

# YMCA

Here for young people  
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## Winning Young Voters' Hearts and Minds

Young people's General  
Election priorities

September 2023



# Introduction

For almost a decade, the UK has been in a near-constant state of political and governmental fluctuation. After three general elections and a referendum in five years, then three Prime Ministers presiding through a global pandemic and economic slowdown in the four years since, the UK is gearing up for its first general election after a full-term of government.

Since the last general election in 2019, citizens have felt the impact of outside forces and the political reactions to these acutely, from national lockdowns to soaring energy bills and rising food prices. Individuals will have been affected by these to more or lesser extents, but everyone has the ability to express what direction they want the UK to go in next.

The Conservatives, Labour and other parties will be vying to show why they should hold power for the coming five years, with manifestos designed carefully for the electorates they want to attract. With young people the least likely to vote, policies often can neglect this group.

YMCAs in England and Wales work with more than 375,000 young people across all areas of their life: from counselling in schools and youth clubs, to training and skills for employment, or a place to call home. We know the challenges they face in everyday life, as well as the bigger changes to the world as they start their working lives.

In 2023, market research agency Survation polled 1,054 young people aged 16-24 in the UK on their voting history and intentions, their political and personal priorities, and what they think the future holds for them.

As politicians assemble their vision for the country, YMCA strongly urges the consideration of young people's views, who could have their future lives determined by the results of this election.

# Key findings

- ▶ **41% of young people indicated that they are highly likely to vote in the next General Election**, compared to only one-in-ten who plan not to.
- ▶ **Not being registered stopped a third (33%) of those who were eligible to vote from doing so in 2019**, in addition 26% told us not caring about politics or not knowing enough about the parties (22%) was the reason they did not vote.
- ▶ **A party that plans to fund the NHS is the biggest draw for young people choosing who to vote for (33%)**, followed by a priority to control inflation (28%). For other policies detailed in Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's five pledges for 2023, 21% of young people support creating more good jobs. Just 10% support decreasing national debt, and only 5% support stopping the small boats as a political priority.
- ▶ **Mental health (34%) is the biggest concern for young people**, followed by getting a job they enjoy (28%) and getting their own place that they can afford (25%). Other day-to-day concerns associated with the cost of living crisis are also weighing on young people: 24% are concerned about keeping up with bill payments, and 22% are worried about affording food shopping.
- ▶ **Almost half of young people are feeling hopeful for their future (48%), and two-fifths are excited (42%)**. Slightly more young people feel unprepared (29%) rather than prepared (23%), and 38% feel worried.
- ▶ **Three-in-ten young people (29%) think they will be less successful in life than their parents**. A quarter (27%) think they will be similarly successful, and two-in-five think they will be more successful (41%).
- ▶ **Around one-in-ten young people are interested in working in one of a range of modern industries**, such as AI (11%), coding (13%) cybersecurity (13%) and green / renewable energy (10%). Favourability is slightly higher in creative industries (20%), whereas a third (34%) are not interested in any of these.



- ▶ **Young people's views on their desired career paths tend to lean positively** across a number of areas. Half of young people (50%) feel that the types of jobs they are interested in will likely remain relevant, despite advancements in AI. While 41% of young people are worried about being able to stay in a job or industry for five years, 47% are not.
- ▶ **Having a friend or family member in the industry young people want to enter is seen as beneficial**, both for those already in work (52%) and those yet to join the workforce (48%). There are differences in experiences of those already working and perceptions of those yet to do so: 48% of those working found it difficult to get a job they wanted to do in an industry they were interested in, compared to 38% of those not working.



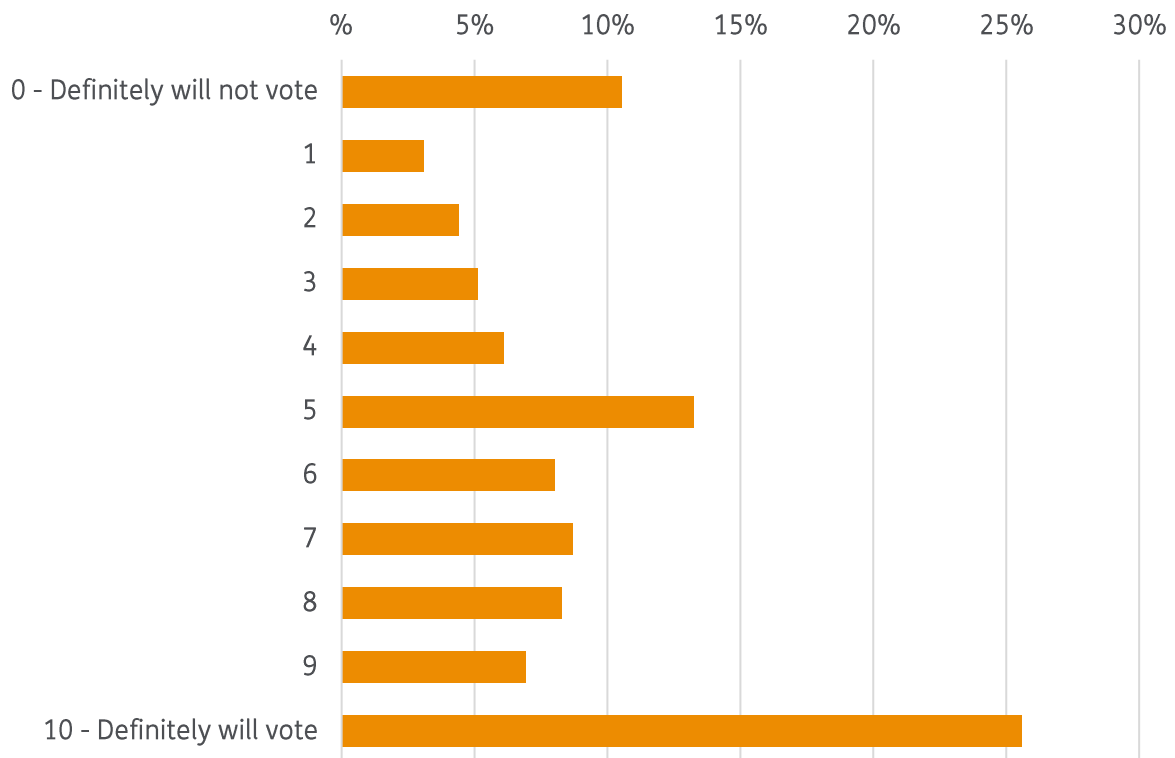
# Voting intention

The proportion of young people who vote in UK general elections is far lower than among other age groups: analysis from the British Election Study estimates that just over 50% of those eligible to vote aged 16-24 voted in 2019, compared to around 60% of 35-44s, 70% of 45-54s and 80% of those aged 75 and over.<sup>1</sup>

These estimates are in line with YMCA's survey of young people in the UK: a quarter of young people aged 16-24 definitely plan vote in the next election, with one-in-ten by comparison planning not to.

Encouragingly, the amount of young people likely to vote in the next general election is almost double the amount who are unlikely to. Ranking their likeliness to vote on a scale from one to ten, two-fifths are highly likely to vote (41% choosing between 8, 9 or 10 on the scale) and almost a quarter are unlikely to (23% selecting 0, 1, 2, or 3).

