

# **THE CO-DESIGN OF AN INNOVATIVE ALL-AGE CAREERS FRAMEWORK IN COUNTY DURHAM**

**The Voices of Residents and Businesses: Context for County Durham's All-Age Careers Framework**

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It was a privilege to learn more about stakeholder ideas to further strengthen education, skills, careers and employment support and what makes a difference in their local community. The contents of the proposed All-Age Careers Framework has been informed by you all – thank you!

## **dmh associates background**

In 2008, Dr Deirdre Hughes OBE established dmh associates to encourage collaboration and fresh thinking in careers, education and skills policy, research and practice. The outcomes from the organisation's work are designed to inform and influence policies, research and practice in the UK, Europe and internationally.

The company is based in North Shields, England. Our expertise includes consultancy, evaluation, evidence and impact assessment, literature reviews, qualitative and quantitative research, digital and labour market intelligence (LMI). We provide a full range of activities each tailored to meet specific organisational or individual needs.

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## Background

This report is the first in a series of three evidence-based papers produced by dmh associates on behalf of Durham County Council, the County Durham Economic Partnership, and the UKSPF Technical Funding Group. These organisations commissioned research to support the co-design of an innovative All-Age Careers Framework in County Durham. The voices of County Durham residents and businesses have played a crucial role in shaping the content of the main report *A Shared Vision: Co-Designing an All-Age Careers Framework in County Durham, January 2025*. We are deeply grateful to all those who contributed to this research, with a total of 2,111 residents and businesses taking part.

The findings presented in this paper are based on a range of consultations conducted between July 2024 and December 2025, including online surveys, interviews, and focus group sessions with both young people and adults from across County Durham. Additionally, insights from seven consultation events held throughout the county, as well as key meetings with business, education, local authority, and community organisations, are featured and summarised in the report.

## Introduction

A series of online surveys were designed and distributed to students; parents/carers; leaders, teachers, and careers professionals in schools and colleges; employers and training providers; young people aged 16+ and adults; as well as through a *Call for Evidence: Have Your Say*, which was sent to key stakeholders and organisations such as employer bodies, trade unions, sector bodies (e.g., Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses), community and voluntary organisations.

The overarching aim has been to identify areas of careers provision within County Durham that are working well, where good and innovative practices can be shared, and where improvements can be made. It was important to determine which aspects of careers education, information, advice, and guidance should be included in the design of a new all-age Careers Framework, what good practices need to be maintained, and what new ideas should be considered for future development.

## Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) provision in Schools and Colleges

The following summarises the views of students; parent/carers; school and college leaders and teachers; and those of employers and training providers. Each of these groups were surveyed online to canvass their opinions of the CEIAG delivered to students and young people aged 16 years and under.

1103 students completed an online survey aimed at them. 1029 of the responses are from students attending 10 schools. Smaller numbers of less than 5 students responded from 26 other schools and colleges while there were no responses from students in 12 institutions.

238 parents/carers completed a survey 146 of whom had children attend one of the 55 schools or colleges in the County which is Parkview Secondary school and 59 attended Whitworth Academy. The remaining parents had children who attended 18 other schools or colleges in much lower numbers. Therefore, it is most likely that the main responses received will reflect the experiences of parents in these two schools.

A separate survey was also sent to headteachers/principals and staff including careers leads in schools and colleges throughout county Durham. Of the 54 schools and colleges in County Durham 27 responses were received representing 9 schools of which 2 were maintained secondary schools. 3 are secondary schools, 1 is a sixth form college, 2 are FE colleges and 1 a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). 6 of the respondents are senior leaders, 7 are careers leads and 15 are subject teachers and one was a careers adviser.

The perceptions of students, parent/carers and schools was compared to those of employers in the county of which 25 employers completed an online survey.

## Summary of findings

Despite much effort to promote and advertise the surveys the fact that of 54 schools and colleges in the county the participation rate of school staff from only 9 (17%), which were from those schools for whom the provision of CEIAG was seen as important, indicates that careers provision varies between schools/colleges. This does not infer that for the remaining 45 schools that careers provision is not important but the fact that these schools have not been able to engage with the survey is either an indicator that due to time constraints, there are other issues than CEIAG which may hold a higher priority for them. The schools were relied upon to disseminate the survey to the students and parents for which again the participation was slightly higher 10 (19%) and 14 (22%) respectively.

### Students Potential Career Options and who has helped so far

64% (n=690) of students turn to parents and family to discuss their careers options while only 7% (n=74) seek advice from a careers adviser and 9%(n=99) speak with a careers teacher. It is noticeable that for years 7 to 9 only 3% (n=25) state they get help from a careers adviser indicating that access to this service for these year groups is limited.

This may be due to the limited exposure that students have with careers professionals and teachers in their schools resulting from time and budget constraints.

- In 6 of the 9 schools the careers leader is allocated **1 hour per week** for this role while in 2 others the careers leader is allocated between **2 to 5 hours** and in 1 college the careers leader works between **31-40 hours** in the role.
- 7 of the 9 schools/colleges employs or contracts a professionally qualified careers adviser to come into the school to provide independent careers guidance. One does not because they have a full-time careers leader already in the school/college. Another does not because of insufficient funding.
- Of the 7 schools and colleges who do employ/contract a professional external careers adviser the hours these work varies:
  - For 1 school this is 1-2 hours
  - For 3 schools this is 6 – 8 hours
  - For 2 schools this is 9-16 hours
  - For 1 college they contract a careers adviser for 25-40 hours

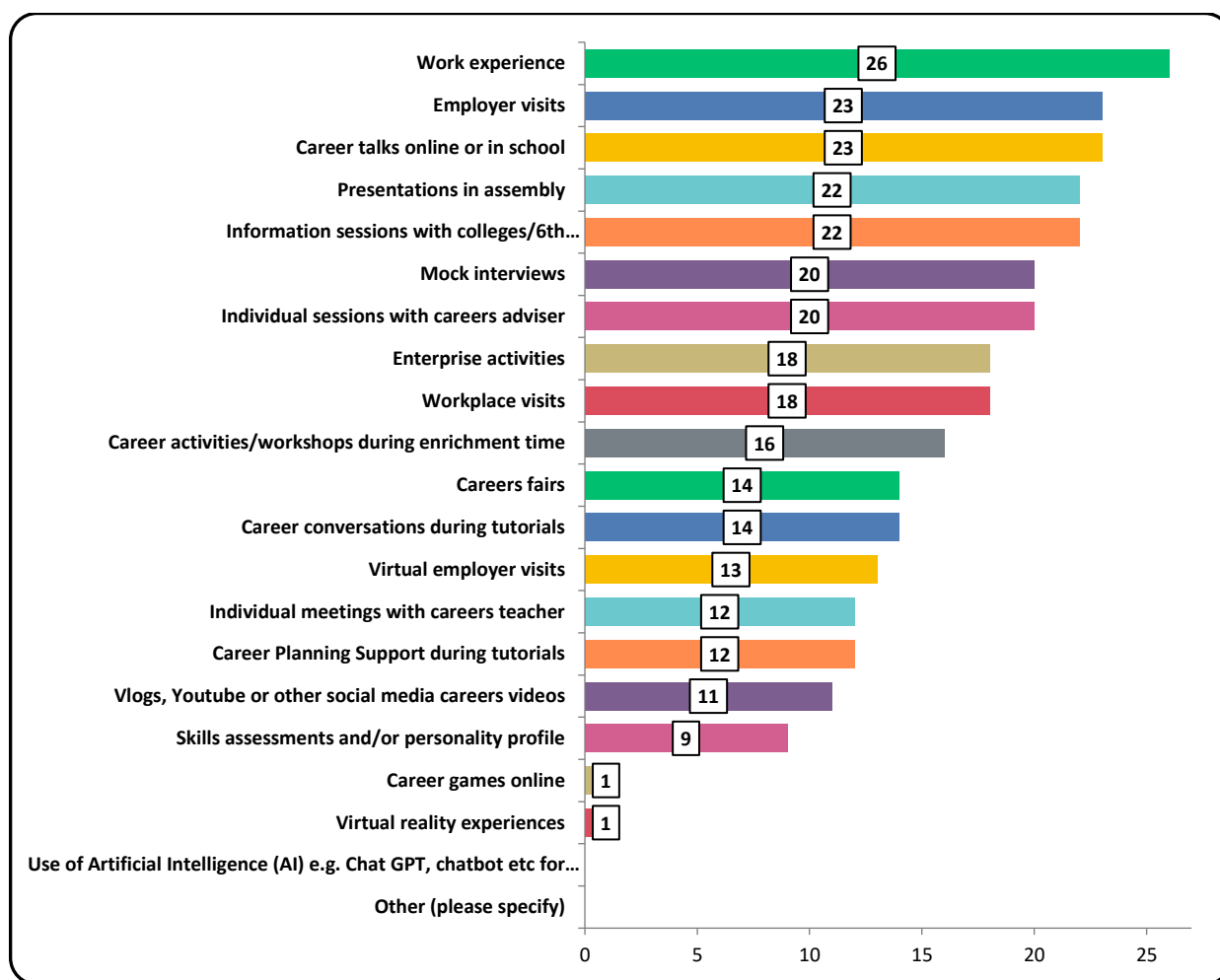
Budgetary constraints are cited as one reason for the limited resources and consequently CEIAG support for older students are prioritised over the younger year groups.

### Types and usefulness of careers activities received

The head teachers/principals and school staff identified the main activities that are delivered in their school/college.

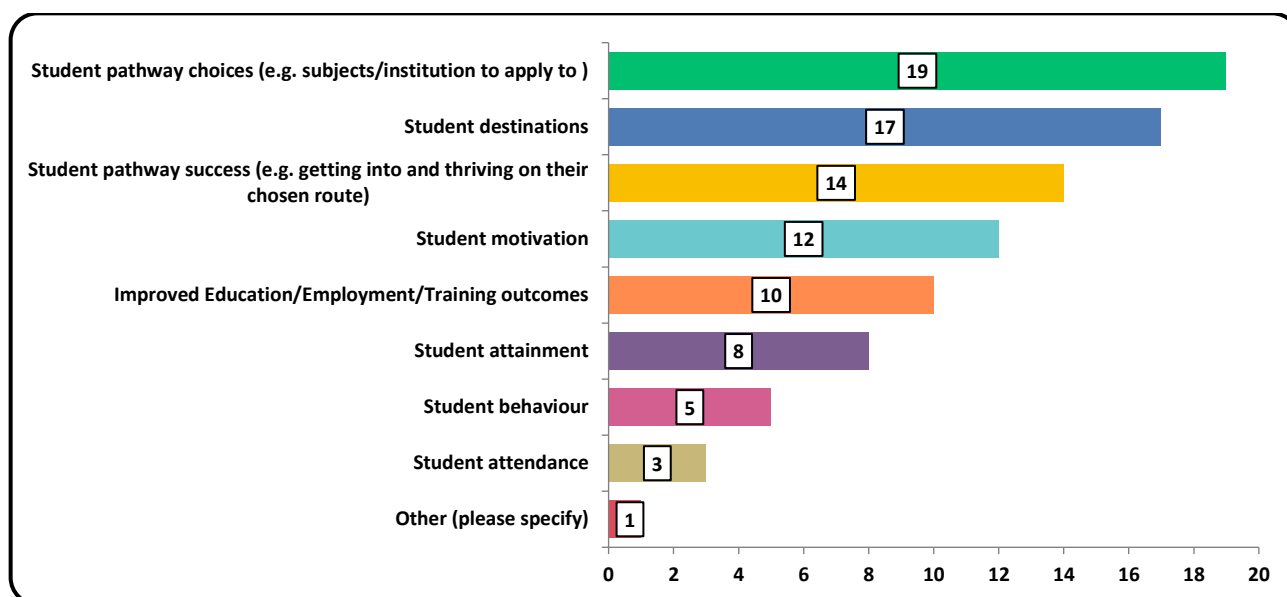
26 of the 27 respondents stated that *work experience* is offered in their school as part of their CEIAG delivery, with *employer visits* and *career talks online* being second as indicated by 23 respondents. This highlights that employer engagement or exposure to the world of work is considered important by those schools/colleges who participated in the online survey. These are shown in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1: Types of CEIAG activities delivered in schools and colleges**



