

Position Paper

# Youth Guarantee: How to support young people finding a pathway

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## Key messages

The Youth Guarantee has the **potential to truly support young people**. To achieve this, **its envelope must be increased**, and youth employment must remain one of the investment priorities of the next **European Social Fund+**. The Youth Guarantee and well-designed youth policies are not budget costs; they are **investments in people**. Inaction poses a real cost to our societies.

Transitions from education to the labour market are becoming longer and more uncertain. We need to leave behind the idea that it is normal for young people to struggle, and instead recognise the fact that **the transition to adulthood is impacted by our policies**. In addition, those who are not in education, employment, or training (**NEETs**) are **as heterogeneous as any other age cohort**, so there is no room for one-size-fits-all approaches.

**Youth unemployment in the EU is 14.5%**, twice as high as the total unemployment rate and there are **8 million NEETs in the EU**. **One in four young people are at risk of poverty and social exclusion**, and 40% of young people in the EU currently find it difficult or very difficult to make ends meet.

In its current form, the Youth Guarantee is **not reaching out to those who need it the most** - aspects such as (but not limited to) ineffective mapping and outreach, pressure to achieve targets, the programme not being well known, and highly educated young people moving more easily in these networks lead to a **creaming effect** in the Youth Guarantee. **Low quality of the offers and mismatches between the offers and the profile of the beneficiaries** remain issues to be tackled.

Public employment services can only perform their tasks when provided with **enough resources and training**. They should **actively reach out to those most vulnerable**, and when proposing opportunities, deliver **personalised approaches** which take into account the skills and profile of the young person.

**Low threshold integrated services models**, combining different services under one roof in a way which is accessible and free for every young person, are a model to follow. Supporting young people, particularly those facing intersecting barriers when accessing the labour market, requires time and involves more than simply finding them a job or training.

More than a national challenge, youth unemployment and inactivity are regional and local issues. Therefore, we need to **empower local authorities**, have better **horizontal and vertical coordination**, and **involve different stakeholders** in the design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation of the Youth Guarantee, **especially youth organisations**.

We call for the **scrutiny of public money** and so EU member states should ensure data collection and follow-up support. The EU should revisit its indicator framework and turn the Youth Guarantee into a permanent instrument, as well as **adopt binding quality standards** for the Youth Guarantee.

## Introduction

The Youth Guarantee is an active labour market policy which holds the promise or 'guarantee' that **every young person under 30 years old who is not in education, employment or training (NEET) should be given a good quality offer of employment, education, or training within 4 months.** At European Union (EU) level, it is funded by the **European Social Fund+ (ESF+)** and has been an **EU policy commitment since 2013.**

The Youth Guarantee was **reinforced in 2020** during the COVID-19 pandemic, to include new provisions – such as the **extension of the age covered** (previously it was under 25 years old) and a **stronger focus on personalised approaches.**

The Youth Guarantee is **not an exclusive policy to the EU.** Candidate states, particularly in the Western Balkans, started similar programmes in order to prepare for their EU membership, with similar discussions currently taking place in the Eastern Partnership countries. Comparable policies have also been adopted in certain countries outside of Europe.

Having an effective Youth Guarantee has been one of the priorities of the European Youth Forum for more than a decade. **We have been at the forefront of demanding a Youth Guarantee at European level – ensuring that this idea raised during the EU Youth Dialogue became a reality.** In this position paper, we renew our commitment to work towards a solid Youth Guarantee which supports young people and provides them with real opportunities to enter the labour market, or access education and training. We look at the shortcomings and gaps regarding the implementation of the Youth Guarantee, and make recommendations on how to move forward to have a more inclusive Youth Guarantee which reaches out to those who need it the most.

**The Youth Guarantee is the most prominent initiative on youth employment at EU level.** Therefore, this position paper calls on national and regional authorities implementing Youth Guarantee schemes to deliver inclusive programmes that reach

out to those who need it the most. Furthermore, it is addressed to the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council, calling them to continue to recognise the importance of the Youth Guarantee, ensure the continuity and improvement of the Youth Guarantee and negotiate its adequate funding under the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-34. We also invite youth organisations and young people to use this position paper as a tool for their own advocacy towards advancing the rights of young people in the labour market.

**Technical note:** This paper was written within the 1-year mandate of the Expert Group on Social and Economic Inclusion of the European Youth Forum.<sup>1</sup> We gathered the views of our members through a questionnaire, complemented by a literature review, and a study mission on the topic to Finland and Estonia.

