholders highlighted the importance of helping young people develop practical skills, confidence and aspirations through careers advice, mentoring, work experience, apprenticeships and entrepreneurship opportunities. There was a strong emphasis on creating clear pathways into education and employment, particularly for young people who may lack access to professional networks, positive role models or previous work-based experiences.

“Skills pipelines. Long term collaborative relationships with organisations to take young people from volunteers, to interns to paid employees, especially within the creative industries.”

Transitions into employment are becoming increasingly complex for young people across the UK. The Milburn Review describes a growing [“generational fault line”](#), with almost one [million young people aged 16-24 currently not in education](#), employment or training (NEET), and [57% of this group economically inactive](#) rather than actively seeking work. [Research suggests](#) that this is not the result of a lack of ambition; rather, many young people face [significant structural barriers](#), including declining entry-level opportunities, reductions in apprenticeship starts, increased health-related inactivity, and the growing [impact of mental health](#) conditions such as anxiety, depression and neurodevelopmental conditions. Evidence also points to [wider systemic challenges](#), including education systems focused on attainment rather than long-term destinations, welfare systems that emphasise deficits rather than capabilities, and labour markets that offer [fewer accessible routes](#) into employment than in previous generations.

Research at Nottingham Trent University contributes important perspectives on employability, skills and youth transitions. Dr [Ricky Gee](#) and colleagues [critically examine the contemporary employability agenda](#), arguing that young people are often positioned through a deficit lens that overlooks the substantial skills, experiences and knowledge they already possess. Their work highlights how students from widening participation backgrounds frequently navigate the dual challenge of “labouring to learn whilst learning to labour”, balancing education alongside precarious employment. Through critical pedagogical approaches, they advocate for supporting young people to understand and navigate labour market inequalities while pursuing socially meaningful forms of work and participation. Complementing this perspective, Dr [Brendan Coulson](#)'s research focuses on skills policy and workforce development, emphasising the need for more flexible and responsive education and training systems. [His work](#) highlights the importance of employer engagement, modular learning pathways and adaptable vocational provision that can respond to changing labour market needs whilst remaining accessible to diverse groups of learners.

Theme 7 - Mental health and loneliness

Mental health and loneliness were often discussed through broader concerns about belonging, trust and social connection. Participants described challenges such as anxiety, low confidence, social isolation and increasing reliance on online spaces for connection. In response, stakeholders emphasised the importance of safe, welcoming environments where young people can build friendships, access trusted adults and develop stronger connections within their communities.

“A safe place. Children can get together, reduce isolation, and screen dependency.”

Research suggests that loneliness follows a "[U-shaped](#)" pattern across the lifespan, with the highest levels reported by those under 25 and over 65. [The BBC Loneliness Experiment](#) found that 40% of 16-24-year-olds reported feeling lonely, compared with 27% of people aged 75 and over. [Social and economic disadvantage](#) also appears to play an important role, with children eligible for free school meals substantially more likely to report frequent loneliness than their peers. Key transition points, including moving to secondary school and entering adulthood, are associated with increased loneliness, whilst reductions in youth service funding and community provision have further limited opportunities for social connection. [Evidence](#) suggests that participation in a diverse range of social groups can improve wellbeing and reduce loneliness over time, highlighting the importance of creating opportunities for young people⁷ to build meaningful relationships, develop a sense of belonging and engage in community life.

These challenges are reflected in growing demand for support services; [one in five young people aged 8-25 has a probable mental health condition](#), and [referrals for mental health support have tripled](#) since 2016. In response, trusted adults play a particularly important role, with [87% of youth workers reporting that](#) they frequently support young people with mental health issues.

Work led by Prof Geraldine Brady and Dr [Gabriella Kofi](#) evaluating [Mental Health Support Teams \(MHSTs\) in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire](#) found that children and young people receiving individual or group support experienced significant improvements in mental health and emotional wellbeing. The evaluation also demonstrated the value of a whole-school approach to mental health, which reached almost 29,000 children and young people in Nottinghamshire during 2024, whilst generating substantial social and economic benefits through early intervention and prevention.

