



Pathways to Potential: Evaluation Report

Evidence-led assessment of the SME inclusive recruitment pilot

September 2026





A new focus for skills support

Taking on a young person is a risk for any employer, precisely because they are unproven, and increasingly it also means providing a level of pastoral support that a young person's previous experience of education has left them needing. For small employers, these are not the only challenges - there is usually a time lag for skills to materialise when they are often needed immediately. A lack of scale and constrained budgets often make it difficult for small employers to have a long-term workforce plan and home working can make it difficult for businesses to transfer knowledge and support new employees. A large employer can often absorb that risk. A small one frequently cannot. The risk here is that policymakers think that SMEs have the same issues as their larger peers, whereas the obstacles they face are materially different. The Rt Hon Alan Milburn's interim review into young people and work, published earlier this year found employers are not short of enthusiasm to help. What tempers that enthusiasm is concern.

Nearly one million young people in the UK, one in eight of those aged 16 to 24, are not in education, employment or training. One of the key arguments is that this is no longer a problem that can be solved on the supply side alone, by making young people more employable through better qualifications, CV support or job search advice. It is, increasingly, a demand side problem too: a labour market that has narrowed its own entry points. Apprenticeship starts for young people have fallen by more than 40%. Entry level roles have become scarcer and more demanding. Recruitment has become more remote and less human, screening candidates through portals and algorithms before anyone has met them.

The Industrial Strategy Advisory Council's July 2026 report on employer investment in skills focuses more broadly on system level structures. They find the UK's skills challenge is driven less by a lack of funding than by system complexity, poor navigation, weak coordination between employers, and limited employer capability, particularly among SMEs, to engage with the skills system in the first place. Both reviews land on the same demand side truth: if more young people are to find work, it has to become easier and more attractive for employers, especially smaller ones, to take them on.

That is precisely the gap Pathways to Potential was designed to test. Policy attention and public spending on youth employment have, understandably, concentrated on young people themselves. That focus is necessary but it is not sufficient. Programmes like this one, working directly with employers to make confident decisions and produce more inclusive recruitment, are one part of what a genuine demand side response looks like. They are, frankly, the tip of a much larger iceberg. A great deal more employer facing work of this kind is needed if the ambition set out in both reviews is to be met.

There is a specific opportunity worth naming here. Apprenticeship engagement runs markedly higher among medium sized firms than among small and micro businesses. There is an opportunity to support those small firms to use apprenticeships with the same confidence as their larger counterparts. They share many similarities with medium sized businesses, yet they are among the lowest percentage users of apprenticeships. This pilot set out to test demand side support at a small scale, and it is exactly the kind of support that now needs to happen at a much larger one.

Anthony Impey

CEO of Be the Business



Ten Steps for SMEs for inclusive recruitment

- 1. Define the role and its real requirements before advertising**
Get clear on responsibilities, hours, and whether the role genuinely needs prior experience or formal qualifications. Requirements that aren't strictly necessary (a degree, "2+ years' experience") screen out capable young candidates and other under-represented applicants before they even apply.
- 2. Budget for the full cost of a first hire, not just the wage**
National Insurance, pensions auto-enrolment, sick pay, holiday pay, insurance and any training all add up. SMEs that haven't costed this properly often stall at the "interested but not hiring" stage.
- 3. Widen where you advertise, including routes into "hidden" talent pools**
Local colleges, universities, community organisations and job boards reach different audiences than word-of-mouth or existing networks alone. Relying only on informal networks or platforms tends to reproduce the same demographic of hires.
- 4. Write job adverts and person specs free of unnecessary barriers**
Use plain, concise titles; state clearly whether flexible or on-site working is possible; avoid jargon or requirements that disproportionately exclude candidates without traditional routes in (e.g. requiring a driving licence when not essential, or graduate-only language for non-graduate roles).
- 5. Apply consistent, structured shortlisting and interview criteria**
Score applicants against the same criteria tied to the job description, rather than gut feel. This reduces unconscious bias.
- 6. Combine training components rather than relying on one alone**
Combining on-the-job training with another component (e.g. basic skills or life skills plus coaching/mentoring) is associated with the highest impact ratings on youth employment outcomes.
- 7. Build in life skills and coaching/mentoring support, not just technical training**
Factor in life skills training and coaching/mentoring alongside any apprenticeship or entry-level training rather than treating technical training as sufficient on its own.
- 8. Prioritise additional support for young people facing extra barriers**
Further training specifically for young people facing additional barriers can lead to better outcomes, suggesting SMEs willing to target and adapt support for these groups may see disproportionate returns.
- 9. Get the basics of compliance and induction right on day one**
Right to work checks, a written statement of employment, PAYE/pension set-up, and clear onboarding (policies, line management, grievance routes) all reduce early attrition and legal risk, and signal a well-run employer to new hires.
- 10. Treat retention as inseparable from recruitment — build a staff handbook and clear progression**
Even without a legal requirement, a handbook covering expectations, disciplinary/grievance procedures and pension information reduces disputes and clarifies "what good looks like" for new starters. These are particularly valuable for young people or those newer to formal employment, who may have less prior exposure to workplace norms.



Executive summary: one page overview

Pathways to Potential tested whether a workshop, practical resources and one to one mentoring could help small and medium sized employers become more confident and capable of recruiting young people and adopting more inclusive recruitment practices.

29 Participating SMEs	27 Endline records	85% Said their approach changed	91% Reported increased confidence
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The strongest initial outcome was reported behavioural and attitudinal change. 85% said participation had changed the way their organisation approached recruitment, and 91% said their confidence in recruiting young people had increased.

