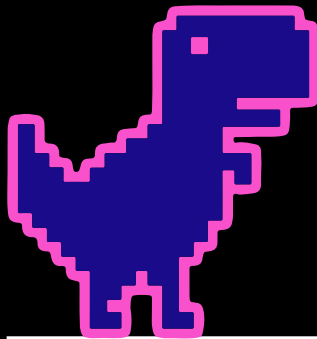




# Launch Report



LEVEL UP

EST. 2024  
DON'T DIS  
MY  
aBILITY



A YEAR OF LISTENING  
PART 1



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## **An Inclusive Story**

Sometimes reports are difficult to understand or are too long to read and digest. So when you see a summary QR code simply scan it with your phone for a more accessible review of the data.





In today's world, we champion diversity and inclusivity, striving to create a society where everyone has equal opportunities to thrive and succeed. Yet, amidst our progress, there remains a group of individuals whose journey towards employment, volunteer opportunities, and social mobility is often hindered by barriers that are both visible and invisible. These are the young people (16 - 25 year old) with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

As we navigate the complexities of our modern landscape, it is imperative that we shine a light on the unique struggles faced by young people with SEND in accessing employment, volunteer opportunities, and social mobility within their communities. These individuals possess a wealth of untapped potential, yet find themselves confronted with systemic challenges that threaten to impede their path to fulfilment and independence.

The barriers these young people encounter are multifaceted and deeply entrenched. From a lack of understanding and awareness among employers to inadequate support systems within educational institutions, the hurdles they face are daunting and, at times, disheartening. Limited access to tailored support services, negative stereotypes, and misconceptions further exacerbate their plight, leaving many feeling marginalised and overlooked.

However, amidst these challenges, there exists a reservoir of resilience and determination among young people within the SEND community. They possess an unwavering spirit and an insatiable desire to prove their worth, not despite their differences, but because of them. It is through their lived experiences and unwavering perseverance that we are reminded of the inherent value of diversity and the limitless potential that resides within each individual.

As we embark on the journey towards a more inclusive society, it is incumbent upon us to dismantle the barriers that obstruct the path of young people with SEND. We must advocate for greater accessibility, foster environments of understanding and acceptance, and empower these individuals to realise their dreams and aspirations. By championing their cause and embracing their unique contributions, we not only enrich our communities but also pave the way for a more equitable and prosperous future for all.

In the pages that follow, we delve into the nuanced realities faced by young people with SEND in the UK, shedding light on their triumphs, struggles, and aspirations. It is my hope that this exploration will serve as a catalyst for meaningful change, inspiring us to create a world where every individual, regardless of ability or circumstance, is afforded the opportunity to thrive.

Together, as one community, let us embark on this journey of empathy, understanding, and advocacy, as we strive to build a society where the dreams of young people with SEND are not only realised but celebrated.

**Christopher Pickering**

CEO - Our 1 Community



## The Beginning!

### Listening to Youth Voice

Lauren, a young participant in various Our 1 Community programmes over the years, faced a year when she could not engage in any activities and proactively asked about opportunities to contribute. After volunteering alongside Lauren during the summer and understanding her aspirations, the concept of “Don’t Dis My Ability” was created.

Since that pivotal moment, Our 1 Community has dedicated significant efforts to understanding and addressing the primary barriers faced by young people with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities). Over the past year, we have engaged with a diverse range of stakeholders, including parents, government representatives, educational institutions, employers, and, most critically, the young people themselves.

This report presents insights from these discussions and outlines a strategic development pathway designed to empower and support all young people with SEND.

# BUT WHY?





# Economic and Social Inclusion

In our society, economic and social inclusion are fundamental indicators of a thriving community. Yet, for young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), the journey to inclusion is fraught with barriers that many of us may never have to consider. These barriers extend far beyond the challenges we see in classrooms and encompass difficulties in employment, volunteering, and social engagement. Addressing these challenges is not only a matter of fairness but a vital economic and social imperative.

Young people with SEND face significantly lower rates of employment compared to their non-disabled peers. According to data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the employment rate for disabled people in the UK was 53.2% in 2019, compared to 81.8% for non-disabled individuals. This disparity reveals a fundamental issue: systemic barriers that prevent capable young people from contributing fully to the economy. For many, these barriers include difficulty accessing transportation, a lack of understanding and accommodations in the workplace, and societal perceptions that undervalue their potential.

From the moment they enter adulthood, young people with SEND encounter a system that struggles to support them effectively. Many young people "age out" of educational and support programmes, losing vital services that helped them navigate the world. This transition can feel abrupt and disempowering, leaving them vulnerable to unemployment, social isolation, and even poverty.



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# A YEAR OF LISTENING



A programme that listens is a programme fit for purpose. We followed the journey of 25 young people over the last year as they transition into adulthood with one simple question. “How can we help?”





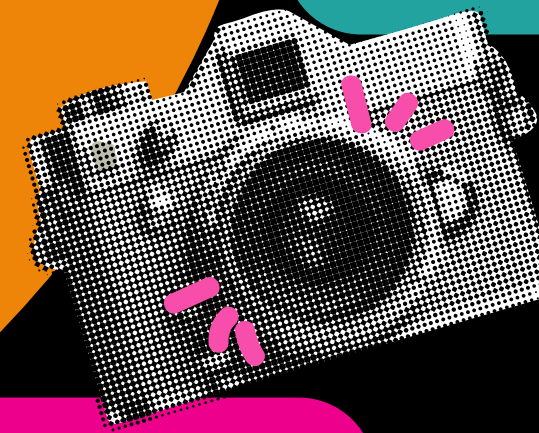
Of the 25 young people engaged, 17 are still in education, with several facing barriers related to motivation and anxiety towards future employment

Twelve young people (ages 16-24) attended Fun Days designed to boost socialisation and emotional well-being through activities like mocktail-making, creative games, and musical expression. Four participants expressed interest in continuing similar activities, highlighting the events' success in building confidence and offering a social platform beyond their usual environments.

Key barriers to accessibility included stairways, inward-opening doors, and busy work environments, all of which limited mobility and comfort for those with physical disabilities

Young people with SEND have a wide range of career goals. Some want to become graphic designers or illustrators, while others are interested in photography. There are also those who dream of being chefs, architects, gardeners, or film directors.

