

# **An exploration of employment opportunities for young people on level 3 courses with an EHCP.**

Document author: Sandra Reynolds

Date : March 2025



## Table of Contents:

### **1. Introduction 3**

Background to the research. 4

### **2. Research questions 5**

### **3. Methodology 6**

### **4. Findings 7**

Employer survey 7

Local companies championing good practice 10

Student Survey 14

Focus Groups 20

### **5 Discussion and Recommendations 23**

1. What existing apprenticeship and employment opportunities are there for high functioning SEND young people with EHCPs in Buckinghamshire? 23

2. What are the skills gaps /shortages within Buckinghamshire? 23

3. What are the aspirations of young people with EHCP in Buckinghamshire mainstream schools? 23

4. What networks exists primarily outside of the council to join up higher ability young people EHCP's with employment opportunities within Buckinghamshire? 24

5. Is the Advanced Supported Internship model needed and is it working well? 24

6. What barriers do these YP face in terms of local employment? 25

Recommendations 26

### **References 28**

### **Useful resources 29**

### **Appendix 1 30**

## 1. Introduction

In 2022 the Government reinforced its commitment to supporting more young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) into employment. The Department for Education is funding a three-year programme to strengthen Supported Internship provision in England. Internships Work aims to double the number of supported internships available across the country. Designed and delivered by The National Development Team for Inclusion ([NDTi](#)), British Association of Supported Employment ([BASE](#)) and [DFN Project SEARCH](#) each supporting a different facet of the programme with the aim of supporting a further 4,500 students with additional needs to access a supported internship by 2025.

As part of the DFN Project SEARCH, Seetec are providing a support offer to local authorities to enable them to establish links and create a network between schools, colleges, employers, council SEND Teams and partner organisations.

Seetec is one of the largest employee-owned public service providers in the UK and Ireland. They offer tailored support and services to individuals and businesses across various sectors, including careers, employability, apprenticeships, and rehabilitation.

This project was completed by Seetec's Research Unit, a small team of researchers within the organisation, they conduct studies to explore people's experiences with education, employability, and justice services. You can learn more about their work on the website. <https://seetec.co.uk/research-homepage/>.

The project aimed to explore the opportunities and barriers faced by high-ability young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) as they seek to find and sustain employment.

Feedback from young people who attended the SEND Employment Forum and Council SEND Teams revealed a significant lack of understanding about the opportunities available in Buckinghamshire for high-functioning, neurodiverse young people, with or without EHCPs. The project aimed to understand the aspirations of these young people, the barriers they faced, and what they needed from employers or providers to gain and sustain employment. The research involved gathering perspectives from both young people and employers.

Despite significant efforts in Buckinghamshire by organisations such as Bucks Business First, the Careers Hub, the Department for Work and Pensions, and Opportunity Bucks, there are still very few Disability Confident employers—less than 1% of all employers in the region. Additionally, there is a lack of awareness about the benefits of a diverse and inclusive workforce.

Supporting more young people with SEND into employment, particularly in sectors facing skill shortages, can have multiple benefits. It can provide financial stability and improve the physical and mental health of these individuals. Moreover, it can positively impact the local community and economy by addressing workforce gaps and fostering a more inclusive society. According to the Centre for Social Justice, a rise of five percentage points in the disability employment rate (not only those with learning disability) would lead to an increase in Gross Domestic Product of £23 billion by 2030.

### **Background to the research.**

The latest figures from the Department for Work and Pensions show the disability inactivity rate was 41.7% in Quarter 3 2024, compared to 14.7% for non-disabled people (DWP, 2025). The employment rate for disabled people with autism at 31% compared to 54.7% for all disabled people – highlighting a significant gap for some neurodiverse people.

Minister for Social Security and Disability, Sir Stephen Timms, said the following in January 2025

'For too long disabled people and those with a neurodiversity condition have been left behind, ignored, and not given the support they need to get into work. 'As part of our Plan for Change, we will turn this around, and with the expertise of these leading academics we will achieve our mission of supporting neurodivergent people into the workplace and reaching our 80% employment rate ambition.' (Department for Work and Pensions, 2025)

This reiterated the UK Government's commitment to supporting people with SEND but also highlights a significant shortfall between the current employment data and the Minister's goal of 80% employment.

Disability Confident, in collaboration with the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, produced a practical guide for managers to recruiting, managing and developing people with a disability or health condition in February 2024. This guide included some key statistics which indicated that there were approximately 9.5 million people of working age with a disability in the UK (Department for Work Pensions, 2024). However, only 5.1 million of them were employed. This represented a significant pool of untapped talent. The guide evidenced that companies that embraced diversity and inclusion benefited from a broader range of experiences and opinions, which made their employees feel valued. This approach enhanced the organisation's reputation with customers, investors, and employees (DWP, 2024).

Organisations that adopted a positive and inclusive approach to managing disability also reaped benefits in terms of increased loyalty and commitment from their employees. It made commercial sense for businesses to have a diverse workforce that reflected their consumer base (DWP, 2024). The DWP's Disability Confident guide also highlighted that

disabled customers and their families had a spending power worth £274 billion per annum.

In October 2024, Buckinghamshire Business First also produced an employer guide focusing on developing a disability inclusive workforce. Throughout the document, alongside information and advice, the benefits to having a diverse workforce were identified. The following infographic taken from their report clearly communicates the broad range of benefits.



(Buckinghamshire Business First, 2024)

## 2. Research questions

Considering the available literature and the current challenges highlighted by existing data, this project aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What existing apprenticeship and employment opportunities are there for high functioning SEND young people with EHCPs in Buckinghamshire?
2. What are the skills gaps or shortages within Buckinghamshire?
3. What are the aspirations of young people with EHCPs in Buckinghamshire mainstream schools?
4. What barriers do these young people face in terms of local employment?
5. What networks exist primarily outside of the council to join up higher ability young people with EHCPs with employment opportunities within Buckinghamshire?
6. Is the Advanced Supported Internship model needed and is it working well?

### 3. Methodology

This research project adopted mixed methodology leaning on both quantitative and qualitative data to answer the research questions identified. Quantitative data was gathered to provide information representative of the identified cohorts whilst qualitative data added insight on experiences, thoughts, and opinions. To achieve this mixed methodology, data was collected in numerous stages utilising varying methods including online questionnaires, focus groups and interviews. All data was analysed thematically.

