



**Youth
Careers
Collective**



Our Strategy

2026–2030

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01

About us

Youth Careers Collective (formerly Spark!) has more than 40 years' experience of working in close partnership with schools, communities, local councils and alongside a large and diverse range of local and national employers.

Our Vision is of a society in which all young people are ready, equipped, motivated, and able to enter the world of work and pursue rewarding careers.

Our Mission is to ensure all young people, particularly those who will most benefit, have access to meaningful employer engagement, work readiness skills development, and employment opportunities, enabling them to transition into sustained work and rewarding careers.

Our Values, which we intend to consistently live through our actions and decisions, are empowerment, collaboration, reliability, quality, and learning.

We are embedded and well-connected in the communities we serve, actively creating community-led approaches and services.

We support the development of young people's employability skills, knowledge, experience and access, so that they are better prepared for and able to effectively transition into the workplace, finding and keeping a job.

We provide:

- Meaningful **employer engagement and employability skills** development.
- High **quality workplace experiences**, placements and internships.
- Inspiring one-to-one **careers mentoring** relationships.
- Supported **transitions into employment**.
- Impactful **place-based partnerships**.

We prioritise our services and support for young people experiencing barriers to entering employment, which includes, but is not limited to, young people:

- on **Free School Meals** and/or Pupil Premium
- with **Special Educational Needs and Disabilities**
- attending **Alternative Provisions and Special Schools**
- with experience of **Local Authority Care**
- with **caring responsibilities**
- experiencing **racial discrimination**.

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Our mission

We are here to ensure all young people, particularly those who will most benefit, have access to meaningful employer engagement, work readiness skills development, and employment opportunities, enabling them to transition into sustained work and rewarding careers.



01

Why we've rebranded

We became Spark! in 2012 and the name and branding has served us well. Our growing team now delivers more incredibly impactful programmes than ever before, alongside hundreds of partners, from meaningful employer engagement and employability skills development to high-quality workplace experiences and inspiring one-to-one career mentoring.

However, with nearly a million young people 'Not in Employment, Education or Training', (NEET), there is huge challenge and a growing need to be urgently addressed, and we must be an increasingly ambitious organisation.

So, over the next 5 years we aim to develop hundreds of new, productive and cross-sector relationships, to drive real and systemic change for young people experiencing barriers to entering employment.

If we are to successfully address the youth unemployment crisis, we know that as an organisation we must:

1. develop a clearer identity and higher profile
2. create and communicate a clarity of purpose
3. proactively work more collectively with our partners and communities.

So, from November 2025, Spark! became **Youth Careers Collective**.

Why Youth? This is the core of everything we do; we will have a laser-like focus on putting young people centre to every programme, every interaction and every decision.

Why Careers? Employment is good, careers are better. We understand that a vital first step is supporting young people into their first job and sustained employment, but ultimately, we believe that every young person, no matter their background and barriers, should have the opportunity to pursue rewarding careers.

Why Collective? We already partner with dozens of school and communities, alongside over 450 employers and 1000 volunteers every year, as well as local councils, voluntary sector organisation and funders. But we will need to take these relationships to the next level, moving beyond collaboration and towards collectiveness. We must be working fully in concert with other organisations and sectors, to create a shared purpose, common goals and unified actions.



More than just a name

This is more than just a name change, it's a promise. A promise that we will always **put young people first in every decision** we make and every action we take, alongside a commitment to prioritise, not just jobs, but ensuring the young people we serve have the real tools they need to **build rewarding careers**, and finally it's a pledge to proactively **bring people and organisations together**, from across sectors and industries, to work collectively to ensure the deepest of impact and long-term change.

We hope everyone reading these words will be able to join us on our exciting next steps and our ambitious drive for improving young lives. Whether you're an individual, a charity, a large employer, a small business, a local council, a school or college, a youth service provider, or an infrastructure body, you have a vital role to play as part of the Collective.

02

A quick look back

The organisation has come a long way since it was first established in 1980, when a group of Hounslow based businesspeople and the Council came together to bridge the massive gap that existed between work and education, forming the Industry Education Partnership Group, subsequently becoming Hounslow Education Business Partnership.

