



COMMISSION ON THE FUTURE OF EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT

CALL FOR EVIDENCE:

SUMMARY OF RESPONSES

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Introduction

The Commission on the Future of Employment Support has been set up to develop evidence-led proposals for reform so that our approach can better meet the needs of individuals, employers and the economy. The Commission is defining employment support as those publicly-funded services that help people who want to move into work, stay in work or progress in work to do so; and that help employers to find, recruit and retain the right people for their jobs.

In November 2022, the Commission launched a Call for Evidence, which sought views on what is working well within the current system, what could be improved and what learning could help to shape future reforms. The Commission asked in particular about how employment support:

- can work better for individuals, and particularly for those more disadvantaged in the labour market;
- can meet the needs of employers, both to fill their jobs and support good work;
- is organised and governed, including the role of the UK, devolved and local government and how services join up and work together locally; and
- can meet the needs of our future economy and society – supporting growth, economic change, an ageing population and transition to Net Zero.

The Commission received responses from 94 stakeholders, with a total of 248 pieces of evidence overall. For each of the thematic areas, the Commission received examples of good practice from across the UK and internationally. We are grateful for all those who contributed their expertise and views and are currently reviewing each of these submissions in detail. This document is a summary of the emerging themes from the Call for Evidence. It captures key themes from an initial review and is not exhaustive. Our detailed review will be presented in an interim report in summer 2023.

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This paper presents key themes against the four thematic areas set out above, and the questions that were asked in relation to these. However, the early findings reiterate both that these four areas are interlinked, and also that there are a number of common themes raised by respondents that cut across them – particularly around:

- the complexity and fragmentation of the current system – which leads to risks both of duplication and gaps in delivery, and often unclear accountabilities;
- the need for a better balance between national and local policy and provision (or between centralisation and devolution) – with most respondents favouring far greater local control;

- the importance of better joining up between services and supports, with alignment with skills and careers services being highlighted in particular – both in meeting current needs and responding to future challenges and opportunities; and
- reforming the current approach to ‘work first’ – with a stronger emphasis on relationships, trust and the *right* job, and less on monitoring, compliance and being expected to take *any* job.

These areas will also be explored in more detail in the interim report from the Commission.

The role of employment support

How can employment support work better for individuals, and particularly for those more disadvantaged in the labour market?

What works well within the current system of employment support?

What role should employment support play in tackling low pay and job insecurity and supporting progression at work?

How can employment services best support skills development and career management?

How well do people understand the support and services available to them?

Many respondents called for employment support to be provided to a wider group of people, beyond those claiming benefits. Some considered that employment support should be **a universal entitlement** (for example Working Free, the Scottish Centre for Employment Research and Demos). Others highlighted particular groups of people who are not on benefits but are in need of tailored employment support. These included, for example:

- Economically inactive people (D2N2 Local Enterprise Partnership and Lambeth Council), who may be unemployed and not claiming benefits because they do not wish to engage with Jobcentre Plus. Lambeth Council noted high numbers of young people who fall in this category.
- Those in low-pay work who are not claiming benefits or who are not able to work the hours they need.
- Second earners in households where a partner is working and benefits are not claimed (Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), Lambeth Council).

In considering how support should be provided to a wider group of people, respondents highlighted that effective employment support for economically inactive groups requires enhanced support to ensure individuals make informed choices about their options. Some suggested specialist work coaches for people aged over 50 and for parents, for example, to provide tailored support. These professionals would be more informed about the particular needs and barriers to work for these groups.

Many respondents emphasised that more localised support is required. Submissions, predominantly from local authorities and voluntary and community sector organisations, emphasised that making improvements to labour market outcomes for disadvantaged groups requires **stronger partnership working** and a **place-based approach**. The Local Government Association highlighted the need for a more effective partnership between government departments and local or combined authorities, to ensure that the local context is accounted for. Examples were provided of European Social Fund (ESF) and National Lottery Community Fund projects (such as those funded through Building Better Opportunities) that included strong local partnerships between local authorities and a wide range of voluntary and community sector organisations to meet varied needs. City-REDI evidence provided learning from Connecting Communities, a voluntary employment support programme tested across nine geographically defined neighbourhoods. The benefits of this highly localised approach included the use of small providers who could use innovative methods to reach and support people who would not typically engage with Jobcentre Plus.