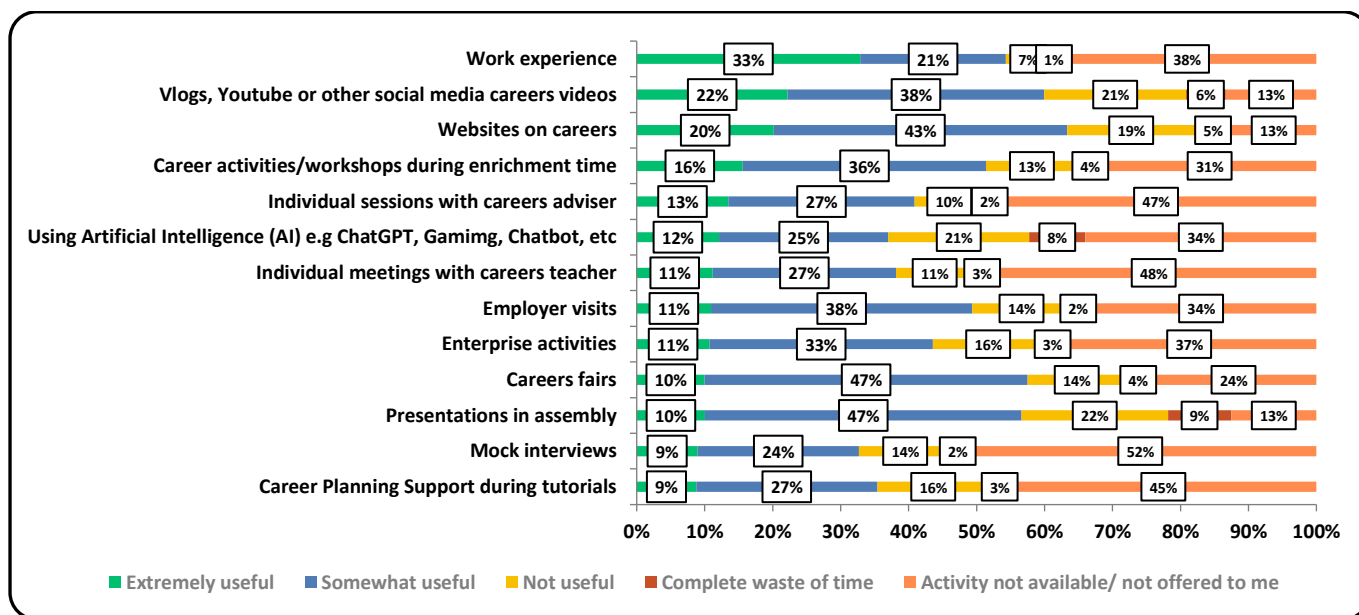
The impact that these activities had on the students are shown in figure 2 below with the main impact identifies as being *student pathway choices*, *student destinations* and *student pathway successes* as illustrated in Figure 2 below.

**Figure 2: Impact that careers activities have upon students**



By comparison, students were asked to rank which careers activities have been most useful to them so far. Figure 3 below illustrates that the most useful activity selected by the students was *work experience*, with a third (33%, n=342) of the students rating it as "extremely useful." This was followed by *vlogs, YouTube, or other social media careers videos*, selected by 22% (n=223) of respondents. The fact that work experience, or exposure to the world of work, is highly valued by students reflects similar feedback provided by their teachers and careers advisers, who arrange these types of activities within their schools. Additionally, the high value placed on vlogs and social media as sources of information suggests that these platforms should be further utilised to enhance and improve careers provision. Employer-produced videos and vlogs could be a valuable addition to the student careers offer or entitlement.

**Figure 3: CEIAG activities ranked by students**



The above question was further analysed to investigate possible differences by year groups.

- 49%(n=149) of the older year groups (years 10 and above) identified *work experience* as being the most useful.
- 22% (n=75) of the older year groups identified *websites on careers* as second most useful followed by 21% (n=68) claiming that *individual sessions with a careers adviser* was most useful.

This compares with responses from years 7 to 9

- 26% (n=177) found *work experience* as being most useful. It should be noted that for 46% (n=316) this activity was not offered to them.
- 25% (n=170) reported *vlogs, YouTube or other social media careers videos* as being second most useful to them.
- *Individual sessions with a careers adviser* and *mock interviews* were the activities that were not made available to over 57% (n=395) of this age group and consequently these were recorded as being least useful to this age group.

As identified above, where vlogs and social media are preferred by students, and because it is difficult for employers to engage fully with younger students, the responses suggest there is scope for careers advisers and employers to harness the power of social media platforms to increase younger students' exposure to the world of work.

### How much has careers support at school/college helped

When asked the question *Do you agree that careers support in school has helped you?*

- 35% (n=382) agreed that the careers support they received in school helped them.

The responses to this varied between the older year groups compared with their younger counterparts.

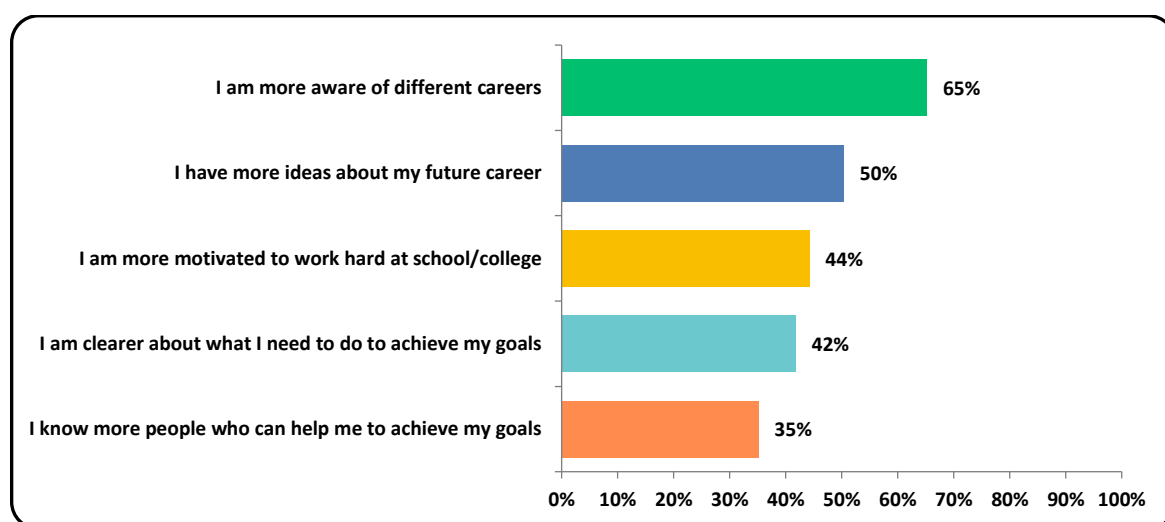
- 41% (n=142) of years 10 and above compared with 33% (n=234) of years 7 to 9 agreeing with the above statement.

This may reflect the greater volume of support offered to older students compared to their younger peers. It could also be a result of the differing activities available to the two groups, with mock interviews, work experience, and individual sessions being more accessible to the older students.

### The type of help that students received

How the students were best helped by the careers advice they received at school is summarised in Figure 4 below. Of the 768 students who responded to the question, the majority (65%, n=501) stated that they are now more aware of different careers, 50% (n=387) have more ideas about their future career, and 44% (n=340) feel more motivated to work hard at school or college.

**Figure 4: How students were helped by the CEIAG activities at school/college**



### Comments from students

Some claimed have no help:

*"I haven't had any lessons really on careers" – Year 8 student*

*"It hasn't" – Year 7 student*

*"I didn't get the support i needed in secondary school"*

While others indicated the type of help they needed and received:

*"I struggled with my attendance in year 9 and my school held a future steps evening. I got to talk to universities and colleges to see what I need to do and where I can go to become a paramedic which makes me want to keep my attendance up and do well in school" – Year 9 student*

*"The best thing has been the careers fairs because it allowed me to actually talk to people and find out what it's like to have that job etc." – Year 8 student*

*"given motivation to succeed and better myself in both knowledge and more" – Year 11 student*

*"I am clearer about what I need to do to achieve my goals" – Year 11*

The above comments show that all year groups have been in receipt of help and support and that the younger year groups appear to have received different type of activities e.g. the year 8 student above who attended careers fairs.



## Parent/carers perceptions

When questioned about what they know of CEIAG provision in their child(ren)s school or college parents and carers were divided in their responses:

- 87% (n=199) of parents/carers do not know who the careers leader is in their children's school or college
- 41% (n=91) of parents/carers agree or strongly agree that their child(ren) are in receipt of CEIAG while at school or college
- 17% (n=39) disagree that their child(ren) are in receipt of CEIAG while at school or college
- 42% (n=95) don't know if their child(ren) are in receipt of CEIAG while at school or college.

These responses may be due to lack of communication from the college or lack of communication from their child(ren)

*"They have received none"*

*"It appears that some children go on trips etc but my daughter has never been given an opportunity. She has had a talk from the NHS in school & Houghal College."*

*"It's generally pushed that everyone will attend university"*

*"The school are or providing basic careers guidance but it does not cover all pupils. I believe they only have capacity for a small number of pupils as it's an external organisation."*

*"Although they are receiving things like taster days at the local college i don't think they have offered anything more bespoke or had a conversation with my child about what they actually want to do or given specific personal guidance as they are unsure still about their options."*

*"Given a job role to research across different subject areas on a regular basis as homework. Also, regular emails and sessions re careers. My daughter went on residential trip to Oxford uni to find out more re studying there. The school is outstanding and this shows in all they do."*

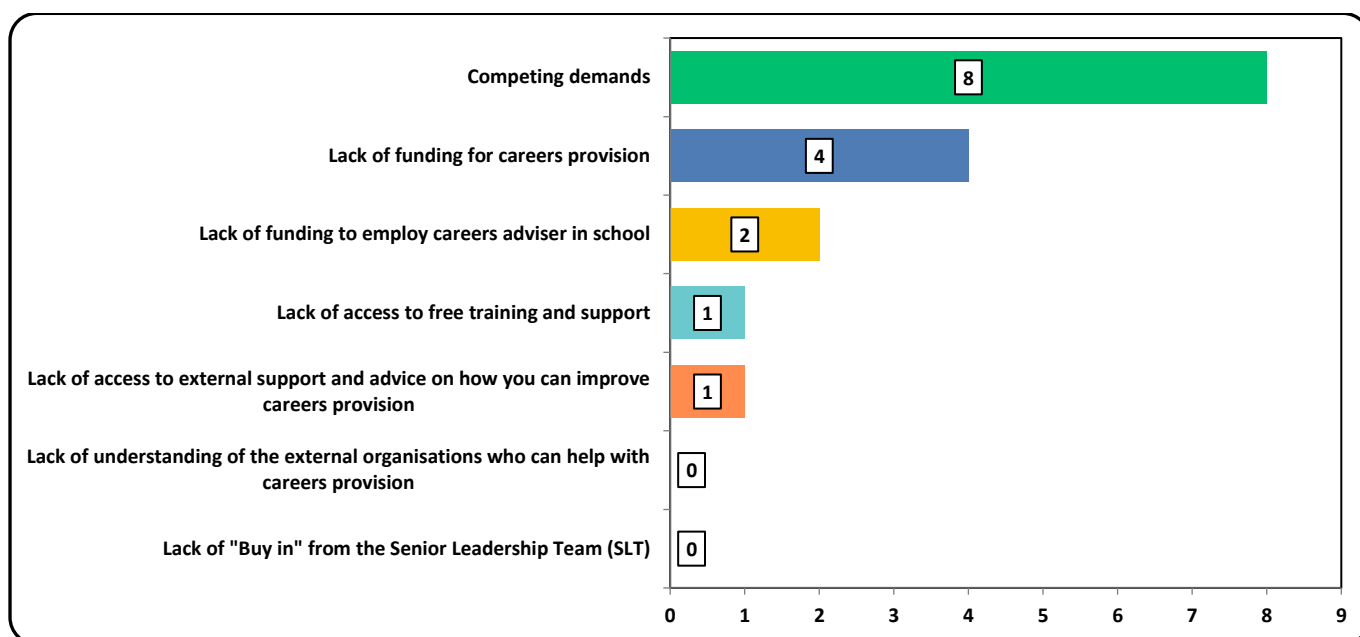
*"I believe discussions happen but they aren't meaningful."*

*"Support from a careers adviser"*

What this indicates is that CEIAG in schools and colleges varies between institutions, and the delivery to students differs across year groups. In some schools and colleges, limited resources are prioritised for older groups, while younger groups do receive some form of careers provision. This finding is supported by responses received directly from the schools/colleges themselves:

When asked the question *If your school or college has struggled to make the progress you think is needed for young people's careers support what are the main reasons for this?* the reasons indicated by headteachers/ senior leaders and careers leads are shown in the Figure 5 below.