After 31 years of serving the Hounslow community, funding for Education Business Partnerships was withdrawn in 2011. As a result, the staff and assets were transferred to a new charity, which a year later, driven by an ambition to reach beyond Hounslow, became known as Spark!.

“

I firmly believe this was one of the best things to happen in our school for years and we even recorded our highest ever attendance for the year group. I am deeply grateful to Youth Careers Collective for providing us with this invaluable opportunity, it's experiences like these that open doors for our students and inspire them to reach for greater heights.

Chib Ijezie – Careers Lead, Kingsley Academy

In 2021 a new vision, mission and values were born, alongside a new strategy, with a clear focus on building sustained place-based partnerships, alongside a priority to develop high impact services for young people most at risk of becoming 'Not in Employment Education and Training' (NEET).

Since that time the organisation has continued to evolve, becoming a leading youth employability charity, reaching tens of thousands of young people and communities, right across west London and beyond.

Over the past 4 years we've grown to reach **more young people**, engaged **more communities** and established **more partnerships** than ever before:

	in 2021/22	in 2024/25
Young people we worked with	3948	6377
Schools/colleges we partnered	40	70
Regions we operated in	5	12
Employers we partnered	371	455
Volunteers who supported us	392	1027

We have delivered **more impactful programmes and activities** for more young people:

Young people:	in 2021/22	in 2024/25
with meaningful employer engagements	1988	6864
On high-quality work experience	675	833
visiting workplaces	398	1249
matched with a career mentor	121	213

We have also increasingly targeted our services and support where they are most needed, including with young people on **Free School Meals** and those with **Special Educational Needs and Disabilities**:

Young people with:	in 2021/22	in 2024/25
Special Education Needs & Disabilities (SEND)	15% (593)	22% (1403)
Free School Meals (FSM)	25% (987)	33% (2126)

02

Our impact



Our **high-quality and supported work experience programme – The Way to Work** provides young people, with identified barriers to entering employment, with before and after workshops, guidance and resources, placement sourcing and support.

83% ▲

of young people say they *'feel confident applying for a job they want'*, an increase from 60% before

76% ▲

of young people say that they have an *'understanding of career opportunities'*, compared to just 39% before

84% ▲

of young people say they *'feel confident speaking with adults in a work environment'*, compared to 64% before



Our **industry insight programme – Kickstart Express** includes a day of preparatory and employability skills workshops, an in-depth workplace visit, including team and business challenges, and a day of reflections, sharing and action following the visit.

83% ▲

of young people said they *'had met people in at least 2 jobs they aspire to'*, compared to 52% before

88% ▲

of young people had an *'understanding of career opportunities'*, compared to 69% before

83% ▲

of young people *'feel equipped to achieve their career goals'*, compared to 64% before



Our multi-stage **Pathways Partnership Programme**, delivered over the past 4 years alongside GSK, Heathrow, Peabody, Notting Hill Genesis and The Football Association, has so far engaged **2068 young people** from **34 communities**.

91% ▲

of young people say they are very *'confident they can succeed in a job'*, compared to 67% before the programme

75% ▲

of young people had an *'understanding of career opportunities'*, growing from 34% prior to the programme

85% ▲

of young people state they *'know people in jobs they aspire to'* at the end of the programme, compared to just 26% before



Our **Youth Employability Partnerships (YEP!) programme** supports a small cohort of young people, with significant barriers to employment, over an academic year to engage with diverse employers. Over the past 3 years the YEP! has supported **974 young people**, across **17 communities**, and in partnership with **66 employers**.

64% ▲

of young people say the programme *'increased their confidence and motivation to get a job'*

69% ▲

of young people say they have the *'knowledge and understanding of the skills needed for a job'*, up from 37% before

91% ▲

of young people completing the programme moved into employment or further/higher education

We have evidenced that our long-term interventions, including multiple workplace and employer engagement opportunities over an extended period, create the deepest impact:

02

Our partners

Our work is not possible without our amazing network of employer partners. Over the past four years we've worked with over 2000 employers of all shapes and sizes, supporting workshops, hosting workplace visits, providing mentors and work experience opportunities.