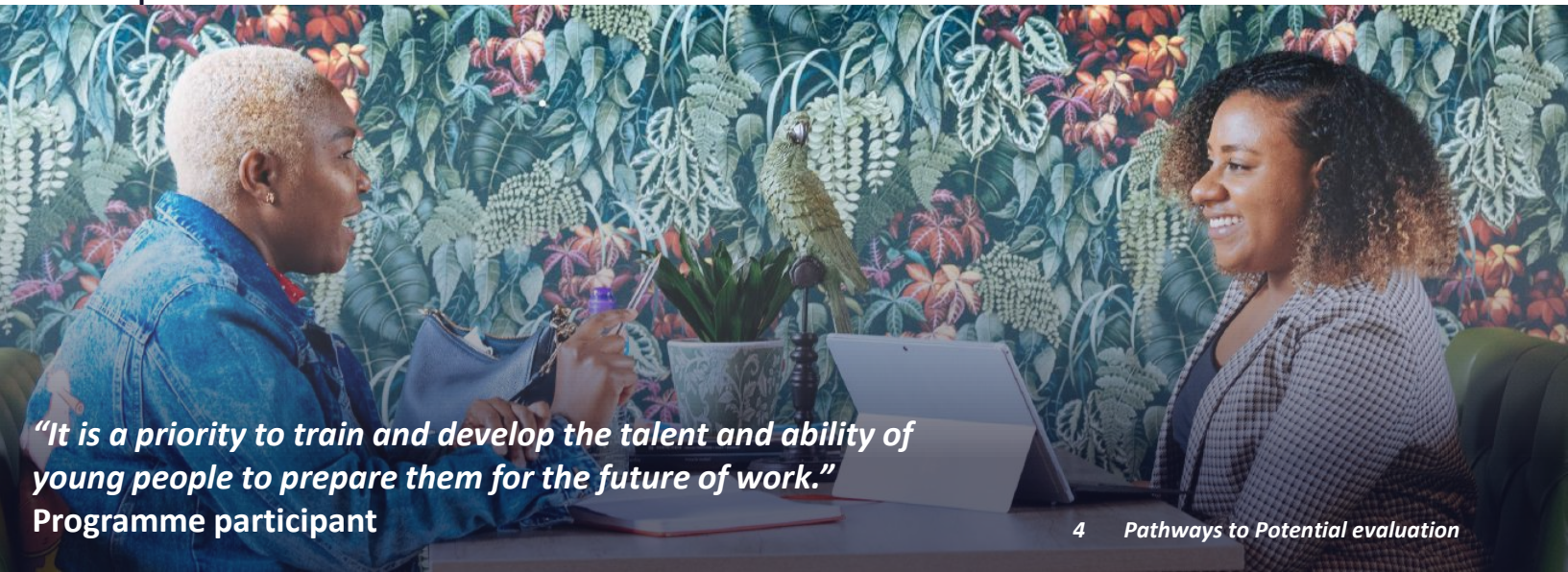
Future intent was also meaningful. 58% of valid respondents rated their likelihood of recruiting a young person in the next 12 months as either 4 or 5 out of 5; 65% gave the same rating for offering work experience; and 54% did so for recruiting an apprentice. Programme satisfaction averaged 4 out of 5, likelihood to recommend averaged 4 out of 5, and mentor satisfaction averaged 4 out of 5.

Overall evaluation judgement: a successful capability-building pilot

The evidence supports the conclusion that the pilot improved employer understanding, confidence and preparedness, and encouraged practical changes in recruitment thinking. It provides credible evidence of movement towards inclusive recruitment (selecting a diverse workforce by removing barriers), but it does not yet provide sufficient longitudinal evidence regarding sustained hiring outcomes or retention.

The most important learnings

- Employer readiness varied substantially. Some businesses were ready to recruit immediately; others first needed support with business strategy, role design, management capacity or workforce planning.
- Mentoring flexibility and tailoring to the employer's stage, sector and immediate challenge were critical design features.
- Success was broader than immediate hiring. For several SMEs, the material change was a clearer recruitment process, greater confidence, stronger onboarding plans, understanding of apprenticeships, or willingness to consider potential and attitude alongside qualifications.
- Employers consistently requested continued signposting, funding guidance, referral connections and follow-up mentoring.

A photograph of two women sitting at a table in a room with a vibrant, tropical-themed wallpaper featuring various plants and a parrot. The woman on the left, with short blonde hair, is wearing a blue denim jacket and holding a blue folder. The woman on the right, with dark curly hair, is wearing a grey blazer and smiling. A laptop is open on the table between them.

"It is a priority to train and develop the talent and ability of young people to prepare them for the future of work."

Programme participant



Building a more inclusive approach to recruitment: Teachsport

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For Teachsport, the Pathways to Potential pilot provided an opportunity to step back and look more closely at how the business attracts, recruits and supports its people.

The company, which delivers PE, sports coaching and childcare services in schools, already had a strong commitment to developing people. With around 20 employees, a London Living Wage commitment and established apprenticeship pathways, Teachsport was already focused on creating careers in sports coaching and playwork. But mentoring through the pilot encouraged owner Carrie Starace to challenge whether the business could do more to make itself accessible to a wider range of people. As Carrie explains:

“Working with my mentor helped me look beyond simply recruiting apprentices and consider the whole employee journey, from application through to onboarding and ongoing support. This prompted us to explore new relationships with local education providers and consider opportunities in areas such as business administration and marketing, alongside its existing sports and playwork apprenticeships.”

The experience has changed how Carrie and her managers think about supporting young people entering the workplace. The pilot highlighted how easily employers can assume that processes or expectations are obvious when, for someone new to work, they may not be. Teachsport is now placing greater emphasis on communication, regular check-ins and creating a supportive starting point for new employees.

The business is continuing to recruit apprentices, with four vacancies planned, and has changed leaders’ job descriptions to explicitly focus on the employee journey and create a supportive environment for all staff, particularly younger employees.



Passionate about Physical Activity for Children





1. Pathways to Potential aimed to support employers to recruit young people; unlocking the doors to the workplace

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The Pathways to Potential pilot was designed to explore how a workshop, learning materials and mentoring could support SMEs to recruit more inclusively and engage with young people from a broader range of backgrounds. The framing of the programme was wrapped around having an impact in the local community and increasing inclusivity.

The programme addressed a practical gap. Smaller employers may have an appetite to create opportunities but lack dedicated HR capacity, clear knowledge of inclusive recruitment, confidence in supporting less experienced candidates, or awareness of apprenticeships and referral organisations. The pilot therefore focused on employer capability as well as immediate recruitment activity.

A central purpose of Pathways to Potential was to help ensure that employers were prepared to open their doors to work-ready recruits from a wider and more inclusive talent pool. This required more than encouraging businesses to consider recruitment. It meant providing leaders with the knowledge to improve processes and make employment decisions more confidently.

