



STEM PATHWAYS FUND

FUND GUIDE

MISSION44





ABOUT THE FUND

THE PROBLEM

The transition from education into employment is one of the most important stages in a young person's journey. For young people facing disadvantage, it can also be one of the most challenging. More than **one million 16 to 24-year-olds** in the UK are currently not in education, employment or training (NEET)¹, highlighting the growing need for high-quality support to help young people successfully navigate this critical transition.

The Further Education (FE) sector is a unique place within our Education system where young people encounter multiple and complex barriers to their progress into, and out of education and into employment. The FE sector has a disproportionately high number of disadvantaged pupils, with challenges linked to:

- Lack access to clear career pathways and employer networks
- Lack of consistent guidance and support
- Higher financial, social, and confidence-related barriers

These barriers limit young people's confidence, aspirations and access to opportunities, making successful transitions from FE into STEM education, training and employment significantly more difficult.

Further Education plays a vital role in developing the UK's future STEM workforce. Around 1.7 million young people aged 16–19 study in FE settings in England², with almost 45% coming from disadvantaged backgrounds³. FE provides many of the technical and vocational pathways essential to meeting the UK's future STEM skills needs. Yet years of underinvestment have placed significant pressure on colleges, limiting their capacity to provide the careers guidance, employer engagement and transition support that many learners need to progress successfully into STEM.

For many young people, particularly those facing the greatest barriers, the journey through Further Education is shaped by a series of critical transition points where the right support is often missing.

- **At entry (age 16):** navigating post-16 options and choosing the right pathway can be confusing without access to strong careers guidance, trusted advice and clear information about future opportunities.

¹ [Office for National Statistics \(2026\)](#), *Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET)*, UK: May 2026. Statistical bulletin, published 28 May 2026

² [Institute for Fiscal Studies \(2025\)](#), *Annual Report on Education Spending in England: 2025–26*

³ [Association of Colleges \(2022\)](#), *Tackling disadvantage in FE: Reversing the narrative of failure*





- **During FE:** financial pressures, competing responsibilities, transport costs, low confidence and limited access to wider networks can make it difficult for students to stay engaged and prepare for their next step.
- **At exit:** pathways into employment, apprenticeships and further study are often fragmented and poorly connected, leaving many young people without the employer networks, industry insight, work experience or confidence needed to secure sustained opportunities.

These challenges are particularly acute for young people pursuing technical and STEM pathways, where access to employer engagement, professional role models and progression opportunities can be harder to secure.

As a result, too many young people leave Further Education without the support, connections and opportunities needed to successfully transition into STEM employment, apprenticeships or further study, increasing their risk of becoming NEET. This reflects a wider system challenge in which careers support and transition pathways are fragmented and inconsistently delivered across the FE sector.

FUND OUTCOMES

The fund's ambition is twofold: to improve outcomes for young people and to contribute to a stronger, more equitable FE and employment system. We will assess projects primarily on the outcomes they deliver for young people, while also valuing how they contribute to wider system change. We do not expect individual projects to achieve system change alone, but we do expect them to consider how activities can influence system priorities, inclusive sector practices, people and or policies.

We are particularly interested in organisations that can demonstrate a strong understanding of the FE sector through previous experience of working with FE learners or institutions, or through established partnerships with FE colleges. We value collaborative approaches that work alongside FE providers to strengthen, rather than duplicate, existing support for young people.

Direct Outcomes for Young People

- Young people have a better understanding of the range of STEM pathways available to them, enabling them to make informed progression decisions
- Young people have increased confidence, skills and belief that STEM pathways are accessible and relevant to people like them.





- Young people have equitable access to high-quality and meaningful STEM opportunities, including employers, professional networks, mentoring, role models and workplace experiences that support their progression.
- Young people successfully transition from Further Education into STEM employment, apprenticeships, higher education or technical pathway.

System Outcomes for the FE and Employment System

Through this pilot, we also aim to contribute to wider systems change by:

- Improving understanding of the practical, financial and structural barriers young people face when accessing and progressing through STEM pathways, helping to inform more equitable policy and practice.
- Increasing recognition of Further Education as a valuable pathway into STEM and the support needed for young people to succeed.
- Capturing and sharing learning about effective approaches to supporting transitions from Further Education into STEM pathways.
- Strengthening collaboration between Further Education providers, STEM employers and community organisations to improve the quality and accessibility of transition opportunities into STEM.

FUNDING AVAILABLE

This pilot will take a portfolio approach, supporting a small number of organisations working across England, to fund different models of transition support in practice. We anticipate awarding up to four grants of between £75,000 and £150,000 over a period of up to 24 months. The exact grant amount will depend on the scope, ambition and budget of each successful proposal.