This research project was conducted between January and March 2025.

Buckinghamshire Council provided data on the number of young people with Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs) enrolled on level 3 courses and their respective institutions. Eight secondary schools had between five and nine students within this cohort, while most schools had fewer than three students meeting this criterion. Bucks College Group had the largest number of level 3 students with EHCPs, totalling 94 students.

To reach and gain views from as many of these young people as possible the eight schools with the largest cohorts were contacted and meetings offered to explain the aims of the research project and to suggest focus groups within school or online to gain students views. Mainstream schools were sent information about the research project and the student questionnaire through Helen Hill the Chair of the Buckinghamshire Schools Careers Lead Forum. Due to the large number of students at Bucks College Group, focus groups were organised at the Amersham and Aylesbury sites as well as the questionnaire being sent to the students via the college email system. Additionally, a focus group was carried out at Rise Space an Alternative Education setting in Aylesbury. 89 students responded to the questionnaire.

Views from employers were received through a questionnaire that was circulated through The Opportunity Bucks Forum, Bucks Business First newsletter, Chamber of Commerce and HWbidco. Employers with apprenticeship vacancies were contacted and sent the questionnaire. It was also posted out through social media by Seetec and Bucks Business First and sent to employers working with Shaw Trust. 13 employers responded to the questionnaire. More detailed information was obtained through meetings with employers, attending job/ careers fairs including The Bucks Skills Show. Advice was

sought from DWP – Disability Confident champion, Buckinghamshire SENDIAS, Shout out about SEND, Talkback, Choices College, Shaw Trust and Buckinghamshire Careers Hub. The questions asked can be found in appendix 1

In addition to young people and employers, other groups of people that were consulted through focus groups and interviews included:

Providers of Supported Internships

DWP – Disability Confident Champion

Parents of Young people with SEND

School Careers Leads

SENDCos in school

Buckinghamshire Careers Hub

SEND colleagues at Buckinghamshire Council

This research followed the ethical guidelines set out in Seetec's Research Unit's code of ethics. The survey included an information sheet in the description and requested informed consent before collecting any information, those who chose not to provide their consent were taken to the end of the survey. Focus group and interview participants were recruited both online and in-person. They were provided information about what the research entailed, the purpose of the research and how their information would be used. Informed consent was gained from all participants. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, where names of organisations or professionals have been included, their consent was gained by the researcher.

## 4. Findings

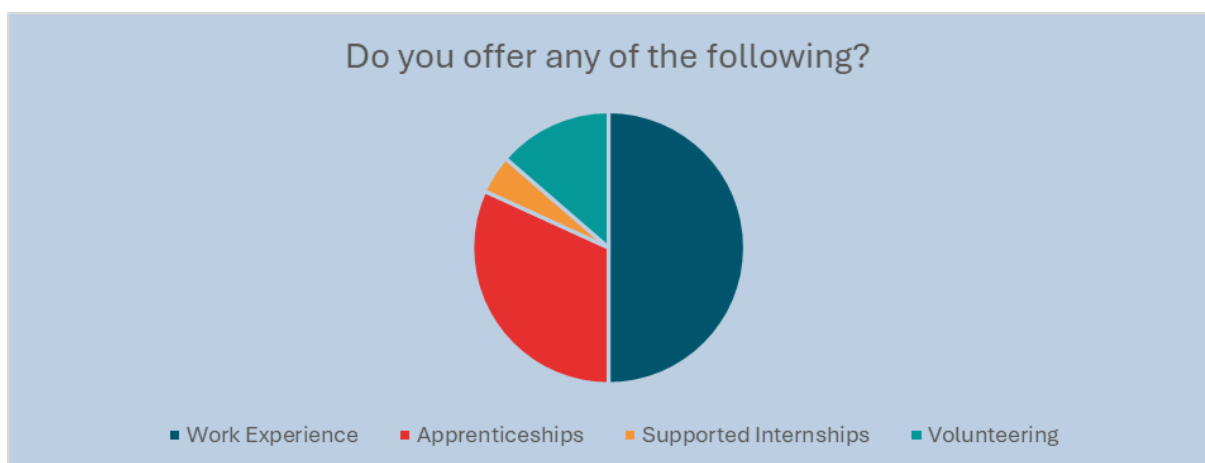
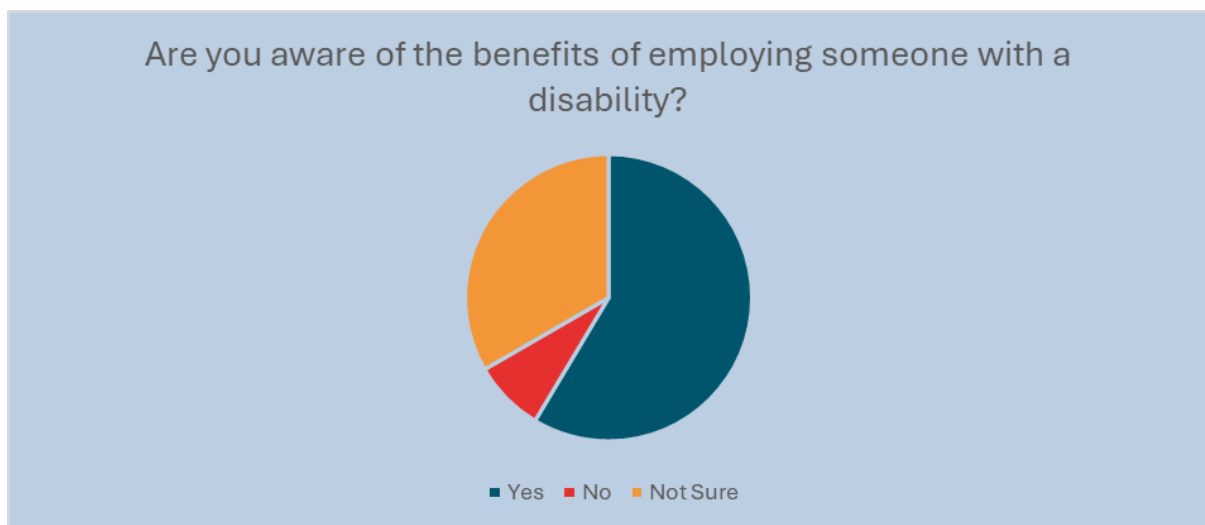
### **Employer survey**

13 employers responded, ranging from micro to 500 employees and sectors included hospitality, construction, town planning, business support, aerospace telecommunications, education, professional services, horticulture, place management, housing.

