A&O SHEARMAN

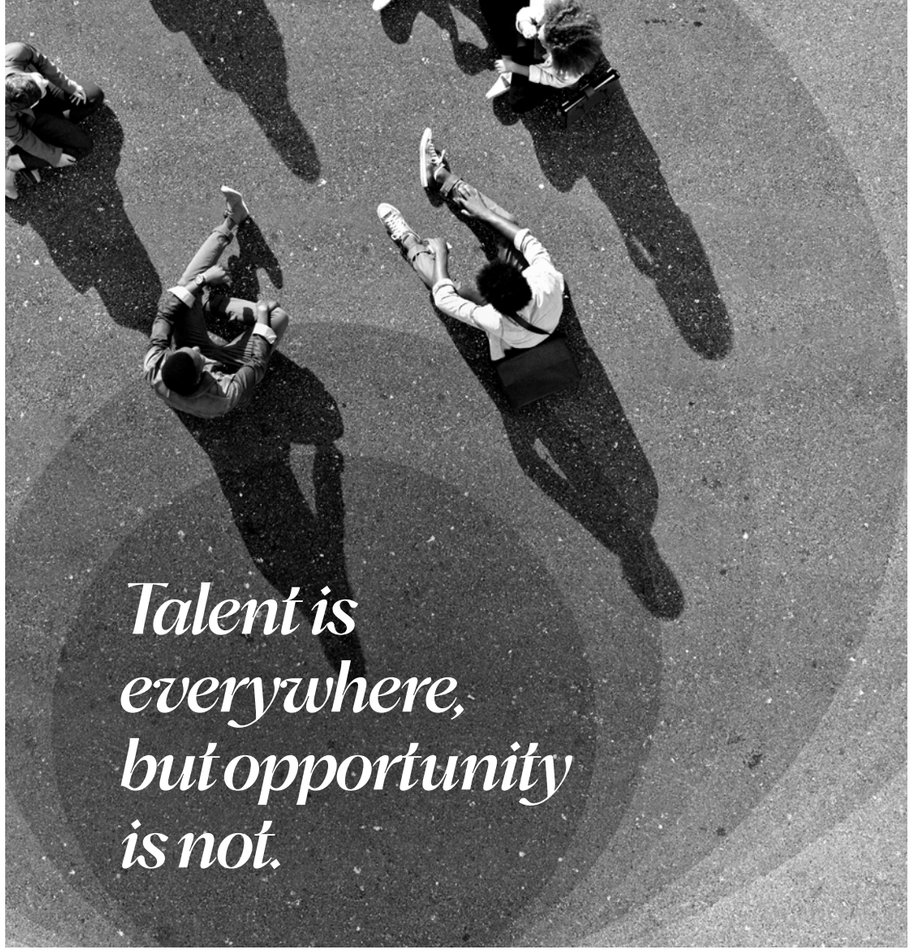


Spark *Liverpool*

IMPACT REPORT 2026

The Talent Foundry

Executive summary



IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE TALENT FOUNDRY

A&O Shearman partnered with The Talent Foundry to support young people across the Liverpool City Region, brought together by a shared ambition to build a more inclusive and socially just society. The partnership focuses on advancing social mobility by combining A&O Shearman's strong commitment to community investment with The Talent Foundry's proven experience in delivering high-impact programs for young people from under-served backgrounds. A crucial part of the partnership's impact was the involvement of volunteers from A&O Shearman and local Liverpool businesses, who played an active role in mentoring young people and offering valuable guidance, insight and support.

Ranked 12th out of 296

ON THE INDEX OF MULTIPLE DEPRIVATION 2025, LIVERPOOL IS ONE OF THE MOST DEPRIVED LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN ENGLAND. YOUNG PEOPLE FACE COMPOUNDING BARRIERS TO FULFILLING THEIR POTENTIAL.

Across the United Kingdom, nearly one million young people aged 16 to 24, around one in eight, are not in education, employment or training (NEET), and the number continues to rise. In his May 2026 interim report, Young People and Work, Alan Milburn warns that Britain faces a "generational fault line", describing the growing disconnect between young people and employment as a "moral crisis". He argues that the challenge is no longer simply one of temporary youth unemployment, but a deeper detachment from the labour market.

Against this backdrop, partnerships between employers and education charities have an increasingly important role to play. By connecting young people with employers, developing essential employability skills and providing meaningful workplace experiences, they help bridge the gap between education and employment before young people become disengaged.

For young people growing up in the Liverpool City Region, where deprivation remains significantly above the national average, these challenges are even more pronounced. Early, place-based interventions that build confidence, aspirations and connections to the world of work can play a vital role in helping young people develop the skills, networks and ambition needed to successfully transition into further education, training or employment.

The proportion of the city's neighbourhoods in the most deprived decile nationally stands at 37%, and over one-third of students across the Liverpool City Region are eligible for free school meals.

