Progress Exchange: From Insight to Action

Executive summary

The first Progress Exchange brought together more than 60 practitioners, employers, policy leaders, funders, educators and delivery organisations to test a central question: why do too many young people remain disconnected from education, training and meaningful work despite substantial activity across the system? The discussion confirmed that the problem is not a lack of commitment or isolated good practice. It is the absence of a pathway that feels coherent to the young person moving through it.

Participants identified five connected priorities: intervene earlier, preserve trusted relationships across transition points, make support easier to navigate, involve employers as co-designers rather than end-point recipients and measure the quality, depth and durability of progress, not simply participation or job starts. Youth voice must shape the design and governance of any response, rather than being added after decisions have been made.

This paper is therefore not a statement of a finished solution. It is an insight-to-action paper for the first virtual roundtable in December. It sets out a shared diagnosis and a small number of propositions to test, including a connected youth pathway, a recognisable front door, named navigators and warm handovers, a preventative birth-to-workplace approach, stronger employer participation and a more useful shared account of progress. The December session should narrow these ideas into bounded tests with a clear lead, participating organisations, a first deliverable, known dependencies, evidence of progress and an agreed review point.

Foreword

When we convened the first Progress Exchange, the intention was never to host another conversation that ended when people left the room. We wanted to create a space where people working across policy, delivery, employment, education and philanthropy could test the argument, challenge one another honestly and identify what practical action might follow.

What struck me on the day was not a shortage of expertise or commitment. There is a great deal of both across Liverpool City Region and beyond. The harder issue is connection. Young people do not experience programmes, funding streams and organisational boundaries separately. They experience a pathway, and too often that pathway becomes difficult to navigate or breaks at the point where continuity matters most.

That is why this paper is deliberately framed as insight to action. It brings together the original Beyond Employability discussion paper, the evidence and lived experience shared at the Progress Exchange, and the learning captured through follow-up conversations, notes and internal reflection. It does not present the Steve Morgan Foundation as having all the answers, nor does it propose another standalone programme. Our role is to use our long-term relationships, convening power and practical experience to help connect insight to influence, and influence to credible action.

The first virtual roundtable in December is the next step. It should help us move from broad agreement towards a small number of practical tests, with the right people around them and a clear understanding of what progress would look like. If an idea is not yet ready to carry a lead, a first deliverable and a review point, we should be honest about that. Momentum matters, but so does discipline.

My hope is that this paper gives that next conversation a strong starting point: grounded in what young people and practitioners experience, ambitious about what can change, and focused on action that makes opportunity more visible, usable and sustainable.

Rich Jones
Regional Director
Steve Morgan Foundation

Purpose and context

The Steve Morgan Foundation convened the Progress Exchange to bring together employers, practitioners, policymakers, funders, educators and delivery organisations around a common challenge: how to improve participation, progression and sustained employment for young people, particularly those aged 16 to 24, across Liverpool City Region.

The Beyond Employability discussion paper prepared for the event combined contributor insight, learning from practice, national policy evidence and regional labour-market context. It asked not simply what opportunities exist, but whether those opportunities are visible, reachable, usable and capable of leading somewhere meaningful.

It raised three core questions:

- Where and when does policy fail to become a usable pathway?
- Where are people making progress before formal outcomes appear?
- What needs to change for participation to lead to sustained opportunity?

Learnings pointed to a simple conclusion. Lasting change is rarely created by a single programme or intervention. Instead, real change depends on the strength of relationships, the prevention of problems before they become entrenched, the quality of local knowledge and the capacity of organisations to stay involved long enough for sustainable progress.

The Insight to Action paper outlines where the problems are and the propositions practitioners in the field believe will meet the needs of the young people they're in place to support.

The reality

The Liverpool City Region has its own unique challenges. One in three neighbourhoods are in England's 10% most deprived with three out of the six councils among the 15 hardest places to grow up according to the Children's Commissioner.

Economically inactive residents total 225,000 and 38,000 citizens are classed as unemployed. The employment rate is 73% which is behind the national average of 76% and the 80% target. To reach that 80%, the city needs to get 90,000 more people into work.

According to statistics the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEETS) across the UK is rising. Figures from the Office of National Statistics covering the period January 2026

to March 2026 showed 13.5% of young people are classed as NEET, equating to an estimated 1,012,000 16 – 24-year-olds. That figure was up by 89,000 when comparing to January 2025 to March 2025.

However, the UK picture doesn't reflect the experiences of young people in the North West. Statistics from the Youth Futures Foundation analysis of Labour Force data suggested, in 2024, that 14.9% of the region's young people were NEET, the highest regional rates.

