

Supporting healthy lifestyles among young adults in the workplace

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1. Executive Summary

1.1 Why focus on young adults in the workplace?

Early adulthood is an important period to establish healthy behaviour patterns for later life. This is an age when individuals tend to have poor diet and low levels of physical activity, and a time of weight gain and increasing mental illness. In addition, there have been recent concerns about high sickness absence and high economic inactivity among young adults. The workplace has potential to be an environment which supports a healthy lifestyle, enabling young adults to develop healthy behaviours, reducing sickness absence and preventing later life chronic disease. However, there has previously been little focus on how workplaces can support healthy lifestyles for young adults. This research aimed to better understand the needs of young adults (age 16–24 years), learn from the perspectives of young adults, employers and wider stakeholders, and identify practical intervention opportunities for future research.

1.2 Where is intervention most needed to improve health behaviours of young adults at work?

Our cross-sectional analysis explored the working patterns, job quality indicators, and health behaviours of young adult employees compared to the older working population. Employment rates increase steadily from age 16 to 24, with many working part-time initially and then moving into full-time work. A large proportion of young adult men and women work in accommodation/food services, wholesale/retail and arts, entertainment and recreation. Young adults show overall poorer job quality than older adults, with lower scores on job autonomy, job-related anxiety and income. 58% of working young adults reported poor job quality on at least two out of six job quality indicators. Young adults reported lower fruit and vegetable intake than older adults, but higher physical activity and no difference in sleep duration.

Our study of how health behaviours change as young people enter employment found an increase in physical activity of around 30 minutes per day when young adults started work. At the same time sleep decreased by around 10 minutes per night, and there was no change in fruit or vegetable intake. Increases in physical activity were highest among men, among those without a university degree, and in those in lower socioeconomic occupation groups.

1.3 How does the workplace environment influence young adults' healthy lifestyles, and how could this be improved?

We conducted focus groups with four groups of employers and four groups of young adult employees, to explore perceptions of the impact of the workplace environment on young adults' lifestyle behaviours and how these could be addressed. For both employers and employees, one group was conducted with participants from each of the following industry sectors that employ a relatively high proportion of young adults: food services, construction, early years education, and social care.

Young people discussed physical and mental health as interconnected aspects of a healthy lifestyle, while employers placed more emphasis on mental health as crucial for young employees, seeing it as both a facilitator and a barrier to a healthy lifestyle. Both young people and employers acknowledged that long hours, low pay, and the nature of work across the four sectors hindered efforts to maintain healthy lifestyles.

Young people emphasised employer responsibility in providing adequate facilities and proactive health initiatives such as healthy food options, spaces to take breaks away from work, and adequate staffing to allow a manageable workload. Meanwhile employers prioritised education and positive role modelling around healthy workplace practices and looking after one's health at work. Both groups agreed on the importance of a supportive and flexible work environment to maintain health and wellbeing and strong relationships with managers. Financial wellbeing support was emphasised across the board, reflecting the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis.

Young adults reported being receptive to employer initiatives to incentivise healthy behaviours. Employers were more reticent, being more willing to intervene where health and safety outcomes were seen to be a priority. Or when not intervening in issues such as sleep or harmful behaviours, could lead to a safety incident at work (that could result in enforcement). However, employers need to be more aware of both the physical and mental health implications of poor lifestyle behaviours that can have a knock-on effect on work behaviours and work outcomes. Also to understand how they can have a role in implementing workplace interventions, encouraging their use and highlighting their benefits.

1.4 What do our findings mean for policymakers, employers and future research?

Our findings from the research described in this report, and discussion with young adult employees and other stakeholders, suggest that a healthy workplace for young adults should encompass:

- A living wage.
- Sick pay for all employees.

- Proactive management to support mental wellbeing and allow discussion around health behaviours.
- Co-creation of any workplace interventions to enable healthy lifestyles.
- Sufficient breaks, and space to take breaks, during the working day.
- Healthy working hours and shift patterns.
- Healthy food options, or facilities to prepare food.
- Being treated fairly at work (effort-reward balance).
- Activities and incentives to enhance physical activity.

Many of these recommendations are not specific to young adults, however, we have seen that young adults may be at higher risk than older adults of not experiencing a healthy working environment. Acknowledging that many of the recommendations for a healthy workplace are likely to increase costs for employers, at least in the short-term, a challenge for the future is to determine which interventions are the most cost-effective, as well as who should pay for these changes, and what aspects should be prioritised.

2. Introduction

2.1 Early adulthood is an important period to establish healthy behaviour patterns

For many people, early adulthood (age 16–24 years) is a time of life when they are at their most healthy. However, obesity prevalence increases faster during this period than any other time during adulthood, with more than half the UK population living with overweight or obesity by their early thirties [1]. In addition, prevalence of mental illness in early adulthood has increased sharply in recent years, with 22% of 17–24-year-olds having a probable mental disorder in 2023. [2]

Diet, physical activity and sleep are health behaviours which are important risk factors for both obesity and mental illness [3–7]. These behaviours tend to become less healthy during adolescence and early adulthood [8–10]. The life transitions and key milestones experienced in early adulthood, including leaving the parental home, finishing education and starting full-time employment, and for some starting a family, will lead to changes in behaviours and development of habits which could persist throughout adult life. Given this period of rapid change before behaviours become more stable, many have suggested that early adulthood should be considered a critical period for development of adult health behaviours.

2.2 Employment and the workplace can influence people's health throughout adult life

Our health is strongly influenced by the people and environments around us [11], including our work environment. Features of the workplace environment which may influence health behaviours include structural aspects (e.g., working hours, commuting needs), the physical environment (e.g., food availability), and the social environment (e.g., influence of colleagues) [12,13]. Recently, high levels of sickness absence and economic inactivity have been reported among young adults, which has not been seen in other age groups, [14] due particularly to long-term ill health [15,16]. This means there is heightened awareness among employers and policy-makers about the importance of supporting younger workers to stay healthy [17].

Existing evidence in the general adult population suggests that work may make both positive and negative contributions to health. However, although 63% of young adults are in full-time or part-time employment [10], and there is evidence from other countries that health behaviours such as diet [18], eating behaviours [19], and physical activity [20], change as young people start working, little is known about the influence of the work environment on health behaviours and health in young adults.

2.3 How can workplaces support young adults' health?

Given that young adults are rarely seen in healthcare settings, the workplace offers a useful setting for health promotion. Interventions to support obesity-related behaviours in early adulthood are considered to yield a 'triple health benefit', preventing immediate weight gain, enabling healthy behaviours across people's whole adult life, and influencing the next generation [21]. Beyond individual health benefits, these interventions could contribute wider economic benefits in terms of reductions in sickness absence, economic inactivity, and healthcare costs.

There is considerable literature around workplace interventions (across adult ages) aiming to improve health behaviours and prevent weight gain, including both individual-level [22] and workplace environment interventions [23]. However, studies tend to include few young adult participants. Many studies focus on cognitive interventions (e.g., education or counselling) [18] rather than low agency interventions (e.g., provision of healthy food) [19] despite previous research suggesting that interventions requiring lower individual agency may be most effective in low socioeconomic [24] and younger age groups [25].

2.4 Aims and research questions

This research aimed to better understand the needs of young adults (age 16–24 years), learn from the perspectives of young adults, employers and wider stakeholders, and identify practical intervention opportunities for future research.

Across the research we aimed to address three overarching research questions:

- 1: Where is the greatest need among young adult employees, and employers, for interventions to address lifestyle behaviours?
- 2: What could employers and policy makers do to support improved lifestyle behaviours and reduce risks of overweight and obesity among young adults transitioning into the workplace?
- 3: What components of a workplace intervention are likely to be most feasible and cost-effective in supporting healthy lifestyle behaviours and reducing weight-related inequalities among young adults transitioning into the workforce?

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

Chapter 3 presents the analysis of two datasets, the Labour Force Survey and the UK Household Longitudinal Survey, to address question one.

Chapter 4 reports findings from focus groups with young adults and employers, presenting perspectives of these groups primarily in relation to research questions two and three.

In Chapter 5, we discuss our findings in relation to current policy, previous research, and wider recommendations for policy change, incorporating contributions from our wider stakeholders and Young Persons Advisory Group, and making recommendations to be considered in future policy and research.

3. Where is intervention most needed to support healthy lifestyles among young adults at work?

3.1 Introduction

As introduced in Chapter 1, the period of early adulthood is a critical period for health behaviour development. Health behaviours are typically worse among young adults when compared to older people. For example people aged 19–35 years show lower diet quality compared to older adults (36–60 years) [26], less physical activity [3], shorter sleep and lower sleep quality [27,28].

The transition from adolescence to early adulthood involves significant life changes, such as moving from parental homes to independent living, and from education to employment, all of which are likely to influence health behaviours [20]. The start of employment is a key transition that contributes to the development of socioeconomic position and potentially contributes to the development of socioeconomic inequalities in health behaviours [29].

Despite this, there is limited research focused on the impact of work and the workplace environment on health which specifically focuses on young adults. There is even less evidence about the effect of starting work on young people's health. A small number of studies have shown changes in health behaviours across the transition into employment, including increases in overall diet [18], increased fast-food consumption [19] and decreases in physical activity [20].

One set of employment attributes which has previously been shown to contribute to health is that of 'job quality.' Previous studies have found that low quality work (low pay, low job autonomy, low job satisfaction, low security and low wellbeing) is associated with poor health outcomes in older adults (35+ years) [30]. Recent reports using data from the UK Household Longitudinal Survey (UKHLS) have shown that low quality work is more common among young adults, with the majority of 16–19-year-old employees reporting at least two negative job aspects of job quality [31]. A majority of people working low quality jobs remain in low quality work for long periods of time, suggesting that young adults' transition into employment may be a critical period for later health development [31].

In this chapter we describe analysis of two datasets, the LFS and the UKHLS, which were chosen because they provide details of employment patterns and health behaviours on a representative sample of UK participants. Our analysis has two main aims:

- To describe the working patterns, work environments and health behaviours of young adults in comparison to the older adult population (section 3.2).

- To examine how the transition into employment is associated with changes in health behaviours, examining differences between individual and job characteristics (section 3.3).

3.2. Describing work patterns, work environments and health behaviours

3.2.1 Datasets

Descriptive comparisons of working patterns, job quality aspects, and health behaviours, between young adults and older adult populations were conducted using cross-sectional LFS and UKHLS datasets. The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is a household survey that collects data on employment, working patterns, and economic activity. Data from the LFS April to June 2023 wave were used, including people between the ages of 16 and 65 [32].

The UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS), a household panel survey that collects data on various aspects of people's lives, including in relation to health, education and work, was also used for cross-sectional analyses of young people's employment patterns [33]. People who were working full-time, part-time, or as apprentices, and were at least 16 years old were included in the analyses. Waves 12 (2020 to 2022) and 13 (2021 to 2023) were used to assess current working patterns of young adults in the UK.

3.2.1.1 LFS variables

Economic activity

Respondents' economic activity was assessed based on the International Labor Organisation (ILO) standard definition of employment. Responses were categorised as 'In employment' for those who reported working or having a job, 'Unemployed' for those not working but willing and available to work, or 'Inactive' for those not working but not available or willing (i.e. due to being a student or ill).

Industries of main occupation

The latest Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) code was used to categorise people's main job. [32]

Working hours

Participants who were employees or self-employed were categorised as working full-time (more than 30 hours/week) or part-time (less than 30 hours/week). They were asked to select one of the following reasons for part-time work: student, ill or disabled, could not find a full-time job, did not want a full-time job, or no reason given.

3.2.1.2 UKHLS variables

Shift patterns

Participants who reported working mornings and other day times were coded as “Daytime shifts.” Evenings and nighttime shifts were coded as “Night shifts.” Respondents with no usual shift pattern or rotating shifts were coded as “Rotating/Varying.”

Job quality

Low job quality includes low autonomy over work, job-related negative emotions, low job security and satisfaction, and low pay [30].

Job autonomy was derived from combining self-reported scores of autonomy over work pace, work manner, task order, and work hours, and a mean score of job autonomy was calculated ranging from 1 (none) to 4 (a lot).

Job security was assessed by asking participant how likely it is that they will lose their job in the next 12 months. Participants responded on a scale of 1 (very likely) to 4 (very unlikely).

Job satisfaction: participants were asked to report their job satisfaction on a scale from 1 (completely dissatisfied) to 7 (completely satisfied).

Job related anxiety and depression: people’s self-reported scores of feeling tense, uneasy, and worried about their job were combined to assess job-related anxiety, where higher scores represent lower anxiety levels. Scores on feeling depressed, gloomy, and miserable about their jobs were combined to an overall job-related depression score, where higher scores represent lower depression levels.

Low pay: was defined as the lowest quartile of hourly pay, which was derived using participants’ monthly gross income and usual hours of work per week [30].

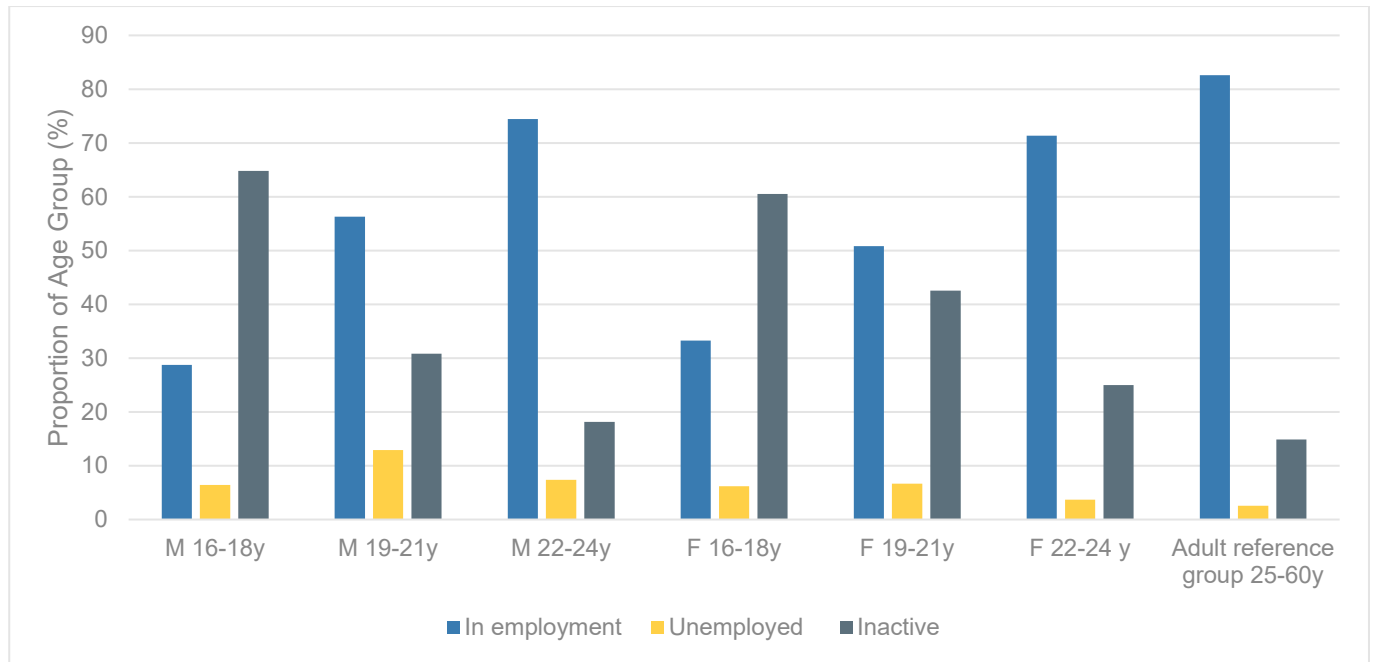
3.2.2 Main findings

This section cross-sectionally explores the working patterns, job quality indicators, and health behaviours among young adult employees compared to the older working population.

3.2.3 Employment, working patterns and job quality among young adults

Early adulthood is the time when most young adults enter employment. Figure 1 below illustrates the employment status of different age and gender groups, compared to an adult reference group aged 25–60 years. Employment increases with age for both males and females, and inactivity is highest among the youngest age groups (16–18 years). The proportion of those unemployed (as defined by the International Labour Organisation) ranges from about 5% to 12% and is highest in 19–21-year-old men.