Respondents particularly emphasised the need for a much greater focus on development of **joined up services with providers of healthcare, housing and social support** to identify and tackle wider barriers to employment through holistic and personalised support. For example, evidence from Mind advocated for a greater role for **health settings** within employment support, along with additional reforms to Access to Work. The Society of Occupational Medicine advocated for using the skills of Occupational Health (OH) trained professionals in a future public system support model (within or alongside Jobcentre Plus for example). The submission from Canterbury Christ Church University provided an example of how mental health professionals can be part of the employment support provided to young people with acute mental health needs. Many voluntary and community sector organisations and local government representatives were concerned about **funding gaps**, especially around the end of the ESF, which has been important in enabling this type of joined-up working for disadvantaged groups. They highlighted that the UK Shared Prosperity Fund is narrower in scope, scale and flexibility than the ESF monies it replaces.

There was consensus about the need for a **different approach to ‘work first’**. Respondents argued that the current approach focuses on rapid labour market entry with an emphasis on taking any job available and often *“insufficient support for future progression, job satisfaction and long-term employment stability”* (The Career Development Institute (CDI)). A greater convergence between job-matching, careers information and guidance and skills development could create more sustainable employment. Respondents noted that this longer-term, more coordinated approach is particularly important given that in the modern labour market people need to navigate more transitions in their career paths and may need more frequent re-training – respondents felt employment support must shift to accommodate this.

There was recognition that **in-work progression is an important part of the employment support landscape but is often overlooked** (eg Black Thrive Lambeth, West of England Combined Authority (WECA), CDI, Capita). The challenges of developing support that is accessible around working hours and commitments was highlighted. The West of England Combined Authority offered an emerging example of promising practice for this group – its Future Bright project which offers 1-1 career coaching and support to access training and increase income.

Improved integration and coordination between employment support, skills provision and career guidance was seen as key to supporting less precarious work and better in-work progression and pay. Demos, for example, propose that these should come together under a Universal Work Service, integrated at a local level, to better support both individuals and employers to navigate the skills system. They argue that this would provide a clear, single point of contact for labour market advice and support - and would be able to refer people to support appropriate for them. The Welsh Government’s ‘Working Wales’ programme aims to simplify access to services through this type of ‘one stop shop’ approach.

Evidence regarding **disincentives** to work considered how the high cost of childcare, lack of social care support, lack of or unaffordable transport in rural areas, and insufficient opportunities for flexible work can make it more difficult for individuals to return or stay in the workplace. Alongside concerns about the current ‘work-first’ approach, respondents noted that a lack of up-front investment in training and skills is a significant barrier in the existing system. Respondents also highlighted more systemic barriers such as racism, able-ism and stigma in the workplace for older people (eg Black Thrive Lambeth, Centre for Ageing Better, the Carers Trust).

Another key barrier to employment mentioned by respondents was **rules and thresholds related to different benefits**. Evidence from the Association of Colleges and CDI suggested that Universal Credit rules and sanctions could be another factor that affects individuals' decisions to not return to the workplace. For example, current Universal Credit conditionality rules limit training which could help an individual find work, and the sanctions in place could undermine the important trust between work coaches and jobseekers. The Carers Trust highlighted concerns among carers about the working hours threshold and low levels of entitlement provided by Carer's Allowance.

Many respondents also argued that strict conditionality and use of sanctions contributed to wider **distrust and negative perceptions** of employment support, particularly among groups more disadvantaged in the labour market. Research conducted by Mind shared that its service users have overwhelmingly negative views of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the benefits system, further undermining its ability to reach people and to support people into work.

A common theme was that **people do not understand the employment support and services available to them**. One provider noted that individuals typically hear about services 'by chance' rather than design because of a lack of information. They reported a lack of coordination also means that some people may move between services and have to re-state their backgrounds and needs over and over again in the hope of finding the right support. This can be demoralising and create an additional barrier to employment. The CDI highlighted the lack of awareness about the National Careers Service and emphasised the need for a clear information and communication strategy and more consistent signposting. Similarly, CPAG noted a lack of awareness among employment advisers and claimants of the Flexible Support Fund – a locally managed, discretionary fund designed to support claimants into work by removing some of the financial barriers to job entry.