On the ground, the experiences of young people highlight struggles to secure employment and a fragmented and complicated system amplifying the issues.

A young contributor from Liverpool described the practical difficulty of pursuing a degree apprenticeship despite having a clear ambition and the ability to succeed. Repeated rejections, limited feedback and scattered support made the route harder to navigate than it needed to be.
Degree apprenticeships were introduced in England in 2015 as a way for young people to earn a wage, pay no student fees and finish with a full honours degree. For the academic year 2024 / 2025, starts in degree level apprenticeships grew 17.1% from 50,110 to 60,350.

He also faced difficulties in finding the right on-the-ground support, whether that was help in applying for roles, mental health support or financial assistance to allow him to get to interviews. His experience illustrates a wider system issue; potential can be present while the pathway remains unclear.

Pre-event feedback from attendees gave a clear indication as to where they believed the system was letting down young people.

"If we want lasting progression, we must focus not only on preparing individuals to access opportunities, but also on removing the systemic barriers that prevent opportunities from being accessible in the first place."
Liverpool City Council

"We should be careful not to measure progress solely by whether a young person achieves a specific outcome at a specific point in time. True progress is often demonstrated by the sustainability of that outcome and a young person's ability to maintain stability, independence and resilience over the longer term."
The Dome Youth Zone

"A common misconception is that a lack of employment or participation is primarily a skills deficit. In reality, many people already possess skills, talents and potential but have experienced barriers such as poverty, trauma, poor mental health, caring responsibilities, discrimination or a lack of opportunity."
Rotunda College & Community Hub

"Relationships and time are often underestimated. People may need someone to meet them where they are, build trust and help them take those first small steps before they are ready to engage with a formal pathway or achieve a measurable outcome."
Everton In the Community

"Participation, progression and opportunity varies massively for young people depending on ethnicity, location and barriers to work, which should not be overlooked in this discussion."
Youth Futures Foundation

"Employers, education providers and support organisations all have a role to play in creating accessible and meaningful pathways. Bringing them together around a shared goal of supporting young people's progression would help create clearer, more inclusive routes into employment and training."
The Dome Youth Zone

From discussion to action

Identifying barriers is only useful if it changes what partners do next. The Progress Exchange was designed as a working session, not a conference or consultation exercise. The discipline now is to convert the strongest areas of agreement into bounded, testable action, without creating a new structure where existing organisations can collaborate more effectively.

The discussion produced a consistent diagnosis. Systemic barriers make support difficult to navigate, conventional measures can obscure meaningful progress, routes into work are non-linear, trusted relationships are lost at transition points, intervention often comes too late and employers are too often asked to receive young people into jobs rather than help shape the pathway from the outset.

Considering the three core questions set out at the beginning, the core points discussed are set out, propositions outlined as a potential solution and next steps explained.

Where and when does policy fail to become a usable pathway?

The problem: systematic barriers

Systematic barriers leave young people questioning who to approach and where to turn. Complicated funding structures, multiple overlapping programmes, eligibility barriers, lack of coordination between services and inconsistent provision across schools and communities are all part of a wider problem. Reduced fragmentation and shared accountability are needed so young people are not carrying the failures of the system.

The proposition: power and voice

Young people should be involved in shaping services, programmes and policies from the outset, rather than be asked to give feedback and input once decisions have been made. It is their lived experience that could prove to be the catalyst for change.

Youth consultation does take place across many organisations but insight can be fragmented and its influence can often be unclear.

Devolution by default could be one solution. Combined authorities are increasingly important for labour-market intelligence, skills planning, employer engagement and commissioning. Local government has a part to play in convening and accountability.

The problem: lack of trusted relationships

A lack of trusted relationships coupled with fragmented handovers emerge as a core reason why young people are likely to lose support, confidence and momentum. Risks can occur across the whole journey including the transition from primary to secondary school, key stage four to post 16, education to training, programme completion to job search, the referral between providers and entry into work.

Young people need someone alongside them through setbacks and transitions while retaining choice and control.

The proposition: single front door

A single front door with a seamless, preventative handover would hide complicated interlinking between services and give the young person one main contact. This could involve employers and other external bodies to ensure smooth movement across pathways.

Alternatively, practitioners need a current, searchable understanding of who provides financial, digital, health, skills and employment support. Better navigation should reduce the burden placed on the young people navigating the system.

The problem: intervention is too late

Lack of early intervention can lead to school disengagement and refusal, suspensions and exclusion. Intervening much earlier than aged 16 could prevent issues further down the line including economic inactivity, criminal exploitation, poor mental health, family breakdown and entry into the care system.

