

Changing the narrative

Mapping project

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Where we started - what young people are facing

Too many young people with SEND are leaving school without the skills, experiences, or confidence they need for what comes next. Nationally, only around 29% of individuals with SEND enter employment after completing their education.¹

At the same time, the number of learners with additional needs is growing. The number of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) has risen year on year. Within the Jewish community, this trend is mirrored: schools report more learners whose needs are not typical, linear, or easily supported by existing systems, including an increasing number experiencing EBSA (Emotionally Based School Avoidance) linked to anxiety, sensory sensitivities, or wider mental-health challenges.

Yet while diagnosis is increasing, provision has not kept pace. Many learners - whether in mainstream or specialist settings still struggle to access consistent, meaningful opportunities to build the independence, social communication, and practical skills that underpin confidence and readiness for adulthood. For some, support thresholds remain a barrier; for others, the challenge lies in limited employer engagement, low expectations, or a lack of joined-up transition planning.

Many of these young people possess exceptional creativity, empathy, and problem-solving skills, qualities that could make them outstanding contributors to the workforce if nurtured early and supported with understanding. But when these strengths are overlooked or unsupported, potential can quickly be lost.

For these learners, when support begins, how it's offered, and who holds it all matter equally. These early experiences shape confidence, aspiration, and readiness for adulthood, helping young people see what's possible, believe they matter, find a sense of purpose, and are both valued and valuable in the world of work.

When support arrives too late, the system itself can marginalise young people from the pathways, opportunities, and scaffolding they need to thrive, leading to isolation and an increased risk of becoming NEET. Once a young person becomes NEET, research shows they are far more likely to remain so for extended periods, with long-term effects on confidence, well-being, and opportunity.²

¹ Source: Department for Education, "Special educational needs and disabilities: an analysis and summary of data sources," 2023 (ONS Labour Force Survey data).

² Department for Education, "NEET Statistics Quarterly Brief: April to June 2023." Around 40% of young people who become NEET remain so for 12 months or longer.

Why this work matters now

New statutory guidance expects schools to embed earlier, more inclusive work-related learning. This creates both an opportunity and a challenge: to ensure these changes are implemented in meaningful ways, not just compliant ones, and that they reach the learners who need them most.

The Wohl Foundation commissioned this mapping to understand what already exists, where inequities persist, and what could be possible if the community's collective strengths were brought together.

The project set out to:

- Map the current provision, partnerships, and strengths across Jewish schools, charities, and employment-focused organisations.
- Identify where gaps, barriers, or inconsistencies limit access to meaningful work-related learning before age 16.
- Explore where collaboration could strengthen inclusion, opportunity, and readiness for adulthood across the community.

This work sits at the intersection of national policy reform and communal readiness. With careers education statutory from Year 7 and employer engagement increasingly expected, this is a moment of both urgency and possibility, a chance to move from compliance to coherence.



How we listened and learned

This initial scoping phase focused on children and young people under 16 who are neurodivergent, have SEND, experience EBSA, live with mental-health challenges, or have complex needs. It drew on a series of 90-minute, semi-structured interviews with schools, charities, and employment organisations working directly with this cohort. Alongside these conversations, we also undertook targeted desk research into the national policy landscape, reviewing statutory guidance, the SEND Code of Practice, the Gatsby Benchmarks, and the forthcoming Work Experience Guarantee (2025). This brief policy analysis helped ensure that what we heard locally was understood within the wider legal and policy framework shaping schools' responsibilities for careers education and preparation for adulthood.

Conversations explored what currently exists, what helps, and what still holds learners back, alongside each organisation's aspirations for the future. This phase intentionally centred the voices of professionals holding the work, recognising that later stages will include families, employers, and young people themselves.

The mapping captured provision across both specialist and mainstream settings:

- Specialist schools such as Gesher and Gateways lead inclusive, vocational models that blend education, wellbeing, and real-world learning. Kisharon Langdon, which serves learners with more complex needs, provides highly individualised support and transition planning, often continuing into adulthood.
- Mainstream schools, including JFS, JCoSS, Yavneh, and Hasmonean, educate the majority of Jewish learners with additional needs, though provision varies in scope, timing, and confidence.
- Work Avenue and Resource hold deep expertise in employability and tend to focus on 16+ and adult pathways.
- ORT UK and Jami typically work with secondary-aged students (primarily KS4/KS5) through skills, wellbeing, and careers-related programmes.
- PAJES and Norwood play system and support roles (training, guidance, inclusion support), with activity spanning schools and families rather than direct KS3 provision.