Challenges with independent travel, such as anxiety and unfamiliar routes, were identified among multiple case studies, highlighting the need for structured travel support





Only a few students had continuous access to supportive educational resources, with gaps particularly impacting their ability to maintain motivation and progression toward employment

75% of young people with SEND faced significant stress and anxiety in academic and work settings, with these psychological barriers impacting their ability to study and progress in their roles

Lack of motivation was cited as a significant barrier to education and engagement, with proposed solutions like taking breaks and finding inspiration from peers or role models

Supported internships were generally viewed positively, with participants noting benefits like increased confidence, new skill development, and improved independent travel abilities



Financial challenges, particularly for additional equipment, tools, and travel, were common. Many students expressed concerns about taking on educational loans, which deterred them from pursuing further studies



Families, particularly parents, were the primary support network for these young people, with many caregivers concerned about the lack of available social services support and long-term independence options

Work environments with mentorship or buddy systems had positive outcomes; for example, young people reported feeling more confident, respected, and better integrated as part of the team

Common barriers in work environments include poor wheelchair access, lack of structured support, and an unfriendly perception of employers toward autistic employees

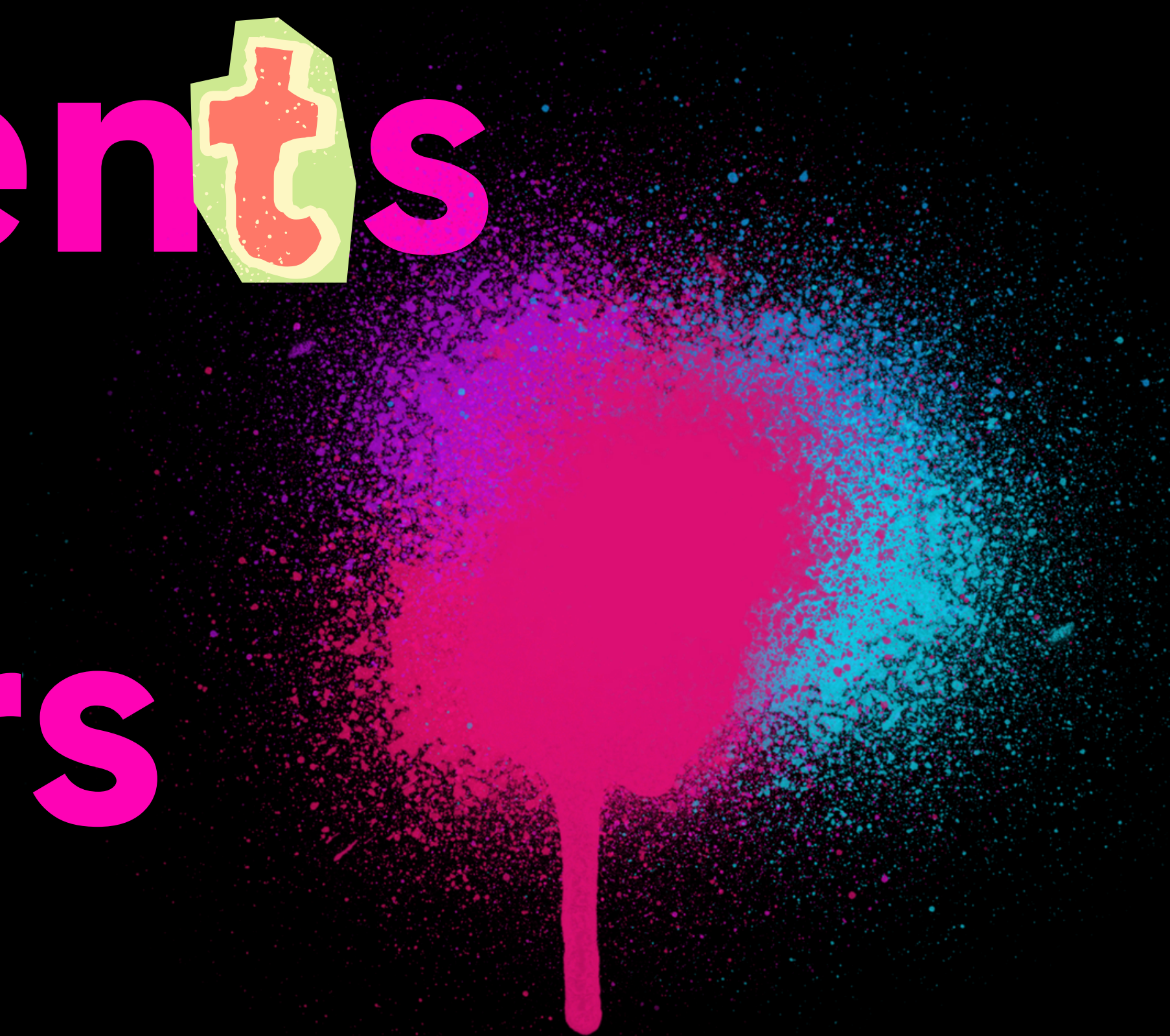




**T**he Parents

&

**C**areers





# WE SPOKE TO THE PARENTS OF



X has lived with their grandparents since the age of three and faces significant challenges in speech and reading, which affect their ability to achieve full independence. Despite these difficulties, X has made progress in education and practical skills, although concerns remain about their ability to live independently in the long term.

In terms of education and work experience, X has completed a Level 1 qualification in Maths, English, and Animal Care, and is currently studying customer service in their final year at college. They have gained practical experience at a garden centre, where they perform basic gardening tasks like mowing lawns and planting, supported by adult social care. X is enthusiastic about this work and aspires to find paid employment in a similar field. Additionally, X has volunteered at the British Heart Foundation, where they were able to carry out tasks independently after initial learning with support from a college mentor. While X demonstrates a clear interest in groundskeeping work, they require supervision to ensure safety and accuracy in tasks due to reading challenges.

In daily life, X has achieved some independence in traveling, being able to manage short journeys if someone meets them at the destination. However, crowded public transport can induce anxiety, causing them to freeze and limiting their ability to navigate public transit confidently. Their grandparent, who has been their primary caregiver, is increasingly concerned about X's future independence, especially given their own advancing age. With limited social worker involvement and minimal support from adult services, the grandparent is considering respite care as a step toward preparing X for a more independent future.

X's journey toward independence is hindered by limited reading and communication abilities, which restrict their ability to handle complex tasks and impact opportunities for driving and advanced work responsibilities. Additionally, X's need for mild but consistent supervision poses challenges for long-term employment and independent living, and the lack of robust support from social services exacerbates these concerns. However, X has demonstrated a number of strengths. They can perform tasks reliably once they are learned and show a clear desire for independence and paid work, particularly in groundskeeping and gardening. X has also developed basic travel skills that allow for some independence with proper support, and they have a sunny, friendly disposition that makes them popular with peers.

To help X build a more independent future, additional support in reading and communication skills could improve their ability to navigate tasks and increase employment prospects. Identifying a supportive employer who understands X's need for guidance would also be beneficial. Introducing X gradually to respite care or supported living arrangements could help them adjust to a future without their grandparent's daily assistance. The path ahead for X will require a collaborative effort among family, social services, and potential employers to create the support systems necessary for X to lead a more independent and fulfilling life.