<sup>1</sup> All together in Dignity (ATD 4th World), Erasmus Student Network (ESN), European Students Union (ESU), European Trade Union Confederation - Youth (ETUC Youth), Flemish Youth Council (VJR), National Youth Council of Croatia (MMH), National Youth Council of Serbia (KOMS), National Youth Council of Slovakia (RMS), National Youth Council of Turkey (GoFor), TDM 2000 International, World Organisation of the Scout Movement (WOSM)

## Why a Youth Guarantee

The global financial crisis of the late 2000s saw soaring youth unemployment rates across the EU, particularly in Southern Europe, making NEETs one of the most vulnerable groups in society. In response, the EU introduced the Youth Guarantee to help **young people get back into the labour market, training or education.**

Over the years, the youth unemployment rates decreased quite substantially. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, **the increases observed in the youth unemployment and NEET rates were not as high as anticipated, thanks to the Youth Guarantee and other EU policy initiatives.**<sup>2</sup>

**Transitions to the labour market are not only becoming longer, but also more complex, uncertain, and less straightforward.**<sup>3</sup> Young people today do not jump from school to work directly, but in between undertake internships, return to further study, pursue formal or non-formal training in between jobs, and then re-enter the labour market.<sup>4</sup> Many first jobs are secured through social networks.<sup>5</sup>

The school to work transition, which is expected to become even more complex with the digital and green transition, has become **more difficult for**

**vulnerable groups.** The perception persists that becoming an adult entails going through hardships and obstacles, which build character. However, poor working and living conditions are **a consequence of our current policies** rather than a rite of passage.

One of youth employment's primary characteristics is precarity.<sup>6</sup> Many young people have a **precarious employment contract**, in which income is low and sporadic, and which makes them the first to lose their jobs during economic downturns.<sup>7</sup> Against this background, young people are left with little financial stability and limited access to social security protection. They are, therefore, often forced to accept any offer of temporary or precarious employment.<sup>8</sup>

These issues have **long-term scarring effects**,<sup>9</sup> negatively impacting potential financial earnings, future access to social security protection, and the capacity to plan, which can lead to the repetition of the poverty cycle.<sup>10</sup>

Currently, youth unemployment rates remain twice as high as those in the general population, and there are 8 million NEETs in the EU. **A quarter of young people are now at risk of poverty and social exclu-**

2 Eurofound Talks (2024) Episode 23: Has Europe failed its youth?, available at <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/resources/podcast/2024/episode-23-has-europe-failed-its-youth>

3 Simões, F. (2022) School to work transition in the Resilience and Recovery Facility framework, Youth oriented active labour market policies under Pillar 6, Study requested by the ECON Committee ; Eurofound Talks (2024) Episode 23: Has Europe failed its youth?, available at <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/resources/podcast/2024/episode-23-has-europe-failed-its-youth>

4 Ibidem

5 Simões, F. & Elena, M. (2024) Public employment services and vulnerable youth in the EU: The case of rural NEETs, in Politics and Governance, Volume 12, Article 7432, available at <https://ciencia.iscte-iul.pt/publications/public-employment-services-and-vulnerable-youth-in-the-eu-the-case-of-rural-neets/98784>

6 To find out more read the European Youth Forum's position paper Always on standby: How precarious work impacts young people's mental health

7 International Labour Organisation (2021) Statistical brief: An update on the youth labour market impact of the COVID-19 crisis, available at <https://www.ilo.org/resource/brief/update-youth-labour-market-impact-covid-19-crisis>

8 European Trade Union Confederation: Youth Guarantee, available at <https://www.etuc.org/en/issue/youth-guarantee#:~:text=Youth%20Guarantee%2C%20the%20only%20policy,by%20offering%20low%2Dquality%20traineeship>. and visited on the 20th of December of 2024; International Labour Organisation (2024) Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024, available at <https://www.ilo.org/publications/major-publications/global-employment-trends-youth-2024> ; Eurofound (2024), Becoming adults: Young people in a post-pandemic world, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, available at: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/2024/becoming-adults-young-people-post-pandemic-world>

9 Tomlinson, M., & Tholen, G. (2023). Scarring effects for young people in challenging economic times: a conceptual synthesis and future policy and research agenda. Labour and Industry, 33(3), 308–325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10301763.2023.2251216>

10 Shildrick, T. et al. (2010) The low-pay, no-pay cycle: Understanding recurrent poverty, The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, available at <https://www.jrf.org.uk/work/the-low-pay-no-pay-cycle-understanding-recurrent-poverty>

sion,<sup>11</sup> and 40% of young people in the EU currently find it difficult or very difficult to make ends meet.<sup>12</sup>

While the NEET acronym and target audience of the Youth Guarantee might appear straightforward, it encompasses **different groups of young people**. Eurostat defines NEETs **as either unemployed** (outside of the labour market but looking for a job) **or inactive** (outside of the labour market and not looking for a job), as well as those young people **not in formal or non-formal education or training**.<sup>13</sup> For example, an early school leaver or a college graduate taking a gap year are both considered NEETs.<sup>14</sup>

It is important to look at disaggregated data to see how this impacts the most vulnerable in our societies. Young migrants represent an important group of NEETs<sup>15</sup> who face additional barriers to access the labour market due to internal administration processes.<sup>16</sup> Another example is young women, who are overrepresented in the global NEET population.<sup>17</sup>