Of the questionnaire respondents, 58% are Disability Confident Employers, 33% were unsure and 1% are not disability confident.

The fact that a third of employers were unsure if they were Disability Confident Employers suggested a lack of awareness and understanding within businesses regarding the scheme and its benefits. The Disability Confident scheme, developed by employers and representatives of disabled people, aims to encourage employers to think differently about disability and take action to improve how they recruit, retain, and develop disabled people (The Department for Work and Pensions Disability Confident, 2024).

When asked if they were aware of the business benefits of employing someone with a disability, 58% were confident, but still 33% were unsure and 8% were not aware. Which further backs up the need to promote the Disability Confident Scheme more effectively.



The results from this small sample indicated that three-quarters of employers had live vacancies, and the majority of these (67%) were suitable for someone completing a level 3 course. Additionally, 50% of employers offered work experience. However, only 5% of employers offered supported internships, 32% of employers did offer apprenticeship



schemes. As part of this research, the apprenticeship opportunities available for young people locally were examined. A snapshot was taken on 20th February 2025 by searching on Find an Apprenticeship - GOV.UK and filtered for Disability Confident employers and included the following opportunities:

Within 20 miles of Aylesbury - 30 opportunities

Within 10 miles of Aylesbury- 6 opportunities

Within 20 miles from Amersham- 59 opportunities

Within 10 miles from Amersham -13 opportunities

Examples of opportunities

Apprentice Data Analyst- United Living Group (level 4)

Apprentice Quantity Surveyor Degree apprenticeship - United Living Group

Civil Engineering Apprenticeship -Atkins Realis

UK 2025 Field Engineering Apprenticeship (level 3) -Vodafone Ltd – Aylesbury

Pension Administrator apprenticeship (level 3) Barnett Waddingham Actuaries and Consultants

Zenopa Ltd

Finance Degree apprenticeship – level 7

Business Degree Apprenticeship – level 7

This illustrated that there were opportunities for young people, but apprenticeships are competitive especially the higher and degree apprenticeships. The Bucks Skills Show had 120 employers in attendance many had live vacancies.

The Stronger Starts Tesco apprenticeships also became live during the research project which aims to encourage young people into apprenticeships (Tesco, 2025).

Comments from employers captured through the survey

Companies that are growing in the region, offer opportunities for all, including young people and are looking for the opportunity to further improve:

*'As we are a small business looking to expand over the next 4 years it would be good to learn more about what we can do as there is nothing currently in place.'*

There are examples of good practice, for example this business has invested in the Disability Confident Scheme at the highest level and shows what can be done to support people with disabilities in the workplace:

*'We are a Disability Confident Leader - reasonable adjustments, flexible working, assistive technology, flexible working hours and practices, mental health first aid support, wellbeing plans, staff support, access to work adjustments, blind shortlisting etc...'*

One business leader provides an example of inclusive practice and a supportive workplace for all.

*'At onboarding stage, we ask each employee about their preferred way of working, communicating, receiving and giving feedback, and any reasonable adjustments we need to make to accommodate their needs. As the director I check in with each of the team members regularly and am always available to them when they need me. We have a very inclusive team, which is highly important to me as the director and to the business. Our business ethos and values are about making a difference to everyone in society and I only recruit team members who align to these values.'* Helen Pettifer Training Ltd

Some businesses are prioritising their recruitment processes when looking to be more inclusive by putting people first and trying to widen the net:

*'In our recruitment process, we proactively offer accommodations to the candidates scheduled for interviews. Before formal interviews, we schedule informal virtual meetings to understand preferences, alleviate any concerns or anxieties, and provide assistance with travel and directions or other support needed. Additionally, we have conducted an accessibility audit and are in the process of making our workplace more accessible. We will be enhancing our website with additional information to help visitors and guests plan their visit, including visual directions to the office and our floorplans.'*

*'Inclusive wording for advertisement Reasonable adjustments are offered for interview and at work'*

The researcher was encouraged to find that when employers were asked what support they could offer students on level 3 programmes, they could all offer something, the most popular was interview practice (20% could offer this) work experience (15%) and help with CVs (17%)

In addition to the surveys the researcher spoke to employers about their inclusive practices, some of these are included below, including useful insight into employers offering apprenticeships by Anna Morrison the CEO of Amazing Apprenticeships

## **Local companies championing good practice**

### **Stantec**

In conversation with Martin Scragg from Stantec, High Wycombe Office. Stantec are a global leader in sustainable engineering, architecture, and environmental consulting. They employ 30,000 people worldwide.

Martin helped create an Employee Resource Group (ERG) for neurodivergent employees, they started by asking what help was needed. Most common issues were excessive light or noise in work environment, also support with understanding of how different people communicate.

The ERG worked with the talent acquisition group team to look at inclusive recruitment, reviewed how adverts are being written and making suggestions on interview process.

The ERG helped develop an employee passport, where people can articulate what support that they need and how to get the best from every employee in the workplace.

The ERG – aim is to continue the openness about what neurodiversity is and what it isn't. Have a balanced outlook, not shy away from the negatives, but celebrate the positives. Created Inclusive moments in meetings, where time is given in the agenda to talk about a piece of inclusive practice. There have been many awareness events regarding neurodiversity, so everyone can increase their understanding of what it is, which would not have been the case 5 years ago.

There is an internal comms channel on Viva Engage for neurodivergent people to talk and post comments.

EKFB- is a joint venture between four leading civil engineering and construction companies: Eiffage, Kier, Ferrovial Construction and BAM Nuttall. In a conversation with Becky Rowley about their SEND Employability Programme, she explained, this is an opportunity for young people within special and mainstream school to attend a programme for 1.5 hours a week and covered topics such as 'guess my job' mock interviews and reasonable adjustments.