**Figure 5: Reason why schools/colleges struggle to make the progress they think is needed for young people's careers support**



The chart above highlights that the main reason identified by 8 individuals who are senior leaders or careers leads in 4 of the schools is *competing demands*. The second and third reasons identified, *lack of funding* were noted by an additional 2 schools.

This further indicates some of the challenges faced by schools and colleges. Limited resources result in prioritising delivery to older students, for whom career decisions are most pressing, while tailoring the types of delivery for younger students based on available resources. Any future delivery programme must ensure that all students have access to CEIAG. While resources are limited, solutions must be found to overcome this challenge by identifying alternative provisions to support younger students in the early stages of their school life.

#### **How can career guidance at school/college be improved?**

When asked *What do you think would improve careers guidance for you?* students who answered this question replied:

10% (n=93) of respondents identified that they wanted more engagement with the world of work either through visits or work experience:

*"I would like to have employer visits to be able to speak to someone in the field of work I want to go into to gain a better understanding."*

*"More chances at helping us gain work experience."*

*"More people who have had experience to come in."*

*"More professional workers from different careers/work spaces come in and introduce their careers and the skills."*

10% (n=90) stated they would like more careers advice or at least someone to talk to about their careers:

*"If there was a career guidance person in school that could help me explore my options for future careers as I get older."*

*"If there was a specific teacher for careers."*

*"Someone talking to me about my career."*

*"1 On 1 Conversations to discuss future careers."*

*"I think it would be much better if we could get extra support with careers because the school doesn't really tell us about how to support ourselves after school finishes."*

*"More one - to - one sessions tailored to that person possibly."*

Younger students raised the issue of insufficient support for their year groups 7, 8 and 9

*"Input for practical careers from year 7."*

*"If career advisors came into all year groups not just 11-13."*

*"I get nothing (I'm in year 8)."*

*"if I could have had help sooner in school, I think its something we need to think about from year 7..."*

*"Work experience in yr 8 and 9 as well as yr 10."*

*"a careers convention for year 9."*

#### **Parent/carer perceptions**

- 59% (n=139) of parents believe their children have some ideas about their future career aspirations
- 39% (n=90) agree that their child(ren)s school supports them well in linking subjects to future careers
- 20%(n=44) disagree that the school supports their child(ren) in linking subject to future careers while 41% (n=94) don't know either way
- 25% (n=58) agree that the school bring employer/employees from the world of work into the classroom, while 53% (n=121) don't know and a further 21% (n=49) disagree.

These responses are further qualified by comments volunteered by parents/carers. Some parents have identified that some schools focus more on exams and students moving onto university at the expense of other options:

*"No employer connections that I'm aware of."*

*"Not for rural careers no employer connections!"*

*"My daughter's current school seems to assume most children will go into Higher Education before work so is perhaps less focused on careers than good grades at GCSE and A-level. In contrast, another school we have visited was more focused on encouraging children to consider their pathway from GCSEs to a career."*

*"The school are very focused on children passing exams and talk about going to university but this is not linked to careers. There has been little or no focus on children who may not be academic and would like to access vocation routes including apprenticeships."*

*"The teachers have not communicated with me, and my child has struggles with academia that have not been addressed and so is feeling unmotivated and low self-esteem and currently does not believe there will be anything for him after school."*

*"Organised visits to employers premises to discuss careers and links to relevant subjects at school."*

*"Homework for subjects are research a career in that area. They suggest options to pick from usually."*

These responses reflect the feedback above, where it is clear that, although schools and colleges recognise the importance of CEIAG, limited resources lead to some form of triage being performed by the careers leader. There is also evidence from the responses that the problem may be more pronounced for those in rural communities.

### **Employer Perceptions of CEIAG in schools/colleges**

- 68% (n=25) of the employers/training providers who answered the survey said they recruited a school or college leaver as an apprentice in the last 3 years – 4 recruited more than 10
- 25% (n=6) have amended their recruitment strategy in favour of apprentices and a further 25%(n=6) have made some changes towards recruiting apprentices, while 16% (n=4) changed recruitment strategy in favour of graduates.

For some, the policy changed as a result of the introduction of the apprenticeship levy. For others, they have always had a set strategy where they recruit both graduates and apprentices in a fixed ratio.

### **Level of Satisfaction with Work Readiness of Young People**

- The highest levels of satisfaction were reported with the work readiness of college leavers, with 64% (n=14) stating this.
- Second highest levels of satisfaction was reported by 59% (n=13) of responses for the work readiness of university graduates.
- The lowest levels of satisfaction was recorded by 36%(n=8) of respondents for the work readiness of school leavers.

This last result may be expected as school leavers will be younger and less mature than their college and university counterparts. Reasons given are:

#### **Lack of Work Experience**

*“Time management, work ethic and managing conflicting priorities in the world of work is missing due to lack of work experience previously”*

*“lack of work experience straight from school”*

#### **Attitude to work**

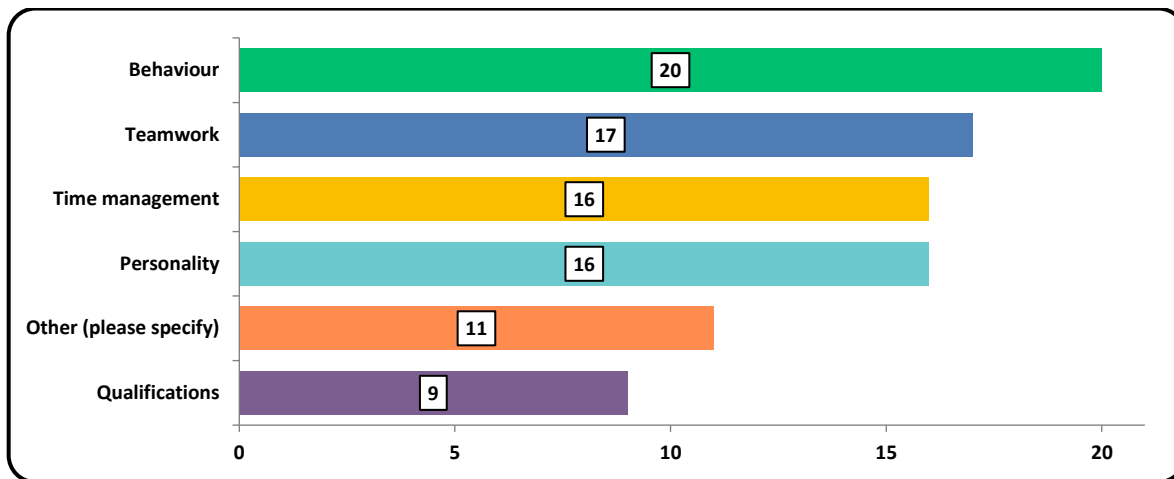
*“School leavers seem to be unable to stay focused the whole day, and often lack communication like if they are late or have doctors’ appointments. We find it hard to keep them for longer than a month.”*

*“In general, satisfied. Circa 6 have been successful. We have 2 who did not make the level due to absence topics and attitude to work.”*

### **Skills Employers are looking for**

Figure 6 below shows the skills that employers consider to be most important in their recruitment of both young people and adults. Clearly behaviour, teamwork and time management rank highest over having qualifications which was ranked lowest on the list.

**Figure 6: Skills that employers consider to important when recruiting**



In the category labelled “other” the following were comments volunteered by the respondents:

*Communication & work ethic; willingness to work and learn, positive attitude; ability/willingness to travel; personal resilience, communication skills, initiative, problem solving, creativity; and passion towards chosen field.*

When asked *What is the one single thing you would want from young people?* this open-ended question was answered to indicate that employers were seeking what can only be termed as *employability skills* and the recruits can be trained in the role:

*“A commitment to learn and take responsibility for their part in the service we provide - they don't need to arrive knowing what to do.”*

The following words were used in their replies: *work ethic; attitude to work; commitment; honesty; motivation; eagerness; and enthusiasm.*

### **Importance of Work Experience**

- 72% (n=18) of employers who participated in this survey believe that having work experience is at least quite important or very important
- 72% (n=19) of employers feel that school leavers have little or no understanding of their business sector well enough to know what skills are needed to succeed in it
- 69% (n=16) feel that college and sixth form leavers have little or no understanding of their sector well enough to know what skills are needed to succeed in it
- 30% (n=9) of employers feel that university leavers in their early 20's have little or no understanding of their sector well enough to know what skills are needed to succeed in it

### **What is an what is not working well?**

Employers were asked *In terms of careers and employability provision, what do you think is not working well?* Replies included:

Issues with CEIAG provision in education

*“Few well-informed CEIAG professionals.”*

*“Not enough guidance on alternative options in education.”*

*“Not enough apprenticeship opportunities. Apprenticeships not promoted as a positive outcome. Some teachers not interested to find out about apprenticeships.”*

*“The 'bar' is set very low, in terms of the level of careers guidance a school must provide - it should be higher.”*

Lack of work experience or employer engagement

*"Lack of work experience opportunities"*

*"More work experience opportunities"*

*"Lack of work experience when in school"*

Lack of education for work

*"Need to be more educated practically from an early educational level."*

*"Basic training for site work."*

*"Lack of competence in employability related knowledge and behaviours."*

*"Customer service skills."*

*"Understanding of the world of work."*

Employers were also asked *In terms of careers and employability provision, what do you think is working well in the current system?* the main replies included:

CIAG in schools

*"Acknowledgement that there are young people at risk of becoming NEET, who need extra support."*

*"One on one support."*

*"Careers information and online info."*

*"Mixed picture, some schools offer more than others."*

Work experience and employer engagement was raised by most respondents

*"Relationships with local schools, work experience."*

*"Volunteering-paid work placements."*

*"Educational engagement - Durham Works Programme."*

*"Increased Employer engagement"*

Apprenticeships and T Levels

*"Engineering T-Levels, Apprentices, STEM visits, factory visits for young people."*

*"Apprenticeships and t levels are great!"*

*"ASK Apprenticeship support in schools."*

Some of the contradictions in the responses from employers to these two questions illustrate again that CEIAG varies across the county, with some employers offering positive perceptions of careers provision, while others have the opposite view.

## **Conclusion**

### **Variations in CEIAG offer**

CEIAG provision in schools and colleges varies across County Durham where a few schools have allocated sufficient funding to be able to provide either a full-time careers leader or external careers adviser in the institution. Consequently, many schools/colleges are compelled to prioritise provision for their students according to year group and those older students.

This is reflected by the responses received from the younger year groups some of whom expressed the feeling that they are not receiving the help they need.

Buy in from the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) in most of the schools who responded to the survey highlighted the importance they placed on CEIAG. The main issue is funding for most schools to be able to afford this provision.