The employment rate across the Liverpool City Region stands at 73.1%, below both the North West (73.8%) and Great Britain (75.5%) averages. In Liverpool itself, the rate is lower still, at 67.5%, down from 70.0% the previous year. The city also has one of the highest proportions of 16–17-year-olds who are NEET or whose activity is not known: 8.8%, compared with 5.7% across the North West and 5.6% in England.

Disadvantaged students in the Liverpool City Region are on average 24.8 months behind their non-disadvantaged peers, significantly worse than the national disadvantage gap of 19.1 months, and qualification levels remain below average, with Liverpool City Region data suggesting a substantial proportion of residents hold no qualifications higher than GCSEs.

Young people aged 16+ from lower working-class backgrounds are much more likely to be NEET than those of any other background.

Research from the Office for National Statistics shows that 23.3% of young people in the most deprived areas say that "people like them didn't have much of a chance in life," compared with only 10% in the least deprived areas. That belief is not a reflection of who these young people are, it is a reflection of what they have been offered. When young people are given genuine connections to the world of work, meaningful mentoring, and the chance to see themselves in successful role models, that story changes. Aspiration is not something young people lack; it is something the right support unlocks.

37%

OF LIVERPOOL'S NEIGHBOURHOODS ARE IN THE MOST DEPRIVED 10% NATIONALLY

57–67%

APPROXIMATE EMPLOYMENT RATE

8.8%

OF 16–17-YEAR-OLDS IN LIVERPOOL ARE NEET OR WHOSE ACTIVITY IS NOT KNOWN, COMPARED WITH 5.6% ACROSS ENGLAND

24.8

MONTHS BEHIND THEIR NON-DISADVANTAGED PEERS

23.3%

OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE MOST DEPRIVED AREAS SAY THAT "PEOPLE LIKE THEM DIDN'T HAVE MUCH OF A CHANCE IN LIFE,"

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Theory of change: *Spark Liverpool*

RATIONALE WHY LIVERPOOL?

The Liverpool City Region was chosen due to its above-average rate of 16-18-year-olds who are NEET. Government statistics show the North West has the second-highest proportion of young people who are NEET.

Data Source: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/3d0b9f9b-ef01-4dee-92d2-08deaa79cd68

OUR APPROACH

Across four days at inspiring venues in Liverpool, Spark Liverpool helps Year 9 students build self-esteem, identify their strengths and recognise the transferable skills they already have. Through engagement with local employers they gain insight into the world of work, broaden their aspirations and explore future career pathways. The program also develops interview skills and confidence, helping young people take positive next steps with greater clarity and self-belief.

RISKS

Counterfactual and attribution:
Without a control group, we cannot attribute changes solely to the program, as maturation or wider school activity may contribute. Instead, contribution analysis drawing on self-reported change, teacher and employer feedback, and progression data builds a credible performance story.

Sample size:
The program worked with over 40 students across 6 schools, which limits the statistical generalisability of the percentage figures reported despite the rich qualitative feedback.