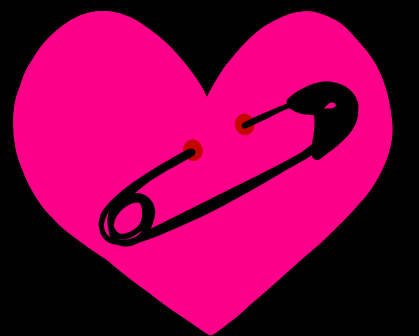


One participant shared how they had been denied a continuing EHCP on turning 20 as their past year had been a “good one”.

They appealed but were rejected and felt the decision making was all too random.



They are able to apply again however “Do not see the point”.



# WE SPOKE TO THE PARENTS OF



Y is a young person with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) who is working toward greater independence, with their family hoping they can eventually secure paid employment and lead a "normal life". However, this journey is complicated by the need for consistent support, transportation challenges, and concerns about future stability.

To help Y become more self-sufficient, their parents arranged independent travel training through the local authority. While Y initially made progress in learning to travel independently, disruptions like a bus strike and changes in college location have set back their development. One of Y's main challenges is handling unexpected situations during travel, such as when a bus doesn't arrive on time. When they can contact a parent, Y manages better, but without immediate guidance, they experience anxiety and vulnerability, underscoring the need for structured and reliable support systems.

An important upcoming step for Y is a supported internship at a local hospital in the supplies department, marking a significant move toward employment. However, Y's family is anxious about what will happen after the internship, fearing that without a job afterward, Y could lose the momentum needed to build a future career.

Several barriers currently limit Y's independence. They experience travel anxiety and struggle with real-time problem-solving in transit. Dependence on parental support remains high; for example, even Y's six-year paper route required parents to provide transportation and supervision. Y's family also feels that society's understanding of SEND issues is limited, noting that social inclusion often faces resistance when something doesn't align with societal norms. While they hope adults are kinder than children, they are concerned about the lack of general awareness and support for people with SEND. Finally, Y's parents worry about their long-term living arrangements, anticipating that independent supported living will eventually be necessary.

The family's goals for Y include securing paid employment and achieving independence, though they recognise that Y will initially need one-to-one support and close guidance in any workplace. Long-term concerns remain about where Y will live, reflecting the family's ongoing need to balance nurturing independence with ensuring Y's wellbeing.

Y's journey is a blend of progress and setbacks, with constant support from their family, who are proactive in seeking internships, advocating for travel training, and planning ahead. Despite these efforts, systemic challenges, societal perceptions, and the unpredictable experiences of SEND individuals create substantial hurdles on Y's path to a more independent life.

**Young people expressed they had little or no experience of tackling the barriers to employment other than attaining the necessary qualifications.**





# WE SPOKE TO THE PARENTS OF



**Z is a young person currently studying Health and Social Care at college and participating in a work placement. Outside of their educational commitments, Z attends the Sea Change Club weekly and spends a lot of time with family, enjoying various activities and holidays. Z also receives Personal Assistant (PA) support for 10 hours a week, plus an additional 7 hours once a month for overnight stays.**

**Daily life presents some challenges for Z, especially in personal care. They often need prompting to use the toilet and, even with reminders, they struggle with thorough self-care. This issue, while often unspoken, is common among young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), as Z's parent notes. Z's limited concentration span makes full-time work unsustainable; engaging in activities for a few hours daily seems the most realistic way to provide a sense of purpose for Z. Due to their need for supervision and guidance, Z will likely require consistent prompting to transition between tasks.**

**Z has shown interest in café work, although they cannot carry heavy items, and completed a work placement at the British Heart Foundation, where they worked under a college mentor's supervision. The charity shop only allows SEND young people to volunteer when mentors are present. Z has also had experience in animal care but found it unappealing and is uninterested in continuing in that field. They actively assist at an after-school club, where they positively interact with children, particularly those who are shy or less advanced. Z's contributions include helping with activities like cooking, art, and events such as discos, earning them a "shining star" award from the school. Though Z has a full DBS check, they cannot be left unsupervised with the children.**



Despite Z's enthusiasm, they face challenges in independent critical thinking and problem-solving, making supervision essential when unexpected issues arise. Z also has no functional mathematics skills, though they present as communicative and capable. Z's parent remains unsure of how much Z fully understands, especially in complex situations.

Independent travel is a significant challenge for Z. Although some efforts have been made to support Z in this area, progress is limited. Z's PA, who has extensive experience with SEND clients, has advised that independent travel may not be feasible. Z's lack of critical thinking skills makes them vulnerable to being stranded or confused in situations like delayed or crowded buses without guidance.

Looking ahead, Z's future will likely involve slow and gradual development with consistent support and supervision. A supported internship may be a possibility, but it would require constant oversight. As Z approaches the end of their final academic year, the family is increasingly concerned about the transition from education into adult social care. Communication from relevant authorities regarding the next steps has been minimal, and this uncertainty is especially worrying for Z's parent, who cannot stop working to provide full-time care.

In conclusion, Z is a happy and eager individual who thrives in structured, supportive environments. Their strengths lie in their ability to socialise and engage in group settings, but limitations in personal care, critical thinking, and independence require ongoing support. As Z transitions from the education system, careful planning and collaboration between the family and social care professionals will be essential to ensure a smooth shift into adult life, enabling Z to engage in meaningful activities with the appropriate level of support.





**The cases of X, Y, and Z, though distinct, highlight common challenges and strengths among young people with SEND as they work toward independence and adulthood.**



The challenges faced by X, Y, and Z underscore the complexities of fostering independence for young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Travel anxiety and dependence are significant issues: each struggles with independent travel due to anxiety, limited problem-solving abilities, or reliance on family or professional support. X panics in crowded buses, Y cannot manage unexpected travel changes, and Z's lack of critical thinking makes independent travel unsafe. In terms of communication and cognitive challenges, X's speech and reading difficulties limit their independence in tasks like driving or advanced work, Z struggles with critical thinking and maths skills, and Y remains dependent on family for daily tasks. All three require supervision in work environments; X needs help to ensure safety and accuracy, Y requires one-to-one support, and Z cannot be left unsupervised with children despite being well-liked.

Barriers to employment further limit opportunities for these individuals. While X, Y, and Z are eager to work, their special needs and supervision requirements make finding sustainable, paid employment challenging. Each has engaged in internships or volunteer roles, but they face difficulties with task independence. The uncertainty of their future employment paths is also a shared concern, with family members worried about transitions: X's grandparent is concerned about long-term employment, Y's parents worry about the period after Y's internship ends, and Z's parent is anxious about the transition from education to adult care amid limited guidance from social services.

Family and support systems play crucial roles for these young people, as each is highly dependent on family for daily support. X relies on their grandparent, Y's parents assist with travel and work tasks, and Z's parent remains actively involved in advocating for them. Each family is also apprehensive about the future, especially when they may no longer be able to provide care. X's grandparent is considering introducing respite care, Y's parents are concerned about future employment and housing, and Z's parent is uncertain about adult care transitions. Minimal involvement from social services compounds these concerns, adding to the families' anxieties.

