

Regional and sub-regional variation in NEETs – reasons, remedies and impact

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Executive summary

The proportion of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) has remained stable at around 9-10% of the 16-18 cohort since 1994 (Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), 2004a).

To tackle the NEET issue, a number of policy initiatives have been developed at both the national and local level to address both NEET prevention and NEET reduction. 'NEET prevention' initiatives are aimed at those 14 to 16 year olds who are still at school and have been identified as being at risk of disengaging from education, to ensure that on leaving school they continue in further education, or find training or employment opportunities. Post 16 'NEET reduction' initiatives aim to reengage young people who are NEET in further education, employment or training (EET).

Research has shown that whilst the size of the NEET group has remained stable, the make up of the group has not. Young people enter and leave the NEET group for a variety of reasons and only 1% of this group appear to remain NEET right through from 16 to 18 years of age (National Audit Office (NAO), 2004).

Furthermore, despite the stability of the overall figure for the NEET cohort in England, the numbers within any one region can vary dramatically from one area to the next. Most recent figures available from the Government Office for South East (November 2005) show that the NEET numbers for young people aged 16 to 18 years old in this region vary from 3.1% in Surrey to 7.8% in Berkshire, compared to the national average of 7.6%. The most recent figures for Yorkshire and the Humber (November 2005) show that the NEET numbers range from 4.2% in North Yorkshire to 11.2% in South Yorkshire.

It is within this context that the two regional LSCs - South East and Yorkshire & the Humber - commissioned the LSDA to examine the reasons for the observed sub-regional and sub-area variation in NEET numbers within the South East, and the Yorkshire & Humber regions. Although the study focuses on these two regions, many of the issues raised will be relevant to other parts of England

The aims of this research project were two-fold. Firstly, the study aimed to highlight the possible reasons underpinning the observed variation in NEET numbers within and across the two regions. Secondly, it aimed to identify the local solutions or current initiatives being developed and tested in the arena of learning, skills and progression to employment, within the two regions and elsewhere in England, to reduce, if possible, the observed variation and the NEET numbers; and to assess their perceived impact by young people and relevant professionals working with NEETs.

A literature review of both grey and published literature was carried out to find out what was already known about reasons for variations in NEET numbers and to identify initiatives that were being developed/implemented in terms of NEET prevention and NEET reduction in the two regions and elsewhere in England.

However, a number of difficulties were experienced when gathering information from across the country - much of the information relating to local initiatives was either out of date or was insufficient to enable an assessment of what worked in preventing young people becoming NEET and/or reducing NEET numbers.

Primary data for this study was collected via face to face and telephone interviews with staff from Connexions, local LSCs and other organisations working with NEETs in the target areas selected for each of the two regions. In addition, focus groups of young people were held in each of the two LSC regions to ascertain their perceptions on what causes young people to become and remain NEET.

The overarching conclusions arising from the research conducted in the two regions are presented in response to the key questions posed in this study. Conclusions specific to each of the two regions are presented in chapter 6 of this report.

Why NEET numbers vary within and between the two LSC regions – South East and Yorkshire and the Humber

The causes of variation in NEET numbers within and between the two regions appear to share common elements or factors. However, the local context with which these common factors interact appears to be critical in giving rise to the observed variations. These factors include:

- *Ineffectiveness of financial incentives* - The failure of financial incentives to encourage take up of learning and training opportunities appears to be more pronounced in economically deprived areas in the regions where benefit take up or the need to work is high.
- *Differential access to labour market* – Access to labour market appears to be much worse in areas where there are large numbers of SMEs or specialist employers, where learning providers do not understand the needs of local labour market, and where employers lack sufficient knowledge about the range of qualifications and the equivalence between vocational and academic qualifications.
- *Membership of disadvantaged communities* - Young people in communities affected by deprivation and multi-generational unemployment, appear to be more likely to have a poor sense of mobility, suffer discrimination in the labour market, lack suitable role-models, and lack access to suitable jobs in their local area.
- *Residence in areas with poor infrastructure* - Areas which have poor transport infrastructure, have poor and inadequate housing are more likely to have larger number of NEETs as young people in these areas are hampered from accessing further education and job opportunities.

