



The Risk of Transfer:

The role of skills at key transition points



Impact and Learning at City & Guilds Foundation

Over the past ten years, City & Guilds Foundation has invested in programmes and charities supporting people at the point systems change around them - whether leaving college, leaving prison, arriving in the UK or returning to work after a break.

Transitions present a crucial turning point in anyone's life, and their success has a disproportionately high impact on long-term employment and wellbeing. At the same time, employers and communities that can facilitate and enable transitions also demonstrate greater maturity, productivity, and diversity that benefits everyone in our society.

This independently commissioned research paper draws on ten years of funding evidence from City & Guilds Foundation and 11 years of the Princess Royal Training Awards to set out what helps and what hinders at the point one system hands a person to another.

As funders, colleges, employers, and policymakers face increasing demand on limited resources, this evidence shows us how focusing on those moments of greatest risk can result in the greatest returns.

We will use this research to strengthen our commitment to working with partners to create smoother transitions for those who need support the most.



Defining Transitions

A transition point is a moment at which a person moves between systems, whether education, employment or a life stage, that operates under different challenges, incentives or definitions of success. In UK education and SEND practice, the term traditionally describes a move between phases of education and preparation for adult life. City & Guilds Foundation adopts a broader definition of any identifiable handover point across a skills and work journey. For example: from school leaving age, into college; into and through work; or leaving prison, the forces or the care system; where the institution changes and a person moving between systems may hit a 'structural gap'.

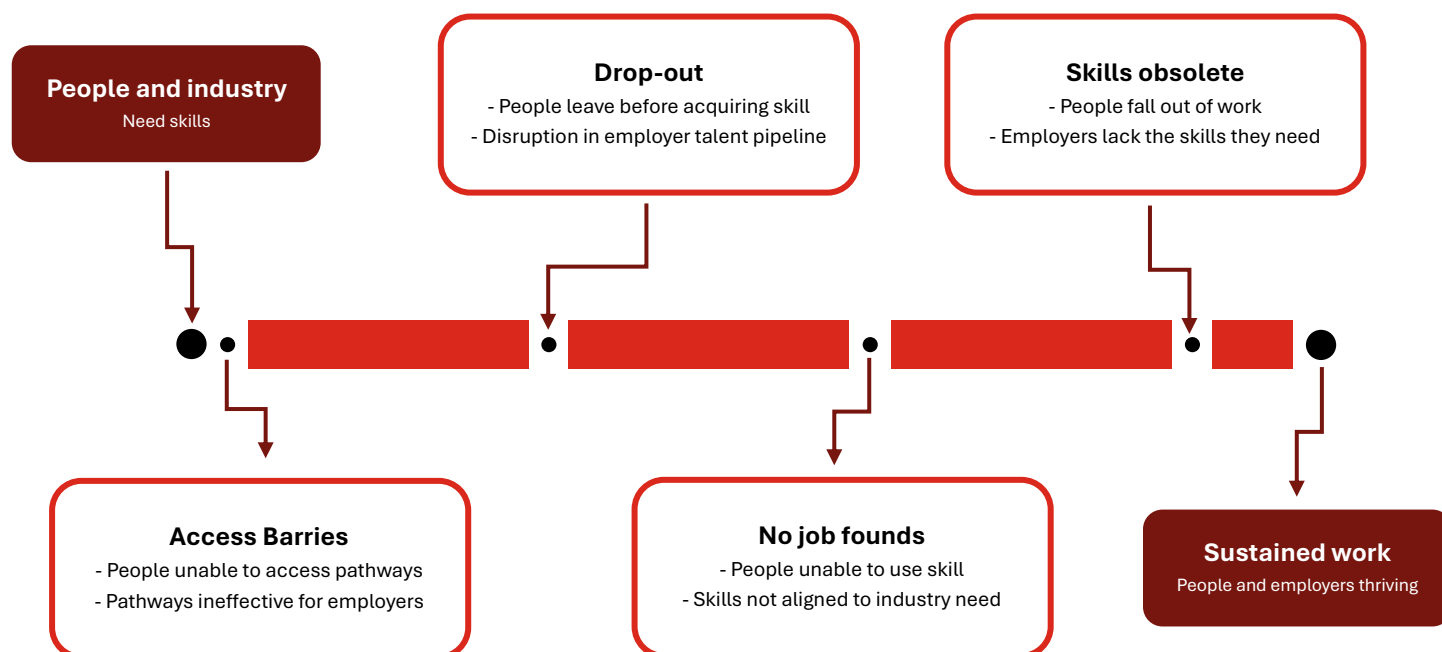
This paper is informed by evidence from programmes funded or awarded by City & Guilds Foundation, along with consultations with stakeholders across the Foundation's networks, including members of its Future Skills Commission for Prisons and Post-16 Transitions Commission, as well as charities and employers working with learners when there are key moments of change in circumstances.