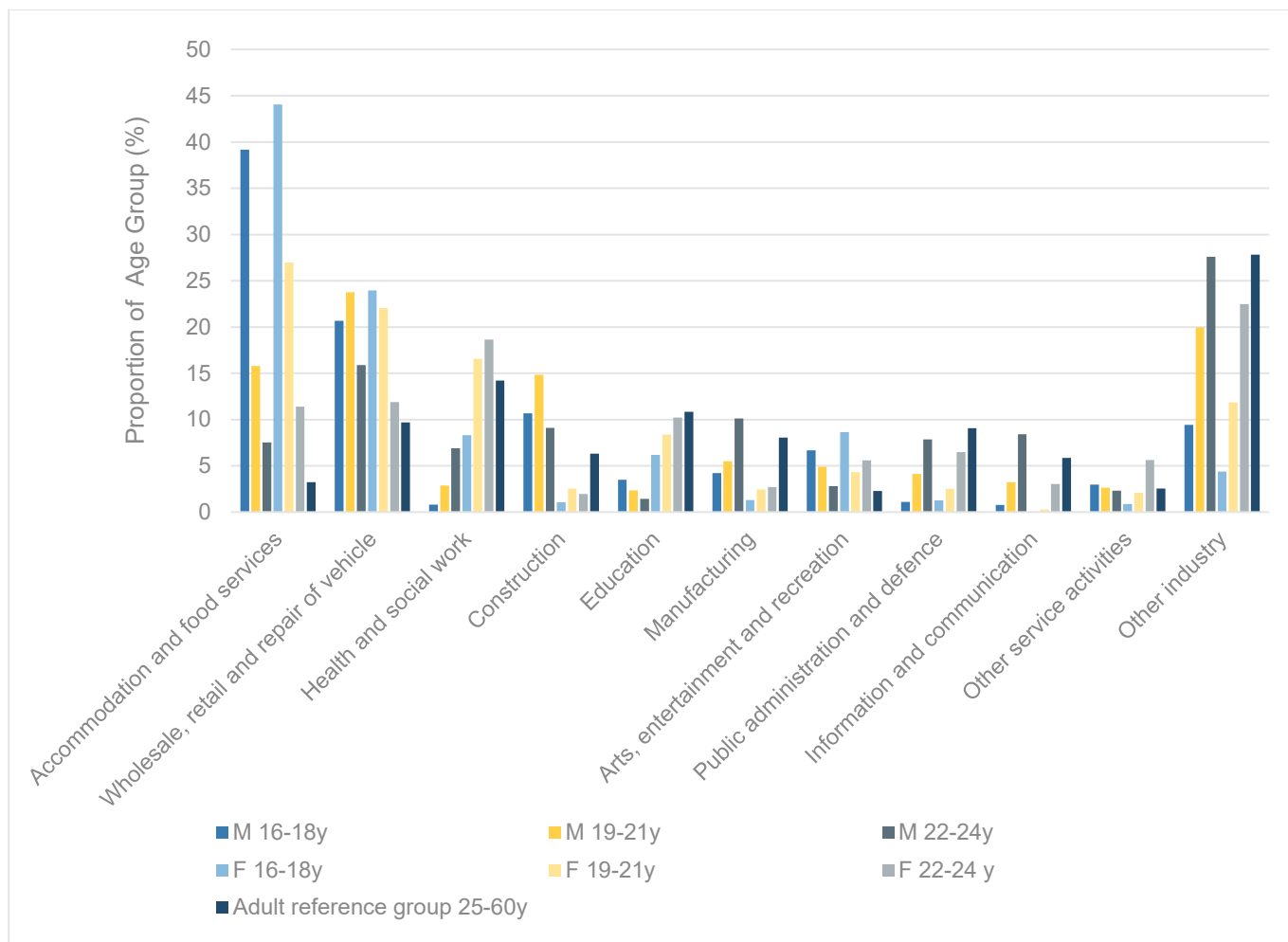
Figure 1: Economic activity in young people by age group and sex (%)



Source: Labour Force Survey, April-June 2023

Industries where young people made up a higher proportion compared to the adult reference group were identified and are shown below in Figure 2. Compared to older adults, a large proportion of young adult men and women work in accommodation/food services, wholesale/retail and arts, entertainment and recreation. The proportion of women working in health and social work and education is higher compared to men in all age groups. Construction work is most common among young men, peaking in 19–21-year-old men.

Figure 2: Industries of main occupation in young people by age group and sex (%)

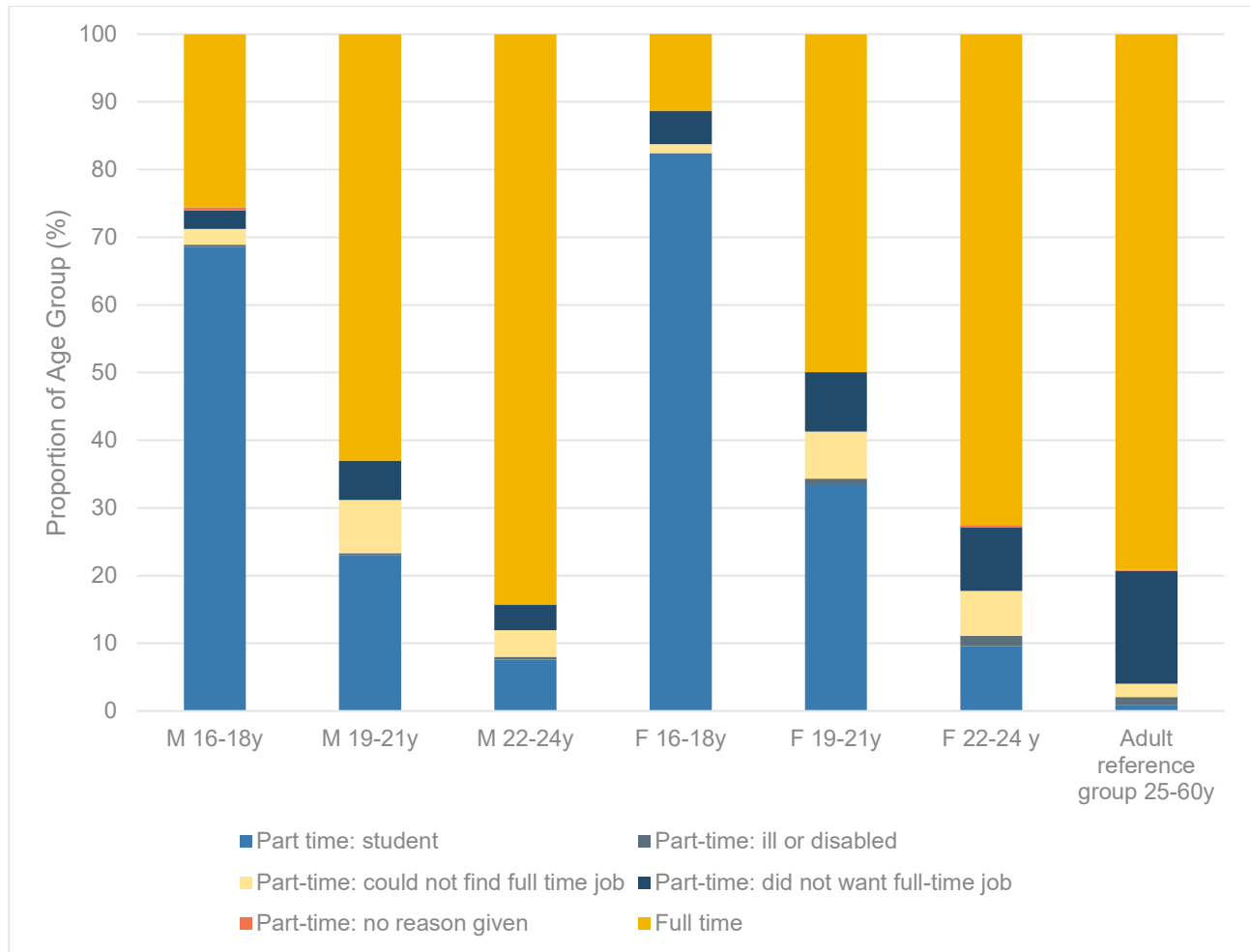


Source: Labour Force Survey, April-June 2023

3.2.4 Working patterns: hours and shift times

The proportion of young people in employment increases as young people finish education. Figure 3 shows the proportion of those working full-time and part-time workers, as well as the reasons for part-time working. For many part-time workers this is due to studying across this age range, with more than 65% of 16–18-year-old men and women reporting part-time work due to being a student. Roughly 7% of 19–21-year-old men and women reported not being able to find a full-time job compared to 2% of the adult reference group. This decreases to about 4% in 22–24-year-old men but stays close to 6.5% for 22–24-year-old women. As age increases, the proportion of those working full-time compared to part-time increases, with about 84% of 22–24-year-old men and 72% of 22–24-year-old women working full-time.

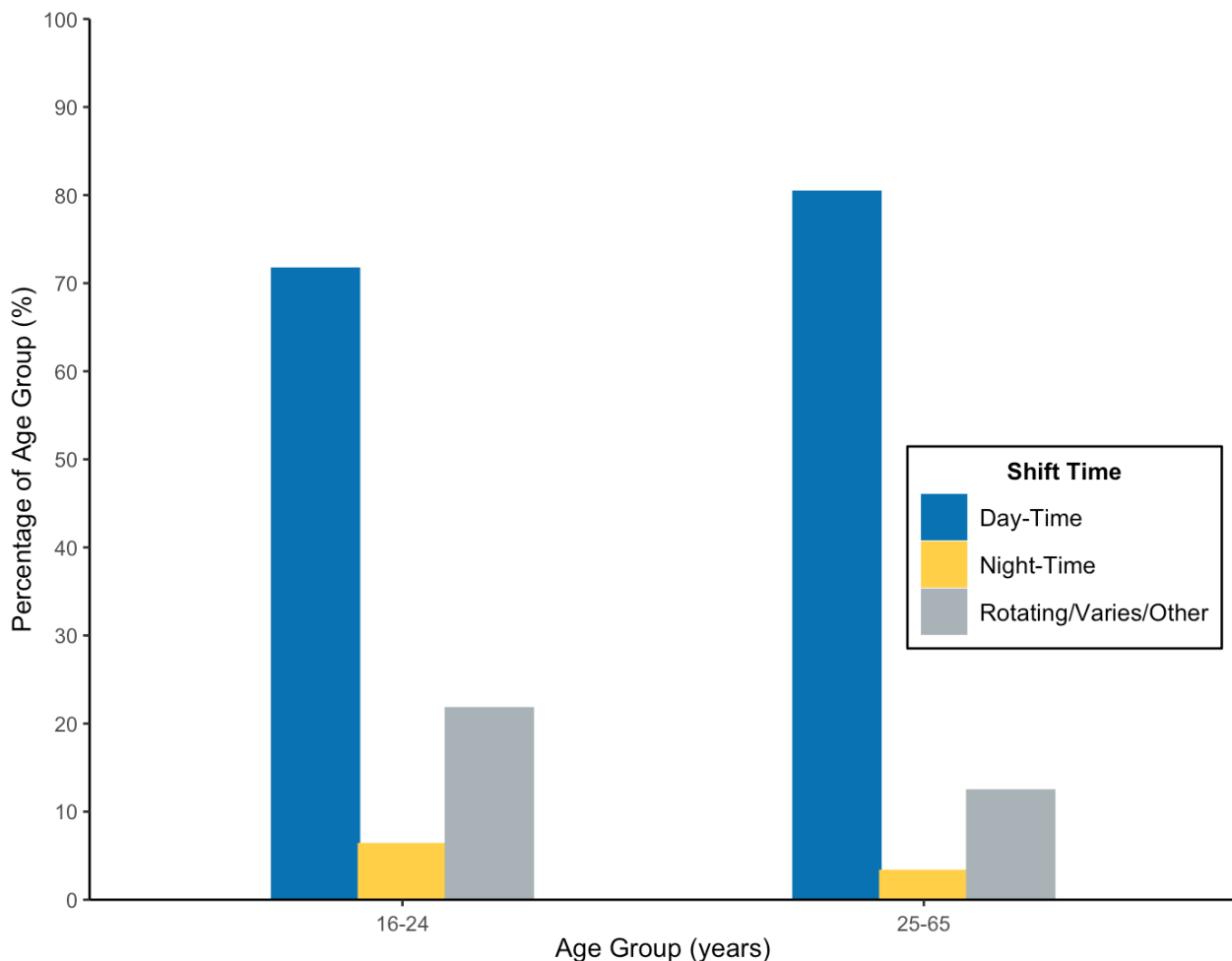
Figure 3: Stacked bar chart whether working full-time or part-time and why (%)



Source: Labour Force Survey

Using the latest data available of shift times (Wave 12 of UKHLS), a larger proportion of young people report working night and rotating shifts compared to the older adult population.

Figure 4: Weighted percentage of shift times per age group (%)



Source: UKHLS Wave 12

3.2.5 Subjective job quality measures, as well as pay, are all important factors of overall job quality.

Measures of low quality work, as developed by Chandola and Zhang, includes low autonomy over work, job-related negative emotions, job security and satisfaction, and low pay [30]. Wave 12 of UKHLS (2020-2021) was used to examine differences in these aspects of job quality between young adults and the older adult working population. Table 1 shows the comparison of six job quality indicators between young adult employees and older adult workers, as well as the proportion of young adults who have at least two low job quality indicators compared to older adult workers.

On average many subjective indicators of job quality did not differ between young adults and older adults (Table 1). However, job autonomy was lower among young adults, while job-related anxiety was higher. Mean hourly pay was significantly lower among young adults compared to older working adults.

Table 1: Job quality indicators

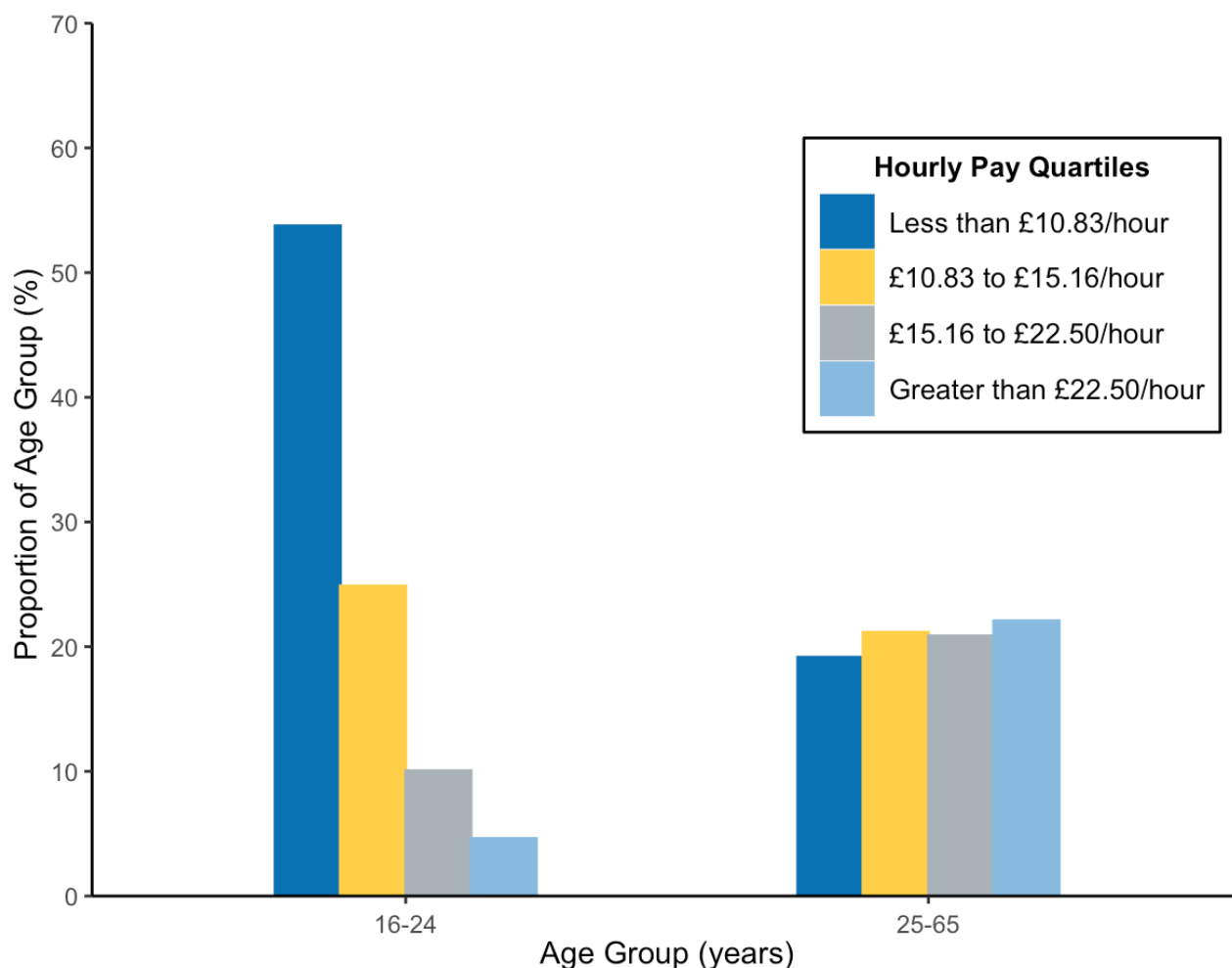
Subjective job quality measures (Mean (SE))	Young adults (16–24)	Older adults (25+)
Job security (1=low security, 4=high security)	3.34 (0.03)	3.33 (0.01)
Job satisfaction (1=completely dissatisfied, 7= completely satisfied)	5.53 (0.05)	5.43 (0.01)
Job autonomy (1= none, 4=a lot)	2.73 (0.03) *	3.09 (0.01)
Job related depression (1= high, 15=low)	12.81 (0.11)	12.91 (0.03)
Job related anxiety (1= high, 15=low)	12.02 (0.10) *	11.76 (0.03)
Mean hourly pay (SE)	£12.74 (0.76) *	£26.03 (1.98)
Proportion with 2+ low job quality aspects (%)	58.2%	36.5%

**Signifies a difference between means t-test p-value of less than 0.05*

Source: UKHLS Wave 12

One key component of job quality which affects young adults is low income. Using hourly wages derived from gross monthly incomes and usual hours worked [30], income quartiles were calculated based on our study sample (age 16-65y). The lowest quartile of hourly pay included those who reported a wage of less than £10.83 per hour. Figure 5 shows that about 54% of young adults make less than £10.83 per hour and less than 5% of young adults make more than £22.50 per hour. The older adult population showed a much more even distribution across income quartiles, ranging from 20 to 22%.