Despite these challenges, X, Y, and Z possess strengths and potential. They are all enthusiastic about work; X enjoys gardening, Y is starting a supported internship, and Z has shown interest in assisting with children's activities. Each can perform familiar tasks with limited assistance once they have learned them: X manages tasks at a garden centre, Y completes a paper route with guidance, and Z is active in a school club with mild supervision. They also have strengths in social engagement, with X being popular among peers, Y benefiting from supportive adult interactions, and Z thriving in structured group settings. Structured support and supervision remain essential to each individual's success. In workplace settings, structured support—such as through supported employment programmes—could offer sustainable job opportunities, accommodating their unique supervision needs. Tailored living arrangements are also necessary; both Y and Z are likely to need supported living, and X may benefit from a gradual introduction to respite care to prepare for a future without their grandparent's constant support.

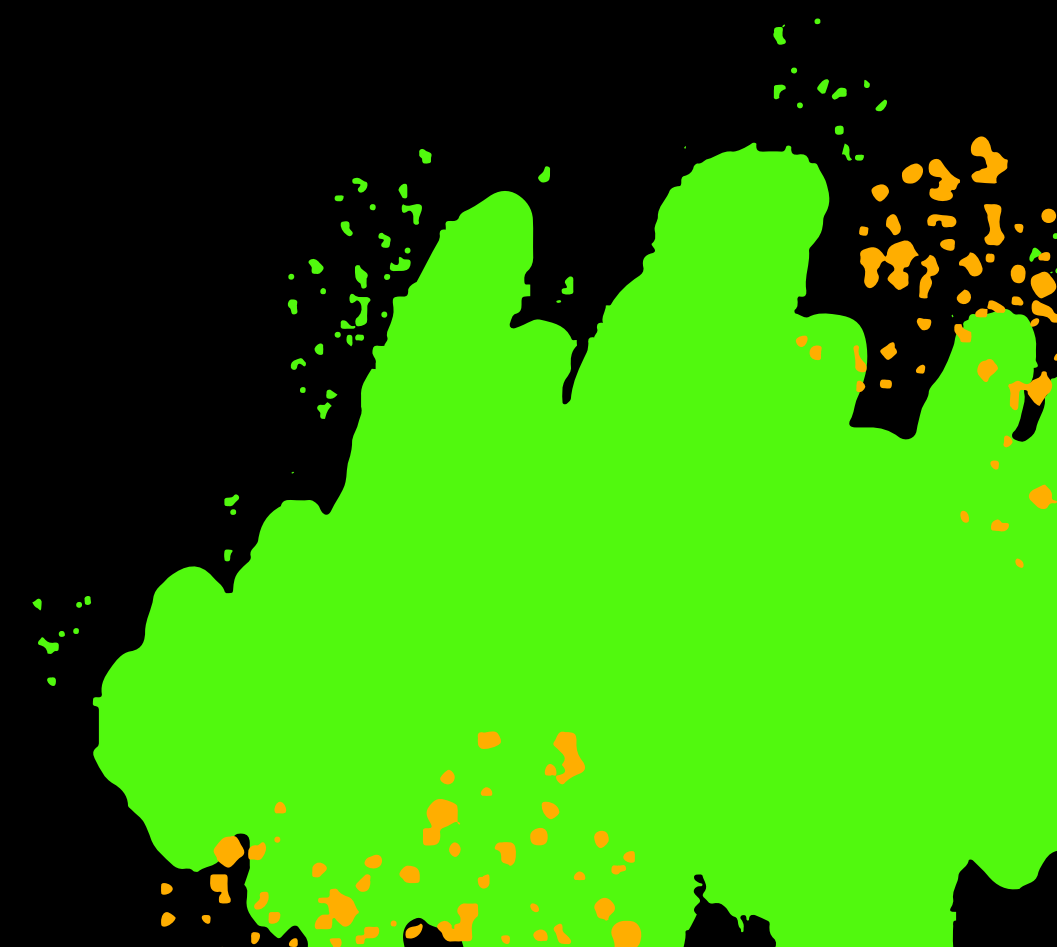
In conclusion, the cases of X, Y, and Z illustrate the common challenges and barriers young people with SEND face in achieving independence, finding employment, and transitioning into adult care. Each has strengths and a desire for independence, but their ongoing need for supervision, difficulty with complex tasks, and lack of comprehensive social support are significant obstacles. Effective collaboration among families, social services, and employers will be essential to create a pathway toward a more independent future for each individual.

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**Young people reported they  
felt some opportunities they  
had to be employed, or,  
engage in activities were  
hindered by risk averse  
employers**





# PERFORMING

# Arts



The performing arts case studies illustrate how young people with SEND have engaged in performing arts programmes designed to support their skills, social engagement, and confidence. The studies highlight individual success stories, showing how participating in music, dance, and theatre helps these young people build self-expression, social skills, and career aspirations within the arts. The case studies emphasise the role of tailored support and mentorship in overcoming barriers, making the arts a viable and empowering career path for SEND participants.







# R's Path to Pursuing Music Education

R is an aspiring singer with a deep passion for music and a desire to begin formal education in this field. They plan to enrol in a Level 1 music course at college, motivated by the opportunity to develop their musical talents and excited about the prospect of learning in a structured environment. However, R is uncertain about how to initiate this journey, lacking clarity on the enrollment process and other necessary steps.

One of R's strengths is their ability to travel independently, which opens up options for attending college and engaging in music-related activities beyond their home. This independence reflects R's readiness to commit to a formal learning environment, where they can deepen their skills and explore their artistic potential. However, R currently faces challenges in accessing essential information about the college music programme. Without guidance on enrollment or insight into what to expect, R feels unsure about how to effectively prepare for their goals.

R's immediate focus is to gather comprehensive information about the Level 1 music course—its requirements, structure, and application process. This includes understanding course content, any audition requirements, and the support services the college may offer to help with their transition. To make this process easier, R would benefit from support by connecting with a college advisor or career counselor who can guide them through enrollment and provide an overview of the programme. Additionally, a mentor or peer within the music course could offer valuable insight into college life, helping R build confidence, navigate the college environment, and find relevant resources.

R's story highlights the importance of accessible information and supportive guidance for individuals embarking on new educational paths. With the right direction and support, R has the potential to develop their musical skills, gain confidence, and take meaningful steps toward a fulfilling music career. By connecting with supportive services and gaining clarity on next steps, R can confidently embark on a structured pathway to achieve their musical aspirations.





# S's Pursuit of a Career in the Creative Arts

S is a talented neurodivergent individual with a strong passion for the creative arts, motivated by a desire to establish a career in this field. Despite their commitment and enthusiasm, S faces considerable barriers due to location, resources, and limited industry connections, which hinder their ability to gain experience and compete in a selective market.