Together, these perspectives offer a grounded, relational picture of what's working well and where collaboration could build a more connected, equitable ecosystem of support. Listening in this way revealed both the strength of what already exists and the quiet gaps that still hold some young people back.

What's emerging across the system

The Jewish community is already doing remarkable work in this space. Across every conversation, what stood out was the compassion, professionalism, and ambition shared across schools, charities, and employers. There are strong examples of creativity, commitment, and collaboration, from inclusive vocational pathways to mentoring schemes and employer partnerships that model what good can look like.

The potential now is to connect these efforts, strengthening what already works while addressing the cultural, relational, and systemic barriers that continue to limit opportunity for learners whose needs fall outside the patterns most employers and systems are set up to serve.

Building on this, the mapping revealed a shared pattern of experience: a community rich in compassion, creativity, and expertise, yet one whose strengths are split.

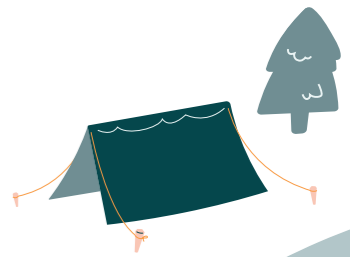
Mainstream schools educate most learners with additional needs but often lack the time, resources, and confidence to provide sustained, high-quality preparation for work before the age of 16. Specialist schools, by contrast, excel in tailoring pathways but have smaller employer networks and limited capacity to scale their expertise.

The system remains asymmetric, rich in some places and fragile in others, meaning a young person's access to opportunity still depends too heavily on where they learn, who teaches them, and what resources surround them.

This imbalance extends beyond schools. While education settings and local authorities hold statutory duties for SEND and careers provision, employers - whose inclusion is critical, currently face no equivalent obligation. This uneven responsibility limits both accountability and opportunity, creating gaps that no single organisation can bridge alone.

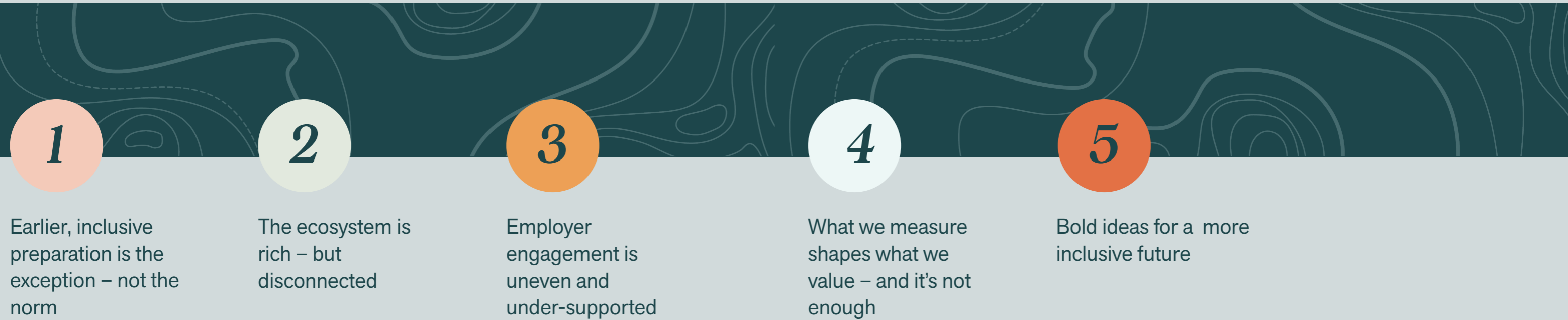
The result is a fragmented landscape in which access to meaningful work-related learning depends more on setting, resources, and relationships than on young people's potential or ambition. Stigma and uncertainty among employers continue to narrow opportunities, and many families still carry the weight of coordinating provision themselves.

