DFN Project SEARCH

Impact Report 2024-2025

Unlocking Talent. Enabling Careers.



Since launching Project SEARCH supported internships in the UK, we have supported 4,049 interns into employment. This impact report presents an overview of our impact and outcomes between September 2024 and August 2025.

Who we are

We're a national charity dedicated to unlocking talent and enabling careers for young people aged 16-24 with a learning disability, who are autistic, or both. In partnership with more than 200 organisations across the UK, we bring together employers, education provisions, local authorities and supported employment providers to deliver our supported internship programme of structured work-based study.

Our vision

To ensure that every young person with a learning disability and/or who is autistic has the opportunity to transition from education into a career of meaningful paid employment.

Our ambition

Our ambition is to support **10,000** young people with a learning disability, who are autistic, or both, into meaningful paid employment by 2030.

Our need

Only 6% of people with learning disabilities in England are in employment, and almost one million young people aged 16-24 across the UK are not in education, employment or training (NEET). Alarmingly, young people with special educational needs or disabilities are also around 80% more likely to become NEET.

Economic inactivity, recruitment freezes and rising costs for employers have limited employment prospects for young people. Young people with a learning disability and/or who are autistic face additional, disproportionate barriers to finding and sustaining work. We believe that every young person with a learning disability and/or who is autistic who wants to work should have a clear, supported pathway into meaningful employment.



Sayful's story

"I used to find so many things really difficult because of my disabilities. This programme has changed my life."



Sayful joined the DFN Project SEARCH supported internship programme at Asda Oldbury after attending The Westminster School. Sayful quickly realised he enjoyed being outdoors and wanted to pursue a career in portering. Despite the physical challenges caused by his disabilities, Sayful showed incredible determination and resilience. He developed his strength, confidence and skills through a range of job rotations, including portering, working in the petrol station, front-end duties and customer service.

"My strength and stamina have increased massively."

Sayful never gave up on his dream of working and being independent.
He began by pushing two trolleys at a time and gradually took on more responsibility, earning praise from his mentors as "the fastest porter in town". After graduating in June 2025, Sayful secured a permanent contract with Asda Oldbury and celebrated his first pay packet by treating his family to a meal.

"I can't thank Asda, The Westminster school, and everyone involved enough for giving me my independence."

A message from our Chair and CEO

This report covers a year of real progress as DFN Project SEARCH saw **1,252 young people** complete a supported internship, and a second consecutive academic year of **500+ interns** moving into paid employment at or above the National Living Wage. We are extremely proud of the fact that since launching Project SEARCH supported internships in the UK, 4,049 interns have gone into employment.

Behind these numbers is a powerful model built on collaboration. We are delighted to now be working nationally with more than **650 community-based partners,** including 240 host businesses, 158 education partners and 96 local authorities.

As an organisation whose work is driven by the sole desire to improve the life outcomes of the young people we support, we are always taking a 'test and learn' approach. As such, we commissioned a randomised controlled trial of our model, funded by the Youth Futures Foundation, where we expect to evidence our social and economic return. This is coupled with a continued commitment to have the lived experience of our Youth Advisory Group and new Shadow Board at the core of how we govern ourselves.

Our national influence also continues to grow. The extension to the Internships Work contract marked the UK Government's continued investment in supported internships. Our first Youth Parliament in Westminster brought more than 60 interns face to face with Ministers and other senior policymakers.

Alongside this, our involvement in the consultation on the Timms review and the Milburn review positions DFN Project SEARCH as an increasingly trusted voice in the sector.

Despite all our success we know that significant barriers remain. Almost one million 16 to 24-year-olds across the UK are classified as NEET and, importantly, young people with special educational needs or disabilities are around 80% more likely to be among them. Prevention is better than the cure - early support for young adults with a learning disability to transition from school to work will prevent them from falling through the cracks, reducing negative experiences for young adults and their families. Raising awareness of the potential life impact of supported internships among parents, carers and young people themselves is a priority for the year ahead and beyond.

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank Kirsty Matthews, who recently stepped down as CEO of DFN Project SEARCH. We are incredibly grateful to Kirsty for her leadership and for all her contributions during her tenure as CEO.

We'd like thank our team, trustees, partners and funders, whose continued and dedicated commitment makes our work possible. We are confident in the direction we are heading and remain committed to ensuring that our young people can achieve the life opportunities that they deserve – employment should be an expectation not an exception.