Becky mentioned some SEND young people scored particularly highly on a plant simulator – suggesting a pipeline for future recruitment – no data was available or case studies of progression from the SEND programme into future employment. She acknowledged that the relationships between the school engagement teams, and recruitment could be strengthened to support young people into employment.

Red Helix - Aylesbury based Cybersecurity company. Jo Colley said many of the 'superpowers' that neurodiverse people bring are exactly what is needed for many roles within this industry. In a podcast with Bucks Business First, CEO Marion Stewart talked about a 6-week STEM project for Primary schools. She was keen to focus on schools with high pupil premium numbers, believing that the diversity found in these schools would be most beneficial to her business. Volunteers from Red Helix run this programme which has been very well received by schools. They also welcome students from local secondary schools to a summer placement scheme. Marion talked about the importance of diversity within the workplace for giving customers what they need.

Fairhive, is a not for profit Housing provider with a motto 'Homes for Living, Communities for Life, they are a level 3 ( Expert) Disability Confident Employer - John Wallbank says: "We changed our recruitment processes because of the Disability Confident

scheme, What we do now is that on all of our adverts, we've actually got a recruitment disclaimer that says 'as part of our continued commitment to our workforce accurately reflecting the community, we welcome applicants with a physical or mental disability'. So, we're really out there showing that we actively welcome people with disabilities to apply. And when applicants go through the HR processes, we ask them whether they need any reasonable adjustments during the recruitment process, and they're always accommodated, we commit to offering an interview with an applicant with a disability if they meet 50% of the shortlisting criteria. And that is why I'm so inspired by all the amazing work Talkback achieved. Talkback is an autism and learning disability charity, and they're such a force for good. They believe that everybody with the right support can find employment, and that could be through work experience, doing part-time work, or full-time paid employment (Talkback, 2025). People with learning disabilities and autism offer so many advantages for employers, but above everything else, people with learning disabilities and autism deserve the same opportunities as everybody else (Buckinghamshire Business First, 2024).

### Amazing Apprenticeships

The amazing apprenticeship website is a comprehensive resource for anything Apprenticeships, with live vacancies, resources for schools, including games and webinars. It also has a regular newsletter for parents and professionals. In a conversation with Anna Morrison CBE, Founder of Amazing Apprenticeships she said that there are many opportunities out there, the norm is for young people to move onto level 3 apprenticeships after A levels or equivalent. This should be seen as a progressive step, rather than a sideways move, as learning in the workplace is very different from the classroom. Students can progress to higher level apprenticeships after completing the level 3. She felt that companies were becoming more accommodating of young people with neurodiversity, and cited JP Morgan as an example of this. She encouraged young people along with their parents, carers and teachers to be as open as possible about what support the young person may need, and to communicate this as early as possible in the recruitment process.

At a careers fair, the researcher listened to two Level 2 engineering apprentices discuss their recruitment experiences. They recounted joining their organisation for a week of work experience, during which they had the chance to try various tasks within the business. On the final day, they participated in an interview where they were asked about their experiences during the week and what they had learned from completing the tasks and activities. They both remarked on how beneficial this process was, as it allowed them to understand and learn more about the business and assess if they were a good fit for each other. Additionally, both new recruits had undergone neurodiversity training as part of their initial training to help them recognise and support individuals with neurodiversity.

## Thames Water

We within Thames water have an absolute commitment to ensure that we are as reflective of the community we serve as possible, this is driven by having the most diverse team that we can manage. We have a policy of bringing 'your whole self to work' and provide help within our recruitment policies of looking across that community. We ask questions about people and how they approach diversity at interview, we have board level sponsors for neurological diversity, we have network groups for people with neurological diversity. We have a company passion and commitment to recognise people for who they are and what they bring. We know that the world of tomorrow will require different skills from today and we want to be ready.

Within the Laboratory, we have made various changes to allow people to excel and be their best. These include allowing ear buds that cancel background noise, use of quiet spaces; changes in how we train and recognise that people respond in different ways to training, the use of speech recognition, coloured glasses, mentoring and support. We have given people that commitment that we will support them by:

- linking them in with the various people networks that exist over the Thames Water family but also
- looking for projects/roles and opportunities where their skill base can really help with.
- support team leaders and managers in spotting, talking and good conversational markers to help and assist.

Personal story – It was noticed when I was at school around my unusual approach to spelling, and thanks to a very committed and forward-thinking English teacher, especially for the early 80's spotted my possible dyslexia, this was confirmed by an educational Psychologist and I went through training and have lived with this all my life, experiencing social stigma and negative comments and connotations but I worked on coping & checking mechanisms that allowed me to thrive within my role, using the skill set that this to my mind advantage gave me in a science / laboratory environment. The use of communication skills, the way of thinking and seeing the world, the ability to see visually but importantly, using the skill of people around me and being managed by me to supplement me, to be used as trusted people for advice and help. Also, as the landscape of acceptance of these issues, of understanding but also more people coming forward, being open has so helped. I have also used this experience to provide empathy, mentoring and support to those around me, and to act, to encourage and to promote. The end story sits that I am head of analytical services for the largest water and waste company in the country, I report to a director of the board, I manage well over 150 scientists, sit on three government committees, various scientific advisory areas and seen as an international expert in metals analysis and radiochemistry analysis. And I am still as dyslexic as I was at 13!

## Student Survey

In total 89 responses were received through the questionnaire; not all questions were answered by all respondents. Students from 7 different secondary schools completed the survey; The Misbourne, Sir William Ramsay, Aylesbury High School, Aylesbury UTC, Amersham School, Chiltern Hills Academy, St Michael's Catholic School. 2 Alternative Providers; Rise Space & New Meaning and Bucks College Group (all 3 campuses)