### **Schools focussed on passing exams**

Some parents/carers and employers have the perception that schools/colleges concentrate more on academic achievement and less on employability skills or exposure to the world of work. Some employers believe that schools hold apprenticeships as a lower priority over promoting going to university. As one parent/carer indicated:

*"I think it would be helpful if all the respective subject areas staff within schools/ FE colleges have direct links with their respective industry sectors ( as most teachers haven't worked outside the Education sector). Companies (ideally local) from each sector should be pursued /encouraged to have strong links, pursued by the school /college so that they can offer demonstrations/ site visits etc. for information on the sort of jobs that come up within that sector."*

### **Employer engagement and Work experience**

Employers identified the skills they look for when recruiting and emphasized employability skills such as *behaviour, teamwork, and time management*. To address these needs, employers want schools and colleges to include more employability skills in their curricula and assert that work experience or exposure to the world of work is important, with 72% (n=18) stating that work experience is essential. It should be noted that these responses come from employers who took the time to complete the survey, and they are likely to be those who also engage with schools and colleges to offer these activities.

The young people themselves also expressed the importance they place on experiences of work and work experience with over 54% (n=594) indicating this as the most useful CEIAG activity they would like to have.

The provision of work experience is varied, with some employers expressing that it is working well, while others express the opposite view.

### **Apprenticeships and T-Levels**

The focus in many schools is on encouraging students to go to university rather than pursue an apprenticeship. Employers and some parents share this perception, believing that apprenticeships and T-levels are undervalued.

*"Not enough apprenticeship opportunities. Apprenticeships not promoted as a positive outcome. Some teachers not interested to find out about apprenticeships."*

## Survey of Young People 16+ and Adults

The aim of this survey was to gather insights from young people aged 16+, as well as adults, about their experiences of careers provision in County Durham and to identify potential improvements to service provision now and in the future. 48 participated in this survey of which:

- 17(36%) were over 50 years old
- 15(32%) were aged between 36 and 50 years old
- 8(17%) were aged between 25 and 35 years old
- 4(9%) were between 18 and 24 years old
- 3(6%) were aged between 16 and 17

22 (47%) were in employment; 19 (40%) were unemployed; 2 were retired; 1 had just left school; 1 was disabled and seeking work; and 1 was in voluntary work. In terms of geographical location, all respondents were evenly spread across the main towns in County Durham.

### Importance of careers guidance and where to find it

16 (33%) of respondents claimed that careers guidance for them is *essential* while 13 (27%) said it is *very important* and a further 15 (31%) believe it is *important*. Only 4 respondents said it is not important at all.

Just over half of the respondents (25) said they are receiving *enough careers guidance and support to help make the most of their talents and skills*, while the remaining 23 disagreed. It was noted that those who were satisfied with the support they received had been in contact with an organisation or had spoken to someone about their careers, while the unsatisfied group had not and had primarily relied on the internet or online services for help.

29 (62%) of the participants in the surveys *had, in the last 3 years, spoken to someone from a careers or employability service in County Durham to explore career options*. Most (11) had spoken with representatives from Employability Durham; 6 had spoken with DurhamEnable; and 2 had contacted DurhamWorks. Others had spoken with the National Careers Service, <sup>1</sup>Durham County Council Careers Service, or their social worker.

When asked where would they go to get careers information advice or guidance most 16(34%) said *the internet or online*, while 5 (11%) identified the *Jobcentre* and 4(9%) opted for the *National Careers Service*. 3 said they would turn to *DurhamEnable* and a further 3 said *Employability Durham*, 2 said *DurhamWorks*. 4 (10%) respondents said they did not know where to go.

Figure 7 below shows how those who responded to the survey would want to learn about careers and work options that young people and adults consider to be most valuable and important to them. The green bars clearly show that for most 30 (64%) the most important activity is *individual careers meetings with a careers adviser* with 18 (38%) identifying *a skills assessment tool* as being important.

The importance of having a careers adviser was stressed as being necessary with the participants since some form of contact with a careers adviser *by email or telephone* was also identified as being important as were *group sessions with a careers adviser*, as highlighted by 14 (30%) and 10 (21%) respectively.

Online and the use of ChatGPT ranked lowest in terms of being important to the respondents. This may be due to limited access to the internet or lack of exposure to these activities especially for the older adults less familiar with technology. It was noticeable that more of the older adults (35+) opted for *a skills assessment tool* compared to their younger counterparts (under 24) for whom their second preference was *virtual reality experiences of the workplace*. This should not come as a surprise since older adults will most likely have already gained experience of the workplace and obtained skills.

Figure 8 below indicates the types of activities that the respondents indicated would be of most benefit to them. The activity selected by 32(67%) was *practical learning i.e. hands on experience in the workplace or training workshops*, followed by 25 (52%) opting for *involvement of employers offering practical support e.g. work tasters*

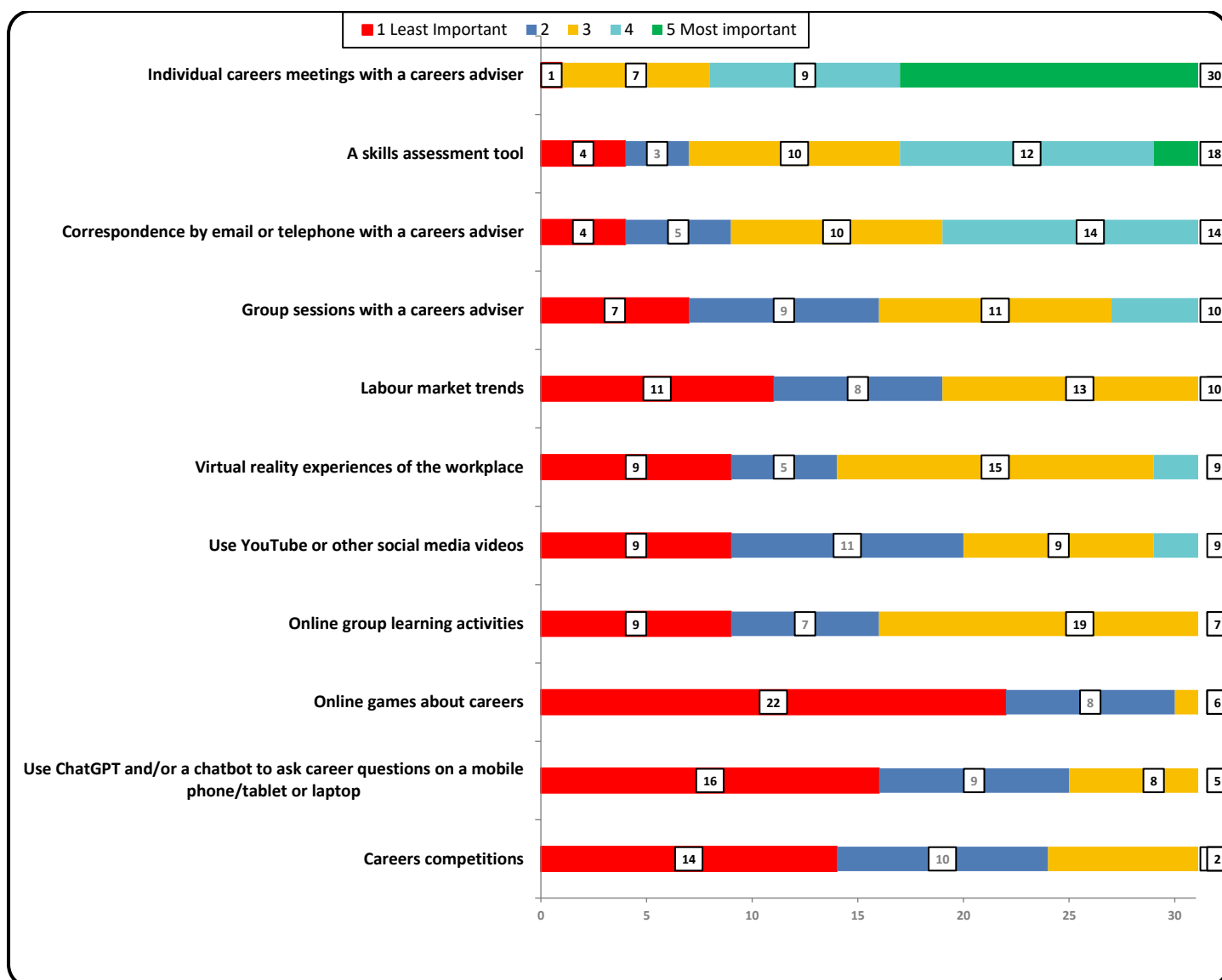
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<sup>1</sup> Durham County Council Careers Service no longer exists but was in existence when the respondent met with them

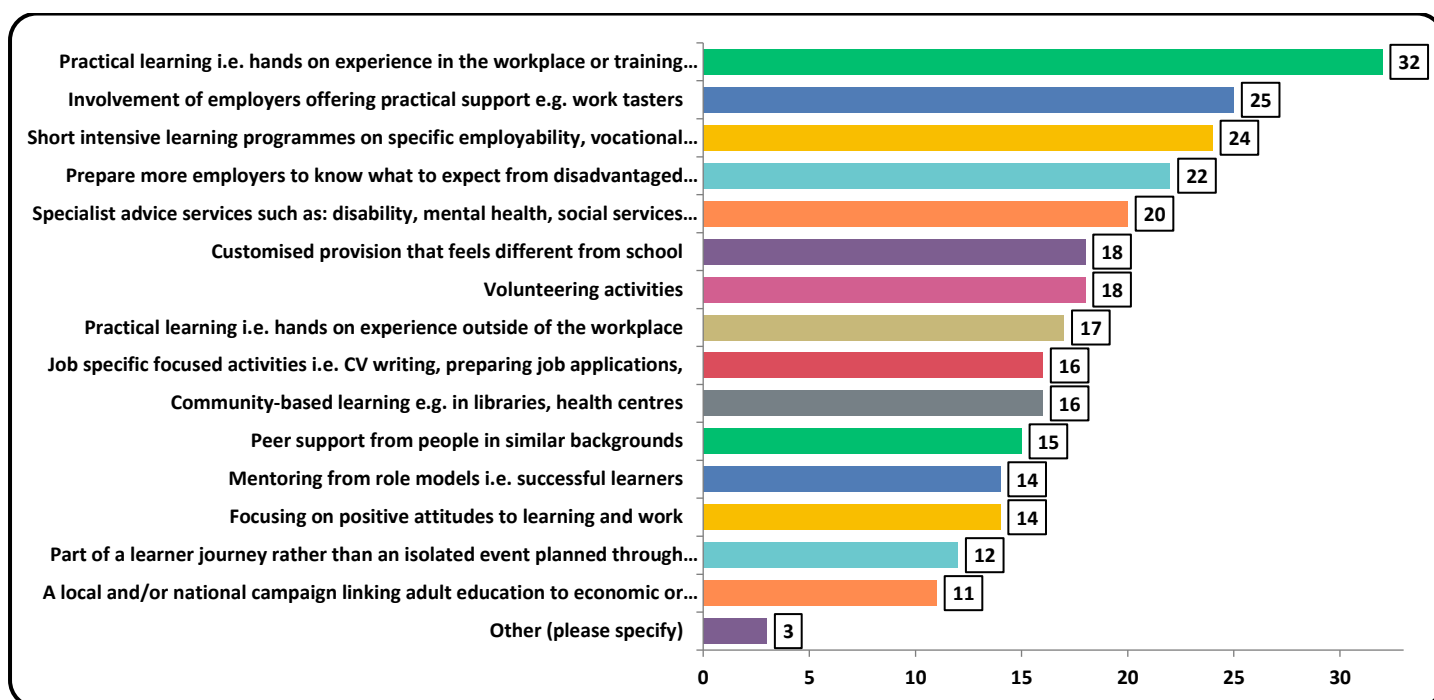


and 24 (50%) choosing *short intensive learning programmes on specific employability, vocational or personal development skills tailored to my needs*.

**Figure 7: How young people 16+ and adults want to learn about work and careers options**



**Figure 8: Activities that young people 16+ and adults see as most beneficial to them**



The young people and adults were asked how they would like to see the delivery of career guidance in County Durham improve.