Some employers go even further, forming strategic partnerships with us, to fund and develop industry-specific programmes and access for young people.

Strategic partners over the past 4 years



Equally, our generous funders and donors over the past 4 years have been absolutely vital to us being able to continue our high-impact work, ensuring the opportunity for long-term engagement and organisational sustainability.

Funders and donors over the past 4 years



03

Our Collective

Youth Careers Collective is a wide and engaged network of organisations working together to address the youth unemployment challenge. In partnership, we are all working to ensure young people with barriers to entering employment or training, are given the support they need, to develop their skills, experience, knowledge and access, in order that they can move into employment and rewarding careers.



EMPLOYERS

Each year over **450 businesses** give their valuable staff time and access to their workplaces, to support our young people, providing opportunities that many would otherwise never be able to access.

Employer partners range from large multi-nationals, such as GSK and Cisco, to local Small and Medium Enterprises, and high-street hair salons and pharmacists.

- **53%** of our employer partners in 2024/25 were **micro or small**.
- **8%** of our employer partners in 2024/25 were **medium**.
- **39%** of our employer partners in 2024/25 were **large**.

SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

In a typical year Youth Careers Collective partners with **70 to 80 schools and colleges**, to develop bespoke interventions and support, to meet the unique needs of their students and communities.

It is only through a collective approach with these education institutions that we can reach and engage young people with barriers to entering employment or training.

COUNCILS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Youth Careers Collective includes numerous local community partners, youth services and local councils, without whom our work wouldn't be possible. When we develop any services, we always do it in concert with local representatives, pooling shared knowledge of the service gaps, identifying needs, and responding to challenges and opportunities. In this way we ensure we are taking a robust community-led approach, avoiding duplication and competition for limited resources.

FUNDERS

The support we get from national, regional and local funders is essential to how we function and fund our work, but the best funders give more than money, acting as a vital partner of the Collective.

Funders such as Inspire Hounslow, Heathrow Community Trust, the Mayor of London, Youth Futures Foundation, Charities Aid Foundation and others, work with us to really understand and respond to the challenges young people face today, as they navigate education and their transition into work, as well as providing access to expertise and evidence, peer-learning networks, training and guidance, to ensure our work is robust and impactful.

FAMILIES AND CARERS

We know that families and carers, more often than not, are key to shaping the opportunities, prospects and life chances of young people. Through our partnerships with schools, colleges and youth services, the Collective proactively engages parents and carers, ensuring they have the knowledge, guidance and access they need to be able to support their children to pursue rewarding careers, as well as helping us to understand the challenges and barriers to work that the young people may be experiencing.

YOUNG PEOPLE

Nothing the Collective does is without the express guidance and direction of the young people we serve. They are central to how we operate, prioritise, make decisions and take actions. Our paid network of Young Associates, largely made up of programme alumni, alongside the young people in the communities we serve, draw on their lived experience and insights to advise and support us in our programme development, delivery and strategy, ensuring the work we deliver is relevant and appropriate in addressing the unique challenges they are facing. In addition, for every activity we deliver we capture learnings and feedback from the participants themselves, ensuring that their input and experiences inform how we continually adapt and improve.

03

Our strategy in a page

GUIDING PRINCIPLES ➔



We will take a **collective** approach



We will focus on **prevention**



We will drive **systemic** change

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES ➔

01.
Increase our reach

- Expand in existing areas, with more schools, employers and councils
- Grow strategically in areas of unmet need

02.
Target our support

- Support 11-18 year olds with barriers to work
- Support 16-24 year olds who are 'NEET'

03.
Deepen our impact

- Deliver more multi-engagement programmes
- Lead cross sector partnership approaches

04.
Influence change

- Disseminate insights and convene stakeholders
- Share expertise and experience through training and consultancy

