

Rathbone/Nuffield Review Engaging Youth Enquiry

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October 15

2008

This report presents the findings of the Engaging Youth Enquiry (EYE) into young people who are classified as 'NEET', and opens the Rathbone/Nuffield Review Open Consultation into the issues involved.

This report is available from the following website: www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk

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Consultation
Report

INTRODUCTION

The background to the Engaging Youth Enquiry (EYE)

The motivation for the Engaging Youth Enquiry is rooted in questions shared by the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training in England and Wales and Rathbone, the education charity, regarding those 16-18 year-olds who are outside education, training and employment. In the most recent data¹, a total number of 189,000 16-18 year-olds were classified as 'NEET' at the end of 2007. This corresponds to a proportion of 9.4% of that age cohort at the end of 2007 (a provisional figure), down from 10.4% at the end of 2006. This proportion has hovered at around 10% since the mid-1990s.

Why do so many young people not participate in education, training or employment? What barriers do they face? How could they best be supported back into education, training and, ultimately, sustainable employment? The view of Rathbone and the Nuffield Review was that the headline statistics needed to be investigated further and that underlying reasons for non-participation needed to be explored.

The Nuffield Review's interest stems from acknowledging that one of the features of 14-19 education and training in England and Wales is that it is a system of medium participation with high rates of attrition from 16-19. The Review aimed to investigate why so many young people do not participate. Rathbone works with young people who have disengaged and the collaboration between the two organisations offered an opportunity to investigate the issues from their different, but linked, perspectives.

The initial collaboration led to the launch of the Engaging Youth Enquiry, which set up a range of workshops in different regions to focus on some of the issues faced by young people classified as 'NEET', as well as conducting analysis of the statistics available on 'NEET' figures, and reflecting the existing evidence.

¹ The most recent figures were published by the DCSF on 19 June 2008: SFR 13/2008 *Participation in Education, Training and Employment by 16-18 year olds in England* [online]. At: http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000792/SFR_132008.pdf, accessed September 2008.

There were two types of workshops, held in parallel – those with young people and those with practitioners. The dual focus was deliberate: to gain access to the viewpoints of young people themselves, but also to investigate the work of those people who work with them regularly. The discussions raised many issues that the Enquiry had already predicted, but also highlighted issues and dissonances which had not been expected. The current report is a reflective account of those discussions, informed by the evidence from the administrative data, and indicates the key factors at play for young people who are classified as ‘NEET’, or who are at risk of becoming ‘NEET’.

Launch of consultation process

The report acknowledges the complexity of the issues involved, and argues for the need for further debate and research in this area. Rathbone and the Nuffield Review view this report as the beginning of a process of consultation in order to engage further with the questions and issues raised by the work undertaken by the Enquiry with practitioners and young people. They therefore invite young people, practitioners, parents, schools, colleges, voluntary sector organisations, researchers, policy makers, and all other interested parties to comment on this report and to engage actively with the Rathbone and Nuffield Review Engaging Youth Enquiry Open Consultation.

The Open Consultation will continue until the end of March 2009 and invites submissions on the issues surrounding young people classified as ‘NEET’, current policy initiatives designed to support them, prospective initiatives and policy instruments to support young people, as well as the full range of wider issues involved. The consultation will be run as an open dialogue, and it will be made available on the Nuffield Review website. The questions that frame this consultation process are included at the end of this report, and are also available online at: www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk

Methodology of the Engaging Youth Enquiry

The collaboration between Rathbone and the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education and Training in England and Wales led to a sharing of expertise and resources which was of benefit to the Enquiry. The Nuffield Review drew on the network of academics and researchers working in this area, some of whom are members of its core group, and many have contributed to the Enquiry. Rathbone drew on the network of voluntary sector organisations and other relevant bodies with which Rathbone collaborates, such as Connexions, the youth service, youth offending teams, employers, housing officers and magistrates, for example, for the practitioner workshops, in order to ensure that the Enquiry benefited from a rich blend of the voices of practitioners and academic work. Further, Rathbone facilitated the organisation of the young people's workshops, held in contexts familiar to the young people, with trusted adults as facilitators. This approach of working within the context of the young people provided more direct access to their viewpoints than would have been possible with a more formal research approach with researcher-led interviews or questionnaires.

Practitioner workshops

Each of the workshops with practitioners lasted for a full day, and involved practitioners in key areas who work with young people classified as 'NEET' on a daily basis. They were run by Rathbone and the Nuffield Review as open dialogues, and each workshop had a set of guiding questions to structure the day's interaction. Bringing together practitioners from various different fields of work and different agencies (such as Connexions, magistrates, voluntary sector organizations, representatives from schools and colleges, researchers, employers, youth offending teams, amongst others) brought to light issues of dissonance and the need for greater collaboration. One example was given by a representative from the Foyer housing project in Manchester, who spoke of the need for consideration of the housing issues when the Connexions service advises on education and training opportunities, and the need for a holistic view of the needs of young people

by, for example, not allocating training which is on the other side of a large city to their accommodation.

Young people's workshops

The 36 young people's workshops were run as extended conversations with the young people that took place on their territory (such as a Rathbone centre or other familiar location), and were facilitated by trusted adults (such as Rathbone or Connexions staff). This avoided the danger of researchers 'parachuting' into the young people's environment to interview them in an unfamiliar situation with an unfamiliar person. The young people's workshops were run in groups of 8-10 young participants to allow for each person to speak as they wished, but without requiring specific input from each young person. The conversations were initiated through a set of guiding questions, rather than a formal instrument. This led, in many cases, to rich exchanges about the issues the young people are dealing with. The use of the familiar adults and familiar contexts meant that the young people were at their ease in the situation and were, in most cases, keen to engage with the issues involved. They were, of course, assured of their anonymity in the final report.

Framing the issues: Long-term trajectories, not snapshot numbers

Producing policy responses to meet the shared and the unique characteristics of marginalised young people is a daunting challenge that was recognised in all of the EYE workshops. This report acknowledges the complexity of the issues involved – there are no simple policy solutions. One size definitely does not fit all.

However, this report does argue in favour of taking a wider and more long-term view of the young people who are classified as 'NEET' than is possible with the current emphasis on the annual 'snapshot' participation figures which indicate estimates of young people who are 'NEET'. The EYE suggests that sustainable progression for these young people will be more likely if they are viewed as individuals trying to construct life trajectories and narratives, rather than as a problem. They must be recognised as presences, rather

than as absences, reflected in the fact that ‘NEET’ is a residual statistical category. This challenges the term ‘NEET’ itself.

The term ‘NEET’ is unhelpful in two ways. First, it is a statistical residual category – literally those young people left over once all other respondents have been allocated to other categories (such as full-time education, training or employment) in the Labour Force Survey (LFS). Second, it leads to a deficit model of these young people as a problem (rather than as a potential asset), coupled with a policy emphasis on reducing numbers. Of course, a reduction in numbers is desirable, but the Engaging Youth Enquiry argues that a broader, more long-term focus on the young people would be more effective in supporting their sustainable trajectories into stable employment and continued learning.

The so-called ‘NEET statistic’ is, in any case, no more than a ‘snapshot view’. This is, of course, the nature of an annually reported figure on the activities of young people who may be living dynamic and rapidly changing lives. Some of the young people who are classified as ‘NEET’ are so-called ‘long-term NEET’, but others are moving in and out of ‘NEET’ classification, termed the ‘churn’ effect, while others are ‘transitional NEET’ (they will be ‘NEET’ for a brief period). Viewed in this dynamic way it is not just those who are ‘NEET’ at any one moment who are of concern, but also, for example, those who are moving between being ‘NEET’ and temporary employment which does not lead to stable employment. These different types of ‘NEET’ status mean that the young people will benefit from different types of initiative and support.

In addition, the EYE argues that there is a further category, for which no figures are available. This category is that of ‘prospective NEET’ – those young people currently registered at school who are at risk of becoming disengaged. The workshops with young people highlighted the fact that many young people disengage astonishingly early in their learning careers. By the time some of these young people enter the ‘NEET’ classification they may have been disengaged for many years. The EYE argues for support for these learners as early as possible in their learning careers. It also frames the issues in this

report within a focus, not just on young people currently classified as ‘NEET’, but those who are at risk of entering ‘NEET’ status. In addition, there needs to be consideration of the ‘post-NEET’ phase and of the appropriate support for young people who have experienced a period of being classified as ‘NEET’ as they become older.

Also, as the legislation for raising the age of participation comes into force, a new category may also emerge of ‘de facto NEET’ – those who may be registered on a programme of education and training, but who are not engaging with it in a meaningful way. This calls for urgent reflection of ways of offering these young people meaningful and positive learning experiences, which will lead to sustainable progression. In order to do this, of course, a workable definition of what counts as meaningful and positive learning is essential.

This report is structured in the following way:

Chapter One: The rise of the ‘NEET’ problem

Chapter Two: Who are these young people? What do they want?

Chapter Three: Staying engaged - Learning matters

Chapter Four: Finding a job - Employment matters

Chapter Five: Listening and caring - Youth work matters

Chapter Six: Prospects for the future - Let’s give them a chance

Questions framing the Rathbone/Nuffield Review EYE Open Consultation

CHAPTER ONE: THE RISE OF THE 'NEET PROBLEM'

The category Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) was formally created by the Social Exclusion Unit in 1999². This label refers to 16-18 year olds who - due to their 'NEET' status - are at risk of not making a future successful and sustainable transition to education, employment or training³. Young people in this category had been a growing policy concern since the late 1970s and early 1980s, largely as a result of the collapse of the youth labour market, increasing rates of youth unemployment⁴ and crime, and disturbances in Inner City areas such as the Toxteth riots.

To place the issue in its historical context it is useful to remember that only 40-50 years ago, the 80% of young people not in grammar schools took no public examinations and left school at 15 with no qualifications, although a sizeable number then moved into apprenticeships with day release to study at a Technical College. The remainder moved into low and semi-skilled jobs, primarily in manufacturing and mining. That world has gone. The manufacturing heartlands of Scotland, the north of England, the West Midlands and South Wales have lost huge numbers of jobs. Manufacturing is still important, earning 20% of the UK's GDP, but the unskilled jobs have largely vanished.

² Social Exclusion Unit (1999) *Bridging the Gap: New opportunities for 16-18 year-olds not in education, employment or training*. [online] At: http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/~media/assets/www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social_exclusion_task_force/publications_1997_to_2006/bridging_gap%20pdf.ashx. The Social Exclusion Unit was established in December 1997 and shut down in June 2006. Its remit was transferred to a smaller task force in the Cabinet Office.

³ It should be noted that the NEET group also covers those who are NEET for 'positive' reasons, which are usually chosen by the individual. This might include a 'gap' year or undertaking voluntary work. Despite this group being captured within the wider NEET group, it is not anticipated that this group requires additional support to make future transitions to education, employment or training.

⁴ Youth unemployment is a key contextual factor in this debate, particularly with the current onset of a recession. In this context, the policy emphasis on achieving qualifications does not address the full picture. See also: OECD (2008) *Jobs for youth: United Kingdom* [online]. At:

<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/33/57/40912683.pdf>, accessed October 2008. It indicates (p. 1) that for teenagers (16-19 year olds) and young adults (20-24 year-olds) '...both age groups were affected by the recent deterioration in labour market performance and this trend could well continue in the short term as projected GDP growth for 2008 and 2009 is revised downwards in the wake of the current uncertain economic climate.' (In 2007 the youth unemployment rate was 14%, slightly above the OECD average, compared with 11% in 2004.)

Coal mining has suffered huge cutbacks, devastating communities such as Ashington in Northumberland and Goldthorpe in South Yorkshire.

New jobs in the service sector are not evenly distributed across the country. The result is localised structural unemployment, which has a disproportionate impact on the young people in these areas. In addition, young people are particularly affected by economic downturns, and especially those young people with few or no qualifications. The issues surrounding the 'NEET' rate are a product of long-term structural and economic change, which is just as much about employment, or rather structural unemployment⁵, as it is about education and training.

A plethora of policy initiatives, youth training programmes, widespread reform of the 14-19 curriculum and qualifications structure, and financial incentives to remain in education and training (such as the Education Maintenance Allowance), have been deployed to encourage young people to stay on after the end of compulsory schooling. In England, challenging Public Sector Agreement (PSA) targets have been set to reduce the proportion of 'NEET' 16-18 year-olds by 2% by 2010 (from a baseline of 9.6% at the end of 2004⁶). Now, in England at least, legislation to require young people to remain in some form of education and training is imminent (up to the age of 17 by 2013 and then 18 by 2015).⁷

⁵ This can be contrasted with frictional unemployment – there will always be some people (perhaps 3-5% of the labour force in a developed economy) who are moving between jobs, some newly redundant workers or workers entering the labour market who are trying to find appropriate jobs. The 'natural rate of unemployment' is that implied by the present structure of the economy and is the aggregate of structural and frictional unemployment, and may be as high as 8-9% of the labour force. Because of the structural component this is difficult to reduce by increasing aggregate demand.

⁶ Previously the target baseline was 10% but a reporting change in 2007 now means NEET figures are reported to one decimal place, 9.6%. The 2010 target is therefore 7.6%. (NEET statistics – Quarterly Brief, August 2008. Available online at <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/STA/t000751/index.shtml>

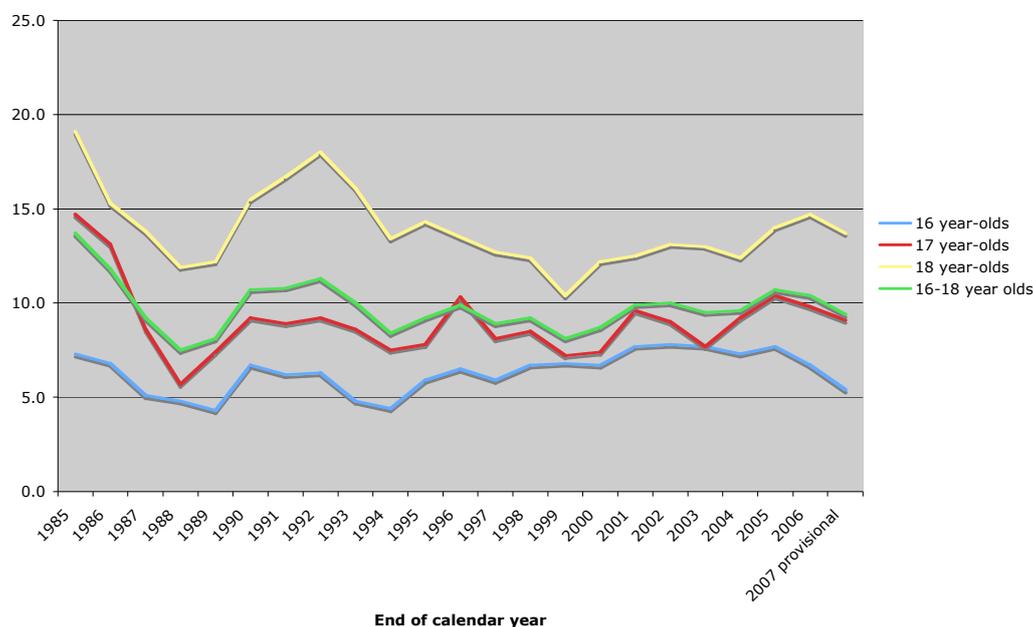
⁷ DfES (Department for Education and Skills) (2007a) *Raising Expectations: Staying in education and training post-16*. [online]. At: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/consultations/downloadableDocs/6965-DfES-Raising%20Expectations%20Green%20Paper.pdf>, accessed September 2008. This legislation is currently going through Parliament in the Education and Skills Bill. See <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2007-08/educationandskills.html> accessed October 2008

1.1 The scale of the 'NEET' problem

Young people who leave school at the end of compulsory education and do not progress to any other form of education and training are described in official statistics as Not in Education and Training (NET). In England in 2007 just under 1 in 8 of all 16 -18 year olds (11.9%) fell into this category. The majority of the NET group are in employment: 56% in 2007. The remaining 44% of the NET group are either unemployed (24%) or labour market inactive, i.e. not actively looking for work (20%). It is this combination of these groups – the unemployed and the labour market inactive – that constitute the 'NEET' category.