*“Despite the public perception of NEET young people as unemployed, disengaged young men, the reality in some countries is that young (often adolescent) mothers make up the largest share of those who are NEET.”*

Eurofound (2024) Becoming adults: Young people in a post-pandemic world

Yet, it has been **ten years since the vast majority of the member states adopted their latest implementation plans of the Youth Guarantee, meaning that they have yet to adapt their offer to the new realities of precarity associated with youth unemployment and underemployment.**

**While the Youth Guarantee has supported many young people, there are still areas that need improvement and demand attention.** By giving structure to the transition from education to the labour market and offering alternative routes within education **the Youth Guarantee has the true potential to support NEETs in finding their path, and to promote the social inclusion of those made invisible by statistics and targets.** To fulfil this potential, **it must be adequately resourced and backed by political will.**

11 Eurostat Statistics Explained: At-risk-of-poverty rate of young people, available at [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Young\\_people\\_-\\_social\\_inclusion&oldid=526294#:~:text=The%20at%2Drisk%2Dof%2Dpoverty%20rate%20was%20at%2019.3,rate%20stood%20at%2016.5%20%25](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Young_people_-_social_inclusion&oldid=526294#:~:text=The%20at%2Drisk%2Dof%2Dpoverty%20rate%20was%20at%2019.3,rate%20stood%20at%2016.5%20%25) and visited on the 18th of December of 2024

12 Eurofound (2024) Becoming adults: Young people in a post-pandemic world

13 Eurostat, Glossary: Young people neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET), visited on the 18th of December of 2024 and available at [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Young\\_people\\_neither\\_in\\_employment\\_nor\\_in\\_education\\_and\\_training\\_\(NEET\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Young_people_neither_in_employment_nor_in_education_and_training_(NEET))

14 Mascherini (2019) identified the following categories of NEETs: re-entrants; short-term unemployed; long-term unemployed; unavailable because of illness or disability; unavailable because of family responsibilities; discouraged workers; other inactive

15 Eurostat: Young people neither in employment nor in education and training by sex, age and citizenship (NEET rates), available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/edat\\_lfse\\_23\\_custom\\_14752371/default/bar?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/edat_lfse_23_custom_14752371/default/bar?lang=en) and visited on the 18th of December of 2024

16 European Youth Forum (2020) Quality Standards on the Youth Guarantee: <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.youthforum.org/policy-library/quality-standards-for-the-youth-guarantee&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1734533839557109&usg=AOvVaw3z6DumQbvZWrvXg1i-Qr0E>

17 International Labour Organisation (2024) Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024, available at <https://www.ilo.org/publications/major-publications/global-employment-trends-youth-2024>

# Lost connection: How to support young people finding a pathway

## I. Actions at the national level

### a. Reinforce the capacity and training of public employment services

The Youth Guarantee is mostly implemented by public employment services. Support is usually dependent on prior registration, which can be a significant obstacle due to the **limited capacity** to reach young people and **institutional distrust**.<sup>18</sup> In addition, public employment services often fail to fully understand the socio-economic realities of young people as one of the multiple barriers to an effective Youth Guarantee.

**The Youth Guarantee is not accessible to all young people equally**, which marks one of the most important shortcomings of the programme. **A lack of targeted measures**<sup>19</sup> results in the Youth Guarantee not contributing to social inclusion and social mobility as effectively as it should. A clear example of this is young people from rural areas, who find it harder to access public services.<sup>20</sup>

Under pressure to reach numerical targets, public employment services often reach out to those with the highest employment possibilities. This rationale is counterproductive, as **public money should be used to support those who are furthest from the labour market and at risk of poverty and social exclusion**.

In order to provide adequate support for young people, public employment services need sufficient resources and training to understand the realities of those who require their assistance. It is imperative

that training be provided to prevent **unconscious bias** and **prejudice**, allowing the support provider to recognise that some young people face intersecting barriers to accessing the labour market.

Ultimately, a better understanding of the target group can lead to changes in the attitudes of support providers.

### b. Effective outreach

**Mapping and outreach have been identified as a challenge in the implementation of the Youth Guarantee.**<sup>21</sup> **The programme is not well-known among young people**, even its beneficiaries do not always realise that they are participating in a Youth Guarantee programme.

It is assumed that all young people are digitally savvy or have access to digital equipment and the internet, when in fact, as of 2021, **approximately 30% of young people aged 16 to 29 lacked basic digital skills**.<sup>22</sup> This inaccessibility, combined with the pressure to achieve targets set for public employment services, leads to a situation where **those young people who are closer to the labour market are more readily supported** (a phenomenon known as “creaming”).<sup>23</sup> In addition, young people with higher educational attainment or greater household support, are able to navigate these networks with greater ease.