WHAT WE'LL DO

▲▲ YOUTH CENTERED AND COMMUNITY-LED ▲▲

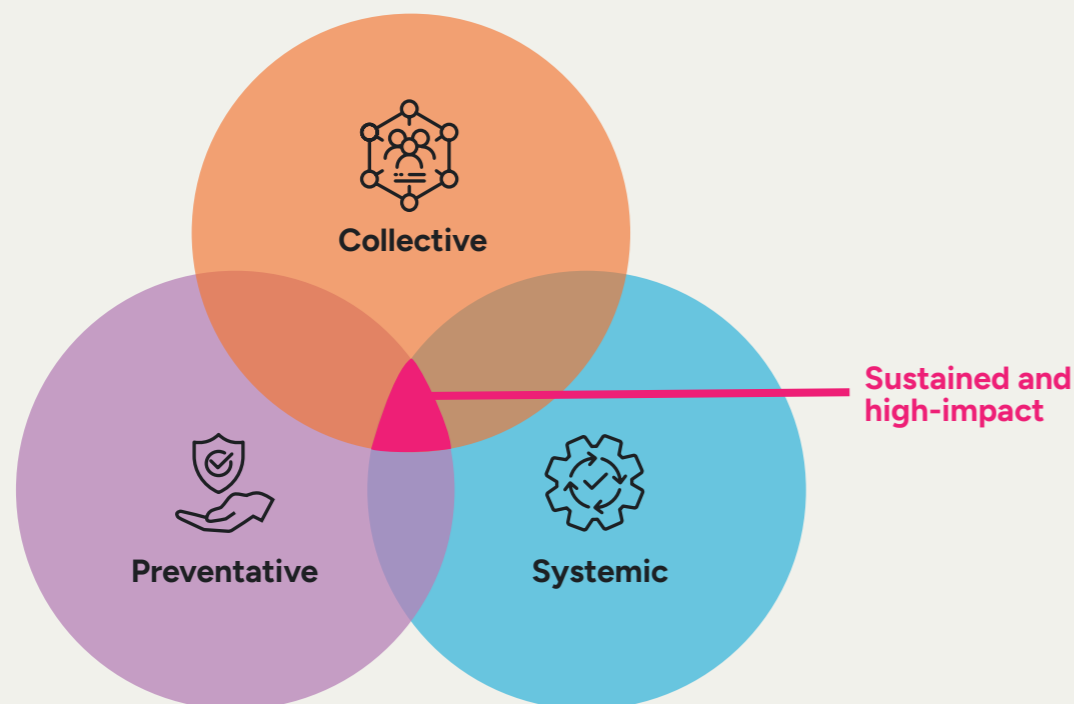


03

Our guiding principles

Our guiding principles are the foundations that will dictate our decisions and behaviours during the strategic period of 2026 to 2030. They provide a framework for actions and priorities, in alignment with the organisation’s mission, vision, and values.

- We will take a **collective approach**.
- We will focus on **prevention**.
- We will drive long-term and **systemic change**.



01. We will take a collective approach

At Youth Careers Collective we hold a fundamental belief that we cannot make any significant impact or change in isolation, and will only achieve anything of note when we work collectively with others, establishing common objectives, developing impactful partnerships and complementary services.

This joined-up approach creates a stronger ecosystem of opportunities for young people, filling service gaps, complementing existing provision, and maximising collective impact.

02. We will focus on prevention

About 1 in 8 young people are ‘Not in Education, Employment, or Training’ (NEET), more than three times the national average across all ages. Our focus will therefore be to intervene early with young people with barriers to entering employment, aiming to avoid them becoming NEET in the first place.

We will prioritise and direct our services where they are most needed, including with young people on Free School Meals or Pupil Premium, those with SEND or attending Alternative Provision, care-experienced young people, those facing racial discrimination, those with compound disadvantage (i.e. multiple barriers to employment).

03. We will drive systemic change

We aim to transform not just individual outcomes but the systems and culture surrounding youth employment.

To build real change for young people and society, all stakeholders, including schools/ colleges, employers, councils, charities and funders, need to establish a shared purpose, common goals and unified actions.

Key commitments

- *Shared Goals:* We will build impactful partnerships, align objectives, avoid duplication and competition.
- *Community-Led Change:* We will empower local stakeholders to lead, ensuring interventions are relevant and sustainable.
- *Tailored Action:* We will develop a deep understanding of each community, adapting services to local needs and opportunities.

