Dear Secretary of State,

Cc: Rt. Hon. Alan Milburn, Chair of the Young People and Work Review
Cc: Rt. Hon. Sir Stephen Timms MP, Minister for Social Security and Disability

We welcome your commitment to tackling the growing number of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) through a fair and sustainable approach to change.[i] We are also encouraged by the Prime Minister's recognition that crude cuts to benefit levels are not the answer to reducing social security spending.[ii]

As a group of over 40 charity leaders, many of us working directly with young people across the UK, we support the Young People and Work review's thorough diagnosis of the NEET challenge and the deep-rooted structural barriers that underpin it.

We stand ready to play our part in tackling it.

As Alan Milburn has rightly identified, too many young people are being let down by systems that intervene too late and offer too little, including for disabled young people on Universal Credit. Change is needed. But this must be built around the principles of support and opportunity, rather than the failed punitive approaches of the past. Many of our organisations support people driven into serious hardship by sanctions.[iii] Evidence shows that cutting benefits worsens health and deepens poverty,[iv] while strict conditionality and sanctions is particularly counterproductive and harmful for disabled people.[v]

There are 184,000 young people aged 16-24 receiving the Universal Credit health element across the UK, representing just 6% of all recipients.[vi] These are young people with severe and complex needs, often living with multiple physical and mental health conditions and overlapping disadvantages including poverty, homelessness and childhood trauma.

For young people cared for at home, the health top-up provides much needed family income to meet living costs and support care arrangements. Other young people living independently or in supported accommodation depend on it to meet their basic costs. We also know that significant numbers are engaged in education, and any loss of income would undermine their ability to sustain that participation. Analysis by Scope shows that removing the UC health element would leave more than nine in ten affected young people in poverty, almost doubling the poverty rate for this group.[vii]

The Netherlands has been cited as a model for tougher approaches. However, disabled young people there are supported by an extensive ecosystem of employment support, vocational rehabilitation, wage subsidies and workplace inclusion measures. Recent and ongoing reforms have explicitly moved away from stricter conditionality and sanctions towards greater flexibility, trust and recognition of wider forms of social participation. What really moves the dial, according to the Dutch experience, is a long-term commitment to support and opportunity creation. Of course, we must also recognise that some disabled young people will always be unable to work, however good the support.

Given the significance of potential reforms for disabled young people, we would welcome transparency about how the Department is engaging directly with young people with lived experience of claiming disability benefits. Meaningful co-production must be a central part of the policy design process.

The fiscal challenge is real, with social security spending under more pressure than pre-pandemic. Despite frequent suggestions that the social security budget is on an unsustainable trajectory, projected spending on non-pensioner benefits is expected to remain flat at around 5% of GDP over the remainder of this Parliament. [viii]

To reduce pressure on social security in a fair and sustainable way, the Government must set a new course.

Ultimately, the question is not whether change is needed, but which policy mix will deliver the best outcomes for young people. A progressive approach to reform would require upfront investment, but pay dividends in the long run. For example, every young person on the Universal Credit health journey should be able to access, on a voluntary basis:

- **A support conversation** with a dedicated specialist adviser with specific expertise in disability, neurodiversity and mental health to build trust, explore aspirations and tailor support options.
- **A range of proven programmes** designed and delivered locally for disabled young people with complex barriers to participation, based around intensive, holistic and trauma-informed support.
- **Earlier intervention**, including improved access to mental health support and earlier identification of young people at risk of disengagement.
- A strengthened **Right to Try Guarantee**, in line with the Social Security Advisory Committee's recommendations, so that disabled young people can genuinely try work or volunteering without fear of losing benefits.
- **Guaranteed pathways into work, training and other valuable forms of social participation, like volunteering.** A more ambitious Jobs Guarantee, backed by stronger expectations and incentives for employers to offer good quality opportunities and job coaching for disabled young people.

These reforms would address concerns that disabled young people can too easily become disconnected from support and opportunity without removing the financial stability that we know young people need to engage with support in the first place. They would mark a decisive break from past approaches that relied on tighter eligibility, harsher conditionality and increased sanctions, which harmed health and pushed people into poverty.[ix] A strong safety net, backed by investment in prevention, support and opportunity is the key to sustainably reducing the social security bill and improving young people's life chances.