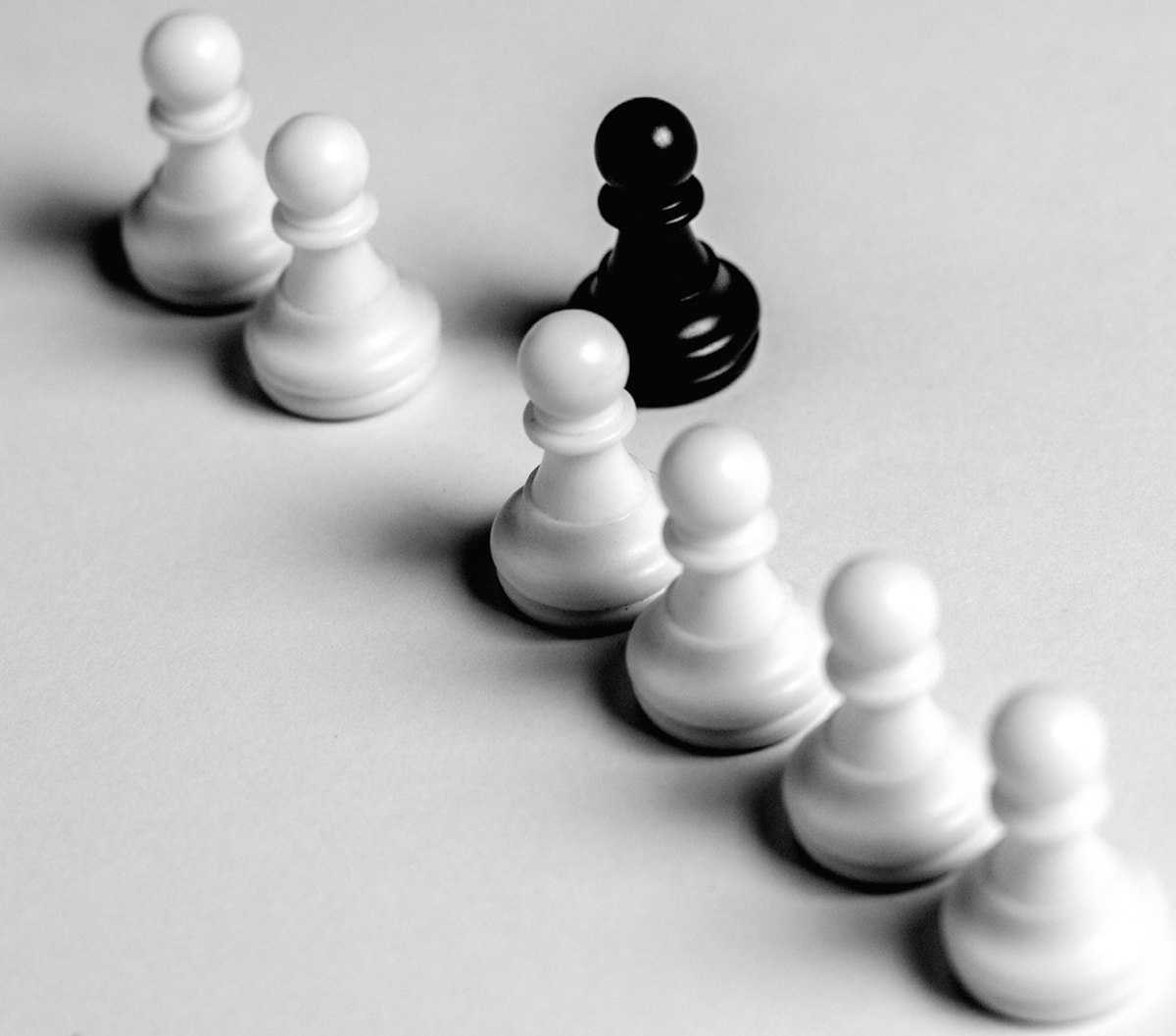
Self-reported data:
Outcome data is primarily based on student self-assessment via post-program surveys, which may be subject to social desirability bias, and we lack independent verification beyond the educator feedback included.

Longitudinal outcomes:
We cannot yet evidence whether confidence, aspiration, and skills are sustained over time or translate into measurable education and employment outcomes.

INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES	IMPACT
• Resources—financial and strategic time from A&O Shearman • School contribution of teaching staff attendance and logistics • Employer volunteer hours approximately 126 • Assets of the young people: enthusiasm, desire and aspiration	• Four full-day workshops delivered at inspiring local venues, each facilitated by experienced facilitators and supported by volunteers • Skills-based activities • Exposure to higher education • Volunteer mentoring and interaction • Targeted recruitment of young people	• Over 40 young people aged 13-14 participated from across six schools in the Liverpool City Region • 33 employer volunteers from multiple sectors • 86% of students said they are more aware of their skills • 74% say they now think more positively about themselves	• Young people: 84% reported they had started to think more positively about their future 86% agreed they are more aware of their skills • Volunteers: 100% agreed volunteering for Spark Liverpool was rewarding 100% would participate in future programs	Post-program surveys show young people have a more positive sense of themselves and their career prospects: • 74% say they are now thinking more positively about themselves • 78% report that the program has helped them to see the next steps to a successful future • 89% have a better idea of the careers available in the world of work

What we changed— *Learnings from 2025*

In response to learnings from the first year of delivery, we strengthened the design and management of Spark Liverpool:



IN RESPONSE

- We introduced a clear thread running through the workshop sequence so that students experienced a more connected journey across the program and our volunteers gained greater clarity on the purpose and progression of each session.
- The briefing and management of volunteers was improved so they better understood the role of icebreakers and energisers and felt meaningfully involved.
- Greater emphasis was placed on active workshop management from The Talent Foundry, with the project manager taking clear responsibility for the smooth running of sessions, supporting facilitators in real time where needed, and ensuring a professional and consistent experience for volunteers and schools.
- In response to school dropout challenges from the previous year, we strengthened our relationship management with schools so that teachers had a clearer understanding of the commitment required and the impact of withdrawal. Five of the six schools who attended consistently provided the same members of staff to accompany the students, educators witnessed first-hand the progression and transformation of pupils, with the result that they became fully invested in the program and are keen for their schools to participate again.
- By placing greater focus on making the workshops enjoyable, rewarding and distinct from the school day, we ensured that the young people were motivated to return and remained engaged throughout the program. Over forty students attended each session, an increase in attendance from last year's sessions.

The root causes *we address*

LIMITED SOCIAL AND PROFESSIONAL CAPITAL

Young people from under-served communities in Liverpool have few opportunities to interact with professionals or gain insight into career pathways beyond their immediate environment. Many participants had limited experience of interacting with adults beyond teachers or parents/guardians.