Dr [Blerina Kellezi](#) and colleagues highlight the importance of social connection and belonging as foundations for wellbeing. Drawing on Social Identity Theory, [their work](#) demonstrates that loneliness can be reduced when people develop meaningful connections with social groups and communities that they identify with. This "social cure" approach suggests that wellbeing is strengthened not simply through participation, but through a genuine sense of belonging. Their research shows that joining and identifying with community groups can reduce loneliness, improve wellbeing, and even lower the likelihood of depression relapse, reinforcing the importance of supportive relationships, community spaces and opportunities for social participation.

Theme 8 – Social media

Social media and digital technology were frequently discussed as both a challenge and a barrier to participation, wellbeing and social connection. Stakeholders expressed concerns that increasing reliance on screens and online interactions may be contributing to social isolation, reduced confidence in face-to-face settings, and a weaker sense of community belonging. Several responses highlighted the impact of social media on young people's motivation to engage in offline activities, alongside concerns that online spaces are increasingly replacing opportunities for in-person relationships and social development. At the same time, participants acknowledged the need to create attractive, meaningful alternatives that encourage young people to connect with others in the real world.

"I think that dependencies on social media and screens creates lack of connection and desire to be out connecting in the real world."

On 15th June 2026, the UK Government announced proposals for a '[social media ban](#)' for those under the age of sixteen. The proposed ban, [expected to begin in early 2027](#), centres on 'user-to-user' social media platforms such as Facebook, X, TikTok and Instagram.

The announcement follows one of the [largest public consultations](#) undertaken by the UK Government, which received more than [116,000 responses](#) from parents, young people and experts. Findings indicated [strong public support](#) for greater regulation of social media, [with 90% of parents and two-thirds of young people](#) supporting restrictions on at least some social media platforms for those under the age of 16. However, whilst concerns about [online harms](#), [misinformation](#) and young people's wellbeing continue to grow, [systematic reviews and meta-analyses](#) have found that associations between social media use and mental health difficulties are often weak and inconsistent across studies, making it difficult to establish a clear causal relationship. As a result, many [researchers advocate](#) a [harm-minimisation](#) approach focused on [digital literacy](#), resilience and [critical engagement](#), rather than relying solely on restrictions or prohibition.

Research at Nottingham Trent University has explored both the opportunities and risks associated with young people's digital lives. Dr [Daria Kuss](#) and colleagues have examined problematic technology use, online harms and [misinformation](#), highlighting concerns around [online toxicity](#), social media use and the impact of digital environments on wellbeing, trust and social cohesion. Their work advocates a [multi-stakeholder approach](#) that combines digital literacy, education, regulation and support from schools, families and communities. Prof. [Lucy Betts](#) and colleagues have similarly explored [how social media influences young people's](#) wellbeing, identifying links between intensive social media use, fear of missing out (FOMO), lower self-esteem, social comparison and cyberbullying.

Conclusions

The **Youth Matters for Nottingham** event provided a valuable opportunity to bring together local authority, youth practitioners, community organisations, and policymakers to explore how the ambitions of *Youth Matters* can be translated into meaningful local action. The discussions and evidence gathered highlighted the interconnected nature of key themes, including people and spaces, community, aspirations and education pathways, youth voice and co-production, arts and creativity, employment and skills, mental health and loneliness, and the impact of social media. Collectively, these findings reinforce the importance of working collaboratively across sectors to create inclusive opportunities, strengthen support systems, and ensure that young people are active partners in shaping the services, spaces, and decisions that affect their lives. Moving forward, the insights generated through the event provide a strong foundation for developing a shared local agenda that places young people's voices, experiences, and aspirations at the centre of Nottingham's future development.

About the Authors

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Rich Pickford is Head of Nottingham Civic Exchange where he leads on facilitating connections between researchers, communities, business and citizens and maximising the impact of NTU and Nottingham Civic Exchange's work. Rich has a background in outdoor education and youth work, and prior to working with NTU he was based with the RSA supporting their work across Wales and the Midlands. He is currently on a part-time secondment to at EMCCA where he is supporting the development of their Areas for Research Interest questions.

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This research briefing was produced by NTU staff follow a workshop on the UK Government's youth Strategy Youth Matters. It connects research expertise at NTU with key themes that participants highlighted. It creates an opportunity to consider how research expertise at NTU can inform future policy and practice debates related to youth work and engagement in Nottingham and the UK related to the new strategy and initiatives that develop from it.

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