1.1 Programme objective

- To enable small businesses to confidently recruit and support young people who are disengaged from the labour market.

1.2 Our key areas of focus in order to achieve the objective

- Increase employers' understanding of inclusive recruitment and its relevance to business performance.
- Build confidence in recruiting and developing young people.
- Improve organisational readiness and practical recruitment processes.
- Increase awareness of apprenticeships, work experience and alternative entry routes.
- Encourage engagement with organisations supporting those who are not in education, employment or training.

1.3 The evaluation question

The central question is not simply whether employers recruited during the pilot. It is whether the programme produced credible movement in the knowledge, confidence, decisions and systems that make inclusive recruitment more likely and more sustainable.





2. The evaluation results are positive, but some caution is advised due to the short time frame and small sample

2.1 Evidence sources

Evidence source	Coverage	Use in the evaluation
Baseline employer survey	29 employer records	Starting position, recruitment practice, confidence, readiness, barriers and prior experience.
Follow up employer survey	27 employer records identified in the consolidated evidence base	Reported change, future intentions, satisfaction and support needs.
Mentoring evidence register	A collation of summaries from each mentoring session	Employer-specific actions, questions, pledges, mentor observations and session content.
Mentor drop-in summary	Group discussion evidence	Delivery experience, readiness, matching, resources and programme design learning.
Employer drop-in summary	Group discussion evidence	Employer experience, networking, support needs, programme usability and sustainability.

2.2 Limitations

- The initial outcomes response base is high overall, but not every employer answered every question. A high level of engagement with the survey was largely based on the connection with programme leads and the focus of the pilot on making an impact.
- The pilot timescale did not permit robust measurement of 6 to 12 month recruitment and retention outcomes.
- Employers entered at different stages of readiness, limiting the usefulness of a single uniform outcome measure.

Interpret findings with appropriate caution

The evaluation was conducted over a short pilot period and relies substantially on self-reported employer data. The number of valid responses varies by question, and matched baseline and endline samples are small for some measures. The evidence is strongest for immediate learning, confidence, changed thinking and intended action; it is weaker for sustained recruitment, retention and long-term business outcomes.



3. Participating employers were a good mix of sizes and sectors

The 29 participating employers represented a deliberately varied SME population. This mix of business characteristics was a strength for learning, but it also created substantial variation in recruitment capacity and immediate need.

3.1 Size coverage

Number of businesses on programme	Count	Percentage
10+	7	24%
6-10	7	24%
1-5	8	28%
0	7	24%
Total	29	100%

3.2 Sector coverage

Sector	Employers
Professional, scientific & technical services	6
Education	5
Business administration & support services	3
Construction	3
Health	3
Hospitality, food and beverage	2
Hospitality, leisure and travel	2
Arts, entertainment, recreation & other services	1
Manufacturing	1
Other	1
Property	1
Technology, information & communication	1

3.3 Differences of needs across the cohort mix

- Sole proprietors and very small firms often needed support with business structure and management capacity before recruitment.
- Employers with established staff teams were more likely to focus on improving recruitment, onboarding and retention processes.
- Sector-specific labour markets and qualification requirements shaped the relevance of apprenticeships and referral partners.

Implications of the cohort mix

A single standardised mentoring journey faces additional complexity to meet all needs equally well. Some employers were further along in their knowledge and support should focus more strongly on implementation; other employers needed to focus on role design and systems; whereas pre-recruitment employers needed to focus on understanding the landscape and workforce readiness before moving into hiring support.



4. A lack of expertise and a focus on mainstream channels are potentially holding back inclusive recruitment

The baseline evidence shows a cohort with varied prior recruitment experience and uneven familiarity with inclusive recruitment. Some employers had never recruited before, while others had established teams and existing experience of work placements or apprenticeships.

4.1 Recruitment channels and maturity

Recruitment route	Employers
LinkedIn	9
Online recruitment sites	6
Recruitment agencies	4
Organisations that provide inclusive talent	2

The baseline indicates reliance on mainstream channels such as LinkedIn, online recruitment sites and agencies, alongside a sizeable group that had not recruited before. Engagement with specialist organisations providing inclusive talent was comparatively limited.

4.2 Starting barriers

Barrier selected	Employers
Lack of expertise	13
Cost barriers	12
Business fit/value concerns	9
Employee training needs	9
Implementation complexity	6
Customisation requirements	4
Not sure	3
Implementation timeline	2
No barriers present	2

Cost and lack of expertise were prominent, alongside concerns about implementation, business fit and employee training. These baseline barriers align closely with the support requested in the follow up survey, particularly funding information, practical guidance and continued mentoring.

4.3 Baseline interpretation

A mixed-readiness cohort

The baseline did not describe a single employer problem. It described a spectrum: businesses already recruiting but seeking better practice; businesses considering their first hire; and businesses whose immediate need was to clarify growth plans and management capacity before recruitment.

5. The programme had high completion rates throughout.

The delivery model combined structured programme content with individual mentoring. All participants completed session one of their mentoring and 97% completed sessions two and three. We believe part of the success with high programme engagement was linked to employers' focus on having an impact in their community.