UNEQUAL ACCESS TO CONFIDENCE-BUILDING

Almost all teachers (96%) believe life skills such as confidence, motivation and resilience are as important as, or more important than, formal qualifications in shaping how well young people do in adulthood. Yet young people from lower-income backgrounds often have the least access to the activities that help build these skills. Nearly half (48%) of state school teachers say they do not have time to focus on improving students' speaking and communication skills.

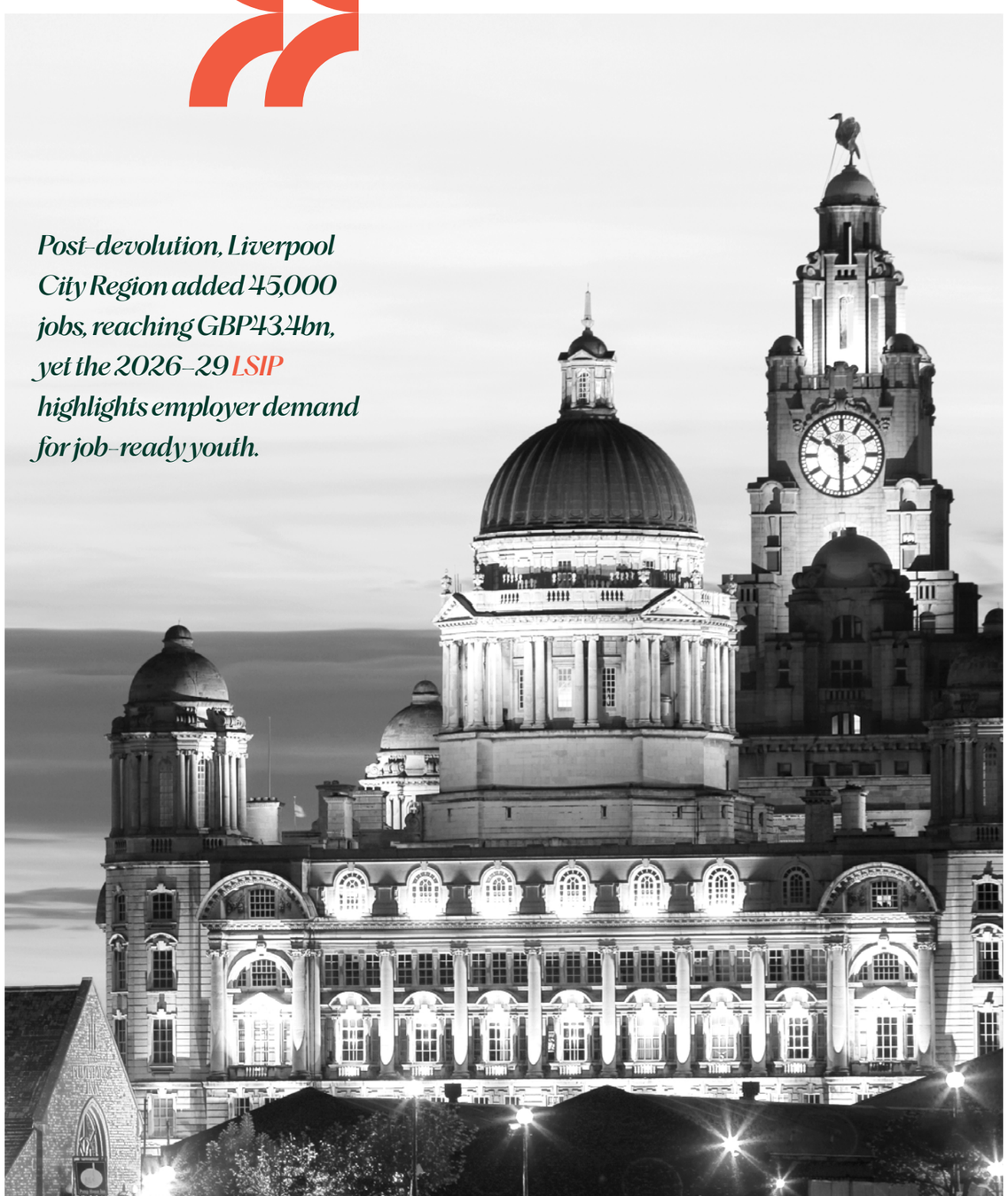
LACK OF AWARENESS OF SKILLS AND PATHWAYS

Young people often do not see the connection between their existing strengths and the world of work and are unaware of the breadth of careers available locally and nationally. Since devolution in 2017, the Liverpool City Region has added 45,000 jobs and grown its economy to GBP43.4 billion, yet employers consistently report persistent gaps in employability skills among young people, with the region's latest Local Skills Improvement Plan (2026–29) identifying demand for more job-ready recruits as a dominant theme.

LIMITED EXPOSURE TO ASPIRATION-RAISING EXPERIENCES

Many participants had never visited a university campus or a civic venue in a professional context and rarely have opportunities to leave their immediate school environment.

Post-devolution, Liverpool City Region added 45,000 jobs, reaching GBP43.4bn, yet the 2026–29 LSIP highlights employer demand for job-ready youth.