Employers

How well does the current system work with employers?

What support do employers want and need, and how should this be delivered?

What examples of good employer practice are there in relation to recruitment, retention, job quality, design and progression?

Is there a role for employment services in supporting employer investment in skills?

How well do employers understand the support and services available to them?

Many respondents, including Haringey Council, CDI, the Local Government Association, and CIPD, suggested that the current employment support system is **not working well** for many employers, highlighting that employer support is inadequate because it is **complicated** and **disjointed**. The majority of employers do not engage with public employment services and this is particularly the case for SMEs (Federation of Small Businesses).

A common theme was the **lack of a central point of contact for employers**. Many respondents (such as D2N2 LEP, Business West, the LGA and CIPD) drew attention to the numerous support schemes, all funded and managed by different organisations. The LGA pointed to analysis it had undertaken which showed that:

'£20 billion is spent on at least 49 nationally contracted or delivered employment and skills related schemes or services, managed by nine Whitehall departments and agencies, and delivered by multiple providers and over different geographies'

The different eligibility criteria and geographic coverage of schemes make it hard for employers to fully understand and be aware of the support offer available to them. It can also mean approaches from multiple external organisations, which may create reluctance to engage with public employment support.

Many respondents (including Southampton City Council, Abri, the Vocational Rehabilitation Association, Haringey Council, the LGA, Make UK and CIPD) suggested that **a more localised public employment support service** could provide a more cohesive and joined-up approach that would be more successful in engaging employers. It could provide more detailed knowledge of the local context and labour market and **help employers to identify suitable candidates to fill vacancies**. **A localised service could** also facilitate **better connections with education and training**, suggest the Association of Colleges. There was a common view that employers would benefit from a single point of contact that acts as a bridge between them and employment support and skills provision.

Another frequent theme was that the **'work first' approach does not effectively support recruitment** because it results in high volumes of applications from inappropriate candidates (eg the Centre for Decent Work and Productivity at Manchester Metropolitan University and Demos). This may then feed negative perceptions of public employment support among employers.

Respondents commented on **weak employer engagement in government skills initiatives** and with the further education sector. Typically, a small number of large

employers are involved in the design and implementation of government skills programmes. The Centre for Decent Work and Productivity called for better employer involvement in policy development, with employers as strategic partners rather than recipients/ beneficiaries of government policy. This would ensure that skills initiatives better meet employer needs and that take up is higher. Nonetheless, respondents indicated appetite among employers for sector-specific skills training (which is supported by a reasonably strong evidence base) such as that provided through sector-based work academy programmes and skills bootcamps.

The CDI noted the **importance of career-support services for employers and employees**. Even though changes to pensions mean people are working later in life, most employers typically do not provide career management support and, as noted above, most people are not aware of the National Careers Service. The CDI called specifically for more use of the 'mid-life career review' model within public employment support (which is due to be taken forward as 'Mid-Life MOTs'). This would help employees to identify new skills required to meet changing workplace needs driven by technological and other change. It would also 'give space for the consideration of health, and finances, alongside careers and skills and development'.

In terms of **how support should be provided to employers to boost investment in skills**, CIPD suggested a focus on **improving people management and leadership capabilities within organisations**. This is more likely to lead to a strategic approach to skills – conducting workforce planning, putting training in place and having a training budget – and investment, engagement with education and training providers and preparation for the future. CIPD draws attention to regional pilot schemes it has run, with funding from JP Morgan, to provide local-level HR and business consultancy for SMEs to improve people management capabilities. The evaluation provides some early evidence of promise.

Respondents also pointed to wider structural barriers to employer and public investment in skills. Some commented that too many employers (particularly smaller or family-owned businesses) continuing to **see training and skills as a cost to be minimised** rather than an investment. CIPD noted that this leads to:

'many Local Enterprise Partnership regions operating within low-skills equilibriums, that is, supply of and demand for low-level skills which creates a negative cycle of firms operating low-road approaches and failing to invest in the workforce and their skills'.

The CDI pointed to a knowledge and awareness among employers about upskilling options, leading to many assuming that attainment of a higher level of education is the main pathway without consideration of apprenticeships and job-related training.