What's emerging now is the possibility of building a more coherent communal framework, one that prepares learners earlier, walks with them longer, and creates the conditions for employers to engage with greater confidence and understanding.



How the story unfolds from here

The pages that follow summarise the five key themes that emerged from this first phase of mapping:



Each theme highlights both the system's existing strengths and its structural fragilities, showing what's already possible, what remains inconsistent, and where collaboration could create more coherent, inclusive pathways for young people across the community.

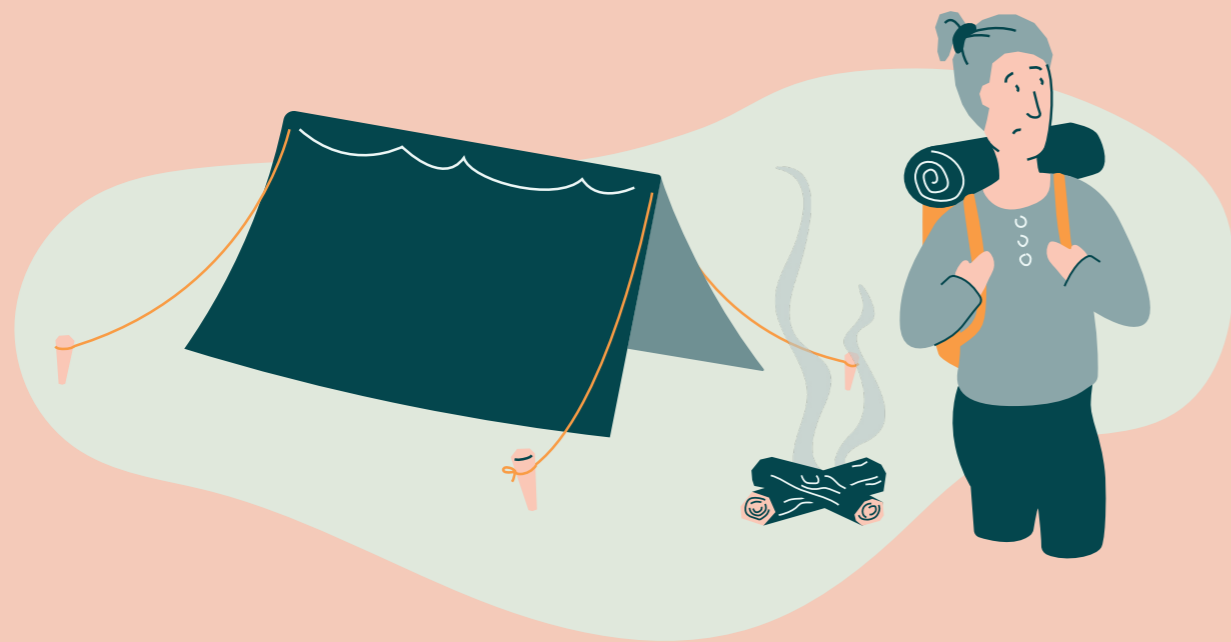
As you read these stories, consider this: *What role could I play in this?*

Each of us holds something, expertise, funding, influence, or connection, that can help strengthen or shift the system toward one that is more connected, equitable, and accessible for every young person.

The first theme begins with timing, exploring why early, inclusive preparation remains the exception, not the norm.

Theme 1

Earlier, inclusive preparation is the exception - not the norm



Structured work-related learning in mainstream schools typically begins in Year 10, far too late for many learners, who need time, repetition, and confidence-building opportunities long before that point. These learners often need consistent scaffolding, relational support and time to practise skills in safe environments to build confidence before entering external environments.

Special schools such as Gesher, Kisharon Langdon, and Gateways embed vocational pathways earlier and more systematically. However, most learners with additional needs are educated in mainstream settings, where early scaffolding is rare and access depends on individual champions rather than systemic design. Yavneh, for example, identified approximately 550 students on the SEN register and nearly 45 with EHCPs. Yet opportunities to develop practical life skills and take part in meaningful, real-world learning, the kind that helps young people feel ready for adulthood and employment, are often constrained by timetabling, funding, and accountability pressures.