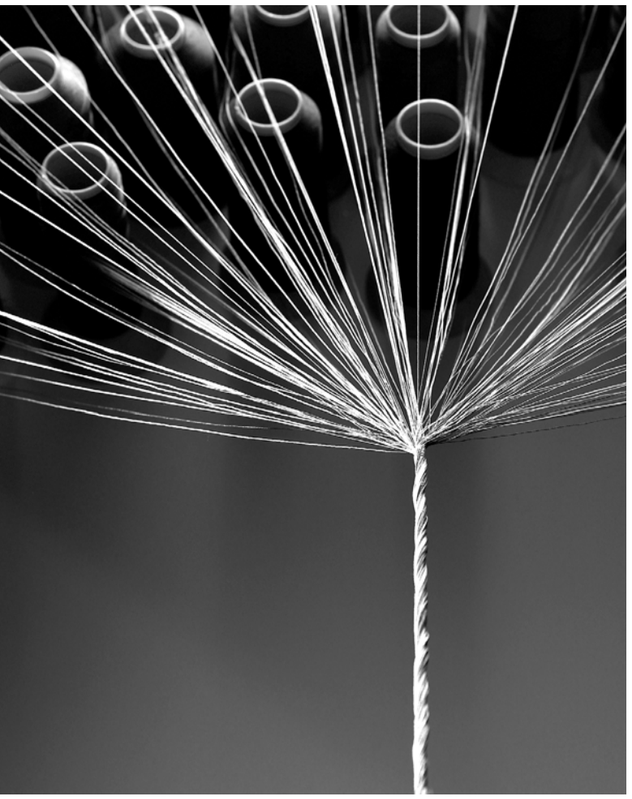
Our theory *of place*

Liverpool is chosen deliberately because of the concentration of disadvantage, the growing jobs market with unmet skills demand, and the commitment of A&O Shearman and local partner employers to sustained engagement in the city. Despite relative improvements in the city's deprivation ranking between 2019 and 2025, Liverpool remains among the most deprived local authorities in England, and its employment rate continues to trail regional and national averages significantly.

The program is designed to connect young people positively to their own community, highlighting Liverpool's rich culture, history, and community spirit through sessions held at inspiring local venues including St George's Hall, Scale Liverpool, Liverpool Hope University, and Hill Dickinson Stadium.

The place-based approach works not in isolation, but through connection. When employers, whether local or national, commit to a place, they help young people see that the world of work is not distant or abstract. It is present, invested, and interested in them.

Local economic context and employer *demand alignment*



The Liverpool City Region's economy is growing, with 45,000 jobs added since devolution in 2017, much of it concentrated in health and social care, professional services, digital and technology, construction, and logistics. Employers across these sectors report persistent gaps in employability skills, including communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and self-management, among young people entering the workforce.

Spark Liverpool's activities are explicitly designed to build these skills, aligning program content with the competencies most in demand from Liverpool City Region employers.