Mark Hudson, Chair of Board of Trustees and
Amy Mitchell, Interim CEO

From DFN Project SEARCH supported internship to employment

How we've created pathways from education into meaningful employment for our young people

We're proud to have supported **1,252** interns through our supported internship programme during the academic year 2024-2025. This also marks the second consecutive year that we have supported over **500** interns into employment at the National Living Wage.

We serve young people who

- Are aged 16-24
- Have an education, health and care plan (EHCP) or equivalent
- Have a learning disability and/or who are autistic
- Want to move into paid employment but would benefit from extra support

Our model of support

Collaboration sits at the heart of our supported internship model. We bring together host businesses, education providers, local authorities and supported employment providers to provide up to 800 hours of structured on-the-job learning with support from teachers, job coaches, managers, and mentors, creating pathways into meaningful paid work for the young people we serve.

Our reach

In collaboration with our partners, we successfully coordinated **180** programmes in 2024-2025 across England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, with **89% (1,115)** of our interns completing their supported internship.

We work nationally, with local impact

With national reach, we've created change where it matters most by working with more than **650** dedicated community-based partners to establish supported internships in priority areas.

This includes:

56 Supported Employment Providers

158 Education Partners

240 Host Businesses

55 Externship Host Sites

96 Local Authorities

46 Advocacy Groups or Other





Strengthening our programmes through training and support

We delivered **18 hours** of training across **four** inset days to train and upskill our programme partners. More than **350** of our programme delivery partners attended our conference, *Don't Stop Me Now*, in November 2024. Held at Leicester Tigers and sponsored by Youth Futures Foundation, we welcomed Barry Fletcher, CEO of Youth Futures Foundation, who delivered an inspiring opening address. We also proudly watched some of our interns deliver powerful sessions, sharing their voices and lived experiences.

"Another great inset day, with relevant and timely topics."

How we're responding to the employment landscape

Responding to the demand for inclusive pathways into meaningful employment for our beneficiaries is crucial. That's why we've formed strategic partnerships with major employers like **Amazon** and **Asda** – in addition to our long-standing partnership with the **NHS** –, combining our expertise with their national reach to support more young people through supported internships. These partnerships are an essential part of our ambition; they have enabled us to scale our programme delivery within established workplaces, so the young people we serve can access the employment opportunities they deserve.



Beyond 2024-2025: What we did next

We have taken action. To counter the challenging employment landscape for our young people, we undertook a **feasibility study in 2024-2025**. This identified the most robust approach for evaluating and evidencing our supported internship model, leading us to launch a randomised control trial (RCT) funded by Youth Futures Foundation in 2026-2027. We want to know what works and where improvements are needed, so we can continue to respond to the specific challenges and needs of our young people.





Sam's story

"I have developed my employability skills and can now do things I definitely couldn't have done before."



Sam completed his supported internship at University Hospitals of Derby and Burton, graduating in June 2025.

Having initially felt nervous about meeting new people and finding the right placement, Sam grew in confidence through a range of experiences, including working in Back of House Catering and as a Library Assistant. He particularly enjoyed his time in the library, where he built relationships with colleagues and gained the confidence to serve library users independently.

The internship also helped Sam become more independent in his personal life, from managing his schedule and budgeting money to meeting new people, joining a table tennis club and exploring learning to drive. Since graduating, Sam has secured an apprenticeship and is looking forward to developing his career and one day becoming a mentor himself.

"My favourite moment was being offered my apprenticeship!"

Influencing policy and public affairs

Shaping policy for lasting change

Our policy and public affairs work turns insight and lived experience into lasting change. We engage with policy decision-makers to influence policies that ensure better provision of supported internships for the young people we serve - and dispel the misconceptions that create barriers to employment.

More than **60 interns** took part in Youth Parliament

£9m in Government investment

Internships Work

Through coordinated parliamentary engagement and ongoing dialogue with ministers and officials, we helped secure a one-year extension to the Internships Work contract, which was completed in 2025-2026. Why did this matter? In putting supported internships firmly on the policy agenda, this represented the UK Government's first dedicated investment in, and formal recognition of, supported internships. The programme also delivered significant benefits across the wider supported internships sector.

National Supported Internship Day (NSID)

Youth Parliament: Young voices at the heart of change

National Supported Internship Day raises awareness of the impact of supported internships as a pathway to employment. As founders of this nationally recognised campaign, we held our first Youth Parliament in Westminster. More than **60** interns with a learning disability and/or who are autistic were brought together with politicians and policymakers to advocate for the benefits of inclusive employment and have their voices heard.