Evidence from mainstream settings suggests that Gatsby Benchmarks are formally embedded but unevenly enacted. In some schools, careers leadership sits alongside other senior responsibilities; for example, heads of department may hold the role part-time, limiting capacity for tailored, strategic, and sustained work-related learning. This capacity gap likely mirrors challenges in other large schools across the sector.

“We need more than one work experience shot for these young people.”

“Sixteen feels like the cliff point.”

“Families are begging to stay because they don’t want to go into the wide world of college... change can be frightening.” (In reference to vulnerable learners who leave because they don’t meet 6th form requirements.)

Why this matters

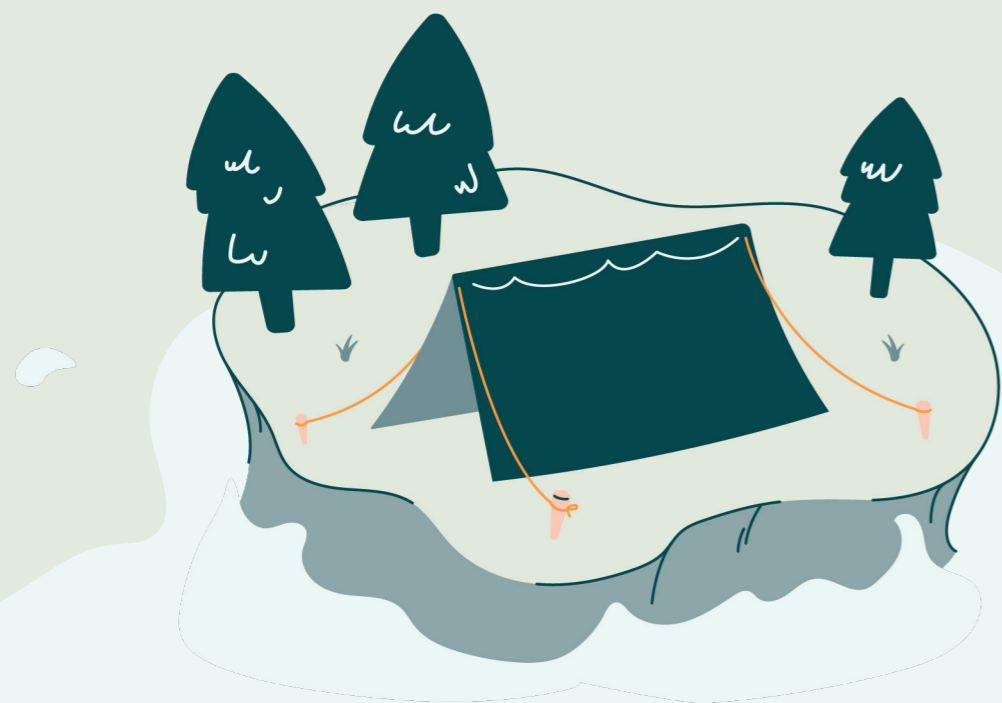
Beneath this sits a deeper equity challenge. The mainstream schools that educate most learners often have the least resource and specialist knowledge to scaffold pre-16 work-related learning. Specialist schools, by contrast, excel in tailoring opportunities to each learner’s interests and strengths; however, their employer access remains limited, constrained by smaller networks, transport, and the staff capacity needed to sustain regular placements and on-site support. Mainstream schools face similar challenges from another direction: large cohorts, competing priorities, and little time to nurture consistent partnerships.

Each part of the system is doing good work, but often in isolation. The opportunity now is to connect them - to share practice, co-design training for employers, and create pathways that allow every learner to benefit from both expertise and opportunity.

Some connections already exist across the community, small but powerful examples of what’s possible when schools, charities, and employers work together. Yet without shared structures to hold them, good practice remains scattered. When provision depends on personal relationships rather than shared systems, young people’s access to opportunity becomes a matter of luck rather than design.

Theme 2

The ecosystem is rich - but disconnected



Across the community, there is deep expertise, compassion, and commitment. Yet families are often left to bridge the gaps between services, carrying much of the coordination themselves. This mapping offers a chance to ease that pressure, surfacing where alignment could make the system work more seamlessly around the young person.