The progress towards the English PSA target is measured using the data in the Statistical First Release on participation by 16-18 year-olds in Education, Training and Employment, published annually in June. Figure 1 shows the trends in the proportion of young people classified as 'NEET' in England between 1985 and 2007⁸. The proportion of young people classified as 'NEET' (the 'NEET' rate) was much higher in the 1980s than it is currently, reflecting the rapid economic downturn that occurred in the 1970s across the UK. This resulted in a sharp decline in the size of the youth labour market, with a greatly reduced capacity to absorb young people with few if any qualifications into low skilled jobs.

⁸ The Engaging Youth Enquiry has published a detailed investigation of how the figures are calculated and why there are certain discrepancies between the Statistical First Release data and the Connexions Service's data. This paper is available on the Nuffield Review website. *Briefing Paper 3: Rates of Post-16 Non Participation in England* <http://www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk/cgi/documents/documents.cgi?t=template.htm&a=195> accessed October 2008

Figure 1: Percentage of young people classified as 'NEET' in England, 1985-2007⁹

The introduction of a variety of youth training programmes, and a sharp increase in participation in full-time education and training from the middle of the 1980s to about 1994 produced a rapid decline in the 'NEET' rates until the end of the 1980s. Subsequently, the 'NEET' rate has hovered at an average of about 10% for 16-18 year olds. The absolute numbers are, of course, affected by the size of the respective cohort in different years. There was a gradual decline in the mid-1990s as the economy recovered and young people found employment. From 1999 onwards, however, the 'NEET' rate of 16-18 year olds started to rise again, even though the economy was doing well nationally during those years. It is only in the last two years that we have begun to see a welcome decline in the 16-18 year old 'NEET' rate.

In the most recent data¹⁰, the proportion of 16-18 year-olds not in education, employment or training in England had decreased from 10.4% at the end of 2006 to a provisional figure of 9.4% at the end of 2007. This corresponds to a total number of 189,000 16-18

⁹ DfES (2008), data from additional Excel spreadsheet tables at:

<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000792/index.shtml> last accessed September 2008

¹⁰ The most recent figures were published by the DCSF on 19 June 2008: SFR 13/2008 *Participation in Education, Training and Employment by 16-18 year olds in England* [online]. At: http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000792/SFR_132008.pdf, accessed September 2008.

year-olds who were classified as 'NEET' at the end of 2007. Comparable figures for Scotland are 8.9% of the 16-19 population, a total of 23,500 young people in 2006, a fall of 1.8% from a level of 27,550 (10.7%) in 2003. In Wales, about 12,000 young people were 'NEET' in 2005, 10.1% of the 16-18 population. Again, however, there was a fall of over 2% in the proportion of 'NEET' between 2003 and 2005. This suggests that the 'NEET' rate is an obdurate but not an intractable policy problem. However, the solution to the 'NEET problem' requires long-term capacity building.

As Figure 1 shows, the proportion of young people who are 'NEET' increases steadily with age. One of the reasons that the proportion of 16 year olds who are 'NEET' has fallen over recent years is that more have opted to stay in full-time education. However, the upward trend in the 'NEET' figures with age suggests the possibility at least that this welcome engagement with further education and training may not lead to sustainable progression to employment for 18 year olds. This could mean that some young people may be being 'warehoused' in forms of education and training that do not enable a significant number of them to make the transition to sustainable employment. Indeed, the most recent available data on the proportion of 19 year-olds qualified to at least a level 2 or equivalent show that, using matched administrative data, 73.9 % of 19 year olds in England achieved at least a *level 2* or equivalent qualification in 2007, which represents an increase of 7.5 percentage points since 2004.¹¹ However, this proportion also shows that over 25% of 19 year olds did *not* achieve at least a level 2 or equivalent qualification. Thus, even if the policy view is focused on the gaining of qualifications, significant numbers of young people are not responding to the perceived need to continue in recognised post-16 education and training leading to qualifications.

The Quarterly Brief, published by the DCSF¹², explains this situation in the following terms:

¹¹ See: <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/trends/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.showChart&cid=5&iid=28&chid=109>, accessed September 2008.

¹² See: <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/STA/t000751/NEETQuarterlyBriefQ22008.pdf> published 26 August 2008, accessed September 2008.

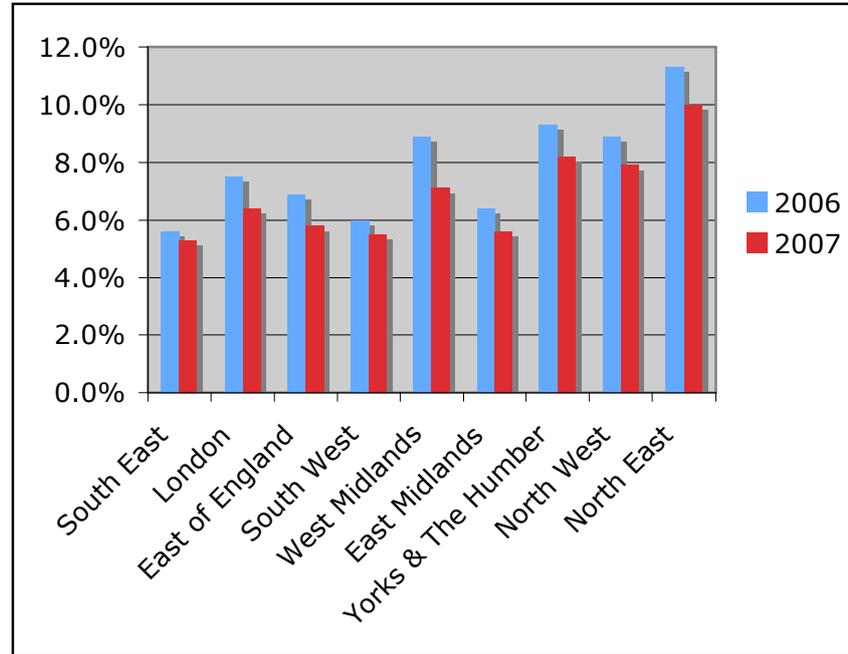
Despite participation in education and training amongst 16-18 year olds rising consistently since 2003, causing the proportion of the NET group to fall, the proportion of the cohort who were NEET *rose* in the period 2003-2005, due to a rise in the proportion of the NET group who are NEET. The latest end of year data shows a welcome fall in the NEET rate to 9.4%, although we still need to see a significant reduction in NEET to meet the 2010 target. This fall reflects a decrease in the NEET rates at all ages.¹³

This explanation highlights the difficulties in interpreting the figures, which requires in-depth assessment of education and training structures, but also of the youth labour market structures. The ‘shifting’ of young people who are classified as ‘NEET’ to the older cohort of 18 year-olds shows one of the potential limitations of the proposed legislation to raise the age of compulsory participation to 17 (by 2013) and 18 (by 2015), as this may simply shift the processes through which young people enter the ‘NEET’ category to a later stage in a young person’s life, but not actually equip them to deal with them any better.

1.2 Regional and local variation

The uneven distribution of employment opportunities is reflected in the huge variation in the proportion of young people who are ‘NEET’ at a local level. Figure 2 shows the variation in ‘NEET’ rates between regions. There are two important points to note. Firstly, the considerable variation between regions in the ‘NEET’ rates; regions associated with former industrialised areas in the north and west Midlands clearly have the highest ‘NEET’ rates, probably linked to higher levels of structural unemployment resulting from long term economic change. Secondly, across all areas there was a decline in the ‘NEET’ rate between 2006 and 2007. Whether this represents the impact of national strategies to reduce ‘NEET’ rates, general macroeconomic growth or a combination of the two is difficult to unpick, but it does seem to be a nation-wide effect.

¹³ <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/STA/t000751/NEETQuarterlyBriefQ22008.pdf> published 26 August 2008, accessed September 2008, pp. 2-3.

Figure 2: 16-8 year old ‘NEET’ rates by region, 2006 & 2007Source: CCIS data¹⁴

There is also significant variation within these regions – the data for Yorkshire and the Humber for 2007 are included in the table below to indicate the potential scale of this variation. In this region, the percentage of ‘NEETs’ ranges from 3.8% in North Yorkshire to 11.3% in Kingston upon Hull, with an even wider variation for the figures of 16-18 year-olds whose current activities are not known, namely between 3.4% in Wakefield and 11% in Leeds. At this level of analysis, the general downward trend observed in Figure 2 is still pronounced in most Connexions partnership areas in Yorkshire and the Humber (see Table 1).

¹⁴ *NEET figures for Connexions Partnership Areas 2006* [online] At: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/14-19/documents/NEET2006.xls>, accessed January 2008.

Table 1: Yorkshire and the Humber Connexions partnership areas: 16 – 18 year-old NEET figures, 2007¹⁵

YORKS & THE HUMBER	16-18 year-olds known to Connexions	16-18 year-olds NEET (estimated numbers)	16-18 year-olds NEET as a percentage	% of 16-18 year-olds whose current activities are not known
	176,176	14,440	8.2%	6.1%
East Riding	8,813	510	5.8%	6.9%
Kingston upon Hull	10,985	1,240	11.3%	8.8%
North East Lincolnshire	7,257	480	6.6%	5.7%
North Lincolnshire	6,326	460	7.3%	6.8%
Barnsley	7,206	580	8.1%	5.3%
Doncaster	10,354	850	8.2%	4.7%
Rotherham	10,457	970	9.2%	5.8%
Sheffield	16,088	1,530	9.5%	4.6%
Bradford	16,099	1,510	9.4%	7.9%
Calderdale	6,578	540	8.2%	4.3%
Kirklees	14,777	1,310	8.8%	6.8%
Leeds	23,930	2,380	10.0%	11.0%
Wakefield	12,122	1,190	9.8%	3.4%
City of York	7,482	280	3.8%	1.5%
County of North Yorkshire	17,702	670	3.8%	2.4%

Nationally, the level of local variation in the 16-18 year old ‘NEET’ rate is stark - from 15% in Knowsley on Merseyside and 13.3% in Stoke-on-Trent to 2.6% in Richmond upon Thames. The variation between London boroughs is from Richmond at 2.6% to 11.7% in Hackney. Clearly the probability of being ‘NEET’ is linked with a variety of other social indicators, including ethnic background and financial situation. Over the whole of England young people are more likely to be classified as ‘NEET’ if they are white, working class and male, but within London, for example, there are large concentrations of ‘NEET’ young people in minority ethnic groups.

This local concentration of what are termed ‘NEET’ hotspots is beginning to attract policy attention at both national and local levels. The DCSF and Government Offices

¹⁵ <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/14-19/documents/NEET2007.xls>, accessed September 2008.

provide additional support to hotspot areas as they develop and implement their ‘NEET’ action plans. Table 2 indicates the reductions achieved.¹⁶

Table 2 Reductions in NEET rates in 6 ‘hotspots’: 2005-2007

	2005 (Nov 05 - Jan 06)	2006 (Nov 06 - Jan 07)	2007 (Nov 07 - Jan 08)	% pt Change (2006-07)
ENGLAND AVERAGE	8.2%	7.7%	6.7%	-1.0 % pt
Barnsley	13.4%	12.3%	8.1%	-4.2 % pt
Durham	13.3%	12.9%	10.4%	-2.5 % pt
Greenwich	12.2%	12.0%	9.6%	-2.4 % pt
Hull	13.9%	14.1%	11.3%	-2.8 % pt
Manchester	12.0%	11.4%	9.5%	-1.9 % pt
Sandwell	10.6%	15.6%	12.3%	-3.3 % pt

However, this focus is on reducing numbers in the short-term may not necessarily enable young people to make sustainable transitions to the labour market.

In addition, the problem in specific areas is attracting attention from local policy bodies, such as the North East policy commission:

We must address the NEET issue immediately, and find a way to ensure all our young people are engaged in active education, training or employment and able to grasp the opportunities available to them (Baroness (Estelle) Morris, of Yardley, Chair of the North-East 14-19 Commission, 2008¹⁷).

1.3 Categories of ‘NEET’

There is a good deal of variability in the ‘NEET’ population that must be taken into account of when developing policy to re-engage young people. The next step is to differentiate sub-groups within the overall ‘NEET’ population.

¹⁶ See DCSF document on Phase 2 of the DCSF NEET ‘hotspot’ work [online, July 2008]. At: http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/localauthorities/_documents/content/1507080007_Phase%202%20NEET%20Hotspots%20-%20Note.doc

¹⁷ See <http://www.gazettelive.co.uk/lifestyle/family-lifr/tm-headline>. Accessed September 2008.

The strategy document published by the DCSF¹⁸ acknowledges two key features of the ‘group’ of young people aged 16-18 who are classified in the official statistics as not in education, employment or training: firstly, the ‘group’ is ‘not static but rather a rapidly changing group’ and, secondly, ‘the NEET group (sic) is not homogenous’.

The document highlights the following characteristics of young people classified as not in education, employment or training¹⁹:

- ‘The ‘NEET’ group is getting older – 52% of those ‘NEET’ are of academic age 18, compared with just 40% 5 years ago;
- The gender gap is widening – 16 year old boys are now more than twice as likely to be ‘NEET’ as 16 year old girls;
- A higher proportion of young people are ‘inactive’ and are not looking for work or learning;
- 39% of those with no GCSEs are ‘NEET’ at 16, compared with 2% of 16 year olds who attained 5 or more A*- C GCSEs;
- Persistent absentees are 7 times more likely to be ‘NEET’ at age 16;
- Young people with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities are twice as likely to be ‘NEET’;
- An estimated 20,000 teenage mothers are ‘NEET’.

A Scottish analysis also reveals the high proportion of 16-18 year olds who are young carers and ‘NEET’, and care leavers are very likely to be ‘NEET’. Young offenders and young people with physical/mental health problems were also over represented in the ‘NEET’ group.

The statistics do not allow us to dig deeper into the contextual and individual nature of young people’s path into ‘NEET’ status. But these figures give the overarching picture,

¹⁸ DfES (2007c) *Strategy document* [online]. At: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/14-19/documents/NEET%20%20Strategy.pdf>, accessed January 2008.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 3, para. 9

and depict a highly heterogeneous population. Some ‘NEET’ young people will require little support to move from negative to positive destinations after they have left school. Others will require a huge amount of support to make a successful transition into employment or further training. However, these young people also share characteristics, to a degree at least. As Richard Williams²⁰ argues:

To describe those who are NEET at 16+ as a “group” is clearly a misnomer. But it is undoubtedly true that among those who are NEET, there is a substantial majority of young people who, after 11 years of statutory education, are united by their common experience of social and economic disadvantage, low educational attainment, relative underachievement and alienation from the education and training system. The educational reform process that has continued apace in England since the Education Reform Act 1988 has completely failed this group.

Nonetheless, we need to know more about possible sub-populations if we are to target policies more accurately to meet different needs. Evidence provided to the EYE by the Sheffield Connexions service is useful here. They identify three groups of ‘NEETs’:

1. A vulnerable group consisting of those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD), teenage parents, looked after young people, those in contact with the Youth Offending Service (YOS), those leaving care, and black and minority ethnic (BME) young people.
2. Long-term NEETs – those who have been NEET for more than six months.
3. Frictional NEETS, those who move into the population then leave quite quickly (though they may later return). This is one of the main issues with the NEET

²⁰ Williams, R. (2007) *Personalisation: A NEET approach to policy failure*. In: Challenging educational disadvantage. Solace Foundation Imprint, p. 29.

group: it is not a static group of the same people but instead much of the group is made up of young people who churn in and out of the NEET group.

