

NEET

ideas

Stephen Lambert *presents a group proposal aimed at supporting Newcastle Upon Tyne's young people to get into education, jobs and training.*

The City Council's cabinet have been presented with findings and recommendations to improve the support available to Newcastle's young people into post-16 education, work and training.

The nine-month cross party Task and Finish Group was set up to explore what can be done by the local authority and its partners to support those young people who are classed as 'NEET' - not in education, employment or training - and make sense of how to prepare young adults for the 'world of work'.

Young people aged 16-19 are required either to be in some form of full-time education, to have started an apprenticeship or traineeship, or to be spending 20 hours or more a week working or volunteering while in part-time education or training. Local authorities like Newcastle have broad responsibilities to encourage, enable and help young people participate in education or training. Specifically this is: 'to secure sufficient suitable education and training provision for all young people in their area who are over compulsory school age under 19 or aged 19 to 25 for whom an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan is maintained'.

Anyone who is not in any form of education or training and not in employment is considered to be NEET. As a result, a person who is NEET will always be either unemployed or 'economically inactive'.

In the UK as a whole there has been a sharp increase in the number of young people aged 16 to 24 who are NEET. In the period December 2023 to April 2024 an estimated 900,000 were NEET. One in

eight young people nationally are NEET, with those lacking 'good' qualifications and with poor mental health facing particular disadvantages. For 16 to 24-year olds the North East had the highest NEET rates in mainland Britain at 17 per cent.

The increase in the number of young people who were NEET in the latest figures was driven by young men, among whom there was an increase of 37,000 on the year, to 467,000. Data from 2023 reveal that one in five young people of those who are NEET have a mental health condition, compared to one in thirteen in 2012. The conditions reported for mental health include depression, bad nerves, anxiety, mental illness or suffering from phobia, panics or other nervous disorders. All types of health condition are over-represented for those who are NEET as compared to the total 16-24 population. Those with learning disabilities, which includes autism, make up eight per cent of people who are NEET.

The key characteristics of young people who were NEET, using data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) Labour Force Survey, show that:

- the proportion of 16-24 year-olds who were NEET was higher for those with disabilities (24 per cent) than for those without (8 per cent);
- a higher proportion of 16-24 year-olds without any qualifications were NEET (24 per cent) than the proportion of those qualified to GCSE level and above;
- the proportion of 16-24 year-olds who were NEET was highest for those from either a Pakistani or Bangladeshi background (13 per cent) and lowest for those from Indian or Chinese backgrounds (six per cent).

Our academic adviser Professor Robin Simmons, a lead national expert on NEET, provided important input. Simmons points out that most young people who are NEET want to work, although there can be 'churn' between lower grade courses and poorly paid, insecure work. Young people who are NEET are from a variety of backgrounds, but those living in deprived circumstances are more likely to become NEET.

Young people often face substantial barriers to participation. This includes both their level of skills, knowledge and qualifications, motivation and commitment to education as well as social, emotional and behavioural factors. Other significant barriers include the influence of family and friends, the accessibility and quality of advice and guidance and the availability of appropriate education, training and employment opportunities.

Simmons goes on to argue that the implications are serious, as being NEET is often related to youth offending, poor performance at school, mental health issues, early parenthood and other 'scarring effects'. There are damaging long term effects of being NEET which extend into adult life. Those who are NEET are more likely to have extended periods of adult unemployment and to end up in insecure, badly paid jobs. Young people who are NEET are also more likely to be involved with the criminal justice system, to suffer from poor health, addiction and relationship breakdown.

Newcastle context

The combined number of young people in Newcastle who are either NEET or whose status is not known remains high but is comparable statistically to that in neighbouring councils and other core cities. According to research by Newcastle City Council, characteristics of young people who are NEET include:

(a) Poor school attendance

Poor school attendance has a direct correlation with youngsters becoming NEET post year 11. Disengagement from school impacts on exam results, on young people's confidence, motivation and on their readiness to enter post-16 education and training. 85 per cent of young people who were NEET at the 2022 Activity Survey were still NEET in August 2023.

