Young people should have a stake in building Wales's economy

Professor Dylan Jones-Evans asks what happens when young people develop skills and gain qualifications, but the jobs they have prepared for are scarce or too far from home. His response to the Milburn Review makes a case for helping young people create businesses. We would add a question. What could young people build if they had the support to start enterprises together and own them co-operatively?

The Milburn Review examined why around one million 16- to 24-year-olds are outside education, employment or training. That figure should prompt scrutiny of the systems meant to support them. Too often, the label "NEET" becomes a judgement about an individual's motivation. A young person can be ready to work and still face an inaccessible recruitment process, a bus timetable that makes shifts impossible, or too few paid opportunities nearby. Demonising young people for systemic failures lets the institutions with the power to change those conditions off the hook.

Milburn's proposals include up to £500 to explore a business idea and a £3,000 start-up grant for young people who can demonstrate that their idea is viable. We want any scheme Wales develops to make collective applications possible. Young people could pool skills, share responsibility and decide democratically how the business is run. In the South Wales Valleys, for example, a youth-led repair co-operative could share tools and premises, train new members and offer a service residents can use locally. A start-up grant could help test the idea. A first paying customer could help turn it into a livelihood.

Professor Jones-Evans has raised concerns about the loss of youth entrepreneurship programmes. Business Wales still lists advice, workshops and start-up support through Big Ideas Wales. Welsh ministers should clarify which programmes and funding will continue, what will replace anything ending, and whether young people who want to start a co-operative will be eligible. A grant has limited reach without specialist advice, ongoing mentoring, affordable premises and access to customers. Councils, colleges and housing associations could help by making suitable contracts easier for new local enterprises to compete for.

Enterprise must be a genuine choice. Young people also need decent jobs, paid apprenticeships, accessible training and support that reflects their circumstances. A programme that counts business registrations while young founders go without a reliable income would miss the point. Wales should measure whether enterprises survive, pay fairly and give their members lasting control over their work.

The Welsh Young Co-operators' principle, "Nothing About Us Without Us," should guide the response. Young people should help decide what support is offered, how applications are assessed and how success is measured. That includes disabled young people, young carers and those who cannot afford to work unpaid while an idea gets off the ground. If Wales wants young people to build their futures in the communities they call home, it should give them the resources and the decision-making power to do it.