5.1 Nature of mentoring support

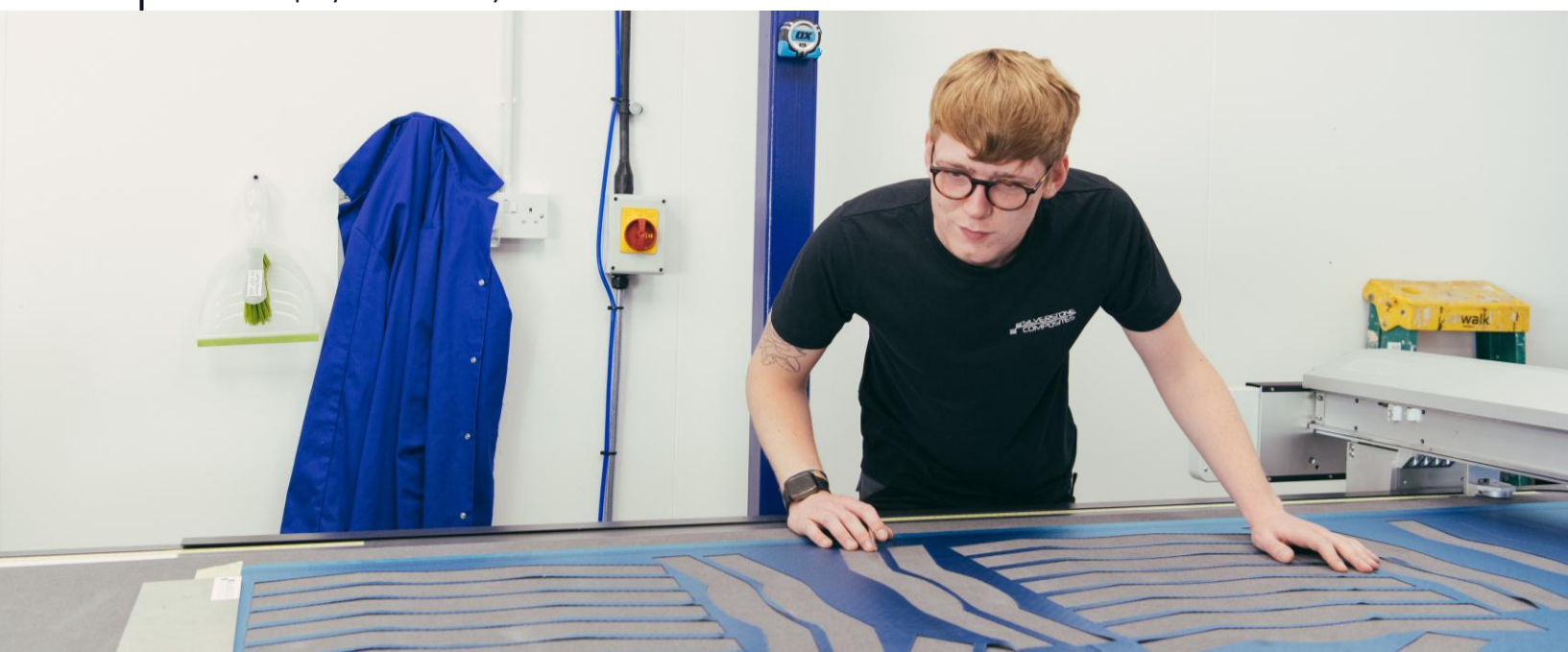
Mentoring frequently extended beyond narrow recruitment advice. Evidence included business strategy, role design, onboarding, workforce planning, remote management, funding, apprenticeships, referral partners and retention. This breadth reflected employer need, but also meant mentors required judgement about where recruitment support should begin.

5.2 Mentor drop-in learning

- Employers were at materially different levels of readiness, and immediate hiring was not an appropriate success measure for every business.
- The value of mentoring depended on the employer's engagement and the quality of mentor matching.
- Three sessions were not always sufficient where business foundations or more complex recruitment challenges needed attention.
- Mentors valued peer drop-ins and identified a need for stronger buddying, practical templates and direct referral pathways.
- Apprenticeship funding and navigation were recurring barriers.
- The pilot should be refined before being scaled unchanged.
- Mentor capacity was not always fully used: one experienced mentor had not yet been matched to a business at the time of the June drop-in, and another mentor's matched business did not respond after an initial conversation, leaving that capacity available for reassignment.

5.3 Employer drop-in learning

- Employers valued meeting peers and sharing practical experience.
- Mentor matching and the relevance of expertise affected perceived value.
- Employers wanted clearer roadmaps, continued support and easier access to resources.
- Apprenticeship costs and funding remained important concerns.
- The employer community itself was viewed as an asset that should continue.



Initial outcomes

"I realise that recruiting young talent is critical to support the long-term growth of the business."

Programme participant



6. Results from the evaluation are positive

85% said approach changed	91% reported higher confidence	70% likely to engage referral partners	4.3/5 programme satisfaction
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6.1 Reported change in recruitment approach

85% said the programme had changed the way their organisation approached recruitment. Four said it had not. This is the clearest direct employer-reported indicator of organisational change within the pilot period.

8 of the 9 businesses that have experienced a change in business size since the programme reported that the programme had influenced their future recruitment plans.

Almost all respondents (93%) reported a change to at least one inclusive recruitment practice as a result of the programme. Most of those (56%) reported changes to their onboarding process with over a third looking at candidate sourcing processes and interview techniques, which aligns strongly with some of the qualitative insights.

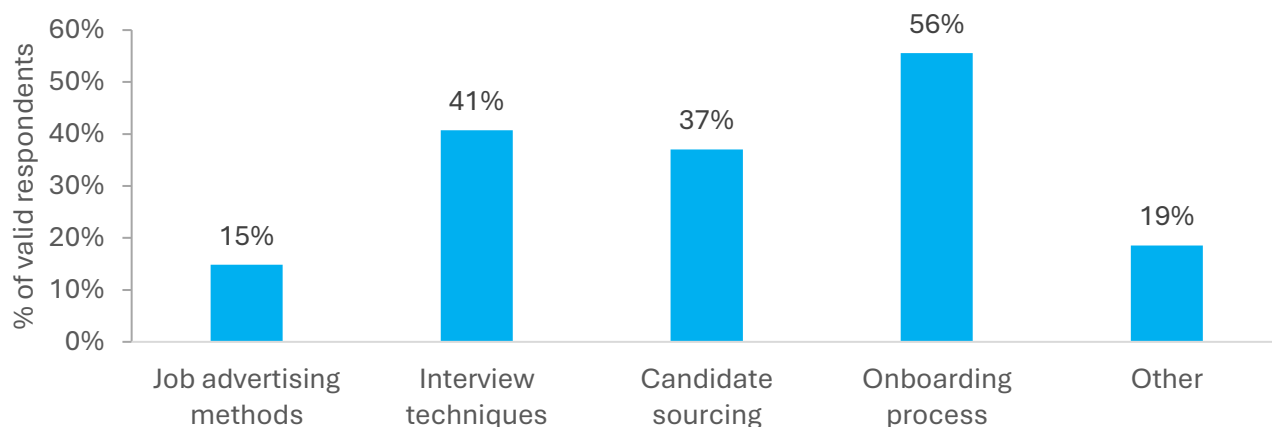


Figure 1. Reported change indicators, endline survey. Percentages are based on valid responses.