The proposition: birth to workplace approach

Activity for NEETS starts at 16 but many argue that's too late. A birth to workplace approach would encompass early language, literacy, attendance, aspiration, confidence and exposure to the world of work. A two-pronged approach, responding to the immediate crisis while building a preventative system for younger children and family's needs to be considered.

Early indicators could be used with care to offer support, primary and secondary schools could be connected to community-based youth and family support services and meaningful employer encounters could be introduced before key subject and pathway decisions are made.

The problem: regulation and risk discourage employers

Safeguarding, compliance and employment requirements can increase complexity for employers. The protections are important, but smaller employers may need additional guidance and support to participate with confidence. Employers lack input early in the process, often only appearing at the end, and are rarely involved in shaping pathways, work experience, sector exposure and recruitment.

The proposition: employers as co-designers

Employers need to be involved as co-designers to ease the transition into employment and provide sustainable opportunities, with education pathways supporting transferable skills. Qualifications remain valuable, but transferable skills, practical experience and clear routes into further learning and work will improve the experience for all participants.

SME's employ a large share of the workforce. Apprenticeship funding, wage support, brokerage and help from larger employers could unlock participation.

Where are people making progress before formal outcomes appear?

The problem: measuring success

Success isn't just about finding a young person employment. It looks different for everyone and cannot be measured simply by entry into education, employment or training. Starting points need to be recognised and progress charted accordingly, whether that's down to increased confidence, practical skills or connection and trust with the agency the participant is working with.

The proposition: person and place centred approach

Current performance systems often reward participation, qualifications and entry into work. What they fail to take account of is whether a young person's life has materially improved. Visible progress could be completing work experience with usable evidence for a CV, skills development and exposure to different sectors, interview experience and clearer career choice or improved confidence, aspiration and readiness for the next stage. Progression and prevention need to be practical with age-appropriate conversations about employment and aspirations alongside family support, financial advice, debt advice and budgeting. Every opportunity should improve skills, confidence, employability or access to a defined next step.

The problem: routes into work aren't linear

Health, mental health, finances, childcare and caring responsibilities are among the factors that may affect routes into work. Support works when these factors are considered. Other barriers can include transport to get to interviews and work, confidence, family influences and limited workplace experience.

The proposition: person focused progress

Pathways matter as much as the final destination and whilst every intervention will not immediately produce a job or the desired end result, progress should remain visible and cumulative. Skills bootcamps, health support, prevention and employer brokerage should be targeted to the specific problem rather than being treated as interchangeable.

What needs to change for participation to lead to sustained opportunity?

The Progress Exchange demonstrated broad agreement that youth unemployment and economic inactivity cannot be solved through isolated employability programmes. Young people's outcomes are shaped by the interaction of education, health, poverty, transport, employer practice, social networks and the quality of transitions between services.

The strongest opportunity is to build a recognisable route into support, trusted relationships that survive transitions, employers involved from the outset, shared accountability and evidence that follows people beyond a short-term job start.

The first virtual roundtable in December should use the following sequence to turn the propositions into a testable design within existing provision. The purpose is not to agree an entire regional model in one meeting. It is to identify the smallest credible next step, the people needed to take it forward and the evidence that would justify continuing, changing or stopping.

1. Convene a small design group bringing together Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, delivery partners, employers, educators and the youth voice.
2. Map the current journey, identifying front doors, eligibility rules, transition points, referral gaps and existing coordination assets.
3. Agree on the design principles confirming minimum experience every young person should receive regardless of their entry point.
4. Select a test geography or cohort where partners can test the model within existing provision.
5. Build employer participation by recruiting a group of employers including SMEs to co-design opportunities and support.
6. Define the data model by agreeing a small set of shared measures, data arrangements and a 12 and 24 month follow up.
7. Prototype the front door and test a common identity, triage route, named navigator and warm handover protocol.

8. Review and scale by assessing user experience, equity, sustained outcomes and system cost before wider adoption.

What the December roundtable must decide

The December roundtable should leave with disciplined clarity rather than a longer list of ambitions. For each proposition taken forward, partners should identify the specific problem to be tested, the young people and place concerned, a willing lead or convenor, participating organisations, a first deliverable, known dependencies, a small set of indicators and an agreed review point. Ideas that do not yet meet those conditions should remain visible as unresolved questions, not be presented as commitments.

The Steve Morgan Foundation's contribution is to convene across boundaries, connect delivery insight to policy and influence, and maintain a focus on practical action. Funding may form part of a later response where it is appropriate and evidence supports it, but the immediate task is to create the conditions for stronger collaboration and a pathway that young people can understand, trust and progress through.

Sources:

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