While connections between schools and external organisations remain uneven, there are strong examples of what communal capital can look like when it works in practice. JFS, for example, draws on its extensive alumni network to place students in a wide range of work experience settings, illustrating the potential of trusted relationships in widening access.

PAJES supports schools and parents with guidance and CPD, Work Avenue and Resource provide employment readiness and coaching, ORT UK brings mentoring and employer networks into schools, and Gesher, Kisharon Langdon and Gateways lead inclusive models that blend education with life and work skills. Norwood contributes through its SEND and transition support, while Jami brings essential mental-health expertise.

Leaders at JCoSS also spoke about the power of shared community infrastructure, a Jewish network of alumni, employers, and parents offering placements, mentoring, and talks. As one teacher imagined, *“Wouldn’t it be incredible if there was a Jewish community bank of amazing people offering amazing places for our students?”*



Yavneh leaders and others expressed a strong appetite for collaboration:

“We don’t work well enough together as schools... it would be lovely if we collaborated honestly and swapped provision.”

Yet there is no single pathway, referral route, or shared infrastructure that links these strengths into a coherent offer.

“Our cohort presents very mainstream, but beneath the surface is trauma and complexity.”

“Parents always ask, how do I adjust this for my neurodivergent child?”

Why this matters

Families are carrying what the system refuses to hold, and until that changes, access will remain unequal and unsustainable. The willingness to collaborate is there, what's missing is a clear view of what works, where the gaps lie, and the trusted leadership to bring people together around shared understanding and collective action.

Theme 3

Employer engagement is uneven and under-supported



Employer readiness remains one of the biggest barriers described across the mapping. Schools and charities consistently reflected that, while some employers express interest and goodwill, genuine inclusion still feels uncertain territory. Stigma about what learners can do, and anxiety about the responsibility of hosting them, persist across sectors. Some employers appear unsure how to offer meaningful placements without specialist help or direct support from schools.

At Gesher, emerging partnership work is showing what good employer support can look like, with a focus on preparation, communication, and relationships that help placements succeed. ORT UK's mentoring and employability skills programmes, which show how inclusion can be reimagined. Employment charities such as Work Avenue and Resource bring expertise in employer preparation and job matching that could be adapted for younger cohorts.

"Employers gave all the right answers, but on the day - it fell apart, they needed scaffolding."

"Employers sometimes just need to stop and listen; it's not as overwhelming as they think."

"Work experience in schools is often of poor quality and risks putting young people off."

"We spend as much time preparing employers as we do preparing students."

Why this matters

Without coordinated employer education, understanding and support, opportunities often depend on luck or family connections, reinforcing exclusion for those who are already most at risk. Schools and charities need shared tools and training to prepare both employers and learners for success.

Theme 4

What we measure shapes what we value - and it's not enough

Special schools and charities tend to capture progress in more relational and holistic ways, such as confidence, wellbeing, communication, and self-advocacy, yet these insights are rarely measured or shared consistently across organisations. The result is a fragmented picture: everyone is measuring something, but not always what matters most to learners.

Success for many learners is found in confidence, connection, and belonging, not just in destinations. Organisations such as ORT UK and Kisharon Langdon see mentoring, self-advocacy, and wellbeing as integral outcomes, yet these remain invisible within formal accountability systems. Mainstream leaders spoke of the tension between inclusion and accountability, noting that flexibility in course design often comes at the expense of performance measures and limited resources.

"We get punished for flexibility; every course costs money and time we don't have."