What works and does not work in terms of NEET prevention

An understanding of the characteristics of young people who were likely to become NEET on leaving school appears to be key to designing programmes and initiatives

that work and achieve the aim of NEET prevention. The young people likely to become NEET are seen as a heterogeneous group with multiple needs. Successful interventions appear to be those which take into account the complexity and multiplicity of problems faced by individuals and offer appropriate level of support.

The key features of such strategies are likely to include:

- Timely intervention at school before disengagement and disaffection set in. This can help to ensure that:
 - problems, such as bullying, are dealt with effectively before they develop, thus decreasing the probability of a young person disengaging from school and becoming NEET. It can also prevent a future call on resources which would otherwise be required for intensive support after a young person has left school and become NEET
 - strong relationships can be developed between family, community and school which can also lead to a positive impact on siblings
- Provision of coordinated and holistic support at school from a range of agencies. Such support appears to be critical where multiple interventions are required. A coordinated and joined up approach appears to benefit all involved including, pastoral support advisers, external agencies and young people, as.
 - Resources are not duplicated in different agencies working with the same young person
 - all agencies acquire an in-depth knowledge of the young person involved and can target their services accordingly
 - young people receiving holistic support feel confident that all their concerns are being dealt with and are also less likely to play agencies off against each other
- Giving young people a role in making decisions about their choices, as it appears to be key to engaging young people who are likely to become NEET as they tend to be those who lack support at home, experience bullying and feel they are not listened to at school because of poor attainment and behaviour. The benefits of including young people in planning service delivery and personal development include improved confidence, a sense of achievement and self worth in young person. These are likely to reduce the probability of young person becoming NEET on leaving school, as their motivation levels and aspirations are likely to have been raised.
- Provision of an alternative curriculum appears to be essential to engaging 'potential NEETs'. The traditional academic pathway is not suitable for all young people which often leads less academic students to disengage from education altogether. An alternative curriculum is likely to both prevent drop out from school and prepare an individual for further education and training with a vocational element.
- Transitional support for those moving from primary to secondary school and those leaving secondary education seems critical for individuals with intensive support needs at a time when they are faced with a wide range of choices.

Continued support during this transition stage can potentially prevent a lapse in confidence and motivation, and consequent disengagement and disaffection from education.

What works and does not work In terms of NEET reduction

The characteristics of the NEET group are also central to identifying the key ingredients which are likely to influence what will work well in terms of NEET reduction. Young people who are NEET are seen as a heterogeneous group with multiple needs. However, they appear to fall into two distinct groups:

- **Core NEETs** - more likely to have social and behavioural problems. This group also comprises the 'Generational NEETs' - young people who come from families where the accepted norm is for adults to be unemployed.
- **Floating NEETs** - young people who may find themselves lacking direction and motivation and tend to move in and out of the NEET group, engaging in low paid and temporary work and short courses. This group contributes to 'NEET churn.'

The key aspects of good practice appear to include:

- **Appropriate targeting of resources according to the need of particular group of NEETs and the local context in which support is being provided. This requires a detailed mapping of NEETS using the available data and deploying PAs and allocating resources on a geographical basis**
- **Holistic support which takes into account the complexity of issues involved as such support can prevent the need for multiple interventions by addressing the full range of issues affecting an individual and can also prevent young people from returning to the NEET group after they have left it. The provision from voluntary and community sector organisations appears to be valued by young people as it seems to fulfil this criteria and has the added advantage of being perceived as independent from statutory services.**
- **Positive partnerships between a range of agencies which work with young people as they appear fundamental to developing good practice. The complexity of the NEET group is such that numerous organisations and agencies need to be involved as they can bring their different perspectives and experience to the table in order to address the issues of concern to young people. Working together allows partners to:**
 - **share specialised expertise and knowledge**
 - **take collective responsibility for NEETs and issues impacting on NEET rather than placing responsibility on a single organisation i.e. Connexions**
 - **engage with the employer community**
 - **share data and knowledge about the destinations of young people**

However, the plethora of meetings focusing on NEETs between various partner organisations is seen sometimes to lead to a lack of clarity about the responsibilities and accountabilities of respective organisations.