Aligned with Mission 44 and Santander UK Foundation's grant-making approaches, we aim for funding to be flexible and, where appropriate, unrestricted, enabling partners to design and deliver solutions that respond to local contexts while working towards shared outcomes

WHO THIS FUND AIMS TO SUPPORT

The Fund will invest in organisations supporting young people aged 16–19 years in FE across England who are who are experiencing barriers to their transition into STEM pathways, including:





- Individuals experiencing financial hardship
- Students with Caring responsibilities
- Unmet Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)
- Unmet mental health support needs
- Limited access to professional networks, role models, or opportunities
- Groups that are underrepresented in STEM pathways, including women, racially minoritised young people, and other underrepresented communities
- Other systemic barriers affecting education and employment outcomes

We recognise that many young people experience multiple, intersecting barriers. Rather than focusing on labels or categories, we want to understand the experiences and challenges young people face, and how your approach responds to the needs, strengths and aspirations of the communities you work alongside.

What do we mean by STEM Careers and Pathways?

For the purposes of this fund, STEM pathways are the routes that enable young people to progress into a wide range of careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

We recognise that there is no single route into a STEM career, and that STEM opportunities exist across many sectors, industries and skill levels. We are interested in pathways that help young people explore and progress towards rewarding STEM careers through academic, technical and vocational routes.

These pathways may include progression into:

- Employment in STEM-related industries and occupations
- STEM apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships
- STEM higher education, including university degrees
- Higher technical qualifications and vocational STEM qualifications
- Further education and specialist STEM training programmes
- Other recognised education, training or employment opportunities that support progression towards a STEM career

We welcome approaches that help young people understand the breadth of STEM opportunities available and build confidence to pursue pathways that are right for them.

What do we mean by transition support?

We recognise that successful transitions are not achieved through one-off interventions at the point a young person leaves FE.





We believe transition support should be planned, sustained and begin well before a young person reaches their next destination. Wherever possible, support should start at least one year before a young person is expected to progress into STEM employment, an apprenticeship, higher education or technical training.

WHO IS ELIGIBLE FOR FUNDING

We welcome Expressions of Interest from organisations working with young people from our target groups (as listed above) aged **16–19** years in Further Education settings across **England only**.

Eligible organisations include:

- Registered Charities
- Charitable Incorporated Organisations (CIOs)
- Community Interest Companies (CICs) **limited by guarantee**
- Community Benefit Societies **with an asset lock**
- Cooperative Societies **with an asset lock**
- Other not-for-profit organisations **with an asset lock**
- Further Education Colleges and Designated Sixth Form Colleges⁴

Please note, we are not funding University Technical Colleges (UTCs). Further information can be found in our Frequently Asked Questions.

This fund is only open to organisations that operate on a not-for-profit basis. Where applicable, organisations must have an asset lock to ensure that assets and profits are used for community benefit.

We welcome applications from organisations that:

- Have experience of supporting young people aged 16–19 to progress into STEM employment, apprenticeships, higher education or technical training.
- Demonstrate a strong understanding of the Further Education sector and the realities of supporting young people in an FE setting.
- Can show how their proposed approach has been designed to meet the needs of the target groups this fund aims to support.

We also welcome applications from organisations working in partnership with Further Education Colleges and/or STEM employers, where the partnership brings together the

⁴ This includes designated Sixth Form Colleges that operate as independent Further Education institutions. **School sixth forms are not eligible** under this fund.





expertise, relationships and experience needed to deliver meaningful outcomes for young people.

We would especially like to hear from:

- Organisations working outside of London
- Organisations that recognise the value of collaboration and are keen to work with others to provide the most impactful solution
- Organisations that work collaboratively with young people to inform or influence their activities, programmes or services
- Collaborations involving ethnic minority-led or smaller not for profit organisations who bring important lived expertise to this work.

For the purposes of this fund, we define an **ethnic minority-led organisation** as one where the Chief Executive Officer (or equivalent) or Chair of the Board self-identifies as being from an ethnic minority background, and at least 50% of the Board of Trustees/Management Committee and/or senior leadership team also self-identify as being from an ethnic minority background.

WHAT WILL WE FUND

We are looking to fund organisations that can demonstrate a strong understanding of the FE transition challenges faced by young people from our target groups in the communities they serve.

Organisations should be able to show why their proposed work is needed, drawing on local data, insight, employer engagement, lived experience or other relevant evidence to demonstrate the barriers young people face in progressing from FE into STEM employment, apprenticeships, higher education or technical training

We are particularly interested in organisations that demonstrate a strong understanding /track record of the FE landscape and the role FE providers play in supporting young people into STEM pathways. Applicants should be able to demonstrate experience of working with FE learners or providers, or present a credible partnership with one or more FE colleges. We welcome collaborative approaches that work alongside FE institutions and STEM employers to strengthen existing provision and improve transitions for young people.