Figure 5: Proportion in each hourly pay quartile, by age group



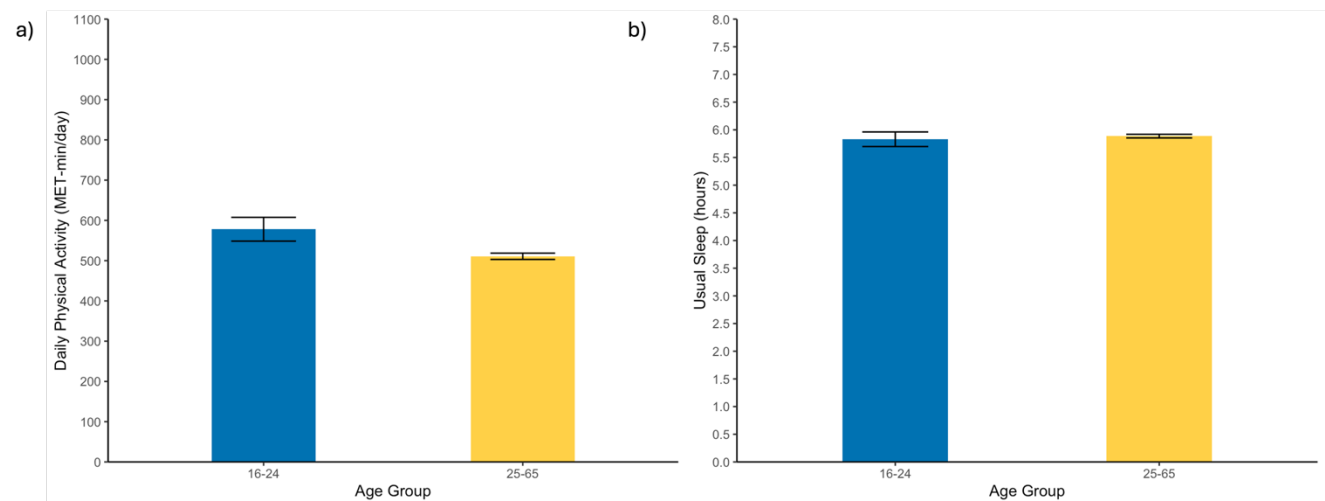
Source: UKHLS Wave 12

3.2.6 Four health behaviours: differences by age group

Here, we focused on health behaviours in working young adults (16–24 years) compared to the older adult working population (25–65). We looked at four behaviours associated with long term health outcomes: physical activity, sleep, and vegetable and fruit consumption [8–10,34].

Figure 6 shows differences in physical activity and sleep behaviours by age group, using the most recent wave of UKHLS data. Physical activity was higher in young adults compared to the reference group ($p\text{-value}=0.027$). Sleep duration did not differ between young adults and the older working population.

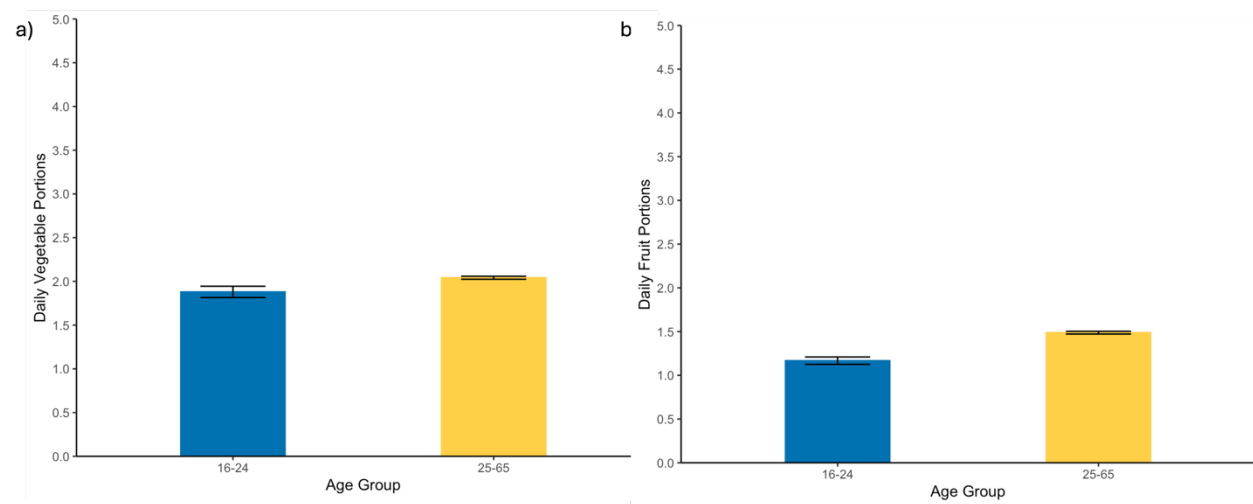
Figure 6: Physical activity and sleep by age group



Source: UKHLS Wave 13

As seen in Figure 7, both daily vegetable and fruit consumption was lower in young adult employees compared to the older adult working population, and these differences were significant (p -value = 0.016, and p -value < 0.001). The majority of both young adults and older adults were not meeting the recommended daily intake of five portions of fruit and vegetables per day [35,36].

Figure 7: Fruit and vegetable intake by age group



Source: UKHLS Wave 13

3.3 Changes in health behaviours across the transition into employment

The UKHLS data collection began in 2009/10, with all residents in each household followed up annually, with the most recent data available (wave 13) collected in 2022/2023. Data on vegetable, fruit, physical activity, and sleep behaviours were first collected in the adult surveys from wave 7.

Physical Activity

Three different variables from the International Physical Activity Questionnaire (IPAQ) were used to assess participants' weekly physical activity habits: moderate, vigorous and walking activity [37]. These responses were combined using the formula provided by the IPAQ guidelines to generate a weekly Metabolic Equivalent Tasks (MET)-minutes/week score. A daily MET-minutes per day estimate was derived from the weekly score, providing an overall measure of physical activity per day.

Sleep

Participants were asked 'How many hours of actual sleep did you usually get per night during the last month?' They were told to indicate the most accurate reply for the majority of the time and that this might be different from the total number of hours spent in bed.

Diet

Vegetable and fruit consumption was measured in two separate questions for each participant assessing usual portion and weekly frequency of consumption. A daily vegetable portion estimate was derived by combining responses to the portion and frequency questions and dividing by seven. Daily fruit portions were derived in the same way.

Individual characteristics

Participants' sex (male or female), ethnicity (white, Asian, black, multiple, other), education (no degree, degree or higher), parental education (no degree, degree or higher) was recorded at their first wave of starting work.

Job Characteristics

Participants' first job characteristics were self-reported at their first wave of starting work: National Statistics Socio-economic classification (NS-SEC) jobs classification ('High NS-SEC' or 'Low NS-SEC'); Shift Times ('Daytime shifts', 'Nighttime shifts', 'Rotating/varying shifts'); Work Hours ('Part-Time' or 'Full-Time'); Commute Behaviours ('Inactive', 'Active', 'No Commute'); Work Location ('Work from Home', 'Office Work' or 'Travelling/Varying Workplaces'); Shift Patterns ('Daytime shifts', 'Night-time shifts', 'Rotating/Varying').

Inclusion Criteria

Included in the longitudinal analyses were UKHLS participants who transitioned into work between the ages of 16 and 30 and responded at least twice to the health behaviour questions in waves 7–13: once before and once after starting work.

3.3.1 Interrupted time series regression model

$$Y_{ti} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T_{ti} + \beta_2 X_{ti} + \beta_3 Z_{ti} + u_{0i} + u_{1i} + \epsilon_{ti}$$

We used multilevel linear models, including an Interrupted Time Series (ITS) design, to analyse how starting work affects various health behaviours over time in years (T_{ti}). The models featured random intercepts (u_{0i}) to account for individual differences and assessed both immediate (X_{ti}) and sustained effects (Z_{ti}) of starting work, allowing for changes in intercept and slope at the point of employment. Interaction terms explored differences between groups, adjusting for factors like sex, ethnicity, and education. A more comprehensive description of analysis methods and further details of this research are available in a scientific manuscript (<https://doi.org/10.1101/2024.07.17.24310567>).

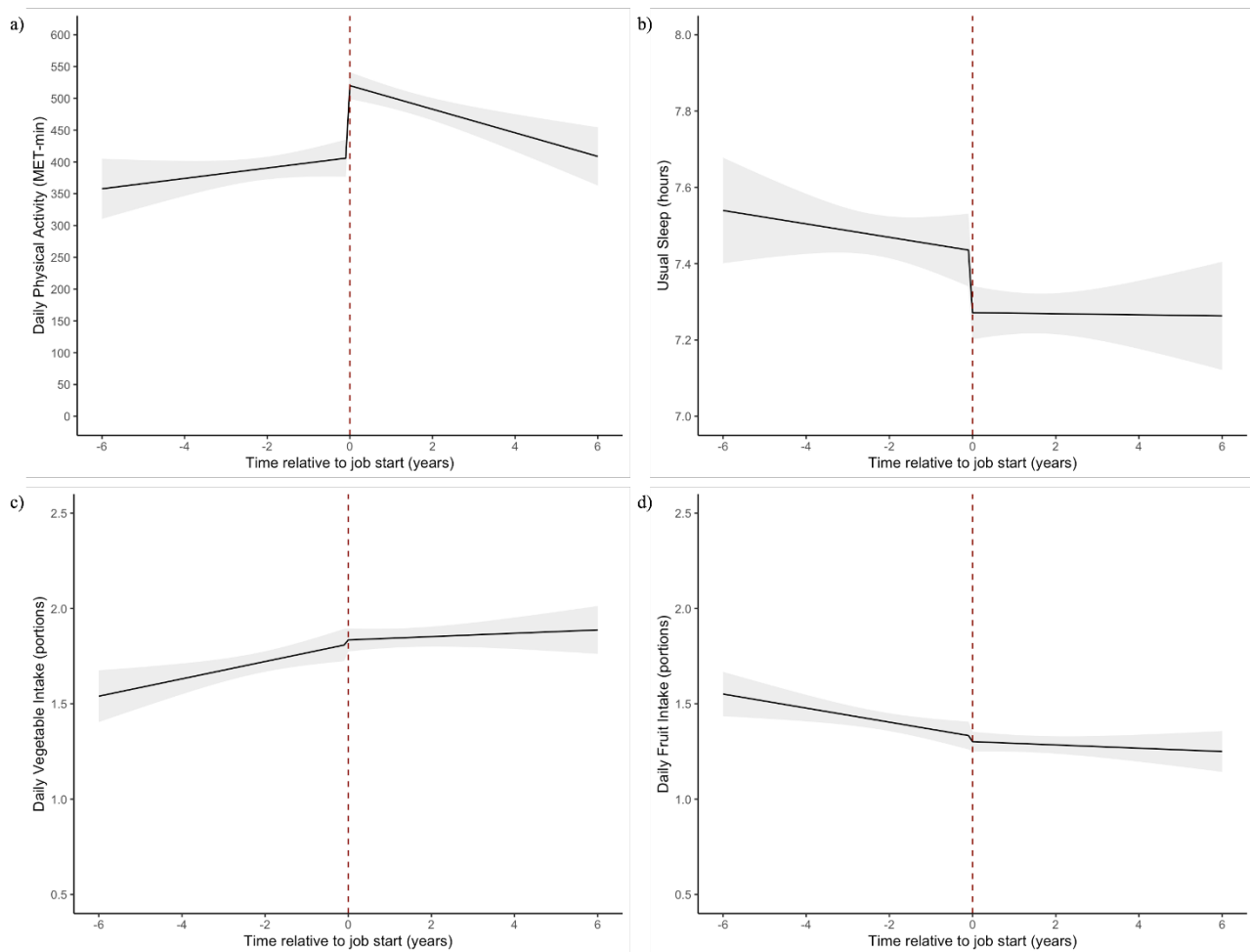
3.3.2 Examining the effect of starting work on health behaviours in young adults

Using waves 7–13 of UKHLS data, we examined how health behaviours (physical activity, sleep, and diet) in young adults changed before and after starting work. Participants were included if they were between 16 and 30 years old, started work within the study period, and had at least one observation before and one observation after starting work. Multilevel models with interrupted time series components were fitted to assess both immediate and long-term effects of starting work.

Daily physical activity increased by 113.3 [95% CI: 80.49 to 146.11] MET-minutes/day immediately after starting work, and then decreased each year by 26.7 [-40.75 to -12.66] MET-minutes/day/year (Figure 8a). This is equivalent to roughly an additional 30 minutes of daily moderate activity (e.g., cycling at a regular pace) immediately after starting work, and then a decrease of just under seven minutes of daily moderate activity each year after starting work.

Usual sleep per night decreased by 9.74 [95% CI: -17.32 to -2.17] minutes/night immediately after starting work and then remained stable each year after starting work (Figure 8b). Starting work and time since starting work had no significant effect on daily vegetable or fruit consumption (Figure 8c and 8d).

Figure 8: Changes in health behaviours through starting work transition

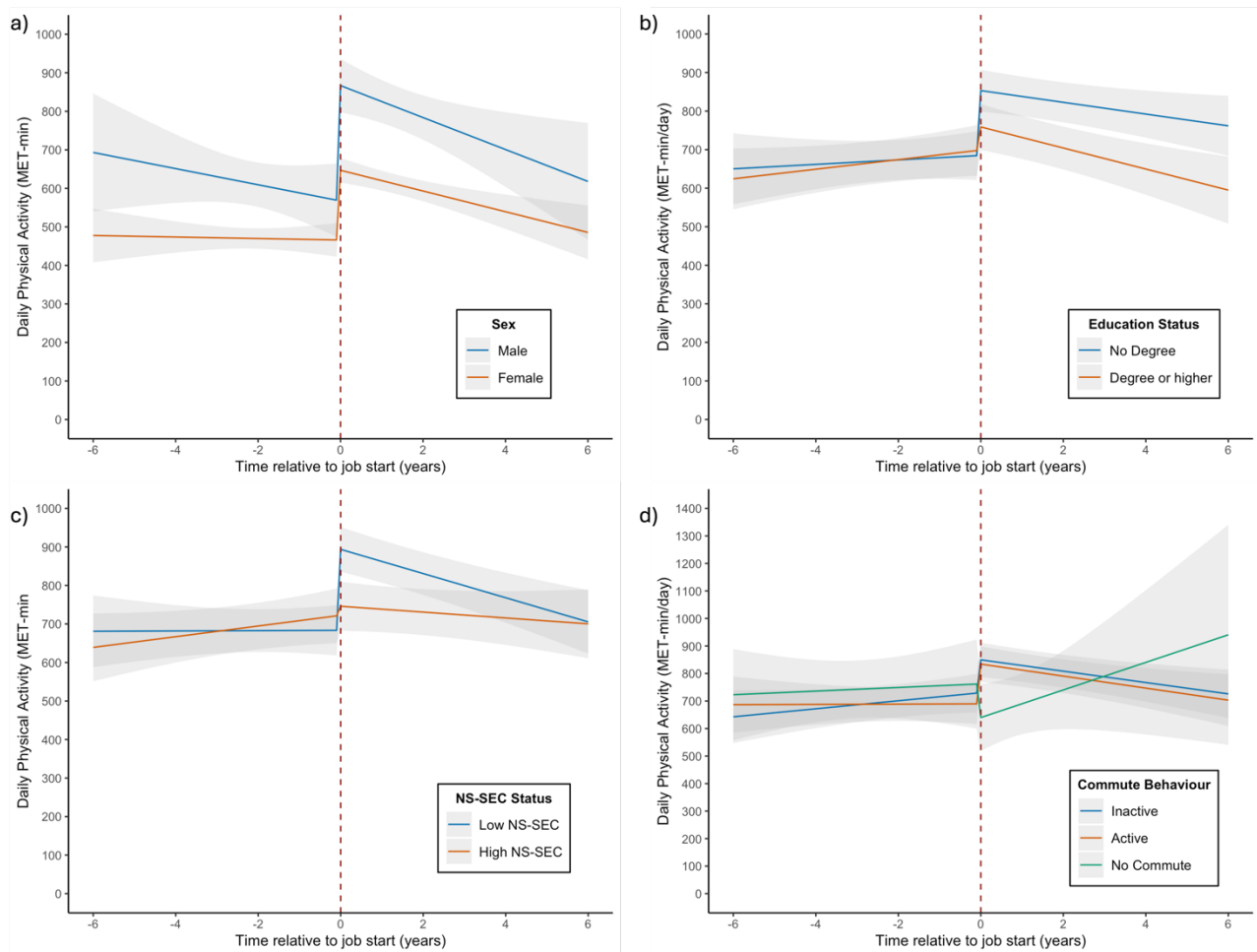


Source: UKHLS

3.3.3 Changes in physical activity based on individual and job characteristics

After starting work, men saw a bigger increase in their physical activity levels (180.97 MET-minutes/day) compared to women (62.58 MET-minutes/day) (Figure 9a). People without a university degree experienced a larger increase in physical activity (164.02 MET-minutes/day) than those with a degree (59.47 MET-minutes/day) after starting work (Figure 9b). Starting a job in a lower NS-SEC led to a significant increase in physical activity (201.36 MET-minutes/day), compared to starting in a higher NS-SEC job (11.25 MET-minutes/day) (Figure 9c). People who did not have a commute (i.e. worked from home) initially reduced physical activity levels (-157.81 MET-minutes/day), whereas those who had any commute (active or inactive) increased physical activity initially (125.71 MET-minutes/day) (Figure 9d).