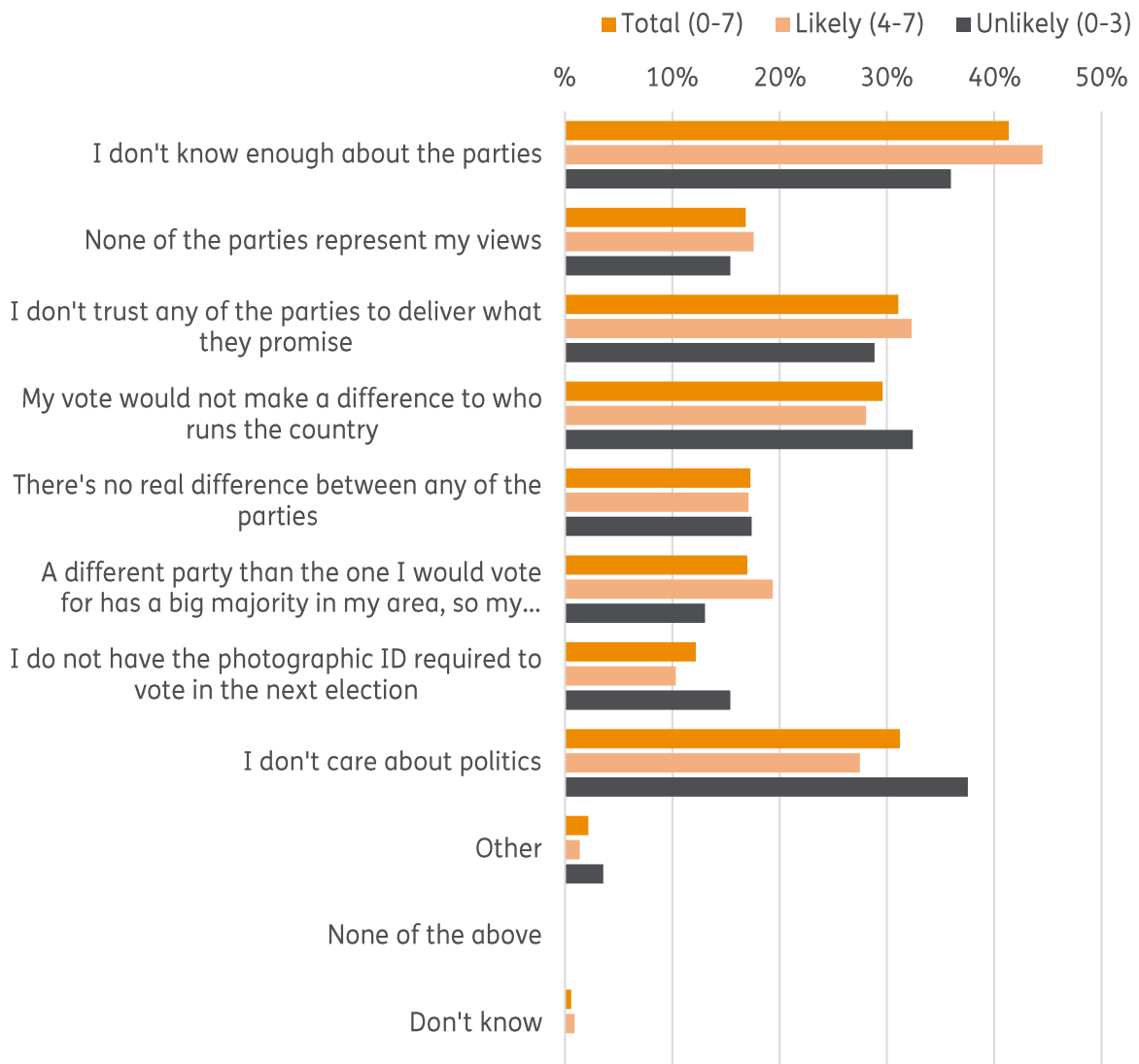
**On a scale from 0-10, where 0 is 'Definitely will not vote', and 10 'Definitely will vote', how likely are you to vote in the next general election?**



<sup>1</sup> British Election Study, **Age and voting behaviour at the 2019 General Election**, 27 January 2021

There is political apathy amongst those unlikely to vote. For those least likely to do so (selecting 0-3), not caring about politics is the driving factor for 38%. A third (33%) feel their vote would not make a difference as to who runs the country. For those more likely but still undecided (selecting 4-7), not knowing enough about the parties is a strong cause for their fence-sitting (45%), followed by not trusting any of the parties to deliver what they promise (32%).

**Why is it that you might not vote, or do not know who you would vote for, in the next general election?**



N=689 | 4-7=436 | 0-3=253

Reported future voting intention may be one thing, however attention should be drawn to what young people told us they did in the 2019 General Election. Of those who were eligible to vote four years ago, around half (52%) did so. More than a third (37%) did not vote, and one-in-ten could not remember. Comparatively, 61% of the overall population in the UK aged 18 or over in 2019 voted in the General Election, or 67% of the electorate registered to vote.<sup>23</sup>

### Can you remember whether or not you voted in the 2019 General Election?



- I voted in the 2019 General Election
- I did not vote in the 2019 General Election
- Can't remember



<sup>2</sup> Office for National Statistics, **Population estimates for the UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: mid-2019**, 24 June 2020

<sup>3</sup> House of Commons Library, **General Election 2019: Results and analysis, second edition**, 28 January 2020