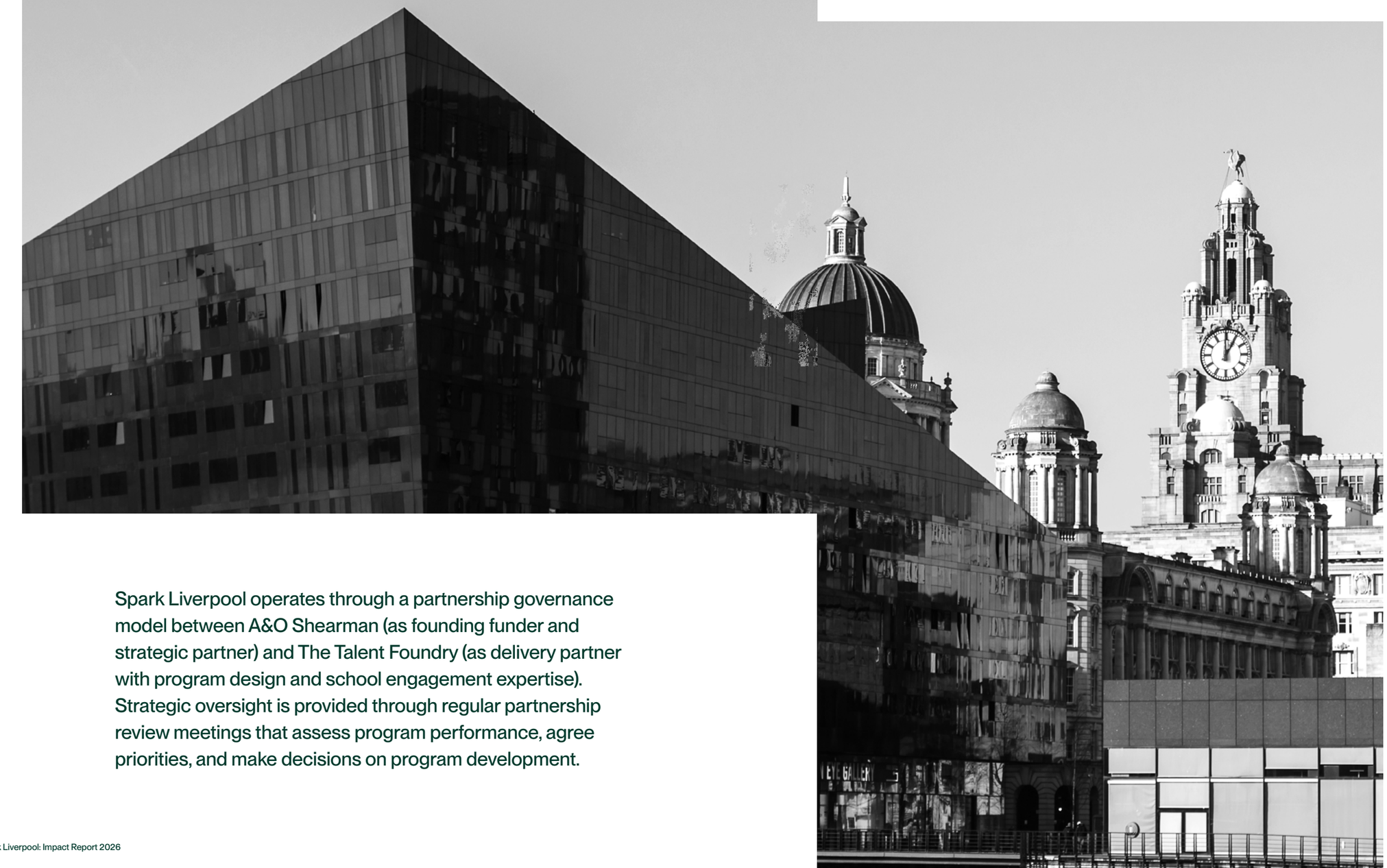
The program also exposes young people to professionals from sectors driving local growth (law, health, construction, transport, government), ensuring that career awareness activities reflect the real opportunities available within the city region.



Community *assets*

A strengths-based approach underpins the program's design. Liverpool's community assets include a strong civic identity and pride, world-class cultural and heritage institutions. The City has an established network of community organisations and voluntary groups, engaged local employers across multiple sectors, a growing higher education sectorwith three universities, and deep traditions of collective action and mutual support. The program deliberately builds on these assets, using inspiring local venues as learning spaces, drawing volunteers from anchor institutions already rooted in the city, and connecting young people to networks that exist within their own community rather than importing solutions from outside. This asset-based lens ensures that Spark Liverpool strengthens what already works in the city while addressing gaps in opportunity.

Cross-sector *collaboration*



CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION EXTENDS BEYOND VOLUNTEER PROVISION

The program was delivered by The Talent Foundry and supported by volunteers from A&O Shearman and a broad range of Liverpool-based employers spanning the private, public and third sectors, including local government,higher education, construction, housing, healthcare, aviation and heritage organisations.

This collaborative approach provided students with exposure to diverse career pathways and insights into opportunities across the regional economy.

Spark Liverpool operates through a partnership governance model between A&O Shearman (as founding funder and strategic partner) and The Talent Foundry (as delivery partner with program design and school engagement expertise). Strategic oversight is provided through regular partnership review meetings that assess program performance, agree priorities, and make decisions on program development.

Outcomes

Young people

GREATER AWARENESS OF THEIR SKILLS AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

"Spark Liverpool has helped me think about my future and what career I want, and to believe in myself"



89%

of students stated they have a better idea of the careers available in the world of work.

BOOSTED CONFIDENCE IN ESSENTIAL AND EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

"It has benefitted me, as it helped me to find out more about my myself and my strengths and the things that I am good at"



91%

of students say that as a result of the Spark Liverpool workshops they feel confident with adaptation and resilience.



83%

of students say that as a result of the Spark Liverpool workshops they feel confident when listening to others.

STRONGER CONNECTIONS WITH LOCAL EMPLOYERS

"I spoke to a nurse, a paediatric nurse, and she told me about what she does, and it kind of gave me a better view on the job because I actually spoke to one instead of just googling about it and finding out what it is on the internet. And me speaking to her has helped me a lot and made it so I know more about it, and I know from her position...what she does."



97%

stated they found it helpful to meet or speak to volunteers at the workshop



IMPROVED CONFIDENCE IN THE APPRENTICESHIP AND JOB APPLICATION PROCESS



84%

of students stated they have started to think more positively about their future.



78%

of students stated Spark Liverpool has helped them to see the next steps to a successful future.

Educators

"It was absolutely beautiful to see how the students changed in the different settings and when engaging with the volunteers. Some jumped over very large shadows during some of the activities."

SCHOOLS CAN BETTER DEMONSTRATE COMPLIANCE WITH EDUCATION AND CAREERS FRAMEWORKS



100%

Educators agree that Spark Liverpool has added value to their career's education, information, advice and guidance for young people.