Key commitments

- *Evidence-Led:* We will use data, research, and impact assessment to guide decisions.
- *Pragmatic:* We will take action where and when it matters most, prioritising progress over perfection.
- *Appropriate:* We will deliver progressive, staged interventions, adapted to meet the unique needs of young people.
- *Employer-engaged:* We will design and deliver opportunities that are employer-led and meaningful and build lasting relationships.

Key commitments

- *Building Influence:* We will engage employers, schools/colleges, local and central government, and sector bodies, to advocate and support for coordinated solutions.
- *Convening Partners:* We will be a trusted voice which brings stakeholders together to align efforts.
- *Amplifying Youth Voice:* We will put young people at the centre of decision-making, with their lived experience shaping solutions.

03

Our strategic priorities

Our strategic priorities outline where we work, who we work with, what we do, and how we influence change, ensuring we maximise impact for young people with barriers to entering employment.

01. Increase our reach (where we work)

What we will achieve

- **Expand locally:** Engage more schools, employers, and councils in our current priority regions (i.e. West London) to drive collective approaches and reach more young people in need.
- **Grow strategically:** Identify regions of unmet need and service gaps and extend our reach by co-developing solutions with local partners and employers.

How we will achieve it

- **Place-based approaches:** We will continue to embed services within communities, ensuring alignment with local need and avoiding duplication.
- **Long-term partnerships:** We will prioritise strategic, sustained collaboration with councils, schools, employers, and the voluntary sector.
- **Employer engagement:** We will build multi-engagement programmes with existing and new employer partners.
- **Evidence-led replication:** We will expand proven impactful models into new areas.
- **Locally relevant services:** We will tailor services to address regional service gaps and local need.

02. Target our support (who we work with)

What we will achieve

- **Preventative focus:** Work with 11–18-year-olds facing barriers to employment, before they leave school.
- **Interventive approach:** Engage 16–24-year-olds who are currently NEET, including care leavers, those at risk of violence, and those facing multiple barriers.

How we will achieve it

- **Employer collaboration:** We will co-design services targeting priority demographics.
- **Funding for impact:** We will secure long-term resources to sustain support for high-need young people.
- **School/college partnerships:** We will identify and support target young people in areas of highest need.
- **Community engagement:** We will partner with youth services and local councils to reach young people outside education settings.
- **Specialist growth:** We will expand provision for young people with SEND and students in Alternative Provisions.
- **Pathways to employment:** We will build transition programmes, supported by employer partnerships.

03. Deepen our impact (what we do)

What we will achieve

- Increase **sustained, multi-touch programmes** that take young people from early awareness through to sustained employment.
- Grow our **Pathways Partnership Programme** providing employer engagement and workplace experiences, personalised mentoring and support, high-quality workplace experience and supported transitions into work.

How we will achieve it

- **Age and need-appropriate support:**
 - » 11–14 (Early Engagement): Career awareness, skills workshops, and workplace insight visits.
 - » 14–18 (Prevention): Employer-led activities, work placements, mentoring, and supported transitions.
 - » 16–24 (Intervention): Career confidence programmes, paid internships, and direct employment pathways.
- **Strengthen employer partnerships:** We will expand and diversify our successful Pathways Partnership Programme.
- **Long-term engagement:** We will work intensively with small, targeted cohorts to build employability skills, career confidence and work readiness.
- **Alumni network:** We will provide ongoing support and track long-term outcomes.

04. Influence change (shaping the system)

What we will achieve

- Create a more **connected, inclusive youth employment ecosystem**, making workplaces more receptive and accessible for young people facing disadvantage.

How we will achieve it

1. Thought leadership

- **Research and publish:** We will share insights on what works and promote cross-sector collaboration.
- **Convene stakeholders:** We will host forums and events to share best practice, align efforts and direct change.
- **Centre youth voice:** We will ensure young people shape solutions and inform decision-making.

2. Training and consultancy

We will provide services to employers, schools, and councils to develop their knowledge and expertise, enhancing their support for young people, including:

- Effective work experience and mentoring programme development.
- Impactful volunteering and early-career talent pipeline development.
- Becoming a youth-friendly employer.
- Building and embedding long-term school/employer partnerships.