# 2019 young non-voters

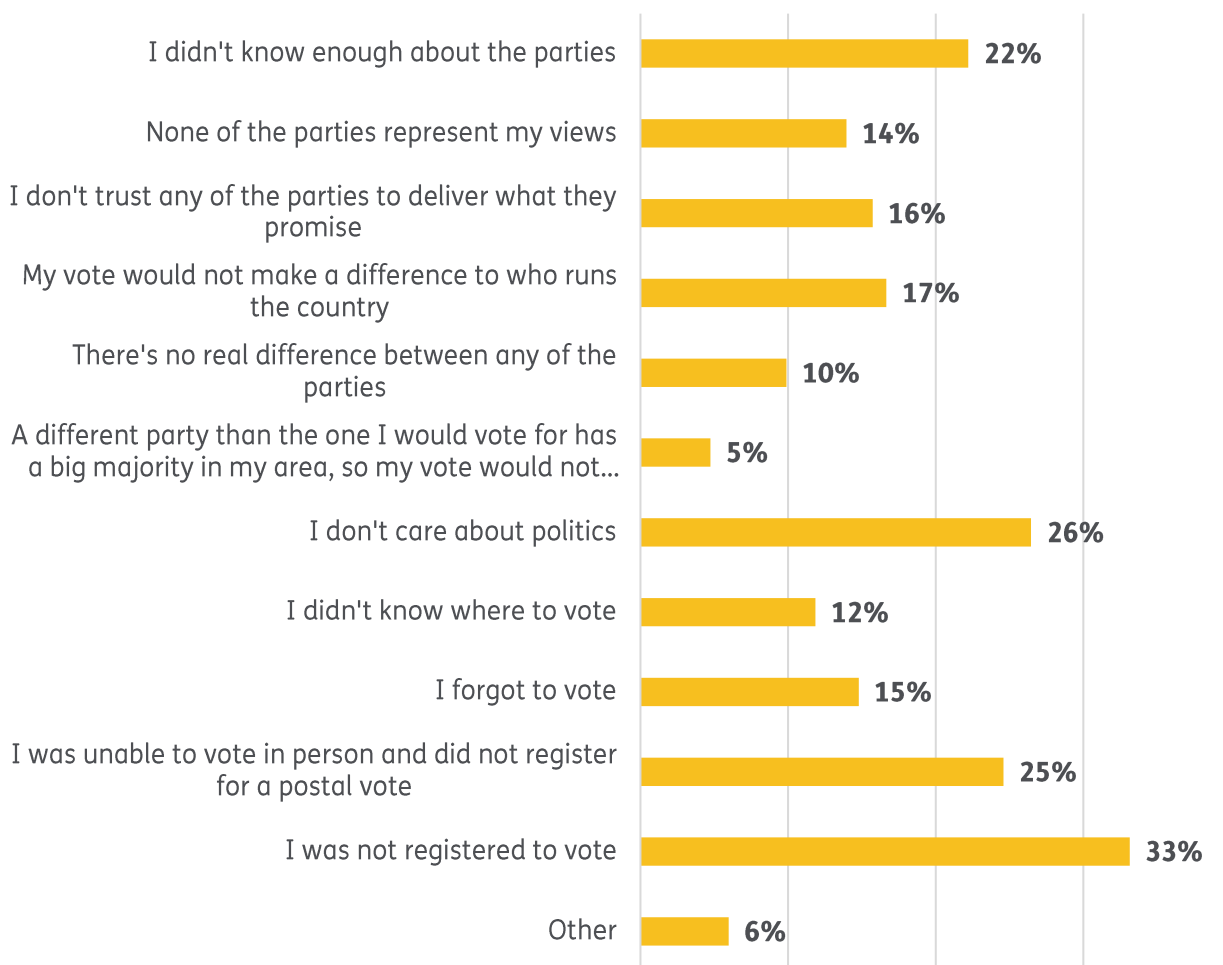
It is important to understand why some young people did not vote in 2019. When seeking to encourage young people to vote in the next general election, it is important to understand why those eligible did not vote. For some, it was disinterest: a quarter (26%) did not vote because of not caring about politics. For others, it was party-based: either through not knowing enough about the parties (22%), feeling none of the parties represent their views (14%) or not trusting any of the parties to deliver what they promise (16%). Indeed, some felt there was no real difference between any of the parties (10%).

Yet, the biggest driver of not voting was not being registered to do so, with one-in-three non-voters reporting this (33%). There were other practicality reasons also: 25% were unable to vote in person and did not register for a postal vote, 12% didn't know where to vote and 15% forgot to vote.





### Why is it that you did not vote in the 2019 General Election?



n=178

When every vote counts, mobilising young voters could prove decisive for parties in marginal seats in the upcoming general election. Particularly when voter turnout among young people has steadily grown across the 2015, 2017 and 2019 general elections, according to the British Election Study's estimates. While it will be the work of individual parties to prove their worth to get young people to the ballot box, targeting registration applications among young people and access to information on voting locations, new photo ID requirements and postal votes will be crucial in increasing civic engagement.

# Young people's policy priorities

To understand the national issues that might mobilise young people to polling stations, we initially asked young people which areas are the most important for a political party to support in order to consider voting for them in 2021, and again in 2023.

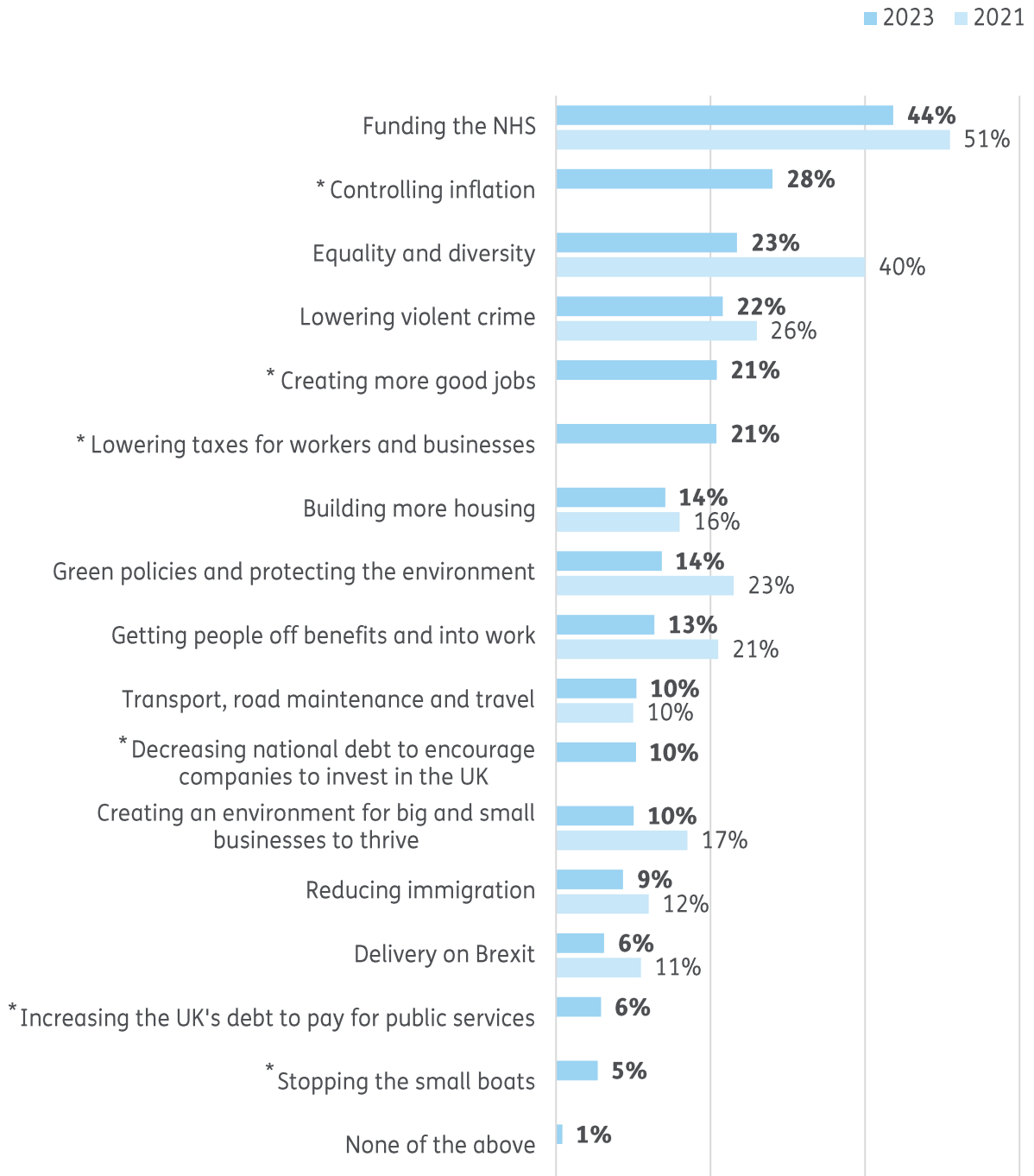
On first look, it could be assumed that support for policies has dropped substantially since we first polled young people in 2021. However, this is likely due to more options listed in 2023, diluting preferences for respondents to select. Given that there were more options to choose from in the 2023 version of the survey, and respondents were asked to choose the top three policy areas, it is likely the larger amount of options may have affected the proportion of young people who chose the original options in 2021 compared to the expanded 2023 re-run.