Light Up Campaign: Shining a light on inclusion

Across the UK, businesses and local authorities lit up landmarks in orange to symbolise a brighter future for inclusive employment. Participating landmarks included: London's Tower 42, Cardiff Castle, Tower of Light in Manchester, Bradford City Hall, St John's Beacon in Liverpool.

Business Roundtable: Championing inclusion

We brought together business leaders from organisations such as Amazon, BAE Systems, Compass Group, Goldman Sachs and the Youth Futures Foundation to explore how employment opportunities for young people with a learning disability and/or who are autistic could be expanded.

Our campaigning secured **£9 million** in government investment to continue the Internships Work pilot, helping to make supported internships more accessible to young people without Education, Health and Care Plans. We also strengthened political understanding and support for supported internships by creating opportunities for MPs to meet interns, employers and delivery partners.





Meadow's story

"Doing a supported internship has changed my life."



Before joining the supported internship at Amazon, Meadow was studying childcare at Darlington College. While she enjoyed the course, she knew she wanted a career that would involve more communication with adults. When her college shared opportunities for supported internships at Amazon, Meadow saw it as a chance to develop new skills and gain experience of the workplace.

Meadow says the experience helped her build confidence and become a better communicator, while giving her the support she needed to manage her anxiety around meeting new people and settle into working life. She has since become a permanent member of the Amazon team and an ambassador for supported internships at Darlington College, where she now gives presentations and shares her experience with others.

"I love getting to know the different sides of people. I also love learning, and knew that doing a supported internship at Amazon would give me lots of support whilst I figured out what it means to be a professional."

Advocacy and engagement

Championing change through authentic youth voice

Our advocacy and engagement work places the lived experiences and aspirations of our interns and their families at the heart of everything we do.

We ensure the voices of our interns, graduates and parents/carers shape what we do, and we adapt our work in direct response to their lived experiences, needs and views. Through co-production with our interns, we strengthen impact. And we use authentic advocacy to influence policy and public understanding.

11 YAG members

121 Graduate Network members

Youth Advisory Group (YAG)

"One of my major highlights from the YAG is how it has helped me come out of my shell. I've interviewed people, I've met YAG members in person which I never thought I'd do. I also took a train without my parents for the first time to attend the Liverpool Away Day. It's been an amazing journey."

- Tom, YAG member

We welcomed **11 young interns** from supported internships across the UK to our Youth Advisory Group. They brought their own lived experiences to inform key areas of organisational development and advocacy. Through monthly online meetings and two in-person away days, they helped shaped recruitment for seven roles, co-produced our temporary website, informed research and strengthened our response to government consultations.

Shadow Board

In May 2025, we launched applications for our new Shadow Board, bringing **eight** interns and graduates together to work alongside our CEO and Board of Trustees. The initiative will ensure lived experience continues to shape our strategic direction and policy priorities.

Graduate Network

Membership to our Graduate Network nearly doubled in 2024-2025 – growing to **121** members - providing ongoing connection, learning and support beyond our supported internship programme. Graduates also played a leading role in advocacy, with **eight** delivering workshops and joining panels at our November 2024 conference. Members also contributed to external influencing opportunities, including Youth Parliament during NSID and giving in-person evidence at consultations.

"I really enjoyed going to the Houses of Parliament. The thing I enjoyed most was meeting other interns and feeling that we are capable of making change."

- Taylor (YAG member) at Youth Parliament

Parents and carers

We worked directly with parents and carers to shape our communications and engagement, including co-delivering webinars for National Supported Internship Day, running a focus group to better understand intern recruitment journeys and using feedback to inform new printed marketing materials. We also shared best practice across our programme network to help onsite teams deepen engagement with parents and carers.

Making it possible

We are incredibly grateful to the Paul Hamlyn Foundation for renewing their support and providing a grant towards the development of our Advocacy and Engagement work in 2024-2025.

Angel's story

"Being able to go to work for 9am really helps you to see what it is like doing a full day at work."



Angel graduated from her supported internship at Blackpool Council in June 2025 and has since secured a job at Showtown Blackpool. Before starting the DFN Project SEARCH supported internship, Angel had gained several Level 2 qualifications but wanted to continue developing her skills. The supported internship helped her build confidence, independence and communication skills through three work rotations, while learning how to respond positively to feedback and develop her understanding of working life.

"Before the programme, when people gave me feedback, I would take it the wrong way."

Angel also became a member of the Youth Advisory Group, where she shared her views, connected with other interns and helped shape the programme. Angel thought it was a brilliant way to meet other interns and to voice her opinions on what matters.