Improve accessibility to all

*"Bespoke offer that ranges from primary through to later life, but offers progression."*

*"Face to face and online presence that is easy to locate and accessible to all."*

*"More accessible for adults. It is not easy to find the information. I would feel they were not interested due to my age and educational background."*

*"To be relevant to me. I've got 2 degrees but they only look at young cheaper people so I feel yuk!"*

*"Be available for everyone."*

*"More of a youth work approach towards support for 16-25 year old built on specific IAG. All age careers from school to adulthood."*

Places and spaces (particularly for rural communities)

*"Careers Guidance in local library or community centre, to save travel costs."*

*"Increase automation/AI to allow for greater guidance to special cases."*

Support for career changers

*"Be more transparent to people that are employed and feel like they have not enough skills to change their careers. Most of them do not know what support is available."*

*"Be more active Encourage learning at any age and that people need to adapt and keep learning new skills."*

*"More listening when changing careers."*

*"There is a lack of services for people in work, but where the work is unsuitable, low paid and low skilled. People in these jobs cannot access services to help them improve their prospects. Where*

*job pay and conditions negatively affect someone's health and wellbeing, this can lead them to have to leave the workforce before they can access help. More support should be available to people in work to maintain or improve their work."*

#### Support for disadvantaged groups

*"More disability focused support and transportation support, more working with companies who will employ disabled people and promoting the skills and assets and benefits of highly effective and reliable disabled individuals."*

#### Funding for specific services

*"Fund DurhamEnable!"*

#### Better collaboration

*"I would like to see a more joined approach and a focal point to go to for the best advice."*

*"More close connection."*

*"Multi-agency including charity & voluntary sector as they have more realistic approaches."*

### **Employers perspectives**

When asked *What is the one single thing you would want from young people and adults in terms of your recruitment strategies*, very few employers identified skills and experience or qualifications. Most employers replied mainly with one-word answers citing: *enthusiasm, resilience, commitment, honesty, drive to succeed, positive attitude, personality and eagerness*.

#### Employers advice

*"To not be embarrassed about being inexperienced at applying for and interviewing for new jobs"*

*"To identify transferrable skills to move into other sectors"*

When asked what they believed to be working well for adults in the current system:

#### Digital platforms

*"Advertising of vacancies on digital platforms, making them easier to find."*

*"Use of job platforms like Indeed and exposure to large business in North East that bring structure and rigour to working practices."*

*"Adult careers advice and online info."*

#### Support services

*"Employability Teams Support /Care Academy."*

*"In depth employability support backed up with Housing support needs and Financial Inclusion advice."*

#### Training and courses on offer

*"Level 7 apprenticeships."*

*"Courses that help people match skills to sectors including completing forms and navigating systems."*

*"Further education."*

### **By contrast, what is not working well:**

A need for better understanding and training

*"Jobcentre provision not working. Jobcentre managers don't understand Manufacturing and engineering requirements. Jobcentre has an administrative approach to activity rather than a skills and requirements approach.. The job seekers who the Jobcentre support have attitude and willingness to work issues. They tick a box to attend an interview but often don't turn up or are not interested which is a great shame."*

*"Understanding corporate opportunities and transferability of skills from other sectors."*

*"Wider training courses."*

*"Jobseekers on Universal Credit should be given more tailored 121 support to suit their individual needs."*

*"Poor attendance to employment related workshops/engagements - Not fully understanding the opportunity?"*

*"Lack of funding for people that are 19+ and want to complete a full-time course."*

*"Inadequate strategic investment in CEIAG."*

*"Employers to understand barriers people face when moving into employment. More need to be flexible."*

## **Conclusion**

While the number of responses to the survey from young people and adults was disappointingly low, we have learned some valuable insights that can feed into the co-design of the all-age careers framework.

Most (60%) of the respondents view careers provision as essential or very important; however, there were mixed responses regarding whether they feel they receive enough careers guidance and support to help make the most of their talents and skills. Approximately half of the respondents agreed, while the other half did not. It was noted that those who were satisfied with the support they received had been in contact with an organisation or had spoken to someone about their careers, while those who were unsatisfied had mainly relied on the internet or online services for help and had not spoken to anyone. This may suggest that they had not been informed about or referred to these services, highlighting the need for better promotion.

The types of support respondents found most helpful include one-on-one meetings or group sessions with a careers adviser, or at least having the ability to contact a careers adviser. Other forms of support valued by respondents should be tailored to their needs, with older and more experienced adults favouring skills assessments, while younger respondents preferred virtual work placements or work experience. All respondents identified practical work experience or work tasters as an important option.

## Consultations with Vulnerable Young People and Adults

Five focus groups and 30 one-on-one interviews were conducted with vulnerable young people and adults to gain insights into their experiences of careers provision in County Durham and to explore potential improvements to service provision in the future. The findings closely aligned with those from the survey of young people 16+ and adults.

### Careers support received at school or college

Feedback from participants regarding careers support at school or college was overwhelmingly negative.

- The majority reported receiving little to no support.
- The six young people interviewed acknowledged receiving *some* support; however, they described it as “very brief,” “spread too far apart over the years,” and “often unexpected.”
- All adults interviewed responded “No” to the following questions:
  - *In the careers activities you experienced at school or college, did you meet any employers or professionals from the world of work?*
  - *Were there any projects or videos about jobs or careers?*
  - *Did anyone visit your school or college to discuss jobs and careers?*

These findings highlight significant gaps in career guidance provision and reinforce the need for a more structured and accessible support system.

### Experiences with the Jobcentre

Many respondents spoke of their experiences with the Jobcentre. Feedback was predominantly negative, with many individuals reporting significant challenges, stress, and a lack of personalised support.

#### Negative Experiences:

Many participants expressed feelings of stress, anxiety, and frustration due to perceived inflexibility and lack of empathy from Jobcentre staff.

*“I have had a really negative experience with Jobcentre and Universal Credit. It’s been incredibly stressful and has negatively affected my mental health. They show no empathy and apply the same criteria to everyone without considering individual circumstances. I was pressured into roles that required excessive travel—up to 3 to 4 hours daily—or jobs I didn’t want to do.” (Adult)*

*“I was sent for an assessment while both my parents were dying, and I was struggling with suicidal thoughts and self-harm. Despite this, my benefits were stopped. I barely managed to get through each day, and I’m amazed I’m still here. I had to fight through a tribunal, which reinstated my benefits immediately. This has happened to me twice.” (Adult)*

*“The Jobcentre is better now than it used to be, but they still don’t truly care. They focus solely on getting you into any job without considering whether it suits your circumstances, which often worsens people’s mental health.” (Adult)*

*“I’ve had only negative experiences. The staff at the Jobcentre look down their noses at you.” (Adult)*

*“I had no idea that support like Employability Durham existed. I asked the Jobcentre multiple times if there was funding or support available to help me find courses, but they provided nothing. Even at my most recent Universal Credit appointment, I got the same response—nothing.” (Adult)*

*“The pressure from the Jobcentre to find work is immense. They sent me to work at concerts, which required two buses each way and inconsistent shifts. The constant pressure and unsuitable job placements took a toll on my mental health. Thankfully, they now contact me by phone instead of requiring in-person visits.” (Adult)*

*“Jobcentre staff don’t understand my condition. They need better training to be more compassionate, understanding, and supportive.” (Adult)*

### Positive Experiences:

Despite the challenges, some individuals reported positive interactions and support from the Jobcentre. Some participants found their advisers helpful and supportive in assisting with job searches and career development.

*"I go every two weeks, and the person there is very helpful. We explore government websites together, and they helped me write my CV for a job in retail." (Young Person, aged 14-19)*

*"I needed mental health support, and the Jobcentre referred me to the right services. They also connected me with Employability Durham, which was really helpful." (Adult)*

*"The Jobcentre introduced me to Employability Durham to help me get back on track. My job coaches were understanding and accommodating, especially with scheduling appointments since I rely on my dad for transportation." (Adult with SEN)*

*"If it weren't for the Jobcentre referring me to Employability Durham, I might not have sought help on my own, given how bad my mental health was at the time." (Adult)*

These varied experiences highlight the need for improvements in training, flexibility, and a more individualised approach to support offered by Jobcentre staff.

### Travel and Transport

Transport challenges emerged as a common theme, with many participants highlighting the difficulties posed by County Durham's rural landscape and the limited availability of public transport. These challenges are compounded by the fact that most courses and job opportunities are concentrated in larger towns and cities, making access difficult for those in more remote areas.

*"I'm only being offered online functional skills courses through Durham Learn because their classroom-based courses are too far away. My partner has the car, and public transport in my area isn't good enough. Although I receive some face-to-face support for Maths refreshers, the next stage is entirely online due to where I live." (Adult)*

*"Getting around County Durham without a car is really difficult. Improved public transport would make it easier for me to access college or work." (Adult)*

*"The bus service where I live is really unreliable. There are only one or two buses an hour, and they often don't show up. Public transport needs to be more reliable because missing a bus can really affect my mental health when I'm trying to get somewhere important." (Adult)*

These responses highlight the need for improved and more reliable public transport options to ensure equitable access to education, training, and employment opportunities across the county.

### Challenges with Courses

Participants highlighted several recurring challenges related to accessing and navigating courses, which often created barriers to further education and career progression. Key concerns included:

- Difficulty finding accurate and up-to-date course information.
- Navigating online information, which was often confusing and not user-friendly.
- Lack of direct contact with knowledgeable individuals for guidance.
- Colleges failing to respond to inquiries.
- Conflicting information regarding course requirements and eligibility.
- Financial barriers, including the cost and availability of funding.
- Transport issues and limited local course availability.

### Participant Experiences

*“Everyone gives me a different answer about the qualifications I need and whether I have to start from scratch.” (Adult)*

*“I’m motivated and have plenty of qualifications, but I’ve realized I didn’t follow the exact pathway I needed. Because my qualifications only cover part of the diploma content, I’m not eligible for funding to complete the full diploma. I don’t know what to do next.” (Adult)*

*“Both my children are in further and higher education, but they’re not studying exactly what they want. For example, my daughter is doing performing arts for theatre, but she really wants to do music writing and production. Unfortunately, those courses aren’t available locally.” (Adult)*

*“If I had to navigate the course application process on my own, I’d have given up without support from Employability Durham.” (Adult)*

*“I didn’t think I was eligible for courses or funding. Without the support I received from Employability Durham, I wouldn’t have even considered the courses I’m now doing.” (Adult)*

*“Applying for courses or jobs involves a lot of online forms and complicated information, but there’s no one to talk to. Without the support I’m getting, I wouldn’t be able to do it alone.” (Adult)*

*“The information about courses isn’t clear. What’s online is confusing. I completed two courses, passed with distinction, and later found out they weren’t actually what I needed. They cost me £2,000, and now I have to start over. The Level 3 course I need is hard to find—only two colleges near me offer it—but I can’t speak to anyone directly; it’s all emails and online forms, and no one responds.” (Adult)*

These experiences underscore the need for more accessible, clear, and responsive course information, personalised support, and streamlined processes to help individuals pursue the right educational and career opportunities.

### **Experiences with Employability Support Programmes**

Overall, participants reported overwhelmingly positive experiences with the support provided by programmes such as Employability Durham, DurhamWorks, Step Up Programme, and DurhamEnable. A key theme that emerged was the *holistic, person-centred approach*, which goes beyond employment assistance to address broader personal development needs. Participants also appreciated the *consistency, reliability, and responsiveness* of their support workers.