04

Our programmes & services

We work to enhance young people's employability skills, knowledge, experience and access, so that they are better prepared for and able to transition into the workplace and rewarding careers.

We do this through a range of meaningful employer engagements, employability skills development activities, high-quality workplace experiences, inspiring one-to-one career mentoring and education to employment transition support.



EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

Typically delivered on the school or community site, meaningful, diverse and multiple employer engagements is key to young people broadening their career horizons, raising their career aspirations and building their career confidence.

WORKPLACE EXPERIENCE

High-quality workplace experiences, ranging from short industry insight visits and week-long-work placements to extended T Level placements and Supported Internships, which develop employability skills, grow confidence in the workplace and create access to career opportunities.

CAREER MENTORING

One-to-one career mentoring provides young people with the opportunity to develop their employability skills and work readiness, set career goals and grow their social capital.

SEND AND ALTERNATIVE PROVISIONS

Young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and those in Alternative Provisions are amongst the most likely to become 'Not in Employment, Education or Training', which is why supporting these young people to have access to skills development, role models and workplaces, is at the core of our delivery.

PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMMES

Bringing together the most impactful elements of our work into one extended programme for young people with barriers to entering employment, currently delivered in partnership with GSK, SEGRO, Notting Hill Genesis, Peabody Housing, Heathrow Airport and others.

TRAINING AND CONSULTANCY

We know that change often doesn't happen quickly, which is why we work with schools/ colleges, businesses and local councils, supporting them develop the expertise, systems and approaches they will need to address the challenges of youth unemployment.

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We've had a long-standing and valuable partnership with Youth Careers Collective for many years. They have trusted relationships with schools and bring extensive experience and expertise in effectively engaging young people. Their approach is both easy to work with and ensures purposeful, meaningful engagement that creates a real impact.

Poorvi Patel – Head of Education, Employment and Skills, Heathrow Airport.

04

Centring young people



Youth Careers Collective's network of Young Associates is made up of young people from our target communities, many of whom have taken part in our programmes. They are vital to how we operate as a charity and are central to us understanding local need and deciding how best to respond.

These brilliant young people inform our strategy, co-design programmes, represent the charity and our work, and direct our priorities. They are paid the London Living Wage for their time.

Over the next 5 years we will grow our network of Young Associates, including the establishment of a Youth Careers Collective alumni community.

We will ensure young people are central to our decision-making and strategy implementation at every level.

We will proactively advocate for ensuring our partners listen to and engage young people, shifting power to enable them to direct and effect real change.

05

Measures of success



- Engage and support more young people who experience barriers to entering employment.
- Operate in more regions and areas where there is a high need and existing service gaps.
- Partner with more employers and volunteers, creating access to more diverse places of work, and inspiring and relatable role models.
- Ensure the young people we work with develop the experience, skills, knowledge and access they require to transition into work.
- Support more young people we work with to transition into sustained employment.
- Better understand and articulate our impact and value, adapting to improve our delivery and creating a greater evidence base for our work.
- Lead a change of practice among stakeholders and partners, to adapt how they operate in order to better ensure positive employment outcomes for young people.

Calls to action

We can't and don't want to do this alone. Join the Collective and work with us to address the youth employment crisis and dramatically improve the life chances of thousands of young people.

You can:

- Volunteer on our employability and careers workshops, in schools and communities.
- Partner us to better understand local need and reach the young people who will most benefit.
- Open up your workplace for young people to visit for an industry insight.
- Work with us to engage and support young people with barriers to entering employment.
- Host young people on meaningful work experiences and placements.
- Donate to the charity so that we can continue our impactful work.
- Develop a bespoke community investment and volunteering programme for your staff.
- However you choose to contribute to the Collective, we look forward to speaking with you soon.
- Build a youth-friendly workplace culture and develop sustainable and diverse local talent pipelines.
- Please get in touch by e-mailing: info@youthcareers.org.uk

Join the Collective

www.youthcareers.org.uk

info@youthcareers.org.uk



**Youth
Careers
Collective**