Despite this, there are some areas for which support has nominally only fallen slightly since 2021, indicating their continued importance to young people. Lowering violent crime was a significant policy area for 22% of young people in 2023 compared to 26% in 2021; building more houses was even more static with 14% indicating importance in 2023 and 16% in 2021.

By comparison, two policy areas in particular have fallen considerably. In 2021, 40% of young people felt that equality and diversity were among the most important areas for a political party to support to consider voting for them, and 23% included green policies and the environment here. In 2023, only 23% and 14% of young people respectively chose these areas.

In terms of understanding this, the survey only identifies the areas young people think are important for a political party to support, and not what has driven any change over the past two years. On the one hand, in 2021 these issues were more central in the media following the proliferation of the Black Lives Matter movement and the upcoming COP26 summit in Glasgow. Conversely, the cost of living crisis may have brought more economic policies likely to directly affect individuals' finances to the forefront of young people's minds.

Which of these areas are most important for a political party to support, in order for you to consider voting for them?



\*(Not asked in 2021)

**NOTE:** Declines between 2021 and 2023 are likely compounded by inclusion of more response options given in 2023, diluting selection compared to the previous wave.



# The verdict on the Prime Minister's five pledges

We initially asked in 2021 which areas were the most important for a political party to support for young people to consider voting for them. We re-ran this question in the 2023 survey, with the addition of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's pledged five priorities to tackle this year.

In the list of options we gave young people, five were included that reflected the five priorities Sunak outlined in January. Not all of these were textually direct matches, either because of original phrasing in the 2021 version of the survey, or to make the language more accessible for young people.

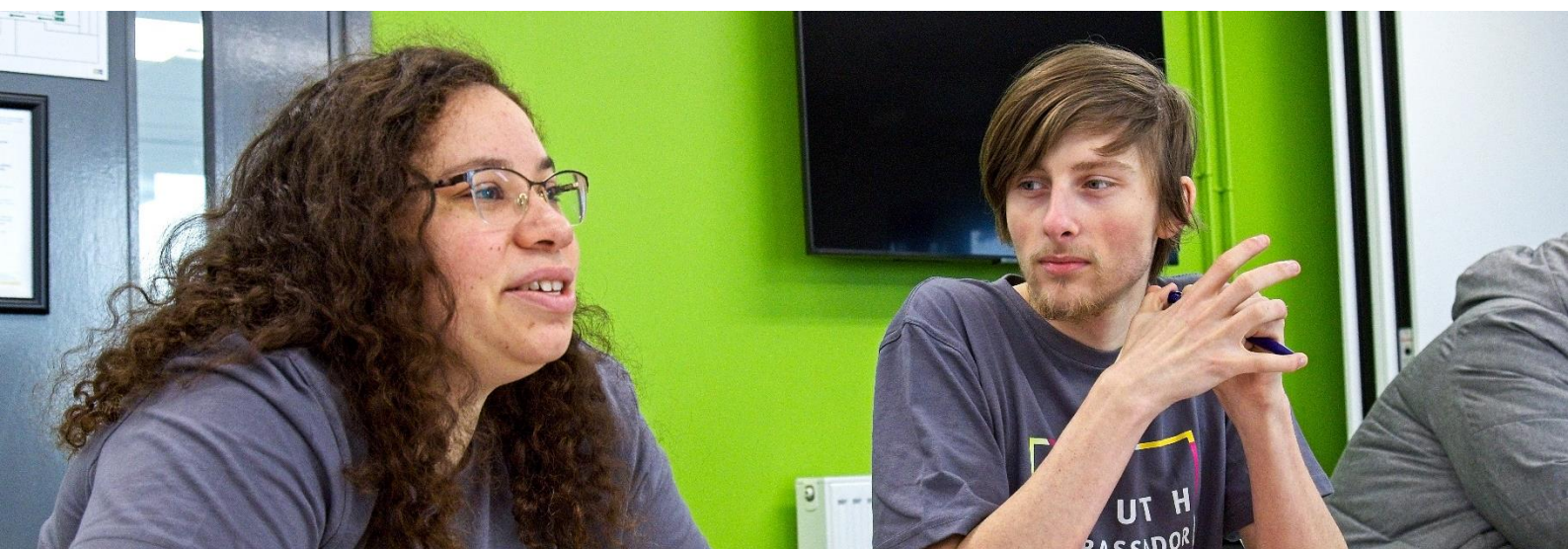
Prime Minister's priorities	Our wording	Which of these areas are most important for a political party to support, in order for you to consider voting for them? (% selecting)
1. Halving inflation this year	Controlling inflation	28%
2. Creating better paid jobs	Creating more good jobs	21%
3. Reducing national debt	Decreasing national debt to encourage companies to invest in the UK	10%
4. Cutting NHS waiting lists	Funding the NHS	44%
5. Passing new laws to stop small boats	Stopping the small boats	5%

Although a more general statement than the waiting lists mentioned in Sunak's priorities, just under half (44%) of young people stated that funding the NHS was an important area for a political party to support. More than a quarter (28%) stated controlling inflation, and a fifth (21%) stated creating more good jobs.

Two of Sunak's priorities did not resonate well with young people. We added the context of decreasing national debt "to encourage companies to invest in the UK" to give an explanation as to why a political party may want to do this – only 10% of young people selected this. Lower still was support for stopping the small boats, which was supported as a priority area for 5% of young people.

## Concerning issues

These national issues can often surface in young people's lives in a multitude of ways. To understand how, we asked respondents the top three issues that they are most concerned about for themselves over the next few years. Again, this repeated a question from our 2021 survey, but included options on physical health, mental health and affording both essential and non-essential items. Accordingly, these additions will likely have reduced the amount of young people selecting options that were in the 2021 survey.