- Involving young people in decision making and recognising their achievements, no matter, how small, as it appears to be important. Young people in the NEET group are rarely involved in decision-making or given an opportunity to voice their concerns. In addition, young people who become NEET often have very poor or no qualifications from school and their sense of self-worth and self-confidence can be improved by noting and celebrating even small achievement which can contribute to them taking bigger steps towards engaging with educational or training opportunities. Additionally,
 - Young people's readiness to make decisions after leaving school and their sense of growing maturity needs to be utilised in enabling them to access further education and employment opportunities.
 - By involving young people in their own development planning, young people can be enabled to 'own' their problems and encouraged to be proactive in identifying their support needs and in recognising the distance travelled.
- Innovative practice (such as the use of sport, art and media to engage young people in project activities and learning opportunities) and informal learning techniques utilised by a range of projects in the region as they appear to encourage and motivate individuals with low aspiration and low sense of achievement.

Factors which **impede** the progress of initiatives focusing on NEET reduction include:

- **Emphasis on hard outcomes and a disregard of soft outcomes by funders is an issue which appears to cause a great deal of concern among agencies working with NEETs.** Young people who have failed to achieve at school and who have lacked adequate support in the home tend to have low aspirations and/or low motivation and self-esteem. Agencies with considerable experience of working with NEETS regard their first priority as tackling these issues before they can address over longer-term the issue of integrating young people into EET as:
 - short-term motivational classes are at times enough to build self-esteem and inform young people about their options
 - For agencies working with young people with a complex array of needs, achieving a hard outcome of integrating them into EET requires intensive support over a long-term to build trust, improve levels of motivation and confidence before the young people feel ready to consider whether they want to engage with further education, training or employment.
- **The link between funding and targets based on hard outcomes is a source of concern for many agencies.** For many NEETs, the achievement of such outcomes over a short-term is unrealistic. Such targets are also likely to skew provision, as services under pressure to meet the funders' targets tend to focus resources on those NEETs who are much easier to work with and are most likely to achieve the hard outcomes of engaging with EET. This is likely to deny those with complex needs, much needed support to help them into EET opportunities.
- **Pre- Level 2 provision such as E2E, E2V, and Life Skills are valuable assets to post-16 learning provision for the NEET group.** They theoretically fill a gap that had previously existed, as many young people are not capable of achieving Level

2. Yet despite the perceived benefits of pre-level 2 provision it is not accessible to all because

- Demand for E2E has outstripped supply and is likely to be targeted towards those most likely to achieve a hard outcome within the prescribed 20 weeks.
 - A lack of pre E2E provision appears to be a significant problem in the South East and the Humber. The introduction of E2E is regarded to have drawn resources away from previously successful Life skills programmes
 - West Yorkshire had been chosen as a pilot area for the introduction of E2V. However, projects/organisations in the South East have found it difficult to attract funding as they have been competing with projects in the north of the country (traditionally seen as less affluent and therefore, a higher priority for funding in this area).
- Provision of 'Roll on Roll off' courses is insufficient to meet demand. The availability of such courses can prevent young people from joining the NEET group.

Implications

Implications for organisations working with the NEET group that emerged from the conclusions are detailed below. Implications for other agencies, such as Local Authorities have also been highlighted where they have a role to play in addressing some of the broader issues raised by this study.

Implications for the LSC

- ◇ Incentives such as training allowances and EMAs do not appear to be sufficiently attractive to encourage take up in the most deprived areas and a better understanding, through further research, is needed of the amounts young people are likely to consider adequate.
- ◇ The potential for young people who leave school without traditional qualifications, to enter EET appears to be restricted by the lack of awareness among employers of the range of qualifications awarded to young people and their equivalence to traditional qualifications such as GCSEs and A levels.
- ◇ Resources could be utilised more effectively through the use of early intervention strategies as it is likely to lead to a reduction in the number of young people becoming NEET in the future and therefore, can reduce the future call and demand on resources for intensive support
- ◇ Using data to map the geographical location of NEETs is likely to support targeted intervention and thus increase the effectiveness of resource utilisation.
- ◇ Emphasis on targets associated with hard outcomes is likely to prevent providers from targeting resources at both the hardest to reach and those who require intensive support
- ◇ Soft outcomes have the potential to lead to hard outcomes in the long-term, and to reduce the likelihood of NEET churn. They need to be seen as an investment for the future