We recommend developing and investing in the branding of the Youth Guarantee, which can create an immediate understanding of what the Youth Guarantee means. It should - at least

18 Simões, F. & Elena, M. (2024) Public employment services and vulnerable youth in the EU: The case of rural NEETs, in Politics and Governance, Volume 12, Article 7432, available at <https://ciencia.iscte-iul.pt/publications/public-employment-services-and-vulnerable-youth-in-the-eu-the-case-of-rural-neets/98784>

19 Simões, F. (2022) School to work transition in the Resilience and Recovery Facility framework, Youth oriented active labour market policies under Pillar 6, Study requested by the ECON Committee

20 Ibidem

21 Council of the European Union (2024) EMCO review of the implementation of the Youth Guarantee - Key Messages - Endorsement, available at <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-6831-2024-INIT/en/pdf#:~:text=The%20share%20of%20timely%20and,to%20reach%20more%20young%20people>

22 European data (2023) Digital literacy in the EU: An overview, available at <https://data.europa.eu/en/publications/datastories/digital-literacy-eu-overview>

23 Simões, F. (2022) School to work transition in the Resilience and Recovery Facility framework, Youth oriented active labour market policies under Pillar 6, Study requested by the ECON Committee ; Simões, F. & Elena, M. (2024) Public employment services and vulnerable youth in the EU: The case of rural NEETs, in Politics and Governance, Volume 12, Article 7432, available at <https://ciencia.iscte-iul.pt/publications/public-employment-services-and-vulnerable-youth-in-the-eu-the-case-of-rural-neets/98784>



initially - start with a **logo and slogan**, followed by an awareness raising campaign - here youth organisations can support the strategy and implementation of campaigns targeting younger audiences.

Accessible language and the use of communication channels that are familiar to young people are important starting points. For example, young people who are NEETs might not perceive themselves as **such** (simply due to unfamiliarity with the concept). Considering the language we use to address them is a step in the right direction for effective communication.

Active outreach also entails hiring **youth workers, youth mediators, or street workers**.<sup>24</sup> A good example of this is creating synergies between public employment services and educational and training institutions, by having a social or youth worker present the Youth Guarantee in schools.

Many countries use **statistical profiling tools** to measure the likelihood of employability by jobseekers and categorise beneficiaries, often leading to misclassification and the reinforcement of discrimination,<sup>25</sup> leaving behind the most vulnerable groups in our society. Previous research has argued that in order to be effective, digital tools need to address the institutions' distrust by vulnerable groups, who, at the same time, are also the groups where digital inequalities are most observable.<sup>26</sup> In addition, we express our concerns about the way statistical profiling can be used to prioritise the support for those who are closer to the labour market.

To tackle these issues, **it's important not to use digital and/or statistical profiling tools in isolation, but to combine them with in-person services. Co-creating these digital tools together with young people**, as well as determining how they are used, is highly beneficial in preventing further discrimination.<sup>27</sup>

### c. Prioritise personalised approaches and ensure follow-up support

When receiving an offer from public employment services, young people often experience a **mismatch between their profile and their work or training**. Certain types of occupations linked to low educational attainment levels are more readily presented to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. A skills mismatch can therefore increase stigmatisation and trap young people in low-quality opportunities.

It is clear that **opportunities should match the background of the person**, an effort already seen in the Council Recommendation on A Bridge to Jobs from 2020. Young people are not a uniform demographic group. In practice, this means that **one-size-fits-all approaches are not effective**, particularly when trying to reach out to the long-term NEETs.

The European Youth Forum highlights initiatives such as **systematic career guidance**, and having **early, preventative actions through monitoring early school dropouts**. In addition, funding must be used to **create entry-level quality jobs** and to **end unpaid and underpaid internships**. Programmes that **develop digital skills** should continue to be valued, as well as those that **support the achievement of the climate targets**.

The Council Recommendation on A Bridge to Jobs from 2020 already calls for the **recognition of the value of non-formal education**, which we welcome and expect to continue in the future across all member states. The skills acquired through Youth Guarantee schemes and non-formal education must be **properly recognised across member states**.

In 2020, the European Youth Forum published the consultation **Quality Standards on the Youth Guarantee**, some of the targeted measures identified included: establishing partnerships with homelessness services; allocating Youth Guarantee funding

24 In some member states, the Public Employment Services put in place a system of youth counsellors, which speeds up the access to the service, the appropriateness of the approach and the overall quality.

25 Eurofound (2024), *Becoming adults: Young people in a post-pandemic world*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, available at: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/2024/becoming-adults-young-people-post-pandemic-world>

26 Simões, F. & Elena, M. (2024) Public employment services and vulnerable youth in the EU: The case of rural NEETs, in *Politics and Governance*, Volume 12, Article 7432, available at <https://ciencia.iscte-iul.pt/publications/public-employment-services-and-vulnerable-youth-in-the-eu-the-case-of-rural-neets/98784>

27 Ibidem



for accommodation costs when hiring a young person with a disability; ensuring young Roma have access to formal education; and supporting young people regardless of their residence status.

We would like to draw attention to the **need to ensure follow-up support**, which for now remains more of an exception, rather than the rule, and whose role is crucial to promote stable employment.