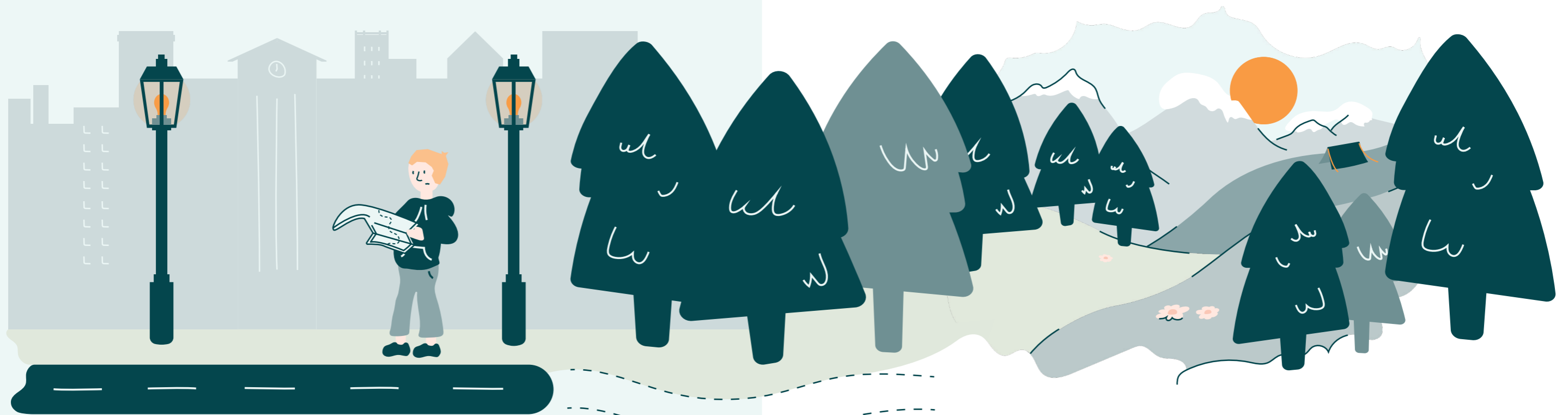
"Walking through the door is a miracle for many of these young people."

"Confidence grows hugely through mentoring."

"The most powerful sign of success is when alumni return as mentors."

"Self-advocacy starts with knowing yourself."

"Parents step out into the wider world and don't have the same support JCoSS provides."



In mainstream schools, the Gatsby Benchmarks and destinations data provide a framework for tracking careers provision, but the depth of implementation varies widely. Some schools use them meaningfully to build real-world readiness, while others, often constrained by time, capacity, or competing priorities, do only the minimum needed for compliance.

Why this matters

If we fail to measure what matters most to learners, we risk making them invisible within systems built to serve others. A light-touch "Communal Outcomes Compass" built around belonging, confidence, employability, and sustained connection could help align schools, charities, and employers around what truly counts, offering a shared language rather than a single measure.

Theme 5
**Bold ideas for a more
 inclusive future**



Across interviews, a shared appetite for transformation was unmistakable. Participants spoke with imagination and urgency about what could change and what's already within reach.



Ideas included earlier interventions, communal transition hubs, neurodiversity-aware employer networks, shared tracking systems, and cultural shifts in how vocational education is valued. There was clear enthusiasm for collaboration, provided it is facilitated and resourced rather than left to goodwill alone.

“Every employer open to hiring people with learning disabilities.”

“An employer-facing strand and pre-18 pipeline so young people arrive with confidence and practical skills.”

“A communal transition hub and ND-aware employer network so every student has a safe, sustained pathway after Year 11.”

“That parents in our community would see FE colleges and apprenticeships as valid, aspirational options not second-best.”

They imagined a community where every organisation, employer, and professional could see themselves as part of one shared ecosystem around young people, connected not just by process, but by purpose, trust, and shared responsibility. Building on this vision, many spoke about the need for protected time and space for schools, charities, and employers to come together once or twice a year to share insights, celebrate successes, and plan opportunities collectively.

Why this matters

What's missing isn't only shared infrastructure, it's the time, coherence, and cultural safety that enable people to work well together. The system holds deep expertise, but without alignment of values, resources, and accountability, that expertise remains scattered. The opportunity now is to create the conditions, practical and relational, that allow collaboration to take root and last, turning collective will into sustained pathways for young people moving towards adulthood.