In November 2007, 22.6% of Sheffield's 'NEET' population was classified as vulnerable, 37% as long-term 'NEETs' and 40% as frictional 'NEETs'. Among the long-term 'NEETs', 53% had been 'NEET' for more than six months, 33.8% for more than one year and 4.9% for more than two years. While data are currently limited it appears that the proportion of young people who are long-term 'NEET' increases across the year groups 16 to 17 to 18. In addition, many in the vulnerable group would also be long-term 'NEETs'.

The Sheffield figures reveal some further interesting points. As they age, these young people become more mobile and less compliant. As a result a larger number of 18 year-olds move from 'NEET' status to become unknowns, compared to sixteen and seventeen year olds. Being unavailable for Education, Employment and Training also increases across the age groups, 15% among 16 year olds, 25% among 17 year olds, and 30% among 18 year olds. The number of teenage parents also rises significantly across the year groups, i.e. 16 to 17 to 18 years.

Data are also available from the Youth Cohort Survey²¹ on why young people enter the 'NEET' group. The commonest reason given is that "I need more qualifications and skills before I can get a job or education or training place". However, it is important to recognise that such data are produced from responses to set questions rather than through a conversation with a Connexions adviser. This may explain why the commonest reasons given by young people in Sheffield for entering the 'NEET' group is that the course they were on or the job they had been in had come to an end. Further exploration of these issues is required as more data become available.

Finally the Longitudinal Study of Young People (LSYPE) is beginning to produce useful data about risk factors associated with becoming 'NEET'. For example, those who smoke

²¹ Data cited in this paper are taken from DCSF (2008) Statistical Bulletin Youth Cohort Study and Longitudinal Study of Young People in England: The Activities and Experiences of 16 year olds: England 2007

or have used cannabis are more likely to become ‘NEET’ (these are also risk factors for early criminal activity) but drinking alcohol does not seem to be a risk factor. Those who in year 9 did not have a clear vision of their future in terms of wanting a job or career were more likely to become ‘NEET’ two years later. Young people who have negative experiences of and feelings about school in year 9 are also more likely to become ‘NEET’ two years later. However, this should not be interpreted as a general state of anomie.

1.4 Conclusion

The long-term changes in demand patterns for labour have undoubtedly led to structural unemployment, with a mismatch between job vacancies and the unemployed. Those who are unemployed either do not have the skills needed and/or live in the wrong place to fill job vacancies. In addition, there has been a reduction in the number of job opportunities compared with the situation prior to the oil shocks and recessions of the 1970s and early 1980s. Young people, especially those leaving school with few if any qualifications, are at particular risk in terms of finding employment under such circumstances. They have low levels of vocational training and lack experience, crucial to gaining access to labour markets where employers are looking for people who are already trained in order to save training costs.

The persistence of the ‘NEET’ ‘problem’ through the 1990s and the early years of the twenty-first century indicates the difficulties of encouraging a significant proportion of young people to stay in education and training, or to help them make the transition to stable and sustained employment. The next chapter of this report examines the questions: Who are these young people? What do they want?

CHAPTER TWO: WHO ARE THESE YOUNG PEOPLE? WHAT DO THEY WANT?

The Engaging Youth Enquiry investigated the life circumstances of young people throughout the workshops with practitioners and young people. It was the theme of the workshops with practitioners and young people²² held in Manchester²³ but was a recurrent issue in all of the other workshops too.

One important issue that emerged almost everywhere is the very terminology being used to label these young people. Practitioners in Manchester argued that young people who are classified as ‘NEET’ do not necessarily know that is the case, and may not be aware of the term. Policy inevitably requires generalisation at some level about these young people, and yet the delivery must be on a case-specific basis. If this transformation does not happen, labels such as ‘NEET’, which are based on broad generalisation about large and heterogeneous groups of young people, are counter-productive.

When the group in Manchester was asked what they thought ‘NEET’ meant and how they felt about it, they replied:

‘Tidy!’ (M, 16)

‘Never knew what it meant before today.’ (M, 16)

‘I don’t like any labels.’ (M, 16)

(All ten voiced agreement.)

²² 10 young people participated in the workshop on 31st October 2007. It was run by three Rathbone staff based in Manchester who work with these young people on a regular basis and have built up relationships of trust with them. Full notes were taken of the discussion, and these are the source of the direct quotations from the young people. The group included four young people from Bury and six from Manchester. Nine of them were young men. Their ages ranged from 16 to 18, and they all had been classified as ‘NEET’ at some point, although they were not necessarily aware of this fact.

²³ See Engaging Youth Enquiry Briefing Paper 2 *The life circumstances of young people* [online] At: <http://www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk/files/documents182-1.pdf>, accessed October 2008.

2.1 Multiple barriers, multiple problems

The workshops highlighted the range and heterogeneity of the challenges faced by young people, but also indicated the problems that they shared. They face multiple barriers to making progress in their lives – poor educational attainment; poverty; low self-confidence and esteem; inner city living²⁴ and poor labour market experience for boys; and for girls, teenage motherhood and a lack of parental interest in their education²⁵; and, above all, a feeling of failure. To have any chance of helping these young people to meet the learning challenges needed to re-engage with society they have to be acknowledged as a diverse group with diverse needs which must be dealt with in a holistic manner.²⁶ There is little point, for example, in investing thousands of pounds in an initiative to provide access to basic skills courses, for example, if the most important problem faced by some young people is where they are going to sleep that night. There is no point in providing access to a short-term training initiative if it has little real likelihood of leading to a job or further learning. Many of the young people spoke of their experience of such ‘schemes’: the experience often did more harm than good, leading to disillusionment and a downward spiral of motivation. Help with reading and writing and support to learn a trade are part of the solution for many young people (and they recognise that) but it is not *the* solution. If that were the case then the ‘NEET’ problem would have been solved a long time ago.

Practitioners at the London workshop also drew attention to those young people who may not feature in local ‘NEET’ statistics, as they are not in touch with services such as Connexions: these include young carers; young people who may have special educational needs; those who are mentally ill; or who may be homebound for reasons of illness or cultural factors. A young person whose activity is ‘not known’ is someone with whom a

²⁴ This is not to say that young people who live in rural areas are not at risk of being or becoming NEET, but rather to emphasise that statistically it is more likely that a young person who is male and living in an urban environment will join this group.

²⁵ Bynner, J. and Parsons, S. (2002) Social Exclusion and the Transition from School to Work: The Case of Young People Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET), *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, 60 (2).

²⁶ See also Spielhofer, T; White, G; O'Donnell, L. and Sims, D. (2006) Determined to Succeed and Young People at Risk of becoming NEET, for a similar perspective but in the context of Scotland <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/127242/0030498.pdf>, accessed September 2008.

Connexions Personal Adviser has lost contact. This might be either because they are known to have left their last activity, or because their records are not sufficiently current to be deemed valid. The period of currency varies, depending on the young person's previous activity: those who were last known to be 'NEET' would be recorded as 'not known' if they had not been in contact with Connexions for 3 months, whilst those in education would remain recorded as such for 12 months before their activity was re-established.

In addition, it is important to note that not all of those young people defined as 'NEET' are from working-class backgrounds – there are middle-class young people who are defined as 'NEET', who are well-qualified and supported by their parents, but who have opted out of the education and training systems for various reasons.

2.2 Gangs

The issue of gangs emerged in both the London and the Manchester workshops. Some participants in the London practitioner workshop felt that some young people were joining gangs as they did not feel a sense of belonging within their families, and this was identified to be particularly the case where they were living in a single parent household, or if they were in the care of the local authority.

Indeed, young people tend to have a desire to fit in and to belong and nowhere is this more apparent than in large and diverse metropolitan areas such as London and Manchester.²⁷ Furthermore, children who are looked-after, in the care of the local authority, have been identified as particularly vulnerable to the influence of gang culture. If a young person does not feel a sense of belonging within the family, they tend to seek to belong to other groups which offer them a similar sense of belonging.²⁸ Whilst for some, positive activities such as youth groups and religion offer alternative means of

²⁷ See Higgs, L. (2008) *How we said no to gangs*. [Online] for a description of the appeal of belonging to a gang. At: <http://www.cypnow.co.uk/Archive/778270/Feature---no-gangs/>, accessed September 2008.

²⁸ Broadhurst, K; Duffin, M. and Taylor, E. (2008) *Gangs and Schools: Interim Report: An Interim Report for the NASUWT*. NASUWT, Birmingham.

belonging; others choose a more negative route, with a sense of belonging ensuing from gang membership and involvement in crime.

These young people live in a society where celebrity is lauded and represents a source of aspiration.²⁹ Moreover, the lifestyle of the ‘gangsta’ is often glamourised within media such as music, films and pop videos which are popular with young people.³⁰ Particularly when parental and local community role models are not present, crime and the gang culture offer not only a sense of belonging, but a route to local celebrity status through alternative, sub-cultural means. The gang leader becomes the ‘significant other’, someone whom these young people aspire to be like, rather than the parent who is not present.

2.3 Community

Young people who took part in youth workshops in London had little attachment to, and in some cases, felt estranged from their local community, citing a lack of community cohesion between different groups. For instance, different ethnic groups tended to stick together rather than socialising and integrating with each other. Others noted significant racial tension in their areas, for instance, between black and white, or white and Asian groups. However, tensions were not only present between different ethnic and cultural groups. “Postcode wars”, between people from different local areas, were perceived to be problematic by some of the young people. This was particularly so for older teenagers: for instance, in the case of the nine young men attending a workshop in Hackney, the younger teenagers (aged 13-15) had friends in different areas with whom they regularly met up without difficulty, but those aged 16-19 tended to find this problematic, envisioning conflict if they moved out of their own local areas.

The proximity of affluent areas such as Canary Wharf and the City highlighted vast income differences, with young people noting that they felt that they were living in

²⁹ The impact of the ‘cult of celebrity’ has recently been raised as a potentially problematic issue in a survey for the Association for Teachers and Lecturers, see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7296306.stm>.

³⁰ Broadhurst, K; Duffin, M. and Taylor, E. (2008) *op.cit.*

poverty whilst rich people were able to become richer. Furthermore, some young people felt that they were excluded and looked down upon within their local community because of their age.

Quotes from young people about their local communities included:

“We are part of a mixed community, but no-one mixes.”

“In our area there are people from different cultures and religions but they do not mix”

“Jam with the people you know, at least no-one is gonna try it” [socialising with people whom one knows means that there is less chance of conflict].

“I am a part of a community where there is a rich community next to us, but we live in poverty – it’s not fair.”

“I don’t feel a part of my community as they look at young people as trouble makers.”

When asked about the environment they live in, the young people at the workshops were critical of the local amenities and highly sensitive to the perceived lack of positive features of the areas they lived in.

The question of what they would change in their local area elicited the following responses at the Manchester young people’s workshop:

‘Whole estate. Flatten everything and rebuild it, and let new people come in.’ (M, 16)

‘I’d stop gun crime.’ (M, 17)

‘Stop the ten year-olds being out at 12 o’clock at night terrorising everyone.’ (M, 17)

2.4 Crime and risk

Furthermore, the presence of and perception of the gang culture in certain areas can lead to a perception of risk and fear of crime for young people. In a report for the charity NCH³¹, it was noted that of the 800 young people (under 25) who responded to an online survey, only 28% said that they felt ‘very safe’ in their local community, compared with 45% who claimed not to feel safe at any time. 29% of these young people said that they had been affected by gun and knife crime, 36% were worried about gangs in their area, and 41% knew someone who had been personally affected.

Similarly, many of the young people taking part in the London workshops saw risk as an inherent and omnipresent aspect of their daily life. Some of the young people commented about the high death/murder rate in their local area, and others identified fights, crime and drugs as negative aspects of their local communities. Further to this, some of the young people said that they felt that school should offer first aid lessons in order to teach them how to deal with people who had been shot or stabbed.

Young people’s accounts of crime and risk included:

“Gang culture, you never know what people are capable of, as far as we know they can be murderers”.

“I saw there was two white men arguing under my block, one had a knife and stabbed the other guy in the heart, the victim was taken to hospital and later died. I was 6 years old at the time and was very scared and will never forget it”.

“My average day is to stay out of trouble”.

³¹ NCH (2008) ‘Step inside our shoes’ Young people’s views on knife and gun crime.’ [Online]. At: <http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/uploads/media/29/329.pdf>, accessed October 2008.

However, some of the practitioners saw this as a sign of young people wanting drama in their lives, with dramatic fantasy lives which bear only a tenuous relation to reality. They felt that these young people wanted to see themselves as “on the edge of gangsterism”, and were addicted to chaos – they have had lots of drama in their lives, and do not want ordinary things. The increased regulation and sanitisation of risk for young people means that they choose to make their own risks, and these may be divergent with reality. However, given how often such statements were made by the young people who participated, it would appear that dramatic incidents such as these are very real for these young people, with the press reporting of such incidents only serving to reinforce this drama.³² Hence the need for work with these young people to challenge the glamourisation of the gang and drug-related lifestyle, through education and youth schemes, which acknowledge and respect the life circumstances and aspirations of the young people, and are targeted at young people who are at risk of gang-related activity³³.

2.5 Housing

At the Manchester workshop, practitioners emphasised the need for security, safety, warmth, access to facilities and support for young people.³⁴ All of these factors are arguably pre-requisites for these young people to achieve in terms of education, training and employment, and for them to progress into stable employment and stable housing. Not all of these factors are available or accessible for young people who are outside employment, education and training. Those young people who are looked after, in temporary or vulnerable accommodation, officially homeless or living with unsupportive families or carers, may be particularly at risk.³⁵ It is a mistake to assume that the young people of concern here will be living at home: many 16-18 year olds are being expected to fend for themselves and find somewhere to live.

³² See e.g. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6464853.stm>, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/london/6463609.stm> etc.

³³ Broadhurst et al., *op.cit.*

³⁴ See Ford, J., Rugg, J., and Burrows, R. (2002) Conceptualising the Contemporary Role of Housing in the Transition to Adult Life in England. *Urban Studies*, 39 (13) 2455-2467.

³⁵ Figures in a personal communication from the DCSF show that of 3,620 19 year old care leavers known to Connexions services and recorded on CCIS, some 2,060 were known to be in education, training and employment, meaning that a significant proportion of this group was classified as ‘NEET’. (December 2006)

At the Northumberland youth workshop, the discussion with the Connexions advisers after the meeting identified accommodation as being a major issue for those leaving care at 16. Once they reach that age, and if they have been asked to leave their foster home, it is unlikely that they will be allocated a new placement. That leads to accommodation in a B&B, with friends or on a tenancy agreement, which is a difficult responsibility for a sixteen/seventeen year old. Another housing-related issue for those who become 'NEET' in rural areas in Northumberland emerged as the cost of housing and the unavailability of social housing for rent.

There are also specific periods of risk for looked after young people, including finding suitable accommodation after a period in prison. For example, they may be placed in bed and breakfast accommodation in an unfamiliar area, which puts them in a highly vulnerable situation.

2.6 Meeting diverse needs

The practitioners emphasised that some young people have seemingly intractable issues in their lives, while some of them may be struggling with temporary, short-term setbacks. This calls for a tailored, case-specific response to the particular needs of each individual within this very diverse category. For example, young people who are classified as so-called 'core' or 'long-term NEET' (those who are 'NEET' for extended periods, and struggle to move out of 'NEET' status) require more sustained input and support in order to progress to what are termed 'positive outcomes', than those who are labelled 'churn' or 'frictional NEET'.

It is important to recognise that the majority of those who are 'NEET' do not fall into this category for more than about six months. But they do churn backwards and forwards between short training programmes, casual work and being 'NEET'. In part this is a consequence of a highly flexible, deregulated labour market. However, the difficulties faced by the 'frictional NEET' cannot be under-estimated, as prolonged periods of

‘churn’ also prevent long-term, meaningful and sustainable progression from taking place, as John’s story below illustrates.