Figure 9: Physical activity trajectories by individual and job characteristics



Source: UKHLS Wave 13

3.3.4 Changes in usual sleep based on individual and job characteristics

There were no differences in usual hours of sleep by job characteristics or individual characteristics, except for education status. People without a university degree showed a decrease in sleep by -2.63 [95% CI: -7.36 to 2.10] minutes/night per year, whereas those who had at least a university degree showed an increase in sleep by 3.58 [95% CI: -0.09 to 7.06] minutes/night per year.

3.3.5 Changes in diet based on individual and job characteristics

Starting work or time spent in work had no effects on daily vegetable portions, and there were no differences by individual or job characteristics.

For daily fruit portions, only education status had a significant effect, such that people without a university degree showed an immediate decrease in fruit consumption by -0.12 portions per day [95%CI: -0.23 to 0.00], and those with a university degree showed an increase in daily fruit portions after starting work by 0.06 portions per day [95% CI: -0.06 to 0.18].

Key takeaways

Young adults show overall poorer job quality than older adults, with lower scores on job autonomy, job-related anxiety and pay. 58% of working young adults reported poor job quality on at least two of six job quality indicators.

Young adults reported lower fruit and vegetable intake than older adults, but higher physical activity and no difference in sleep duration.

Our longitudinal findings suggest that as young adults started work, they showed a decrease in sleep duration (of 10 minutes on average), an overall increase in physical activity (of 30 minutes on average), and little effect on fruit and vegetable intake.

Increases in physical activity after starting employment were highest among men, among those without a university degree, and among those in lower socioeconomic occupation groups.

4. How does the workplace environment influence young adults' healthy lifestyles, and how could this be improved?

4.1 Introduction

As introduced in Chapter 1, our health is strongly influenced by the people and environments around us [11], including our work environment. Features of the workplace environment which may influence health behaviours include structural aspects (e.g., working hours, commuting needs), the physical environment (e.g., food availability), and the social environment (e.g., influence of colleagues) [12,13]. In this chapter we report the findings from focus groups with young adults and employers, presenting perspectives of these groups primarily in relation to research questions two and three:

- What could employers and policy makers do to support improved lifestyle behaviours and reduce risks of overweight and obesity among young adults transitioning into the workplace?
- What components of a workplace intervention are likely to be most feasible and cost-effective in supporting healthy lifestyle behaviours and reducing weight-related inequalities among young adults transitioning into the workforce?

Four industry sectors were chosen, to represent a diverse range of workplace experiences, with each having a high proportion or high numbers of young adult employees (see Chapter 3, Figure 2, and Appendix 1). These industries were food services, construction, early years education, and social care.

Eight focus groups were conducted, four with employers (one per sector) and four with young adult employees (one per industry sector). In total, 23 young adults and 28 employers took part in the research (an overall sample of 50 participants) (see Appendix 4 for detailed breakdown of participants). Research participants were recruited through Roots, a market research agency, following a screening questionnaire to ensure they met the eligibility criteria for the research (see Appendix 2). The focus groups were conducted online with the aid of a digital whiteboard to facilitate interaction. Focus groups with young people lasted one and a half hours each, those with employers lasted one hour.

The aim across each focus group was to explore perceptions of the impact of the workplace environment on young adults' lifestyle behaviours and how these could be addressed, from both the employee and employer perspectives (addressing Research Questions two and three, see Introduction). The discussions focused on participants' perceptions of enablers and barriers to healthy lifestyles in the workplace, as well as potential ways for employers and policymakers to promote healthier lifestyle behaviours. The research topics discussed included:

- Young people's and employers' understandings of a 'healthy lifestyle' (Section 4.2).

- The impact of work on employees' health and wellbeing, particularly in terms of nutrition, physical activity and sleep (Section 4.3).
- The role of the employer in supporting employees' health (Section 4.4).
- Access to current support and opportunities to lead a healthy lifestyle at work (Section 4.5).
- Potential additional ideas for a workplace initiative to support healthy lifestyle behaviours (Section 4.6).

The focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed, with digital whiteboards saved for analysis. Framework Analysis (Goldsmith, 2021; Ritchie and Spencer, 1994) was adopted to compare findings and identify common themes across the different industries represented, with a focus on perceived challenges, solutions, and pathways to better lifestyle behaviours.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows: Section 4.2 focuses on understandings of a 'healthy lifestyle.' Section 4.3 focuses on the impact of work on health and wellbeing, and challenges to maintaining a healthy lifestyle, including around sleep, nutrition, and physical exercise. Section 4.4 focuses on the role employers should play in supporting employees' health and wellbeing, including around sleep, nutrition, and physical exercise. Section 4.5 focuses on the support young employees can access in their workplaces to support a healthy lifestyle. Section 4.6 focuses on additional support that could benefit young people in the workplace to lead a healthy lifestyle, as well as ideas for specific initiatives that could be implemented. Each section outlines overarching messages across young people and employers, as well as findings specific to young people and to employers.

4.2 Defining a 'healthy lifestyle'

Key takeaways

- Young people across various sectors highlighted the connection between physical and mental health, stressing the need to balance both. They pointed out that physical activity boosts mental wellbeing, while good sleep (though sometimes difficult due to work demands) and a balanced diet, are essential for overall health. Achieving work-life balance and setting boundaries to allow time for all important life aspects was a common theme.
- Employers also valued work-life balance, emphasising sufficient rest and recovery for employees. They focused on the mental health of young employees, noting their relative lack of work experience and resilience to stress. Nutritious meals and healthy snacks were also deemed important among employers.
- Both groups recognised the need for a balanced life that includes rest, good nutrition and exercise, to foster healthy habits. Young people were more detailed about the importance of sleep, nutrition and exercise. While employers viewed 'work-life balance' more broadly, stressing the separation of work and personal time.

- Young people tended to see physical and mental health as interconnected aspects of a healthy lifestyle. While employers placed more emphasis on mental health as crucial for young employees, seeing it as both a facilitator and a barrier to a healthy lifestyle. Both young people and employers acknowledged that long hours, low pay and the nature of work across the four sectors hindered efforts to maintain healthy lifestyles.

4.2.1 Young people

Among young people working in construction (especially those heavily involved in manual labour and those on sites), there was a strong focus on how regular physical activity, having a balanced diet and good sleep, were essential to boosting energy levels, mental resilience and workplace safety. They highlighted, in particular, the importance of regular exercise to help with good sleep, and to feel motivated to work and eat healthily. Nutrition was also highlighted as key, with some mentioning they did ‘meal prep’ for the week during their free time, to avoid eating fast food while at work, which was usually the only food available near the sites where they worked. There was also a financial element to this, with one young person sharing that if they didn’t want to spend a lot (e.g., over £5) to buy food while at work, the only option was unhealthy food (e.g., McDonald’s, KFC, Greggs).

- *“You have to keep your physical health up as that builds mental resilience (...) when I eat healthily I’ve got more energy, if I want bad food, I know that kills my energy.”* (young person, Construction)
- *“If I don’t have the physical side sorted then the mental side gets a hit. What I eat, how I spend my day, how I take time out, having a set routine. It’s about getting your whole life sorted out not just one aspect. When I’m on sites, takeaway is full of rubbish. I do meal prep on Sunday for the rest of the week.”* (young person, Construction)

For early years participants, a greater emphasis was placed on establishing boundaries, being self-aware around their wellbeing needs, and prioritising one’s needs around both physical and mental health, as the foundations for healthy living.

- *“One big thing is setting boundaries, which is something that I started doing last year, setting boundaries and saying no when it fits me, which released that stress anxiety that I was getting for so many reasons. Putting yourself first is not a bad thing.”* (young person, Early years)
- *“If you’re not feeling good physically, then this will start to affect your mental and emotional wellbeing (...) so it’s about making sure you’re exercising and also making sure you are listening to yourself and know what works for you.”* (young person, Early years)

Those working in food services were more likely to stress the importance and challenges of maintaining healthy sleep habits, alongside a fulfilling social life (often based around alcohol) and working in a supportive environment. Young people working in the sector stressed the importance of genuine and authentic socialisation, particularly as they felt their interactions during the working day were quite performative, which was part of the customer facing nature of the roles. They also emphasised the importance of good rest, as

their jobs were very physical and would often lead to fatigue if adequate rest was not prioritised. Looking forward to going to work, therefore enjoying the job and workplace environment, was also shared as a key element supporting a healthy lifestyle, boosting mental health.

- *“Importance of socialisation with others. It seems really straightforward, but it is so easy to fall into talking with customers or colleagues all the time. It’s important that it’s not performative, that you can still be yourself.”* (young person, Food services)
- *“Good sleep, good water and nutritious food (...) at work we have one meal a day (...) but you can’t take a 5 minute break again.”* (young person, Food services)

Participants in social care prioritised good mental health, often linked to the emotionally demanding nature of their job. Making time for oneself and important aspects of life (e.g., family) was seen as key to maintaining a work-life balance. Conscious eating habits and understanding the impact of food on both physical and mental health were also viewed as significant. As in other sectors, there was a shared sense that health should be viewed holistically, as an interconnection of both mental and physical health, and that a healthy lifestyle meant tending to both equally. Young people working in the sector highlighted financial wellbeing as a key component of a healthy lifestyle. Noting the stress of managing finances and the impact of low wages on their wellbeing and ability to sustain wider healthy habits, including a good diet and physical exercise.

- *“Before I would have said physical health and what I put in my body, but now it’s also a lot about a good mental health. More holistic to how I used to view it. It was the shift from working in hospitality and customer service roles, it was mentally and physically draining, and I didn’t have lot of time for myself. Now I am in a patient facing role where I need to protect my mental health because of what I bring home with me – both elements are really important to keep me afloat.”* (young person, Social care)
- *“I need to focus on my financial health for my mental health and physical health to be taken care of.”* (young person, Social care)
- *“Healthy lifestyles, there’s so many different components that trying to balance them out can be mentally exhausting. Healthy food, we’re in a cost of living crisis, really difficult situation where it’s the working class people suffering. We can’t access even NHS, but then can’t have healthy food which would help us not access NHS. By the time you try do it all you’re so exhausted.”* (young person, Social care)

4.2.2 Employers

Among employers in the construction sector, safety was a paramount concern and a key driver for prioritising a healthy lifestyle, with employers noting that adequate rest is essential to prevent accidents. They stressed the importance of having adequate rest time between shifts. However, as also highlighted by young people, employers noted this could be compromised by employees taking on excessively long shifts, or working two jobs, in order to support their financial wellbeing. One employer also noted that younger workers may be more likely to push their physical and mental boundaries to take on more work, compared to older ones.

- *“It’s about having proper downtime and relaxation (....) where you are not going to be worried about work stuff. That’s really important.”* (employer, Construction)
- *“Then you end up taking on board as much as you can take and sometimes the line gets pushed and it gets to the stage you’re spending 12–14h a day at work. If you don’t have your own boundaries, the employer won’t have any either.”* (employer, Construction)

Employers in the early years sector emphasised the importance of work-life balance and mental health, and focused on the holistic nature of supporting a healthy lifestyle (particularly in view of the strenuous nature of childcare work). Elements supporting this included nutritious food and snacks, access to sanitary items and mental health resources at work, and working in a safe, supportive and nurturing work environment.

- *“It’s about having good work life balance and knowing when to switch off...when staff go home it’s their time to be who they are and not the nursery manager.”* (employer, Early years)
- *“It’s about healthy eating, I used to every week stock up the staff room, and it is easier to buy unhealthy things for the girls as it is much cheaper, but lately I think everyone is getting into a health kick and they have made it known during staff meeting that they would prefer healthier options.”* (employer, Early years)

In the food services sector, employers acknowledged the challenges of unsociable hours, and their wider impact on physical and mental health. They stressed the importance of flexibility and tailored job design (i.e. duties and responsibilities of the role tailored to individual needs) to support employees to have a healthy lifestyle, with attention paid to how rotas and shifts are structured and assigned. Some employers also flagged concerns around alcohol and drug consumption in the sector and the impact it had on healthy lifestyle behaviours but acknowledged that it was often an issue that didn’t get spoken about.

- *“Where you treat an individual as an individual, and you can adjust job design to what people need.”* (employer, Food services)
- *“When you go home, you leave work behind, you enjoy your personal time (...) I never had issues with alcohol consumption. I worked in a place where the head chef was taking drugs, everyone knew it, but because he never missed a thing and was working perfectly, he had this silent approval.”* (employer, Food services)

In social care, employers discussed the importance of good quality workplace settings, having balanced hours of work (neither too lengthy nor too short) and having good support from managers and co-workers – as being key to a healthy lifestyle among employees. They also mentioned the importance of flexibility at work, with one employer explaining that their employees sometimes work a bit later if they have an appointment that week, so they can take the time off. Being able to have an open dialogue with managers about the need for flexibility was an important aspect for young employees to support a healthy lifestyle. This was contrasted by another employer who mentioned that sometimes this can turn into people working overtime frequently, as a result of trying to increase their income,

which was contrary to having a healthy lifestyle, and that employers have a responsibility to minimise this risk.

- *“We are working quite heavy, strenuous jobs and it making sure that we’ve got the policies in place that prevent people from having a mental health episode...we can make it a nice place to work.”* (employer, Social care)
- *“Work-life balance, you know not sticking to your hours but being balanced, starting work at a sensible time...we need to be conscious that you can’t expect people to consistently work overtime...you shouldn’t have people working overtime. Really that’s an indication of poor planning.”* (employer, Social care)

4.3 Impact of work on health

Key takeaways

- Mental health emerged as a major concern among young people across all sectors, with many experiencing stress, anxiety, and burnout from job responsibilities and work environments.
- Physical health issues, such as musculoskeletal problems and the impacts of poor working conditions (e.g., dust exposure in construction, prolonged sitting in social care, long hours standing in food services, heavy lifting in early years) were also prevalent.
- The quality of relationships with bosses and colleagues and the overall work atmosphere significantly influenced both mental and physical health, affecting sleep and motivation when negative.
- While young people stressed the importance of work-life balance, achieving it was often hindered by long, unsociable hours. Many young people worked multiple jobs to supplement low pay, further complicating their work-life balance.
- Employers across sectors emphasised the need for proper rest and downtime but also noted that long hours and inadequate rest periods, often driven by financial necessity, led to physical and mental strain. They recognised that low wages significantly impacted young employees' health behaviours and lifestyle choices. With the high cost of healthy food, gym memberships, and wellness activities being a recurring issue amid a cost of living crisis.
- Employers were also aware of widespread mental health issues, but often linked them to a perceived lower resilience to work stress among young people, potentially exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic's impact on mental health and social skills.

4.3.1 Young people

Among young people working in construction, there was a strong focus on the use (or lack) of personal protective equipment (PPE). Young workers felt pressured by older colleagues to forgo safety measures, leading to health risks from dust and manual handling. Young people also noted that while all companies did a risk assessment and

many provided extensive training and PPE, the adherence to safety practices varied widely, especially among subcontractors and smaller firms. Those working on sites emphasised that the physical nature of their job helped them feel more stimulated and helped them keep a good routine. They contrasted it with the times they worked in the office and felt more sluggish, which impacted their motivation to exercise after work and sleep patterns as well.

- *"I have worked in places where I was knocking down walls, it impacts me. You breathe in so much dust and rubbish, then don't want to go to the gym. And if it was a really heavy day, or you don't do things properly, it can put out your back or shoulder."* (young person, Construction)
- *"Younger people can be influenced by older ones (...) older ones can mock people a bit and bully people into not doing things (...) If you wear all your PPE you're good. I care about my health, I don't care what it looks like, I won't risk my health."* (young person, Construction)
- *"If you have a boss stressing you out it impacts you, your mental health and sleep. No matter what my boss does, I'll stick to my healthy habits. But if the boss is stressful and gives me a hard time, it impacts my mental health and affects what I do outside of work."* (young person, Construction)

In the early years sector, young people highlighted the emotional toll of working with children, which was both a source of satisfaction and stress, due to the responsibility and emotional investment. However, being in a supportive work environment, peer support from colleagues, and having supportive managers were also reported as positive factors mitigating some of the negative impact of work on health. Conversely, when the work environment was felt to be unsupportive, participants were more likely to report a negative impact of work on their health, and in particular their mental health. Young people also reported not getting enough breaks or long enough time, having their breaks interrupted to attend to children, or losing time off their breaks if they had to go and buy a meal, which meant they did not have time to properly rest. These issues led some to be too exhausted to prepare meals or eat healthy food when they got home (something which was often compounded by long commuting times) and often resorted to eating a quick 'unhealthy' snack.