Although the pilot supported improvements across a range of recruitment practices, the evidence suggests that job advertising and the practical promotion of opportunities should receive greater attention in a future programme. Employers may understand the principles of inclusive recruitment without yet being confident in how to translate them into an accessible job description, an inclusive advertisement or an effective route to candidates.

A second programme could therefore include more structured support on vacancy design and advertising. This could include reviewing job descriptions, removing unnecessary entry requirements, communicating flexibility clearly, explaining potential opportunities and selecting channels that reach candidates who may not respond to conventional recruitment methods.

This should be accompanied by a stronger regional referral network. Many organisations are already funded to prepare and support people into employment, while SMEs often struggle to identify or access these organisations. A future model should bring these two groups closer together by establishing local referral partnerships, providing employers with a clear route to work-ready candidates and ensuring that employment-support organisations understand the opportunities available through participating businesses. This would create a more joined-up pathway from candidate preparation to employer engagement, interview, placement and sustained employment.



6.2 Confidence in recruiting young people

91% said their confidence in recruiting young people had increased. The qualitative responses give this finding practical meaning: employers referred to clearer onboarding, greater understanding of apprenticeships, considering character and potential alongside qualifications, and seeing recruitment of young people as manageable rather than complex.



Figure 2. Reported change indicators, endline survey. Percentages are based on valid responses to each question; denominators differ.

“The biggest change has been recognising that potential and attitude are often more valuable than existing experience. The programme has given us greater confidence to recruit young people based on their willingness to learn and to support their growth through structured training, mentoring, and clear career development opportunities” Programme participant





6.3 Referral partner engagement

70% of respondents said they were likely to engage with organisations or referral partners supporting young people within the next 12 months. Seven were unsure and one said no. **The result is a positive shift, but alongside the other evidence from the programme it shows employers need practical introductions and locally relevant pathways.**

6.4 Future recruitment intentions

These figures demonstrate intent, not completed recruitment. They nevertheless show that the programme moved a substantial proportion of employers towards considering concrete opportunity routes, particularly work experience and apprenticeships.

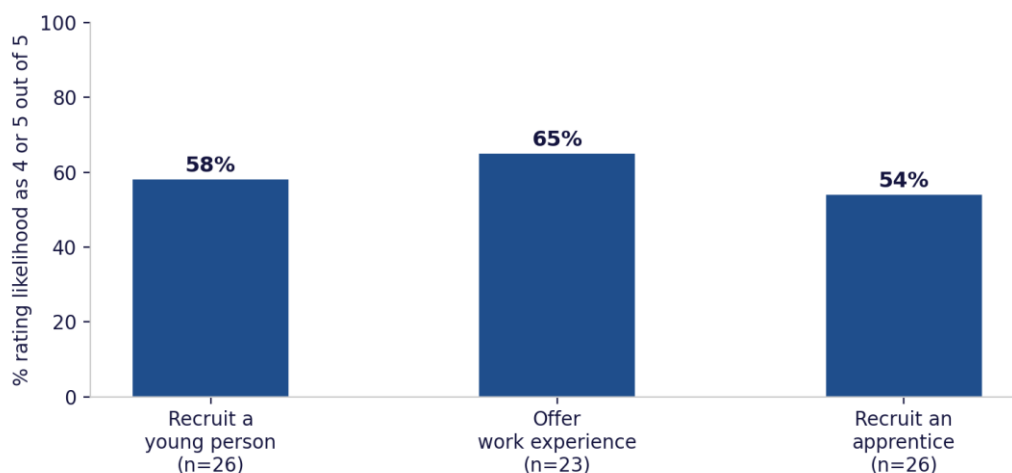


Figure 3. Follow up survey. High intention means a rating of 4 or 5 out of 5.

6.5 Satisfaction

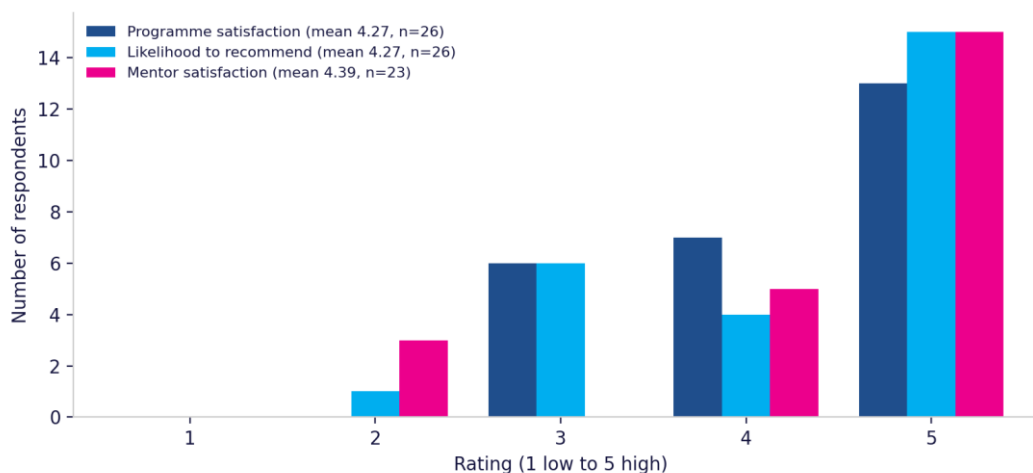


Figure 4. Follow up survey satisfaction ratings.

Programme satisfaction and likelihood to recommend both averaged 4 out of 5. Mentor satisfaction averaged 4 out of 5. No respondent rated programme satisfaction below 3; however, three mentor satisfaction ratings of 2 reinforce the importance of matching and managing expectations.



A new perspective on recruiting young people: The Flag Consultancy

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When Andrew Nagberi bought The Flag Consultancy earlier this year, he was new to running a construction business and keen to understand how to approach recruitment and workforce development. With 16 employees and an established team of engineers, finding the right people, particularly younger workers, was already a challenge.