We're particularly interested in organisations whose proposed activities respond directly to these identified needs and help strengthen successful transitions into STEM pathways.





Funded activities could include, but are not limited to:

- Mentoring, coaching and access to role models
- Employer engagement and industry exposure
- Work experience, placements and internships
- Careers education and progression support
- Confidence, skills and leadership development
- Collaborative approaches that strengthen progression into STEM pathways through partnerships with FE providers, employers and local communities
- Other innovative approaches that strengthen successful transitions into STEM pathways

Across all funded partnerships, there will be a strong emphasis on collaboration between education, STEM industry, and delivery organisations and young people, and a focus on shared learning and storytelling.

WHAT WE WILL NOT FUND

- Capital costs including building work and renovations
 - Spending that has already taken place
 - Activity that takes place outside of England
 - Party political lobbying activity
 - The practice or promotion of religion or any particular belief systems
 - Loan repayments
 - Investment
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HOW TO APPLY

Our application process has two stages:

- **An Expression of Interest (EOI):** providing key information about your organisation and proposed activities. We encourage applicants to carefully review the eligibility criteria and fund priorities before applying, as the EOI is the first stage of assessment. Only eligible organisations that demonstrate a strong fit with the aims of the fund will be invited to progress to the next stage. You can find a copy of the EOI questions [here](#) to support your application. The EOI can be found [here](#).
- **Full application:** A small number of organisations shortlisted through the EOI stage will be invited to submit a full application. This will provide an opportunity





to share more detail about your proposed work, delivery approach, budget and expected impact. Throughout the assessment process, eligible applications will be reviewed by Mission 44, Santander UK Foundation and Mission 44 Youth Advisors as part of our participatory decision-making approach.

TIMELINES

Stage	What to expect	Timing
Expressions of Interest opens	Submit an online Expression of Interest form (EOI). This should take 45 mins to 60 mins to complete.	Tuesday 28th July 2026
Expression of Interest deadline	Expression of interest close. Only organisations that meet the published eligibility criteria will be considered for the next stage of the process.	Wednesday 9th September; 5pm.
Invitation to apply	Following a review process, a small number of organisations will be invited to submit a full application, including a project proposal (maximum five A4 pages), project budget and due diligence documentation. The application builds on the EOI, so applicants will only be asked to provide additional information needed to support a funding decision.	Monday 28th September 2026
Full application deadline	Only shortlisted organisations complete a full application.	Monday 19th October 2026; midday.





Funding decision	Applications are reviewed by Mission 44, Santander UK Foundation and Mission 44 Advisors. We may contact shortlisted organisations if we need any additional information to support the decision-making process.	Late November 2026
Grants awarded and funded activity commences	Successful applicants are notified, grant agreements are finalised, and projects begin mobilisation. Programme delivery is expected to commence from January 2027.	December 2026 – January 2027

Accessibility

We want to ensure our application process is as accessible as possible. The EOI is submitted through a Google Form, which has been designed to make the application process straightforward and proportionate. If you experience any accessibility barriers to completing the form, please contact us at youth@mission44.org and we will discuss alternative arrangements.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Why has this fund been created?

The fund brings together the shared priorities of Mission 44 and Santander UK Foundation to improve the transition from FE into STEM employment, apprenticeships, higher education and technical training for young people facing barriers to progression.

Young people facing the greatest barriers, studying in FE are more likely to experience financial, social and structural barriers that affect their progression. Many also have less access to employer networks, work experience, careers guidance and role models than their peers. At the same time, FE colleges continue to play a vital role in preparing young people for the future while operating under significant resource pressures.





Through this pilot, we are investing in organisations that are helping to strengthen these transitions. Alongside funding, we want to capture the experiences, insights and stories of the organisations and young people involved to shine a light on the FE sector.

Who can apply?

The fund is open to eligible not-for-profit organisations working with young people in England. This includes registered charities, charitable incorporated organisations (CIOs), Community Interest Companies (limited by guarantee), Community Benefit Societies and Cooperative Societies with an asset lock, Further Education Colleges and Designated Sixth Form Colleges. We are not accepting applications from UTCs at this time. Please see the [eligibility section](#) for the full criteria before applying.

How do I apply?

The application process has two stages. For this stage:

- Complete the [online EOI form](#), which should take approximately 45-60 minutes to complete. At this stage, we'll ask about your organisation, the need you're addressing and your proposed approach.
- To help organisations prepare their application, we've [provided a copy of the Expression of Interest questions](#). This document is for reference only. All applications must be submitted through the [online Google Form](#).

What are you looking to fund?

We're looking to fund activities that strengthen young people's transitions from Further Education into STEM employment, apprenticeships, higher education or technical training. Work should respond to an identified local need, work collaboratively with FE providers and other partners where appropriate, and support young people from our target groups to access and progress through STEM pathways.