We urge you to make these principles the foundation of your reform agenda and would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and the Milburn Review team to discuss how government and civil society can work together to achieve them.

Yours sincerely,

1. Shān Nicholas, Interim Chief Executive, Action for Children
2. Jolanta Lasota, Chief Executive, Ambitious About Autism
3. Deborah Alsina MBE, CEO, Arthritis UK
4. Sue Millman, CEO, Ataxia UK
5. Lynn Perry, CEO, Barnardo's
6. Andrew Clark, Chair of Trustees, BuDS Disability Service
7. Kirsty McHugh, CEO, Carers Trust
8. Melissa Milner, Director of External Affairs, Catch22
9. Patrick O'Dowd, Director, Caritas Salford
10. Rachel Case, Director of Fundraising and Communications, Cardinal Hume Centre
11. Andy Bell, CEO, Centre for Mental Health
12. Simon Bull, Chief Executive, Charcot-Marie-Tooth UK
13. Geoff Fimister, Policy Co-Chair, Disability Benefits Consortium
14. Anna Bird, CEO, Contact and Chair of the Disabled Children's Partnership
15. Elayne Hill, CEO, Central England Law Centre
16. Efua Poku-Amanfo, Head of the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition
17. Dame Carol Homden, CEO, Coram
18. Sophie Livingston MBE, Chair of the End Child Poverty Coalition
19. Caroline Collier, CEO, Inclusion Barnet
20. Sabine Goodwin, Director, Independent Food Aid Network
21. Cheryl Ward CBE, Group Chief Executive, Family Fund
22. Sir David Holmes CBE, CEO, Family Action
23. Andrew Lennox, CEO, Guide Dogs
24. Alfie Stirling, Director of Insight and Policy, Joseph Rowntree Foundation
25. Katie Ghose, Chief Executive, Kids and Vice Chair of the Disabled Children's Partnership
26. Dr Sarah Hughes CBE, CEO, Mind
27. Andrew Fletcher, CEO, Muscular Dystrophy UK
28. Anna Feuchtwang, CEO, National Children's Bureau
29. Alan Markey, Chair, National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers
30. Ruairi White, CEO, National Survivor User Network
31. Rita Waters, Group Chief Executive, National Youth Advocacy Service
32. Meghan Meek-O'Connor, Head of England & Westminster, Save the Children
33. John McLachlan, Interim Chief Executive Officer, Scope
34. James Watson-O'Neill, Chief Executive, Sense
35. Sarah Elliott, CEO, Shelter
36. Sally Callow, Managing Director, Stripy Lightbulb CIC
37. Emma Revie, Co-CEO, Trussell
38. Thomas Lawson, Chief Executive, Turn2Us
39. Matt Dronfield, Interim CEO, Toynbee Hall
40. Sonia Malik, Associate Director of Policy, Influencing and Voice, Young Lives vs Cancer
41. Jane Beaven, Chief Executive, Young Epilepsy
42. Christine Phillips, Chief Executive, Z2K

[i] https://x.com/patmcfaddenmp/status/2079279150817329212
[ii] BBC (July 2026) Andy Burnham: The Laura Kuenssberg Interview
[iiiiii] Central England Law Centre and Public Law Project (2025) Sanctionable Failures
[iv] Barr, B. et al (November 2025) The Health, Poverty and Employment Effects of Cutting Income Replacement Benefits for the Disabled
[v] NAO (2016) Benefit sanctions & Baumberg Geiger, B. (2017) Benefits conditionality for disabled people: stylised facts from a review of international evidence and practice
[vi] Analysis of Stat-Xplore figures for March 2026. Data for Northern Ireland was obtained from the Department for Communities and refers to August 2025.
[vii] Action for Children et al. (March 2026) Protecting the Universal Credit health element for disabled young people
[viii]JRF (May 2026) Tackle economic failures at root to ease pressure on Universal Credit
[ix] Barr, B. et al (November 2025) The Health, Poverty and Employment Effects of Cutting Income Replacement Benefits for the Disabled