

MCS Charitable Foundation

Getting Gen-Z into retrofit and renewables jobs: the appetite is there, but not the awareness





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MCS Charitable Foundation,

www.mcscharitablefoundation.org

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About MCS Charitable Foundation

MCS Charitable Foundation is an independent UK-wide charity. Our mission is to accelerate the widespread adoption of renewable energy and low carbon technologies. With growing concern about the climate emergency and energy costs, the need to advance low carbon solutions has never been greater. We want everyone to have access to affordable and reliable renewable energy, so that we can have warm, comfortable homes as part of a resilient, zero carbon future. The Microgeneration Certification Scheme (MCS) was set up by the UK Government to maintain and promote standards in home-grown renewable energy. Since 2018 the scheme has been run by the independent MCS Service Company. MCS Charitable Foundation, set up by UK Government in 2018, is the sole shareholder of the Company, and uses the Company's business surpluses to fund its charitable work and grant-giving programme.

About Savanta

Savanta is a fast-growing, global, data, market research, and advisory company that informs and inspires its clients through powerful data, empowering technology, and high-impact consulting, to enable its clients to make better decisions and achieve faster progress.

The Savanta logo consists of the word 'Savanta' in a large, black, serif font, followed by a red colon and two red dots.

Designed by Jimmy Davies - jimmydavies.com

Foreword



A generation of young people is preparing to enter the workforce with levels of concern about climate change like never before, and a determination to tackle it. But despite record awareness about the environmental challenge facing us, Gen Z do not necessarily see “green jobs” as being for them, instead thinking of climate action as something they can undertake in their personal lives.

This timely report sets out how to unlock the potential and drive of Gen Z to help with the seismic shift in the workforce that we need to meet net zero. To meet legal net zero goals, the UK will need more than a hundred thousand workers in the solar and heat pump industries alone in the next decade. 15-25-year-olds – those at the start of their careers or about to enter the workforce – will be absolutely crucial in providing that capacity. The question is, what do those young people want from their work life, why do they not see “green jobs” as an option, and how can they be recruited or encouraged into careers that support the green transition?

This report builds on thorough research into those questions, which have not been fully addressed before. Among the key findings, which should be heeded by Government and by advisors working on education as well as net zero policy, is the need for apprenticeships to be much better promoted. Promoting apprenticeships encourages young people to consider green career options that they would not otherwise be aware of.

At present, university is still seen as the default option for aspirational students – this report shows that better promotion of apprenticeships can provide young people with respectable, viable and accessible routes into secure and fulfilling jobs.

Gen Z is coming of age in a time of huge uncertainty, but also a time of opportunity for the UK to secure its standing as a climate leader. Gen Z can be the driving force of that leadership. Adopting the findings of this new report will be a foundation towards achieving that vision.

David Cowdrey, Director of External Affairs

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Executive Summary

It is an accepted fact that there is a skills shortage across the economy – it is as difficult to find an HGV driver as it a nurse or, in the context of this report, a heat pump engineer or solar panel fitter. But if we are to have any hope of reaching our net zero goals, this is an issue that must be addressed across the building and small-scale renewables sectors.

With projected job numbers estimated to increase in the tens of thousands for the heat pump and solar sectors, and the hundreds of thousands across the building industry, we must recruit a new generation of skilled workers as re-training the existing workforce cannot meet all of this demand.

This brief report sets out the findings of research on ‘What Gen-Z want from a Green Job’ conducted by the market research agency Savanta on behalf of the MCS Charitable Foundation.

The research involved a quantitative survey of 1000 young people and four follow-on focus groups. It explored understandings and perceptions of future career aspirations, environmental awareness, perceptions of ‘green jobs’ and ‘jobs in renewables’, and potential career paths.

A key finding of the research was that despite young people being environmentally aware and concerned about climate change, there was a disconnect between that concern and an awareness that they could have a positive impact on the planet through their work. There was also a general lack of awareness of apprenticeships as a potential training route into the sector.

The findings lead to six clear recommendations:**1. Demonstrate impact**

Some participants questioned the level of impact some jobs defined as ‘green’ could have. They wanted to understand the sustainability and extent of impact they could have in their career.

2. Provide examples

Gen Z understood the broad-brush definition of green jobs, but wanted to understand what these looked like in greater detail. This is particularly important in the context of the small-scale renewables sector – what do jobs look like in the sector, and how can we promote them? The creation and promotion of good case studies can be invaluable in showing people the routes in and job options available to them.