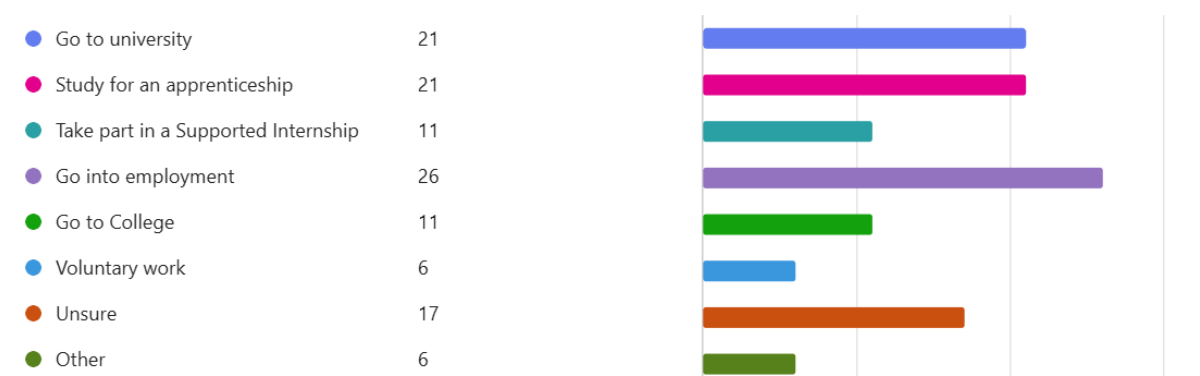
28% of students surveyed were in year 12, 28% year 13 and 43% in year 14, or year 1, 2 or 3 of college. 94% of students had an Education Health and Care Plan. Slightly more women completed the survey than men 49% to 43 % split with 5% non-binary.

Students career aspirations are shown below:

Sector	Number of students
Health and Education	10
Protective Services	2
Game/film/creative	12
Art/creative	10
Sport	6
Trade	7
Business/law/finance	5
Retail	7
Music/theatre	3
Technology	4
Customer Service	6

Although the target for the research was level 3 students, just under half of students were also studying GCSEs with their level 3 programmes or were on lower-level courses.

## When asked about their next steps after their current course



22% were looking to progress into employment, 18% apprenticeships, 18% university, 14% were unsure, 9 % college, 9% supported internships, 5% voluntary work and 5% other.

When asked if they had applied for their next step, 49% had and 51% had not yet applied. The reasons students had not yet applied fell into 5 main categories which are listed below with some of the students' comments:

1. It was too early to apply as they were on year 1 of a 2- or 3-year course.
2. Not enough information and advice about the next steps.
3. A belief that they had to wait until they had their results to apply.
4. Their additional needs were holding them back from applying.
5. A perceived lack of opportunities, especially for people with additional needs.

Comments from young people on why they had not applied included:

The comments from young people in some ways contradicted the findings in the report. In the initial section, employers highlighted their inclusive practices, and the researcher noted several vacancies. The Buck's Skills Show was also well-attended by employers offering apprenticeships and other job opportunities and yet young people were not identifying these opportunities, suggesting a disconnect.

*'There is nothing to apply for, and anyway they wouldn't take me.'*

*'Job availability is limited, and my skills aren't up to standard just yet.'*

*'Workplaces seem deterred when they find out I need additional support.'*

However, it is evident that more opportunities are needed for employers and young people to engage directly. Such interactions would help bridge the gap in understanding their respective viewpoints and facilitate the integration of more young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) into the workforce.

Many of the young people surveyed expressed concerns about the insufficient availability of careers information, advice, and guidance. This lack of support resulted in uncertainty, confusion, and, in some instances, an inability to progress in their career paths. Additionally, there was a common misconception among the respondents that applications for future opportunities could only be submitted after receiving their results, which is not accurate. See comments below:

*'Not enough clear direction, no support network, Unsure on results and what to do next.'*

*'No one has talked to me about what my options are or how to do any of it.'*

*'I am still sorting my CV.'*

*'Because I have not explored enough options yet and it is only my first year of my Level 3 College course.'*

*'Because I am unsure on what to do after college.'*

*'I am unsure of what I would like to do.'*

*'I'm unsure of my best options and choices.'*

*'I want to understand which is the best option when I know what I want to do.'*

*'I need to finish my A levels.'*

*'Waiting till I am 18 for more job opportunities plus still doing maths GCSE.'*

*'I need to get my Maths and English results first. I don't have the required GCSE level.'*

The final barrier identified by young people was the concern that their disabilities would hinder their progress into employment. While the researcher noted some examples of good practices from employers, it was evident that there is still a significant journey ahead in terms of employers becoming more Disability aware.

*'I'm not good with talking to people I don't know.'*

*'Health Issues.'*

*'ASD'*

*'My additional needs.'*



These findings highlight the importance of continued efforts to raise awareness and implement inclusive practices to ensure that young people with disabilities have equal opportunities to succeed in the workforce.

When asked if they had enough information about options after their level 3 course

58% said yes, 26% responded no and 16% were unsure

When respondents were asked what information was missing to enable them to make decisions about next steps, 26 responses were received, most indicated that they were not sure what the options were and how and when to apply. Some asked for information about SEND employment opportunities.

**Student comments included:**

*'Still working out what is accessible for me'*

*'I need help with where to look and writing cover letters'*

*'I don't even know where to start looking'*

*'Where to apply How to apply'*

*'Need more help and info about employers who are local and employ SEND'*

**Careers Guidance within school and College**

43% of respondents had received a careers interview in school/college, 48% had not and 9% were unsure if they had received this service.

When asked to rate the effectiveness of the careers interview session the greatest percentage of students, 46% gave it the highest rating of 5, 17% gave a rating of 4, 29% rated the interview a 3 and very few rated lower.

This showed that for students who had access to a careers interview, the vast majority found it to be a positive experience that supported them in moving forward with their next steps. But there is a lack of consistency in provision of careers guidance interviews with more than half of the young people missing out on accessing this vital service.

When asked what other activities have prepared you for next steps, the following were listed:

Career fair – Bucks Skills Show was mentioned

Workshop/talks

Work experience

Voluntary work

Drama club

Young enterprise

## Transition meeting

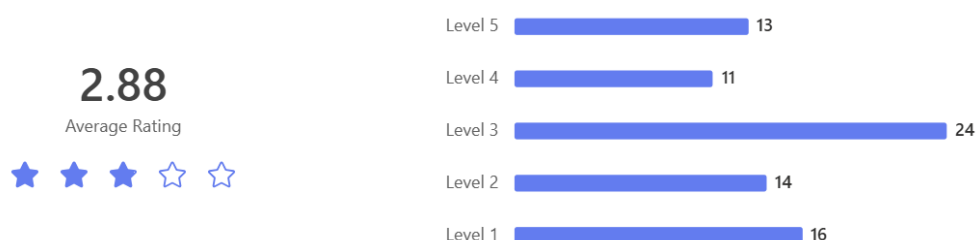
When asked about their experience of the workplace, the following activities were mentioned

% of respondents	Activity
23	At least 1 week work experience
8	Visit to employers
10	Industry days in school
14	Career fairs
3	Virtual work experience
12	Paid employment
18	Voluntary work
10	No experience
3	Other

The researcher was encouraged to see that the majority of students had some contact with employers. The Bucks Skills Show was highlighted as a good opportunity. Work experience was accessed by 26% of the students surveyed, 18% had volunteered, and 12% had managed to gain paid employment.