EDUCATORS FEEL MORE PREPARED TO CONNECT STUDENTS WITH EMPLOYERS

"The Talent Foundry really listened to our students even finding volunteers in the areas (of work) that my students expressed an interest in. The facilitators used the right amount of nurture and challenge and managed to engage all my students throughout the four sessions. The program has shown the students what possibilities there are open for them and that they are allowed to dream and can follow their dreams too."



80%

of educators agreed that Spark Liverpool has led them to feeling more equipped to connect students to meaningful employer and/or higher education encounters.

"The four-trip project was an incredible experience that truly boosted students' aspirations and helped them think more deeply about their futures. Visiting different places around the city had a powerful impact, giving them a real insight into the working world and showing them the many paths their lives could take. By taking learning beyond the classroom, the project enriched their education in a meaningful way—making lessons come alive, broadening their horizons, and inspiring them to imagine new possibilities for themselves."

"Our students really enjoyed the workshops and were amazed by the places they were taken to. It made them feel valued to be allowed to visit these unusual places and their behaviour was so different in the professional places surrounded by the amazing volunteers who treated them as the interesting individuals that they are listening to their opinions, experiences and ideas."



Volunteers/Employers

VOLUNTEERS FIND THEIR PARTICIPATION REWARDING AND VALUABLE

"I really enjoyed the sessions as it felt genuinely rewarding to spend time supporting young people, hearing their ambitions, and seeing first-hand the impact that confidence and encouragement can have. Seeing their confidence grow from the first session to the last was amazing, and the students even helped me boost my own confidence."

100%

of volunteers rated their volunteering experience as excellent or good.

VOLUNTEERS CONNECT WITH STUDENTS AND UNDERSTAND THE CHALLENGES THEY FACE



82%

of volunteers agreed that their participation in Spark Liverpool gave them increased understanding of the barriers that young people face today.

CSR/ESG AND SOCIAL VALUE FULFILMENT

Spark Liverpool is "something that genuinely sets (A&O Shearman) apart. Being so heavily involved in a program like this shows a real commitment to social mobility and early engagement with young people, rather than just talking about those values in principle. For me personally, knowing that the firm invests time, skills and energy into initiatives like Spark Liverpool is something that would absolutely attract me as a prospective colleague."

Methodology

This section outlines the approach taken to measuring and reporting on the impact of Spark Liverpool in 2026.

Data collection: Impact data was gathered through post-program student surveys completed by all 40+ participating students. We received feedback from all six partner schools. All volunteers completed a feedback survey. In addition, a selection of students took part in in-depth qualitative interviews and recorded video/written reflections on their experience.

Outcome measurement: Outcomes are structured against our Theory of change and measured primarily through self-reported post-program survey responses. Percentage figures represent the proportion of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with outcome statements.

Qualitative quotes are drawn from recorded interviews and written feedback, selected to illustrate the breadth of experience across participants.

Framework alignment: This report draws on principles from the Theory of Change methodology and is structured to align with emerging best practice in place-based impact measurement.



Contribution to *systems change*

Early evidence and longer-term ambitions

While Spark Liverpool is in its early stages, there are signs of contribution to broader systems change within the Liverpool City Region

INFLUENCING SCHOOL CAREERS PROVISION

Six partner schools have now embedded Spark Liverpool into their annual careers education calendar. Educators report that the program has added value to meeting the Gatsby Benchmarks for careers guidance, particularly Benchmark 5 (Encounters with Employers and Employees) and Benchmark 6 (Experiences of Workplaces).

CHALLENGING NARRATIVES ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE FROM DEPRIVED AREAS

By connecting professionals with young people from areas of high deprivation, the program actively challenges deficit-based narratives and builds empathy and awareness among the employer community. This shift in perception is a precondition for longer-term labour market inclusion.

BUILDING EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT INFRASTRUCTURE

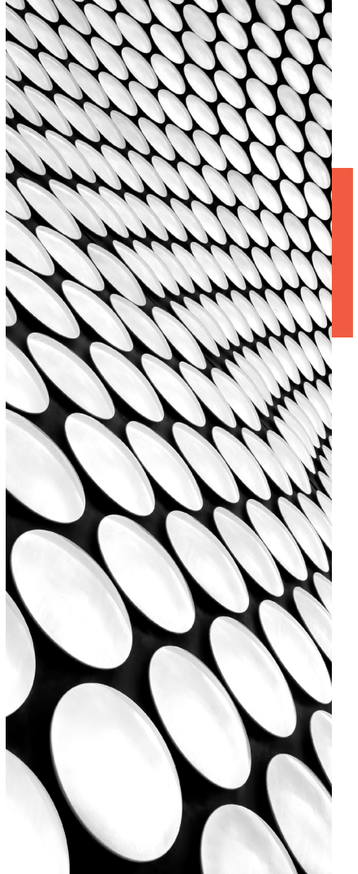
Through the program, a network of 33 local volunteers from multiple employers has been established across the Liverpool City Region. With future investment, this creates a replicable infrastructure for employer-school engagement that extends beyond the program itself. Employers have indicated a desire to continue volunteering within the program's next cycle.