Living in South Shields, S encounters geographic and financial challenges. Creative arts opportunities, such as auditions and apprenticeships, are primarily located in Newcastle and Sunderland, which require commuting. Given limited financial resources and the unreliability of public transport, accessing these opportunities is challenging, as travelling to nearby cities is both time-consuming and costly.

Additionally, S is navigating a highly competitive and often exclusive creative arts industry. The intense competition in South Shields and surrounding areas makes it difficult for S to secure roles and entry-level apprenticeships, especially as there are limited beginner-friendly positions available. This sense of exclusion is intensified by industry biases that may overlook neurodivergent individuals, limiting S's opportunities to break into the field.

A significant barrier S faces is the lack of accessible support and funding for neurodivergent individuals in creative arts. With career pathways typically oriented around costly university programmes, few affordable options exist for hands-on experience or apprenticeships suited to individuals with additional needs. Consequently, S feels limited in their options and hindered by the lack of support specific to their situation.

S has also observed industry-specific biases that favour informal networking for securing roles rather than formal auditions, which makes it harder for them to succeed. Navigating social interactions and industry networking poses challenges for S, particularly as subtle social nuances influence casting decisions. When nervous or under pressure, S may struggle with oral communication, often missing opportunities due to difficulty expressing themselves clearly. These obstacles have affected their confidence and made it more challenging to access work opportunities.



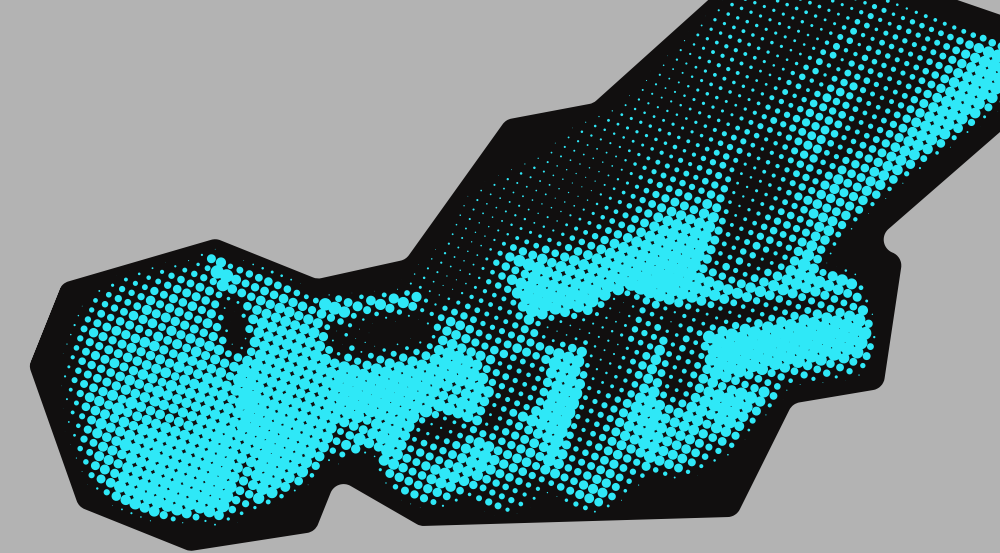
S's main goal is to gain practical experience and create a sustainable path into the creative arts. They need accessible networking opportunities, mentorship, and hands-on experiences within their local area, along with targeted support to strengthen their industry-specific communication skills, such as managing audition nerves and presenting effectively.

Connecting S with a local mentor in the creative arts who understands their unique challenges could provide guidance in finding opportunities and overcoming specific industry barriers. Networking events and workshops tailored for neurodivergent individuals would also give S the chance to build connections in a more accommodating setting. Increased funding for creative arts apprenticeships in South Shields would allow S to gain experience locally, reducing the need to commute. Creating more accessible entry-level positions or community-based arts programmes would offer S a chance to develop a portfolio and build confidence. Structured communication and audition coaching sessions could further help S practice essential skills in a supportive environment, providing strategies to handle nerves and communicate effectively during auditions.

S's experience underscores the need for a more inclusive support structure within the creative arts industry. By establishing accessible pathways, promoting acceptance, and providing targeted support, the industry could create more opportunities for neurodivergent individuals to succeed. With mentorship, local opportunities, and tailored resources, S would have a stronger chance of thriving in the creative arts, bringing their unique talents to the field.







# T's Path to Songwriting and Singing

T is an aspiring singer-songwriter with a passion for creating original music, already demonstrating creativity and dedication through their lyric writing. However, they feel uncertain about how to set their lyrics to music and are unsure about the next steps to develop their skills as a performer.

One of T's strengths lies in their natural talent for lyric writing, revealing strong creative instincts and a desire to connect with others through music. They are highly motivated to bring their words to life and eager to gain the skills needed to perform their songs with confidence.

While T is comfortable crafting lyrics, they struggle with musical composition, lacking experience in creating melodies or arranging music to accompany their words. They recognise that learning about musical composition and receiving guidance from a skilled mentor could help them move past this barrier. Additionally, T's lack of self-confidence and nervousness around new people make sharing their music publicly a challenge.

T would benefit from regular singing lessons to build confidence in their vocal abilities, with feedback from a vocal coach to validate their talent and refine their technique. Gradual exposure to performing in supportive settings—such as open mic nights or informal gatherings—could help T overcome performance anxiety, with each positive experience on stage reinforcing their confidence.

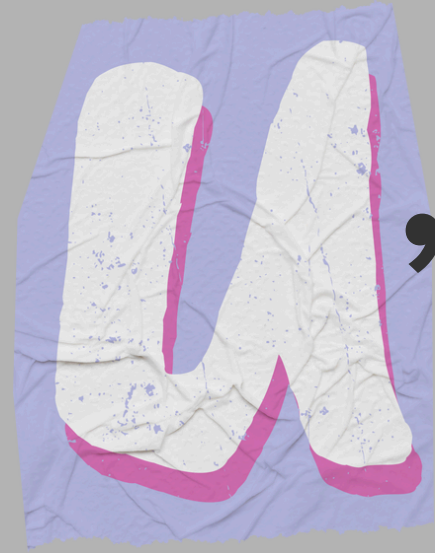


T's main goals are to learn how to set their lyrics to music, gain confidence in their singing, and find supportive opportunities to perform. Access to a songwriting mentor who could provide guidance on musical composition would give T the tools to turn their lyrics into complete songs. Similarly, regular performance practice in low-pressure settings would help T gradually become more comfortable with public performances.

To support T's growth, connecting with both a vocal coach and a songwriting mentor would be ideal. A vocal coach could provide personalised vocal training, while a mentor in composition could help T build their musical skills. Engaging with local music communities or peers with similar interests could also help T ease their nervousness around new people, offering a foundation of support as they grow in confidence.