#### **Positive Experiences:**

*“The support takes a holistic approach, aiming to stabilise me and help me get back into work at the right pace. I initially thought it would just be basic employability support, like CV writing, but it’s much more than that. If I had known about this earlier, it would have been a great help. They even connected me with a men’s peer support group, which has had a more positive impact than I expected, even though I was hesitant at first.” (Adult)*

*“My work coach has been a tremendous support, always encouraging me and helping me find support groups. It’s not just about getting a job; it’s about supporting me as a person in so many ways.” (Adult)*

*“I was referred to Employability Durham through the Jobcentre. They understand that certain jobs could negatively affect my mental health, and they support my goal of taking courses first. I’m now doing a gym instructor course and hoping to enrol in a foundation degree. They’ve offered to help with funding and travel costs if needed. Their approach strikes the right balance—encouraging but not pushy.” (Adult)*

*“The one-on-one support I receive is invaluable. My coach provides comprehensive information on funding, courses—everything I need. It’s like having a life coach. I’m truly grateful for their help.”* (Adult)

*“Having a support worker who consistently responds and doesn’t let me down makes a huge difference. The reliability and responsiveness I’ve experienced here are unlike any other support I’ve received.”* (Adult)

*“The diagnosis session was eye-opening. It introduced me to support areas I hadn’t considered before, like nutrition, and was tailored to my specific needs.”* (Adult)

*“I’ve been signed off sick for a year due to physical and mental health issues. I had never received any support for my mental health before joining Employability Durham. I don’t feel ready to work yet, but they are helping me explore options at my own pace.”* (Adult)

*“I’m currently job searching, and the support I’ve received has been great. My adviser helped me update my CV and post it online. They also connected me with financial assistance, which has been a huge relief.”* (Adult)

#### Negative Experiences:

Despite the generally positive feedback, some participants encountered challenges and unmet expectations in their support journey:

*“I expected more support than I’m getting. My meetings are fortnightly on Teams, but I often feel like I’m left to figure things out on my own. The support is sometimes good, but they keep suggesting I go back into childcare just because I’m qualified for it—even though I don’t want to. I feel unheard. As someone with dyspraxia, I need a mentor who understands me and takes a more patient, step-by-step approach.”* (Adult with SEN)

*“My support meetings are all online, but I’d prefer face-to-face sessions at my local library. Getting out of the house would really help my mental health.”* (Adult)

*“I didn’t find Durham Enable helpful. My work coach and I didn’t get along, and I felt humiliated by their comments in front of others. I was already struggling with my mental health, and their remarks only made things worse. They didn’t create a supportive environment.”* (Adult)

These insights highlight the importance of personalised, empathetic, and flexible support tailored to individual needs, with options for both virtual and in-person engagement to enhance accessibility and well-being.

#### Support Needed and Desired

Participants expressed a range of support needs, with mental health, confidence building, in-work support, and assistance for individuals with disabilities being the most frequently mentioned. These insights highlight the importance of comprehensive and ongoing support to help individuals overcome barriers and achieve sustainable employment.

#### Mental Health Support

Mental health support emerged as the most commonly cited need, with many participants emphasising the importance of addressing their well-being before considering employment.

*“Trying to get back into employment feels like a major hurdle right now. My ability to handle stress at work is low, and I need to address this first. Work is a trade-off between earning money and protecting my well-being.”* (Adult)

*“The analogy of building a house on a foundation of sand really resonates with careers support. To have a successful career, I first need to be mentally strong and prepared.”* (Adult)

*“There needs to be more support groups or counselling services available.”* (Adult)



### Confidence Building Support

Many individuals expressed the need for support to build their self-confidence, which they felt was a barrier to accessing opportunities.

*"There is support available, but you have to be proactive in seeking it out. If like me you're shy or lack confidence, it's much harder to get the help you need."* (Adult)

*"I don't have to look for work because I care for my dad and have psychosis, so I'm entitled to benefits. But I do want to work—my self-confidence has just been very low."* (Adult)

*"I'd like to take a few more courses to build my confidence. I recently completed a first aid and a confidence-building course, and they were really helpful."* (Adult)

### Support While in Work

Participants stressed the importance of ongoing support during the transition into employment, recognising that challenges often arise after securing a job.

*"I need a more stable, less volatile work environment."* (Adult)

*"Support shouldn't stop as soon as I get a job. It might take months to settle in, and there will be challenges. I've been in a good place before, but DWP assessments have set me back and thrown me off course."* (Adult)

*"Once you leave school or get a job, support disappears completely—you fall off a cliff. Different organisations don't work together; they pass the buck. If you end up out of work, it feels like the rug has been pulled from under you. And by then, the job market has changed, and everything feels new again."* (Adult)

*"Having ongoing support for my mental health while I'm in work would really benefit me."* (Adult)

*"The support I'm receiving now is great, but I know I'll still need help when I start working."* (Adult)

### Support for Individuals with Disabilities

Several participants expressed a desire to work despite receiving disability-related benefits, highlighting the need for tailored support to help them re-enter the workforce.

*"In 2020, I was diagnosed with COPD and had to give up my job. I'm now receiving suicide support because I'm struggling without work. I can't do my old job (painting and decorating) anymore, but I want to work."* (Adult)

*"I'm on PIP, and my partner works and receives Universal Credit. The Jobcentre says they can't support me because I don't have to work, but I want to work."* (Adult)

*"The Jobcentre acknowledges my mobility issues, so I'm not required to work, but I really want to."* (Adult)

*"More support is needed to help people with mental health and health conditions return to work."* (Young Person, aged 14-19)

### Additional Support Needs

*"There need to be more job opportunities in Durham."* (Young Person, aged 14-19)

*"We need to reduce the stigma around being unemployed."* (Young Person, aged 14-19)

These responses emphasise the need for a more holistic, individualised, and continuous support system that provides mental health and confidence-building services, ongoing assistance in employment, and targeted support for individuals with disabilities.

## **Suggestions for Improving Careers (and Employability) Support**

Participants shared a variety of suggestions on how careers (and employability) support could be enhanced to better meet their needs. Key themes included the importance of a holistic approach, better communication, earlier intervention, and greater accessibility to tailored support and meaningful opportunities.

### **Holistic and Person-Centred Support**

*"There should be more focus on well-being alongside careers and employability. A holistic approach that looks at the whole person, not just the job."* (Adult)

*"Getting a job doesn't automatically fix people's problems—support services need to recognise this."* (Adult)

*"Early intervention is key. There should be better access to mental health support earlier in life to provide a safety net for people."* (Adult)

### **Improved Access to Opportunities and Information**

*"There need to be more opportunities to meet employers and explore different career options."* (Young Person, aged 14-19)

*"The job fairs I attended were useful, but I wouldn't have known about different job options without them. If companies were more involved in the community, it would help."* (Adult)

*"Seeing someone immediately after being referred would be more helpful rather than waiting weeks for an appointment."* (Adult)

*"There needs to be clearer messaging about what support is available. I didn't know about Employability Durham until three years into dealing with the Jobcentre."* (Adult)

### **Tailored and Consistent Support**

*"Support should be tailored to individuals, especially for those with special educational needs (SEN). My children don't fit into boxes, and careers advice should reflect their individuality and interests."* (Adult)

*"Having someone who follows your journey and whom you trust and knowing you can return to them at any stage, would be incredibly helpful."* (Adult)

*"Some support workers didn't answer my calls or follow up with me. It's disappointing when you're promised support, but people don't follow through."* (Adult)

### **Jobcentre Improvements**

*"The Jobcentre needs to spend more time understanding their clients rather than making assumptions based on a quick glance at their CV. They recommended jobs that weren't right for me or that I wasn't qualified for."* (Adult)

*"The Jobcentre should make their services clearer upfront instead of asking 'what do you want from us?' People don't always know what's available."* (Adult)

*"They need to listen more and understand what people want to do, rather than pushing them into any available job."* (Adult)

### **Support Beyond Getting a Job**

*"More support should be available for people transitioning into work. Support shouldn't stop once you get a job, as settling into a new role can be challenging."* (Adult)

*"There should be support for people with anxiety around using public transport, as well as better transport links overall."* (Adult)

### Meaningful Training and Work Experience

*"More work placements or voluntary opportunities would help people try different jobs and gain experience." (Adult)*

*"Employability training courses need improvement. I've been on many, and most have been boring, unhelpful, and not recognised by employers. The qualifications from these courses don't seem to hold much value." (Adult)*

### Utilising Lived Experience

*"Recruiting people who have been through the service to volunteer and support others would be great. They would bring empathy and real-life understanding to the support process." (Adult)*

These suggestions highlight the need for more personalised, proactive, and practical support, with a greater focus on individual well-being, earlier intervention, and better communication of available resources.

### Digital Support and Accessibility

Participants highlighted the need for County Durham-specific online platforms and reliable information sources, with many expressing difficulties navigating digital resources effectively. Key concerns included the lack of a centralised, trustworthy platform for job and course searches, limited digital skills, and the preference for face-to-face support over online interactions.

#### Digital Barriers and Accessibility

*"I find interacting with people one-to-one or in groups far more beneficial than digital platforms. I struggle to engage with online resources." (Adult)*

*"Being out of the job market for so long, my digital skills have declined. My children help me, but I still struggle." (Adult)*

*"I rely on my daughter or partner to help me with technology because I'm not very confident using it myself." (Adult)*

*"Even though I've taken a computer course, I still find technology challenging, which makes it difficult to access online resources." (Adult)*

*"The Durham Council website was easy to use, and I'm not great with technology. I found Employability Durham through it and contacted them via email—they responded quickly." (Adult)*

#### Concerns About Online Job Searching and Training Providers

*"It would be great if major employers collaborated to create a dedicated platform for career support. It's frustrating when job listings don't include company names because they're posted by agencies. I want to know if the company aligns with my values and offers good employee benefits." (Adult)*

*"Online information is often limited and not always accurate. There are so many fake websites and training providers with hidden fees. I still haven't received my certificate for a course I completed, only to find out later it wasn't City and Guilds accredited. We need a trusted platform for County Durham where all course information is verified and accurate." (Adult)*

*"A careers chatbot that appears on all provider websites, offering verified information about courses and jobs across Durham, would be really helpful and ensure reliability." (Adult)*

#### The Need for a County Durham-Specific Platform

*"A dedicated County Durham platform to help navigate jobs and courses would be really useful, as long as it's not just filled with recruitment agencies." (Adult)*

*“Better online information tailored to Durham would be a huge help.” (Adult)*

*“I use the internet at the library because I don’t have a smartphone. I research jobs using Google, but it would be helpful to have a dedicated Durham-specific resource to ensure the information is accurate.” (Adult)*

*“Having a centralised online platform where everything is in one place would make it so much easier. Right now, you have to search around too much.” (Adult)*

These responses underscore the need for a user-friendly, centralised online hub that provides verified, localised information on jobs, courses, and support services in County Durham. Additionally, enhancing digital literacy support and offering alternative access points—such as community centres and libraries—could help bridge the digital divide for those who struggle with technology.

## **Conclusion**

The main conclusion of the report is that there are significant systemic barriers hindering career progression for vulnerable young people and adults in County Durham, and that a *more holistic, individualised, and continuous support system* is needed. This conclusion is supported by the experiences of participants across various areas of career and employment support, including education, job centres, and training courses.

Here are some key points supporting this conclusion:

*Inadequate Careers Support in Schools and Colleges:* Participants reported a lack of meaningful career guidance, with many receiving little to no support. The support that was provided was often brief and inconsistent, with little exposure to employers or work-related activities.

*Negative Experiences with the Jobcentre:* Many participants described negative experiences with the Jobcentre, including feelings of stress, anxiety, and a lack of empathy. Jobcentre staff were perceived as focusing on getting people into any job rather than considering individual circumstances or long-term suitability. There were, however, some positive experiences where Jobcentre staff provided helpful support and referrals.

*Challenges with Travel and Transport:* Limited and unreliable public transportation, particularly in rural areas of County Durham, makes it difficult for people to access education, training, and job opportunities.

*Difficulties with Courses:* Participants faced multiple challenges related to accessing and navigating courses, including inaccurate information, confusing online resources, a lack of direct guidance, and financial barriers<sup>5</sup>.... Many people found that the courses they had taken were not what they needed, leading to wasted time and money.

*The Need for Enhanced Digital Support and Accessibility:* Participants expressed difficulties navigating digital resources and a preference for face-to-face support, highlighting the need for a centralised, user-friendly online platform that provides accurate, verified information. The lack of digital skills was also a barrier for some.

*Positive Impact of Holistic Support Programmes:* The report highlights the overwhelmingly positive impact of holistic, person-centered programmes like Employability Durham. These programmes go beyond basic employability support to address broader personal development needs.

*Crucial Need for Mental Health and Wellbeing Support:* The need for mental health support was frequently cited, with many participants emphasizing that their well-being should be addressed before they can consider employment.