DEMONSTRATING PLACE-BASED CORPORATE INVESTMENT WITHOUT PHYSICAL PRESENCE

A&O Shearman's model of deep community investment in a region where it does not have offices provides a replicable template for other corporate partners. This challenges the assumption that meaningful corporate social impact requires co-location and could influence broader corporate CSR/ESG strategy.

LONGER-TERM SYSTEMS CHANGE AMBITIONS

Over the next three to five years, the partnership aims to help reduce NEET rates among program participants. We will also explore how sharing program data and learnings can inform local authority careers strategy.



Systems *change*

This program seeks to influence systems-level change in the Liverpool City Region by demonstrating to schools that employer engagement can be embedded as a core part of pastoral and careers provision, rather than a one-off enrichment activity.

Over time we hope that the program will influence changes in school careers provision practice, increase employers' adoption of place-based employment models and contribute to local policy and strategy documents.

Key *assumptions*

That self-confidence and transferable skills developed through four workshop days contribute to creating lasting behavioural change in young people facing multiple disadvantages.

That exposure to professional role models and career pathways translates into different choices and actions by young people in the months following the program.

That schools will continue to identify and prioritise the young people who stand to gain most, and that those young people will attend all sessions.

That the Liverpool jobs market will continue to grow, meaning that increased employability skills among participants will translate into improved employment outcomes.

That the partnership between TTF and A&O Shearman sustained beyond two years, enabling consolidation of networks, deepening of relationships, and longitudinal tracking of impact.

Limitations and *next steps*

This report represents an early-stage assessment of Spark Liverpool's impact. We are transparent about what we can and cannot yet evidence, and we are committed to strengthening our measurement framework over time.

WHAT WE CANNOT YET EVIDENCE:

Counterfactual and attribution: We do not have a control group or comparator cohort, which means we cannot definitively attribute the changes observed solely to the programme. Some of the outcomes reported by students may have occurred through other interventions, natural maturation, or wider school careers activity. We acknowledge this limitation.

Sample size: The program worked with over 40 students across 6 schools. While the qualitative depth of feedback is rich, the small sample size limits the statistical generalisability of the percentage figures reported.

Self-reported data: The outcome data in this report is primarily based on student self-assessment via post-program surveys. While self-reported data captures meaningful subjective change, it may be subject to social desirability bias or recency effects. We do not have independent verification of behavioural change from teachers or parents beyond the educator feedback included.

Longitudinal outcomes: We cannot evidence whether the confidence, aspiration, and skills gains reported by students are sustained over time, or whether they translate into measurable education and employment outcomes (e.g., GCSE attainment, post-16 progression, reduced NEET status).

HOW THE MEASUREMENT FRAMEWORK IS EVOLVING:

For future program cycles, we intend to introduce pre-program baseline surveys alongside post-program surveys, enabling genuine pre/post comparison; map outcomes more systematically against the Gatsby Benchmarks for Good Career Guidance; and explore the feasibility of a Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis to quantify the program's social and economic value.



Appendix

‘NEET by characteristics’ for 16-17 in East Midlands, East of England, England, Knowsley, Liverpool and 10 other locations for 2025

		NEET proportion	Activity not known proportion	NEET/ not known proportion
England		3.4%	2.2%	5.6%
North East		5.0%	1.7%	6.8%
North West	North West	4.3%	1.4%	5.7%
	Knowsley	5.7%	0.8%	6.5%
	Liverpool	5.9%	2.9%	8.8%
	Sefton	3.6%	0.2%	3.8%
	St. Helens	5.7%	0.6%	6.4%
	Wirral	4.6%	0.9%	5.5%
Yorkshire and The Humber		3.9%	1.9%	5.7%
East Midlands		2.8%	2.8%	5.6%
West Midlands		3.3%	2.9%	6.2%
East of England		3.8%	1.3%	5.1%
London		1.9%	1.4%	3.3%
South East		3.4%	3.7%	7.0%
South West		3.9%	2.2%	6.1%

Data Source: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/3d0b9f9b-ef01-4dee-92d2-08deaa79cd68

The need for an intervention in the Liverpool City Region (LCR) is outlined in the table below, which demonstrates how much more deprived each Local Authority within the LCR is compared to other areas nationally.

Local Authority District	Schools that attended the program	Proportion of neighbourhoods more deprived than the England median (IMD 2025)
Liverpool	The Academy of St Nicholas Childwall Sports and Science Academy	85%
Knowsley	Kirkby High School	96%
Sefton	Christ The King Catholic High School and Sixth Form College	59%
St. Helens	The Sutton Academy	68%
Wirral	Woodchurch High School	50%

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