The ecosystem around the learner: what holds and connects it

Schools (mainstream & special)

Limited access to meaningful work-related learning before Year 10

Life skills and vocational learning embedded early

Deep SEND and therapeutic expertise (special schools)

Varying degrees of Gatsby Benchmarks embedded

Alumni networks as employer gateways (JFS, JCoSS)

Employer links often depend on individual staff or informal contacts

No shared cross-school framework for careers and inclusion

Goodwill and established networks (Work Avenue, Resource, ORT)

Alumni and community employers willing to mentor if co-ordinated

Few early links with schools (KS3-4)

Need deep education and cultural change around SEND / ND inclusion

Lack of inclusive frameworks and long-term partnerships

No shared data or tracking platform

Mostly post-16 focus

Reliance on individual leaders rather than shared systems

Parents & families

Strong advocacy and insight

Transition guidance and planning inconsistent after 14-16

Some whole-family support emerging (Norwood, Jami)

Families still carry coordination pressures

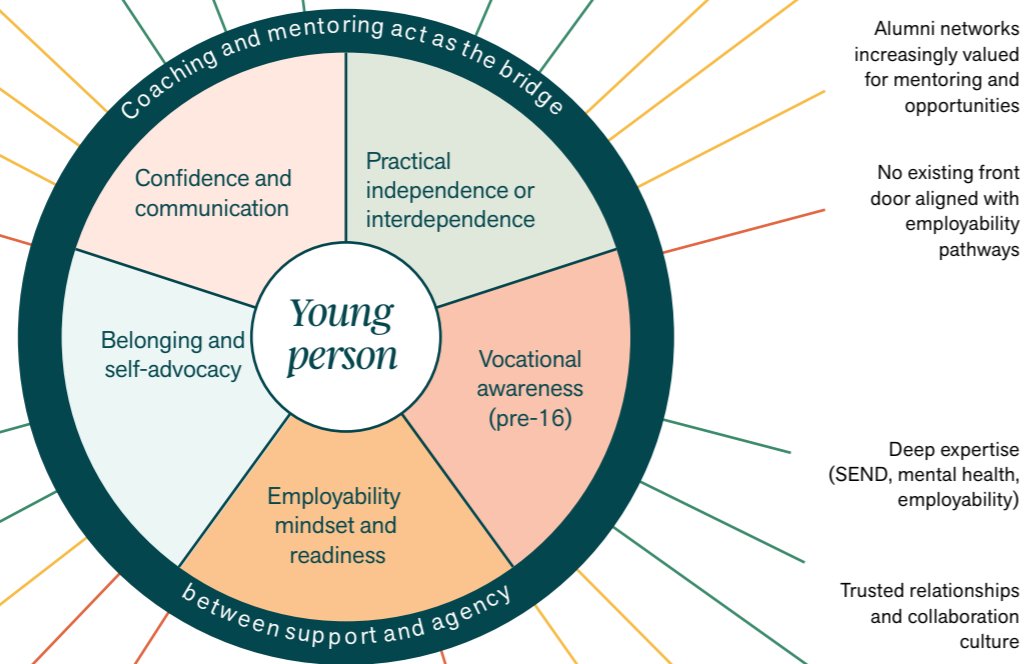
Alumni networks increasingly valued for mentoring and opportunities

No existing front door aligned with employability pathways

Deep expertise (SEND, mental health, employability)

Trusted relationships and collaboration culture

Strong links with schools and alumni volunteers (ORT, Resource)