*Importance of Confidence Building and Ongoing Support:* Participants highlighted the importance of building self-confidence and the need for continued support throughout the transition into work. There was a recognition that challenges often arise after securing a job, highlighting the need for in-work support and that support should not stop once a job has been found.

*Tailored Support for Individuals with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities:* Tailored support was identified as essential to help individuals with SEN and/or disabilities return to work, acknowledging the need for a targeted approach. Overall, to address these systemic barriers, support services need to adopt a *holistic, person-centered approach* that considers individual's unique needs and circumstances. This includes focusing on mental health, wellbeing, building confidence, offering tailored and consistent support, improving access to opportunities and careers information, and providing ongoing assistance as people transition into employment. The need for clear communication, earlier intervention, and better collaboration between organisations is also emphasised.

### **Community Consultation Events**

For those who attended the events, key enablers are identified as willingness from practitioners to work more closely together towards offering more seamless all-age careers support. There is a wide range of experience, expertise and initiatives available that could feed into a new All-Age Careers Framework. Employers who attended the event highlighted a willingness to get behind any new framework or strategy.

**The main barriers or difficulties getting in the way of individuals gaining access to CIAG** are already reflected in Figure 28 above. Consultation feedback comments summarised below expand upon these issues – see also: Appendix 1 for specific quotes:

- *Financial Barriers:* lack of funding for travel and equipment and the minimum wage is currently too low.
- *Rurality, Transport and Accessibility:* rurality and the transport system is unreliable.
- *Lack of Qualifications:* low qualifications, literacy and numeracy skills of school leavers coupled with low school attendance. A lack of good careers guidance at a younger age, limited training opportunities and Labour Market Information. One response identified a reduction in NEET support.
- *Poor Mental Health and Social Issues:* mental health issues for individuals with the consequence that they lacked self-esteem and confidence impacting on their motivation.
- *Lack of Opportunities:* limited job and apprenticeship opportunities and generational unemployment as well as skills misalignment.
- *Structural and Systemic Challenges:* funding ceasing, limited or being completely removed has impacted social mobility programs, SEND support resulting in overstretched services unable to cope with demand.
- *Social and Cultural Barriers:* individual mindsets are influenced by peers or local culture leading to negative attitudes and aspirations or dependence on benefits. There may also be limited exposure in certain areas to opportunities for work experience.
- *Careers and Employability Support:* individuals do not have access to support and advice and there are a lack of opportunities for training or experience.
- *Insufficient Teacher Industry Placements:* to learn first-hand about the changing world of work and for real life challenges / projects to be co-designed for students in the classroom or in local communities.
- *Needs of Specific Groups:* support is needed by specific groups of SEND and disadvantaged individuals.

### **Conclusions**

Respondents suggest that a more joined-up approach is needed to improve collaboration and cooperation. Better communication and information sharing between agencies could address the inconsistency and lack of awareness of careers support services for young people and adults.

## Call for Evidence

A series of questions were posed to stakeholders from representative organisations and charities across the county, including the NHS, DWP, and the Growth Company. Of the 39 respondents, 10 represented charities or social enterprises; 7 represented local authorities; 3 were from Higher Education Institutions; 2 represented businesses; and 1 represented a trade body. The list in Table 1 below shows the organisations that responded.

**Table 1**

|  |  |
|--|--|
| NHS England                                | Durham Area Action Partnership                           |
| DurhamLearn, Durham County Council         | Stockton Borough Council                                 |
| Bridge Creative                            | North Easington PCN                                      |
| Karbon Homes                               | Stockton Borough Council, Careers                        |
| DWP  | St Bede's Catholic School & 6th Form College- Lanchester |
| Wheels2Work County Durham                  | Durham County Council                                    |
| Spark                                      | Employability Durham - DCC                               |
| Education and Employers Charity            | Stanley Community Centre, The Venue                      |
| Education Development Trust                | Durham Employment & Skills - DCC                         |
| Durham University                          | WBFL   |
| Durham University (Careers and Enterprise) | Northern Learning Trust                                  |
| Learning Abilities CIC                     | National Careers Service                                 |
| Groundwork NE & Cumbria                    | Robin Todd Centre  |
| Durham Trinity School and Sports College   | DurhamWorks Programme for Schools                        |
| Durham Christian Partnership               | The Growth Company - matrix Standard                     |

The aim of this survey was to compare the findings from the analyses above with those of businesses and organisations primarily providing education, employability and/or careers support services to individuals or groups in the community, and to explore ideas for a future all-age careers framework in County Durham. To achieve this, the following open-ended questions were posed:

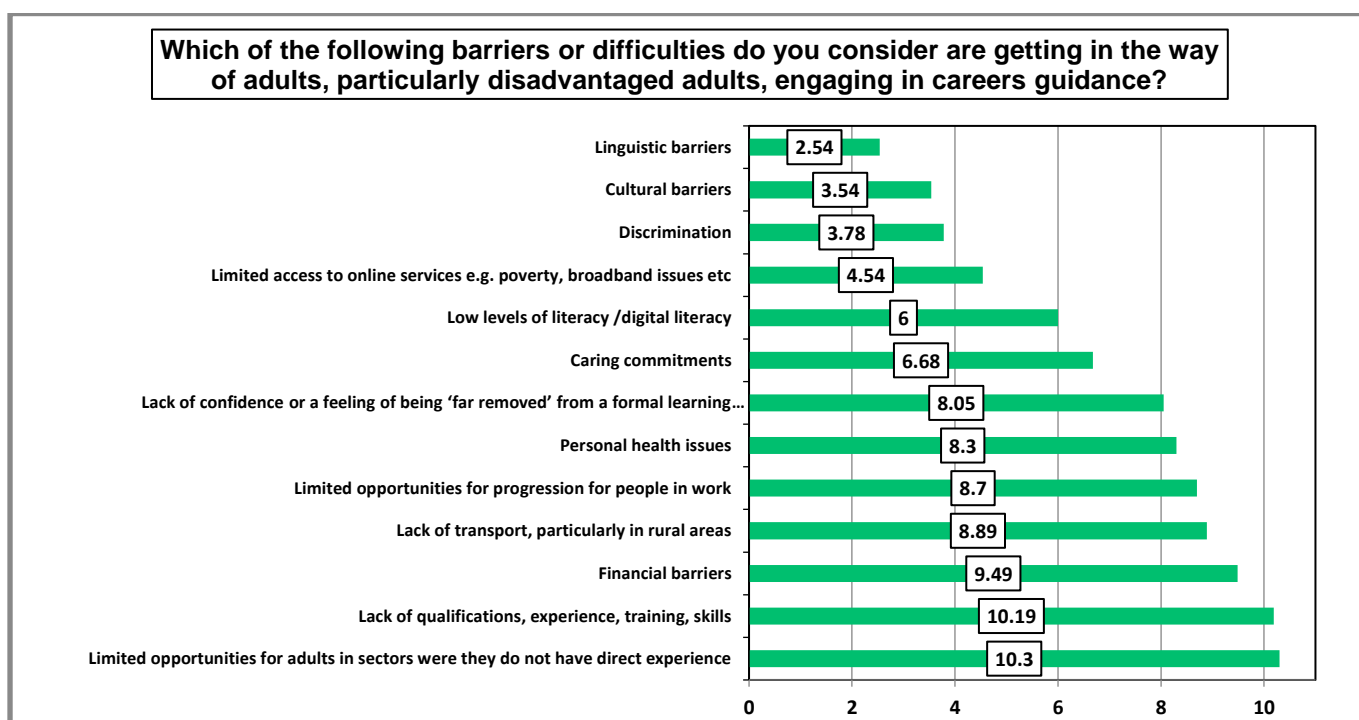
1. What is working well with regards to careers and employability support services for young people and adults in County Durham?
2. Can you provide a brief example(s) of good/interesting careers and employability support policies and practices in County Durham?
3. What is not working well and what are the main reasons for this?
4. What are the barriers or difficulties you consider are getting in the way of young people, particularly those most disadvantaged?
5. What policies and practices are needed to ensure the right model of delivery and timing for careers support for young people and/or adults, who need careers guidance most?
6. How can greater priority be given to young people and adults' views that can feed into the future co-design of an innovative and impactful all-age careers offer in County Durham?

### Barriers to careers

We asked respondents to rate, by priority, a list of barriers or difficulties they considered to be preventing adults, particularly disadvantaged adults, from engaging in careers guidance. These are shown in Figure 9 below, which highlights the main identified barrier: *limited opportunities for adults in sectors where they do not have direct experience*, followed by a lack of qualifications, training, and skills.

Reading Figure 9, the top 7 barriers (i.e., those scoring 8 or above) were all considered important by the respondents.

Figure 9: Barriers to adults engaging with careers guidance



### What is working well

To help overcome some of the above identified barriers are a number of successful careers and employability support models that exist in County Durham. Some examples are listed here:

- **DurhamLearn** embeds careers information, advice, and guidance (CIAG) into curriculum planning and offers supported internships for individuals with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs).
- **The National Careers Service (NCS)** provides workshops and sessions for schools and colleges, tailored support to meet customer demands (e.g. refugees, customers over 50), and excellent service to all referrals.
- **DurhamWorks** provides targeted support for NEETs (young people not in education, employment or training) aged 16-24 to help them overcome barriers to engagement and access careers guidance and employability support. They also deliver work-related learning sessions to young people in schools involving employer engagement with business ambassadors.
- **DurhamEnable** supports individuals with disabilities, neurodiversity, and long-term health conditions to overcome barriers by developing employer partnerships and providing tailored one-to-one support to facilitate inclusive hiring practices.
- **County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust** provides mandatory careers sessions for all foundation doctors as part of their generic skills curriculum. These sessions cover career decision-making, self-awareness, application and interview preparation. Doctors also have access to a careers lead for one-to-one impartial and confidential careers guidance.
- **Apprenticeship support** is offered by the council and funded through the apprenticeship levy to provide career opportunities as well as opportunities to upskill.
- **Spark** provides a game-changing program that embeds real examples of local roles that relate directly to the school curriculum.
- **The Primary Futures** programme provides primary schools with a range of free resources and volunteers.
- **The North East Ambition (NECA) Careers Hub** runs a successful Employment Advisor (EA) scheme and delivered a primary pilot project involving a range of schools.
- **The DICE project** provides funding for internships and enterprise support in County Durham.

Some responses also describe a reverse job fair held by the *DEC forum and Bridge Creative* where autistic adults and adults with learning disabilities showcase their skills and abilities to potential employers. Other types of

support are also identified such as *Wheels2Work* providing transport for people struggling to access the workplace which is particularly supportive for those living in rural communities.

Flexible support includes meeting clients at locations that suit them, offering longer appointments when needed, and providing telephone calls for quick updates. It also involves working together with other organisations that share the same goal and connecting with local services such as community centers and food banks. Additionally, helping to overcome barriers to employment, such as health problems and social isolation, is a key part of the support provided.

### **What is not working well and what are the main reasons for this?**

From the 37 replies received these have been categorised into these themes:

1. **Careers Guidance and Support:** respondents stated that both adults and students need better CEIAG to be delivered by professionally trained and independent careers professionals who have access to and an understanding of the employment and jobs market.
2. **Lack of resources in schools :** as indicated in the above survey analyses the call for Evidence response also identified that schools are resource limited and in some cases careers education holds a lower priority. There are also claims that there is no provision for Maths and English for 16 -18 year olds.
3. **Accessibility of and Engagement with Careers Provision:** replies received claim that there is limited access in rural areas for face-to-face careers interviews. There are also comments that some young people and adults don't attend interviews that have been arranged. Other issues raised are the levels of absenteeism in schools.
4. **Employer Engagement and Market Challenges:** respondents claimed that employers have a culture of temporary workers or in some cases it is difficult to engage with employers and this presents barriers.
5. **Funding and Policy Issues:** underfunding or sporadic funding has led to problems in overcoming barriers such as providing solutions to transport issues, supporting internships or employability support has ceased.
6. **The Need for Improved Collaboration and System Coordination:** silo working and a lack of coordination between departments leads to either duplication or missed opportunities. National initiatives are a "one size fits all" approach which isn't ideal for Durham where there are specific issues such as rural areas being isolated.
7. **Lack of Promotion and Awareness of Services:** as indicated previously there are individuals who have not accessed services because of lack of awareness. There needs to be efforts to better promote services available to individuals.
8. **Regional and Structural Issues:** concerns were raised here about talent leaving the region (brain drain) and a lack of jobs particularly in rural settings.