3. Explore routes in

The variety of jobs available that had positive impact on the environment felt unexplored for many participants. They wanted to understand qualifications required for the range of jobs – this is especially important in relation to promoting apprenticeships as a viable route into the sector.

4. Emphasise variety

Although participants were concerned about climate change, many still wanted to pursue jobs in line with their passion and skills. Emphasise that a dream job with positive impact is possible. In short, their passion and skills can align with a job in the small-scale renewables sector. It is up to the sector to show them how.

5. Create an open forum

Participants had many questions about green jobs and shared they hadn’t thought of using their jobs to have a positive environmental impact. Allowing an open dialogue with young people to explore their options in the sector will be key to fostering interest. This could be through school assemblies or university job fairs, or online forums such as LinkedIn, Instagram and TikTok.

6. Meet them where they are

Gen Z are proactive in their research into their future careers. They acknowledge the power of hearing tailored advice from teachers/universities, but also from online sites and social media. These will be key areas to influence.



**Gen-Z – an untapped
workforce that can help
deliver net zero**

Introduction

It is an accepted fact that there is a skills shortage across the economy – it is as difficult to find an HGV driver¹ as it a nurse² or, in the context of this report, a heat pump engineer or solar panel fitter. But if we are to have any hope of reaching our net zero goals, this is an issue that must be addressed across the building and small-scale renewables sectors.

Solar Energy UK estimate that we will need up to 60,000 people working in the solar industry by the mid-2030s.³ In the heat pump sector, the Heat Pump Association suggest the number of heating engineers required by the same time at 50,000.⁴ Looking across the whole sector, the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) estimate an additional 350,000 people – or an additional 13% on the current workforce level – will be needed to deliver the necessary building improvements across the sector, including a further 80,000 project managers and associated support staff.⁵

Re-training the existing workforce into new roles can meet some of this demand, but it cannot fill it all. In the heating sector, for example, research from the Gas Safe Register shows the median age for gas engineers is 55.⁶ More problematically, the research also shows that 55 is the same age at which some engineers begin to leave the register, with peaks at 60 and 65. This means that a majority of the existing 140,000 heating engineers⁷ are due to retire within a decade, making them an unlikely source of re-training. And with anecdotal evidence from other sectors suggesting a similar picture, there is a clear need to find alternate sources of new workers to reach the numbers required, with school leavers an obvious and seemingly untapped option.

But how do we go about recruiting the next generation of young people into the sector?

What do we know about their perceptions of ‘green jobs’, and how it compares to others they may be considering?

This short report sets out to answer some of these questions, based on research conducted by the market research agency Savanta⁸ commissioned by the MCS Charitable Foundation.

1 www.cips.org/supply-management/news/2023/july/hgv-driver-numbers-stabilise-but-risk-of-shortages-remains/

2 www.kingsfund.org.uk/blog/2022/10/nhs-nursing-workforce

3 solarenergyuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Be-part-of-a-brighter-future-E-Booklet.pdf

4 www.heatpumps.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/A-Roadmap-for-the-Role-of-Heat-Pumps.pdf

5 www.citb.co.uk/about-citb/construction-industry-research-reports/search-our-construction-industry-research-reports/building-skills-for-net-zero/

6 www.gassaferegister.co.uk/media/2490/decade-review.pdf

7 www.gassaferegister.co.uk/about-us/news/news-2019/ten-years-of-keeping-people-gas-safe

8 www.savanta.com

Researching what Gen-Z want from a ‘green job’

There is, of course, an issue with the term ‘green job’ that needs to be acknowledged from the outset. It is such a broad phrase that covers a vast array of jobs, as can be seen by the ONS definition:

“Employment in an activity that contributes to protecting or restoring the environment, including those that mitigate or adapt to climate change.”⁹

However, as a route into understanding young peoples’ perceptions and understandings about career options, it provided a useful starting point from which to delve further into their views on ‘jobs in renewable energy’.

The Savanta research was conducted in two phases:

Phase 1

Phase 1 involved a quantitative survey of 1030 young people split into two roughly equal groups – 15-17 year olds, and 18-24 year old undergraduates (with a small minority of that group – 3% - undertaking an apprenticeship or work-based training).

Phase 2

Phase 2 comprised four focus groups of six participants split equally by age (16-17 and 18-24) and if they were studying STEM or non-STEM subjects. The focus groups were designed to explore and probe further into the key themes that emerged from the quantitative survey.

⁹ www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/articles/greenjobscurrentandupcomingwork/march2023

Summary of key findings

The research findings clearly showed there is an appetite for Gen-Z to do jobs that they feel have value and can have a positive impact on the planet, but a lack of awareness of what those jobs are and, crucially, how to go about training for them.