T's journey reflects the challenges that many emerging artists face when moving from personal expression to public performance. With structured support and encouragement, T can develop the skills and confidence necessary to bring their lyrics to life and share their music with others. By connecting with the right mentors and gradually stepping into the performance world, T is well on their way to achieving their dream of becoming a confident singer-songwriter.





# U's Journey Toward a Professional Dance Career

U is a dedicated and passionate dancer currently enrolled in a Level 1 dance programme, aspiring to pursue a professional career in dance. They have attended a few auditions, with support from their parents, who help search for opportunities online. However, U feels uncertain about how to navigate the audition process independently.

U demonstrates strong commitment to their craft by regularly attending auditions and working hard in their dance programme. Their enthusiasm for dance and active pursuit of auditions reflect their desire to grow professionally. U's parents play a supportive role by researching and identifying auditions to help them gain experience. Despite this motivation, U faces several challenges in understanding the audition process. They have not received clear guidance on where to find auditions or what to expect, and they would benefit from learning how to submit video auditions, a key skill in the dance industry. U also struggles with understanding on-the-spot questions during auditions and would benefit from having these questions in written form ahead of time to prepare clear responses.

U's immediate goals are to gain access to reliable information on auditions and to better understand audition expectations, especially for video submissions. Resources or support providing insights into what casting directors look for, how to prepare audition videos, and where to find reputable listings would be invaluable. To succeed, U could benefit from a mentor or career advisor in the dance industry who can guide them through the audition process. This support could include tips on locating professional auditions, preparing for video submissions, and understanding typical audition questions. Access to written materials or example questions would give U the preparation time they need.

U's experience highlights the importance of accessible resources and mentorship for young dancers pursuing professional careers. With proper guidance on finding auditions, preparing for them, and understanding complex instructions, U can gain the confidence and skills necessary to thrive in the competitive dance industry. By securing these resources, U can continue to progress toward their dream of becoming a professional dancer.

# SEND in the



The case studies highlight the importance of inclusive and accessible support in the creative arts for neurodivergent individuals, emphasising mentorship, funding, local opportunities, and tailored skill-building as key strategies to empower these individuals in pursuing fulfilling careers. The cases of R, S, T, and U reveal recurring challenges, including geographic constraints and financial limitations that restrict access to resources and opportunities, especially in smaller towns. Each individual faces barriers due to limited information and guidance on industry pathways, which could be mitigated through mentorship or career counselling. Financial constraints further limit their options, as affordable local training or creative apprenticeships with neurodivergent support are scarce. Networking challenges and informal industry practices often leave them disadvantaged, making it harder to establish professional connections. Additionally, they frequently need confidence-building, particularly in communication and performance skills, which could be bolstered through regular, supported practice. Tailored support in audition preparation and communication skills would help manage the anxiety they feel around industry expectations, while gradual exposure to public performance in low-pressure settings would build comfort and confidence, allowing them to contribute their unique talents to the arts.



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# IDENTIFIED BARRIERS

Employers Culture and Empathy

Lack of Motivation

Team Working

English & Maths  
Qualifications

Keeping Focused

Financial barriers

Start Times

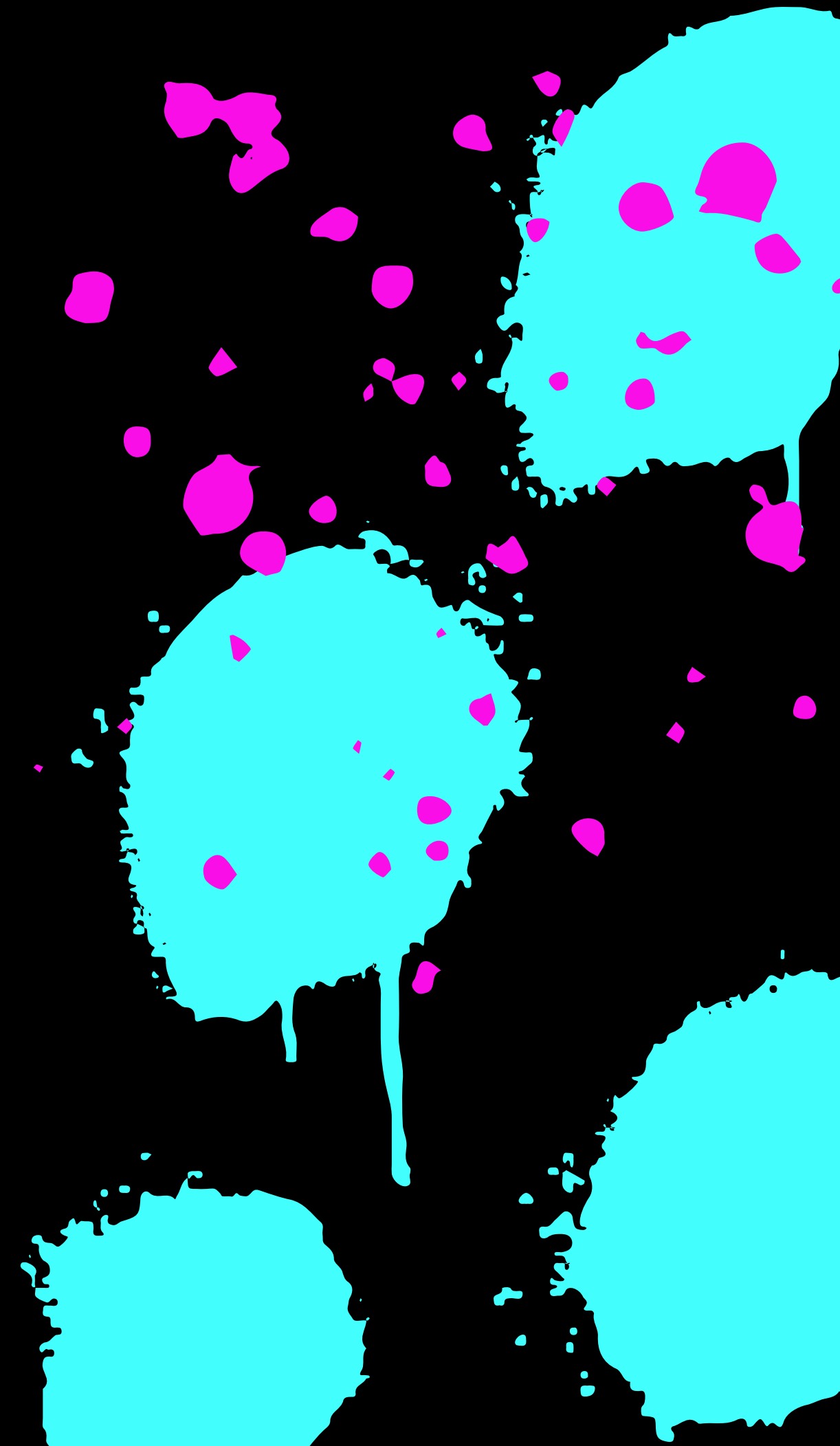
Building infrastructure

Unsure of future ambitions

Stress & Anxiety

Busy Work Environments

Travel







**U**nloc**K**ing  
£10.**1** billion

# 46.8%

According to UK government data, there are approximately 1.2 million young people aged 16-25 who have Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. Of this group, 46.8% (561,600) are economically inactive (not in education, employment, or training - NEET).