John’s story

One young man’s story illustrates the challenges faced in searching for employment. John completed school, started A levels but left college because he wanted to work. He has had a succession of short-term casual low paid jobs through which he has accumulated experience and demonstrated his ability to turn up on time and work hard. He aspires to be a bar manager but he cannot make the transition from casual to full-time employment because of the high levels of structural unemployment in the old coal mining area he lives in. Thinking about working in the nearest big city, Newcastle, is constrained by poor public transport links. At 19 he will graduate from 3 years of off-and-on status as a NEET young person to job centre plus. Surely he would have been better served by staying on at college? But he lives in a relatively isolated mining community where the pit closed a generation ago: his problem is not fundamentally educational, or about his lack of aspirations or qualifications, it is about lack of economic opportunity, an inability to realise economic well being. Even with A levels he would only have been able to find a job if he left his community.

2.7 The use of drugs

The following quotation shows how cannabis can become embedded into the daily routine of some young people:

‘Get up at 8ish. Have a cig, come to college, earn some dough, have some weed.’
(M, 16)

Drug use increases the risks for young people in two ways: firstly, that they will be outside education, employment and training and, secondly, that they will become involved in offending. One of the practitioners at the workshop working in this area with young people commented that the focus was not just on so-called hard drugs such as heroin and crack. This is partly because the patterns of use for cannabis users are the

same as for heroin users. They offend to get more cannabis, and their whole lives revolve around this particular issue.

2.8 Use of time

The young people we worked with are often stereotyped in the media as feckless, work shy and even feral. Certainly we should not pretend that none of them has anti-social values or acts in anti-social ways. They will readily admit to behaving badly in schools, many will have been expelled or been persistent truants. But, in terms of the ways in which young people choose to use their time, it became clear at the youth workshops that there were routines and clear patterns to the young people's days. However, it was also clear that much that was 'routine' to these young people involved risky or even criminal activity. Nonetheless, they often worked hard, as one youth worker put it to us, 'to maximise their economic resources', and for most a key aspiration is to find work that pays a reasonable wage.

One response to the question of what an average day contains was:

'Wake up at half eight, go to YMCA. Eat at break around 11. Get a kebab when I get in. Make my own money –got my own income. Go home to touch base at 1. See me mum and me nana. Everybody comes to my house. In the afternoon I'm out with the boys on the estate. Chilling – terrorising, tipping stuff off bridges.'

(M, 16)

2.9 Aspirations for the future

A crucial issue is confusion about what these young people need. They are often described as having 'low aspirations'. However, it seems more accurate to say that they speak of hopelessness – of ever having stable jobs and achieving personal economic well being, a key concern of the children's strategy. Given that many come from families where they are the third or fourth generation who are workless, this is hardly surprising. It is crucial to remember that even when they have completed school, and done reasonably well, some young people still find huge difficulty in finding sustainable employment because of high levels of localised structural unemployment.

However, policy makers often construct the problem they seek to solve in terms of young people who are ‘NEET’, or at risk of becoming ‘NEET’, as lacking aspiration, but (as has already been noted) they are a diverse group, and this is certainly not always the case. Indeed, practitioners identified problems ensuing from aspirations which are too high as well as those which are too low. For those whose aspirations are low, it may be difficult to engage them in the classroom setting, particularly when this goes hand in hand with low attainment.

But for many of these young people, as one participant in the Manchester practitioner workshop put it:

‘Actually, in the end, the young people are quite aspirational, and it is about provision and opportunity.’

On the other hand, another participant commented on the particular issues faced by young people who have multiple disadvantages:

‘I am finding more and more that young people have multiple disadvantages, and they have poverty of aspiration. There is an absolute and complete lack of hope. They see what is on offer in Manchester, but it is not accessible to them.’

At the workshops with young people, all of the participants expressed some form of aspiration, many of which were highly specific. These aspirations were potentially very difficult for these young people to achieve, because of the multiple disadvantages they faced (including poor housing, low levels of qualifications, being looked after, being a young parent, having a criminal record, being homeless or coping with psychological problems). However, they were able to express clear and precise aspirations. In addition, young people aspired to a range of various jobs including, for example: chef, solicitor, holiday rep, bar worker, plumber, shop worker, auxiliary nurse, joining the army, youth worker, fire fighter, scaffolder, warehouse worker, joiner, and so on. A number of young

people also had entrepreneurial aspirations and aimed to run their own businesses. Many of these occupations require on- the-job training, rather than an extended period in education away from work.

When asked about their aspirations for the future, the young people in Manchester, for example, responded:

‘I’d do my GCSEs again. Graphic designer.’ (M, 18)

‘Engineering – cars.’ (M, 18)

‘Home improvement business.’ (M, 17)

‘Just want money.’ (M, 16)

‘I just want a job, me, I’m not bothered what sort of job.’ (M, 16)

‘Mechanic.’ (M, 17)

‘Joiner.’ (M, 16)

‘Run me own pub.’ (M, 17)

‘Have me own hair and beauty salon.’ (F, 16)

‘Own Amsterdam. Be England manager. Head of the FA.’ (M, 16)

On the other hand, it was also clear that they did not have a planned trajectory for achieving those aspirations, which is reflected in their projections of where they would be 5-10 years later. This is shown in the quotations below.

‘Want to have a job and a nice family. Don’t want to be living in this hole either.’
(M, 16)

‘Don’t know. I’ve got no GCSEs, so I won’t be doing what I want. And I don’t want to go back to college.’ (M, 17)

‘In a flat. (Has a 14-month old daughter). In me own house with me own job. Paying me own bills, living a life by meself.’ (M, 16)

‘Prison. Boxing career.’ (M, 17)

‘Joinery.’ (M, 16)

‘Can’t see myself running that pub.’ (M, 17)

‘Me own flat or house.’ (F, 16)

All of the young people who participated in the workshops had remarkably normal aspirations: a job, a home, a car, a family. The issue is perhaps less about raising aspirations, and more about providing the means to realise existing aspirations. Given also that these young people are much more likely to bear the brunt of structural unemployment, this raises the question of why it continues to prove so hard to encourage these young people to stay in education and training. Why do so many of them have a history of truanting and of being permanently excluded from school when it seems to be in their interest to engage with schooling?

2.10 Schooling and educational attainment

One of the key findings from our work with young people over the last year is the very pronounced feeling of alienation from schooling so many expressed. Many of the young people certainly have unhappy memories of schooling, and in most cases they do not want to re-engage via an education route: they want a job. However, the reasons for dropping out are far more complex. For many it is not primarily about the school curriculum, or about a lack of vocational learning opportunities, but an inability to cope with the necessary authority structures that must underpin the structure of schooling. Some of the young people described a feeling of not being treated with respect. For example, a participant in Northumberland commented: ‘Teachers – they talked to you on

a different level, like they're higher up, treat you like a three year old.' (Female, Northumberland). A sense of being trapped inside an autocratic system was clearly of concern to some of the participants. Part of the disillusionment with school was generated by the pressure the young people felt under, particularly in year 11. Those who were still attending at that point argued that there was too much work and too much pressure to complete that work against tight deadlines.

This is not to criticise teachers or to argue against the value of schooling for the majority of youngsters. These young people are challenging - many will readily admit to poor behaviour at school and many are on the margins of gangs, which provide an alternative life style for them. However, some are affected by illness, or by caring responsibilities, which limit their ability to engage with schooling. Others, the majority, expressed an active dislike of their experience of schooling, which made dropping out a rational response for them; they are failing on their own terms. We have to recognise this as their lived experience of schooling in the design of initiatives to support them back into sustainable positive outcomes, and in giving teachers the resources to support them. For many, stopping going to school was a rational response, particularly if they had been told repeatedly that they were failures with little expected of them, both by schools and their families.

2.11 Conclusion

After 11 years of compulsory schooling most of the young people we have listened to over the last year are united by their experiences of disadvantage, poverty, low self confidence and a sense of hopelessness. Many are embedded in a culture of worklessness – they are often the third or fourth generation who have not worked. Others are in care and have been for years, or are homeless.

These young people are often described as having no or low aspirations. Much policy is predicated on the idea of raising their aspirations. Again, listen carefully to them and you will find these young people are remarkably normal. They want a home, a car, a family eventually. Above all, they want a job that will pay a family sustaining wage. They do

not want to be dependent, especially on parents or carers who themselves may be living on benefits and they are by and large not idle: they are out there trying to earn money, often in an alternative economy.

The vast majority of them failed in school and they feel failures. Many, but not all, will have left school with few if any qualifications and they are likely to have poor basic skills. But they failed in school for a diverse set of reasons. About one third of these young people have some form of learning disability or they have been blown off course by some event such as illness or pregnancy. Many young people at the workshops were carers, staying at home to look after a sick mum or their brothers and sisters.

Helping them, the practitioners argued, involves going beyond the illusion of inclusion and of consultation, and genuinely listening to young people. This means that it is important for those practitioners in a position of guiding and counselling young people to have the time available for the young people to reflect upon and discuss their potential progression route, rather than a ready-made solution being 'imposed' upon them. Provision and interventions need to be relevant, high-quality and challenging. They also need to be case-specific, that is to say tailored to the actual, rather than perceived, needs of individual young people. In addition, it is important to avoid 'ghettos of provision' for some groups of young people, such as young offenders, and to respect local circumstances, such as young people's (un)willingness to travel to certain areas in their city. This is linked to issues of territorial ownership by certain groups of young people, the presence of gangs, gun crime and other threats to young people's safety.

This is a challenging agenda and one that is unlikely to be met by a menu of short-term training schemes. Most of the young people had some experience of being placed on a scheme or initiative. They thought this would lead to a job but typically it did not. Instead, it leads to a downward spiral of motivation, rather than providing sustainable progression routes to further education, training or work. The next three chapters on education, employment and youth work point to some possible ways forward.

CHAPTER THREE: STAYING ENGAGED - LEARNING MATTERS

Even though a young person may be disengaged from the education system, this does not mean that he or she is not keen to learn. A key issue identified by practitioners was how to keep young people engaged in learning towards positive outcomes for themselves and society.

A first step is to ask why young people disengage from mainstream schooling, in order to think harder about what might help them to stay engaged. Secondly, consideration is given to potentially more appropriate alternatives to mainstream schooling that may benefit some young people. Thirdly, this chapter focuses on the opportunities the personalisation agenda may offer to young people, and what models of local learning systems are available to support consideration about how institutional and organisational arrangements might be developed, in addition to curriculum and qualification developments, to promote engagement in positive learning.

3.1 Disengagement from and disaffection with schooling

A key theme that emerges from the Engaging Youth Enquiry is the deep alienation many young people feel from the school system. In order to support young people to stay engaged in positive learning it is necessary that the sources of this feeling are acknowledged and understood. This section reviews the evidence collected to date. First, we examine the scale of the issue and then seek explanations from both the young people and the practitioners who worked with the Enquiry.

The scale of the problem

There are no direct measures of the level of disaffection and disengagement of pupils from schooling. We must turn to proxy measures such as the rates of exclusion from school and the level of persistent absence (truancy).

Exclusion

A permanent exclusion is when a pupil is excluded (expelled) from a school and their name removed from the school register. A fixed-period exclusion is when a pupil is excluded from school, but remains on the register of that school because they are expected to return when the exclusion period (usually a few days) is completed. Permanent exclusion rates from all schools currently stand at around 12 pupils in every 10, 000 (8, 680 in the academic year 2006/07). The majority of such exclusions are from state secondary schools (87%)³⁶. While there are permanent exclusions from primary schools, the peak age for such exclusion is at ages of 13 and 14. Boys are nearly four times as likely to be permanently excluded as girls (80% of those permanently excluded are male), and three times as likely to receive fixed-period exclusions (75% of those who are temporarily excluded are boys). Those with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are nine times more likely to be permanently excluded compared to those with no SEN. Boys are also more likely to be permanently excluded than girls at an earlier age.

Persistent differences in the rate of exclusion according to ethnic background remain: boys of black Caribbean origin and mixed white and black Caribbean background are three times more likely to be permanently excluded than boys of white British origin. By comparison, young men of Asian background are less likely than boys with a white British background to be permanently excluded, while those with black African backgrounds are as likely to be permanently excluded as boys with a white British background. Girls from a black Caribbean background are nearly four times more likely to be permanently excluded than girls from a white British background. However, this largely reflects the overall low rate of permanent exclusion of girls with a white British background. Girls from a black Caribbean background are as likely as white British boys to be permanently excluded.

The main reasons for exclusion are persistent disruptive behaviour (31% of permanent exclusions and 23% of fixed-period exclusions), with around 10% of permanent

³⁶ SFR 14/2008 Permanent and fixed period exclusions from schools and exclusion appeals in England, 2006/07. Available online at http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000793/SFR14_2008.pdf

exclusions and 21% of fixed-period exclusions involving verbal abuse/threatening behaviour against an adult. Such behaviour is symptomatic of those disaffected from schooling. Rates of permanent exclusion have fallen sharply from 12,300 in 1997/98 to 8,680 by 2006/07, largely as a result of a reduction in the rate of permanent exclusion of boys (from 0.26% to 0.18% of the male school population). The permanent exclusion rate for girls has remained steady at 0.05% of the female school population over this time period. However, the majority of that fall occurred between 1997/98 and 1999/2000. Subsequently, the number of permanent exclusions has fluctuated between 8,300 and 9,900, i.e. between 0.12-0.13% of the school population. Indeed, the number of permanent exclusions from local authority maintained secondary schools is higher today than in 1999/2000.

The number of fixed-period exclusions has risen from 4.49% of the school population in 2003/04 (344,500 exclusions) to 5.66% by 2006/07 (425,600 exclusions). This increase is primarily the result of an increase of over 2% in the rate of fixed period exclusions in Local Authority maintained secondary schools, from 8.66% in 2003/04 to 10.83% in 2006/07. Collectively, these data are indicative of a system that is struggling to accommodate some young people, that is to say to be totally inclusive. There is, of course, a dilemma for school managers and teachers: the extent to which a few pupils may be allowed to disrupt the learning experience for the majority. There appears to be variation in the rate of exclusions between schools: some seem to be more inclusive than others³⁷. The reasons for this require further investigation. There is a link to deprivation: in state-funded secondary schools, rates of both permanent and fixed-term exclusion are three to four times higher for young people eligible for free school meals. But deprivation is likely to be a correlate, not a cause, of the underlying behavioural problems that lead young people to be excluded: the vast majority of young people from poorer backgrounds complete secondary school without being excluded. Another possible reason may be the way bad behaviour is construed. It may be the case that what is ground for expulsion in one school is not construed as being sufficient grounds for expulsion in another. If this is

³⁷ The new Academies in particular appear to have very high rates of permanent exclusion, 0.47% of their population compared to 0.22% for local authority maintained secondary schools.

the case then we need to understand how these differing interpretations of poor behaviour are produced and acted upon.

The link between exclusions and ‘NEET’ classification

There is a clear link between being excluded from school and becoming ‘NEET’ later in life. Many of the young people who participated in the Engaging Youth Enquiry reported being excluded, both permanently and temporarily. For some, this had meant relocation to another school, for others to a Pupil Referral Unit. Some young people were also receiving support from third sector, voluntary organisations. But for many, being excluded was just another point in a trajectory towards becoming ‘NEET’ at 16.

There is a requirement for Local Authorities to ensure that those permanently excluded from school are placed in appropriate alternative provision within six days. However, there was an indication that some young people who participated in the Engaging Youth Enquiry had disengaged completely from the education system once they had been excluded, often from an early age. There is a need for further research into the learning trajectories of young people once they have been permanently excluded and how the pathway of such young people to becoming ‘NEET’ can be diverted to ensure positive outcomes.

Truancy

Truancy rates provide another measure of disaffection and disengagement. Again, there is no simple measure of this, as pupils may be absent from school for a number of legitimate reasons, as well as illegitimately. The law is straightforward: parents or guardians are required to ensure that young people up to the end of the academic year in which they turn 16 are in appropriate education. This could include being educated at home, but for the vast majority it involves full-time attendance at school. Overall the evidence is positive: school attendance rates are improving³⁸.

³⁸ SFR 05/2008 Pupil Absence in Schools in England, including pupil characteristics: 2006/07. Available online at <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000775/index.shtml>, accessed October 2008.