- ◇ Incentivisation of employers to engage with NEETs by offering them work-based learning opportunities or work-placements needs to be considered to increase the pool of relevant opportunities for NEET young people
- ◇ Provision of sufficient pre-E2E programmes for young people not able to access existing E2E provision needs to be considered.

Implications for Connexions

- ◇ There appears to be a need to raise awareness among young people of the long-term benefits and future earning potential of taking up training even when it pays a lower level of income compared to a job for equivalent hours
- ◇ The effects of multi-generational employment within families and communities on young people are likely to be more effectively addressed through initiatives that encourage parental input.
- ◇ Early intervention strategies that target young people who are likely to become NEET appear to have proven successful and consideration needs to be given to a greater investment in this area
- ◇ Transitional support between school and post-16 provision appears to have proven successful but provision is patchy and needs to be made more consistent and to be adequately resourced
- ◇ Involving young people in decisions about their future options has been found to raise their aspiration and motivation levels, and needs to underpin all work with young people likely to become NEETS. In addition, celebrating small achievements are likely to increase young people's engagement with EET opportunities
- ◇ Involvement of employers in LMCs needs to be considered as it can be of benefit to not just young people but also to agencies working to reduce NEET numbers. It can lead to an increased awareness among employers of the NEETs issue, improve their understanding of the range of vocational qualifications and how they compare, and lead to work-placement or work-based learning opportunities for young people.

Implications for Local Education Authorities

- ◇ Coordinated support, from all relevant agencies, to young people likely to become NEET while they are still at school has proven successful. However, this appears to be patchy and needs to be made integral to work with all potential NEETs
- ◇ Anti-bullying policies which can effectively deal with and stamp out bullying are necessary to ensure that students do not disengage with school and consequently, education.
- ◇ Alternative curricula which offer a range of vocational options and have the flexibility to meet the needs of young people with wide ranging interests and aptitudes can help to engage young people who can not cope with academic curricula; engender self-confidence; and equip them with the basic skills they need to tackle more formal assessments at a later stage.
- ◇ An alternative curriculum is much more likely to engage the hardest to reach but in order for it to have the desired impact on NEET numbers, consideration needs to be given to how its status and the awareness of its

potential can be raised within the FE sectors and with employers, especially SMEs.

Implications for Local Authorities

- ◇ Availability of an accessible transport system appears to be key to ensuring that young people are better able to access any further education or suitable job opportunities the areas has to offer

Implications for learning providers

- ◇ Young people's employability in the local labour market can be improved if they can access learning and skills provision locally which can give them the qualifications and skills demanded and needed by the local labour market.
- ◇ Provision of roll-on roll-off courses can help to prevent young people joining the NEET group as they can access learning opportunities as and when they are ready without having to wait long periods to start courses, causing them to become dishearten and disengaged.
- ◇ Limited provision at levels suited to the abilities of some young people in the NEET group can mean that they are less likely to access education and training opportunities.

Implications for all

- ◇ Partnership working is an invaluable asset but there needs to be a clarity about to how agreed actions should be progressed and where accountability lies. This can lead to a coherent and co-ordinated approach to tackling NEETs both regionally and sub-regionally, while still allowing flexibility at local level for staff to tailor the interventions to the specific circumstances of NEETs in their local area. The emerging Children's Trusts offer an ideal opportunity for building effective and sustainable partnerships across the sector divide, to tackle the issue of NEETs.
- ◇ For the 'generational', 'core' or long-term NEETs, a multi-pronged approach is needed which can address issues as wide ranging as improving parenting skills, developing deprived communities, improving the infra-structure within these communities, and reducing child poverty.