BLOSSOM

LET EVERYONE BLOSSOM:

CLOSING THE GAP FOR LGBTQ+ NEETS

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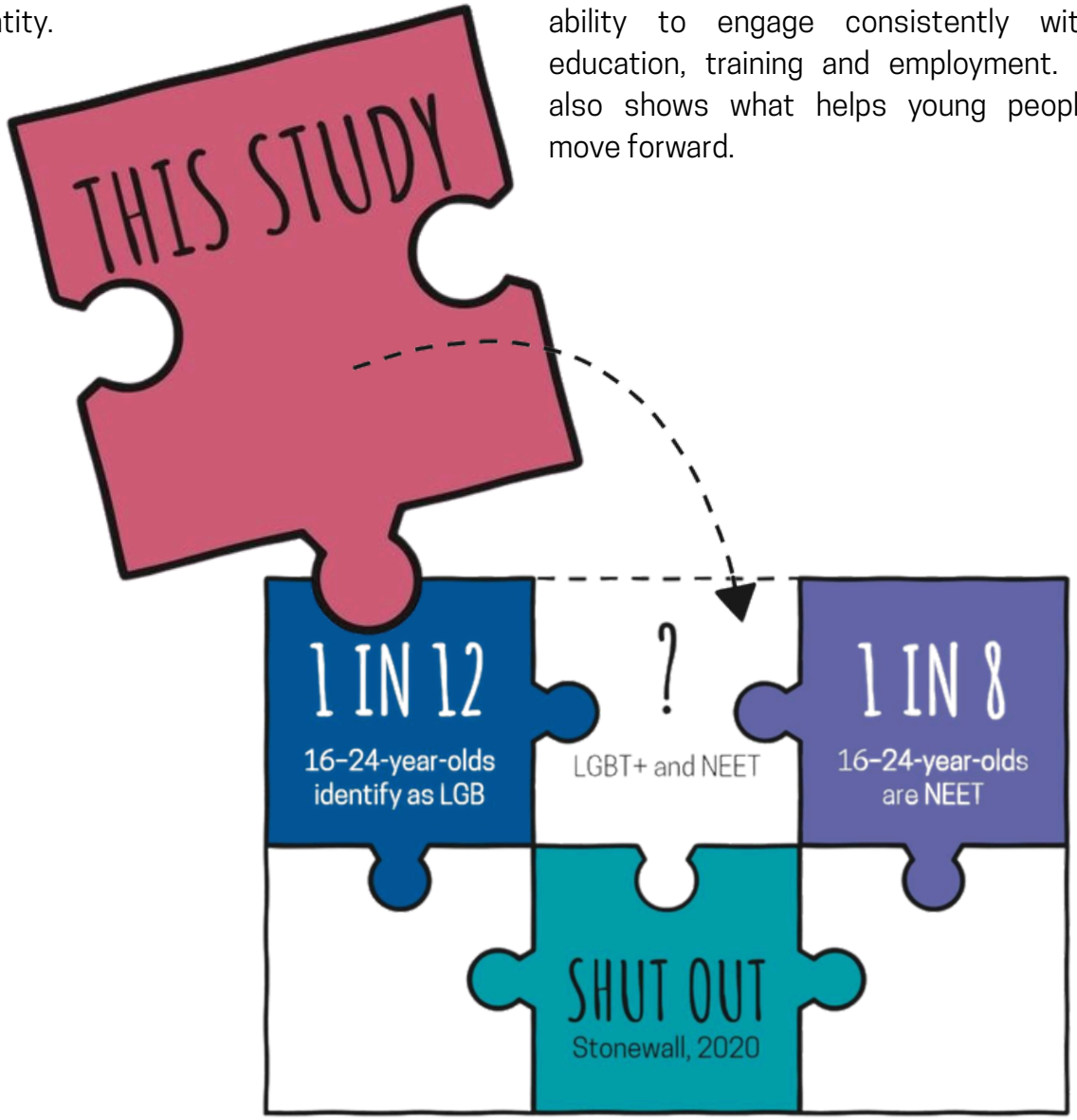


Context

Around one in twelve 16 to 24-year-olds in the UK (8%) identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual, which is more than half a million young people (ONS, 2025)[1]. The number who are LGBTQ+ is likely to be higher, but there is no robust national estimate that combines sexual orientation with trans and non-binary identities.