Given that their primary information sources are careers advisers (both dedicated careers advice services and teachers), parents and social media, follow-on research is needed to understand how they perceive jobs in the sector, and in-turn how they are presenting those views to young people.

The other key finding was the interest in apprenticeships as a route into work, but a lack of knowledge as to how to turn this interest into action. This should be of particular interest to training providers across the spectrum of the industry, given the depth and breadth of apprenticeship options available now. Not only can we look to get more young people into hands-on apprenticeships on the front-line of installing or developing green technologies, the option of doing more office-based supporting roles as apprenticeships also exists, such as accounting roles to support green businesses.

Given the scale of the looming skills shortage, coupled with the increasing urgency of moving towards net zero, the research findings suggest a clear need for education providers - who, via careers advisers, are often best-placed to provide careers advice to young people - to present a wider range of options to them on their future careers – both in terms of what that career could be, and how to train for it.

The remainder of the report sets these findings out in more detail, beginning by outlining where Gen-Z are in terms of career hopes and aspirations, job expectations and environmental awareness, before moving on to discuss how they perceive their career options and how to achieve them. The report then focusses more specifically on exploring what young people think of 'green jobs', with a specific focus on jobs in renewable energy, before concluding with a set of recommendations on how to promote green jobs to young people that, it is hoped, can go some way towards creating the next generation of workers in the sector.

What Gen-Z want from a job, any job...

Perhaps unsurprisingly, and in common with what would seem to be a fairly reasonable aspiration for us all in relation to our work, the two most common things that Gen Z want from a future job are enjoyment and financial security. Perhaps more surprisingly, given that Gen-Z have a strong overall awareness of and concern regarding the environment in general and climate change in particular, this does not seem to drive their motivations for future jobs.

The research highlighted that:

Healthcare, business and accountancy are the most favoured industries for Gen Z when they think about their future careers.

When looking at what they want out of their future careers, having a job which they would enjoy and being well paid were priorities for the majority of respondents.

The current economic instability in the UK is a key driver of Gen Z's focus on financial security for their future careers.

Comparatively, having a job that benefits the environment was only important to a minority (15%) of respondents.

Gen Z did have interest in having a job which has a positive impact on the environment, but this was not a dominating factor in their motivations.

When prompted to think and talk about climate change as part of the research, young people showed they had done some thinking about elements of their careers that could have a positive impact on the planet. However, their focus was often more on their own personal impact on the environment such as their transportation to jobs, rather than the impact the actual job could have – whether positive or negative. Over 80% of participants saw a green job as ‘a job that is good for the planet’ – but didn’t necessarily connect that with a job that they might be able to do as a career choice. This view was neatly summarised by one focus group attendee who commented:

“In all honesty, I don't think of the environment when I think of my career prospects. It's there but...an afterthought.”

(Non-STEM student, 15-17yr old)

Participants were keen to stress that they wanted to do jobs that aligned with their passions and skills, however there was a clear disconnect between their expressed concern for the environment and a belief they could do something about it through their work. To help resolve this, they suggested it made sense for pathways into green careers to be broad, so they could see how what they are learning or studying can be done in a green way (e.g. working in finance), rather than pushing for exclusive green pathways (e.g. being a heat pump installer).

The older age group (18-24) and those with a pre-existing awareness of Net Zero, along with those with pre-existing links to the sector (for example through their parents’ work) were more likely to consider green jobs. Similarly, male students and those studying STEM subjects are significantly more likely to consider a job installing renewable technology over women and those not studying STEM, with some seeing themselves as in an excellent position to make a strong impact:

“I think we're in the perfect place to be the change makers and be the ones that will have an impact and hopefully solve the climate crisis...When you're looking at targets for 2050..for net zero that will absolutely be our generation that has to step up and tackle that.”

(STEM student, 15-17yr old)



**To reach net zero we
must encourage a diverse
workforce into the sector**

While encouraging to see such a positive response to the potential offered by jobs in renewable technologies, the sector needs to engage with a more diverse group of young people to address the current imbalance in the workforce.

What these findings highlight is the need to appeal to a much broader range of potential workers if the sector is to avoid a major skills shortage in the near future. Research from the Energy Systems Catapult on increasing diversity in the heating sector¹⁰ showed that only two percent of heating engineers are women, and only five percent from ethnic minorities. The report highlighted the need for an increase in availability and awareness of fair job opportunities, flexible training and work opportunities, and the promotion of a healthy and inclusive environment in which women and ethnic minorities feel a sense of belonging if they are to be drawn into the sector.