The evidence gathered in this paper does not examine the appropriateness or effectiveness of the support that occurs within one point of journey or another, but what happens between the two. Regardless of the quality of the support at a specific stage, unless it transfers with the movement of the person, its value will not be fully realised.



Skills pathways: disrupted at transition

The way the skills system is designed has traditionally assumed a single shared pathway through transition points – the same route, in the same order, for everyone. In practice, skills development is deeply bespoke. No two people travel the assumed pathway the same way, and each point of transition is a place where it can hold for one person while fragmenting for another.



City & Guilds Foundation focuses on key transition points where there is a risk of a skills pathway being disrupted, such as school to further education or apprenticeship, further education to work, redundancy to retraining or prison to community.

Successful transitions lead to sustained education, training and employment. Effective transition support also helps people develop the skills employers need, reducing skills gaps in the labour market more broadly. On the flipside, unsuccessful transitions are associated with disengagement, higher unemployment risk and long-term social costs.

Failed transitions are unevenly distributed across people and regions. People already facing socio-economic disadvantage, poor wellbeing or neurodivergence are the ones least able to absorb a system built on fixed timing, assumed coordination and uniform delivery. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are markedly less likely to sustain participation in education or training without additional support. 21% of 16- to 24-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds are NEET, against 10% from higher professional backgrounds, unchanged for a decade.

The same divide shows in wellbeing and neurodivergence: those out of work are far more likely to report a mental health problem, and around half of people entering prison are neurodivergent, against 15% to 20% of the general population.

These patterns are heightened when people face additional barriers to skills and work. Around three million unpaid carers in the UK balance work with caring responsibilities, and nearly half say they are considering reducing their hours or leaving work altogether. 25% of NEET young people report poor mental health, against 9% of those in employment. Only 22% of care leavers aged 27 are in employment compared with 57% of their peers. People entering prison are significantly less likely to hold formal qualifications, and training through the gate has been seen to reduce reoffending, which currently costs the UK an estimated £22.7 billion a year.



"Processes fail at transition points, when there's handovers of responsibility from one person or one institution to another."

Mike Adamson CBE, Interim CEO City & Guilds Foundation (November 2025 – July 2026)

The central finding is that transitions fail in three consistent ways through timing, missing coordination and unsuitable formats.

Investment concentrated at, or ahead of, the transition point itself may prevent costs further down the line.

The six friction-reduction findings set out in this paper suggest where that investment should most effectively sit.

Three forms of transition failure

The Cliff Edge: a failure of timing?

Support in the UK is structured around age and status thresholds, not readiness, and tends to stop abruptly instead of tapering off. The Department for Education's evidence to the Public Accounts Committee acknowledged that statutory cut-offs produce a cliff edge for care leavers, while 16- to 18-year-old apprentices lose their enrichment entitlement where they need it most, and prison release support often stops at the gate.





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The Broken Bridge: a failure of coordination?

The system isn't set up to connect colleges, employers, schools and council systems to each other. Skills England's report concludes: "We have a fragmented and confusing skills landscape that lets down learners, frustrates businesses and holds back growth." The Local Government Association traces this to separate funding streams, each owned by a different part of government and targeting a different cohort, layered onto an already "complex delivery landscape" locally.

How this shows up for people securing work is demonstrated by The Industrial Strategy Advisory Council's paper (July 2026) and suggests not a shortage of willing employers, but a lack of support to help them navigate the system and build the capability to take someone on; a constraint we have seen repeated in consultation with senior skills specialists during the development of this paper.