- *"(In my old job) I got to the point I was going to break myself if I didn't distance myself from the stress (...) So now, with supply, it's obviously a lot less hours, which had an impact money wise, but I was kind of weighing it up that I have a lot more time to focus on helping myself out and doing things that bring me joy."* (young person, Early years)
- *"In the nursery we only get one hour lunch break. If I haven't brought it with me, I need to spend time to go get it, and it takes time off the break. Usually, it's a meal deal or Greggs, not the healthiest of foods. Even during the break there are children to take care of. And the staff room is next to playground, you hear children screaming, you don't get peace of mind."* (young person, Early years)
- *"I'd come home from work, I was looking for any snacks or something that I could just ingest and then get on with my day. I could see the physical manifestations of it on my face...Nutrition is so important, and if it's not healthy that can have an impact on your*

mental health, and then of course your physical health. If there was the ability to make a healthy snack or just have something at your disposal that has nutritional benefits then that would be good.” (young person, Early years)

Among those working in food services the stress of working in fast-paced environments like bars and restaurants was a recurring theme. Young people reported the mental toll of constant interaction at work and having to ‘put on a happy face.’ As well as the physical toll of limited access to healthy food and drinks, inadequate spaces to take breaks (i.e., lack of staff rooms) and a reluctance to take breaks so as not to miss out on customer tips. One participant mentioned that they only had a single meal during their full-day shift, and within a single break, which contrasted with nutrition guidelines recommending multiple meals balancing different nutrients (fruits, vegetables, nuts, oils). Long and unsociable shifts were reported to interfere with sleep patterns, as well as work stress and anxiety creating sleep disturbances (e.g., stress dreams). Some concerns were raised around social activities often being centred around a drinking culture. Many young people reported being too exhausted to dedicate time to exercise and good nutrition in their personal time.

- *“(The impact of) work can be really negative – if I have a day off I just feel like I don’t want to do anything as you’ve just been on your feet this whole time. I don’t even want to think of basic necessities like getting up and doing things.” (young person, Food services)*
- *“If you’re running your body into the ground frequently, you don’t get a lot of time for recovery. Days off in hospitality are never two consecutive days off.” (young person, Food services)*
- *“There’s a big drinking culture, it’s the easiest way to socialise after work with your colleagues and often the only places open are pubs. I had to leave a job because the only way to socialise was drinking afterwards, I was coming home at 5am and 6am and would have a ‘night cap’ like a beer.” (young person, Food services)*

Financial pressures significantly impacted mental health among young people working in social care. In particular, the need to work long hours to meet financial obligations, or working night shifts, could exacerbate both physical and mental health issues, especially sleep patterns and fatigue levels. Frequent travel, often requiring young people to move between different cities to meet clients, was also a key challenge which impacted workers’ health. While some found their work environment supportive and flexible, which benefitted their health, others found specific job aspects detrimental to their health, in particular the physically demanding nature of the work. They also reported often experiencing emotional exhaustion from their responsibilities and the emotional toll of their roles. A further challenge raised by young people was the impact of work on nutrition, tied to issues like stress-eating, due to the impact of work on mental health, not having enough time during lunch breaks, sometimes as a result of client meetings overrunning, or eating meals at unusual times due to the length of shifts.

- *“I think one thing is that one of the places I work at, you have to then switch to the night shift like within a week constantly. So that sort of would mess up your sleep schedule, and also your eating pattern, which was quite difficult to do. Like I was having difficulty sleeping when I got home because maybe it’s loud during the*

daytime, everyone's out, and then having to switch it back to daytime, so it just didn't give enough time for your body to get used to it." (young person, Social care).

- *"I live in Brighton and I have a client in Winchester, which is about a 3 hour train ride. Then I do a 12 hours shift, yes, three days or more in a week. So, I was away from home having to get an Airbnb just to go there and it was mentally draining. Just having us to travel back and forth to be there for 12 hours. But I did it just because of the finances."* (young person, Social care)
- *"Like, there's a lot more emphasis on pleasure that comes from unhealthy foods. As opposed to, you know, having a healthier buffet to pick at. (...) I would say if I've had maybe like a challenging day where I've dealt with a lot of heavy topics, maybe someone in crisis and I don't have an adequate debrief or a come down from that. That comes home with me and I want to order a takeaway and it's that knock-on effect. Then let's say I've had a patient that had a lot of things to do in a one-hour session, and it runs into my lunch, and I've now not even got time to go downstairs and microwave what I've got. It's going to the shop. It's going to Greggs across the road and it's that really slippery slope that you can get yourself into."* (young person, Social care).

4.3.2 Employers

Employers in construction emphasised risks around long shifts or over-working to increase income, as mentioned above. One employer emphasised that the widespread lack of sick pay in the sector is a challenge and has a significant impact on young workers' health – as they are less likely to take time off when sick to not lose out on pay. There was consensus that the main impact of work on health was tied to issues of financial wellbeing and wanting to either increase or not lose out on pay.

- *"Some will try and buy every work hour under the sun, you need to watch a bit to make sure they are taking breaks (...) there is a cost of living thing about this."* (employer, Construction)
- *"There's companies which still don't pay for sick days. I've been working in a company for 10 years and I never took a sick day because I knew what it entails is that I will not be paid. So yeah, I often cancel my own appointments because they didn't fit with work and I don't want to book half day off, which in theory I really should be able to do."* (employer, Construction)

Among employers in the early years sector, it was commonly felt that there is a significant gap between young employees' expectations and the reality of the job, leading to mental health struggles. Some felt that this was a direct consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic and its effect on young people's resilience. The mismatch between expectations and the reality of work, and the impact on employee health, meant that many employers were struggling with retention of younger workers. Employers also shared that given the physically and emotionally intensive nature of the job, employees are often too exhausted to look after their diet and physical health outside of work. As well as facing financial challenges, due to low salaries, which inhibited access to healthier lifestyle choices. Employers recognised that due to the cost of living, accessing healthy meal options and gyms was often not within their employees' possibilities. A further significant concern

(similarly to the construction sector) was that young employees took on too many shifts, or sometimes worked two jobs to make ends meet, with detrimental impact on their physical and mental health.

- *“Those young staff who have moved out for the first time there was a culture shock in budgeting to survive (...) COVID has impacted everyone massively, it has made everyone think of their health and wellbeing a bit more, but it did impact the younger staff more because they missed out of a big chunk of their lives (...) they never socialised and never learnt life skills, and they are being thrown into a heavy workload where there is a lot of responsibility.” (employer, Early years)*
- *“Things are very expensive, junk food is cheaper and there is not time if you’re tired at the end of the day to make a healthy meal. Gyms are expensive (...) so they have somewhere to go we offer as part of our wellbeing assistance yoga classes, discounted gym membership and some form of yoga/meditation...it’s not pushed but it is money off, and this is a big part of how you live healthily.” (employer, Early years)*
- *“Some take two jobs which means they have to opt into the working time directive which we do advise against (...) it’s not ideal to work two jobs because it is a lot and we don’t let any of our girls work over 48 hours with us because it is just too much, and some work two jobs because that’s the way to make ends meet. We do have that conversation.” (employer, Early years)*

Some employers working in food services shared that hiring practices in the sector tend to favour physical appearance, which can exacerbate mental health issues, particularly those tied to body image which they feel young people are more susceptible to (resulting from the influence of social media). Another issue was the impact of work anxiety, with employers feeling that younger employees were more prone to struggle with mental health as a result.

- *“Social media is a challenge, it can be a really dangerous space for people especially if they are young and impressionable (...) I think in hospitality it can be a bigger issue than in other sectors.” (employer, Food services)*
- *“[After the pandemic] They are coming from sheltered environments, usually their home, but now they need to come in and talk to you and others – even if there’s nothing stressful about the work, they might get very anxious. There was someone (...) when she came into work it wasn’t her safe space. She didn’t want to address it, she stopped working.” (employer, Food services)*

Employers representing the social care sector described jobs as often high-pressured with long hours and constant demands, often leading to employees eating quick and unhealthy meals or struggling to disengage and ‘switch off’ after the work-day is over. They recognised that there was a lot of pressure to ‘get the work done’ and that working long hours was due to choice in some cases, to get paid more but often it was also because many employees felt they had to go above and beyond in their caring role to attend to clients’ needs.

- *“People are working through their lunch breaks, and being busy and not preparing food for work...they are just grabbing unhealthy food because they don’t feel that they*

have the time to lead healthy lifestyle because they are working all these hours which we obviously try to discourage.” (employer, Social care)

- *“We try to make sure that people are taking their lunch breaks, but it is not always going to stop everybody as there is a pressure to get work done.” (employer, Social care)*
- *“Because of the nature of the jobs and the services, you're dealing with crisis all the time, crisis after crisis after crisis. So, I think the workers put their own health on the back burner.” (employer, Social care)*

4.4 The role of the employer in supporting employees to have healthy lifestyles

Key takeaways

- Young people across various sectors viewed employers as crucial in supporting their health, particularly mental health. They emphasised the importance of regular check-ins, supportive management, and open communication. Flexibility and understanding personal needs were also deemed vital.
- Key employer roles included providing good facilities, adequate pay for a healthy lifestyle, healthy food options, exercise encouragement, cleanliness, and appropriate break areas. While they believed employers should provide resources and encouragement, young people also felt individual responsibility for wellbeing was crucial.
- They highlighted the need for employers to adhere to policies, especially around rest periods, and valued having autonomy and feeling trusted.
- Conversely, employers stressed the importance of raising awareness and education as part of their responsibility. They focused on positive role models at work who demonstrated healthy behaviours.
- Employers also highlighted the need to educate young employees about their rights, work expectations, and financial management. They recognised a gap in financial knowledge among young people and agreed they could play a more significant role in financial education, as financial wellbeing was viewed as key for a healthy lifestyle. This included addressing concerns about taking sick days, understanding payslips, managing money, and signposting to financial advice. Flexibility in work arrangements was also seen as essential.
- Both young people and employers valued a supportive work environment, with employers endorsing open-door policies. Overall, young people emphasised employer responsibility in providing adequate facilities and proactive health initiatives, while employers prioritised education and positive role modelling. Both groups agreed on the importance of a supportive and flexible work environment to maintain health and wellbeing.

4.4.1 Young people

In construction, young people talked about the environment created by managers and shared that a supportive and respectful manager, who grants trust and autonomy, results in a more motivated and healthier workforce. Some emphasised this aspect of employer responsibility and reported that when their relationships with managers were not good, this had an impact on both their work and healthy habits outside of work (e.g., losing motivation to go to the gym). They acknowledged that maintaining healthy habits is ultimately their own responsibility but appreciated employers who provided the necessary facilities (e.g., clean environments) to support and aid this. Often, young people working in the sector did not have access to washing facilities, kitchens, or even running water.

- *“You sometimes don’t have the right cleaning facilities for your own stuff, you don’t have enough breaks, and nowhere to heat up food.” (young person, Construction)*
- *“You spend so much time at work, it affects everything you do. In terms of what the employer can do – that’s your own responsibility. They can only put the facilities in place, be flexible if you have stuff going on in your life. They can’t take stresses away. But some employers can get frustrated if you’re having troubles in your life, instead of being respectful. That doesn’t work.” (young person, Construction)*

In early years, beyond a supportive work environment, with regular check-ins and where employees could feel comfortable discussing issues with managers, the provision of facilities, like quiet and soundproof break rooms, and healthy meal options were deemed to be an important responsibility on the part of the employer. Additionally, young people felt that employers could play a role in supporting them to have healthy lifestyles through employee benefits such as gym memberships and team bonding activities. Young people also felt that employers should encourage feedback from young employees around the things they need at work to support their health, as it would make employees feel valued and support retention. There was also a sense that during the pandemic, more attention was paid by employers to employees’ physical and mental health which had a positive impact on morale and wellbeing, and that this had stopped but should be encouraged more. However, similarly to young people in construction, young people in early years also felt that there should be clear boundaries around the employer’s role in supporting health. They felt that employers should not overstep and tell employees how to manage their health but should only encourage and make resources accessible.

- *“Employers definitely have a role (...) they have that requirement as if you’re not getting that time to take a break and chill out you’re not going to be on your best game and ultimately its then impacting the lives of these children as well as the other staff.” (young person, Early years)*
- *“It is obviously quite a very hard job to do and it’s a very physically and emotionally demanding job (...) I feel like sometimes lunch can be like another thing that you have to think about. So, I don’t know, if there’s a way that they can help with, like, refreshments or just providing lunch for the workers.” (young person, Early years)*
- *“We’re all adults, we have to take our healthy habits and lifestyles as initiatives that come from ourselves. However, I do think that employers and companies should put like maybe incentives in place, perhaps maybe like a gym voucher scheme or maybe*

like a walk or like cycle to work or something where the incentive is either to get a pay rise or maybe a voucher (...) it's about making things available.” (young person, Early years)

In the food services sector, young people highlighted that employers should improve their practices in adhering to recommended rest periods, breaks, and meal provision. As well as ensuring adequate staffing to prevent overworking employees. These policies were not always followed. They also suggested that providing healthier meal options and employers fostering a culture of healthy habits, could play an important role. One young person mentioned that in their staff room at work there would always be sugary beverages and suggested that the employers could encourage employees to have better nutrition by providing reusable water bottles and providing a salad bar as an option for staff meals. However, young people also felt that for the employers to play a credible role in supporting healthy lifestyles among employees, they should be good role models themselves, and this was often not the case.

- *“Employers do have a role to play – there needs to be 11 hours off between shifts, but that is not followed. Employees are often not in a good mood because they don't sleep well because of their shifts not being planned well (...) should have healthier options for staff food. If you change that it will have a positive impact on both physical and mental health because what you eat affects your mood.” (young person, Food services)*
- *“Yes but often the employers I worked for, they are not the healthiest people, they are also very stressed. There's a weird contrast between being told “you should be healthy for your shift” and then being given a 10 hour shift with a short break in between.” (young person, Food services)*
- *“My employer pays everyone minimum wage, it really affects your health. Supervisors only get 1 pound extra per hour, and all we get is 30% off food. We don't follow the shift limit rule at all. So, it's a responsibility of both, I play a role, my employer plays a role. It's 50/50. (...) Your employer making it more accessible for you is helpful to you taking control and responsibility – it's a duty of the employer to make options more accessible, then whether I take it up is up to me.” (young person, Food services)*

In the social care sector, given the emotional strain of the work, access to mental health and emotional support at work was viewed as crucial. Young people felt that employers should provide these resources (e.g., signposting to mental health services, counselling sessions, and tailored support for dealing with emotionally challenging situations). Additionally, creating an environment where employees feel comfortable discussing their needs, preventing them from taking work-related stress home. Moreover, ensuring a manageable workload, fair wages, and providing flexibility in shifts were seen as important to prevent burnout and physical strain. Offering flexible work schedules and ensuring employees can take necessary breaks was felt to be key to manage stress and physical exhaustion, and help employees manage any existing health conditions. This was accompanied by the importance of recognition and appreciation of employees' contributions, alongside providing opportunities for employee feedback and suggestions. Adequate training and safe working practices were highlighted as necessary to prevent injuries and support overall health. Young people also felt that employers could promote

physical health by encouraging exercise and healthy living, potentially through incentives like gym discounts or organised wellness events. Several participants felt that employers could provide ergonomic equipment such as suitable desks and chairs and access to occupational health services, to prevent and address physical health issues.

- *“I think it is important for my employer to recommend an active lifestyle as well as supporting mental health and talking about it is difficult because in that sense your employer cannot do absolutely everything (...) we have to take responsibility but employers can touch on different areas.”* (young person, Social care)
- *“I think if you are a manager or a team leader and you have people who are working underneath you, I think that you play a role in making sure that they are finding that they're on top of things at work, but they're also not taking things home. And there are different ways of measuring that. You know, caseload trackers, regular supervision, making sure that staff have wellbeing days dedicated to them, and time to show appreciation as well. I think appreciation and showing value are really integral.”* (young person, Social care)
- *“My organisation does really well with this because we also have like a wellbeing kind of portal where we're given some free counselling sessions, especially because of the nature of the work. But also, there are things like some discounts on healthy eating and vegan food brands and things like that, that I think is really wonderful. And they also have these blogs that encourage us to eat healthy, stay healthy, exercise, things like that. And my manager would never be someone who, like, no matter how many comfort breaks I take in a shift, they would never say no or they would never be like, you're not doing your work because they just know that that's what the work requires.”* (young person, Social care)

4.4.2 Employers

In construction, employers highlighted the need for both young workers and managers to be educated about good work practices and health and safety at work. This included topics such as understanding the physiological impacts of stress and the importance of feeling comfortable to take sick days. One employer talked about culture more generally, and how the onboarding process was a key responsibility to educate young workers around values and behaviours in the workplace, and ways to look after themselves. The sector also faces challenges related to the divide between office-based and on-site workers, with concerns over fairness and practicality of flexible working arrangements (e.g., working from home when under par, instead of taking sick leave) and access to facilities that enable healthier lifestyle behaviours at work. One employer emphasised the impact of mental health after the Covid-19 pandemic and acknowledged that it is an employer duty to give workers the opportunity to work in hybrid ways where possible. In addition, to have power on how they dictate how they plan life around work, to make their own decisions about lifestyle. The discussion also focused on ensuring that whatever the employer did, it focused on modelling healthy behaviours and ensuring inclusivity and representation of all the workforce.

- *“Definitely about modelling behaviours and empowering people (...) .have to be aware that mandating healthy lifestyle behaviours can be triggering for some (...) want to make sure that everyone feels represented.” (employer, Construction)*
- *“[In the office] people are taking their sick days working from home, which is a real issue as that doesn’t support someone’s wellbeing at all (...) Boys and girls who are out on site and are self-employed, they don’t get that day paid and what it says is either lose your day’s pay, which at the moment no one can really afford to do, or come in and suffer.” (employer, Construction)*
- *“I think we as an employer you have you should take responsibility for educating your staff...It’s about education, and it is also massively linked to mental health...it’s about educating people and allowing them to know what they can access on site...keeping people hydrated, and just around organisation and taking responsibility for that.” (employer, Construction)*

Early years employers emphasised pastoral care and emotional support, focusing on the importance of employers playing a supportive role that extends beyond work, such as providing financial advice and creating an open-door policy where employees feel safe to discuss personal issues. There was also a sense that employers could help young workers set boundaries to support their health, particularly around ensuring employees took annual leave, and that they did not take on too many shifts. There was a significant concern about burnout, coupled with the sector’s perceived low salary ceiling, though employers felt they could take limited action to mitigate these challenges. Similarly to employers in construction, employers in early years also felt that they had a role to play in providing financial education to their young employees. Some employers highlighted the importance of listening to employee feedback, particularly around things like snack provision and nutrition, to ensure they are being supported in the way they would like.