**Social innovation** also plays a role in delivering personalised approaches, where change is created through a people-centred approach, and the **target group is simultaneously the expert in finding solutions**.

#### **d. Extend low-threshold integrated services models**

A huge deterrent when trying to get support from public services is the fact that young people often find themselves **knocking on different doors**, without seeing their lives getting better. While this is true for everyone, it is of particular importance to those coming from vulnerable backgrounds as they will need to share their stories with multiple public officials, instead of just one who can follow their entire journey and support them through it. We should bear in mind that **supporting young people is not only dependent on finding a quality job, but also on mental health counselling, support with housing, and other aspects that make up an independent life**.

Low-threshold integrated services which require minimal effort from young people to access, and are free and open to everyone, cut back bureaucracy and administrative work. **Multiple services should be gathered under one roof to be made more accessible**, particularly in regions with high youth unemployment and NEET rates. This way, we can support young people through an intersectional and holistic framework.

These service models, however, are more of an exception rather than the rule. **Using public money to create and fund centres such as this, or to support multidisciplinary teams, should**

**be an investment priority for the ESF+.** To turn this into a reality, member states have to look into overcoming any competency issues between their national and regional authorities, and put supporting young people at the centre of their work.

#### **e. Foster community building and involve youth organisations**

More than a national challenge, **youth unemployment and inactivity are truly regional challenges**. Looking at countries such as Italy or Spain, which have high youth unemployment rates, the rates are higher in certain regions compared with others - for example, southern Italy or the Spanish archipelagos.

Fostering community building and partnerships among different stakeholders, from **trade unions to employers, civil society organisations, and in particular youth organisations, while taking into account local labour market and policy dynamics is very important** for the success of the Youth Guarantee.

To achieve this, we **need a more structured coordination and collaboration across different levels of governance and between different stakeholders**: what researchers call horizontal and vertical collaboration<sup>28</sup>.

Involving youth organisations in all steps of the process is a way to bring young people into decision-making on a topic on which they are the experts. By **promoting youth participation** in policy-making and decision-making, we can bridge the trust divide that hampers public services and drives away those most vulnerable.

#### **f. Ensure access to social benefits**

Young people often experience discrimination when trying to access social protection, either age-related or because of non-standard contracts, which reduces the benefit amount and/or excludes young people completely. In addition, **they and their families are at risk of losing their social benefits when accessing the Youth Guarantee**, as many member

<sup>28</sup> Francisco Simões (2022) School to work transition in the Resilience and Recovery Facility framework, Youth oriented active labour market policies under Pillar 6, Study requested by the ECON Committee

states allocate the level of support based on household composition rather than on individual need.<sup>29</sup>

Firstly, we recommend the **removal of age-based eligibility criteria for accessing social protection**. Secondly, **young people in the waiting period for a Youth Guarantee scheme should be granted a minimum income**. And thirdly, **granting this access to social protection cannot translate into cutting social benefits to other members of the household**.

When it comes to adequate minimum income schemes themselves, we recommend: the inclusion of individual means testing and regular updates of amounts to maintain adequacy. The EU has a role to play here as well by adopting a **Directive on Adequate Minimum Income** to set minimum requirements and common standards across the EU.<sup>30</sup>

#### **g. Collect disaggregated data**

Numbers don't always show us the full picture; aggregated data can mask important details and disparities. Alongside data on youth employment and the NEET rates, member states have to ensure **disaggregated data collection to understand how the Youth Guarantee is reaching out and/or supporting different groups of young people**. Moreover, we also need to collect **qualitative data** to have a better understanding of the quality of opportunities, as well as their **post-placement outcomes and job security** following the completion of the Youth Guarantee.

Data collection cannot be blind to different forms of discrimination and inequalities that can take place; it must be intentional and consider the experiences of those most vulnerable. It is important to work together with civil society organisations to develop data collection methodologies collectively.

Against this background, we call on all member states to ensure that **systematic data collection processes are in place**.

## **II. Actions at the European Union level**

### **a. Establish stronger links between the Youth Guarantee and other initiatives and strategies**

How do you arrive on time at your new job, training or school under the Youth Guarantee when you can't even afford a public transport card, or worse, when there are no public transport connections in your neighbourhood? Who is going to look after an ill family member or your child when you are the primary caretaker? These are just examples of challenges that young NEETs face on a daily basis, which the Youth Guarantee is not yet designed to encompass.

It is difficult to think about work, or the type of work that fits best, when basic living conditions are not met. That is why **any future Youth Guarantee proposals need to take into account housing, care, social protection, and healthcare initiatives, and vice-versa**.

Early onset interventions in cases of young people who have just become a NEET are very important and the goal of finding an opportunity for them within four months should be maintained. At the same time, **supporting a young person with multiple challenges or in the situation of long-term NEET through a personalised, intersectional, and holistic approach takes time**, definitely more than four months. Therefore, we also need to remove the pressure from public employment services to simply achieve targets, in order to focus on the actual person across the table, cutting back the creaming effect, and preventing the Youth Guarantee from becoming a "tick-the-box" exercise for public employment services.