Almost one million 16 to 24-year-olds in the UK (981,000, or 13%) were not in education, employment or training in April to June 2026 (ONS, 2026)[2]. We do not know how many of them are LGBTQ+, because national NEET statistics do not record sexual orientation or gender identity.

Stonewall's Shut Out study (2020)[3] showed how LGBT young people can be pushed out and shut out of education, employment and training. This study gives an up-to-date picture of how being LGBTQ+ can intensify other barriers, affecting confidence, wellbeing and the ability to engage consistently with education, training and employment. It also shows what helps young people move forward.



1 Office for National Statistics (2025) Sexual orientation, UK: 2024. Released 9 December 2025.
2 Office for National Statistics (2026) Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK: August 2026. Released 27 August 2026.
3 Stonewall and BritainThinks (2020) Shut Out: The experiences of LGBT young people not in education, training or work.

Key Findings

LGBTQ+ young adults experience distinct and compounding barriers across education, training and employment. Experiences such as LGBTQ+-related bullying, misgendering, family relationship challenges or rejection, poor mental wellbeing, disability, limited support networks, financial insecurity and discrimination often intersect, creating a cumulative disadvantage.

LGBTQ+ identity introduces additional calculations about acceptance, disclosure, safety and discrimination. 91% reported that when applying for a job, they worry about how their LGBTQ+ identity will be treated. The expectation and/or experience of discrimination was reported as a bigger barrier to employment than qualifications, experience, financial pressures, anxiety or health considerations (by 82% of LGBTQ+ NEETs). Young people described having to research employers, judge whether a workplace was safe, decide whether to come out, anticipate people's reactions and work out whether they could cope with being misgendered or concealing part of themselves.

Discrimination is experienced or anticipated at multiple stages, from education and training through to recruitment and the workplace, with 69% of respondents having experienced LGBTQ+ discrimination, harassment or exclusion in at least one setting.

Young people described a need for both general employment support and LGBTQ+-specific support. Progress becomes more likely when young people have stability, trusted relationships, relevant skills and an inclusive route into suitable work. They needed help with stability, health, confidence, skills and access to opportunities, delivered in ways that also understood identity, safety and belonging. 69% wanted LGBTQ+ peer support, 60% wanted inclusive employers and 71% thought that targeted LGBT-led employment support would help them.

LGBTQ+ NEETs want a broad package of practical and identity-responsive support to aid them on their journey from stability to opportunity. They want practical employment support delivered in ways that understand their lives. Support was generally seen as needing to provide three things: stability, a practical route forward, and an environment in which respondents felt safe and understood.

Overall, our findings point to a question that is not simply, "*how do we get this young person into any job or course?*", but instead, "*what would make it possible for this young person to enter - and remain in - education, training or work that is safe, inclusive and right for them?*"

Recommendations

These recommendations draw on two related but distinct evidence streams. The survey of 55 young people meeting the study's strict NEET definition shows how common particular barriers, experiences and support preferences were within that sample. Interviews and triad discussions with 17 young people at different points around the NEET experience show how those barriers interact, how young people respond to them and what helps them move forward. Recommendations that rest only on the interviews and triads are marked (interview evidence).

This research strongly reinforces Stonewall's call in Shut Out for LGBTQ+-inclusive education, careers, mental health, housing and employment support. Six years on, it adds up-to-date survey evidence on the scale of anticipated discrimination and the limited confidence young people place in existing employment services. It also goes further, showing how money, housing, qualifications, health, disability, language, caring responsibilities and dependence on family interact over time.

The recommendations also align with the Milburn Review's interim diagnosis that youth disengagement reflects a fragmented transition system, weakened entry routes and insufficient shared accountability, rather than a lack of aspiration. LGBTQ+ young people are not identified as a distinct group in the Milburn interim report. This research helps fill that gap by showing how the structural barriers Milburn identifies interact with discrimination, anticipated prejudice, decisions about disclosure and concerns about safety and belonging. Where a recommendation builds directly on Milburn's analysis, we say so.

Overarching Recommendation

Develop an LGBTQ+ youth participation pathway built on three stages: stability, a practical route and opportunity. Being LGBTQ+ affects whether young people feel able to apply for work, and can itself contribute to housing and financial instability. This is why the pathway includes targeted LGBTQ+ support. This should sit within a joined-up youth participation system rather than as a separate service. Most of the support can come from mainstream provision; LGBTQ+-specific support should be targeted where being LGBTQ+ makes the biggest difference at each stage.