The Formats that do not successfully transfer

Classroom-based delivery is how the education system has traditionally organised learning, but vocational training depends on practical application, and Foundation stakeholders are clear that today's workforce needs hands-on learning more than ever.

What Works Growth's evidence review of employment training support shows in-firm and on-the-job training consistently outperforms classroom-based delivery, with programmes co-designed with employers and closely mirroring real jobs the strongest single design feature identified.



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Evidence from Practice: What reduces friction?

Across City & Guilds Foundation's funding evaluation, and the consultations with key stakeholders across the skills landscape, the same factors are key drivers of successful transitions. Leaders returned to each of these as key ingredients that are often lacking in standard provision.

A through transitions trusted adult or mentor

In group consultations with senior skill sector representatives, a trusted adult at the key moment, potentially delivered through a "Training the Trainer" model, was repeatedly identified as the single highest-leverage intervention available.

Hackney Quest's New Futures programme works with young people aged 16-30 facing a combination of interconnected barriers, including housing instability, mental health distress, disrupted education and complexity within benefits systems. With over three decades in the borough, Hackney Quest operates from a position of deep community embeddedness, with established relationships across youth, housing and mental health networks in Hackney. The Transitions Commission funding has enabled Hackney Quest to expand therapeutic support into five youth spaces across the borough, recruit a dedicated caseworker and Talking Quest coordinator, and grow its active 16+ network to over 100 organisations and practitioners, used for referrals and intelligence-sharing.

"Mentoring and coaching can be in any sector... any age... small, large, medium-sized organisations. So that's something that we know works."

Fenella Tallon, Chief Assessor, Princess Royal Training Awards



A physical space where it is needed

Providers and charities continually emphasise the fact that a dedicated space, that people want to go to and has positive associations, makes a huge difference when it comes to inspiring people that are disengaged to embrace skills development opportunities.

For example, Voyage set up its college-based transition into the green economy programme with its own separate entrance, distinct from the college's main entrance, recognising that the vulnerable people it supports often have negative associations with mainstream education.

"What makes The Clink Bakery so special is that it provides a rare and vital therapeutic environment in an otherwise highly pressurised prison context."

PALife Magazine commenting on the bakery at HMP Brixton

Hands-on practical teaching

It is not new to suggest that practical application of learning is a good thing, but it is repeatedly identified by Foundation partners as not only a good way of developing skills, but incredibly valuable for wellbeing, mental health, confidence and a perceived welcome shift from the daily dominance and pull of technology.

Construction Youth Trust's Building Opportunities programme runs a five-day introduction to construction and the built environment, delivered by employers across schools, covering bricklaying, carpentry, joinery and civil engineering, followed by a work experience placement. Participants gain direct exposure to real workplace environments rather than classroom teaching alone, with one-to-one coaching connecting what they've seen to realistic sector pathways.

"If it's something with your hands, your projection of barriers disappears."

Will Evans, Managing Director, Onwards & Upwards

Essential skills as core provision

Employability skills, as well as Maths and English, act as a safety net for transitions, particularly when there is disruption to a pathway.

MYTIME Young Carers built its programme in Dorset & Isle of Wight through 1:1 mentoring, mock interviews, CV-writing, for young adult carers balancing work with caring responsibilities across transition points.

As a result, 94% left with a completed CV, and 94% could name their own transferable skills explicitly, meaning that even when they were not immediately moving into further work or study, they had a clear framework to pick up where they left off.

Employer capability

Employers have a clear role to play in supporting successful transitions, especially when the pathway is less well trodden.

Princess Royal Training Award recipient, The National Theatre, restructured its apprenticeship entry around attitude and aptitude rather than experience, removing the unpaid-internship barrier that once dominated technical theatre.

Over 12 years, 70% of apprentices have come from underrepresented backgrounds, and 90% move directly into employment in the field in which they trained. One of the key hallmarks of the scheme was that each department had to bid for an apprentice by showing they have considered the entire journey from recruitment through to post-apprenticeship support stretching up to one year beyond completion.

This combined with a quarterly 360 review of every apprentice by peers, colleagues, and managers was cited as being key for apprentices to move across department, and into employment without friction.