"You will be made to feel very welcome. No one will judge you and everyone's opinion matters."

Angel says the experience has "changed my life", helping her become more confident, independent and willing to get out and about.

2024-2025: Our year in numbers

The employment landscape faced by our young people

For young people with a learning disability and/or who are autistic, the pathway into paid employment remains challenging. In 2024-2025, the figures were startling. Just **6% of adults** with a learning disability known to local authorities and receiving long-term support were in paid employment. For those with autism, the UK employment rate was **34%**, compared with **55.3%** for disabled people overall and **82%** for non-disabled people.

Between October and December 2024, a huge **837,000 young people** aged 16-24 were not in education, employment or training (NEET). This represented **13.6%** of this age group and an increase of **1.5** percentage points on the previous year - equivalent to around **103,600** more young people.

These figures highlight a continuing upward trend seen since the end of Covid, and an increasing need for our supported internship programme.

At a glance

We supported **1,252 interns** across 180 supported internship programmes.

52% (584) of interns gained employment

42% (464) gained employment at criteria*

Average hourly wage was £12.61

*Our criteria: 16+ hours a week at the prevailing wage

Employment outcomes across regions

Find out how many interns secured paid employment on completion of their supported internship by region.

Scotland, Wales and Ireland **67%**

England (North) **53%**

England (Midlands) **51%**

England (South) **46%**

Upskilling our partners

We provided **18** hours of inset training across **four** days

391 onsite team members attended our inset days

We delivered **72** sessions of our Fundamentals Training

20 Lunch and Learn sessions delivered to onsite teams

"Fantastic training with relevant topics and differentiated approach of delivery. Thank you so much!"

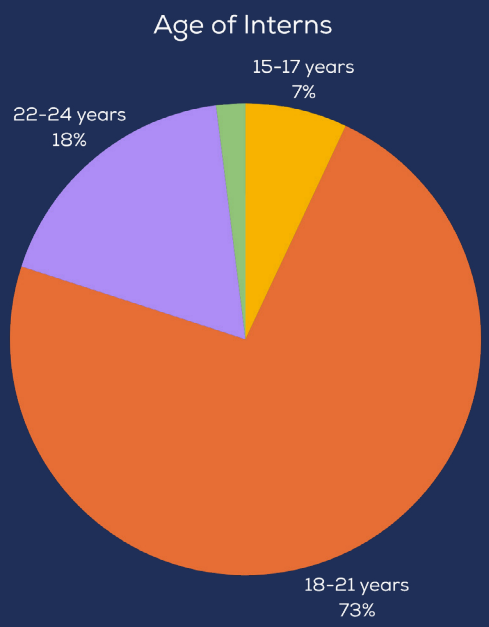
About our interns

20 years old Average age of our interns at the start of the programme

73% of interns were aged between 18-21

25 years+ Most successful age group to secure employment

For the first time in our history, those 25 years and above were the most likely to secure employment, while the youngest were the least likely. In 2023-2024, 74% of interns achieved employment, which suggests increasing barriers for our younger interns.



Gender of our interns

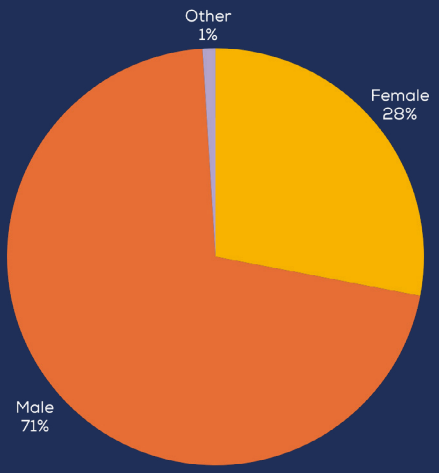
71% identified as male

28% identified as female

1% identified as non-binary

Interns who identified as male represented the largest group of our intern cohort. These figures reflect EHCP and equivalent provision, which are predominately issued to young people who identify as male.