Does funded activity need to be new?

No. We welcome both new and existing work where organisations can demonstrate how funding will strengthen, expand or enhance their work to improve transitions into STEM pathways.

Why are University Technical Colleges (UTCs) not eligible?

This fund has been designed to support young people transitioning from Further Education into STEM employment, apprenticeships, higher education and technical





training. As University Technical Colleges (UTCs) are classed as schools rather than Further Education colleges, they fall outside the scope of this funding programme.

We recognise that STEM-focused UTCs provide an important and valuable technical education pathway for many young people. However, this fund is intentionally focused on the Further Education sector because it supports a disproportionately high number of disadvantaged young people while continuing to face significant and longstanding underinvestment. By targeting FE, we aim to strengthen transitions at a critical point where additional investment has the potential to make the greatest impact. Therefore, this programme is limited to organisations working with Further Education providers and learners.

Can organisations apply in partnership?

Yes. We welcome collaborative approaches that bring together organisations with complementary expertise. One organisation should act as the lead applicant and be responsible for managing the grant and reporting requirements. Applications should clearly explain the role of each partner.

Do I need to have an existing relationship with a Further Education college?

Not necessarily. However, organisations should demonstrate a strong understanding (or have a track record) of the FE sector context, have experience of working with FE learners, have experience of working with FE learners or institutions **or** can demonstrate credible partnerships; and are committed to working collaboratively with FE providers rather than delivering activity in isolation.

How long will the Expression of Interest take to complete?

The online Expression of Interest should take approximately **45 - 60 minutes** to complete. At this stage, we're looking to understand your organisation, your proposed activities and why it is a strong fit for the fund. We are not expecting detailed project plans or budgets. We encourage organisations to upload existing information about work as opposed to creating anything new.

What happens after I submit my Expression of Interest?

All eligible Expressions of Interest will be assessed against the fund's priorities.

A small number of organisations will be invited to submit a full application. Organisations that are not shortlisted will be notified once the assessment process has concluded. This will be by the end of September.





What will I need to submit if I'm invited to the full application stage?

Shortlisted organisations will be asked to submit:

- a proposal (no more than five A4 pages)
- a project budget
- due diligence documentation.

The full application builds on your Expression of Interest, so you won't be asked to repeat information you've already provided.

How will applications be assessed?

Eligible applications will be reviewed by Mission 44, Santander UK Foundation and Mission 44 Youth Advisors.

Applications will be assessed against the published funding priorities, including the strength of the proposed approach, understanding of local need and understanding challenges of the FE sector context and support required for our target groups, organisational capability, partnership working and potential to improve transitions into STEM pathways.

Why are Mission 44 Youth Advisors involved in the fund?

The fund is part of Mission 44's initiative, co-designed by Youth Advisors to advance intergenerational philanthropy and promote more equitable, youth-informed approaches to funding and decision-making.

Mission 44 Youth Advisors work alongside Mission 44 and Santander UK Foundation to shape the fund's priorities, review applications, inform funding recommendations and capture learning from the pilot. This shared approach combines professional expertise with the lived experiences and perspectives of young people.

The fund is also an opportunity to demonstrate how intergenerational decision-making can strengthen corporate giving and encourage more organisations to embed young people's voices in how they design programmes and make investment decisions.

Will unsuccessful applicants receive feedback?

Due to the anticipated volume of applications, we're unable to provide individual feedback at the Expression of Interest stage. However we will inform organisations if they have been unsuccessful. Organisations invited to submit a full application will receive feedback where possible following the final funding decisions.





Can I apply for more than one project?

Organisations may only submit **one application** to the fund. If your organisation delivers multiple programmes, we encourage you to submit the proposal that best aligns with the fund's priorities.

How many grants do you expect to award?

For this pilot fund, we expect to award up to **approximately 4 grants** through the fund. The final number of grants will depend on the quality of applications received and the funding requested by successful organisations. We are looking to invest in a portfolio of organisations that reflects different approaches, partnerships and communities across England.

When will funding decisions be made?

Funding decisions are expected to be made in late November 2026. Please refer to the [timelines section](#) for key dates.

Can I speak to someone before applying?

We've designed the fund guidance and FAQs to answer the most common questions. If you have a query that isn't covered, please contact us by email at youth@mission44.org. To ensure fairness, we'll only provide clarification on the published guidance and eligibility criteria and won't be able to advise on the strength of individual proposals.

Still have a question?

If you have a question that isn't answered in this guidance, please contact the team at youth@mission44.org before the Expression of Interest deadline. We'll also publish responses to common questions where appropriate to ensure all applicants have access to the same information.

Please note that we are unable to accept or consider unsolicited proposals submitted by email. All applications must be submitted through the published application process.