Employers/employability

Charities & communal organisations

Held by philanthropy and stretched public funding

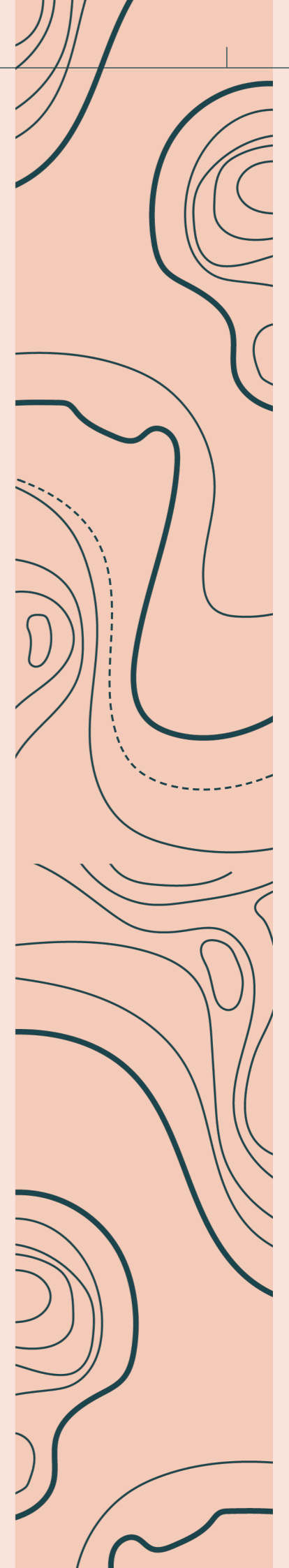
— Strength — Emerging — Fragile

Closing reflection

What emerged most powerfully from this phase was not deficit but desire, a clear collective will to do better for our young people. The knowledge, compassion, and expertise already exist; what's missing are the shared systems, resources, and leadership that hold this work together, creating the accountability and alignment needed to turn shared intent into real impact.

This first stage tells the story as professionals see it, through their own experiences and self-assessment. Listening next to young people, families, and employers will deepen that understanding, revealing where experience and perception meet, and where they may differ.

These findings are a beginning, not a conclusion. They suggest a community ready for deeper connection and shared learning. The next step could be to widen this listening, bringing together those who live, work, and are educated within this system, to explore what a truly inclusive, pre-16 pathway to work might look like.



Appendix

Organisations interviewed during this phase:

School	Employment	Communal organisation
Gesher	Work Avenue	ORT
Kisharon Langdon	Resource	Jami
Gateways		PAJES
JFS		Norwood
JCoSS (inc. PRSP)		
Yavneh		

SWOT analysis

The mapping phase revealed both the strength of the ecosystem and its fragility in terms of connections. Below is a synthesis drawn from all interviews, Airtable data, and policy analysis.

Strengths

Deep SEND expertise across schools and organisations
 Relational and therapeutic culture
 Alumni and mentoring networks
 Adaptive, creative practice in small orgs
 Community-based employer networks
 Holistic and confidence-building approaches

Weaknesses

Late start to vocational prep (Year 10+)
 Fragmented collaboration and transitions
 Fragile employer readiness
 Limited tracking and shared data
 Short-term funding cycles
 Cultural stigma around non-university pathways

Opportunities

New statutory frameworks (e.g. Work Experience Guarantee 2025) Shared digital tracking tools
 Communal employer training offers
 Parent peer support networks
 ND-aware mentoring at scale
 Expanding into underserved regions (e.g. Manchester)

Threats

Funding instability and siloed systems
 Lack of a communal "front door" and no-one wanting to own this
 Employer disengagement or fear
 Policy barriers and high thresholds for support
 Cultural stigma and fear about diagnosis and future independence
 Risk of young people falling through gaps post-16

Definitions of need and impact

This section sets out the types of needs commonly encountered across the community and how they typically impact a young person's ability to access or succeed in work-related learning:

Term	Misc	Impact
Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)	Includes a wide range of cognitive, physical, communication, sensory, and social/emotional needs	May affect pace of learning, ability to process information, or capacity to navigate unfamiliar environments without support
Neurodivergence	Includes diagnoses such as Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC), ADHD, dyspraxia, dyslexia, Tourette's Syndrome, and others	Young people may experience social communication challenges, sensory sensitivities, executive functioning difficulties, or anxiety around change
Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH)	Includes anxiety, depression, trauma-related responses, and emotional regulation difficulties	Can affect attendance, participation, trust in adults, and ability to manage transitions or new experiences
EBSA (Emotionally Based School Avoidance)	Persistent absence or withdrawal from school due to overwhelming anxiety, trauma, or unmet needs	Disconnection from peer groups and systems; re-entry into structured learning or work settings requires careful scaffolding and trusted relationships
Without EHCP (but with clear support needs)	Many learners do not meet thresholds for formal plans but still face daily barriers in school and beyond	These students are often invisible in formal tracking and may not access tailored support, despite clear challenges

Next steps: listening forward

This report offers a foundation, not a fix. The next phase will continue with focused listening, this time to the voices that have not yet been centred.

The next phase will ask:

- What does meaningful work-related learning look and feel like for young people with SEND?
- What do families need to navigate this journey without carrying it alone?
- What would help employers feel prepared, supported, and able to take part?