- *“It’s not just about looking after staff whilst they are in your workplace, but also when they are at home...early years sector is a struggle at the moment – you do a 40 hour week when you get home you are exhausted and you forget about your hobbies and what you enjoy doing in your personal time, and make sure that you always find time to carry them out.” (employer, Early years)*
- *“I’ve had to talk through a pay slip because the girls have never had it before. They don’t understand NI, pensions, and I have had to help them budget for the first time when they have moved out...I’ve helped them shop for cheaper things, and those little things that look after their wellbeing, and that looks after them and helps them...wages are a big thing, and I always try and push the directors when they are down for everyone to get a pay rise because that makes a huge difference.” (employer, Early years)*
- *“I was just putting teas, coffee, biscuits and cakes in the staff room thinking I was helping staff, but the feedback asked for more healthy options. So, I provide fruit now and staff can pick and choose, and there is encouragement there to stick to their own healthy lifestyles.” (employer, Early years)*

In the food services sector, employers stressed the importance of balancing support with respect for personal boundaries. There was an acknowledgment that young workers are particularly influenced by their peers and role models within the workplace, and are more

likely to follow their health behaviours, both the positive and the negative. This sector emphasised the importance of providing practical health support, such as educating staff on managing night shifts and offering nutritious meals during shifts. In the case of one employer, an incident at work relating to an employee's diabetic condition led to better enforcement of health and wellbeing policies and practices across the business. However, some employers felt their responsibility was limited to adhering to health and safety practices at work, and that young people's sleep and nutrition should not be their concern. Others saw it as a matter of being flexible and trying to accommodate young workers' needs, while also ensuring a benefit to the employer.

- *"We did a session on night working, 'Night Club' – spoke of loads of things people could do to be healthy, how to support sleep, brought in samples of food they could try. Make sure that people weren't thinking the only way to get through a shift was to chuck loads of energy drinks in them. Young people look up to older staff members and copy what they do. For me it's making sure they see right role models in the team."* (employer, Food services)
- *"We work quite unsociable hours. I'm not too concerned with sleep, it's none of my business. I'm not their father. (...) Food wise, we offer what we have on the menu, fried food mainly. If they want something healthy they need to go out, but it's easier to get free meal."* (employer, Food services)
- *"It's about you as the employer looking at things differently. If someone needs to come in earlier because of bus times, find them other tasks, change their times. Blur the rigid lines of 'it has to be this way.' (...) It's about job design and being flexible with it"* (employer, Food services)

In social care, employers focused on providing holistic support that included both physical and emotional health initiatives. The importance of positive reinforcement by the employer and providing spaces for reflection and socialisation were highlighted. Some employers mentioned implementing initiatives promoting healthy diets and physical activity, to enhance productivity and overall wellbeing. Additionally, employers highlighted the value of providing training in emotional resilience and stress management, ensuring that young workers are equipped to handle challenging situations both in and out of the workplace. While there was consensus across employers in the sector that this was important, not all employers had the policies and structures in place to support this.

- *"Just have the opportunity to give them information and the advice and suggestions to give to them, they don't have to go away and implement that into their daily life (...) what you might do in that situation to benefit them in a certain way."* (employer, Social care)
- *"Creating a safe space to discuss professional and personal matters that are impacting their work. Offering support, coaching, and training as required. Celebrating positive achievements, peer and management support, recognising conflict, poor health, stress and providing education and support around this, being flexible."* (employer, Social care)
- *"I appreciate that not everyone does this, but there are certain healthy foods that are available in a canteen at our business. Some of it is free, is complementary, some of it at a small charge...there are different varieties that people can choose from – and you*

know some people will opt for a healthier option than others, but it is about finding a balance.” (employer, Social care)

4.5 Access to workplace support for a healthy lifestyle

Key takeaways

- Both young people and employers agreed that the most effective workplace support was a good work environment and strong relationships with managers.
- Young people across all sectors highlighted the importance of quality employment relationships, highlighting that positive interactions with managers, regular check-ins, open communication and a supportive environment were crucial for their wellbeing. They stressed the importance of feeling comfortable and safe in raising concerns, feeling trusted, and genuinely valued. They could discern genuine employer interest in their wellbeing versus performative gestures and felt truly valued only in the former case.
- Employers echoed these views, acknowledging the value of peer support alongside good management. They tended to provide various health supports, which ranged from more formal measures like Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) and industry-specific resources (e.g., helplines), to signposting to charity resources like Mind. Some offered information on healthy eating but only a few provided healthy meal options.
- Financial wellbeing support was emphasised, reflecting the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis. Some expressed a desire to provide more formal support (e.g., health insurance, counselling) but often faced cost constraints.

4.5.1 Young people

In the construction sector, participants reported benefiting significantly from strong mentorship and regular appraisals. They appreciated mutual respect and trust from their employer, which allowed them to manage their own schedules without being micromanaged. The opportunity to learn new skills daily were also highly valued, adding to the fulfilment they derived from work. One participant, who had an office-based role, explained that their company had schemes in place like cycle to work. However, due to the lack of changing facilities on site, they felt that few people took it up, as they would not be able to shower or change. Another explained that their workplace provided fruit in the office for breakfast, as well as coffee and had fridges to store food, as well as an on-site café. This highlighted the contrast and inequality in access to some types of support between site-based workers and those based in offices. However, young people recognised that this was partially due to the nature of on-site-work and was tied to the wide range of sites, which meant that not everyone could accommodate the same type of facilities.

- *“My boss does ask how I am doing every now and then. I’ve got a good relationship with the senior engineer I work with, he’s a mate (...) there is a level of trust that I really enjoy (...) it makes a huge difference if you get along with the boss.” (young person, Construction)*

- *"I am based in the office, there's fruit every morning, and on some days vegetables. There's a coffee machine in every kitchen. And there's a fridge if you want to bring in food. Meetings are sometimes catered. There's also a café and it's subsidised."* (young person, Construction)

Those working in the early years sector discussed how the level of perceived support varied widely between workplaces, largely depending on the personal relationships between staff and management. Some nurseries were seen to provide excellent support, allowing employees to feel comfortable coming forward with their struggles. While others, despite having support systems in place, failed to create a safe environment, so staff were reluctant to express concerns. Effective support was described as developing personalised work plans through open communication with managers.

- *"Just knowing that there is a manager you can go to, to get things off your chest, so I don't have to go home and think about it, and when I am trying to sleep it's not on my mind. It's really helpful for like a workplace to create an environment where we can share things with them."* (young person, Early years)
- *"I have worked somewhere where I was working such long hours and it was taking a toll on me mentally and physically, my immune system was way down and I was stressed, I wasn't eating right...but I had a good relationship with my boss and I said here are ways I am struggling, so they put a plan in for me...I started to take the lead and figuring out what worked well for me."* (young person, Early years)

In the food services sector, some young people reported a culture of normalising physical pain and injury. This was felt to discourage younger staff from seeking help or voicing their concerns and was exacerbated by the widespread lack of sick pay, often forcing employees to work through illness. Overall, there was a widespread sense that there was not much or effective workplace support in the sector.

- *"Something which puts me off calling in sick, is there is no sick pay. I'll sometimes use a day of holiday instead."* (young person, Food services)
- *"I agree with glorifying pain, it's a really weird thing especially older people do. I got a burn yesterday, and one manager said 'well I have this massive burn on my arm' – like you're only complaining because you're younger. (...) I have a friend who broke his foot, was off for two days then the employer phoned in and asked him to come back and stay behind the bar. The only way you get support in my workplace is if you have an ongoing medical condition."* (young person, Food services)
- *"Give a try working for independent places, you do tend to get someone directly above you who is a bit more grounded. Still very stressed out because they don't make much money, but they'll be able to help you out. There will be people who want to genuinely help out, and those doing it performatively. There's been times I got injured and technically could still work so was pressured to come back."* (young person, Food services)

In the social care sector, support was felt to be highly variable. Some participants reported that their organisations provide genuine support, making employees feel valued and fostering a sense of community and shared purpose. However, other organisations were

seen as offering only performative support, rather than genuinely caring for their staff's wellbeing. Among social care workers, the overwhelming workload and extensive training requirements could also be daunting, but those who reported having supportive colleagues and managers felt that these types of support were effective at mitigating challenges, through guidance and adjustments. However, some young people also reported challenges in accessing support at work due to limited resources and capacity, or as a result of feeling like the employer could take limited action to support them. For example, a young person with a physical disability felt like their employer could only do so much to support them and that the issues they experienced were tied to wider systemic and structural challenges.

- *"Yeah, she's pretty understanding. I do have to, like, explain to her what all the different symptoms are and the way that they can manifest and stuff, and it's like having to re-explain every now and then (...) a lot of my issues with employment are less from my employer and more from the system, and they're struggling to access help from the NHS, help from Universal Credit and all of those that are forcing me into having to work these kinds of hours. So, there's not much that my bosses can do."* (young person, Social care)
- *"We have an in-house mental health counsellor, so she covers the whole company, but we find she's extremely hard to get in contact with because she supports so many people. (...) So, I work long hours and I don't really see another staff member until my shift ends, which we have half an hour for handover and I'm shattered. I don't want to speak to anyone. So, I would just go home and ignore it. (...) So, I think in my head by the time I'm at work next, I would have forgotten about it and just leave it alone. You wouldn't really speak to colleagues because there's no one around. You only have your manager, but then they're not on-site, they're off-site, so it's a bit awkward to call them if you had a little problem (...) So on paper it sounds good. It sounds perfect, but actually when you're in the job and if I did want support like that, it's not actually as available as they make it out to be."* (young person, Social care)

4.5.2 Employers

In construction a number of employers offered 'Toolbox Talks,' focused on different aspects of health and safety in construction work, while one used a Perks Box system, whereby each manager could give perk points to employees (e.g., discounts for coffee, gym, healthy food). Some employers offered Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP), health insurance, and apps for mental health support. However, a number of employers were concerned about the financial implications to the employer of these measures, while others felt it made commercial sense as it supported a healthier workforce and reduced sickness absence. There was also a sense from some, that promoting healthy living did not have to be expensive and that it could be as simple as having good conversations which helped employees feel valued and supported. There were also concerns raised around equality and inclusivity in providing and accessing support. One employer highlighted that workplace support was not always inclusive of workers with different abilities and health conditions. Another raised that office-based workers had access to more and better quality support compared to site-based workers, who were sometimes seen as 'cogs in a wheel.'

- *“It makes a lot of commercial sense to have healthier employees (...) I think there's ways to promote healthy living and conversations that you can have around being healthier that don't necessarily have to cost.” (employer, Construction)*
- *“But not everyone is able to participate in things like that, it was raised as an EDI issue in our company as not everyone could participate equally. We have a wellbeing week, which includes financial wellbeing. People also submit stories of health and wellbeing challenges to remove stigma in the workplace. We also have a recipe corner.” (employer, Construction)*
- *“We have HR, we have like an employee assistance programme, we also do the wellness theme of the month, I think it was prostate cancer awareness last month, and they also do healthy eating. I think somebody mentioned about the 10,000 steps, getting people to try and walk 10,000 steps, you know, for a prize. I think a lot of companies do run initiatives like that, but it's difficult to say if it goes far enough.” (employer, Construction)*

In the early years sector, building strong personal relationships with staff and listening to staff was seen as crucial, with strong implications for staff retention. In this sector staff recruitment and retention was a significant concern and therefore greater emphasis was placed on this aspect. One employer shared that they had changed the type of food they provided as a snack, following feedback from the young staff, and by using a collaborative approach to providing better food options to support their wellbeing. Some employers provided a combination of information and resources, alongside practical support such as healthy snacks and sanitary products. Employers had a range of other measures in place, from having managers get Mental Health First Aid training, to providing wellbeing days and using private insurance companies like Bupa for mental health support. Employers across the sector emphasised the importance and prevalence of mental health, and that they focused much of their support on this aspect. There was also a recognition of the interconnection between mental and physical health, with one employer sharing that they focused on addressing mental health concerns, to prevent subsequent physical illness.

- *“If I can get past a barrier with them where I can really find out about their lifestyle and what is going to be helpful for them, then I can work with them to make that work (...) some of them are afraid to say.” (employer, Early years)*
- *“We try to make sure we've got material available for staff around stopping smoking, things that come out of community nursing and things like that. Things like dry January, it's about keeping people engaged, even if it is just a conversation, they may not want to proactively take part in them. We try and make sure that there is awareness of them.” (employer, Early years)*
- *“There are things that you do, and we would class those as more of the traditional forms of support (...) but some of the things that have been spoken about are more from our own backs because we see value in them, like refreshments, giving people the healthy choices, sanitary products, there is no obligation or expectation necessarily for us to do that. We do that because we want people to feel valued by us (...) as an organisation we want people to see that we care about them and don't just see them as a means to an end to be able to run the business.” (employer, Early years)*

In the food services sector, employers emphasised the provision of healthy food and drinks in the workplace during shifts. They also stressed the importance of good planning around rotas to support employee wellbeing and ensure they had enough time to rest. Employers in this group were mainly small businesses and there was often a greater reliance on peer support and friendly, informal communication within the company, as many small businesses lack a formal HR department. This could present challenges as it meant that employers often lacked formal policies and processes to ensure consistent and equitable wellbeing support for their young employees. However, many employers used external resources like charities and industry bodies to provide information and support, particularly around mental health. As stressed by employers in other sectors, financial education and initiatives around financial wellbeing were also key forms of support provided by employers in the food services.

- *“Bakers start at midnight or 2am, they have a different lifestyle. They go to bed at 7pm. We keep bakers for a very long time – we structure the rota so it’s long shifts, but very few during the week. We make sure people have a lot of space between shifts. It’s about not getting into people’s business, but taking responsibility to give them the opportunity to be rested. In terms of food, they take something from our stock, which is either a healthy sandwich or sausage roll, but that’s on them.”*
(employer, Food services)
- *“We point them in the direction of money and debt advice, can be a massive thing for young people. Especially with problems of buses and transport. We try and pay wages upfront so they can buy bicycle, transport passes. (...) we have some people doing two or three shifts, we try to give them more hours so they only work at one place rather than three places.”* (employer, Food services)
- *“We use the LTC charity [License Tray Charity], we are all members of the BII [British Institute of Innkeeping]. We have support there as well through a helpline, we can turn to them to understand how to manage a situation with a staff member. We don’t monitor usage, we have posters and we can refer people to use that number. But we don’t have data about usage.”* (employer, Food services)

The social care sector employers emphasised that the nature of the work drives them to encourage young employees to make most use of workplace-specific support where confidentiality and understanding of job-related stress are shared, and peer support can be effective. One employer mentioned that they used the staff canteen to encourage healthy eating, by providing healthy options and providing information resources. Providing flexible supervision, offering informal discussions and peer group management to address concerns collectively were also types of support offered by employers. Mentorship and comprehensive training were emphasised, as well as creating safe spaces for emotional expression, and recognising the importance of addressing personal worries to prevent negative impacts on health and wellbeing.

- *“If there is someone sitting there tense, and not doing their best, I try to explore with them and 9 times out of 10 there is something that they are thinking or worried about or not sure about (...) so they need an outlet for that, and you just try to show them how actually that’s having a negative impact on you, your health and your wellbeing.”*
(employer, Social care)

- *“The staff canteens put up notices on healthy eating. Not the most exciting thing in the world, but a lot of people do use the staff canteen, because it is in the building, and quick and easy (...) so at least the messaging is there (...) constant little reminders eventually sink in.”* (employer, Social care)
- *“It took about six months for us to help our young people to change their eating lifestyles...one of the main challenges is that unhealthy food is cheap (...) It took time and there are a lot of distractions and alternatives, but eventually people did come on board...it is understanding the benefits of living a healthy lifestyle, we just keep explaining the benefits...for both their lifestyle and their mental health.”* (employer, Social care)

4.6 Ideas for additional support and workplace initiatives

Key takeaways

- Young people across sectors expressed a desire for additional workplace support and initiatives for healthy lifestyle behaviours. They called for efforts to destigmatise mental health issues and provide formal support, such as subsidised counselling or therapy.
- Emphasising a healthy diet, they suggested access to healthy food options, free or subsidised meals, and proper facilities like microwaves. Cooking classes and education on healthy eating were also recommended.
- They advocated for better physical workplace environments, including adequate break areas, clean facilities, and basic amenities like running water, hand sanitisers, clean toilets, and changing facilities, especially in physically demanding sectors.
- Improving pay and providing financial support, such as sick pay and help with transport costs, were recurring themes. Young people also suggested offering incentives for healthy behaviours and recognising employee efforts to boost morale and encourage healthy habits.
- Employers, on the other hand, emphasised increasing financial literacy and support, including financial planning, understanding pension schemes, and providing information on entitlements.
- They agreed more could be done in health and wellbeing initiatives, from stress management and nutrition education, to practical measures like cooking classes and addressing substance use.
- Employers also highlighted the importance of workplace initiatives to promote exercise and active living. Building peer networks and role modelling healthy behaviours were seen as effective and quickly implementable practices.
- Both groups recognised the importance of a supportive work environment and the role of employers in fostering better health and wellbeing through practical support, education, and a positive workplace culture.

