

The Door Needs to Stay Open: FM's Role in Giving Young People a Route into Work

2 hours ago



84% of young people not in education, employment or training want a job or training. The Milburn Review makes this plain: this generation has not given up on work. Too many simply cannot find a way in.

More than one million 16-24-year-olds in the UK are not in education, employment or training, the highest level in over 12 years. Six in ten of them have never held a job. In 2005, that figure was four in ten. Entry-level roles have declined sharply across the economy, with around 1.6 million mid- and lower-skilled positions lost over the past two decades. For young people without qualifications or existing connections to work, the first rung of the career ladder is harder to reach than it has been for a generation.

That is where employers have a direct role to play. Facilities management has an answer that is rarely heard loudly enough.

A sector with real pathways

OCS employs more than 135,000 colleagues worldwide, delivering facilities management services to more than 8,000 customers across the public and private sectors. More than 1,000 colleagues are currently in live apprenticeships across the business, developing practical skills on real contracts and building capability day by day.

FM is a sector where a first role genuinely can lead somewhere. A cleaning operative can become a team leader and, in time, a contract manager. Security colleagues build careers in operations management. Engineers who start on building systems progress into specialist and technical roles. These are not theoretical pathways. They reflect the careers of colleagues working across OCS contracts now.

The Milburn Review identifies how entry-level roles have become harder to access, and how the social contract, effort rewarded with opportunity, has weakened for younger workers. FM employers have the scale and the structure to start rebuilding it.

Building confidence from day one

Confidence is the missing ingredient for most young people starting out. Skills can be taught. The belief that you belong, that you can do the job and grow in it, takes longer to develop and requires a different kind of support.

OCS's learning and career development programmes support colleagues at every stage of their journey. Learning is practical and paced, but much of the development happens through daily supervision rather than formal training. Managers who coach, encourage and create space for learning shape a young person's confidence more directly than any programme on its own. For younger colleagues new to structured employment, that relationship makes the difference between someone who disengages and someone who grows.

It shows in how they turn up, how they communicate and how they take on responsibility.

"Young people don't need to arrive work-ready. They need an employer who takes the time to build that with them. The colleagues who've come through structured programmes are often the ones who stay, progress and bring others with them. That's what genuine investment in a first job looks like, and it's what the sector needs more of." – Sarah Williams (*pictured*), Chief People Officer, OCS UK & Ireland.

What it looks like for real people

Daniel Taylor, 18, from Liverpool, finished college and was, in his own words, "getting up late and not engaging with anyone or anything." Through an OCS-supported programme run in partnership with Everton in the Community, he gained qualifications, employment skills and paid work experience. "At the start I didn't believe I could get a job," he said. "I want to work and earn my own money."

Aaron Rowlands, 19, also from Liverpool, came to the programme after some earlier work experience had ended. He completed it, gained accredited qualifications and reflected: "I am proud of myself and what I have achieved. It has improved my self-belief."

Neither needed a polished CV. They needed a structured opportunity, a supportive environment and an employer willing to invest time in them.

"Every young person deserves the chance to fulfil their potential, but for many, the journey into employment can feel overwhelming and out of reach. Too often, the ambition is there, but the opportunities, experience or confidence to take that first step are not. Through our partnership with OCS, we've seen first-hand the difference that meaningful work experience, accredited learning and supportive employers can make in helping young people build self-belief and develop the skills they need to thrive. We've seen participants arrive unsure of their future and leave with qualifications, practical experience, renewed confidence and a clear sense of direction. For many, programmes like this provide a vital bridge between education and employment, opening doors that may otherwise have remained closed and helping them realise what they're capable of achieving. That's the power of creating genuine pathways into work." – Maxine Roberts, Adult Enrichment Manager, Everton in the Community

The employer's responsibility

The Milburn Review is a diagnostic report. Policy recommendations will follow in 2026. The employer argument is already clear: entry-level work that asks nothing of employers beyond filling a vacancy is part of the problem. Entry-level work treated as the start of a career is part of the solution.

Structured early-career development also makes commercial sense. Colleagues who are properly supported stay longer, develop faster and strengthen the operational capability on which services depend. Recognised qualifications and clear progression routes build a workforce that lasts.

OCS is putting that commitment into practice. The business has signed up to the DWP's Jobs Guarantee pilot, which creates funded placements for young people who have been out of work, education or training for 18 months or more. DWP funds 25 hours of work a week over six months, and OCS plans to deliver the programme nationally when it moves into its second phase early next year.

One million young people are ready to work. Employers who offer genuine development and a clear path forward help rebuild economic mobility and their own workforce. The sector has the pathways. The question is whether employers are prepared to use them. OCS is.