The group of most concern to the Engaging Youth Enquiry are those identified as persistent absentees (PAs), defined as an individual having more than 63 sessions of absence during the year (typically they are absent for more than 20% of the time). In 2006/07 there were around 272,950 PAs in primary, secondary and special schools (4% of enrolments). In primary schools PAs accounted for almost 2% of enrolments; in secondary schools this was nearly 7% and in special schools it was over 11%. However, compared with the previous years, the percentage of PAs has decreased in secondary schools. Nonetheless, the rate of overall absence for PAs is over 5 times higher than the rate for all pupils.

The problem of persistent absence is widespread but in 2006/07 there were 28 secondary schools where 20% or more of the school population were PAs. In almost a third of all secondary schools, the percentage of the school population who are PAs falls between 3% and 6%. The problem has been, and continues to be, clearly linked to local levels of poverty and deprivation. In 2006/07 some 4.2 % of girls in primary, secondary and special schools were PAs. This is slightly higher than the proportion of boys who were PAs. The problem of PA grows as pupils age, and is higher among white and mixed ethnic groups than minority ethnic groups.

The link between persistent non-attendance and becoming 'NEET'

Again, there is a strong correlation between persistent non-attendance at school and becoming 'NEET' at 16. For example, the Longitudinal Study of Young People (LSYPE) and the Youth Cohort Studies³⁹ show that, in 2007, young people who had been persistent truants were more than twice as likely not to be in full-time education at 16, compared to those who had never played truant. However, it is important to recognise again the vast improvement over time: in 1989 young people who were persistent truants at secondary school were nearly eight times more likely to be out of full-time education, compared to those who had never played truant.

³⁹ DCSF (2008) Youth Cohort Study & Longitudinal Study of Young People in England: The Activities and Experiences of 16 year olds: England 2007. Available online at www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway

Again those who participated in the Engaging Youth Enquiry frequently reported playing truant from school. For many this led to a process of gradual detachment whereby they had effectively given up going to school by the age of 14 or 15, often with the seeming consent of their parents or carers. Why does this happen?

3.2 Why do young people disengage from learning?

It is important to recognise that there is no single reason why young people stop attending school regularly. The evidence collected through the Engaging Youth Enquiry points to a multitude of reasons which often interact with each other to reinforce poor behaviour and non-attendance. Young people are both pushed out of the school system, for example by being bullied, or pulled out to participate in alternative activities. The following quotes from participants in the Manchester youth workshops give some idea of the feeling being expressed about experiences of school and not being in school:

‘Got kicked out, didn’t I? I got kicked out of every primary school – about eight.’
(M, 16)

‘Went to primary, but played truant a lot at secondary.’ (M, 18)

‘I didn’t really like it. Didn’t get on with any of the teachers – all stuck-up.’ (M, 18)

‘I never went. Couldn’t be bothered to go. You learn more when you are not in school.’ (M, 16)

‘It was boring.’ (M, 17)

‘Fighting with people and me getting expelled all the time. Think the staff had something against me. Think it was because I gave them abuse all the time.’ (M, 17)

Others indicated a feeling of not being wanted, and of being trapped inside an autocratic system. One young man had had a long spell of non-attendance in year 9, then started attending again in year 10, and completed year 11 even though:

‘... they tried to get me to do a part-time timetable but I said no, I want to do my GCSEs – they hated us man.’ (M, Northumberland).

The same male participant identified one of the good things about being at school as the opportunity to ‘give the teachers some grief.’ This is not to condone his anti-social attitude but to recognise that, for him, active resistance seemed, therefore, to be a way to establish some personal control in the face of the system, rather than absenting himself. Here agency is being exerted by failing on the young person’s own terms, which was a recurrent theme across the EYE workshops.

The importance of being treated with some respect and being allowed to learn in the way that they thought suited them, emerged as a key theme in the Northumberland workshop when the participants were asked who their favourite teacher was at school and how they would change the system:

‘Mr X helped us talk, he talked at our level, used our language, let us listen to music when we were writing rather than sitting in silence.’

‘Being with your friends and not being shouted at by teachers for stupid things like running in the corridor.’

‘Teachers talking at your level, coming down to your level rather than towering over you. Mr Y was helpful, if you were stuck he explained things more.’

Peer groups and friends

The importance of peer group relationships, being with friends, was another key issue. This was particularly important at times of transition between schools since it is here that

peer groups can be disrupted. Often, this may be in the interest of the learners, but when young people already have a low sense of self-worth, separating them from established friendship groups at the start of secondary schooling can be devastating. In the case of one young woman it eventually led to complete non-attendance by the age of 14. This had led to a downward spiral in motivation and confidence, such that she was now excluded from participating in activities with her friends because they were at work and she was not. This young woman identified becoming an air hostess as her ideal job, but then commented:

‘But I don’t think I will be one ‘cos I don’t want to go to college ... I dunno why I don’t want to go to college, I don’t know anyone. I’m not confident about going to college but I could do the job.’

She now spent her days largely waiting for her friends to come home from their jobs or college courses. National policy cannot be expected to reach out to meet the needs of this young woman directly and that is one of the challenges of helping those in the ‘NEET’ category. Rather, she needed sensitive attention paid to her overriding need to be with a small group of other young people she trusted in order to stay in school: this is just as much a part of the personalisation agenda as is providing more bespoke learning opportunities.

Such insights raise some concern that splitting learning between different sites, a design feature of the new Diploma programmes when delivered through collaboration between providers, could be problematic for vulnerable learners.

‘If you keep dotting yourself around all the time, friends don’t go there, so you don’t go there.’

Clearly, if sufficiently strong incentives and targeted support are put in place then young people will participate in new ways and overcome fears and uncertainties. But the importance of such peer group relationships and the security such, albeit limited, social

networks provide, need to be acknowledged. Splitting learning across sites may increase rather than reduce the motivation to disengage.

An ingrained sense of failure

The emphasis on academic attainment and on qualifications, and particularly on the five GCSEs at A*-C benchmark, in schooling, has serious implications for those young people who do not succeed within mainstream schooling. The practitioners at the Manchester workshop commented that some of those who are classified as 'NEET' have carried an ingrained sense of failure with them since secondary, or even primary, school. Part of the disillusionment with school was generated by the pressure experienced by young people, particularly in year 11, where it was felt, by those still attending, that there was too much work and too much pressure to complete that work against tight deadlines. This sense of failure affects the young people's capacity for self-motivation, and for identifying, realising and implementing their aspirations.⁴⁰

However, participants in the youth workshops also commented positively on mainstream subjects that they had enjoyed, often in connection with a trusted teacher. As such, the young people seemed to display a general hostility to the perceived assessment regime and the control structures involved in classroom teaching, rather than to 'traditional' subjects. Therefore, a reluctance to engage with schooling is not necessarily a reluctance to engage with learning, and a work-related alternative may not provide a solution for these young people. Could different forms of learning community, for example, benefit them more?

Learning disabilities and basic skills

In addition, some young people may have speech and language difficulties, or other learning difficulties, which affect their ability to communicate effectively. They may have received no support at all with these difficulties at primary or secondary school. It was deeply troubling to discover that 90% of the young people with whom Rathbone

⁴⁰ See Archer, L. and Yamashita, H. (2003) 'Knowing their limits?' Identities, inequalities and inner city school leavers' post-16 aspirations. *Journal of Educational Policy*, 18 (1), 53-69.

work had such poor basic skills in literacy and numeracy, after supposedly completing 11 years of compulsory schooling. Encouragingly, the young people themselves were recognising this as an issue, and information from the Activity Agreement pilots⁴¹, for example, points to basic skills tuition as being a common choice for young people who are ‘NEET’.

Bullying

Many of the young people who participated in the youth workshops spoke of persistent bullying as a contributing factor in their decision to play truant and disengage from schooling. The recent analysis of data from the LSYPE shows that young people who reported being bullied were twice as likely to be ‘NEET’ at 16 compared to those who had not been bullied. Furthermore, those who reported being bullied did substantially worse in their GCSE exams than those who did not, with a difference of 14% points in the proportion achieving five A*-C at GCSE.⁴²

The same study breaks down the incidence of bullying by personal, family and social characteristics. It finds little effect of socio-economic status or gender on the incidence of bullying. White young people report the highest incidence of bullying and there is a substantially lower (about 7%) rate of reported bullying in grammar schools. However, the strongest predictor of being bullied is special educational needs and disability.

‘More than four fifths of young people with “School action plus”, a statement of educational need or a disability that affected their schooling reported having been bullied, compared with under two thirds for other young people.’⁴³

⁴¹ Maguire, S. & Huddleston, P. (2008) Lessons from the Activity and Learning Agreement Pilots. SKOPE Seminar, Oxford.

⁴² DCSF (2008) Youth Cohort Study & Longitudinal Study of Young People in England: The Activities and Experiences of 16 year olds: England 2007 – section 3. Available online at www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway

⁴³ DCSF (2008) Youth Cohort Study & Longitudinal Study of Young People in England: The Activities and Experiences of 16 year olds: England 2007 – section 3. Available online at www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway

Poor transitional support

Some young people are at greater risk of becoming detached from education, employment and training during their transition between primary and secondary school, between compulsory and post-compulsory education, and between education and the labour market. Some young people simply drift away, for example because they obtained poorer exam results than they had expected at 16.

Important initiatives such as the September guarantee⁴⁴ (see box below) are trying to help prevent such drift. There is a continuing need, however, for schools and colleges to engage with businesses and with further and higher education institutions, and to have staff who are fully-trained mentors, who can become critical friends to those young people who are at risk of becoming classified as 'NEET'. This places demands on the information, advice and guidance (IAG) and careers advice in place for young people, especially once they are outside a formal educational context.⁴⁵ This also requires support for the wider family and carers, so that IAG becomes available in a systematic way to the young person and their support network. This would provide a 'network of transition', and information and guidance about the various possible progression routes available to young people.

The September Guarantee

The September Guarantee is an offer, by the end of September, of a place in learning to young people completing compulsory education. The guarantee was implemented nationally in 2007.

⁴⁴ This is defined as: 'The September Guarantee is the guarantee of the offer of a suitable place in post-16 learning to all young people leaving Year 11. From September 2008, we are extending the September Guarantee to 17-year-olds so that young people who have been on a short course, or have dropped out during Year 12, have a chance to re-engage in learning. The September Guarantee is a key part of the overall 14-19 strategy and supports the delivery of the NEET target.' [online]. At: <http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/youthmatters/connexions/neet/>, accessed October 2008.

⁴⁵ See Foskett, N. (2004) *IAG (Information, Advice and Guidance) and Young People's Participation Decisions 14-19* [online]. At: www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk/cgi/documents/documents.cgi?a=47&t=template.htm.

The guarantee is being extended to 17 year olds in 2008 to give those who enrol on one year or short courses, or who leave the activity they chose when leaving school, further opportunities to engage in learning.

The offer must be one of the following:

- full or part-time education in school, sixth form college, independent learning provider, or FE college;
- an apprenticeship or programme-led apprenticeship. This must include both the training element and a job or work placement;
- Entry to Employment (E2E);
- employment with training to NVQ level 2

This is an important element of the Department of Children, Schools and Families' strategies for reducing the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training ('NEET'), increasing participation, and attainment at age 19.

The imminent post -16 progression measure may have a positive impact here (with schools being held accountable for the progression of learners once they have left the institution), but there is also the danger that this progression measure may be counter-effective for those most at risk, with schools eager to break their association with young people who are at risk of not achieving progression to positive outcomes.

However, information, advice and guidance for this particular group of learners might, alternatively, be best delivered outside the school/college context. This would allow young people to engage directly and independently with the information available about potential progression routes, outside a context that they may well associate with failure.

Low levels of academic attainment

Clearly all of the various factors described in this section can act together, individually or as a small cluster of factors, that either push or pull young people out of the education system. Their impact is to reduce educational attainment at 16. Thus, for the majority of young people who are classified as 'NEET', one of the key barriers they face is that they hold few qualifications or qualifications at a low level. This means that they are unable to

access certain courses they might be motivated to attend. Indeed the best predictor of remaining in post-compulsory secondary education and then subsequently attending Higher Education, whatever your personal or family characteristics is attainment at 16. If a young person obtains five or more GCSEs at grade C and above then they are more likely to start and complete two years of post-compulsory secondary education, compared to those who do not. The government is correct, therefore, to focus efforts on raising attainment at 16 as the key to increasing participation. These efforts need to start early enough in the young people's education careers to be effective.

However, many young people find it difficult to reach this level of attainment by age 16, and they are most at risk of dropping out of the system. The post-16 education and training system currently struggles to include such young people. For example, practitioners at the Manchester workshop commented that there seemed to be a gap in provision for those young people who were not yet ready for level 2 programmes such as apprenticeship. This may be the right route for them eventually, but they need some bridging provision, ideally delivered in the workplace. However, the decision to discontinue NVQs as a stand-alone route, one in which a young person could obtain a NVQ1 or NVQ 2, without having to be an apprentice, particularly affects vulnerable learners with low levels of prior attainment. It appears that attempts to rationalise provision to promote programme-led funding can act against the interests of the young people of concern to the Engaging Youth Enquiry. What they may need is more flexible alternatives, including more flexible opportunities to learn and gain qualifications at work.

3.3 Alternative arrangements

There has been a plethora of attempts since 1997 to relax the structures of the National Curriculum introduced in 1988 in order to produce more appropriate alternative modes of participation and encourage better learning environments for young people at risk of dropping out of school. By and large these have revolved around providing more opportunities for vocationally-related learning, a curriculum ideology that has been termed "weak vocationalism".

Weak vocationalism: a dominant curriculum ideology

There have been repeated attempts to develop new vocational qualifications – GNVQs and applied GCSE – and the provision of opportunities to study outside of school, for example in a further education college or with a private training provider⁴⁶, as part of the increased flexibility programme. The development of the new Diplomas is, in part, a continuation of this strategy. But it is important to recognise that there is little new in such work.

The late 1970s and early 1980s saw a proliferation of qualifications designed to deliver a pre-vocational curriculum largely designed for those who were increasingly staying on as a result of rising youth unemployment. They all had some impact on motivation by enabling new forms of interaction between teachers and learners, or between non-teachers and learners in projects such as SKIDZ⁴⁷. But the impact on staying on rates or supporting progression to work of such programmes is much harder to judge on the basis of the available evidence.

The hope is, of course, that the new Diplomas, and the various pathways in the Foundation Learning Tier, when it comes on stream, will provide the means for engaging more of the young people who are likely to become classified as ‘NEET’ at age 16. Such aspirations may be misplaced for two reasons. First, as we have already stated, a primary reason for disengagement from schooling may be an inability to cope with school’s power and authority structures, rather than the curriculum alone. Second, it may be that young people of concern to the Engaging Youth Enquiry do not want the weak vocational learning opportunities offered by the new Diplomas.

Strong vocational alternatives

⁴⁶ See, for example Fox, J. (2005) *The Confusing language of the 14-19 Debate and Three Case studies of ‘Other Providers’*. Nuffield Review Aims, Learning and Curriculum Discussion Paper 18. At: www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk, accessed September 2008.

⁴⁷ See Fox, J. (2004) *Ivor the Engine and Practical Curriculum Reform 14-16*. Nuffield Review Working Paper 29 [online]. At: www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk, accessed September 2008.

The provision of alternative, more practical, learning opportunities was welcomed by young people who participated in the EYE workshops. Some wanted to learn a trade for example by being able to do brick-laying and hairdressing courses. But these were not always available as an option:

‘I wasn’t allowed to do hairdressing, I was in too high a set. If I’d been given the chance to do it I would have done it.’ (Female, Northumberland)

The opportunities for building walls or cutting hair are severely limited in the new Diploma qualifications and this means that they are unlikely to appeal to the young people with whom we spoke. The obvious solution is for these young people to go into apprenticeships. But access to apprenticeships can be highly competitive and requires some minimum level of prior academic attainment. Many of the young people participating in the workshops do not have this minimum level of attainment. Some alternative is required. This may be some form of programme-led apprenticeship in college or with a private training provider with strong links to local employers. But we certainly need more flexibility in our funding arrangements to allow access to more traditional work-based learning opportunities outside the formal apprenticeship system.