4.6.1 Young people

In the construction sector, young people stressed the lack of basic amenities (e.g., toilets, running water) with facilities varying widely by site. They also highlighted the lack of adequate spaces to have meals, which were often eaten in their own vans, in empty shipping containers, or the building under construction itself. They also emphasised both the prevalence and stigma around men's mental health and suggested implementing regular mental health check-ins and appointing wellbeing managers to support workers.

- *"Everything is individual, it depends on the site, but if there's no basics you'll want them. Running water on site, microwaves, fridge to keep food, so you can bring your own stuff and warm it up."* (young person, Construction)
- *"In big construction sites, there's olden ways of thinking, men don't open up. There are health and safety managers, but obviously if there's something like a wellbeing manager, checking in on mental health, that would be great. Among younger men, people do talk about mental health more, but there's still a culture that men don't talk about feelings."* (young person, Construction)
- *"I think there's a bit of a rise in men's mental health and talking about that at work is important. So having team talks, I think that's quite helpful as much as it is to talk about your physical health and your mental wellbeing. There's also like your emotional wellbeing that helps alongside that."* (young person, Construction)

Among workers in the early years sector, the emphasis was on the importance of providing healthy meals for staff and the need for food education at work. Young people in the sector also called for protected break times, including more frequent and flexible breaks, and adequate and quiet spaces to take breaks. This was often related to staff resourcing issues, and young people called for improvements to staff cover so adequate breaks could be taken. Some young people encouraged initiatives to build a sense of community among staff and supporting mental health through dedicated activities and staff appreciation days.

- *"They are dealing with healthy food all day for the children, so it would be nice if a little extra was made so we can have some as well. It's also about feeling recognised by the managers."* (young person, Early years)
- *"It's about breaks and stuff, having that non-judgemental time to just step away. You can get a toxic work environment where managers are watching over you (...) Sometimes you need that 5 minutes to decompress, just 5 minutes in a soundproof room."* (young person, Early years)
- *"We had a chef in our nursery who worked in the kitchen and prepared fresh meals for the kids every lunch. And doing something like a cooking class in the evening, or encouraging getting the food right for a healthy body could be good."* (young person, Early years)

Young people in the food services sector highlighted the need to ensure at least one nutritious meal per shift and maintaining clean, dedicated break spaces. Subsidised counselling services and offering mental health days were also mentioned. As well as inclusive team-building activities and improved managerial skills to foster a supportive work environment. Alongside these, there were suggestions for making free meals

mandatory, including healthy options. There was a shared call for improved policies on sick pay, and a recognition that this required a cultural shift across the sector. Young people also stressed the importance of encouraging physical activity and team bonding, through activities which were not centred around drinking and focused more on health (e.g., sports).

- *“Have a free meal provided, it should be a basic right. It’s nice to have at least one good proper meal. And having sick pay. [name of business] partnered up with PureGym so they offer us a discount on memberships, 20% off.”*
- *“More team-building days, but first give us spaces where we can sit and eat, keep first aid boxes up to date, have a small fridge just for staff food so if I want to have a salad I can keep it fresh (...) Also different people have different dietary requirements – how can they be inclusive of all people’s needs? A little bit of consideration can go a long way.” (young person, Food services)*
- *“We spoke a lot about food, but a lot of the time we need something physical. Like as a team, like a sport. We do lots of movement at work but it just strains your body rather than being movement for fun or mental health (...) Having employee wellbeing activities, keeping the team as a team (...) find ways to bring team close without focusing on drinking, doing very physical things.” (young person, Food services)*

Finally, young people in social care raised the need for more flexible working arrangements to help balance heavy workloads and personal life. Also advocating for better pay to alleviate the impact of financial stress on wellbeing.

- *“Pay you better. I can’t really think about anything else they could really do. I think you’re almost limited because even if I have my basic contract, you’re always going to have to work more. I think it’s almost impossible not to work extra hours.” (young person, Social care)*
- *“My frustration is with the system as a whole. There’s not enough support put in place for people that do have physical disabilities or learning difficulties to be able to access work. And I think, yeah, my issues with the system as a whole, the way that the pay scaling works. (...) If there’s two people in a household and a child. It’s mentally draining and it’s debilitating to think that two adults have to work a 40-hour week whilst raising a child. (...) I think it’s quite an archaic way to still run things. But that’s out of my hands” (young person, Social care)*

4.6.2 Employers

In the construction sector, some employers suggested introducing regular financial education events, covering budgeting, financial planning, and the advantages of pension schemes, and one employer suggested integrating financial literacy into induction programmes. There was also a suggestion of creating resource hubs or distributing materials about different government support schemes; empowering young employees by making them aware of the different types of assistance they can access.

- *“But I think a lot of people are just living pay-check to pay-check. There isn't much knowledge on what can I do with my money (...) But I think actually there's a there's a big education deficit there.” (employer, Construction)*
- *“It's not down to the company to pay for you to go to the gym...it can be good to promote it, and say this is how you should ideally live your life, but it's a lot of money – if you're in a position to do that, then great, but if you're a smaller company it's a lot of money to just give away.” (employer, Construction)*

In the early years sector, employers raised the challenge that small businesses often struggle to provide extensive healthcare and wellbeing packages due to financial constraints. However, some employers highlighted an interest in seeking funding or grants to subsidise healthcare packages and gym memberships and negotiating discounts with local providers. Implementing recognition programmes to celebrate staff contributions and advocating for more governmental support, particularly around raising wages, were also seen as important initiatives. Some employers felt that there should be more education in schools around life skills, to help young people become more conscious and take responsibility for their health before they transitioned to work. One employer mentioned that having a peer network at senior management level could be a good initiative to help managers get support from each other, in order to provide better support to employees.

- *“If we could afford it, it would be a more robust healthcare package, because it can cover a lot. It's not hugely expensive but it can add up if you have a lot of employees (...) it could stop some illnesses gradually becoming worse.” (employer, Early years)*
- *“It is an undervalued industry...this would never happen but I would like some sort of funding or a grant to be put towards our staff and we want to show them that they are valued...it might be a gym membership or money towards lunches every day that are healthy. It could be like a BUPA thing, but something towards something they can't afford, and their needs.” (employer, Early years)*
- *“I think in terms of additional support might be around sort of a more formal process of being able to engage with your equivalents in other settings to get support from each other, be that professionals network or something that you can, that maybe isn't available in your organisation for people at the top end of it.” (employer, Early years)*

Among employers in the food services sector, there was a shared view that young employees could benefit from nutrition education and cooking lessons, leveraging the expertise of in-house chefs. Implementing greater flexibility in work schedules was also seen as beneficial, as well as creating partnerships with other establishments to provide benefits and discounts and enhance job satisfaction. One employer raised that more should be done to address drug use in a nuanced way, to prioritise workplace safety and open communication without being overly intrusive. Another talked about the potential benefit of developing an ‘entitlement leaflet,’ which can help young people understand free and discounted services they can access, to support their financial wellbeing.

- *“Cooking lessons. If you have chefs there, you could use them to provide that education and it is a nice way to teach them more about what the company does, and teach skills for a healthier lifestyle.” (employer, Food services)*

- *“Entitlement leaflet, like you are entitled to a free bus pass, you can get support for housing, and so on. Many young people are missing out because they don’t have knowledge of what they can access.” (employer, Food services)*
- *“It involves having a good role model. This is by far the healthiest work environment I’ve ever worked in, the owners are fit, healthy. They exercise a lot, they eat well and that I think does sort of trickle down to a certain extent (...) And I think it’s about that peer connection and having the right things in common, maybe. And that comes from the top, I think.” (employer, Food services)*

In the social care sector employer did not have many suggestions for additional workplace support, aside from improving the focus on positive role modelling.

- *“It is always good to lead by example, a young person will copy what we do. The gym, exercise, lunch walks, if we do it ourselves – we are more likely to convince a young person to do it.” (employer, Social care)*

Conclusion

- Young people tend to see physical and mental health as interconnected aspects of a healthy lifestyle. However, employers place more emphasis on mental health as crucial for young employees, seeing it as both a facilitator and a barrier to a healthy lifestyle. Both young people and employers acknowledge that long hours, low pay, and the nature of work across the four sectors hinder efforts to maintain healthy lifestyles.
- Mental health emerges as a major concern among young people across all sectors, with many experiencing stress, anxiety, and burnout from job responsibilities and work environments. Employers are also aware of widespread mental health issues, but sometimes link them to a perceived lower resilience to work stress among young people, potentially exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic's impact on mental health and social skills.
- Young people emphasise employer responsibility in providing adequate facilities and proactive health initiatives, while employers prioritise education and positive role modelling around healthy workplace practices and looking after one’s health at work. Both groups agree on the importance of a supportive and flexible work environment to maintain health and wellbeing
- Both young people and employers recognise the importance of a good work environment and strong relationships with managers. Financial wellbeing support was emphasised across the board, reflecting the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis.

5. Discussion

5.1 Summary of findings

Many people first enter the workplace during early adulthood, including as part-time workers while studying, before moving into full-time work. We found that low job quality is common among young adults, with almost 60% experiencing at least two out of six aspects of low quality work such as low pay, high job-related anxiety or low job autonomy. Meanwhile, our analysis showed that only a minority of young adults meet recommendations for key health behaviours, including diet, physical activity and sleep. Our analysis of changes in behaviour when young adults start work suggests that fruit and vegetable consumption does not change. However, on average, physical activity increases when young adults start work – particularly among men, young adults with lower levels of education, and those entering more manual occupations. Sleep duration reduced as young adults started employment, and this change was consistent across the population demographics and job characteristics studied.

Our qualitative research found that many young people were aware of the importance of healthy lifestyles (including healthy diet, physical activity and sufficient sleep), emphasised links between their physical and mental health, and were (in most instances) taking measures to maintain healthy lifestyles. Young people and employers recognised that the work environment, job design, and relationships between employee and employer could all contribute to supporting or inhibiting healthy lifestyles among young adults. However, young adults particularly highlighted the impact of low pay and long working hours on their ability to maintain healthy lifestyles, with stress and tiredness from work contributing to poor diet and poor sleep outside of work. Employers also recognised the challenges for young people in relation to the cost of living and the need for some young people to work multiple jobs, which made it difficult for them to maintain healthy working hours.

When considering the role of the employer in supporting healthy lifestyles, young people emphasised the provision of good facilities such as healthy food options, spaces to take breaks away from work, and adequate staffing to allow a manageable workload. Additional incentives such as gym memberships and team activities were seen as beneficial, especially when the young people could not afford them without having this as an employee benefit. Both employers and young people recognised the benefits of supportive management and good communication with their employers for their health. Flexibility around work arrangements (e.g., shift patterns) were considered important, as well as a supportive culture. Where there were reports of some effective interventions to improve healthy lifestyle behaviours (e.g., healthy food provision in offices), this had occurred because employer-employee communication allowed for a 'safe-space' to voice opinions, and collaboration and co-creation of potential lifestyle interventions.

We did observe some differences in emphasis between employers and young adults. Young employees emphasised the physical work environment and proactive initiatives from the employer to encourage healthy lifestyles. However, employers prioritised

education and information provision, for example through employers offering financial education, nutrition education, education around managing stress, as well as positive role modelling. Young adults also reported being receptive to employer initiatives to incentivise healthy behaviours, whereas employers were more reticent, concerned about interfering too much in individuals' behaviour. Employers were more willing to intervene where health and safety outcomes were seen to be a priority, or when not intervening in issues such as sleep or harmful behaviours could lead to a safety incident at work (that could result in enforcement).

5.2 Strengths and limitations of the research

5.2.1 Data analysis (Chapter 2)

Our quantitative research is based on two large national surveys; the LFS and the UKHLS, both representative of the UK population. Our analysis of how health behaviours change in young adults when they start employment is the first analysis of this question in the UK context. However, all the variables were self-reported, including employment details, measures of job quality and health behaviours. Self-reported health behaviours included physical activity, sleep duration, and fruit and vegetable intake. More detailed data on health behaviours collected over time in this age group will be necessary for more nuanced analysis of changing behaviour patterns.

The study design used a multilevel interrupted-time series analysis to improve causal inference by including a baseline trend before starting work and allowing modelling of both immediate and long-term effects of starting work. Adjustment for confounders in the analysis of differences by individual and job characteristics, further strengthens our findings on how the impact of starting work may differ for different groups of the population.

5.2.2 Focus group research (Chapter 3)

Our qualitative research focused on a limited number of industries, in order to draw out distinctions between different employment contexts. We selected four industries with high numbers of young adult employees and distinct characteristics (early years education, social care, construction, food hospitality). However, these will not reflect working conditions of all young adults, and in particular we have not included industries with mainly desk-based roles who may have different challenges such as hybrid working.

The focus group format allowed fruitful and lively discussions with participants building on each other's narratives. The discussion was aided by the use of Jamboard, an interactive whiteboard, where participants could add any further thoughts and insights around each research theme, in an anonymous way. We included a diverse mix of participants, ranging in age, ethnicity, gender, and location. However, given small numbers in each group, we were not able to make links between individual characteristics of participants and their ideas and experiences.

5.3 Reflections on the findings from wider professional stakeholders

We convened a workshop with stakeholders including participants from employment charities, independent research organisations, professional bodies, and other universities. We presented our findings and invited discussion of our findings, the incentives and barriers to promoting healthy lifestyles among young adults in the workplace, and what employers and policymakers could do further to support healthy lifestyles in the young adult workforce.

Much of the discussion focused on the wider issues that young people face in the workplace. For example, pay, hours, and working conditions, which have an important influence on health behaviours, and that need to be addressed before more targeted interventions around health behaviours can be implemented. Stakeholders highlighted the need for young people to have access to sick pay from the start of their employment, and suggested greater investment in the Health and Safety Executive, legislation around healthy workplaces, and universal access to occupational health support.

The stakeholders agreed that while there is a need for focus on young adults, who may have particular challenges, many of the issues discussed applied across the working age population. In addition, employer-led interventions should target all levels of an organisation. However, tailoring of interventions is important and there is a need to make sure they are appropriate to different groups including young adults. Including young people in the design of workplace interventions will help ensure these are appropriate for this age group.

5.4 Reflections on the findings from our Young Persons Advisory Group

We discussed our findings from both the data analysis and focus group research with our Young Persons Advisory Group (YPAG) participants as part of our ongoing engagement with this group. We invited comments on the findings themselves, as well as wider discussion around what a healthy workplace should offer to support health behaviours of young people.

The YPAG agreed with many of our research findings, discussing how these reflected their own experiences or that of their friends. Of the topics discussed for intervention, they prioritised the need for adequate breaks during the working day, and for these break times to be protected. The YPAG members also highlighted how advance notice of work schedules and shifts would benefit their health, allowing individuals to plan their life and their sleep around these working hours. They spoke about the necessity of good communication, ensuring that young people were happy to speak to their managers about any issues, which could include aspects of work detrimental to their health and wellbeing.

YPAG members emphasised the unfairness of current variation in the National Living Wage by age, which led to younger employees being paid less for doing the same work.

This is particularly important at a time of cost of living crisis. By contrast with the participants of our stakeholder workshop (see section 5.3), our YPAG told us they were less concerned by the lack of sick pay, pointing out that interventions to improve health would hopefully reduce the need for sick pay. In general, our YPAG members suggested that they would be most interested in employer offers that would make them feel like they were saving money, for example, food vouchers to buy healthy food. Others suggested more regulatory action, for example a 'Wellbeing Charter' which employers would be required to comply with.

5.5 Discussion of findings in relation to current policy, previous research, and wider recommendations for policy change

Over the last decade, considerable workplace wellbeing research has shown that being in employment is important to people's health and wellbeing. However, for those in work, what people experience in the workplace, how the work is designed, and the quality of work are also major factors in helping maintain health and wellbeing.

Previous studies have considered quality of work and ways that this might be improved in the United Kingdom [38]. The Taylor Review, published in 2017 recommended a more proactive approach to workplace health. Additionally, improvements to employment rights, particularly for those on flexible contracts, noting that 'Better quality work is also healthier work', leading to benefits for employees, but also a positive impact on employers and wider society [39]. A 10-year update to the Marmot review, published in February 2020, reflected that work quality has not improved since 2010, adding that 'there have been several new types of poor quality work emerging' [40]. Since 2020, the circumstances discussed in these reports have been further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis, which have had disproportionate impacts on certain societal groups, including young people, who may already have difficulties maintaining health and wellbeing when transitioning into work. Our research found that young adults in particular are more exposed to low quality work, compared to an older adult population. Our qualitative research found that, across four focus industries, poor quality of work, including low pay, long working hours, stressful and tiring work with insufficient breaks, and poor line management is likely to have a negative impact on young adults' health and wellbeing more generally, and their perceived ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle. There remains considerable scope for improvements to young adults job quality and working environments, which would support healthy lifestyles and long-term health outcomes.

One important aspect of poor quality work is low pay. Our young adult focus group participants frequently mentioned the role of low pay and resultant long working hours in restricting their ability to live healthy lives, and this was also recognised by employers. Further legislation to improve employment rights and working conditions may be needed, particularly around payment of a living wage at all ages, and sick pay provision. A recent enquiry into sick pay concluded that Statutory Sick Pay should be reformed to increase the level of support and expand entitlement [41], and this was supported by our own findings in young adults. We are hopeful that the new government will take forward these and other reforms, which will benefit the working population in general and young adults in particular.