On a more encouraging note, all participants were interested to hear they could have a positive environmental impact in their career when presented with a broader definition of green jobs, such as a sustainability manager within a retail company or an accountant in a green finance firm, and not just as an installer of renewables. But the disconnect shown by research participants between their awareness of climate and environmental issues, and an understanding of how their work might address them highlights the need for a significant shift in the language used when discussing career options with young people.

However as the next section highlights, perhaps the real challenge lies in shifting perceptions – both of young people and those who are advising them on their career options – and enable them to consider alternative pathways other than the one that leads to university.



¹⁰ es.catapult.org.uk/report/skills-diversity-in-heating/

Gen-Z career paths

For the majority of research participants, university was seen as the natural path to take after school. For some, this was as a way into a desired career or out of interest in pursuing a particular subject, but for others the appeal of university is the social aspect of getting the 'university experience' and living independently for the first time:

"I want to go to university because I like the subjects that I'm studying and I wanted to sort of study them, go to depth. And I also want the experience of university. So that's sort of three years of higher education and then the sort of social life and the experiences that come with it."

(Non-STEM student, 15-17yr old)

When looking at these motivations in more detail, what became apparent was the lack of awareness of alternatives to university due to a lack of promotion at school. And of those who had undertaken their own research into apprenticeships, there was a feeling that there was a fairly limited choice on offer. In general, research participants were not aware of the breadth of careers that can be supported through alternative educational routes such as apprenticeships:

"There's been a lot of support in my school for universities, but not with apprenticeships. For apprenticeships, I don't know as much as I should. For me university is the only option"

(Non-STEM student, 15-17yr old)

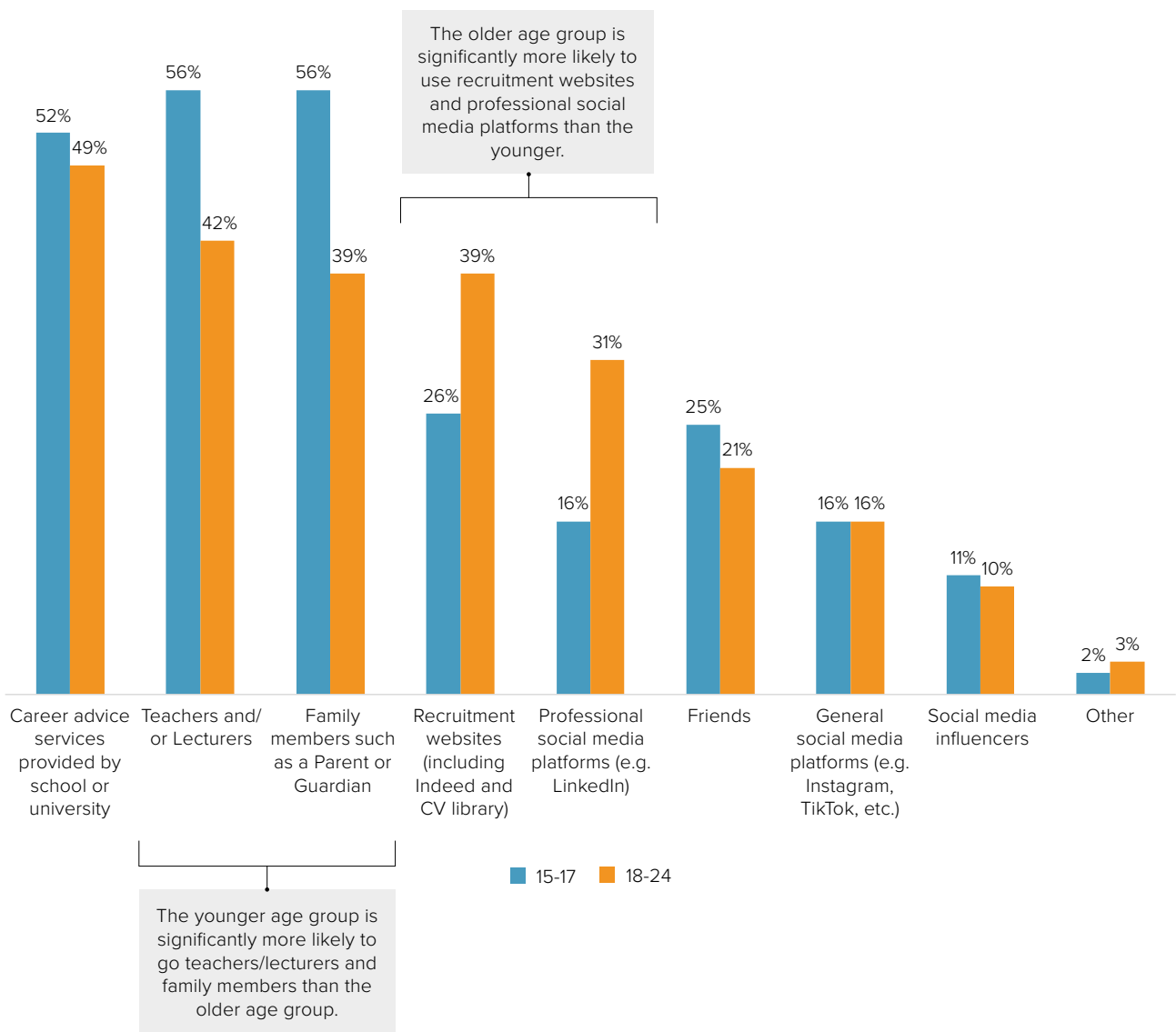
These findings are not necessarily surprising, but they do suggest that young people are being presented with a limited set of options for their post-school life, whatever form that takes. To explore this further, we asked participants what sources of information they relied upon for careers advice. On first asking this question, careers advice services provided by school or university, parents, family members and teachers or lecturers all featured highly (see fig. 1.).