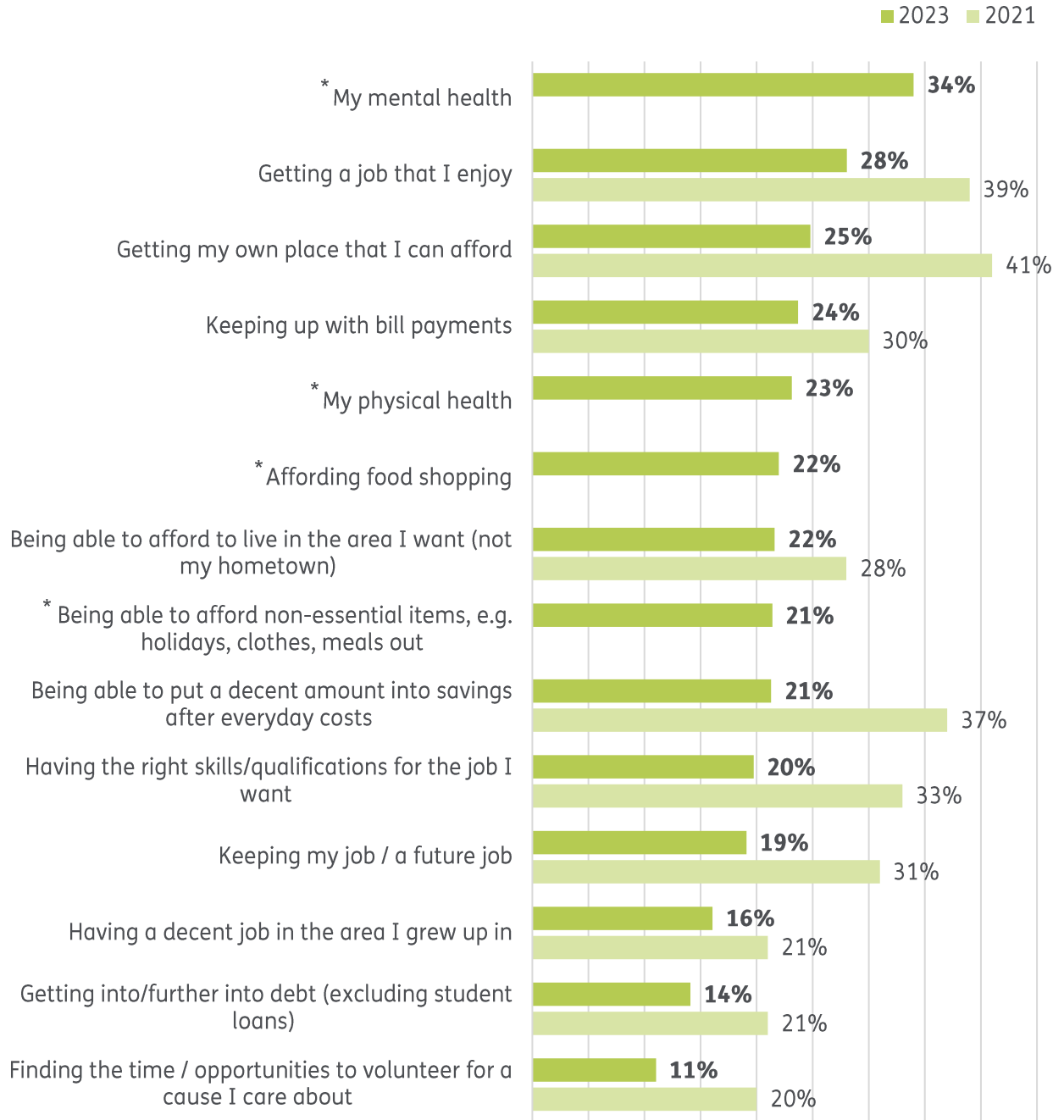


The issue young people were most concerned about was their mental health (34%). Getting a job that they enjoy (28%) and getting their own place that they can afford (25%) were the next-highest ranking, although both with a smaller proportion of young people selecting these than in 2021 (39% and 41% respectively). Mental health and affordable housing were the number-one concerns for the most young people, with 13% and 10% respectively putting these problems at the top of their lists.

With the caveat of diluted responses in the latest survey compared to 2021, things that could help them with their long-term financial security are less frequently at the forefront of young people's minds: those reporting being able to put a decent amount into savings after everyday costs has reduced to 21% from 37% in 2021.

Comparatively, a more pressing concern has climbed over the past two years as the cost of living crisis has bitten. Keeping up with bill payments has moved from being the issue ranked sixth-highest in terms of concerns in 2021 to fourth-highest in 2023.

**Issues young people are most concerned about for themselves over the next few years (top three)**



\*(Not asked in 2021)

**NOTE:** Declines between 2021 and 2023 are likely compounded by inclusion of more response options given in 2023, diluting selection compared to the previous wave.



# Hope for the future

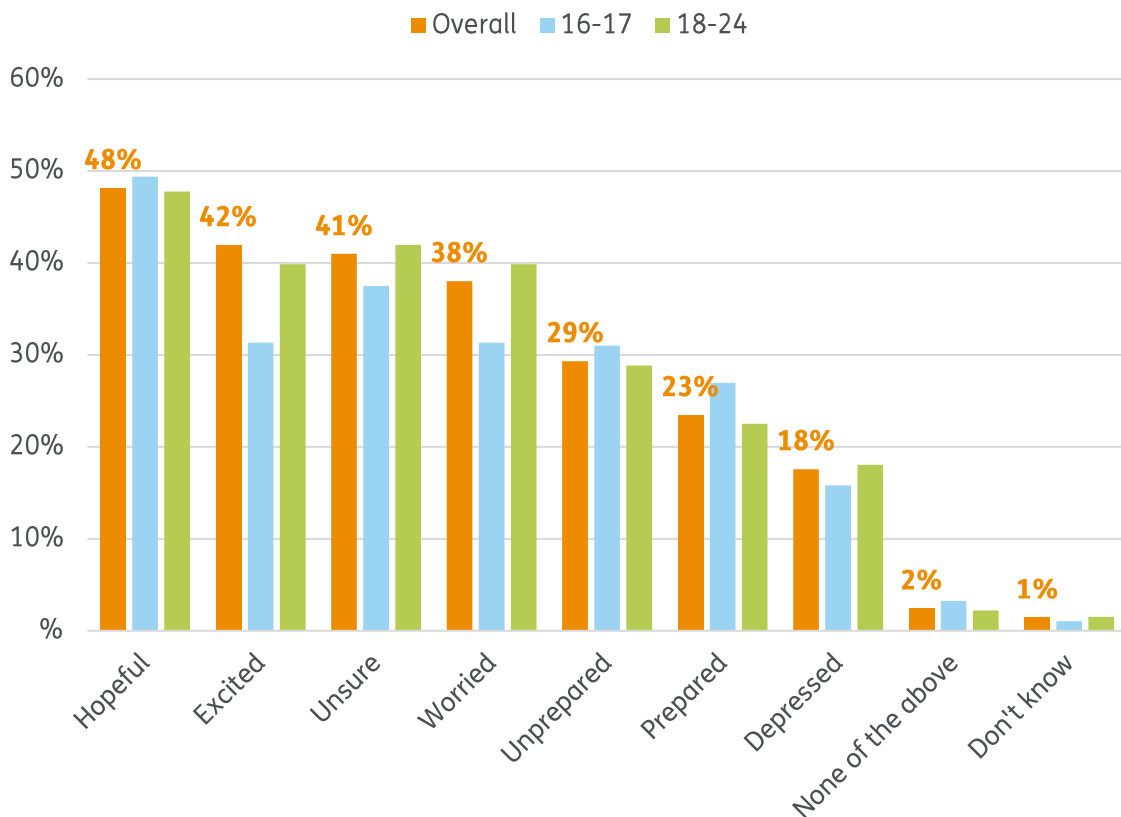
While there are a number of headwinds young people may be facing today, from competition for entry-level jobs, to low wage growth and a squeezed rental market, our survey respondents on the whole had relatively buoyant outlooks for their lives.