Respondents commented on employer practices that can help to increase labour market participation among disadvantaged groups and improve the quality of work. These included **inclusive recruitment practices, flexible working and job design and crafting**. Respondents considered that employers are particularly keen to do more in terms of improving inclusion and diversity in their workforce (eg Generation: You Employed UK and the East Sussex County Council) but they need more support in order to do this. The Inclusivity Works programme in Gloucestershire provides an example of efforts in this area.

Place-based initiatives such as the Good Employment Charter for Greater Manchester and the West Yorkshire Fair Work Charter were also suggested as effective means to drive changes in employer practice. In Greater Manchester, through a process of co-design, seven characteristics of good employment were defined for the Charter, related to secure work, fair pay, inclusive recruitment, health and wellbeing, flexible work, engagement and voice and people management. Employers were invited to become supporters of the Charter, making commitments across the seven characteristics. A tiered structure was developed that allowed supporters to become members, when they met key criteria for all characteristics.

Many respondents thought publicly funded **business support services** could help to provide employers (particularly SMEs) with expertise in these area (eg St Helens Chamber Ltd, Education Development Trust, CIPD) and noted gaps in existing provision. For example, CIPD highlighted research by the Gatsby Foundation into the provision and quality of business support services provided through Local Enterprise Partnerships via the Growth Hubs, which found 'variability in both the scope and scale of business support services'.

Structure and governance

How should employment services and support be organised - at what levels and in what part of government should responsibility for funding, policy and delivery sit?

How effective is the current role, structure and composition of the 'contracted-out' market? Should there be any changes?

How well-coordinated are employment support, skills and training, careers information and guidance, and other public services?

Should employment support and benefits administration continue to be delivered by the same organisation?

What role should Jobcentre Plus (and other employment support) play in monitoring compliance with benefit conditions? If this was not done by Jobcentre Plus, how should it be organised and managed?

How should the performance and success of public employment support be measured?

Submissions from the Local Government Association (LGA), local and combined authorities and several think tanks highlighted that the current **approach to employment support is overly centralised**, which made it harder to tailor services to local economies and needs. National employment support programmes are often not aligned with regional priorities, creating a complex, **hard to navigate system which leads to disengagement and duplication**.

These organisations highlighted that **devolving funding and assigning greater responsibilities to local areas** for policy, design and delivery of employment support could bring benefits in relation to:

- Greater potential to integrate and align policies at a local level to support improved partnership working and to reduce gaps and duplication of services. Many felt that the challenges around poor coordination between employment support, skills and training, careers information and guidance could be overcome or at least reduced through increased local leadership. This could include pooling or aligning of different funding streams.
- Being more responsive to local needs and providing support that is tailored to local contexts, by drawing on local knowledge.
- Opportunities for co-design with local stakeholders, particularly employers.

Nonetheless, responses acknowledged that there are **challenges associated with localisation**. These include:

'issues relating to economies of scale, the availability of knowledge and capacity, short-term churn of programmes and initiatives and concerns about the local variability (postcode lottery) in the quality of service provision'.

City-REDI at Birmingham University

Some respondents felt that economies of scale could still be achieved with nationally commissioned, regionally delivered employment support (eg Capita).

In relation to the current role of the 'contracted out' market there was a common view that **contracted out provision is important for providing specialist support** for people facing complex and multiple disadvantages in the labour market. Contracted-

out providers can bring specialist knowledge and skills but also help to engage people who have had or fear having negative experiences of public services. For example, the Centre for Ageing Better noted that for over 50s:

‘support can and should be delivered through local community organisations that already have the trust of local older people and in an environment that enables jobseekers to be comfortable and not worry about conditionality’.

In relation to **national programmes** and services that are contracted out by DWP (eg most recently the Restart programme), there were concerns among some respondents that contract package areas for delivery were too large. This made integration and partnership working with local services more difficult and, from a market perspective, limited opportunities for smaller providers.

As noted earlier, a key point made by respondents was that **national employment, skills and training programmes are commissioned from multiple government departments**. Respondents highlighted that programmes often have overlapping target groups and intended outcomes but there is no coordination or partnership working between government departments. This had led to a fragmented system lacking in coherence and complementarity. Calls were made for **improved strategic oversight and accountability** of how employment and skills funding is used.