Further exploring this within the focus groups, the influence of social media was far greater than first described, suggesting there are at least two main avenues of information gathering: traditional routes such as parents and careers advice services, followed by online platforms such as Instagram and TikTok where the role of influencers may be significant in shaping future career decisions.

“The information that was given as about universities was the best. So I'm very lucky to have a good set of subject teachers that could help me go through what I wanted to do”

(Non-STEM student, 15-17yr old)

Figure 1: Which of the following would you go to for information about careers? Base: All respondents (1030), 15-17 (508), 18-24 (522).



Promoting apprenticeships
is key to attracting a new
workforce



Spreading understanding and awareness of green jobs amongst careers advisors and teachers is an important first step. They are a key source of advice for young people on their next steps and have a significant influence over their students' choices. As such, an understanding of their perceptions of green jobs and the routes into them, and how they then talk to young people about them, would be a valuable next research step.

When post-school options were discussed as part of the focus groups, it emerged that some people had considered apprenticeships as a way to earn and learn, and was seen as leading to a guaranteed job upon completion. However, ultimately many chose against them because of a perceived lack of choice, not much support from their school when choosing to go down that path (compared to university), a fear of being left out from their peers going to university, not wishing to go into work straight from school, and a perception that apprenticeships are very competitive and there are not enough spaces:

"They are a great idea, but schools/colleges don't talk about them enough. People my age then don't do enough research to understand them...If I did know about them then I would have considered them a lot more."

(Non-STEM student, 15-17yr old)

"One of the biggest criticisms of apprenticeships is that they don't offer as much for long term future as universities. And so, I feel that IF my apprenticeship could do that, then I would definitely go for that. And because it is a far more stable way of entering a career than perhaps university is at the moment"

(STEM student, 15-17yr old)