The new Youth Guarantee should take into account the new proposal by the European Commission to improve the quality of traineeships in the EU, as well as the European Quality Framework for Apprenticeships. In sum, this means that there

29 Applying household-based means testing, which takes the assumption that members of the household pool and distribute their resources equally, can prevent young people from becoming independent and significantly reduce the amount they receive. (Precarious work and mental health paper)

30 For more information on this, check the European Youth Forum's policy paper with its proposals for the Council Recommendation on Minimum Income: <https://www.youthforum.org/policy-library/european-youth-forums-proposals-for-the-council-recommendation-on-minimum-income>

should be no space for unpaid internships or unpaid apprenticeships under the Youth Guarantee and they should abide by quality criteria. The **European Youth Forum has its own Quality Charter on Internships and Apprenticeships** which can be a source of information on how to provide quality opportunities.

*“While the reinforced Youth Guarantee is seen as primarily an economic/employment policy, its success is closely related to the policy areas of family, housing and childcare, to measures fighting gender and intersectional discrimination, and to synergies with the European Commission’s 2023 mental health strategy.”*

Eurofound (2024) Becoming adults: Young people in a post-pandemic world

## **b. Allocate adequate funding to the Youth Guarantee and turn it into a permanent instrument**

Active labour market policies, support for youth employment, and accessible public services are not costs in the budget, but rather investments. On the contrary, **inactivity by our institutions is a real cost!** Beyond the financial costs, a society failing to include young people is missing out on innovation and skills development.

*“In 2011, the economic loss due to the disengagement of young people from the labour market was €153 billion. This is a conservative estimate and corresponds to 1.2% of European GDP.”*

Eurofound (2012) NEETs Young people not in employment, education or training: Characteristics, costs and policy responses in Europe

In order to deliver quality programmes that support young people and promote social inclusion, social policies and initiatives need adequate funding. **Youth employment is one of the investment priorities during the current ESF+ cycle, and should remain so in the future.**

The Youth Guarantee should be **recognised as a right of young people**. This means that it should not be a one-off crisis solution tool, but rather a **permanent instrument to effectively support young people during their transition to the labour market and into adulthood and to become rights holders**.

Against this background, we should **prioritise long-term planning and structural reforms**. Understanding the links between the Youth Guarantee and other policy areas and how they all impact young people prevents benefit cuts during economic downturns and allows for more strategic approaches.

The current ESF+ regulation from 2021 stipulates an earmarking of 12.5% for countries with a NEET rate above the EU average. **Given the upcoming negotiations on the MFF, we would like to highlight that the Youth Guarantee needs sufficient funding to be properly implemented.**<sup>31</sup>

## **c. Leverage European Union funds by adopting binding quality standards**

The Youth Guarantee was implemented to fight youth unemployment and inactivity. However, it **has not curbed the use of precarious contracts which have come to characterise youth employment**. By offering low-quality opportunities, it masks the real numbers of unemployed and NEET youth.<sup>32</sup> The Youth Guarantee should strive to support young people in finding stable employment, instead of trapping them in an endless loop of precarious opportunities.

When public money is being invested and spent, it is only natural and fair that there is scrutiny over the usage of these funds and that there are strings attached. Adopting **binding quality standards and conditionalities is much needed**. This also aligns with our previous recommendation of turning the Youth Guarantee into a permanent instrument.

31 In 2015, the Eurofound estimated the implementation cost of an effective Youth Guarantee to be 50bn EUR yearly in the EU. (Eurofound (2015) Social inclusion of young people: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/2015/social-inclusion-young-people>)

32 European Trade Union Confederation: Youth Guarantee, available at <https://www.etuc.org/en/issue/youth-guarantee#:~:text=Youth%20Guarantee%2C%20the%20only%20policy,by%20offering%20low%2Dquality%20traineeship.> and visited on the 20th of December of 2024

We propose as an ex-ante conditionality that **employers only have access to these funds if they are acting in accordance with the law and are not using the Youth Guarantee to replace entry-level jobs.**

We need **several criteria to ensure the quality of the opportunities**, such as: transparent recruitment procedures; recognition of the skills acquired by providing adequate certificates; fair pay; access to social security protection; learning objectives that are regularly monitored; and access to complaint channels.

#### **d. Ensure adequate governance, monitoring, and evaluation**

While we need vibrant local and regional ecosystems to deliver the best opportunities for young people - the conditions for such an environment need to be set at macro level. Moreover, coordination between the different stakeholders should also mirror such a vibrant ecosystem, instead of just monitoring progress. Here, young people and youth organisations can have a lot to contribute - especially on principles of social innovation, and should be present at the different governance spaces and meetings at EU and national levels.