When asked to rate their knowledge of local employers

The rating was 2.88 out of 5, showing some awareness if the local labour market and job opportunities but also showed a need for more LMI to be provided to students. The Gatsby benchmarks, a renowned benchmark for outlining good careers practices, supports this agenda (Gatsby Benchmarks, 2024).



66% of participants had attempted to gain work experience or a paid job. The highest success rates were observed when assistance and support were provided to find and

maintain the work placement, with an understanding of the individual's needs, including reasonable adjustments. Some students noted that employers were hesitant to hire individuals with additional needs, and that the available jobs were not suitable for those with autism or mental health conditions.

Students' comments included:

*'Unable to find employment but have undergone a week's work experience'*

*'Yes- it was slightly difficult as most places want adults or previous work experience'*

*'It was successful when I did it with my dad and when I did it with my college because they both understood my needs'*

*'It took a very long time, and jobs were often inappropriate for mental health and autism.'*

*'I do work experience for a charity shop in Chesham it was successful.'*

*'I faced an issue with finding the right thing and am still currently searching but will probably have to settle with doing something I don't want to do for a little while.'*

*'I got an industry placement with an employer that visited one of my classes to promote their business to us.'*

*'No one wants to employ ASD people.'*

*'No as soon as they realise, I need extra support, they seem to change their mind.'*

*'I did an online virtual work experience with Wellcome Sanger.'*

*'It is very difficult if you have additional needs. I was offered a position because my sister worked there and I was offered a trial, they adapted the role to suit my needs.'*

When asked what help they would need to access employment opportunities,

It was clear that more information about local employment opportunities was needed, along with support and guidance to navigate these opportunities. Practical suggestions included providing a list of vacancies, facilitating introductions to employers through the college, offering interview support, and assigning a job mentor to provide ongoing assistance. There was also a clear need from the students for employers to take the time to understand their particular needs and make reasonable adjustments. Additionally, there was a perception that there was a lack of opportunities, especially for people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

**Student comments included:**

*'I need someone to supervise me, guide me, remind me of where I am in the task, help me read complicated documents or instructions, give clear instructions in chunks, support, tell me in a kind way if I am not getting something right, be honest and upfront, keep to a schedule, let me know early as soon as possible if a change is coming.'*

*'Continued support with my disabilities and managing them also support for employers to understand disabilities better'*

*'Understanding. Social breaks. Regularity and routine.'*

*'Support and hope someone knows what I need and understands'*

*'Knowing where to look. It is not easy when you have an additional need, and you are up against candidates without any needs. '*

*'A job mentor to help me navigate everything that has to be done, and where I can find opportunities and someone to support me in a job interview'*

*'The opportunity to undertake some basic work experience in a variety of workplaces, so that people can get to know me.'*

## **Focus Groups**

Focus groups were carried out at Amersham and Aylesbury Campuses of Bucks College Groups and Rise Space Alternative Education Provider. These gave an opportunity to talk more in depth about experiences of young people. Their stories echoed some of the feedback gained from the questionnaires in terms of the lack of holistic careers advice, lack of knowledge about next steps, experience of negative and counterproductive practice in the workplace. Despite these challenges, an underlying sense of optimism was evident among the participants. They believed that with appropriate support and understanding from employers, coupled with a robust support network, employment could become a realistic and achievable goal.

Student A: shared her experience of attending a Grammar School where the careers programme was heavily focused on progression from GCSEs to A-levels and then to university, with little mention of alternative routes. She discovered Rise Space through a careers event and now enjoys a varied curriculum that includes travel training, physical activity, online learning, art therapy, and gaining independent skills such as self-management and trauma support. Initially aspiring to a career in genetic research, her Functional Neurological Disorder made the practical aspects of this work unsafe.

Currently, Student A works as a Teaching Assistant (TA) on Fridays at Rise Space. This role suits her well as she has built strong relationships with the staff, who understand and support her needs. Although she is paid for this work, she feels supported and knows that if any issues arise, her colleagues are understanding. In contrast, during a previous work experience at a different company, she did not feel safe or supported enough to tic, whereas at Rise Space, she can tic without any problems.

Student A also highlighted the importance of having a role model at Rise Space, a staff member with ADHD, who successfully manages her role. This representation is crucial for Student A. She explained that while she can appear neurotypical, this requires a lot of masking, which is exhausting. She expressed reluctance to disclose her disability during job interviews due to the competitive nature of the job market. She fears that if she masks during the interview, employers will expect her to maintain that perfect, eloquent persona at all times, which is not sustainable for her.

Student B: disengaged from school due to mental health issues and spent some time in hospital and a special school for her GCSEs. She then attended a mainstream college, which was not the right environment for her, followed by online education before finding Rise Space. She is currently on an A-level programme and aspires to careers in social work and personal training.

Student B has experienced several work environments:

Kitchen: The noisy and trauma-inducing environment was not appropriate for her.

Nursing Home (Activities Coordinator): She enjoyed this work but had to leave due to mental health issues. She hopes to return as a volunteer, where there would be less pressure.

TA in SEND School: Colleagues misinterpreted her need for quiet time during breaks as rudeness, creating a negative atmosphere. She found it exhausting to mask her behaviours to fit in.

Oxfam (Voluntary Work): This environment was very supportive and inclusive, accommodating people with various abilities and disabilities, including severe autism, down syndrome, and severe anxiety.

Self-employed Personal Trainer: She qualified online and now works as a personal trainer.

Student B's feedback included:

- Voluntary work is much more accessible than paid work.
- The importance of family support and other support networks, with advocates to speak on her behalf when necessary.
- Autism and ADHD are invisible disabilities that can be masked, but this is not sustainable and is exhausting.
- Employers need to understand the mental health issues associated with neurodiversity.