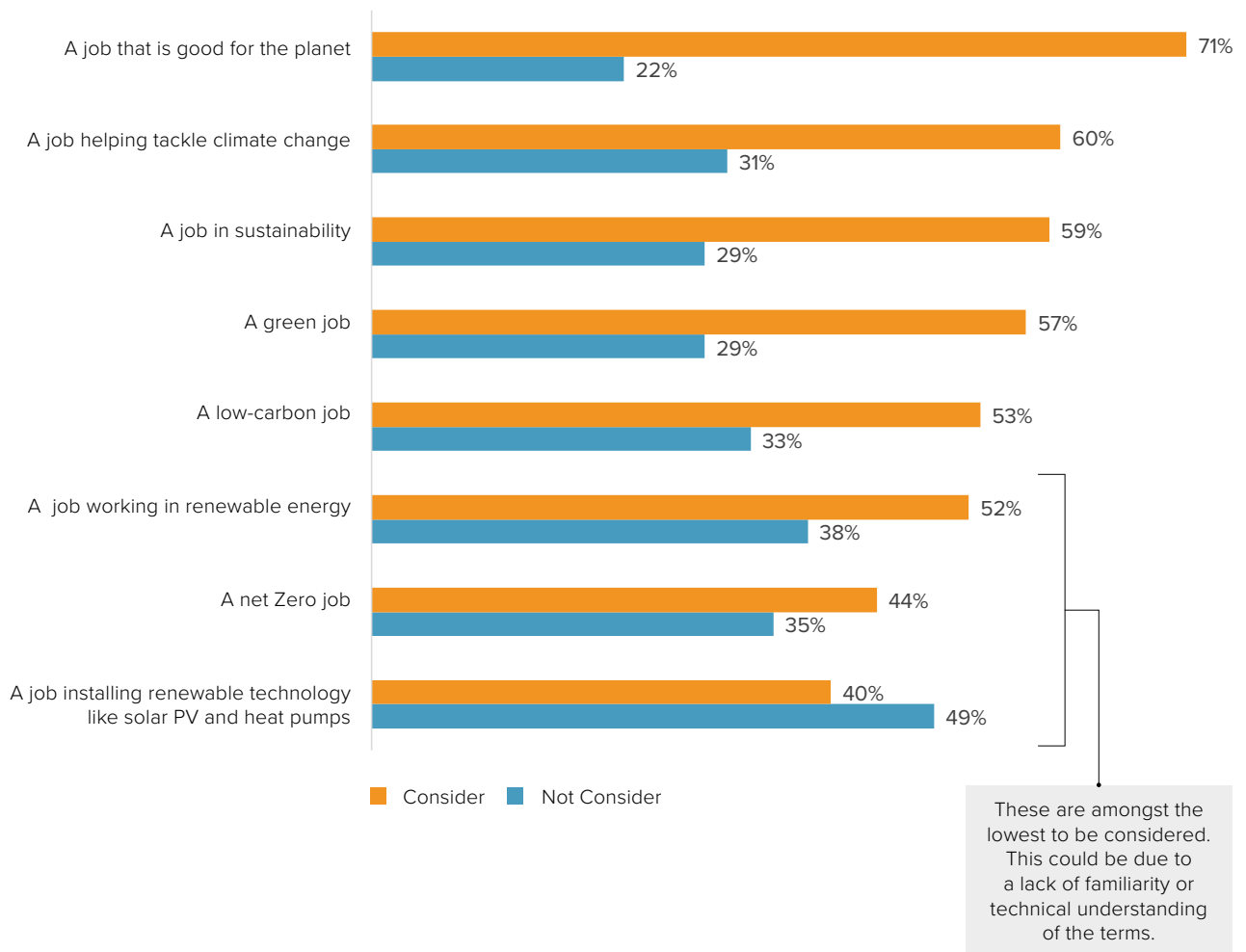
In short, university is seen as the default path for Gen-Z, and their awareness and support of other training options is low. As highlighted in the previous section, there appears to be a disconnect between young peoples' concern for the environment and a belief they can necessarily do anything about it through their work – a situation possibly exacerbated, even if unwittingly, by the careers advice they receive. In the next section, we explore this point further by unpacking young peoples' perceptions of 'green jobs', and whether they saw them as an option as a career.

Awareness and perception of green jobs

When asked how familiar they are with certain terms for green jobs, there were high levels of familiarity across both research groups for terms such as 'a job that is good for the planet' (85%), closely followed by a job helping tackle climate change (84%), a job in renewable energy (84%), a job in sustainability (82%) and a job installing solar PV or heat pumps (79%).

When the question was then rephrased to ask, "Based on what you know now (if anything), how likely are you to consider doing each type of job in the future?", the figures changed somewhat (see Fig 2.)

Figure 2: Based on what you know now (if anything), how likely are you to consider doing each type of job in the future? Base: All respondents (1030).



Overall, there was a strong appetite among participants to consider the broad variety of green-related jobs for the future. They were most familiar and would consider doing most jobs that are 'good for the planet'. Those who are older, know someone in the sector or have a pre-existing knowledge of Net Zero were more likely to know or consider green jobs, while male students and those studying STEM were more likely to consider jobs installing renewable technology.

Some recognised the breadth of potential green jobs:

“I think green jobs are where you can have branches of lots of professions. So you could have legal clinics working in environmental action. It doesn't have to be the whole industry, just like the whole of BP or Shell or whatever isn't necessarily green, but arms of it could be doing good stuff.”

(STEM student, 15-17yr old)

While others didn't:

“I don't know what my role would be if I were to get a green job tomorrow.”

(Non-STEM student, 15-17yr old)

Around 40% of participants stated they wouldn't consider a green job in the future, with just over 3-in-10 stating they were simply not interested or wanted to go into other fields, while another 3-in-10 stated they didn't know much about them.