Currently, however, the opportunities for the recognition of alternative learning experiences, which take place outside school and/or college environments, are rare. This can be in part attributed to the current focus within the education system on gaining accredited qualifications. Indeed, practitioners felt that the current education system was inflexible and unresponsive to the needs of young people and employers, as well as being complex.

3.4 Alternative provision

Do we need to think about the education we offer young people at risk of being ‘NEET’ in a different way? If we construe the path to independent adulthood as a process of increasing engagement in socially shared thinking then what we need to do for any young person is to enable access to appropriate ‘thinking spaces’ that offer them the resources to

face life's challenges. Usually various social institutions construct such 'thinking spaces': families, schools and colleges, youth and peer groups, and so on. In such thinking spaces, the child and then the adolescent is engaged in processes of joint activity and dialogue that confront and challenge them on issues about which they have to take a stance.

“This constant confrontation with joint activities, with words and other symbolic mediations, with role-taking, but also with socially built situations, with set problems and their accepted solutions, with memories and expressed feelings, contributes to equipping the individual with the means to think, which he or she in turn learns to use by reinvesting them in new contexts and also in facing new technologies.”⁴⁸

The veracity of this statement is evident in the work of Connexions advisors, youth workers and colleagues from third sector organisations, taking young people away on residential activities or organising work experience for them: this is an attempt to construct appropriate thinking spaces from which to build new trajectories.

However, the merging into socially shared thinking can be vastly different for different young people and a common feature of many (but by no means all) young people we have talked with over the last year is a rejection of school or college as a meaningful thinking space for them. This seems primarily an outcome of not being able to cope with the necessary authority structures required to run schools: authority that allocates young people to groups without their friends, and that appears arbitrary and unreasonable to the young people (though from the perception of the teacher or school head may appear entirely reasonable), that makes demands they cannot or do not want to meet. This is what disrupts the trajectory to joining society. These are not new issues. Read Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour*⁴⁹ or Phil Brown's account of life in a Welsh comprehensive

⁴⁸ Perret-Clermont, A.-N. (2004). Thinking Spaces of the Young. In A.-N. Perret-Clermont, C. Pontecorvo, L. B. Resnick, T. Zittoun & B. Burge (Eds.), *Joining Society. Social Interaction and Learning in Adolescence and Youth*. (pp. 3-10). Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press.

⁴⁹ P. Willis (1977) *Learning to Labour: How working class kids get working class jobs*. Farnborough, Hants: Saxon House, Teakfield.

school in the 1970s⁵⁰ and it is clear that these issues have been around for a very long time. The reason why the issues were less important politically then compared to now was there was an exit route for young people: into low skilled manual and semi-manual work.

Given these constraints and the issues of authority and power that seem to push some young people out of the education system, another option might be to set up an alternative set of organisations to provide for the needs of the young people of concern to the Engaging Youth Enquiry. To some extent this is already happening with third sector voluntary organisations increasingly providing learning opportunities for 14-16 year olds, for example, that are constructed to be more appropriate to the learners' needs. There are suggestions to break up monolithic school structures to form smaller, 'boutique' schools better able to personalise the curriculum to meet the needs of learners. Such smaller-scale organisations might be better able to listen to the voices of learners when designing learning activity.

Suggestions from young people participating in the youth workshops about how the education system could be improved included, in many cases, a desire for more practical forms of learning, which related to their own interests or to a future career:

'Schools should have better things to do like motor bikes' (male, Walker)

One participant when asked about her favourite subject in school said:

'Textiles, because we used to do more than just writing. We just did more other stuff, like for our course we had to do a wall hanging, so, instead of just sitting doing nothing we were actually on the sewing machines and things like that'
(female, Bradford)

⁵⁰ Brown, P. (1987) *Schooling ordinary kids: inequality, unemployment, and the new vocationalism*. London: Tavistock

Another young woman talked about her ideas about how the education system could be improved, to stop young people from playing truant:

‘...if they asked them what they wanted to do and they did the lesson in something they wanted to do it in then they’d probably stay. Like something they were interested in or something they wanted to do when they were older’ (female, Bradford)

Another participant’s opinion on the current education system was that:

‘They teach you things you don’t need to know’ (female, Walker)

We could also draw on a range of example from abroad – the essential school movement in the United States, Production Schools in Denmark - as possible alternatives. We should certainly fund third sector providers in a more equitable and longer term way to provide services to young people. But there is a problem with all of this. It may be pragmatic, but it is potentially socially divisive. Young people could be ear marked as being suitable for treatment by a different type of provider, thereby reducing commitment to educate all young people equitably.

3.5 An inclusive learning system

The workshop participants in Cardiff indicated a need for the development of a responsive learning eco-system, whereby multiple providers and forms of learning are recognised, ranging from formal learning which takes place in a school or college environment, to informal learning which takes place through participation in leisure-time activities. Developing a wider concept of learning to include more informal forms of learning and more diverse learning environments, will enable the engagement of a greater number of learners, as well as maintain the interest of those young people who may be at risk of becoming disengaged.

Maintaining positive contact with learning

It is important to emphasise that even if a young person may be disengaged from school this does not mean that they are necessarily disengaged from learning. There is a need to recognise that teaching and learning takes place outside of formalised learning environments such as schools and colleges as well as within them, with youth clubs and youth workers playing a significant role. Indeed, a young person who is disengaged from school may continue to engage in learning opportunities, but with alternative providers, such as through the Youth Service. The workshop participants in Cardiff emphasised the need for young people to maintain contact with positive forms of learning.

Use of multiple providers (but with co-ordinated action)

At the Cardiff workshop, the desire for more flexible learning led into the suggestion that there should be greater recognition of the key role of non-formal learning. In view of this, the current separation between formal and informal learning can be seen as inherently problematic. An alternative option would be for youth services to sit alongside schools and colleges, as all offer learning opportunities so should be afforded similar status. Thus a need for collaborative partnership and greater synergy between organisations providing formal, informal and non-formal modes of learning was identified.

How can such a system be designed?

One example of such a system is the REAch programme in Wolverhampton, which is presented here as a case study. A collaborative approach to learning has been instigated there, through the adoption of two key programmes, 1) the REAch Programme (Raising Enjoyment and Achievement), and 2) the growing partnership between the Wolverhampton 14-19 development team and the Youth Service. These will be addressed in turn in this section.

The REAch programme aims to use a collaborative approach in order to improve young people's attainment and inclusion. This programme emphasises learning through a variety of different experiences, both within and outside the classroom, in an inclusive Level One curriculum for young people at Key Stage 4. A collaborative curriculum has

been constructed for these students, offering the possibility of appropriately guided personalised pathways, engaging students in a unique and stimulating learning experience. The programme is delivered on two full days per week, with the other three days of the students' time devoted to studying the core curriculum within school. Programmes across the city are aligned, in order that all students receive their entitlement, and so that students can attend aspects of the programme delivered by other schools which are in consortium with their 'home' school.

Participation in the programme leads to the award of two qualifications: BTEC Level 1 Certificate or Diploma in Vocational Studies, and the ASDAN CoPE (Certificate of Personal Effectiveness) Award, also at Level 1. The 14-19 team have developed the Level 1 Certificate in Vocational Studies (known locally as 'Explorer') in conjunction with BTEC. The programme for 'Explorer' is rooted in ideas of experiential learning, with programme delivery enhanced through visits to vocational settings. Students choose three vocational areas to experience (e.g. land-based studies, engineering, art and design) which are covered in one term each. Collaborative delivery between schools in consortia means that students move around to schools within the consortia delivering each different area of the programme. The ASDAN CoPE award is a flexible programme, in which credit is gained through the completion of challenges. The flexibility of the programme enables students to select experiences which they themselves find to be motivating, with a large variety of opportunities available through the online database 'area-prospectus.com'⁵¹. Furthermore, the programme can respond to demand from students, with extensive support available for the development and funding of opportunities not currently available.

Progression from the programme in various ways is possible. From 'Explorer' students can progress either by adding further units within the chosen vocational areas, or increased focus on one specific vocational area which has been chosen. From the Level 1 CoPE award, students can progress onto CoPE at Level 2, either during Key Stage 4 or post-16.

⁵¹ www.area-prospectus.com/wolverhampton

It is intended that the current structure will be built on by expanding the qualification options at level 1, and adding entry level qualifications, although the requirement for one Personal Development and one Vocational qualification will remain. Further to this, the 14-19 team intend to make the programme increasingly inclusive of those who are currently disengaged and /or excluded from education – something which the flexibility and unitised nature of the current programme allows for. Additionally, the fact that the programme does not demand specific prior learning means that it is particularly suitable to these groups of young people. Close work between the 14-19 development team and the Youth Service should enable more informal learning and wider opportunities for accredited learning to become part of the programme in the future.

Further to this, there is a growing partnership between Wolverhampton’s 14-19 Development Team and the city’s Youth Service. Available learning options for 14-19 year olds in the city have been expanded and transformed, to encompass the more informal opportunities available through the Youth Service. All available learning opportunities for young people, including experiential learning activities from informal providers as well as the formal curriculum, are presented to young people in the City’s online 14-19 prospectus⁵². Each young person’s individual learning journey is recorded in a web-based programme called My-iPlan⁵³. This enables young people themselves, and those who work with them (including teachers, youth workers, and Connexions personal advisors), to record all forms of learning in which the young person has partaken, including more informal forms of learning. Current key work in this area surrounds the development of unitised experiential learning, which can be delivered in youth settings and can be formally accredited. The overall aim here is to provide a fully inclusive 14-19 learning strategy, leading to an increasingly diverse offer for young people in the city.

⁵² Op. cit

⁵³ www.myiplan.com

What gets in the way?

Currently, funding of courses is tied to accreditation, with accreditation as the key driver in the system. This is exacerbated by the government's recent strategy on 14-19 qualifications⁵⁴, which notes that government funding in post-14 education is to be focussed on four sectors: general education (GCSEs and A levels), Diplomas, Apprenticeships and the Foundation Learning Tier, all of which offer some kind of accreditation for courses studied.

Funding on an outcome basis is fundamentally problematic, as this involves the assumption that a young person choosing a course knows what they want to do for their future career. If a young person starts a course and finds that it is inappropriate in some way, and consequently drops out, in the current system they are often unable to start a new course until the start of the next academic year, the following September. In the meantime, they may fall into being classified as 'NEET', and may find it hard to become engaged again and re-enter the education, employment or training system. In many cases, young people are unsure about what they want to do, and would prefer taster courses focussing on different areas of work rather than full courses leading to very specific qualifications. Consequently, this indicates the need for young people to have the opportunity to take part in a range of activities so that they can decide what they enjoy and what they want (and do not want) to do for a career. This is possible in the Wolverhampton system, where young people working towards the ASDAN CoPE award are able to experience three different vocational areas for a term each – but this is not widespread.

Moreover, in the 14-19 qualifications strategy⁵⁵, skills and qualifications are intrinsically linked, with the gaining of qualifications seen as fundamental to getting a job.

Practitioners at the workshop in Cardiff noted that employers do not necessarily look for qualifications when looking to employ a young person. In some cases, qualifications are used by employers as a filter, determining which applicant to offer an interview, but

⁵⁴ DCSF (2008) Promoting Achievement, Valuing Success: a strategy for 14-19 qualifications.

⁵⁵ Op.cit.

attitude and willingness to work were considered the most significant assets for a potential employee. Employers consider whether the young person has a particular aptitude for the job: knowledge which can be gained, for instance, through having undertaken a work-experience programme with the company. Many young people get jobs through informal networks of contacts. Moreover, it is the non-accredited forms of learning which hold most appeal to some young people.

It may rather be the case that the institution itself, or the type of learning that is offered within formal learning environments, does not appeal to them. The agenda of personalisation of education and training is currently prevalent, but current models of classroom-based learning may be considered highly restrictive.

3.6 Conclusion: The need to maintain a distinct purpose

Whilst integrated forms of learning may be desirable, the maintenance of distinct roles by professionals (such as youth workers and teachers) and organisations (such as schools and youth groups) working with young people is imperative. Organisations should retain their own discrete roles, but they should work in partnership together to ensure a wide range of opportunities for young people with multiple providers. Participants in the Cardiff practitioner workshop said that they felt that it may be problematic if schools become too closely identified with youth workers, as this may cause young people to withdraw, and to engage less with youth workers. Rather, they felt that distance is needed to ensure youth workers' integrity. In a similar connection, Tiffany⁵⁶ raises the point that it is not desirable for youth workers to work to pre-determined agendas – young people engage with the youth service in their free time, requesting support within this context when they feel they need it. The imposition of an agenda may act as a barrier to communicating with those who may be disengaged from formal learning, and moreover, contradicts the intention of the youth service to enable young people to have control over how they themselves want to utilise their spare time. Similarly, an article in the

⁵⁶ Tiffany, G. (2007) *Reconnecting Detached Youth Work: Guidelines and Standards for Excellence*, Federation for Detached Youth Work.

Guardian⁵⁷ emphasised the community-based and young-person-focussed nature of youth work, which is dissonant with schools' more strictly focussed agendas and targets.

⁵⁷ <http://education.guardian.co.uk/egweekly/story/0,,2257719,00.html>

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDING A JOB - EMPLOYMENT MATTERS

A key theme that emerged from all of the workshops was the importance for the young people of getting a job. The overwhelming majority wanted to work and they were being realistic about the sort of work they were likely to get: bar work, the wider hospitality sector, retail. These are the sectors we know that a large number of young people already get jobs at age 16 and 17. Such jobs are often disparaged as indicating low aspirations or described as jobs without training. However, there is extensive research evidence to suggest that such jobs matter to young people, and they are valued providing they can pay a decent wage.

Through participation in youth organisations and sub-cultures it could be that these young people are recapturing something which official society has denied to them or increasingly seen as being illegitimate for 16-18 year olds: access to work. We know about the crippling intergenerational effect of the disappearance of work within an entire community. Visit Ashington, or Goldthorpe or the Welsh valleys and the impact is clear. We were told again and again that many of the young people we were interviewing were from families where no one had been employed for two, three or even four generations. Growing up in a world in which their parents and other older relatives are not living within the discipline – and rewards – of regular jobs, young people lack an image of the possibilities of work and often turn to other ways of getting along or, sometimes, prospering. This motif of getting along outside the official labour market was a common one in the discussions with young people. It is indicative of their agency; they are not feckless or idle – most work hard at something. The likelihood is that they would work hard in entry-level jobs if they were available.

Such work is often portrayed as being low skilled, low wage work that young people should not aspire to, and work that will soon vanish, as argued in the Leitch review of skills.⁵⁸ Recent research by SKOPE has demonstrated, however, that low paid work

⁵⁸ Her Majesty's Treasury (HMT) (2005) Skills in the UK: The long-term challenge (Leitch review of skills). London: HMSO.

remains an important feature of the UK employment landscape and is likely to stay so, despite the ‘evidence’ of the Leitch review. Why should young people not enter such employment?⁵⁹

Katherine Newman’s research⁶⁰ has shown that for marginal youth even low paid, routine jobs can serve as important routes to social participation. In the US she demonstrates how young people in the most marginal communities use low-paid, dull fast-food or similar jobs to earn money, as well as to define themselves as productive members of the broader society. Work plays a key role in youth development: dull, uninteresting, underpaid but productive work provides a socialisation vehicle for joining society. In the UK research at the University of Exeter has produced similar findings.⁶¹

4.1 Challenges to getting a job

Young people face two key challenges in getting a job: living in an area where there is a sufficient supply of jobs to make getting one a realistic possibility and then successfully competing for the jobs that are on offer for those with few or no qualification and limited work experience. Employers can readily substitute better qualified or more experienced labour often at little marginal cost.