Percentage of Interns by Gender



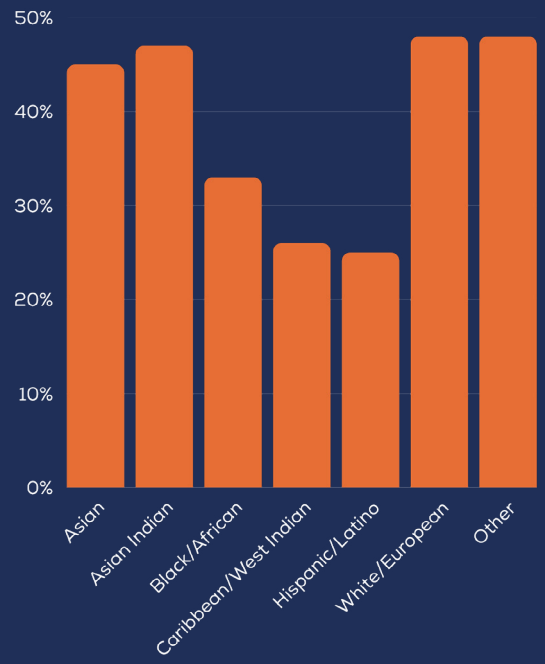
Ethnicity of our interns

70% of our interns were white/European.

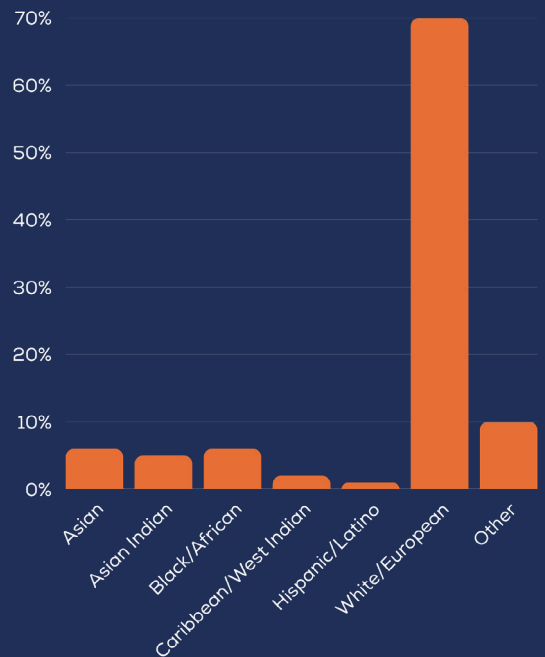
This is representative of national ethnicity population figures.

Interns who identified as Black/African or Caribbean/West Indian achieved lower rates of employment – a trend seen nationally across the youth employment sector. We continue to explore opportunities to address this disparity, including research and work with other organisations.

Percentage of Interns Employed by Ethnicity



Percentage of Interns by Ethnicity



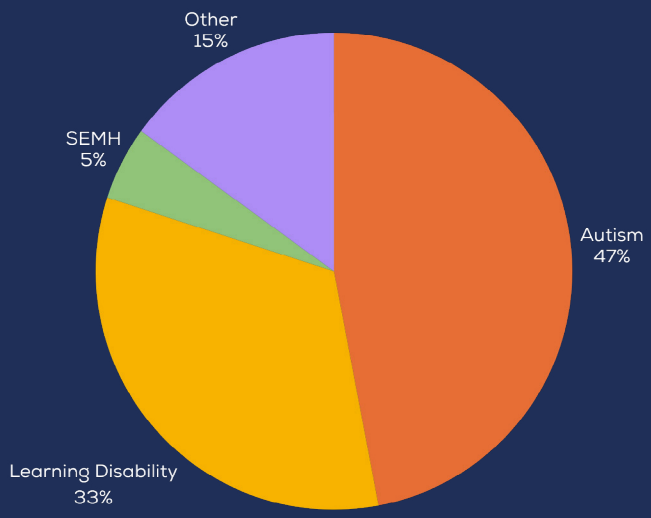
Primary disability

47% of interns identified autism as their primary disability

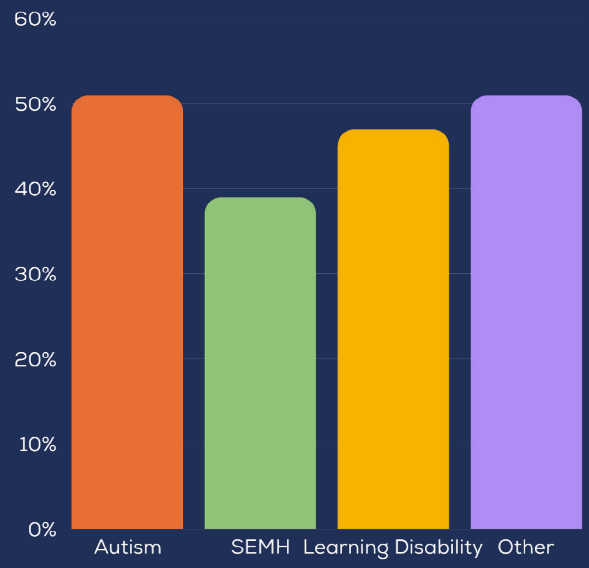
33% of interns identified a learning disability as their primary disability