Gen Z had a positive perception of green jobs. However, they mainly associate them with traditional renewable energy industries. In general, green jobs were seen as innovative, rewarding and friendly but were less likely to be seen as well paid. People associated green jobs with more traditional 'green' roles - jobs that they saw as good for the planet and good for society as a whole, such as solar PV installers, low-carbon heating engineer or insulation installer, and less so roles such as project developers, design engineers or finance roles.

Young people also felt they had many misconceptions around green jobs and were surprised that they could still have a positive impact on the planet without being a scientist or activist. Two in five respondents felt higher education qualifications were needed to do a green job, while nearly two-thirds felt NVQ Level 3 or higher was needed.

In combination, these findings suggest a clear need to make a wider connection between young peoples' career aspirations and how a 'job that is good for the planet' can meet those aspirations in a variety of different ways, along with the promotion of clear qualification and training pathways other than university. Research participants said that they would like school assemblies or dedicated days to learning about green jobs and how to get into them, along with universities holding events such as jobs fairs or providing newsletters which speak about green jobs.

“We have a lot of assemblies, but they all seem to be on similar stuff which I don't really find too useful. Maybe some of those could be used to advertise the green jobs. It would be good to have people from the industries and talk about them.”

(STEM student, 15-17yr old)

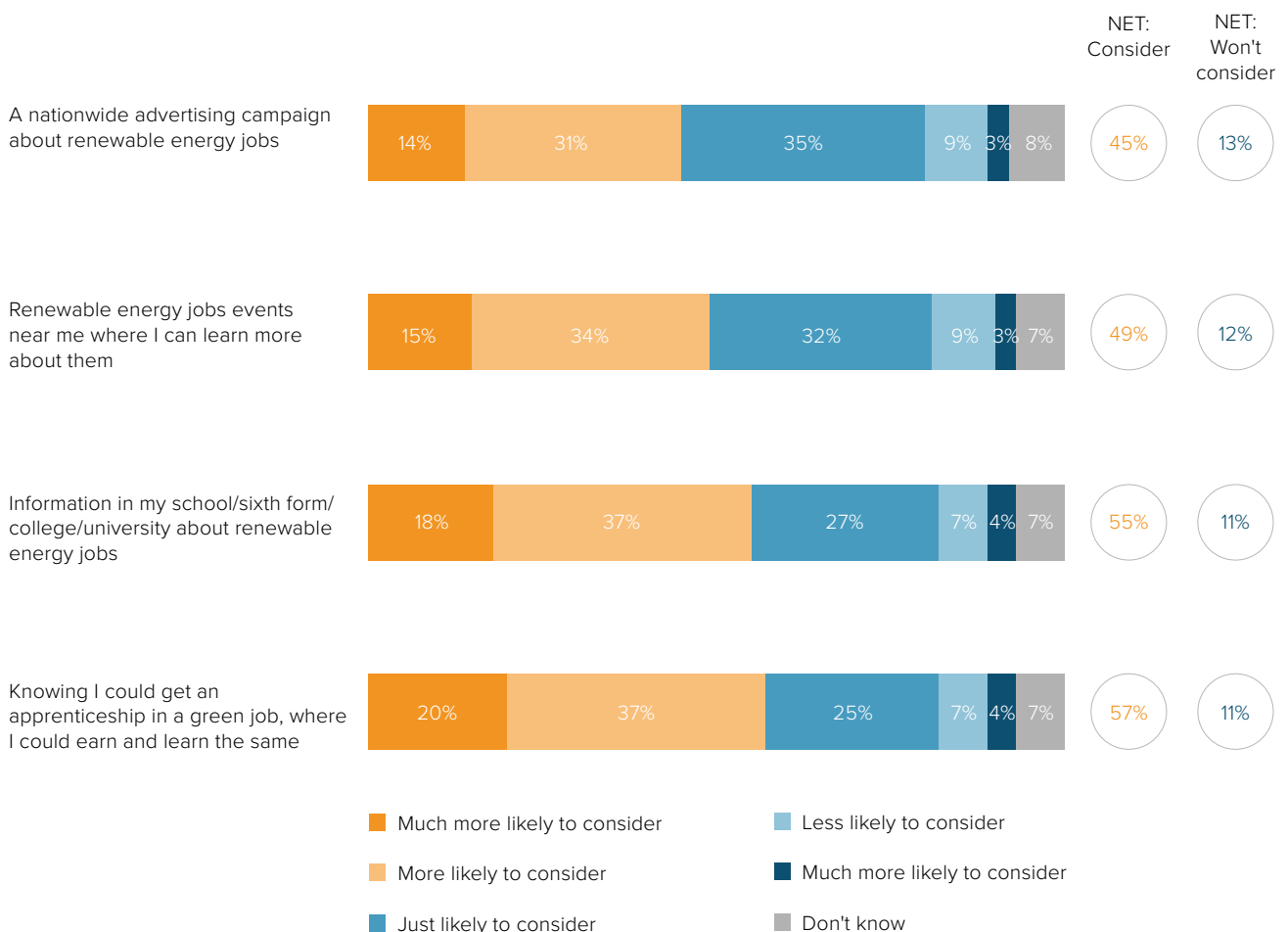
Both age groups mentioned the importance of social media on promoting awareness of green jobs. This is both in practical terms with green jobs being promoted on LinkedIn but also in a subliminal way through platforms like TikTok.