Taking part in the Pathways to Potential pilot gave Andrew the opportunity to explore recruitment options in more depth and gain practical insight into apprenticeships. The programme helped him understand the different stages involved in recruiting an apprentice, as well as the financial implications, giving him a clearer picture of the options available to the business.

Working with his mentor also encouraged Andrew to look at recruitment challenges from a different perspective. Although his mentor came from a similar professional background, they brought a fresh viewpoint and challenged him to consider approaches he had not previously explored. Andrew explains:

“A practical outcome which came from this programme was a new connection with a local skills college, opening up conversations about the possibility of students visiting the business to shadow the team and gain an insight into the work.”

The experience has also prompted Andrew to think more broadly about how the business can attract its next generation of talent. While he is still considering the right route – whether apprenticeships or developing young recruits through an in-house training framework – the pilot has given him greater understanding of the choices available and a clearer focus on building a younger workforce for the future.



7. Before and after comparisons suggest strong shifts in employer understanding and behaviour, albeit on a small sample

7.1 Matched quantitative measures

Matched baseline/endline analysis was possible only for employers with valid values at both points. The sample sizes are therefore small and should be interpreted as supporting evidence rather than population estimates.

Measure	Matched (n)	Baseline mean	Endline mean	Mean change	Improved	Same	Lower
Inclusive recruitment understanding	8	2.76	4.25	+1.49	6/8	2/8	0/8
Confidence using inclusive recruitment	9	2.16	3.33	+1.17	7/9	2/9	0/9
Organisational readiness	9	3.08	3.67	+0.59	4/9	2/9	3/9
Engagement with referral organisations	7	1.70	3.14	+1.45	5/7	0/7	2/7
Challenge recruiting the right employee (higher=easier)	8	2.33	3.38	+1.04	4/8	3/8	1/8

The strongest matched movement was in understanding of inclusive recruitment and engagement with referral partners. Confidence and reduced challenges showed strong positive average movements. Organisational readiness showed a slightly smaller increase, suggesting the importance of leadership and management skills to bring teams along on the journey.





7.2 Qualitative change

Employer comments reveal several forms of change that are not captured by a single numerical score.

Theme in employer-reported biggest change	Indicative number of comments
Onboarding, support and retention	5
Apprenticeships and alternative routes	3
Young talent as a business asset	3
Potential, attitude and wider assessment	2
Confidence and practical action	2

- Employers described more structured onboarding and a clearer view of the first months of employment.
- Several moved from a qualification-first mindset towards greater consideration of attitude, character, interests and potential.
- Employers reported increased confidence that recruiting young people was manageable and valuable.
- Apprenticeships and alternative entry routes became more visible and better understood.
- Some employers linked young talent to long-term growth, innovation and social value.
- A small but consistent minority reported no meaningful change, or a genuinely mixed view, most often citing lingering doubts about the dedication or readiness of younger recruits, or hesitancy among senior managers to invest time in training them. This is included deliberately: it is a minority position, but it is a real and useful signal for how the model should be refined.

7.3 Illustrative employer voice

“Focus on the character of the candidate, not just the qualification.”

“The knowledge that it is not complex and is doable, and that resources are available to support.”

“Clearly planning and documenting how we support them from advert to employment.”

“I had not considered the value of hiring an apprentice or understood the options.”

“Being inclusive and open to candidates that show potential, rather than focusing only on the CV or current experience.”

“It has completely changed my outlook on recruiting and developing young people.”

“Honestly, I still think most young recruits lack the dedication we had before.”

“Before the programme, our recruitment approach was focused mainly on technical skills and experience. The training helped us recognise the value of recruiting based on potential, attitude, and transferable skills, while investing in structured development and mentoring.”

Mentoring had a key impact

One mentor's case notes describe the clearest example of employer turnaround in the cohort: an established engineering employer who had previously lost an apprentice to a larger competitor and had become sceptical that apprenticeships were worthwhile. Across three sessions covering recruitment culture, retention and career development, the employer moved from rejecting apprenticeships to contacting a college, reviewing candidate profiles and scheduling an interview with an apprentice candidate.

8. The mentoring element was very highly valued by participants

The mentoring evidence indicates that mentors acted as translators between inclusive recruitment principles and the realities of small business decision-making. Their contribution was strongest when they helped employers define an achievable next step rather than treating recruitment as an isolated transaction. **Mentorship was very highly valued by participants, with over 80% of respondents viewing it as a key part of the programme.**

8.1 Mechanisms of impact

- Diagnosing the employer's true starting point and identifying whether recruitment was immediately viable.
- Helping translate broad ambition into role definitions, recruitment processes and onboarding plans.
- Challenging assumptions about young candidates, apprenticeships and inclusive talent.
- Providing confidence, accountability and a trusted space for discussion.
- Signposting employers to tools, referral organisations and funding information.
- Connecting recruitment decisions to business strategy, retention and management capacity.





Creating a culture where apprentices can thrive: Smarty Pants Abbey Lane and Clever Cloggs

For Jennifer Lewis, owner and director of two London nurseries, apprenticeships have long been an important way to build her workforce and develop in-house talent. But taking part in the Pathways to Potential Pilot gave her the opportunity to reflect on her approach and consider how she could provide even stronger support for apprentices and younger staff.

Through the pilot, Jennifer was paired with mentor Rowena, who provided an external perspective and a space to discuss the challenges of running a small business. Having someone outside the sector to listen, challenge her thinking and help set goals gave Jennifer greater confidence in decisions she was already making and encouraged her to think more deliberately about the employee journey. Jennifer adds,

“People say you need to grow your own in this sector and that’s the truth. So many nurseries advertise for level 3 qualified staff and they find vacancies difficult to fill so if you can upskill your own staff and provide opportunities for them to grow and to support them, they usually want to stay working with you and you retain good, skilled people.”

One change Jennifer has made was to introduce peer support between apprentices. Newer apprentices now shadow those with more experience, giving them someone who has recently been in their position to turn to for advice and reassurance. Jennifer believes this helps build confidence and creates a culture where everyone learns from one another, rather than creating a divide between qualified and unqualified staff.