If these 561,600 young people with SEND were able to work and earn up to £9,000 per year, the total potential earnings would be £5.0544 billion

The injection of £5.0544 billion into the economy could have a multiplier effect, where the increased spending by young people with SEND boosts overall economic activity. The multiplier varies but is typically estimated to be between 1.3 and 2. This means the actual economic impact could be between £6.57 billion to £10.11 billion

# £9000



There are 22,500 young people aged 16 - 25 year old with SEND in Tyne and Wear and around 10,530 of them are economically inactive.

10,530

£189.54  
Million

If these 10,530 young people were able to work and earn up to £9,000 per year, The direct economic contribution from these earnings would add £94.77 million annually to the Tyne and Wear economy. This income could be spent on local goods and services, benefiting local businesses and boosting economic activity.

The local economic multiplier effect could range from 1.3 to 2. Thus, the overall impact could be £123.2 million to £189.54 million

# The **E**conomic Case for Inclusion*n*

Investing in the inclusion of young people with SEND is not just the right thing to do; it makes economic sense. A more inclusive workforce benefits everyone. Employers who embrace diversity and make reasonable adjustments often find that their workplaces become more adaptable and innovative. Moreover, the skills and perspectives that young people with SEND bring can be a tremendous asset, particularly in roles that require attention to detail, creative problem-solving, and empathy. Volunteering and internships are also powerful pathways to employment. These experiences provide young people with practical skills and connections while offering employers a chance to learn how to support a diverse workforce. Yet, the lack of legal requirements for reasonable adjustments in volunteering settings remains a significant barrier. Addressing this gap could open up more opportunities for skill development and economic participation.

If all economically inactive young people with SEND in the UK found full-time employment at the minimum wage, they would contribute £11.42 billion annually to the economy, with a total impact of up to £22.84 billion when factoring in the multiplier effect. In Tyne and Wear, the contribution would be £213.99 million annually, with an overall impact of up to £427.98 million. These figures highlight the transformative potential of breaking down employment barriers for young people with SEND, not only for their personal independence but for driving national and regional economic growth.





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# The Employers



We spoke with local employers and asked them to give anonymous feedback around their company culture relating to employing young people with SEND



# 67%

of businesses said they have employees on their senior leadership team who identify as having special educational needs or disabilities

# 1 in 3

businesses did not feel like they could employ and support young people with SEND

# 17%

of the businesses employ a young person (up to 25 year old) with SEND

# 80%

of businesses would like young people with SEND to help make them more inclusive

# What does current employment look like?

The largest sectors employing young people with SEND tend to be those that offer structured, supportive environments, with roles often in health and social care, retail, hospitality, and administrative support. These sectors are well-suited due to their flexibility in roles and relatively lower entry requirements, making them accessible for individuals who may benefit from task-specific support or adaptations.

Supported internships, particularly in health and social care roles such as in hospitals through programmes like Project SEARCH, provide pathways to paid positions. For example, Project SEARCH internships often focus on roles within hospitals or healthcare facilities, where interns gain hands-on experience under close supervision, enhancing their skills for future employment in similar settings. Retail and hospitality are also common fields, as they can offer structured, repetitive tasks in environments where accommodations, such as job coaching, are often feasible.


According to the Children's Commissioner for England, supported internships and structured work placements are crucial in these sectors, as young people with SEND are often significantly underrepresented in employment without this tailored support. For those with learning disabilities, supported internships in these sectors have demonstrated higher success in transitioning to sustained employment. Nonetheless, the need for ongoing support post-internship remains a barrier, with only around 5.9% of adults with learning disabilities in paid employment in 2018-19.

Improving the visibility and funding for such supported roles could further increase employment rates in these fields, as shown by positive outcomes in programmes that include dedicated job coaching and gradual role adjustments.





# Are we doing enough?



The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) plays a pivotal role in supporting young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) as they transition into the workforce. Through programmes like Access to Work and supported internships, the DWP aims to create pathways that enable SEND youth to secure and thrive in employment. However, despite these initiatives, significant gaps remain in the consistency and accessibility of support, underscoring the need for enhanced resources and reforms to truly meet the diverse needs of SEND jobseekers.

# Current Support

**Access to Work Scheme:** This DWP programme provides financial support for accommodations and adjustments needed by employees with disabilities, including SEND young people. The programme can fund a wide range of needs, from assistive technology to job coaching.

**Supported Internships:** The DWP and Department for Education (DfE) promote supported internships as a pathway to employment for SEND young people. These are structured, time-limited programmes that offer work experience alongside tailored support, often yielding positive employment outcomes.

**Employer Incentives and Disability Confident Scheme:** The Disability Confident Scheme aims to help employers become more inclusive and supportive of SEND employees. Although helpful, it's criticised for lack of enforceable standards and may benefit from more rigorous evaluation and training.

**Jobcentre Plus Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs):** DEAs offer specialised support for disabled jobseekers, including young people with SEND. They help match candidates with employers who understand their needs and work on individualised employment plans.

**Local Authority SEND Teams:** Many local authorities have SEND teams or employment advisors who collaborate with schools, colleges, and employers to support the transition into work. These services vary widely in quality and scope depending on local budgets and priorities.

**Work and Health Programme:** Tailored for people with disabilities, this programme offers individualised employment support. However, its reach can be limited due to eligibility criteria and availability across regions.



# 25%

**According to recent statistics, only about 25% of young people with SEND remain employed one year after completing a supported internship. This is largely due to the lack of continued, individualised support post-internship, which many SEND participants need to maintain stable employment**



# The Gaps

**Insufficient Transition Support from Education to Employment:** The transition from school or college to work is challenging for SEND students. Many do not receive adequate career counselling or access to work placements that align with their abilities and interests, limiting their employment potential and readiness.

**Limited Access to Work Awareness:** Many employers and SEND young people are unaware of the Access to Work scheme, and the application process can be lengthy and complex, leading to underutilisation. A recent DWP report highlighted that only a small percentage of eligible SEND young people engage with this scheme.

**Lack of Employer Engagement and Training:** While programmes like Disability Confident encourage employer inclusivity, many businesses still lack training on practical ways to support SEND employees effectively. This gap often leads to a reluctance to hire SEND individuals due to perceived accommodations costs and support requirements.

**Mental Health Support:** SEND young people often face mental health challenges that are inadequately addressed in the transition to employment. The stress of navigating job searches and workplaces without sufficient mental health support can discourage SEND youth from pursuing employment.