Challenges were also noted around a **lack of alignment between nationally contracted-out programmes and employment support commissioned through other public services**, particularly local government. Many respondents noted duplication of services and gaps within the system due to a lack of strategic coordination. Respondents felt this duplication and overlap represented poor value for money and led to unhelpful competition between providers for referrals and a reluctance to share learning and good practice. Some providers of locally commissioned employment support also noted variable knowledge and practice among work coaches about available provision leading to inconsistent referrals.

The **types of contracts used in contracted-out provision was raised by some respondents**. Voluntary and community sector providers, for example, considered that payment by results contracts placed too great a risk and onus on providers and were not appropriate for the more complex, intensive support required by the most disadvantaged groups.

Organisations shared evidence that outcome and engagement rates increase as an employment support service becomes more **empowering, co-produced and personalised**, and that **conditionality can be detrimental to the health, wellbeing and progress toward work** for a range of service users. They highlighted that, in contrast, the current conditionality regime assumes that unemployment is driven by individuals’ behaviours alone.

There was a strong view among respondents that there needs to be **significant reform to separate the functions of monitoring compliance with benefits conditions and employment support**. They felt that combining these functions within one role **undermined the trust between individuals and work coaches**, which is critical for effective support. In terms of alternative possible approaches, the following were suggested as options for consideration:

- Machinery of Government changes eg DWP should maintain responsibility for benefits administration, but another department should be responsible for employment support and careers, with separate workforces.
- Create new roles with Jobcentre Plus for 'customer compliance officers' who are responsible for interviewing customers to ensure their circumstances are up to date and to detect and correct overpayments as distinct to work coaches.

Respondents commented on the **narrow definition of success of employment support** and services and advocated for more sophisticated measurements of performance. In particular, there was a call for moving beyond a measure of the numbers of people moving into jobs to a consideration of measures of quality including, for example, wage, employment quality, education and training opportunities, work life balance and employee participation. Where employment support is provided to economically inactive groups, some respondents felt it would be important to measure participation in education and training and increased confidence and steps towards employment.

Meeting future needs and opportunities

How do we ensure that employment support can meet the needs of the 21st century, and in particular changes brought about by technology, home and hybrid working, population ageing, changing migration patterns and the transition to Net Zero?

What are the opportunities for the UK to make more and better use of digital channels and technology to improve employment services and support?

Respondents frequently highlighted the **need to plan for future skills demands and communicate them more effectively** so that employment support, skills and careers systems can adapt and meet these needs (eg Demos and the Centre for Social Justice). Several respondents emphasised the importance of improved national and local planning and labour market information (eg Abri, East Sussex County Council), with the Institute of Directors calling for a new:

‘Shortage Occupations Agency’ that is public sector, but arms-length from government with one statutory duty: to produce the best analytical and technocratic forecast of current and future skills shortages in the UK’.

In terms of **supply-side solutions to meeting future needs**, there were suggestions of:

- **More proactive employment support for those in work** who will need to change jobs and gain new skills due to technological and other shifts making their roles redundant (Demos). CPAG emphasised the need to focus on a well-matched job, citing evidence that people who have already lost their jobs from automation have typically moved into low-paid and low skilled work, for which they are ‘over-qualified’.
- **Developing appropriate new training and skills pathways** to support decarbonisation and the transition to Net Zero (Centre for Social Justice). Some respondents considered that **Skills Bootcamp-type models** were a key ingredient of training and skills pathways and viewed them as a flexible way of responding to rapidly emerging skills needs. With up-front investment to scope, research and develop training, respondents felt they could be scaled relatively easily. City-REDI highlighted pilot projects led by members of the West Midlands Regional Economic Development Institute in response to meeting future needs and opportunities. These included the development of a new digital skills curriculum for young people focused on producing apps without the need for coding in response to identified local business needs, and the East Birmingham Energy Taskforce, which is developing future opportunities and training in the cleantech sector based around the Tyseley Energy Park.
- **Government investment in new enterprise schemes** (Abri), with business support, focussed on priority areas.
- **Improved preparation for young people in school for the world of work** (Abri, East Sussex County Council, City-REDI)
- **Incentivising employer investment in shortage skills by offering tax credits** for company costs incurred in training existing staff in the identified skills shortage areas (Institute of Directors)

Improving the participation and productivity of over 50s in the labour market

was seen as central by many respondents to meeting future needs. The Centre for Ageing Better noted that many over 50s are not able to access employment support

and those who are eligible for public employment support, have not fared well in previous government programmes such as the Work Programme and Work and Health programme, due to payment models that incentivise providers to 'deprioritise older workers'. The Society of Occupational Medicine noted the potential increased role for Occupational Health professionals in recommending reasonable accommodations for those in danger of falling out of work, which could be particularly relevant for this group.