At the Northumberland workshop, it emerged that, while Ashington had two large employers, the local hospital and a large engineering company, both are looking for more skilled workers than the young people who participated in the youth workshop. The engineering company, for example, recruits mainly graduates, and this is where there main skill shortages are. While the hospital may provide some lower-skilled jobs, for example in catering and cleaning, these did not seem to be the types of jobs the young people found easy to access. They have to compete with older workers. Evaluations of

⁵⁹ See: <http://www.skope.ox.ac.uk/WorkingPapers>, accessed September 2008.

⁶⁰ Newman, K.S. (1999) *No shame in my game: The working poor in the Inner City*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf and the Russell Sage Foundation.

⁶¹ Quinn, J.; Lawy, R., Diment, K. (2008) *Young people in jobs without training in south west England: Not just’ dead-end kids in dead-end jobs’* [online]. At: <http://www.swslim.org.uk/downloads/2565.pdf>, accessed September 2008.

StepUP, for example, suggest that older people were more successful in gaining employment, perhaps because they had set themselves lower employment horizons than young people and were prepared to take such jobs, even though they may be low-paid.⁶² Thus, the predicament that these young people find themselves in, as a result of their disengagement from schooling and the disruption of their pathways to qualifications is in part at least a youth unemployment problem – an inadequate supply of reasonably good jobs for them as low-skilled young people.

4.2 The sustainability of work

Some young people may try hard and work through to the end of year 11, but they still have low levels of attainment. This may be sufficient to support progression to a local college, but such participation may be short-lived and not lead to further qualifications. In areas with a lack of suitable permanent jobs for young people with few qualifications or qualifications at a low level, the result is often a churn between temporary jobs and ‘NEET’ status. While such work may result in an increase in human capital through accumulated experience, it does not seem sufficient to generate an entry pathway to more enduring work in an area where there is little employment for the poorly qualified, and where employers can substitute better qualified young people for less well qualified at no or little additional marginal cost.

Comments from young people at the Northumberland workshop included:

‘There’s nowhere in my area you can get a job unless it’s in a pub.’ (Female, Northumberland)

‘Why can’t young people get jobs? How do we get the experience to get a job when we can’t get a job to get the experience ... they expect you to get a job but for two years you have to live off your mum and dad. If mum and dad don’t qualify for EMA [because they earn too much] it’s not fair that some kids going

⁶² Hasluck, C. and Green, A. (2007) *What Works for Whom? A Review of Evidence and Meta-analysis*. DWP Research Report No. 407. Leeds: Corporate Document Services.

to college get £30 pw, but if you try and stand on your own two feet you don't get anything for it.' (Female, Northumberland)

'We [i.e. those of us leaving education and training at 16 and 17] need to have the same rights as 18 year olds – like signing on the dole.' (Female, Northumberland)

It cannot be assumed that all parents are supportive of their young people going to college and denying support could be a stimulus to drop out for the youngsters of the income group just above the eligibility margin. However, it was noticeable in the young people's workshops that many of the participants identified their parents, and particularly their mothers, as a key source of support. This challenges the validity of the assumption that poor parenting or unsupportive families play an important role in young people becoming classified as 'NEET'.

The current casualisation of the entry level labour market is highly problematic, with workers seen as easily disposable commodities. The increasing use of temporary contracts and agency work does not afford the necessary sustainable employment to young people to lead economically successful lives, economic well being, identified as a key outcome of Every Child Matters. Furthermore, increased immigration, particularly from the newest member countries of the EU, has been considered by some to have an impact on the availability of jobs for young British workers.⁶³

4.3 Employers

The experiences of some participants in the youth workshops in relations to employers had been negative and/or confusing, as illustrated by the quotations below:

'Half of these jobs say school leavers but you need the experience but how are you supposed to get the experience to get the job? Or you take in your CV and they say they'll ring you but they never do and when you go in they say 'Oh we'll ring you next week' but they never do' (female, Bradford)

⁶³ Ernst and Young ITEM club (2007) 'Migration and the UK economy'.

Another respondent from the same workshop, however, noted that Rathbone had helped her in this way:

‘That’s why Rathbone is good because it helps you get the experience so you can get a job. And they get you a placement and you might get a job with that placement’ (female, Bradford).

Furthermore, the portrayal of these young people as “feckless” is problematic and needs to be dispelled, particularly as it is frequently not the case. Some of the respondents from the youth workshops led extremely busy lives, as shown by the quotations below.

‘Through the week I go to my placement, which is in ****. [...] I go there four days and one day training. On a night I go home and go to work some of the days and on the rest of the days I spend time with my boyfriend. Then on a weekend, on a Saturday I work all day at Morrisons and then on a Sunday I get a rest’ (female, Bradford)

‘Get up about seven, get kids ready, take kids to nursery, come to centre, pick up kids, bath, feed and bed. At the weekend it’s the same except there’s more cleaning’ (female, Doncaster)

‘I come to training 10am to 4pm, after that I sometimes go to work and if I don’t have work I either go home or go and see my friends’ (Tower Hamlets)

Practitioners at the Cardiff workshop noted that some of these young people may come from families where unemployment has been the norm for several generations, and therefore may experience considerable personal and familial barriers to entry into the workplace. It is crucial that a deficit model is not adopted by employers in relation to these young people. A more positive approach towards young people, and towards

working with them in order to engage them in work and/or education and training, is needed.

Such comments indicate the need for employers to become involved in programmes which aim for the re-engagement of young people in education and/or employment. Employer involvement, through the provision of particular opportunities such as work experience, or through involvement in the delivery of courses and so on, helps to break down the negative perceptions which some young people may hold about employment, and which have acted as barriers to their engagement in the world of work. However, for this to be successful, employers must be offered significant amounts of support. In addition, young people taking part in placements with employers need to follow the employers' rules, regarding factors such as timekeeping, for instance, in order that they can continue with their placement.

Why should employers take on such young people, especially as they may be costly to train? Support for employers and the young people is essential. Organisations such as Rathbone play an important role in mediating between employers and young people, ensuring that young people know the rules (and that if they disobey them, they may risk losing their placement) and that any problems which arise are sorted out quickly and effectively. Support is provided both to the young person and to the employer.

4.4 Information, advice, guidance and support.

There is a need for extensive guidance and support for young people as they progress from being disengaged to becoming re-engaged in education, training or work. Young people need someone who is able to guide them through the system, providing ongoing personal support. This has proven successful: one participant at the practitioner workshop in Cardiff described a scheme in Swansea which involved youth workers supporting young people and led to 96% of participants going into education or employment.

Youth workers were viewed positively by participants from the youth workshops:

‘Youth workers were better than teachers; they had more time for me’ (female, Walsall).

‘Amanda from YMCA [is my role model]. She is always calm’ (female, Doncaster).

It is also important to consider what engages and motivates young people, and to tailor support in this way. Rather than dismissing their ideas about what they want to do, their ‘dream’ careers could be a source of encouragement and a valid starting point for giving advice.

4.5 Transport and regional issues

In terms of practicalities and employment, it is important to recognise the bounded nature of some young people’s lives – for various reasons, young people may be unwilling or unable to travel far from their homes. This applies, for example, to the work of Rathbone in Poplar, where young people avoid certain ‘postcode areas’ because of fears of violence and gangs.

At the Northumberland youth workshop, unlike in other workshops, gangs did not appear to be a major issue but both Connexions workers in the post-workshop discussion identified other causes of no-go areas, associated with ‘not treading on the toes’ of powerful community members with whom young people might have fallen out. In particular, those with drug habits might avoid certain areas if drug trading was going on there and young people owed dealers money. Unfortunately one of these areas was near a local Connexions service in Northumberland which increased the problems of meeting with these young people. Meetings were therefore arranged in alternative venues. In addition, in Northumberland⁶⁴, the rural nature of the area can mean that it is very expensive and time-consuming for young people to reach potential employers. This kind of regionalised structural unemployment penalises young people in those areas, particularly when traditional forms of employment have disappeared in recent decades.

⁶⁴ A workshop was held in Morpeth on 22 May 2008.

This may restrict young people's horizons of action in terms of their imagined futures, although not in the case of all of the young people – one young man, for example, was looking forward to passing his driving test so he could travel further to find work. However, at the practitioner workshop, the problem of narrow horizons was mentioned, as young people can be unwilling to leave the Northumberland area.

4.6 The 2012 Olympics: an opportunity for young people in London?

London's successful bid for the 2012 Olympics offers the potential for new ways and means of training and/or employment for young people living in London, if it is utilised in the right way. Lessons must be learnt from the Commonwealth Games in Manchester (2002), where various opportunities for the involvement and engagement of local young people were not taken up. There was a local labour agreement for jobs in the construction of the venues for the games, but as this extended for 30 miles around the venue, much of the labour was not necessarily from the immediate local area. The facilities were intended to be for community use after the event – but they are expensive to use, and thus cannot be used by all of the local community. Furthermore, whilst young people from the local area were involved in the event as volunteers, they tended to be high-achieving young people, thus not representing all sectors of the local community.

Care must therefore be taken that this is not repeated in London. There is already evidence of this being repeated, in that mini-events which have taken place so far have tended to focus on those young people who are high achievers. Whilst emphasis is placed on the opportunities for the re-generation of East London as a result of the Olympics, with the current youth policy stressing the opportunities for employment and engagement of young people in this locality through the Olympics⁶⁵, evidence for this has not so far been widespread. Moreover, the opportunities that are available, such as volunteering, may be useful to some people but are not providing a real job. Practitioners at the London workshop noted that young people feel that the Olympics is not for them: there is a need for more inclusive notions to be adopted in order that the Olympics can truly be seen as a source of regeneration for the local area.

⁶⁵ See for instance <http://www.london.gov.uk/gla/publications/childrenyoungpeople/youth-policy.pdf>

4.7 Conclusion

The young people who participated in the Enquiry emphasised the importance of getting paid work. Employment, even in quite mundane entry level jobs, provides the opportunity for young people to grow up, to act like adults, to take responsibility and make a contribution. They also provide the opportunity to develop skills and experience that can lead to better jobs. However, current policy seems to view participating in the labour market via such jobs, which may provide little opportunity to undertake training leading to a qualification, as illegitimate.

The raising of the participation age will reinforce this illegitimacy and force many employers, who would have offered jobs to less well qualified 16 and 17 year olds, to think again. They will not want to be involved in the bureaucracy needed to monitor participation in education and training that leads to level 2 and 3 qualifications. This policy is more about meeting government targets for the attainment of level 2 qualifications by 19 year olds rather than engaging with the lived reality of the sorts of young people we have been working with.

In the past, poorly qualified young people gained access to employment often through local social networks involving their parents, other relatives and their friends. In areas where worklessness is rife such networked access to employment has obviously declined. Under such circumstances young people need access to youth workers and Connexions advisers who can mediate their access to the labour market. It is to the work of these people that we turn next.

CHAPTER FIVE: LISTENING AND CARING - YOUTH WORK MATTERS

The third key theme that emerged through listening to young people in the Engaging Youth Enquiry workshops and the practitioners who work with them, was the importance of an adult, a significant other, to help them re-engage. If we think about the journey these young people have to make in order to live productive lives then it is clear that road is very different for different groups. For those who have temporarily lost their way then a relatively small amount of guidance is likely to help them back into a course or into employment. The September guarantee and the hard work of Connexions advisers and careers staff play a crucial role in this.

For others, those who have had a history of persistent absence from school, early detachment from the education system, and are long-term 'NEET' the road is much more difficult. For them, the role of the significant other, someone with whom they can build a relationship over years, is crucial. In addition, there is the challenge of the support needed for vulnerable groups, for example those with learning difficulties and young offenders. This support is required at the 'prospective NEET' stage, as well as once young people become classified as 'NEET'. Prevention is always better than cure.

5.1 The need for a 'significant other'

Practitioners agreed on the need for young people to benefit from sustainable relationships with significant others who could advise them on progression, engage with them and allow young people to control their next steps. This includes issues of inter-agency working, and work with families and carers, as well as with the young people on an individual basis. There is a host of individuals and agencies that the young people who participated in the workshops come into contact with, including youth workers, Connexions advisers, police officers and probation staff. The practitioners at the Manchester workshop highlighted some of the problems and challenges involved with inter-agency working such as conflicting targets, short-term funding and multiple targeting of the same individuals by different agencies.

The work of practitioners from these various agencies can be driven by what was seen as a rather narrowly focussed performance management system. The participants in the Manchester practitioner workshop argued in favour of moving away from a target-driven⁶⁶, tick-boxing approach to a more case-sensitive approach that allows professionals working with these young people to focus on communicating with them and supporting them, rather than following an ‘audit trail’. This is essential to enable the young people they work with to be able to value themselves, an essential condition before they can value educational and employment opportunities, and so meet their aspirations and goals. As practitioners argued:

‘Many NEETs do not have a critical friend. Many do not have people to inspire them, apart from Wayne Rooney, media stars or people on the estate who make loads of money by dealing. They have to feel that the system has a place for them. If that does not happen we will not make any headway.’

However, we should not assume that this involves just an individual who listens and cares: it involves the *active* building of trust:

‘Caring is good, but it is not enough just to care. You will get nowhere with the NEETs unless they have a trusted individual.’

This insight highlights the need for the caseload of practitioners working with young people with complex needs to be appropriately small. Building up and sustaining trust with often vulnerable young people requires regular contact, significant periods of time, and the long-term retention of staff. These points apply to the young people, but also to their parents and carers, who may find that there is little support for them in their attempts to engage with the young people in their care, and to support them in planning their futures. One magistrate at the Manchester workshop even commented on how

⁶⁶ See Keep, E. (2004) *The Multiple Dimensions of Performance – performance as defined by whom, measured in what ways, to what ends?* Nuffield Review Working Paper 23 [online]. At: www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk.

grateful parents were for the attentions of the court. This implies that some parents appreciate the recognition of their children's situation, even if it is 'negative recognition' from the legal system. It may trigger access to support and resources not previously made available.

The implications of this requirement for long-term engagement in order for young people to re-engage are profound. In particular, there is a need for sustained funding to ensure capacity building and retention of staff. Short-term funding arrangements have little impact on the more difficult to reach young people and the continued search for funds to sustain local work diverts attention away from the young people. Furthermore, continual reorganisation of children's services and the reintegration of Connexions work with Local Authorities, for example, have an unsettling effect that can disturb effective working relationships. The practitioners working with young people need long term stable contracts at reasonable levels of pay to ensure the provision for long-term support. There is also a need for effective and relevant continuing professional development along the lines of that available to other educational professionals.

5.2 Communication with young people

At the heart of successful work with the young people who participated in the workshops is successful communication. The practitioner workshop in Manchester, in particular, was full of references to the need for effective, unbiased and non-judgemental communication with young people, based on a process of negotiation, and listening to their needs, rather than imposing choices upon them. Further, a number of practitioners highlighted the need to avoid a 'patronising attitude', which implies that young people are in some way not behaving 'in the right way'. Further, assumptions, widely reported in the press, that worklessness can be equated with inactivity, must be challenged, as many workless people may lead very busy, productive lives. One practitioner argued in the following terms:

'People will see it as us criticising them, and their culture and their way of life, and we are telling them that there is a better way. How can we get around that and

change culture and perception without it being them-and-us? Communities have to create a change from within, without us parachuting in with the message that you are not doing it right and don't know how to bring up your children. In events throughout the city on worklessness, I have never yet met a workless person who was not busy every day. Their lives are full, they are busy doing things. They are not playing Play Station until 3am, as it is stereotypically shown. For many people, the act of going to university is a given – you go to school, go to university. That is a cultural thing, it is just what you do. It is no different for many 'NEET' young people – you pick up a pattern that is a well-trodden path.'

Communication is not just with young people, it may be on behalf of young people. For example, Connexions advisers very often spend long periods of time negotiating with learning providers and trying to persuade employers to give young people a chance. This requires a quite different skill set to working with young people, an issue highlighted in the Learning Activity Pilots. Youth workers and Connexions advisers increasingly need to be multi-skilled to carry out their crucial mediating function on behalf of young people. To this end they need to be properly trained to work alone and in multi-agency teams. However, to make the investment in such training requires good staff retention and a willingness on the part of the worker to invest their time. Such willingness often only comes about when there is some security of job tenure.