Student C: recounted her experience working in retail at a high street shop. Despite the employer being aware of her disability and the need for reasonable adjustments, these accommodations were often overlooked during busy periods. When Student C requested a change to her working hours to fit her new college timetable, her request was denied. In contrast, a colleague of similar age without a disability was granted the same change. This disparity led Student C to leave the workplace, convinced that her disability was the reason for the rejection and that the employer was seeking an excuse to let her go.

As part of the research, questionnaires were sent to Careers Leads and SENDCos within Buckinghamshire Schools. Although fewer than ten responses were received, those who did respond demonstrated a good understanding of their students and had comprehensive careers programmes. Some schools utilized a careers platform to support students and included life skills and interventions from SENDCos and specialist staff to supplement their offer.

When asked what help students would need to access employment opportunities, two schools mentioned the need for more one-to-one careers interviews, taster days, and work experience. They also suggested having a familiar person from industry who visits the school and then offers a visit to their workplace, a list of suitable/prepared employers, and interview practice.

A questionnaire was sent to parents through FACT Bucks, unfortunately only 3 parents responded. When asked what was preventing their young person from applying for their next step they responded:

*Unsure and anxious of next steps and to what extent they can work without detriment to health and wellbeing Need to get further with current course. Need some safe work experience to build confidence and work out support needs - but local authority gave refused to fund Local Authority supported internships very restricted in employment sectors covered - focus on academic catch up and peer group /group activities does not meet needs- individual approach required*

*He doesn't know where to find out about jobs with his skill level and struggles with his ASD to make contact with employers*

*Our LA being useless and having NO OPTIONS for post 18 with an EHCP!*

## 5 Discussion and Recommendations

### **1. What existing apprenticeship and employment opportunities are there for high functioning SEND young people with EHCPs in Buckinghamshire?**

Through the questionnaire and talking to employers at careers events, together with searching for live vacancies including disability confident companies. There are numerous opportunities available. Further research would be needed to explore how competitive these are and whether the recruitment methods used are inclusive and give young neurodiverse people a fair chance of success.

### **2. What are the skills gaps /shortages within Buckinghamshire?**

The Buckinghamshire Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) August 2023 examined this in depth. A key feature of the Buckinghamshire economy is the dominance of small businesses. 42% of all employees working in Buckinghamshire work for companies employing fewer than 50 people, compared to 32% nationally. In addition, self-employment levels in Buckinghamshire are higher than average. Self-employment is particularly common within construction and film and TV, two of Buckinghamshire's key sectors.

A skills mismatch – data from the 2019 national Employer Skills Survey suggested that there is a greater mismatch between the type of skills sought by local employers and the skills held and jobs sought by local residents than elsewhere in the country.

The LSIP focused on the construction, digital, engineering, film and TV and health and social care sectors, given their growth and employment potential. All of the sectors are experiencing significant recruitment problems and are suffering from applicants lacking work readiness and digital literacy.

### **3. What are the aspirations of young people with EHCP in Buckinghamshire mainstream schools?**

Looking at the career aspiration of the young people surveyed, the highest number of young people wanted to go into the creative industries, film, gaming, digital media and art & design, health & social care and trades which align very closely with the skill shortage areas illustrated below.

## Sectors



Many neurodiverse young people have the skills and attributes needed to excel in areas with skill shortages. Providing information about these sectors and the opportunities within them from a young age can help create a pipeline to these companies.

A model where employers build relationships with these young people over time—starting in the school setting and progressing to the workplace—can be highly effective. This approach can lead to work experience opportunities, apprenticeships, or supported internships. Gradually building relationships between the young person and the employer will yield the most positive outcomes.

#### **4. What networks exists primarily outside of the council to join up higher ability young people EHCP's with employment opportunities within Buckinghamshire?**

Young people often rely on their schools, colleges, and families for careers support and work experience opportunities. There is a statutory duty for schools and colleges to provide independent careers advice (Gatsby Benchmarks, 2024). This includes encounters with employers, technical and vocational education providers, and careers within the curriculum. A wealth of information is available for young people through the Buckinghamshire Skills Hub, which hosted events such as the Bucks Skills Show and Confident Futures Show. Buckinghamshire Business First served as the primary support for local businesses, and their publication, "Developing a Disability Inclusive Workforce - An Employer Guide," provided a comprehensive resource for employers. Additionally, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), through the Disability Confident Scheme and the forums chaired by Ben Stykuc, offered invaluable support.

#### **5. Is the Advanced Supported Internship model needed and is it working well?**



The researcher engaged with Shaw Trust, which provided a supported internship for level 3 students. The previous year marked the inaugural run of the programme, and this was reflected in the low number of participants due to the short lead-in time. However, this year, they anticipated a full cohort, and recruitment efforts as of February 2025 were progressing well.

## **6. What barriers do these YP face in terms of local employment?**

Many young people are inadequately prepared for the transition to next steps, lacking information on different options, other than traditional academic routes. They have some knowledge of the local labour market but require support with applying for jobs including writing a CV and preparing for interview.

Young people's experience of finding, securing and sustaining work is greatly enhanced by having a good support network and having an educated employer who values what diversity can bring to their workplace.

Their perception and or experience is that they will need to mask their disability to at the very least give them a chance of success.

Within the workplace, although there is some good practice happening and a willingness from employers to do better. In reality, due to business pressures, employees with additional needs are not catered for and end up overwhelmed and often leave employment due to mental health issues.

There appears to be a lack of understanding from employers about the mental health needs of young people with disabilities.

Parents and young people expressed a frustration in the lack of post 18 options within the county, one parent talking about the lack of variety of supported internships at a higher level

On the positive, young people with support from family, professionals and education settings seem to do well and have had positive experiences of the workplace. It is where this support is not available that young people are being left confused and without options.