To monitor and track progress, the European Commission has put in place an **indicator framework**, which has been the same since 2017. **This remains an area for improvement.** Not only does this indicator framework place its focus on performance only - such as the NEET rate, the youth unemployment rate, or positive and timely exits from the Youth Guarantee preparatory phase. Therefore, it fails to properly accommodate the quality of the opportunities being offered and it does not provide a mirror to the precarity of youth employment.

To look beyond the numbers, disaggregated data collection is crucial, as a general statistic can be **oblivious to the types of offers, their remuneration level, access to social security protection,**

**or the socio-economic background of those taking up these offers.** This last part in particular, is important to understand who is being supported and who is being left behind, and how we can reach out to those most vulnerable, adopt targeted measures, and direct the funds to those who need them the most.

Considering the level of precarious work taken by young people in the current labour market, it is valuable to **adjust the current follow-up indicator of the situation of young people 6, 12, and 18 months after exiting the Youth Guarantee preparatory phase so that it is more mindful of job security.** This would involve not only checking if young people are in employment, education, or training, but also their **types of contracts and the likelihood of losing them in the short-term.**

The Employment Committee (EMCO) reviews the Youth Guarantee every two years, however, the **last evaluation of the programme dates back to 2019.** Therefore, ahead of the new cycle, a deeper look into how the programmes have been doing would provide added value to policy-making at European level.

In addition, we need to put in place “**independent monitoring by an independent organisation** responsible for upholding quality in the Youth Guarantee and evaluating young people’s experiences, good and bad.”<sup>33</sup>

The Council Recommendation on a Bridge to Jobs (2020) reinforcing the Youth Guarantee allows for monitoring of the implementation of the Youth Guarantee through the European Semester mechanism and addresses country-specific recommendations.<sup>34</sup> As it happens, **mentions of this programme, or youth employment in general, are scarce in the country-specific recommendations.**<sup>35</sup> Moving forward, we recommend that the European Semester pay closer attention to the implementation of the Youth Guarantee in its country-specific recommendations.

33 European Youth Forum (2020) Quality Standards on the Youth Guarantee: <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.youthforum.org/policy-library/quality-standards-for-the-youth-guarantee&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1734533839557109&usg=AOvVaw3z6DumQbVZWrvXg1i-Qr0E>

34 Points (30) and (31)

35 European Commission, Country Specific Recommendations database, available at: [https://www.google.com/url?q=https://ec.europa.eu/economy\\_finance/country-specific-recommendations-database/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1734608622127486&usg=AOvVaw1PDfd-xBwQSoEzd-uZsDR6](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/country-specific-recommendations-database/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1734608622127486&usg=AOvVaw1PDfd-xBwQSoEzd-uZsDR6), visited on the 18th of December of 2024

## Final remarks

The Youth Guarantee is the most significant youth employment policy at EU level. It has the potential to truly support young people and promote social inclusion. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was expected that the youth unemployment and NEET rates would increase astronomically - which didn't happen, precisely because there was a Youth Guarantee in place. This speaks volumes about the importance of this programme and how we should work every day to improve it so it can help the young people most in need of it.

Looking at all the challenges that young people are facing, the Youth Guarantee should be a driving force towards promoting decent employment. Moving forward we need adequate funding, the involvement of youth organisations in all phases of the process, and leveraging EU funds by adopting binding quality standards and turning the Youth Guarantee into a permanent instrument.

We have to provide training and sufficient resources for the public employment services to deliver the best quality offers to young people, as well as better vertical and horizontal coordination between stakeholders, while prioritising personalised approaches and extending the integrated services models.

Investing in young people and youth employment is not just a matter of budget. Inaction poses a real cost to our society! Let us guarantee that the EU funding goes to people who need it the most.

## Annex

### Examples from the national level

*In Albania, UNICEF and UNDP, supported by EU funding, piloted Youth Guarantee projects in 3 municipalities: Tirana, Vlorë, and Shkodër between 2023 and 2024.*

Unicef: EU4Youth - A project implemented by UNICEF and UNDP in Albania

*In Serbia, a pilot programme of the Youth Guarantee is taking place in 27 different municipalities across three branches of the National Employment Service. The programme is set to finish in 2026, but most opportunities are low-paid and low-skilled.*

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*Slovenia has an initiative called "First Challenge" which provides hiring subsidies to employers hiring young people for the first time.*

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*A known example of a low-threshold integrated services model is one-stop-shops. In Finland, ESF+ funding has helped build a network of these centres - Ohjaamo - who have both an online and offline presence, and gather several services under one roof.*

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*At these one-stop-shops in Finland, young people can get housing, mental health, financial, or career advice (among others) - although not all one-stop-shops deliver all these services. There was an early-on investment in the branding of this programme, so it can be easily recognised by young people, who need only to walk in one of these centers.*

European Youth Forum's Study Mission to Finland and Estonia, November 2024

*In Estonia, they have the concept of services being offered through networking. In other words, it means that no matter which door someone knocks, they will be seamlessly re-directed to the correct service.*