Some solutions were suggested by the respondents to improve the provision of CEIAG, improve communication between departments and organisations, and how to reach out to some individuals. Other ideas were suggested as to how to create a new talent pipeline:

*"Greater use of the matrix Standard across DWP contracts to ensure quality assurance."*

*"Strengthen the link between funders and quality assurance bodies".*

*"Delivery of sessions in foodbanks across County Durham."*

*"Flexible part-time roles, internships, and placements for pipeline talent into entry-level jobs at the Local Authority."*



*“Enhanced focus on safeguarding and collaborative service delivery.”*

It is notable that in response to the above questions about what is and isn't working well, the feedback largely reflects the findings from the previous survey analyses in earlier sections. For example, the need to promote careers service provision, identified in point 7 above, aligns with the fact that almost 50% of adults claim they have not received enough support. Further analysis revealed that these individuals had only ever searched the internet and had not spoken to anyone about their careers. Another example, highlighted above, is the lack of a careers focus in education, which was also identified in the survey responses from both employers/training providers and parents.

### **The barriers or difficulties getting in the way of young people**

These were similarly categorised for ease of understanding and analysis. Many of these barriers listed below are already reflected in Figure 9 above. The feedback comments summarised below expand upon these issues.

1. **Financial Barriers:** lack of funding for travel and equipment was cited as barrier along with a claim that the minimum wage is currently too low.
2. **Rurality, Transport and Accessibility:** rurality has been cited as an issue and the fact that the transport system is unreliable.
3. **Lack of Qualifications:** low qualifications, literacy and numeracy skills of school leavers coupled with low school attendance. Other problems raised were lack of good careers guidance at a younger age, limited training opportunities and Labour Market Information. One response identified a reduction in NEET support.
4. **Poor Mental Health and Social Issues:** various concerns were raised that resulted in mental health issues for individuals with the consequence that they lacked self-esteem and confidence impacting on their motivation.
5. **Lack of Opportunities:** limited job and apprenticeship opportunities and generational unemployment as well as skills misalignment were cited as barriers.
6. **Structural and Systemic Challenges:** funding ceasing, limited or being completely removed has impacted social mobility programs, SEND support resulting in overstretched services unable to cope with demand.
7. **Social and Cultural Barriers:** individual mindsets are influenced by peers or local culture leading to negative attitudes and aspirations or dependence on benefits. There may also be limited exposure in certain areas to opportunities for work experience. One respondent identified discrimination as being a barrier.
8. **Careers and Employability Support:** replies indicated that individuals need support and advice and do not have access to this or there are a lack of opportunities for training or experience.
9. **Needs of Specific Groups:** concerns were raised regarding the support needed by specific groups of SEND and disadvantaged individuals.

### **Conclusion**

Policies and practices are needed to ensure the right model and timing for careers support, focusing on young people and adults who need guidance the most.

*How can we prioritise the views of young people and adults, enabling them to contribute to the co-design of an innovative and impactful all-age careers framework in County Durham?*

The following recommendations aim to address identified issues and barriers, reinforcing points raised in earlier sections based on feedback from students, parents, teachers, careers leaders, employers, training providers, and individuals aged 16 and over.

1. **Addressing Systemic Barriers:**

**Transport:** Improve transport infrastructure and provide subsidies for travel costs.

**Financial Challenges:** Offer financial support, such as grants or subsidies, particularly for low-income individuals.

**Inclusive Employment Practices:** Respondents highlighted the lack of inclusive employers and awareness of graduate recruitment cycles. Encouraging businesses to adopt inclusive recruitment policies and offer more entry-level roles and apprenticeships could create more opportunities, particularly for disadvantaged youth.

2. **Enhancing Careers Education and Guidance:**

**Early Intervention:** Begin career education in primary school and continue it through secondary education to raise aspirations and challenge stereotypes.

**Sustainable Intervention:** Provide regular, age-appropriate interventions like career fairs, work placements, and employer interactions to expose young people to diverse career paths and essential skills.

**Access to Qualified Careers Professionals:** Ensure all schools and colleges have access to independent, impartial careers guidance practitioners with appropriate qualifications. This is especially important given concerns about the limitations of careers guidance delivered by teaching staff who may lack time, resources, or expertise.

**Personalised Support:** Tailor advice to individual needs, particularly for those facing additional challenges like disabilities, mental health issues, or low confidence. Using methods such as diagnostic tools, guidance techniques, and one-on-one support can help overcome barriers and create effective action plans.

3. **Fostering Collaboration and Co-Design:**

**Joined-Up Approach:** Encourage a more integrated, collaborative approach between schools, colleges, employers, and support providers to ensure a smoother transition from education to employment. Sharing data, resources, and coordinating services effectively can create a more cohesive support system.

**Engaging Young People:** Involve young people in the design and evaluation of services to ensure they meet their needs. This can be achieved through workshops, advisory panels, surveys, and digital platforms.

**Learning from Existing Good Practices:** County Durham already has successful careers initiatives, such as DurhamLearn, the National Careers Service, DurhamEnable and DurhamWorks. Examining these models and identifying best practices can provide valuable insights for improving services across the county.

## Appendix 1 – Community Consultation Events

### What is not working well and what are the main reasons for this?

#### Quotes from respondents

##### 1. Careers Guidance and Support:

- "IAG needs to be provided by suitably qualified professionals."*
- "Schools focus on delivering CEIAG guidance interviews themselves without independence or impartiality."*
- "Lack of understanding of specialist careers providers and the distinction between careers and employability."*
- "Value of effective careers guidance is not always appreciated by training/education providers."*
- "Lack of proper guidance when attending schools, colleges, and universities."*
- "Independent career support in some schools."*
- "Lack of inclusive employers and opportunities."*
- "Careers guidance isn't something adults are used to thinking of for themselves."*

##### 2. Lack of resources in schools :

- "Lack of careers focus in education."*
- "Schools lack resources for careers; government funding rarely reaches schools."*
- "Overly intrusive activities that don't fit within current curricula models, especially in primary education."*
- "No provision for Maths and English outside of college for 16-18s."*
- "Lack of Maths and English provision for those who just want subject-specific support."*
- "English and Maths provision for 16-18-year-olds, alternative education colleges."*
- "Supporting people with complex needs, such as SEND."*

##### 3. Accessibility of and Engagement with Careers Provision:

- "Accessing face-to-face services is affected by poor/unreliable transport links in rural areas."*
- "Lack of central information service/hub for identifying provision and signposting."*
- "Young people and adults' non-attendance at interventions arranged for them."*
- "Struggling to engage with clients who are homebound or reluctant to participate virtually."*
- "School attendance issues, high absenteeism."*
- "No central point for easily accessible career information."*

##### 4. Employer and Market Challenges:

- "Lack of local graduate schemes and awareness of graduate recruitment cycles."*
- "Increased wage for international students makes it difficult for local businesses to sponsor graduate visas."*
- "Employer culture of temporary work damages career progression."*
- "Difficulty in making the correct contacts within businesses."*
- "Lack of business awareness about internships and placements."*

##### 5. Funding and Policy Issues:

- "Sporadic funding makes it difficult to entrench internships in businesses."*
- "National funding requirements are prioritised over service users' needs."*
- "End of ESF funding has reduced employability support for those requiring intensive support."*
- "Support for transport solutions remains underfunded."*

##### 6. The Need for Improved Collaboration and System Coordination:

- "Provision is disjointed and inconsistent across the county."*
- "Council departments work in silos and fail to facilitate progression between services."*
- "National initiatives take a 'one size fits all' approach that doesn't account for travel/rural difficulties."*
- "Would like to collaborate with other services but need to ensure they are fit for purpose."*

##### 7. Lack of Promotion and Awareness of Services:

- "Promotion of services is insufficient or poorly coordinated."*
- "Lack of awareness in schools about careers support."*
- "Lack of websites promoting career opportunities in County Durham."*

##### 8. Regional and Structural Issues:

- "Lack of jobs in desired fields due to the rural or small-town setting."*
- "Brain drain" as talent moves out of the North East."*

## Appendix 2 – Community Consultation Events

### The barriers or difficulties getting in the way of young people.

#### Quotes from respondents

##### 1. Financial Barriers:

- "Lack of funds for travel, training, or necessary equipment."*
- "Financial barriers to interview clothing and access opportunities."*
- "Minimum wage for 16–20-year-olds is insufficient to live on."*
- "Cost of attending college with minimal financial support."*

##### 2. Rurality, Transport and Accessibility:

- "Rural isolation and unreliable public transport."*
- "Anxiety related to using public transport."*
- "Long and inefficient public transport routes (e.g., 20-minute car journeys equating to over an hour on buses)."*
- "Lack of cheap, reliable, frequent public transport."*
- "Accessibility to work, training, and education opportunities hindered by location and transport"*

##### 3. Lack of Qualifications:

- "Poor basic education and lack of literacy/numeracy skills."*
- "Leaving school with no qualifications or without Maths/English qualifications."*
- "Poor school attendance and low participation in educational planning."*
- "Lack of good careers guidance and exploration at younger ages."*
- "Realistic goal-setting and awareness of Labour Market Information (LMI)."*
- "Limited vocational training opportunities."*
- "Reduction in NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) support services."*

##### 4. Poor Mental Health and Social Issues:

- "Mental health issues, low confidence, and self-esteem."*
- "Apathy, lack of motivation, and lack of interest."*
- "Anxiety resulting in poor attendance, compounded by family support enabling avoidance."*
- "Generational unemployment within families, affecting aspirations and attitudes."*
- "Family responsibilities and poor family support."*
- "Hunger and poverty affecting focus and engagement."*

##### 5. Lack of Opportunities:

- "Limited local jobs, especially for young people and entry-level roles."*
- "Lack of quality apprenticeships within reasonable commuting distance."*
- "Perceived mismatch between job availability and expectations."*
- "Few role models or mentors for guidance and inspiration."*
- "Generational unemployment leading to low aspirations."*
- "Job market mismatch with skills not aligned to employer demands."*

##### 6. Structural and Systemic Challenges:

- "Removal or reduction of Local Authority NEET support services."*
- "Loss of ESF funding for social mobility programs"*
- "Limited SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) provision."*
- "Inconsistent provision across regions, resulting in a "postcode lottery."*
- "Overstretched support services with insufficient resources to meet demand."*
- "Confusion caused by too much involvement with multiple services."*

##### 7. Social and Cultural Barriers:

- "Peer influence leading to low aspirations and negative attitudes."*
- "Preference for benefits or illegal activities over employment."*

*"Cultural "bubbles" shaping mindsets and limiting broader perspectives."*  
*"Lack of awareness of available support and career pathways."*  
*"Limited exposure to different occupations and work experiences."*  
*"Discrimination based on race, disability, or socioeconomic background."*  
*"Lack of aspiration combined with a need for realism."*

**8. Careers and Employability Support:**

*"Lack of good work experience and vocational training opportunities."*  
*"Insufficient access to high-quality, independent, and impartial careers advice."*  
*"Poor understanding of what is required to access opportunities."*  
*"Young people unaware of their core skills or how to articulate them."*  
*"Difficulty navigating recruitment processes and lack of inclusive employment opportunities"*

**9. Needs of Specific Groups:**

*"Barriers faced by young people with SEND or disabilities."*  
*"Increasing numbers of ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) type needs."*  
*"Need for subsidised recruitment to encourage hiring of disadvantaged individuals."*  
*"Post-COVID disengagement and reluctance to participate in education or training."*  
*"Recruitment risks for businesses hiring disadvantaged individuals."*  
*"Lack of provision tailored to SEMH (Social, Emotional, and Mental Health) needs."*