1. Stability: housing, financial security and wellbeing. LGBTQ+ focus: early help where family rejection or unsafe family housing is driving instability, and mental-health support that understands identity.
2. A practical route: mentoring, job-search guidance, skills and qualifications. LGBTQ+ focus: LGBTQ+ mentors and role models, and guidance on finding safe employers and making decisions about disclosure.
3. Opportunity: work placements, inclusive employers, advocacy and brokerage. LGBTQ+ focus: placements with employers who can show they are safe, and advocacy when discrimination happens.

Continuity runs through all three. Young people may move between stages in any order, and more than once. Support should stay with them through the fragile early weeks of a new job, course or placement. The pathway should be delivered through funded partnerships with LGBTQ+ organisations, with each part of the system doing what it does best.

The sections below set out those roles.

Government, policymakers and commissioners

Including the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Education, combined and local authorities, and those commissioning youth employment provision.

- Name LGBTQ+ young people as a distinct group in national and local NEET strategies. Around 1 in 12 people aged 16–24 in the UK identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or another minority sexual orientation (ONS, 2025). Census 2021 also recorded around 17,000 non-binary people and 23,000 trans men and women aged 16–24 in England and Wales alone (ONS, 2023), figures that are likely to underestimate the true number. This is a large group with distinct needs, and it should not be assumed to benefit from general provision. The Youth Guarantee and local employment and skills plans should turn their commitments to tailored and inclusive support into explicit provision for LGBTQ+ young people, including outreach through LGBTQ+ organisations, safe referral routes, LGBTQ+-competent support and funded roles for specialist organisations.
- Involve LGBTQ+ young people in shaping NEET policy and programmes. National and local policymakers should set up ongoing ways for LGBTQ+ young people, including those with lived experience of being NEET, to help shape strategies, services and funding priorities, with their time paid.
- Set clear, checkable standards for LGBTQ+ competence in commissioned employment programmes. Commissioners should require providers to show, not just state, that their services are safe for LGBTQ+ young people.
- As a minimum, this should mean that providers:
    1. Record and consistently use a young person's chosen name and pronouns across their systems, whether or not legal documents have been updated;
    2. Do not share information about sexual orientation or gender identity without consent;
    3. Train front-line staff in trans and non-binary inclusion, disclosure and responding to discrimination;
    4. Have a clear process for supporting young people who experience discrimination from an employer or placement;
    5. Can refer to, or work in partnership with, an LGBTQ+ organisation; and
    6. Collect feedback from LGBTQ+ participants and report on their outcomes

- The Department for Work and Pensions should investigate low benefit receipt among LGBTQ+ young people. Only one in five survey respondents reported receiving any of the listed forms of support. Further work should compare this with take-up among young people generally and establish how far it reflects ineligibility, lack of awareness, difficulty navigating the system, immigration status or reluctance to engage with Jobcentres. This links to the wider research needed on the hidden LGBTQ+ NEET population (see Suggestions for further research). In the meantime, local authorities and commissioners should fund proactive entitlement checks and outreach to young people who are not claiming or engaging with Jobcentres, rather than assuming non-use means no need.
- Improve national data collection. Government departments and national statistics producers should safely record voluntary information on sexual orientation and gender identity within NEET, employment and skills programmes, and examine outcomes by ethnicity, disability, health, poverty and caring responsibilities (see Suggestions for further research).
- Pursue long-term change while meeting needs now. Policymakers should continue to drive LGBTQ+ inclusion across education, employment and training. Because that change takes time, they should also fund practical support that helps LGBTQ+ young people navigate the barriers that exist today.

Jobcentres and employment-support providers

- Tackle fear of discrimination as a barrier to applying. Many young people in this research were not held back by a lack of skills alone, but by uncertainty about whether they would be safe and accepted. Advisers should help young people work out what a good job looks like for them, including identity safety alongside pay, hours and progression; research employers' inclusion practice; make informed decisions about whether and when to disclose; and focus applications on employers where they are likely to thrive. This raises the chance that applications lead to jobs young people can stay in.
- Offer young people a genuine choice between LGBTQ+-led support and LGBTQ+-competent mainstream provision. The survey shows substantial interest in LGBTQ+-led employment support, but does not show that everyone wants a wholly separate service. Both routes should be available, with warm referrals between them.
- Assess the whole picture. Initial assessments should consider financial, housing, mental-health, qualification, caring and accessibility needs alongside employment goals, so young people are not left to manage these through separate, disconnected systems.
- Reach young people where they already are. Outreach should run through LGBTQ+ organisations, community networks and the online spaces young people use, rather than waiting for them to approach formal services. This responds to Milburn's concern about the large hidden NEET population who are neither claiming benefits nor receiving meaningful employment support.