“I rely on social media a lot and I trust social media...if there is a company that has social media and a website, I feel like I would trust them more and rely on that information...it is like they are trying to reach out to people and be open about things.”

(STEM student, 18-24yr old)

This awareness of green jobs could be combined with spreading greater awareness of alternative training routes after school amongst young people and those who influence them. This last point is of particular relevance, given that just over half of respondents said that if they knew they could get an apprenticeship in a green job or there was information at their place of education, it would make them consider a renewable energy job in the future (see Fig 3.).

Figure 3; To what extent would the following make you more or less likely to consider a renewable energy job? (Base: 1030-474)



Conclusions and Recommendations

If we are to have any hope of reaching our net zero goals, we must address the skills shortage across the building and small-scale renewables sectors.

We simply cannot transition the UK to a net zero economy without recruiting a significant number of new entrants into the job roles required for its delivery, and this will heavily rely on encouraging a new Gen-Z workforce to consider a 'green job', or in the context of this report, a job in the small-scale renewables industry. But as this report has shown, while there is an appetite for Gen-Z to do jobs that are 'good for the planet', they don't know enough about them or the pathways to secure them.

As a group, Gen Z are concerned about climate change and want to do something about it. They also want financial security and to enjoy their work, but don't necessarily equate green jobs with either of those things. As the research findings also clearly show, there is an appetite among Gen-Z to do jobs that they feel have value and can have a positive impact on the planet, but a lack of awareness of what those jobs are and, crucially, how to go about training for them.

What this research has clearly highlighted is that there is an untapped audience of young people with a desire for good, well-paid jobs that they enjoy, and feel are making a positive contribution to the environment. With the majority of the 29m homes in the UK in need of some form of retrofitting to make them fit for the future, the demand for skilled workers across the sector can only grow.

It is up to us as a sector to find ways to encourage new recruits into the sector by showing them how it meets their career aspirations to ensure we can continue to decarbonise homes, heat and energy as part of the transition to net zero.

Overall, the clear conclusion to draw is that there is a need to increase awareness among young people of both the potential impact of green jobs and ways into jobs in the sector.

To do this, the following six recommendations emerge:

1. Demonstrate impact

Some participants questioned the level of impact some jobs defined as ‘green’ could have. They wanted to understand the sustainability and extent of impact they could have in their career.

2. Provide examples

Gen Z understood the broad-brush definition of green jobs, but wanted to understand what these looked like in greater detail. This is particularly important in the context of the small-scale renewables sector – what do jobs look like in the sector, and how can we promote them? The creation and promotion of good case studies can be invaluable in showing people the routes in and job options available to them.

3. Explore routes in

The variety of jobs available that had positive impact on the environment felt unexplored for many participants. They wanted to understand qualifications required for the range of jobs – this is especially important in relation to promoting apprenticeships as a viable route into the sector.

4. Emphasise variety

Although participants were concerned about climate change, many still wanted to pursue jobs in line with their passion and skills. Emphasise that a dream job with positive impact is possible. In short, their passion and skills can align with a job in the small-scale renewables sector. It is up to the sector to show them how.

5. Create an open forum

Participants had many questions about green jobs and shared they hadn’t thought of using their jobs to have a positive environmental impact. Allowing an open dialogue with young people to explore their options in the sector will be key to fostering interest. This could be through school assemblies or university job fairs, or online forums such as LinkedIn, Instagram and TikTok.

6. Meet them where they are

Gen Z are proactive in their research into their future careers. They acknowledge the power of hearing tailored advice from teachers/universities, but also from online sites and social media. These will be key areas to influence.

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