European Youth Forum's Study Mission to Finland and Estonia, November 2024

*The National Youth Council of Spain (CJE) is involved in the work of the Youth Guarantee Monitoring System of the public employment services, although their impact to make changes remains limited. At the same time, regional Youth Councils, such as Castilla y León, manage the programme directly with the public employment services in the region.*

Members' Consultation Summer 2024

*The Estonian co-creation model involves multi-stakeholders from early on in the designing of the policies - not only youth organisations, but also different Ministries (from Education to Justice), other civil society organisations, and local authorities. The policy is created based on different principles such as: equal partnership; one-door approach; long-term permanent change; and legitimate expectations.*

European Youth Forum's Study Mission to Finland and Estonia, November 2024

*Serbia has a programme called "My First Pay" granting hiring subsidies to employers. However, the level of pay is below the minimum wage and the employee does not have a work contract, being excluded from any benefits under national labour law.*

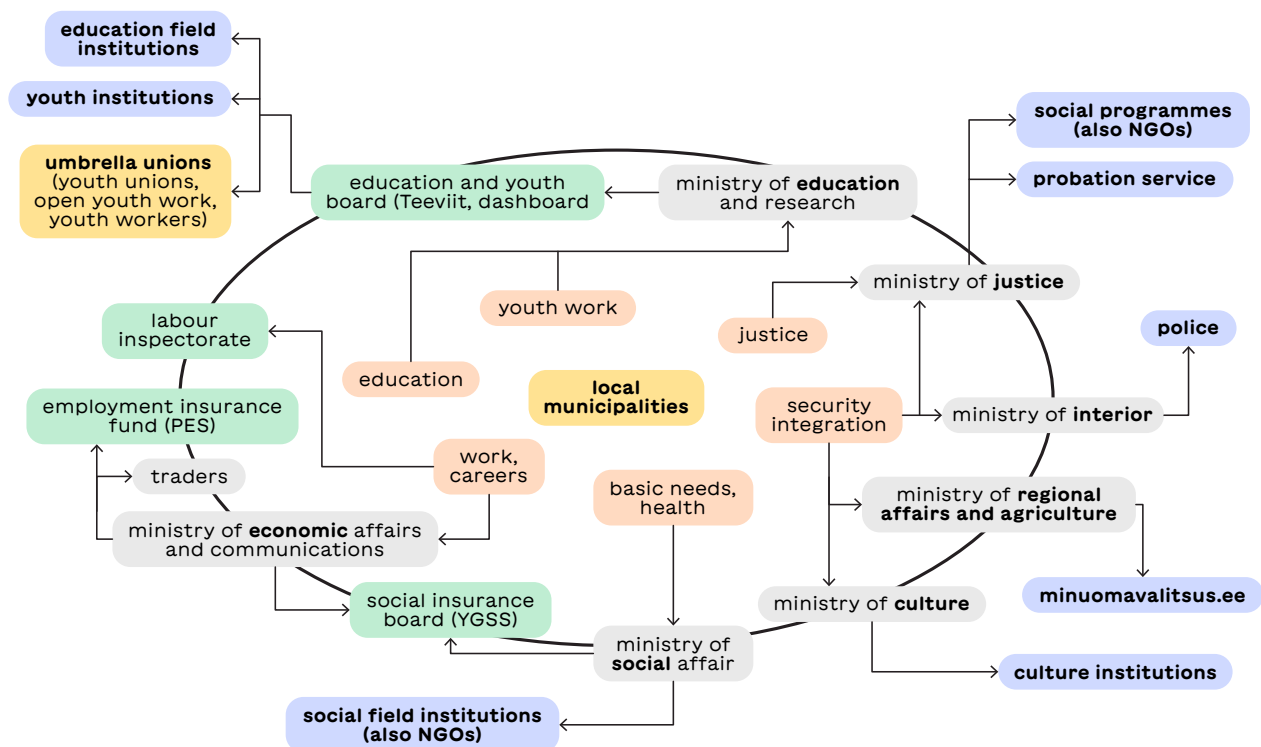
Members' Consultation Summer 2024



## Non-extensive set of examples of the added value of involving youth organisations in all steps of the process of the Youth Guarantee

Design	Implementation	Monitoring	Evaluation
Facilitating democratic selection processes of young people to be involved in the decision-making processes.	Supporting public employment services with outreach through joint awareness raising campaigns.	Providing critical feedback on the state of the implementation of the programmes, as the ones best suited to represent young people's interests and speak on their behalf, taking into account their diversity.	Supporting in developing methodologies and research methods.
Supporting in developing targets, goals, milestones, and indicators.	Mediating between public employment services and young people.		
Supporting in developing the types of activities to be implemented at national and local level.	Directly implementing projects related to support transition from education to the labour market and youth employability.		

## Stakeholder mapping which informs the co-creation model implemented by the Youth Guarantee Coordinator in Estonia - by Heidi Paabort





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