Recommendations

In practice, funders and local Government could most affect change if they:

- Extend or taper statutory support past its current cut-off points, such as enrichment entitlement for 16-18 apprentices.
- Bring the skills system together, with a focus on the challenges of transition and less on generic skills gaps, pathways and entitlements.
- Put resource into employer capability directly, alongside learner-facing support.
- Build transition-point coordination supported by a trusted adult or mentor support into Local Skills Improvement Plans so transitions are planned and coordinated locally.
- Use mayoral and local responsibility for skills to build the local infrastructure connecting employers, colleges and schools directly. A national policy rarely fixes a coordination failure on its own; it needs a local convener holding all three relationships at once.
- Encourage funders to invest for the longer term before the transition point, ahead of the friction moment. City & Guilds Foundation's social return on investment evidence from prisons and displaced people's routes into work shows a modest amount spent early prevents a far larger cost later.

How this insight is informing our thinking

Targeting resources to have the greatest impact possible

- Transitions affect everyone, but the likelihood of failure compounds when there are circumstantial and structural barriers or infrastructure gaps, when the consequences of failure can be more catastrophic.
- If we can find, fund, and celebrate ways of minimising the risk of failure at transition points, reducing friction and improving support, then the demands on both sides of the transition will decrease, freeing up much-needed resources.

Collaboration is non-negotiable

- Transitions challenges show up at all stages of the skills pathway (and beyond) and supporting people with compounding barriers to successfully navigate something that even those with relatively few barriers can find difficult requires deep and collaborative work.
- For the Foundation, that is not something we want to shy away from. We want to support innovative solutions, ways of working, and test and learn if there is a model, or models, that can work for one group or another.

The role we play depends on the need

- Having that depth of impact needs to be balanced with our responsibility to deliver nationally relevant activities, that advance technical education and support individuals and industry everywhere.
- As we develop our strategy, we will need to make the most of all the mechanics in our power, from convening and funding to awarding and investing, to ensure we are not only having a direct impact but creating insights and practical solutions that can be adopted at scale.



About the Research

This paper draws on a multi-method evidence base built up over several years from Bean Research's evaluation and learning partnership with City & Guilds Foundation. In addition, Bean drew on interviews and focus groups with 40 individuals between June and August 2026, including The City and Guilds of London Institute (CGLI) Fellows, Council members, skills providers and funded partners, providing first-hand perspective on how place can and does shape skills delivery.

This sits alongside a thematic analysis of ten years of Princess Royal Training Awards data, drawing on the 300+ awarded applications examined in Insights from 10 Cycles of the Princess Royal Training Awards and evaluation of City & Guilds Foundation's outcome evaluation of grants and feedback from funded partners, examining not only what the Foundation's funding has achieved but how. More recent recipients of The Transition Commission funding fed into this analysis directly.

About City & Guilds Foundation

With a focus on high-impact social investment, recognition and advocacy programmes, the City & Guilds Foundation aims to innovate, celebrate and evaluate opportunities that make a real difference in people's lives, supporting everyone to succeed, no matter who they are or where they come from.

The Foundation is a catalyst for providing opportunities in skills and work and delivering against our purpose. With a commitment to sharing knowledge and driving forward skills for growth, City & Guilds Foundation works with thousands of organisations, generating industry relationships, bringing together networks, matching funding, celebrating best practice and inspiring change.

City & Guilds Foundation is the working name of The City and Guilds of London Institute.

The City and Guilds of London Institute ("CGLI") is a body incorporated by Royal Charter and registered as a charity.

Additional References

Thank you to all those who took part in consultations that informed this paper, especially:

- Anthony Impey MBE, Chair, Chair of the Apprenticeship Ambassador Network; Board member, Skills England & Chair, City & Guilds Industry Skills Board & International Advisory Board
- Fenella Tallon, Chief Assessor, Princess Royal Training Awards
- Mike Adamson CBE, Interim CEO, City & Guilds Foundation (November 2025 – July 2026)
- Junior Smart OBE, Founder, SOS Gangs Project

And all those who participated in an in-person or online World Cafe to support the City & Guilds Foundation in developing its future strategy.

The paper has also cited various publications including:

Be the Business (2026) Pathways to Progression: Evaluation Report.

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About City & Guilds Foundation

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