We asked young people how they felt about their future, with the ability to choose up to three words. Almost half (48%) of all young people said that they felt hopeful about their future, and two-fifths (42%) felt excited.

Not all sentiment was positive, however: 41% felt unsure about their future, 38% felt worried and 29% felt unprepared.

There was slight variation in feeling between those aged 16-17 and those aged 18-24. For the younger age group, 31% felt excited, compared to 40% of the latter. Those aged 18-24 were more likely to feel worried with 40% reporting this, compared to 31% of 16-17s.

## Looking forward, how do you feel about your future?



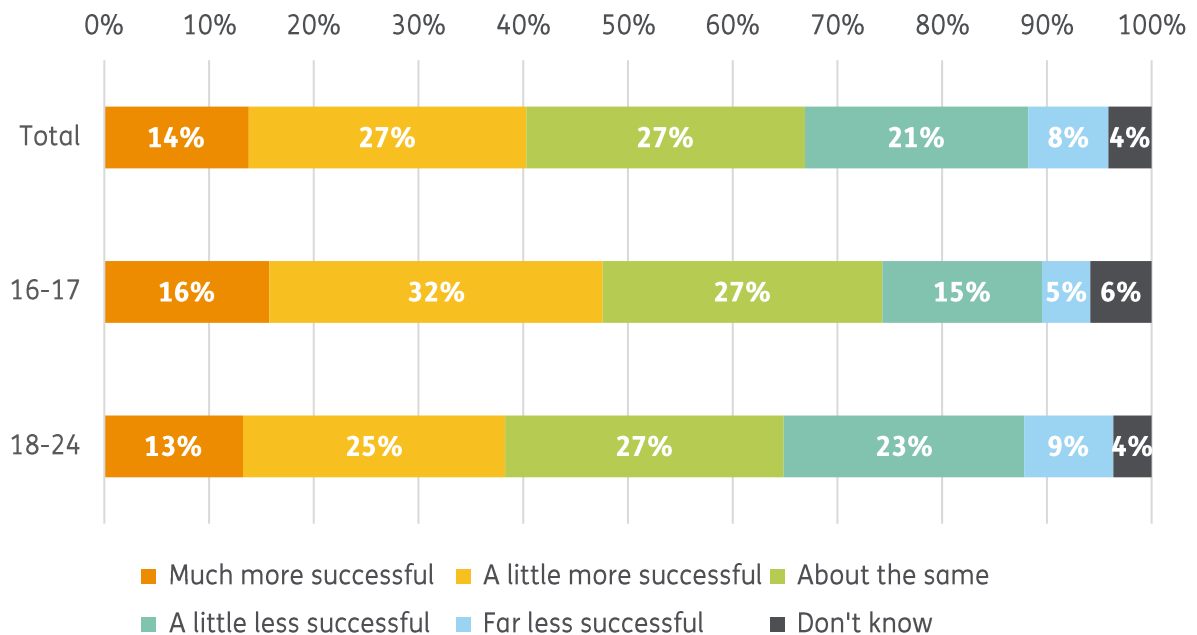
16-17 = 227 | 18-24 = 827

We also asked how successful young people felt they will be in their lives, compared to their parents. More young people thought they would be more successful (41%) than about the same (27%) or less successful (29%). While it is encouraging that many young people do think they will be more successful than their parents, the fact that six-in-ten do not feel this way runs counter to the standard narrative of generational progress that has dominated the post-war era.

Optimism is stronger amongst 16- and 17-year-olds than 18- to 24-year-olds, where 48% and 38% respectively felt they would be more successful, and 20% and 31% felt they would be less successful.

This positivity is not echoed in some economic analyses of life chances, with decades of low pay growth, spiralling house prices and low financial resilience often indicating that young people may be worse off than generations that came before them – accentuated further by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis.<sup>4</sup>

**How successful do you feel you will be in your life, compared to your parents?**



16-17 = 227 | 18-24 = 827

<sup>4</sup> Resolution Foundation, An intergenerational audit for the UK: 2022, 14 November 2022

# The future of work



As they seek the success they hope for, today's young people are entering the workforce at a disruptive time. The world is undergoing the “fourth industrial revolution” – that is, the automation of processes, interconnected systems and intelligent computers in manufacturing and production. Discussion continues amongst industry leaders, politicians and international conglomerates on how this will impact what the workplace will look like.

Interest in working in newer and innovative industries is small but significant amongst young people, with around one-in-ten wanting to work in fields such as green energy, data science, AI and robotics. This is higher for computing (14%), coding (13%) and cybersecurity (13%).

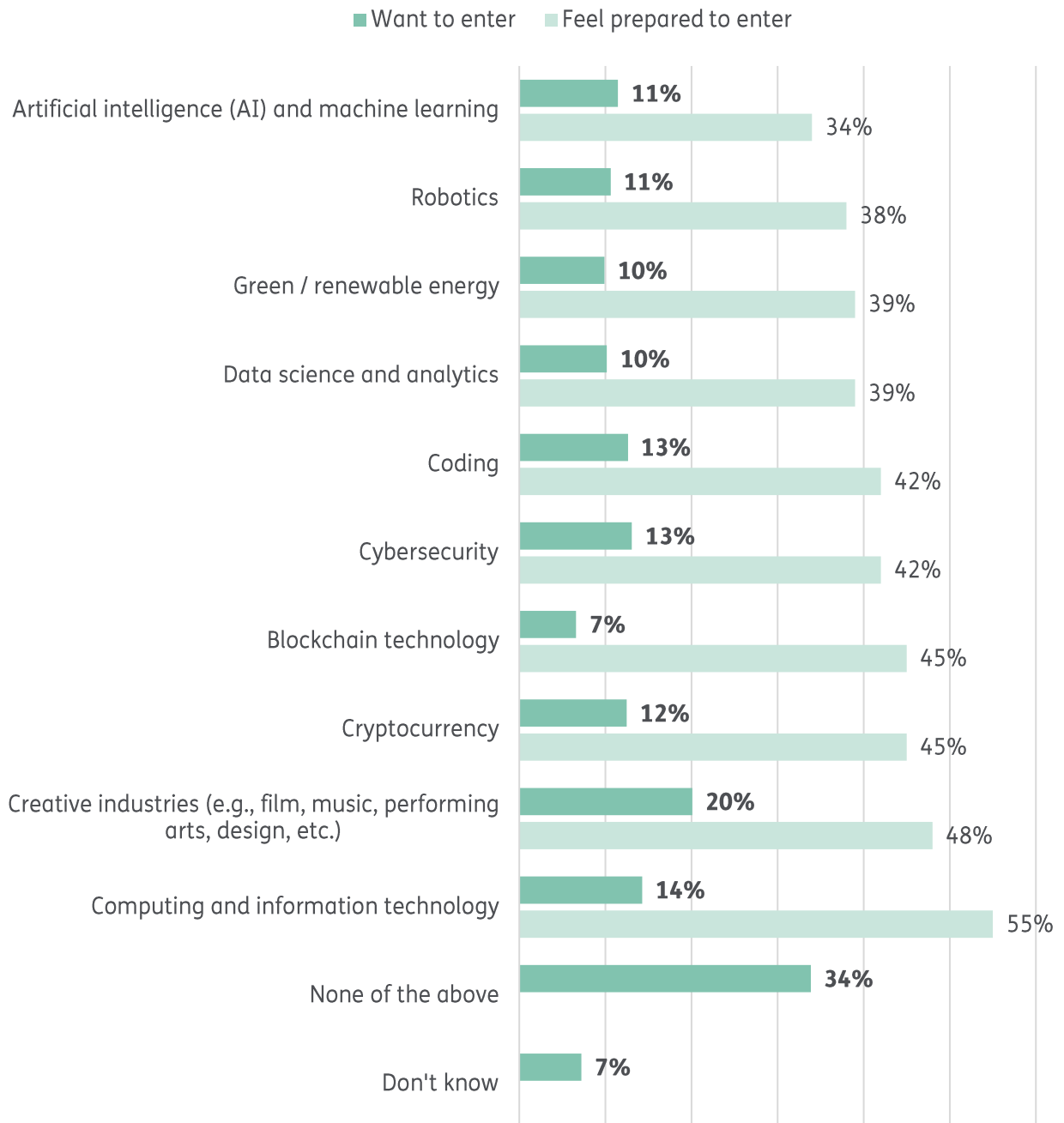
Although a more general and wide-ranging option, one-in-five young people are interested in working in creative industries, such as film, music, performing arts and design: far higher than the nascent technologies listed. For a further third, none of the industries listed reflected their career interests.