5% of interns identified Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) as their primary disability

Percentage of Interns by Primary Disability



Percentage of Interns Employed by Primary Disability



Employment characteristics

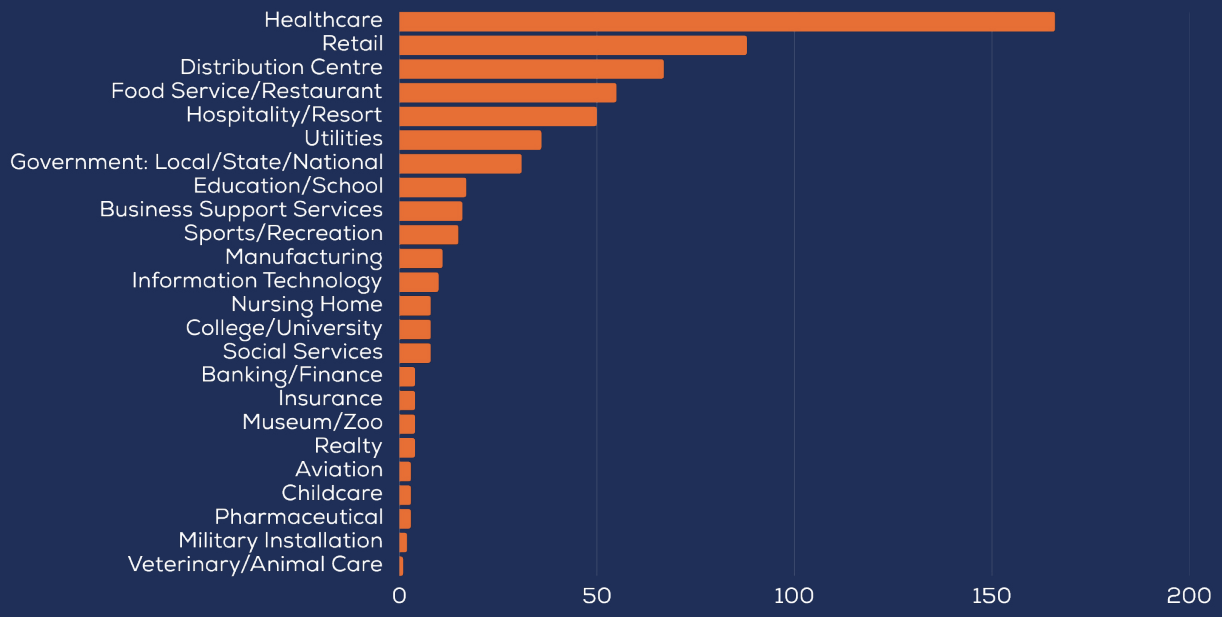
27% of our interns gained employment in healthcare

25% of our interns gained employment in retail & distribution

54% of interns find employment in a host business

46% of interns find employment in the community

Jobs Achieved by Industry



Healthcare remains the leading sector where our interns find employment, with retail and distribution following closely behind. We did see hospitality placements drop this year, but the overall picture remains encouraging; our interns have continued to move into a varied range of industries and career paths.

Thank you to our funders

For young people with a learning disability and/or who are autistic, the pathway into paid employment remains challenging. Our vital work wouldn't be possible without the generous and continued support of the individuals, corporate partners and trusts and foundations that believe in what we do.

Their investment and commitment to our mission helped us to expand our reach, deliver more supported internships than ever before and create lasting change for the young people we serve.

In 2024-2025, we:

- Continued our partnership with the DFN Foundation.
- Introduced our Major Donor programme and secured an opportunity to join the UBS Optimus Foundation portfolio.
- Agreed sponsorship for our Leicester conference from the Youth Futures Foundation and Compass, supporting our programmes with best practice training.
- Secured continued unrestricted funding from the Pears Foundation.
- Received funding from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, including a grant to support the development of our Advocacy and Engagement work.
- Developed a major partnership with Amazon to help scale our supported internship model, representing a value of £2.2 million.

We are deeply grateful to all our funders and partners for their continued belief in our work. Their investment, expertise and commitment will help us to realise our ambition of supporting **10,000 young people with a learning disability, who are autistic, or both, into meaningful paid employment by 2030.**

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DFN Project Search

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