

The National Employment Service - a plain-English summary

What it is, what it would cost, what we honestly know, and the question we are putting to you.

Discussion draft · version 1.0 · May 2026. This is the short, public version of the [White Paper](#). It is a proposal for discussion, not a finished policy. We set out the options and the evidence; whether the country wants this, and how much of it, is a decision for the public and Parliament - not for us to make for you.

The problem, in one paragraph

Britain has millions of people who want to work or contribute but can't find a way in, at the same time as employers can't fill jobs and communities have real work going undone - caring for isolated older people, repairing local environments, mentoring young people, keeping libraries and local culture alive. The help that exists is scattered across jobcentres, colleges, councils, charities and benefits offices, and a person who loses their footing has to navigate all of it alone. Nothing joins it up, and no one pays for the valuable work the market won't.

What NES would do

The National Employment Service (NES) is the missing connective layer. It doesn't replace jobcentres, colleges, careers advice or local government - it uses them, and adds two things they don't provide:

1. **Better Work and Skills** - one route into work, retraining and support, with real help to get there, whatever field you're suited to.
2. **Paid Community Contribution** - paid, real jobs doing socially valuable work the market won't fund, for people the job market currently has no place for.

The principles behind it:

- **You volunteer.** There are no sanctions and no benefit threats. The offer is good enough that people want it.
- **It's a real job at a real wage.** Placements pay the Real Living Wage, with proper employment rights - not "benefits with activities attached".
- **Work always pays.** NES comes with a fix to the way Universal Credit currently claws back earnings, so taking a job always leaves you better off.
- **It doesn't undercut existing jobs.** Roles must be genuinely additional work that wouldn't otherwise happen, signed off by unions and the local community.
- **It meets you where you are.** If you can move toward an ordinary job, NES helps you get there with real employers. If you genuinely can't - because of a severe disability, or because the jobs in your town simply don't exist - NES is a permanent, dignified place to contribute and be paid for it.

Two people it's for

Marie, 52, a former shop manager in a coastal town. The store closed, and there's little retail work left where she lives. NES assesses what she can do, agrees a retraining pathway into adult social care - a sector crying out for staff - pays for the childcare and travel that were the real barriers, and stays with her after she starts the new job, because the evidence is clear that people stick in work when support continues past day one. Marie is a *bridge* case: NES's job is to get her into an ordinary paid job and make it last.

Daniel, 38, long-term unemployed in a former coalfield town, managing a health condition. There are almost no jobs for him to compete for, and years out of work have knocked his confidence. NES pairs him with a specialist (using a method called Individual Placement and Support, or IPS, a well-tested way of helping people into work that has the strongest evidence in this field), and places him in a paid, real role restoring local green spaces - work his community values and the market would never fund. If a path to an ordinary job opens up, NES supports it. If it doesn't, the contribution and the wage are worthwhile in themselves. Daniel is a *floor* case: success is measured by his wellbeing and the value of his work, not by pushing him toward jobs that aren't there.

The honest numbers

We will not pretend this is free, and we will not claim it "pays for itself" - because it doesn't.

- A paid placement costs about **£26,000 a year**.
- After the savings it generates (lower benefits, more tax, less pressure on health and social care), it still costs the public purse roughly **£14,000-£16,000 per placement** - a real, ongoing cost. At 300,000 placements that's around **£4 billion a year**.
- Weighing up everything it delivers - the work done, the wages, the wellbeing, the savings elsewhere - the value to society comes out at roughly **break-even** on cautious estimates (with a realistic range from somewhat below to meaningfully above). For people who go on to ordinary jobs, the longer-term return looks clearly positive; for those who can't, the case rests on the worth of dignity and contribution.

In short: NES is plausibly good value for society, and a genuine, permanent cost to the Exchequer. That is the honest position.

The question we're putting to you

The numbers tell you the price and the likely return. What they can't tell you is whether it's worth it, because that depends on something a spreadsheet can't measure:

How much should the country pay for people to do valuable work in communities the market has left behind - and is that worth a real, ongoing cost to the public purse?

That's a value judgement, and it belongs to the public, not to analysts. We've set out the evidence as honestly as we can so the judgement can be an informed one.

Why we'd test it first, not build it nationally

The evidence from past schemes - in the UK, France, Austria and elsewhere - is encouraging but not conclusive at national scale. So the proposal is to **run a serious pilot first**: around 12,000 paid placements across four or five different kinds of area, over three years, costing £1-1.8 billion. The pilot is designed from the start to **measure** the things we're currently unsure about - how many people take part, the wellbeing effect, the value of the work, whether it displaces other jobs, and how many move on to ordinary work - rather than assume them.

Crucially, the pilot builds three things that are useful **even if NES never goes national**: a faster way for government to evaluate its own programmes, a better national job-and-placement matching service, and a way for people to see their own skills records in one place without anyone building a national database. So the country gets something useful either way, and the big decision is only made once we actually know whether it works.

The full case, with every figure graded for how strong the evidence is and sourced, is in the [White Paper](#), the [Implementation Plan](#), the [Evidence Annex](#), the [Costing](#) and the [Pilot Design](#). This proposal was developed under [The Pragma Method](#), an approach for turning long-unsolved problems into implementation-ready policy on graded evidence and across the political spectrum.