- Keep supporting young people in the early stages of work, placements or learning, so they can manage disclosure, workplace relationships, adjustments and early concerns before these lead to withdrawal.
- Help young people break the cycle of rejection. Repeated rejection can lead to anxiety, exhaustion, lower confidence and eventual withdrawal. Advisers should help young people make sense of rejection, strengthen applications and re-engage at a pace that works for them, rather than simply asking for more applications. This closely reflects Milburn's account of the "applications black hole". (interview evidence)
- Recognise activity that doesn't show up as employment. Volunteering, informal work, freelancing, skills development, managing health and planning a business should be treated as foundations for progression, not evidence of inactivity. (interview evidence)

Schools, colleges, universities and training providers

Close the gap between inclusion policies and young people's experience. Many schools and colleges already have inclusion and anti-bullying policies, yet young people in this research described bullying, isolation and disengagement that those policies did not prevent.

Providers should test whether their policies work in practice by listening to LGBTQ+ students through anonymous surveys and student voice, and by tracking attendance, exclusions and destinations. Sustained LGBTQ+-related bullying, absence or declining belonging should be treated as an early warning of NEET risk that triggers joined-up pastoral and careers support.

Make sure LGBTQ+ students know where to turn, inside and outside school. Every student should know at least one named, trusted member of staff they can approach, what will happen if they report a concern and how their privacy will be protected. Because internal routes do not always feel safe, providers should also signpost local and national LGBTQ+ youth services as an alternative source of support.

Employers, recruiters and online job platforms

Show, before people apply, that it is safe to apply. Because fear of discrimination stops some young people applying at all, general statements of inclusion are not enough. Job adverts and recruitment information should set out practically how the organisation uses chosen names before legal documents are changed, how to request adjustments, what staff networks exist and how discrimination is reported and dealt with. Employers should also offer a named contact who can answer questions confidentially before someone applies.

- Train recruiters, interviewers and line managers in trans and non-binary inclusion, disclosure, intersectional discrimination and responding to inappropriate behaviour.
- Offer reasonable adjustments and flexibility around health, disability and caring responsibilities, while keeping pay and hours stable enough to live on.
- Monitor recruitment, retention and progression of LGBTQ+ employees and use what you learn to improve practice.
- Recognise voluntary, freelance, creative and informal experience as evidence of skills and potential. (interview evidence)
- Address bias linked to accent, confidence in English and culturally different ways of presenting oneself, particularly where these interact with racism or visible gender nonconformity. (interview evidence)
- Online job platforms should verify vacancies, make discriminatory or misleading content easy to report and make sure names, titles and identity information are handled respectfully.

LGBTQ+ organisations and the wider voluntary sector

- Bring together community trust and practical employability support. LGBTQ+ organisations should connect peer relationships and belonging with careers guidance, skills, qualifications and access to inclusive employers, working in partnership with employment specialists where they do not hold that expertise themselves.
- Equip young people to navigate the barriers that exist now, through practical tools, confidence-building, advocacy and knowledge of their rights, while the wider system catches up.
- Develop peer-support, mentoring and role-model programmes that reduce isolation and build confidence, networks, practical knowledge and familiarity with different careers.
- Make LGBTQ+ community spaces affordable and accessible. Free or low-cost activities, travel support, online options and non-commercial spaces can include young people who cannot afford conventional LGBTQ+ venues.
- Offer low-pressure ways to get involved that do not require young people to complete complex assessments or repeatedly explain their identity and circumstances.
- Recognise that there is no single LGBTQ+ NEET experience. Support should respond to how being LGBTQ+ interacts with ethnicity, poverty, disability, neurodivergence, mental health, housing and caring responsibilities.
- Involve young people in designing, running and evaluating services, paying them for their time wherever possible.
- Build culturally and linguistically responsive support through partnerships with organisations trusted by different ethnic, migrant and faith communities. Mainstream services may lack LGBTQ+ understanding, while LGBTQ+ services may not fully understand language, racism, migration or culturally specific family pressures. (interview evidence)