(b) Young people with an EHC (Education, Health and Care) Plan.

20 per cent of young people with an EHC Plan are NEET at age 16-18, compared to an overall NEET

figure of seven per cent. The City has a high percentage of young people attending Supported Internships - 4 percent compared to 0.5 per cent for England as a whole. (These are one-year study programmes for young people with SEND, preparing them for jobs.)

(c) Looked After Children / Care Leavers

The NEET rate figures for these two groups are consistently around 30 per cent.

(d) young people involved in the Youth Justice system are more likely to be NEET - for example 42 per cent in Newcastle.

(e) Mental health

Local data relies on young adults reporting mental health issues. 78 per cent of the cohort identified as NEET have declared a mental health issue.

(f) Young parents

In May 2023 there were 33 young parents between the ages of 16 and 18, 91 per cent of whom were NEET, preferring to remain at home to care for their baby/child.

Spatial differences persist across the City, with the most disadvantaged electoral wards having the highest number of NEETs. In the deprived ward of Elswick the NEET rate stands at over 15 per cent compared with affluent Gosforth, with the tiny rate of 0.48 per cent.

The issue of young people who are NEET, or at risk of becoming so, is a tragedy both for our city, due to the wasted talent and potential, and for the young adults themselves. Of course, the Group* welcomes the positive work that the Council and its partner organisations are doing, such as free travel for the city's carers and care leavers. But more is needed to support those young people most in need.

The work of the Group drew upon a wide range of sources, including Newcastle's Lord John Shipley, chair of the House of Lords Youth Unemployment Committee. The main areas identified by the Committee as contributing to reducing unemployment were highlighted as the following:

- the prevalence of low skills and the related shortages of skills including those needed in the future; the role of the national curriculum in supporting digital, essential life skills;
- careers education and work experience, the availability of work experience opportunities and barriers to access;
- the role of FE in tackling youth

unemployment, parity of esteem with HE and its role in skills provision, including the Government's Lifetime Skills Guarantee;

- the shortage of apprenticeship opportunities for young adults, the impact of the apprenticeship levy;
- identifying disadvantaged groups, addressing ongoing job disparities, addressing prejudice and discrimination, and targeted programmes;
- Government departmental coordination, existing and future initiatives and reforms needed to improve delivery.

We found from our localised research that there are a number of barriers that some young people, mostly from disadvantaged backgrounds, face in accessing education, paid work, and job related training. The Review highlighted that, due to the cost-of-living crisis, increasing numbers of young people need a job due to low household incomes, and that they can't consider an unpaid study programme or education place.

Other barriers were the location of training providers, their access and associated costs such as travel, as well as study programmes being mostly full-time. In response to our findings we've made a number of policy and practical recommendations, including:

- an increase in the number of Level 1 post-16 study courses;
- an increase in the number of part-time vocational study programmes;
- increased funding to support Newcastle City Learning;
- fund 'mentoring' for young people and to support those at risk of becoming NEET;
- more opportunities for apprenticeships, work experience and supporting internships;
- more careers advisers, especially for young people with Special Educational Needs.

And we envisage that Devolution and the establishment of the NE Combined Authority, with its emphasis on skills and employability, will have a major role to play in meeting the needs of this group, both in the city and in the wider region.

The newly elected UK Government has already pledged its commitment to tackling youth unemployment. The Government will establish a 'youth guarantee' of access to training, an apprenticeship or support to find work for all 18 to 21 year-olds, to bring down the number of people who aren't 'learning or earning'. They have promised two week's worth of work experience for every young

person, and improved careers advice in schools and colleges. These are important steps to prevent the re-emergence of a Lost Generation both in the city, the region and elsewhere in Britain.

*Members of the Supporting Young People into Education, Employment and Training Task Group are Cllr Stephen Lambert, Cllr Peter Lovatt, Cllr Christine Morrissey and Cllr Charlie Gray.

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