For those who indicated they would be interested in working in one of these industries, young people felt least prepared to work in AI and machine learning (34%). As a rapidly developing industry, particularly coming to the forefront with generative AI platforms such as ChatGPT, it may be the case that the pace and its trajectory can be hard for young people to feel ready to enter.



Fields which young people can do in their own homes or in education have a higher feeling of preparedness among those interested in working in them: coding (42%), cryptocurrency (45%) and computing (55%) for example, with the latter being the highest reported preparedness. The second-highest is amongst those interested in working in creative industries (48%).

### Desire to work in future industries and preparedness to do so



# Views on working life



On the whole, young people are more positive than negative when looking at their future working lives. We gave young people a series of contrasting statements and asked them which best matched their own perspective.

Almost half (47%) of young people were not worried about being able to stay in a job or industry for five years, compared to two-fifths (41%) who were worried about this. A further 12% didn't know – a response chosen more amongst those economically inactive (i.e., students or those not seeking work) where the proportion was 21%.

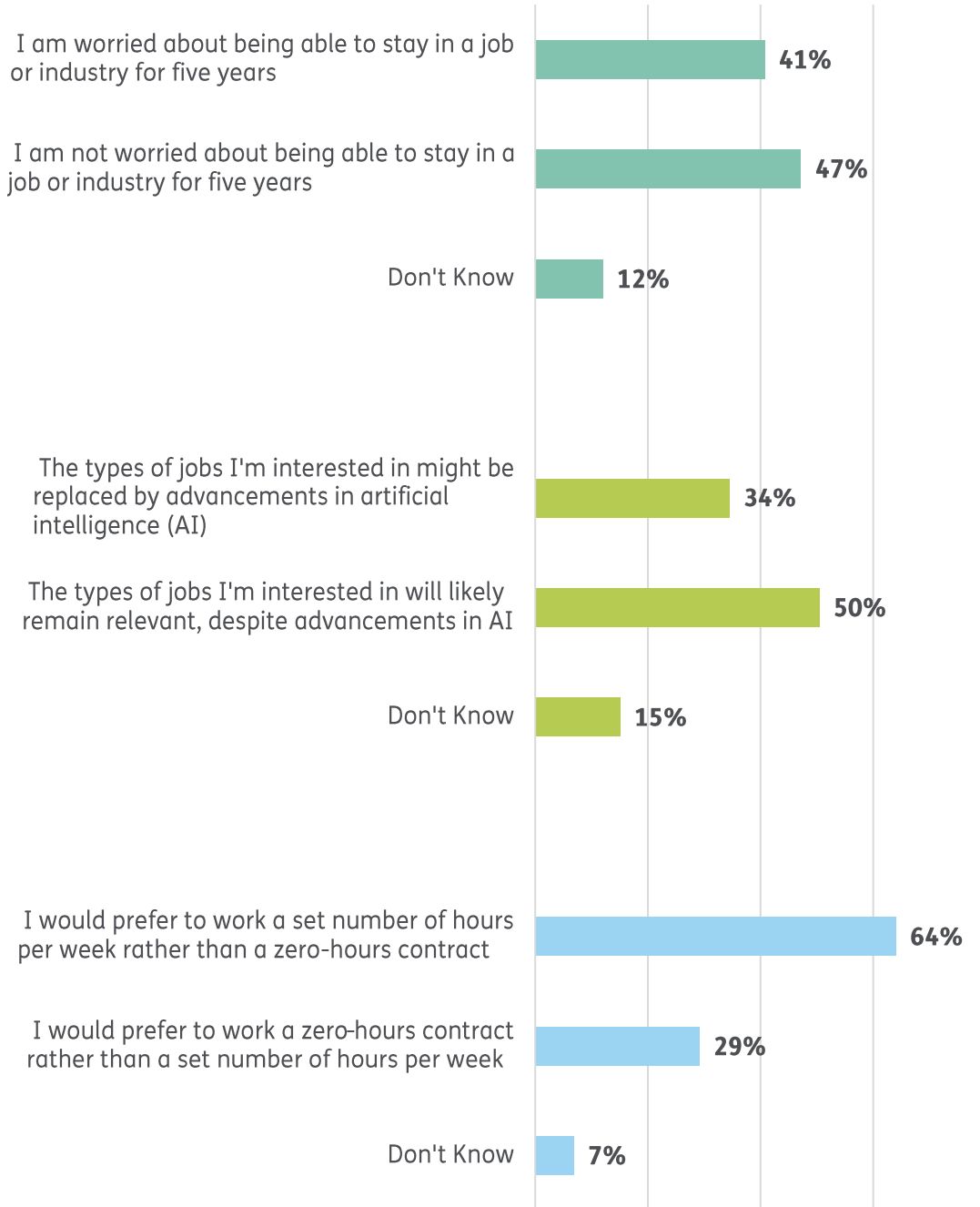
Half (50%) felt that the types of jobs they are interested in will likely remain relevant, despite advancements in AI. This rose to 55% for those in full-time employment, whose experience of daily workplace tasks will likely have informed their view on what could be automated. A third of all young people (34%) felt the types of jobs they are interested in might be replaced by advancements in AI.