An Employment and Training Support Passport is a document that can be used in a workplace or training setting to enable a young person to share information about themselves. This document was developed by Buckinghamshire Council with input from the SEND Employment Forum and is available on their preparing for adulthood website (Buckinghamshire Council, 2025)

This could include information like:

1. strengths, skills and experience
2. passions, hobbies and interests
3. diagnosis, disability or health condition
4. information to help people understand them better
5. a personal emergency plan
6. any reasonable adjustments

During the research, the following came to the researcher's attention. The week of the 17<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> March 2025 was Neurodiversity Celebration Week. Neurodiversity Celebration week is a worldwide initiative that challenges stereotypes and misconceptions about neurological differences (Neurodiversity Week, 2025). It aims to transform how neurodivergent individuals are perceived and supported by providing schools, universities, organisations, and others around the world with the opportunity to recognise the many skills and talents of neurodivergent individuals, while creating more inclusive and equitable cultures that celebrate differences and empower every individual (Lexxic, 2025).

## Recommendations

The results of this research will inform the design and implementation of programs to better prepare young people for the transition to employment. The research project was limited by the available time (three months). With more time, it would have been beneficial to reach out to more employers and interview additional young people who have successfully been recruited. Exploring what makes this journey successful for both young people and employers would be valuable. This research focused on students currently enrolled in level 3 programs. The following recommendations are suggested:

- Earlier and multiple opportunities for students to have a careers meeting from a professionally trained careers adviser.
- All young people to attend the Bucks Skills Show and/or Confident Futures Show with preparation for students beforehand to achieve maximum impact.
- Employers should offer sustained support to individual students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) within mainstream schools. This support should start within the school to build relationships, then gradually extend to short

periods in the workplace. Over time, this can lead to work experience opportunities, ultimately progressing to apprenticeships or supported internships.

- More employers to offer informal, work experience style recruitment practices rather than the traditional interview.
- For all young people to have an Employment Passport that details what strengths they have and what support they need.
- Information about opportunities in skill shortage areas and the pathways into these careers should be made available to young people starting from primary school and continuing throughout secondary school.
- More information about the employment/apprenticeship opportunities available for young people
- Greater range of options discussed in mainstream schools for SEND young people including alternative education and Supported Internships.
- Webinars/events/podcasts for employers to share good practice in inclusive employment.
- Share more widely the comprehensive resources on inclusive recruitment such as Buckinghamshire Business First's employer guide on developing a disability inclusive workforce (Buckinghamshire Business First, 2024).

## References:

Buckinghamshire Business First (2024) *Developing a Disability Inclusive Workforce - an employer guide*. Available at: <https://bbf.uk.com/news/developing-a-disability-inclusive-workforce-an-employer-guide> (Accessed: March 2025)

Buckinghamshire Council (2025) *Preparing for Adulthood Employment and Training Support Passport*. Available at: <https://www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/schools-and-learning/bucks-sendias-service/preparing-for-adulthood/> (Accessed: April 2025)

Department for Work and Pensions (2024) *Recruiting, managing and developing people with a disability or health condition*. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/675affa5f16811211aaa80e5/recruiting\\_managing\\_and\\_developing\\_disabled\\_people\\_practical\\_guide\\_for\\_managers\\_print\\_ready\\_pdf.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/675affa5f16811211aaa80e5/recruiting_managing_and_developing_disabled_people_practical_guide_for_managers_print_ready_pdf.pdf) (Accessed: March 2025)

Department for Work and Pensions (2025) *Employment prospects for neurodiverse people set to be boosted with launch of new expert panel*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/employment-prospects-for-neurodiverse-people-set-to-be-boosted-with-launch-of-new-expert-panel> (Accessed: March 2025).

DFN Charitable Foundation (2025) *Employability*. Available at: <https://dfnfoundation.org/employability.html> (Accessed: March 2025).

Gatsby Benchmarks (2024) *Understanding the updated Gatsby Benchmarks for 2024 and beyond*. Available at: <https://www.gatsbybenchmarks.org.uk/updated-benchmarks/> (Accessed: April 2025)

Lexxic (2025) *Neurodiversity Resources*. Available at: <https://lexxic.com/resources> (Accessed: April 2025)

Neurodiversity Week (2025) *Introduction*. Available at: <https://www.neurodiversityweek.com/introduction> (Accessed: April 2025)

Talkback (2025) *Our autism and learning disability services*. Available at: <https://talkback-uk.com/> (Accessed: April 2025)

Tesco (2025) *Stronger Starts Retail Tesco Apprenticeships and Graduates*. Available at: <https://www.tesco.com/careers/en-GB/our-teams/early-careers/apprenticeships> (Accessed: April 2025)

## Useful resources

[Special Educational Needs and Disabilities | Career Seeker Type | Buckinghamshire Skills Hub](#)

[Bucks SENDIAS service | Buckinghamshire Council](#)

[Home - Buckinghamshire Business First](#)

[Disability Confident employer scheme - GOV.UK](#)

[Developing a Disability Inclusive Workforce - an employer guide - Buckinghamshire Business First](#)

[Home - Business Disability Forum](#)

[Choices Magazine – March Parent & Carers Guide - Amazing Apprenticeships](#)

[Meet the Employer - Amazing Apprenticeships](#)

[Top autism tips: employment - recruitment and interviews](#)

[Movement to Work](#)

## Appendix 1

### Questionnaire for young people

Purpose: to establish

1. What their aspirations are short term and long term
2. How much information they have about their options and their careers ideas.
3. What knowledge they have about local employers and opportunities such as apprenticeships and supported internships
4. What barriers have they faced in looking for employment?
5. What support/help do they need to be able to access employment or other provision?
6. What preparation they had received for transition to next steps
7. Whether they had received professional careers guidance

### Questionnaire for Parents

Purpose: to establish

1. What they feel are the barriers preventing their son/daughter entering employment.
2. What knowledge they have of local suitable employment opportunities
3. What support their son/daughter has received in realizing their career aspirations?
4. What they feel they need to support their son/daughter into employment
5. What support they feel their son/daughter needs?

### Questionnaire for Employers

Purpose: to establish:

1. What sector they are in and roles that they have
2. If they have any live vacancies
3. Have they had sight of the Developing a Disability Inclusive workforce Guide?
4. Are they aware of the value of employing a person with a disability?
5. What support would they need to take on a young person with SEND?

### Questionnaire for Careers Leads/SEND COs

Purpose: to establish:

What young people with SEND in mainstream schools are made aware of opportunities such as supported internships and apprenticeships. What additional support do they need to access employment opportunities.