**Inconsistent Implementation:** Support for SEND employment varies greatly by region. For instance, the quality and availability of job coaches, tailored training, and workplace adjustments differ widely, leading to unequal access for young people across the country.



# 21%

Employment rates are especially low among young adults on the autism spectrum. A study from Drexel University showed that only about 20.9% of autistic young adults secured full-time employment post-school, a rate significantly lower than peers with other disabilities. Factors such as difficulty in navigating social expectations, the need for consistent routines, and lower employer accommodations play a role in these outcomes



# Solutions

**Simplifying Access to Work Application Process:** Streamlining the application process and expanding outreach efforts to inform SEND youth and employers about Access to Work benefits could increase the scheme's reach and impact.

**Mandatory Disability Awareness Training for Employers:** Requiring basic SEND awareness training for all employers receiving government incentives would help foster understanding and confidence in employing young people with disabilities.

**More Consistent Funding and Support for Local SEND Services:** Standardising funding for local authority SEND employment services across regions would reduce geographic disparities in service quality, ensuring more uniform support for SEND youth seeking work.

**Expanding Supported Internship Models:** Increasing the availability of supported internships, especially in partnership with local businesses, can provide valuable experience and confidence for SEND youth.

**Enhanced Transition Planning:** Schools and colleges should implement robust, individualised transition plans that integrate job preparation, soft skills development, and career counselling from an early stage.

**Greater Access to Job Coaches and Employment Mentors:** Dedicated job coaches can bridge the skills and experience gap, offering on-the-job support and training. This would be especially effective if provided as part of the Access to Work programme or through Jobcentre Plus.

**Increasing Financial Incentives for Employers:** Offering more substantial financial incentives and subsidies for companies hiring and training SEND youth would encourage greater employer participation. Building on the Disability Confident Scheme, this could include tax breaks, subsidies, or direct grants for disability accommodations.

**Mental Health and Wellbeing Support:** Integrating mental health support services for SEND young people entering the workforce could reduce stress and improve job retention. Collaboration between the NHS and employment services could provide critical mental health resources to young employees.

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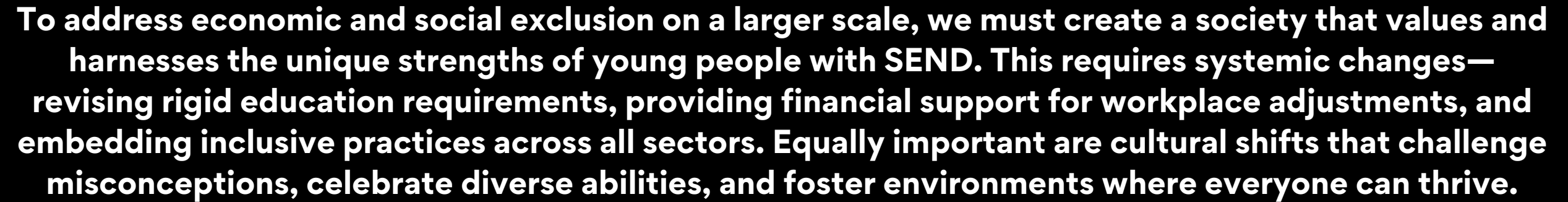


A  
NEW  
Solution

# Creating Social Change and etting Paid!

**The Don't Dis My Ability programme is a bold and empowering initiative that addresses the economic and social exclusion faced by young people with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities). Emerging from prior work with young people, it amplifies their voices and tackles the significant barriers they face in accessing employment, volunteering, and leisure opportunities—barriers that often leave them marginalised and at risk of poverty. The programme places their lived experiences at the heart of its mission, recognising them as experts in their own lives and providing them with a platform to influence real social change.**

**Through activities such as auditing businesses, towns, parks, and beaches, participants provide invaluable insights into accessibility and inclusion while earning income for their expertise. This uniquely blends work experience, social mobility, and paid freelance opportunities, positioning participants not just as learners but as specialists. With professional guidance, they consult, advise, and advocate on behalf of SEND individuals, gaining skills in investigation, analysis, and reporting that drive meaningful change for businesses, communities, and the future of SEND employment.**



**By supporting young people with SEND into meaningful paid employment, employers are not just creating opportunities; they are building workplaces of the future—ones that embrace innovation, inclusivity, and the untapped potential of diverse talent. This holistic approach ensures that every step forward benefits not just individuals but society as a whole, enriching communities and fuelling sustainable growth. Together, we can transform economic and social inclusion from aspiration into reality.**





# Audit Benefits



A disability access audit can offer several benefits to businesses, including improved inclusivity, legal compliance, and enhanced customer experience. Here's a breakdown of some key benefits:

## 1. Legal Compliance

- In the UK, businesses are required to make "reasonable adjustments" under the Equality Act 2010 to ensure accessibility. An audit helps identify and implement these adjustments, reducing the risk of legal action and potential fines.

## 2. Enhanced Customer Reach and Revenue

- By making premises accessible to people with disabilities, businesses can tap into a broader customer base, including the 14.6 million people in the UK living with a disability, along with friends, families, and carers who value inclusive spaces.

## 3. Improved Reputation and Brand Image

- Accessibility improvements reflect a commitment to inclusivity, which can significantly boost a brand's reputation. Customers increasingly prefer businesses that demonstrate social responsibility, and this commitment can foster loyalty and positive word-of-mouth.

## 4. Increased Employee Productivity and Well-being

- An accessible workplace benefits not only customers but also employees. Accommodations can improve the work experience for employees with disabilities, resulting in greater job satisfaction, productivity, and reduced turnover.



## 5. Positive Impact on Customer Experience

- Accessible environments improve navigation and comfort for everyone, not just those with disabilities. Features like ramps, clear signage, and accessible restrooms make the space more enjoyable for all.

## 6. Cost Savings in the Long Run

- Regular audits and small, proactive changes tend to be more cost-effective than larger, reactive changes if issues are raised through legal challenges. Early action can also help avoid expensive retrofitting and build accessibility into routine maintenance.

## 7. Employee Education and Awareness

- Audits often involve training to ensure staff understand how to support customers with disabilities. This improves the overall customer service experience and enhances staff confidence in interacting with all customers.

## 8. Better Alignment with Community Values

- An accessible business is an asset to its community, reinforcing values of inclusivity and respect.





**The key to tackling the economic and social exclusion faced by young people with SEND does not rest with any one individual or organisation. It is a collective responsibility and a challenge that requires collaboration across every sector in the country. Together, we can create a future where the unique strengths of young people with SEND are recognised, valued, and leveraged to benefit everyone.**

**If you would like to support this transformative programme by booking an accessibility audit, providing funding, or exploring opportunities for collaborative working, please don't hesitate to contact us. Let's work together to build a more inclusive and thriving society for all.**

**[www.our1community.co.uk](http://www.our1community.co.uk)**



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THANK YOU