Despite young people disproportionately on zero hour contracts, with 13% of all 16- to-24-year-olds in employment in the UK on these compared to 3.6% of all workers,<sup>5</sup> it is not the preferred model. Two-thirds (64%) of young people would prefer to work a set number of hours per week, while three-in-ten (29%) would prefer to work a zero hours contract.

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<sup>5</sup> Office for National Statistics, [EMP17: People in employment on zero hours contracts](#), 15 August 2023

**Which of the following statements comes closest to your views?**



There were a few areas we asked to compare young people's expectations for entering the workplace against those who had already done so, to see how in-line perceptions were to reality.

The most notable disparity was in terms of getting a job in a desired sector: 47% of those not working were confident they will be able to get a job they want in an industry they are interested in, while 42% of those in full-time employment felt it was easy for them to do so. On the other hand, 38% of those not working are not confident they would be able to get a job they want in an industry they are interested in. For those in full-time employment, almost half (48%) said doing this was difficult. There is a chance that those yet to start work are slightly over-optimistic about their chances of getting their desired jobs.



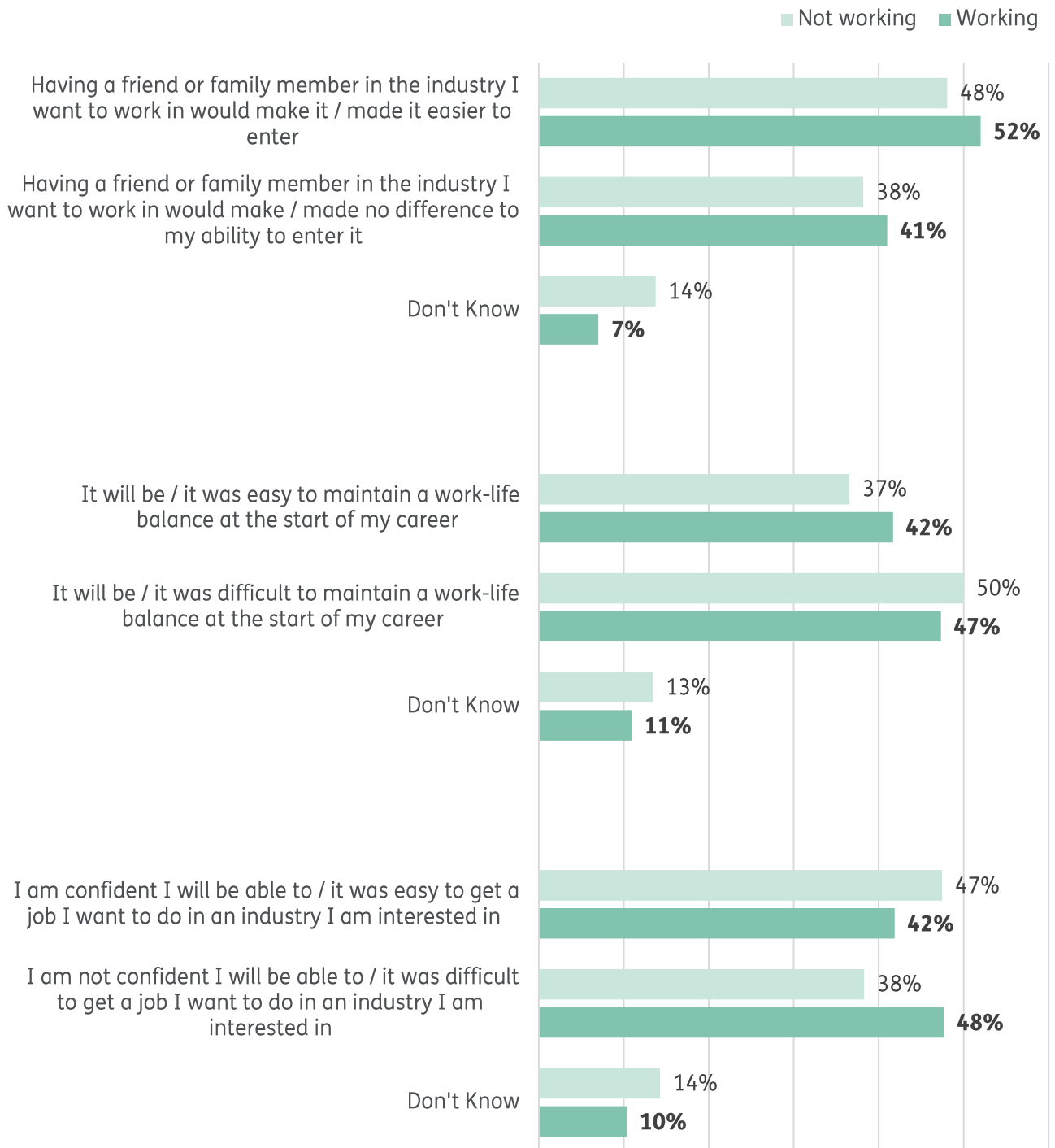
Entering a competitive workplace can be difficult at the start of a young person's career, where proving merit in a pile of applications prior to the interview stage can be challenge enough. Beyond a CV and chance, knowing someone in the industry an individual wants to enter can bring certain advantages, from introductions to insider tips.

Around half of young people not in work and those working full-time felt that having a friend or family member would make it easier (48%) or made it easier (52%) to enter that field, while around two-fifths of both groups felt this would make (38%) or made (41%) no difference. Perceptions here track relatively well to experiences of young people in work, where personal connections can provide a useful entry into career paths.

Those yet to enter work are less likely to think that it will be easy to maintain a work-life balance at the start of their career (37%) than those already in full-time employment found it (42%), with half (50%) of the former expecting it to be difficult. Here it seems that those not yet working may find this balance for wellbeing easier than they might anticipate.



Which of the following statements comes closest to your views?



Not working = 320 | Working = 704

# Conclusion

With both an upward trend in young voter turnout at the last general elections, and 86% of 18-to-24-year-olds surveyed indicating a likeliness to do so this time around, the young vote is fertile ground for parties to win. As long as they are registered to do so: with a third of young people who did not vote in 2019 reporting this as a blocker, a voter base can only be as strong as those with the ability to cast their ballot. And with the introduction of voter ID requirement, this is a potential two-fold barrier.

The future young people want is one where they can have peace of mind. A third of young people are most concerned about their mental health over the coming few years, with getting a job they enjoy and their own place that they can afford shortly after. These are the basic essentials in life: wellbeing, fulfilling work and a home. But given spiralling housing and rental prices, lower real-term wages than a decade ago and with overall NHS waiting lists in England at a record high, things that for generations had been a given are becoming harder to attain.

In a year of growing expenses, it is not surprising to see that saving for the future has fallen down young people's priority lists, when affording bills and food shopping have become frequent concerns. Despite this, the UK's young people remain hopeful – but this hope can only materialise if the Government of tomorrow can help them unlock the basic building blocks to thriving independently. Their aspirations for the future can only then get bigger.

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## YMCA ENGLAND & WALES

### **Get in touch**

For any questions or support,  
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calling: **020 7186 9500**



**Here for young people  
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YMCA enables people to develop their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.