The experience has also prompted Jennifer to think about her own role and the future of the business. She is increasingly focused on developing her team so that responsibility is shared and the business is not reliant on her as its sole decision-maker.

The impact also extends beyond her own nurseries. Jennifer is championing apprenticeships across the early years sector, running conferences and workshops to share good practice and make training more accessible to smaller providers at an affordable cost, with a series of workshops taking place on the Ofsted Toolkit in October and November.



8.2 Matching and relationship quality

Mentor and employer evidence both show that matching mattered. Important dimensions were often the employer's stage, the type of support required, the mentor's HR or business expertise and the quality of the working relationship. Where the match was strong, some relationships were expected to continue beyond the formal programme. Where it was weaker, the employer did not always use the mentor's capacity fully.

The delivery experience demonstrated that effective matching should be based on the employer's primary objective and the specific capability it needs to develop. Although each business was allocated a principal mentor, the support model adapted where specialist needs emerged. A small number of businesses received input from more than one mentor or adviser, with additional support brought in where helpful.

Examples included businesses requiring detailed HR guidance on employment contracts, policies and the foundations needed to employ people safely and effectively. In these cases, a mentoring session was provided by the HR organisation supporting the programme. Other employers required specialist apprenticeship guidance, ranging from the practical steps involved in recruiting a first apprentice to exploring how a growing business might recruit multiple apprentices or become more directly involved in apprenticeship delivery. These needs were picked up through additional specialist mentoring rather than expecting the original mentor to advise outside their area of expertise.

This responsive approach was a strength of the pilot. It also highlights an important design consideration for future delivery: mentors should not be expected to provide business, HR, recruitment or apprenticeship advice themselves, instead acting as a guide through the process. The programme should instead operate through a core mentor supported by a clearly defined network of specialists who can be introduced when a more technical need is identified.

8.3 Session length and boundaries

Three sessions provided a useful structure, but were not sufficient in every case. Some employers needed more time because recruitment depended on prior work on strategy, structure or management readiness. A future model should retain a defined core while allowing evidence-based extension, rather than offering unlimited mentoring or ending support before an actionable plan is established.



9. Some parts of the programme delivery are critical elements for any future programme

Programme feature	Evidence of value
One-to-one mentoring	Allowed support to respond to different employer stages, sectors and immediate barriers.
Practical focus	Employers referred to onboarding, role design, interview and appraisal systems, funding and concrete next steps.
Structured reflection	Baseline, mentoring and endline prompted employers to examine current practice and identify change.
Peer connection	Drop-in sessions enabled networking, shared learning and reassurance that challenges were not unique.
Broad definition of opportunity	The programme increased consideration of apprenticeships, work experience and alternative routes rather than only standard hiring.
Employer capability focus	The model addressed knowledge and readiness, creating conditions for later sustainable recruitment.

Mentoring was viewed positively across all of the evidence we collated. Employer comments, follow on survey responses and mentor observations all support the importance of mentoring and reflect genuine programme effects rather than isolated positive feedback.



10. There are still challenges to overcome with programme design

10.1 Employer readiness

The most significant design challenge was variation in readiness. Employers who were not yet able to define a role, supervise a new recruit or fund employment required a different intervention from those already recruiting. Without early triage, mentoring time could be diverted into necessary but broader business support.

10.2 Funding and apprenticeship complexity

Funding, wages, apprenticeship rules and access to support remained recurring concerns. Employers did not simply ask for information; they wanted navigation, practical interpretation and connections to organisations that could help them act.

10.3 Referral pathways

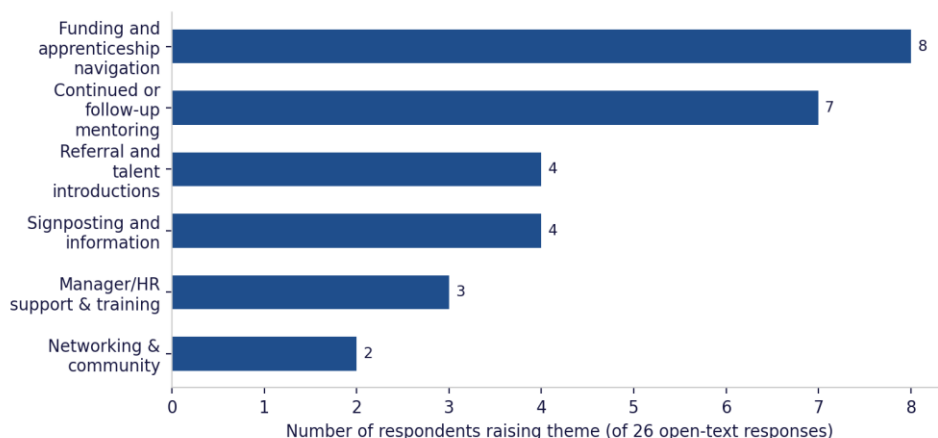
The programme increased interest in referral partners, but employers still needed direct, locally relevant routes to candidates. A national model should not assume that awareness will automatically convert into engagement.

10.4 Mentor matching and engagement

Mentor satisfaction was generally strong, but the evidence shows that expertise and employer commitment influenced outcomes. Matching should be treated as a substantive programme function, with the option to rematch where necessary.

Some evidence highlights an additional delivery risk beyond matching quality: employer non-responsiveness. Mentors reported employers not responding after an initial meeting and late cancellations. Mentors suggested a stronger triage step assessing commitment and availability, not only eligibility, before matching begins.

10.6 Support requested after the programme



The requests point to businesses wanting support to continue, especially mentoring with additional funding and apprenticeship navigation. Smaller numbers asked for direct introductions to talent and referral partners, clearer signposting, manager or HR support and training, and continued networking.

“Additional support in accessing young talent, guidance on apprenticeship and graduate recruitment, and opportunities to connect with schools, colleges, and universities would help us continue this journey. Ongoing mentoring, funding opportunities, and access to best-practice resources would also support as we build a sustainable programme for recruiting and developing young people.” Programme participant

11. Success starts with improving awareness, understanding and confidence

The pilot demonstrates preceding outcomes that lay the groundwork for future recruitment. These are important elements that need to be supported for effective recruitment to take place.