- Assess reliance on family separately from emotional safety. Family may provide essential housing and money while being unsafe or rejecting. Services should respect young people's wishes about family involvement and help them build other networks of support. (interview evidence)
- Offer an enterprise and self-employment route for young people for whom this is a real aspiration, including business planning, financial guidance, mentoring, equipment, workspace, start-up grants and advice on tax, benefits and irregular income. Self-employment should be a genuine choice, not a fallback for young people shut out of conventional work. (interview evidence)

Mental-health, housing, welfare and other support services

- Treat mental health, housing and financial stability as part of employment progress, not problems to solve before employment support can begin. For some LGBTQ+ young people, these pressures follow directly from family rejection or discrimination. This builds on Milburn's argument that health services should support participation as well as treatment. Engagement should stay voluntary, paced around fluctuating health and based on what the young person feels is safe and achievable, and employment support should never be used to question eligibility for financial or health support.
- Recognise the risk when LGBTQ+ young people depend on family housing that is conditional, rejecting or emotionally unsafe, even if they are not formally homeless. (interview evidence)
- Provide coordinated casework and warm referrals so young people do not have to navigate several systems or repeatedly disclose sensitive information.
- Make sure services understand LGBTQ+ young people's needs and can respond to the combined effects of identity, disability, neurodivergence, poverty and family circumstances.
- Offer support or referral on identity documents, gender-affirming healthcare, welfare entitlements and discrimination rights where these affect access to education or work.

Funders and research bodies

1. Funding support

- Fund long-term, multi-part support that builds lasting local capacity, rather than repeated short-term pilots. This reflects Milburn's warning that time-limited initiatives repeatedly disappear without changing the underlying system. Our evidence does not support a short, single-focus response to the combination of barriers young people face.
- Fund partnerships between LGBTQ+ organisations and organisations with expertise in employment, ethnicity, disability, mental health, housing and migration, rather than expecting one provider to hold every form of expertise.

- Measure the steps along the way, such as stability, confidence, belonging, qualifications, work experience and access to inclusive employers, as well as entry into work or education. Funders and commissioners should also be clear about who is responsible for retention and progression once a young person has started work or learning.

2. Further research

Future research should build a larger, more geographically representative and longitudinal evidence base on LGBTQ+ young people's movements into, out of and around NEET status. It should actively reach those who are not engaged with benefits or support services; examine how LGBTQ+ identity interacts with disability, neurodivergence, ethnicity, migration, language, poverty and caring responsibilities; and test which combinations of LGBTQ+-led and mainstream support lead to suitable, secure and sustained progression. Research and evaluation should measure stability, adequate income, compatibility with health and caring responsibilities, identity safety, retention and longer-term development, not simply entry into education or work.

- Build a larger and more representative evidence base, including how many LGBTQ+ young people are NEET, and with more 16–18-year-olds, young people outside London and the South East, participants from Scotland and Wales, and young people not already engaged with services.
- Carry out longitudinal research into how LGBTQ+ young people move into, out of and around NEET status, including whether the education, training or employment they enter is suitable and sustained.
- Investigate the hidden LGBTQ+ NEET population, particularly young people who are not claiming benefits, using formal employment services or accessing specialist support.
- Explore intersecting experiences in more depth, particularly those of disabled and neurodivergent LGBTQ+ young people, young carers, and young people affected by racism, migration, language barriers, poverty or insecure housing.
- Examine discrimination throughout recruitment, including on online platforms, alongside the reasons for limited engagement with Jobcentres and other formal employment services, so that both can be addressed.
- Pilot and evaluate different support models, comparing LGBTQ+-led provision with LGBTQ+-competent mainstream services, to establish what works, for whom and in what circumstances.
- Explore self-employment and freelancing, examining whether they provide secure and positive career routes or are sometimes pursued to escape inaccessible or discriminatory workplaces. (interview evidence)
- Use accessible and participatory research methods, including jargon-free materials, active recruitment beyond existing service users, and trained peer or near-peer researchers, or partnerships between experienced researchers and LGBTQ+ youth co-researchers, to build rapport and inclusion.

Check out the Full Report on our website:
https://blossom.lgbt/let-everyone-blossom-report/

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