Many outlined the need for **increasing digitisation** of public employment services, **allowing better connection** and support for those in more rural areas as well as those with disabilities and health conditions that make access to physical Jobcentre locations more difficult. With increased remote and hybrid working remaining in place in the post-pandemic context in many sectors, respondents reflected that greater flexibility to choose a preferred approach should also be offered in employment support. Respondents were nonetheless cautious to add that **any digital employment services should be co-designed and developed with service users** to avoid unintended consequences and ensure services meet the needs of end users. Many organisations highlighted the risk of digital exclusion, particularly among older populations with lower levels of digital literacy, and younger populations lacking digital access. Consequently, respondents tended to advocate for carefully designed hybrid modes that offer choice to maximise the potential of digitisation while maintaining universal access.

Next Steps

Alongside this written call for evidence, the Commission has also been running hearings and consultation events with practitioners, service users, policy makers and wider experts in employment support and services. The findings from these, as well as from the more detailed analysis of the 249 pieces of evidence submitted in writing, will be published in an interim report in the summer 2023. This will set out the Commission's initial view of the current system, its strengths and areas for improvement.

Following this, the Commission will then begin the process of developing options for future reform. We are keen to work with as diverse a range of partners on these as have already submitted evidence, and to do this in a way that involves service users as well as practitioners and wider stakeholders. More details on this process and how to get involved will be set out in the interim report in the summer.

In the meantime, we would like to thank everyone who has fed into the work of the Commission so far.

If you have any questions or comments on this report or on any aspects of the Commission's work then please email us, at commission@employment-studies.co.uk

List of respondents

Abri
Association of Colleges
Australian Council of Social Service
Belina Grow
Black Thrive Lambeth
Business West
Canterbury Christ Church University
Capita
Career Development Institute
Carers Trust
Centre for Aging Better
Centre for Social Justice
Child Poverty Action Group
CIPD
City-REDI, University of Birmingham
Communities that Work
D2N2 LEP
Deakin University
Demos
Disability Rights UK
DOWN2U
Earlybird
East Sussex County Council
Edinburgh Napier University
Education Development Trust
Employment Related Services Association
ESRC Centre for Society and Mental Health
Fedcap
Federation of Small Businesses
Fife Voluntary Action
Generation: You Employed, UK
Gloucestershire Gateway Trust
Graft Thames Valley Limited
Greater Manchester Combined Authority
Haringey Council
Housing Employability Network North East (HENNE)
Humankind - Step Forward Tees Valley
Institute for Employment Studies
Inclusivity Project (University of Exeter)
Institute of Directors
Institution of Occupational Safety and Health
Ipsos
Jobs22
Lambeth Council
Learning and Work
Living Wage Foundation
Local Government Association
London Borough of Camden
Long Covid Work
Make UK
Manchester Metropolitan University
Manchester Metropolitan University Decent Work and Productivity Research Centre
Mind
National Citizen Service (NCS) Trust
National Federation of ALMOs
National Housing Federation
North Norfolk District Council
Pertemps
Phoenix Insights
Recro Consulting
Reed in Partnership
Renaissi
Scope
Scottish Centre for Employment Research (SCER)
Skills Builder Partnership
Social Finance
SOM
South London and Maudsley NHS
South Tyneside Council
Southampton City Council
SQW
St Helens Chamber Ltd
Staffordshire University
Sussex Community Development Association
Swansea Council
The Art of Human Being
The Growth Company
The Open University
The Vocational Rehabilitation Association
UK Youth
University of Birmingham
University of Glasgow
University of Manchester
University of Portsmouth
Unlock - for people with criminal records
VIVID
VONNE
Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA)
WEA
West of England Combined Authority
West Yorkshire Combined Authority
Working Free Ltd
Working To Wellbeing
Youth Futures Foundation