The role of employment and the workplace as part of the wider determinants of health, and as a venue for health promotion has been highlighted previously [42]. We would argue that the role of the workplace is particularly important for young adults, who typically experience greater socioeconomic disadvantage and are less likely to be in regular contact with health services. Promotion of healthy lifestyles in early adulthood, in addition to immediate influences on weight status and mental health, may enable development of healthy behaviours that persist across the life course and influence the next generation.

Young adults told us that they would welcome more support from employers to enable healthy lifestyles, for example provision of healthy food, time and space for breaks, and support for physical activity. This presents an opportunity for employers to contribute towards public health and prevention of ill-health and economic inactivity. Employers have an important role in implementing workplace interventions, encouraging their use and highlighting their benefits. Some employers, but not all, suggested that initiatives to support a healthier workforce made commercial sense, through reductions in sickness absence. However, others did not feel that the costs of provision of some health benefits (e.g., gym membership) would not justify the return, particularly for smaller employers. Employers need to be more aware of the physical and mental health implications of poor lifestyle behaviours, and their consequences for work behaviours and work outcomes. Many employers were willing to engage in health promotion among their employees, and some were already talking to their staff about what would most benefit them, but (as has been reported in other areas [43]) lacked guidance on the best way to approach these topics and how to ensure that their offer is cost-effective.

5.6 Recommendations for future policy and research

Based on our research described in this report, a healthy workplace for young adults is likely to include:

- A living wage.
- Sick pay for all employees.
- Proactive management to support mental wellbeing, and allow discussion around health behaviours.
- Co-creation of any potential workplace interventions and employee voice about what works.
- Sufficient breaks and space to take breaks during the working day.
- Healthy working hours and shift patterns.
- Healthy food options, or facilities to prepare food.
- Being treated fairly at work (effort-reward balance).
- Activities/incentives to enhance physical activity.

Many of these recommendations are not specific to young adults and align with [other reports on health and work]. However, we have seen that young adults may be at higher risk of not experiencing a healthy working environment, than older adults.

Acknowledging that many of the recommendations for a healthy workplace are likely to increase costs for employers, at least in the short-term, challenges for the future are to determine which interventions are the most cost-effective, who should pay for these changes, and what aspects should be prioritised. Further research should explore employers' decision making around implementation of healthy lifestyle support, as well as the trade-offs they face between investing in health-improvement interventions and investing in other initiatives, including other employee benefits and overall remuneration. Understanding the extent of these trade-offs and how employers would respond to policy incentives designed to encourage further investment in employee health is critical, since employers are a key gatekeeper to delivery of healthy lifestyle interventions.

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Inclusive Terminology

The terminology used to define ethnicity continues to evolve, and greater awareness has arisen about gender, cognitive differences as well as of disability. IES seeks to be a learning organisation; as such we are adapting our practice in line with these shifts. We aim to be specific when referring to each individual's ethnicity and use their own self-descriptor wherever possible. Where this is not feasible, we are aligned with Race Disparity Unit (RDU) which uses the term 'ethnic minorities' to refer to all ethnic groups except white British. RDU does not use the terms BAME (black, Asian, and minority ethnic) or BME (black and minority ethnic) as these terms emphasise certain ethnic groups and exclude others. It also recommends not capitalising ethnic groups, (such as 'black' or 'white') unless that group's name includes a geographic place. More broadly, we understand that while individuals may have impairments it is society that disables them, hence we refer to disabled people. Not all people identify with male or female and we reflect their self-descriptions in our work and use the term non-binary should abbreviation be necessary. We value neurodiversity. Where possible we always use people's self-descriptors rather than impose categories upon them.

Accessibility

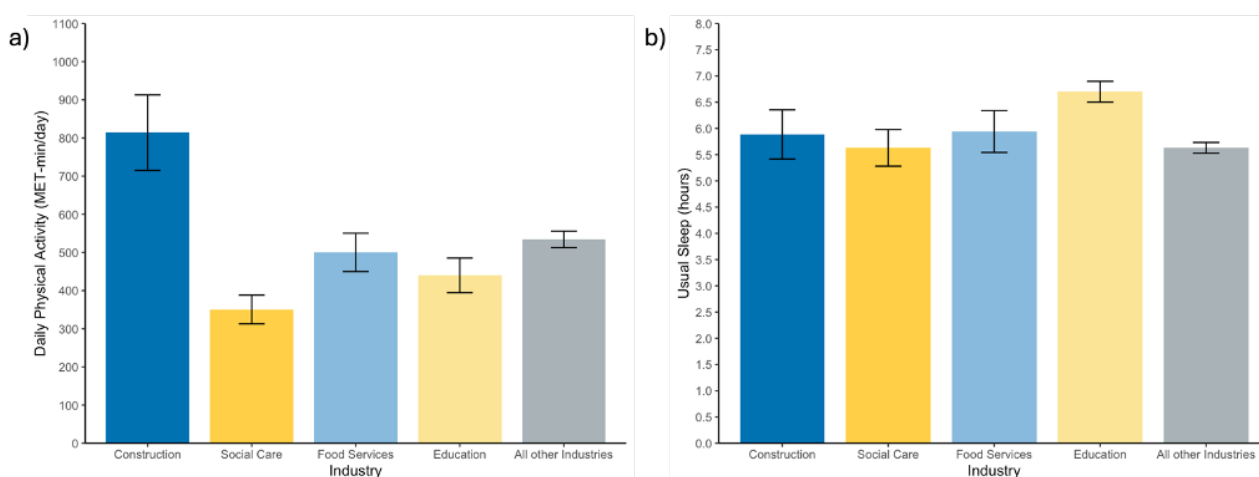
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Appendix 1 - Four focus industries: health behaviours by industry

Here we focused on young adults (16–24 years) working in the four industries concurrent with our qualitative focus groups. Looking at four industries that are common among young adults; Construction, Education, Social Work, and the Food Industry, we examined how health behaviours in young adults differ across these industries.

Physical activity was particularly low in those working in social care, and construction workers reported much higher levels of activity compared to all other industries. Usual hours of sleep did not differ much by industry but was highest in the education sector.

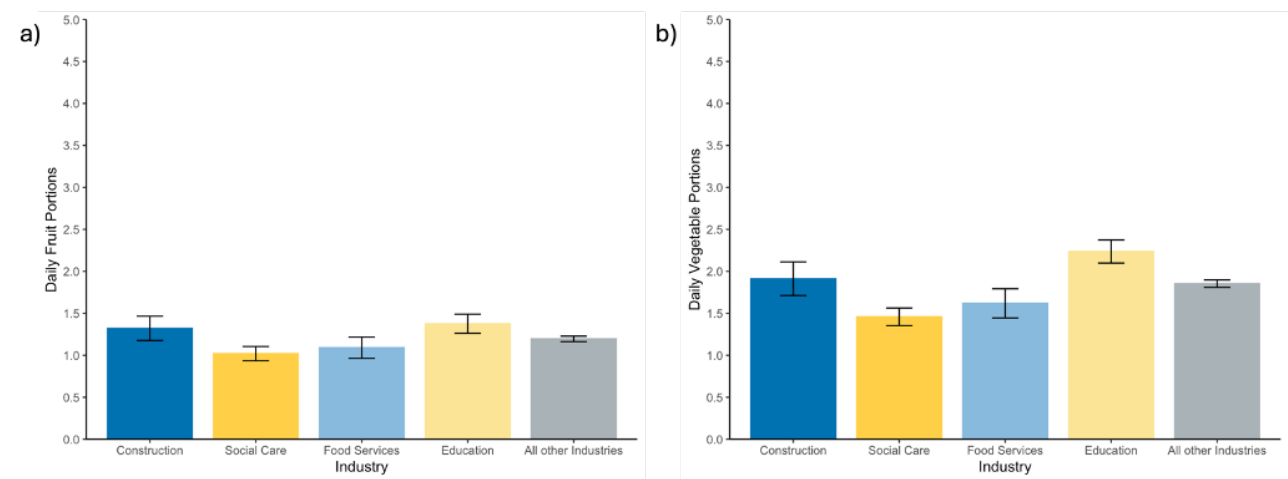
Figure 10: Physical activity and sleep by industry



Source: UKHLS Wave 13

Fruit consumption did not differ much across industries but was higher in young adults working in education compared to social care workers. Vegetable consumption was lowest in social care workers compared to those working in construction, education, and other industries.

Figure 11: Fruit and vegetable intake by industry



Source: UKHLS Wave 13

Appendix 2 – Participant screening questionnaires

Employers

Q1	Do you have experience of recruiting and/or working with young people aged 16-25?		
	Yes	1	CONTINUE
	No	2	CLOSE
	EXCLUDE ANY PARTICIPANT WHO ANSWERS NO.		

Q2	Do you have experience of recruiting and/or working with young people aged 16-25 in your current role?		
	Yes	1	CONTINUE
	No	2	CLOSE
	EXCLUDE ANY PARTICIPANT WHO ANSWERS NO.		

Q3	Do you hold or have you held a role as manager or supervisor of one or more employee(s) aged 16-25?		
	Yes	1	CONTINUE TO Q4
	No	2	CLOSE
	EXCLUDE ANY PARTICIPANT WHO ANSWERS NO.		

Q4	Where is your job based?		
	England	1	CONTINUE TO Q5
	Wales	2	CONTINUE TO Q5
	Scotland	3	CONTINUE TO Q5
	Northern Ireland	4	CONTINUE TO Q5

Q5	How large is the organisation you work for?		
	Micro (0-9 employees)	1	CONTINUE TO Q6
	Small (10-49 employees)	2	CONTINUE TO Q6
	Medium (50-249 employees)	3	CONTINUE TO Q6
	Large (250 + employees)	4	CONTINUE TO Q6

Q6	What industry is your organisation in?		
	Construction	1	CONTINUE TO Q7
	Early Childhood Education and Care	2	CONTINUE TO Q7
	Food Services	3	CONTINUE TO Q7
	Social Care	4	CONTINUE TO Q7
	Other industry	5	CLOSE
	EXCLUDE ANY PARTICIPANT WHO ANSWERS 'OTHER INDUSTRY'		

Q7	What is your job title?		
	<hr/>	1	CONTINUE TO Q8

ASK ALL QUALIFYING PARTICIPANTS

Q8	Thanks for your time today. We think you could be a good fit for the research and the client would really appreciate your valuable input. To recap, the research is a 60 minute online focus group over a videocall platform such as Teams or Zoom. Would you be happy to take part and schedule in an appointment for your participation?		
	Yes	1	Continue
	No	2	Close
	ALL TO CODE YES		

Q9	The focus group will be recorded for internal use only – the recording will not be available to any third parties and is only used to enable the end client to produce transcripts of the focus group. Are you happy to participate on this basis?		
	Yes	1	Continue
	No	2	Close
	ALL TO CODE YES		

Young people

Q1	Are you currently in full-time employment or in a full-time work placement?		
	Yes	1	CONTINUE
	No	2	CLOSE
	EXCLUDE ANY PARTICIPANT WHO ANSWERS NO.		

Q2	What age group are you in?		
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	16-18	1	CONTINUE TO Q3
	19-21	2	CONTINUE TO Q3
	22-24	3	CONTINUE TO Q3
	25+	4	CLOSE
EXCLUDE ANY PARTICIPANT WHO ANSWERS 25+.			

Q3	Do you identify as having a health condition or disability (physical and/or mental)?		
	Yes	1	CONTINUE TO Q4
	No	2	CONTINUE TO Q4

Q4	What is your ethnic group?		
	African	1	CONTINUE TO Q5
	Any other Asian background	2	CONTINUE TO Q5
	Any other black/African/Caribbean background	3	CONTINUE TO Q5
	Any other ethnic background	4	CONTINUE TO Q5
	Any other white background	5	CONTINUE TO Q5
	Bangladeshi	6	CONTINUE TO Q5
	Caribbean	7	CONTINUE TO Q5
	Chinese	8	CONTINUE TO Q5
	Indian	9	CONTINUE TO Q5
	Mixed/multiple ethnic background	10	CONTINUE TO Q5
	Pakistani	11	CONTINUE TO Q5
	White English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British	12	CONTINUE TO Q5
	White Irish	13	CONTINUE TO Q5

Q5	Where is your job based?		
	England	1	CONTINUE TO Q6
	Wales	2	CONTINUE TO Q6
	Scotland	3	CONTINUE TO Q6

	Northern Ireland	4	CONTINUE TO Q6

Q6	What industry do you work in?		
	Construction	1	CONTINUE TO Q7
	Early Childhood Education and Care	2	CONTINUE TO Q7
	Food Services	3	CONTINUE TO Q7
	Social Care	4	CONTINUE TO Q7
	Other industry	5	CLOSE
	EXCLUDE ANY PARTICIPANT WHO ANSWERS 'OTHER INDUSTRY'		

Q7	What is your job title?		
	_____	1	CONTINUE TO Q8

ASK ALL QUALIFYING PARTICIPANTS

Q8	Thanks for your time today. We think you could be a good fit for the research and the client would really appreciate your valuable input. To recap, the research is a 90 minute online focus group over a videocall platform such as Teams or Zoom. Would you be happy to take part and schedule in an appointment for your participation?		
	Yes	1	Continue
	No	2	Close
	ALL TO CODE YES		

Q9	The focus group will be recorded for internal use only – the recording will not be available to any third parties and is only used to enable the end client to produce transcripts of the focus group. Are you happy to participate on this basis?		
	Yes	1	Continue
	No	2	Close
	ALL TO CODE YES		

Appendix 3 – Discussion guides

Employers

What does 'healthy lifestyle' mean to you? What are some of the key things that come to mind?

- *Is It physical, mental, or both? How do they interact?*

For this project, we're honing in on nutrition, physical activity and sleep. In what way can work/employers in your sector play a role in supporting young employee's health in these spheres?

- *Mental health support/ physical health support*
- *Are you currently experiencing any challenges in your workplaces?*

What are the particular challenges for maintaining a healthy lifestyle for younger employees working in your sectors and organisations? Particularly in relation to nutrition, physical activity and sleep

- *How do they manifest themselves?*
- *How do you collect data about it/monitor it?*
- *How different is this to people of other ages in your sector/organisation?*

What access to support or opportunities at work do young employees have to support a healthy lifestyle in your organisations?

- *Access to EAPs/OH/manager support/lifestyle apps/canteens*
- *Physical workplace, job design, nature of employment contract*
- *If not – why not?*
- *Are these different to what employees of other ages have access to?*
- *Where do they go to do support?*
- *Are any of these currently evaluated?*

What additional types of support or resources would be most helpful in promoting healthy lifestyle behaviours for young employees in your workplace?

- *Are there specific areas (e.g., nutrition and physical activity) that you feel need attention?*
- *How would you prefer to receive support?*
- *How can we make sure any additional support or intervention is engaging and effective for younger workers?*
- *Consideration of health in recruitment and retention practices and, employee benefits offered.*

Young people

- What does 'healthy lifestyle' mean to you? What are some of the key things that come to mind?
 - Is It physical, mental, or both? How do they interact?
- Do you feel like work affects your health?
 - How does work fit within your life when it comes to health?
 - Does it support it? Does it affect it negatively? Or is it a bit of both?
 - Are there specific challenges you face in maintaining a healthy lifestyle while working?
- For this project, we're particularly interested in nutrition, physical activity and sleep. Do you think there are particular challenges for maintaining a healthy lifestyle for young people working in construction / early years / food / social care in relation to these three aspects?
 - Are there things in your workplace environment that affect these aspects (e.g., kitchen facilities, time schedules, job design incl. the tasks you have to do at work, autonomy and agency over your work)?
 - Do any specific aspects of work have an impact on health behaviours outside of work?
- Do you think that work/employers have a role to play in employees' health, again in relation to nutrition, physical activity and sleep?
 - Why yes? Why not?
- Do you think that young people have access to support and opportunities at work that support a healthy lifestyle?
 - Yes, the things that support it are...
 - No, the things that prevent it are...
- Where do you go for support, guidance and advice around health at work? Is it helpful?
 - What are the things that work well and that you'd want to see employers keep doing/do more of?
- What (additional) types of support or changes would be most helpful in promoting healthy lifestyle behaviours in your workplace?
- If you were to design a workplace initiative to promote healthy lifestyle behaviours, what elements or features would it include?
 - Are there specific areas (e.g., nutrition, physical activity, stress management) that you feel need attention?
 - How would you prefer to receive support?
 - How can we make sure this intervention is engaging and effective for young adults like yourselves?

Appendix 4 – Sociodemographic breakdown

Employers

Gender

Female	15
Male	13

Ethnicity

Any other Black/ African/ Caribbean background	2
Caribbean	2
Indian	2
Mixed White and Black Caribbean	1
Pakistani	1
White British	17
White European	2
White Irish	1

Business size

Less than 10	3
10-49	11
50-99	4
100 - 250	3
250 - 999	2
1000+	5

Industry

Construction	8
ECEC	8
Food Services	6
Social Care	6

Job title

Director	1
Manager	16
Owner	1
Senior Manager / Director	9
Supervisor	1

Young people

Gender

Female	16
Male	7

Ethnicity

African	1
Any other Black/ African/ Caribbean background	1
Any other Mixed/Multiple ethnic background	1
Caribbean	1
Indian	3
Pakistani	3
Prefer not to say	1

Industry

Construction	5
ECEC	6
Food Services	5
Social Care	7

Employment status

Full-Time	16
Part-Time	7

White British	11
White European	1
Age	
19-21	5
22-25	18