The pilot also recognised that employers entered the programme from very different starting points, irrespective of their size. Some required general knowledge and confidence before they could begin considering recruitment. Others already had established employment practices but wanted to become more socially inclusive, reach different communities or introduce new routes such as apprenticeships and work experience. A future programme should identify this primary objective and level of readiness at the outset, so that the support provided reflects where the employer is in its journey rather than relying principally on employee numbers or business size.

Level of success	Evidenced within the pilot
Awareness	Employers became more aware of apprenticeships, referral organisations, funding routes and inclusive practice.
Understanding	Matched survey data and open-text responses show improved understanding of inclusive recruitment and onboarding.
Confidence	Most respondents reported increased confidence in recruiting young people.
Process change	Employers described changes to role profiling, interviewing, assessment, onboarding, reviews and ongoing support.
Intent and commitment	Employers reported future intentions and recorded pledges relating to recruitment, work experience, apprenticeships and referral engagement.
Implementation	Some evidence showed active recruitment progress, but the evaluation period was too short to measure implementation consistently across the cohort.
Sustained outcome	Recruitment, retention, Potential and business impact would require follow-up between 6 and 12 months.

One mentor argued explicitly that helping a business become ready to recruit the following year, rather than during the pilot itself, should still count as a successful outcome. This is consistent with the report's broader treatment of readiness and intent as legitimate, if intermediate, forms of success.

Evaluation conclusion on success

The pilot succeeded as an employer capability and behaviour-change intervention. Evidence of completed and sustained employment outcomes is not yet mature enough to support a definitive employment-impact claim.

Past research also shows us that trigger events such as businesses opening new premises, bringing out a new product, facing new competition or external changes can result in businesses being more receptive to business support. It is likely similar events or times in a business lifecycle will coincide with when businesses are most likely to seek out or be receptive to new talent. This could be explored further in future research and programme design, and future evaluation could potentially capture these trigger events more systematically.



From mentoring to a first hire: The Watch Collectors' Club

For Hamish Robertson, founder of the Watch Collectors' Club, the Pathways to Potential pilot helped turn an interest in widening his recruitment into a practical decision to grow his business through an apprenticeship.

Hamish had been running the events business largely by himself, with support from his co-founder. When Hamish joined the pilot, mentoring from experienced business leader Simon Parrison opened up a new option: recruiting an apprentice. Hamish had not previously considered apprenticeships, but Simon helped him understand how they worked and challenged the assumption that his first employee needed extensive experience.

With support from an apprenticeship training provider, Hamish recruited Amaya as the company's first employee and marketing apprentice. She started in June and is already making a tangible contribution, particularly through social media and content creation. Her role is also expanding, with responsibility for key business improvement measures leading to increased ownership planned over the coming year.

For Hamish, the experience has changed how he thinks about recruitment. Rather than always looking for experienced candidates, he can see the value of recruiting someone with the right attitude who can learn and grow with the business. The apprenticeship model has also made taking that step feel financially manageable for a small company. Hamish explains:

"The apprenticeship model really works for us because we have our own brand and culture. Bringing someone into the business who is relatively new to the workplace means I can help them learn how we work and develop the skills we need. This route also makes taking on a new employee feel much less of a financial risk, which is particularly important for a small business."

The pilot has given Hamish the confidence to consider broader recruitment routes in future, including opportunities to support people who may face greater barriers to employment.





12. Programme Summary

Pathways to Potential was funded by the City & Guilds Foundation and delivered by Be the Business as a pilot to explore how SMEs could be better supported to recruit young people and adopt more inclusive recruitment practices.

The programme aimed to build employers' confidence and capability to look beyond traditional recruitment routes, qualifications and previous experience, recognising the potential, attitude and transferable skills of young people who may otherwise struggle to access employment. It also sought to help SMEs connect with a broader and more diverse talent pool and create accessible routes into work.

13. The programme had a larger than expected impact on the firms involved.

Some changes could be made to improve design, but the programme merits further exploration

1. The pilot generated credible evidence of changed employer thinking and increased confidence. The strongest direct indicators were the proportion reporting a changed recruitment approach and increased confidence in recruiting.
2. The programme widened employers' understanding of what inclusive recruitment involves, particularly onboarding, support, apprenticeships, work experience and assessment of potential.
3. Mentoring was an important mechanism of change, but its value depended on readiness, matching, employer engagement and access to practical routes for implementation.
4. The cohort's diversity produced valuable learning but can be a challenge for a uniform three-session model.
5. The evidence supports further development and testing of the model. Test the refined model through a second, larger pilot before national rollout.

14. Recommendations

1. **Provide an 'on demand' confidence/capability boosting service for SMEs that have been participants in the programme to help them continue along the journey they have already started.** Too often, support falls away just as SME leaders are making good progress. Some business leaders were also at an earlier stage than others, so continued support can help them move forward.
2. **Every small business leader in the UK should be engaged in some form of mentoring relationship.** Mentoring for business leaders was a critical design feature. Matching based on primary objectives and flexibility are vital to the success of relationships.
3. **Small businesses leaders do and should encourage the next generation through direct access to leadership and delegation.** SME employers play multiple roles beyond employment, such as coaches, careers advisors and providers of developmental support. Smaller employers closeness to recruits and the amount of day-to-day contact they have can have a lasting impact on development.
4. **Build in direct, locally relevant routes to candidates via referral partners to skills-based support programmes.** The programme increased interest in referral partners, but employers still needed support to engage with referral partners. A referral network map for businesses across the UK could help with initial awareness.
5. **Inclusivity and having an impact in the community provide a useful framing for programmes related to hiring young people.** Many small business leaders are highly connected to their operating location and want the local area to thrive. Most are supportive of recruiting young people and increasing inclusivity in their business practices – but the conditions and level of risk must feel balanced with the potential benefits.

About Be the Business

Be the Business is an independent, not-for-profit organisation, with a single goal: to help business owners and leaders improve the performance of their business.

By combining peer-to-peer networks, the employee expertise found within pioneering corporate partners, independent experts and our research and insights, we inspire leadership teams to create and deliver sustainable business change. Collectively we're transforming the UK's productivity, raising the value of businesses in our communities, safeguarding jobs and improving standards of living.

For more information, visit bethebusiness.com/about-us



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