5.3 Trust and dignity

Trust is a highly significant factor in the re-engagement of many young people who are defined as 'NEET'. The building and nurturing of meaningful relationships with these young people by those who work with them, in the education and training sector, but also in the voluntary sector, can provide positive outcomes. The key role of volunteers and detached Youth Workers, and their strong relationships with young people, must be highlighted here.⁶⁷ The building of these strong relationships is highly significant, particularly in cases where the young person expresses a high amount of resistance to re-

⁶⁷ Tiffany, G. (2007) *Reconnecting Detached Youth Work: Guidelines and Standards for Excellence*. Federation for Detached Youth Work.

engaging into training, education or work. Whilst nurturing such relationships may be a labour-intensive process, this is highly effective in finding ways that young people can become re-engaged in the education, training or employment system.

Furthermore, it is significant to consult with young people about their own lives and what they want to do with them. By developing a more adult relationship, this allows them to take responsibility. Young people who attended the young people's workshops noted that they found the trusting and supportive relationships that they had established with workers from Rathbone to be positive:

“Everyone from Rathbone is understanding, they might be harsh on us sometimes but they want to bring out the best in us.”

“If I need to chat to someone there is always someone with experience to talk to, in a confidential manner.”

“Treated by outreach and engagement team as equals”.

5.4 Role models

Another oft-repeated stereotype about young people at risk of becoming ‘NEET’, or already ‘NEET’, is that they lack appropriate role models. The practitioners from the Manchester area commented that, for some young people, nobody in their family or wider context had had a job for two or three generations, no one had been to university, and perhaps no one had completed secondary education. In those circumstances, the life circumstances that lead to becoming classified as ‘NEET’ reflect following a well-trodden path.⁶⁸ This highlights the effect of the lack of positive role models for these young people:

‘No role models. No one.’ (M, 18)

⁶⁸ Bynner, J., and Parsons, S. (2002) Social Exclusion and the Transition from School to Work: The case of young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET). *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 60 (2) 289-309.

‘None. My last foster parent. Mum – she sorted me head out a bit. She listened. I come in drunk every night and she was there for me.’ (F, 16)

However, it is significant that young people from the London workshops looked up to the youth workers as role models, and some of them aspired to be youth workers themselves. The following are examples of responses from the young people at the workshop when asked about their role models:

‘Chris⁶⁹ is mine because he was bad in the past, and now he’s good. Chris. Chris got us off the streets. He got us started on something.’ (M, 16)

‘My sister because she’s at college now. She’s 23. Problems with drugs. She’s turning it round now. So I think I can do it.’ (M, 18)

‘My mate because he is 29 and when he was younger he got in trouble for all sorts.’ (M, 18)

‘When you speak to him [the youth worker] he tells you how his life was.’ (M, 16)

However, youth workers are far more than role models. They actively intervene in the lives of the young people for whom they take responsibility. We were struck throughout the Enquiry by the number of times youth workers, in particular, displayed a deep-rooted sense of active concern for young people and their communities, translated into a willingness to do what it takes to engage the young people in positive activities.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Rathbone Outreach worker, based in the Manchester area.

⁷⁰ See Higgs. L. (2008) *How we said no to gangs*. [Online] for a description of the commitment of one particular youth worker to the progress of individual young people. At: <http://www.cypnow.co.uk/Archive/778270/Feature---no-gangs/>, accessed September 2008.

5.5 An evening in Hackney

During an evening visit to Hackney⁷¹, the various complexities facing the detached workers came to the fore⁷². The ever-present gang culture meant that some areas were no-go for the young people. This effectively means that the job centre, Connexions premises and the Rathbone centre were all beyond the safe territory of the young people. One key feature is the major importance of the presence of an adult role model the young people could talk to and respect; in this case the Outreach worker, James Cook. As a former boxing champion and loyal resident of the area, who campaigns hard to get and maintain facilities for local young people, he clearly enjoyed the respect and affection of all who saw him out on the streets of Hackney. However, his charisma and popularity cannot disguise the fact that for many of these young people the situation appears hopeless. There is drug use, gang warfare, poverty, difficulty in accessing housing, reluctance on the part of employers to take on young people with that address, and a sense of fatalism. James Cook engaged with the young people on the streets, and in the youth club in the area, but the step from that to participating in learning provision seemed too large for the majority of the young people. He argued that there needs to be greater provision of practical forms of learning in places the young people feel safe to go, such as the local youth club. As such, there is a need for guaranteed, longer-term funding in order to provide young people with a pathway to employment and training. He bemoaned the passing of the Neighbourhood Support Fund, and argued strongly that engagement work cannot be about certification, but must focus on engagement itself. However, for many young people who are classified as 'NEET', a lack of positive role models is a problem. While we can recognise the excellence of the work of practitioners such as James Cook, we have to be realistic about what they can achieve under very difficult circumstances.

5.6 Conclusion

The range of needs of young people who are either 'NEET' or at risk of becoming 'NEET' is vast. This places enormous demands on the practitioners and youth workers who engage with them and listen to their viewpoints carefully. This needs to start early

⁷¹ With Rathbone outreach worker James Cook, 23rd May 2007, 6-8pm.

⁷² See Engaging Youth Enquiry Working Paper 1 [online] At: <http://www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk/files/documents177-1.pdf>, accessed October 2008.

for vulnerable learners who are ‘prospective NEET’. Youth workers have much to offer here, providing their distinctive role and contribution is recognised, and their right to work outside formal authority structure is valued.

The scale and diversity of their work cannot be under-estimated: these are immensely skilled and committed professionals whose work is too often under-valued, under-resourced and subject to short-termism. They often have to work on short-term contracts which runs entirely counter to the central feature of their practice: the need to maintain and sustain long-term relationships with a community. These communities also place varying demands on these youth workers, depending on the local social, economic and cultural circumstances.

We should not stereotype the work of these practitioners. Much of their time may be spent engaging with young people in informal contexts, such as the ‘street corner’. For some young people, however, a rather different context is more appropriate. This applies particularly to young people with caring responsibilities, who are restricted in their free-time and movement, and to young people who, for cultural reasons, are reluctant to participate in such interactions without the presence of a family member. This indicates the need for safe environments in which youth workers can interact with young people who are at risk of becoming ‘NEET’. The issues associated with helping young people with learning disabilities and mental health problems require even more case-specific interactions, often in concert with other professionals. Such multi-agency working is placing additional demands on youth workers and Connexions advisers.

Often the support required by young people may be of a seemingly banal nature – help with transport, accompanying them to the Job Centre or the local FE college, appropriate clothing for a meeting with an employer, an alarm clock, a telephone call to remind them of an appointment. This practical support is crucial. So, a youth worker’s role is not just to listen, but often to act on behalf of a young person.

Building the capacity of these practitioners is central to effective interventions, especially for most difficult to reach young people. Initiatives to achieve a quick win in relation to ‘NEET’ numbers do little justice to the complexity of what is needed to value these young people’s lives and to support them and treat them with appropriate dignity and respect. The ‘NEET’ figures emphasise these young people as an ‘absence’, a residual statistical category. This Enquiry reframes them as a positive ‘presence’, young people with aspirations and much to contribute to their local communities, if they were given the chance. Let us reiterate – many of these young people are difficult, but there are sufficient stories of success which extol the need not to give up on them.

CHAPTER SIX: PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE - LET'S GIVE THEM A CHANCE

A report such as this one often concludes with suggestions for policy. However, the evidence we have uncovered indicates the deep-seated nature of so many of the issues facing young people who are, or run the risk of becoming, 'NEET' that we think this would be inappropriate. Thus, we wish to engage in a further round of consultation lasting until the end of March 2009, rather than drawing conclusions at this point. This will give time for a wide range of contributions to be made that alert us to good practice, developing policy initiatives, young people's narratives and successful interventions. During this time we will also be drawing upon and pulling together evidence and ideas from research and practice in other countries.

6.1 Current policy

The complexity of the issues involved could all too easily lead to a simplistic castigation of government policy. It is important to recognise and acknowledge how much has been done since 1997, and there are many good suggestions in the Ten Year Youth Strategy and the Every Child Matters proposals. We welcome these, but it appears that policy does not always fully appreciate the complexity of the issues. For example, the investing of £190 million in new youth facilities without a similar level of support for detached youth workers, who are crucial to helping young people make the journey needed to engage with the new facilities. Youth work is about people and communication, not facilities and shiny new paint.

Sometimes the policy direction can also appear contradictory. For example, there is a tension between the promotion of collaboration at the local level and the continuing emphasis on the independence of schools, as indicated by the continuing establishment of academies. We see no evidence that this programme is benefiting the young people we are concerned with, but it is the flagship school policy for both the Labour and Conservative parties. We agree that collaboration is essential for inclusion, but we cannot see how this will be achieved by developing a system of semi-independent schools and colleges.

The same observation can be made about apprenticeship policy. Of course, apprenticeship programmes, if properly constituted, are a great way for young people to learn, but the aspirations to expand apprenticeship are unlikely to be successful unless massive incentives are introduced to encourage employers to offer such training. Even if this happened, apprenticeship may not be an appropriate vehicle for the young people, at least initially. Rather, they need a range of alternative work-based learning provision which lies below apprenticeship. Historical models are available, such as the Unified Vocational Preparation (UVP) programmes, from which we could learn much, but that would require a move away from formulaic programme-led funding streams. Here, the Activity Agreement pilots have suggested what can be achieved for the young people we are concerned with if funding can be unhooked from unhelpful programme structures and top-down performance management.

Another key element in current policy thinking is that another round of vocationalism will help these young people. We should not conflate vocational with practical learning. The young people who participated in the Enquiry would welcome more practical learning opportunities but these could be offered across a range of mainstream subjects. However, the 'educational' policy thinking for these young people is rather narrowly focussed on employability, located within a dominant skills agenda. All young people need a general education, not a narrow vocational one stemming from a naïve form of human capital theory. Furthermore, much of the emphasis on vocational learning is based upon a patronising view of young peoples' motivation: that learning about work will capture their attention. Indeed it may, but there is still an important need for education involving music, the arts and humanities which also serve to engage the interests of all young people.

6.2 Putting the 'NEET' issue into perspective: the importance of context

The issues addressed by the Engaging Youth Enquiry are hardly new: they are the result of long-term social, cultural and economic change. However, the policy focus on the so-called 'NEET' issue is a more recent phenomenon, linked with the policy drive to raise

participation in post-compulsory education and training, and to increase the skills levels of the workforce.

The evidence of the Enquiry shows that a ‘qualifications first strategy’ cannot address all of the issues involved. The young people who participated in the Engaging Youth Enquiry faced a range of multiple barriers to re-engagement, including low attainment at school, a reluctance to engage with learning within institutional authority structures, caring responsibilities, being in vulnerable housing and living in an area with few educational and employment opportunities, or feeling that those opportunities were not available to them.

Progression into the labour market is increasingly difficult for those with low or no qualifications, but local and regional structural unemployment means that raising qualification levels alone will not suffice to include all young people in meaningful work. This was shown clearly in the workshop in rural Northumberland, and this situation calls for more than educational reform and the introduction of new qualifications and forms of learning – economic and community regeneration are crucial.

The entry level jobs available are often casualised, partly because of weakly regulated and flexible labour markets. This type of work can lead to young people moving in and out of ‘NEET’ status as they take on temporary contracts for employment, and are then laid off. This is the so-called ‘churn’ effect. It is not just a product of educational failure, but also of a weakly regulated labour market. Policy makers of all political persuasions eschew stronger labour market regulation, looking to the education and training system to achieve the conditions necessary for full participation in work⁷³. This might suggest that a greater degree of regulation of the youth labour market may be needed than is currently the case. However, stronger labour market regulation may well deter employers from offering any employment to young people (this may also result from the requirement for

⁷³ See for example Tony Blair’s (2007) Role of Work in the Nation’s Future speech in Manchester for the seminal definition of this policy stance.
<http://se2.isn.ch/serviceengine/FileContent?serviceID=23&fileid=59BCA61F-4FA0-23EB-02D8-207026129C3D&lng=en>

all young people to participate in some form of education and training up to the age of 18 by 2015). There is also some evidence that weakening labour market regulation may help young people into work, but not necessarily into sustainable, fulfilling employment⁷⁴. This raises questions about the way young people are treated in the labour market. Thus, we need to consider issues concerned with labour market reform and education and training reform in tandem.

It goes without saying that, ultimately, achieving economic well-being is a function of having a job. Many of the young people that contributed to the Engaging Youth Enquiry come from families that are workless: in some cases and in some parts of the country, worklessness in these families is also intergenerational. The fact that so many of the young people that contributed to our Enquiry were highly motivated towards ‘work’ should therefore be taken as a positive and encouraging finding. The issue here is the tension between the ‘policy view’ of how young people should make the transition to employment as against that of the young people themselves.

The young people that contributed to the Engaging Youth Enquiry wanted first and foremost to get a job at the earliest opportunity. At Rathbone, many young people who are regarded as being highly troublesome in school or college prove to be perfectly capable of being excellent employees and of being re-motivated to learn as a result of being in work. There is also a need for a major programme of investment in detached youth work and mentoring. Many of the young people that Rathbone work with are desperate for the presence in their lives of stable, long-term relationships with people who can provide the emotional and practical support that they need in order to engage properly with learning and work.

It is the combination of factors regarding the labour market situation and barriers to re-engagement that makes lowering the ‘NEET’ rate so difficult. The Engaging Youth Enquiry argues that the focus needs to be on building *sustainable* progression

⁷⁴ OECD (2008) Des emplois pour les jeunes (*Jobs for Youth*) Canada. Paris : OECD

opportunities to education, employment and training. Short-term initiatives to reduce numbers do not work, especially if they lead young people to enter a downward spiral of motivation if they engage with such initiatives and they do not lead to jobs. Key challenges are then to identify ways in which young people can be supported in their learning careers while in school, helped to make successful transitions to further education and training and into sustainable employment. We should not assume that this process of transition will necessarily be a linear sequence, as it is for many who progress within the academic route to GCE A level study. We need to develop ways of building transition support networks that will enable young people at risk of becoming 'NEET' to achieve economic well being.

6.3 Learning matters, but in what form?

The issues that are emerging from the Engaging Youth Enquiry about the relationship of these young people to school are of real significance. The first cohort of young people who will be required by legislation to remain participating in the education and training system until the age of 17, started secondary school in September 2008. This cohort will be followed by those required to remain in education and training until the age of 18. Therefore, a limited amount of time is available in which to consider how all of these young people will be encouraged to attend some form of education and training on a basis which is about more than just turning up, or worse still, turning up with some kind of attendance order in their hands.

Many of the young people who participated in the Engaging Youth Enquiry were severely alienated from schooling. Some had stopped attending before the end of primary school. It is debatable whether such alienation can be addressed solely by further vocationalism driven by a narrowly-defined skills agenda. Successive waves of 14-19 curriculum reform seem to have had little impact on participation amongst this group. This raises questions about the future effectiveness of further qualification reform, including the Diplomas, especially if these do not improve the quality of the young people's engagement in learning, and the fundamental relationship between teachers and learners, and between young people and institutions.

The evidence from the Engaging Youth Enquiry indicates that the curriculum (and specifically the focus on vocationalism as a driver for curriculum reform) is far less important than is often assumed: what is more, if not most important, is the issue of finding places for young people to learn in which they feel valued, feel safe, make good progress in their learning and experience positive relationships with their peers and adult tutors.

It is undoubtedly the case that family and wider life circumstances play a major role in some young people's issues with school. However, more often than not, the young people who engage with Rathbone, for example, also have significant experiences of schools as being places where they have been poorly treated by staff, where their specific (often special) educational needs have not been met, where they may have been bullied and where they have been labelled as failures. Indeed, some 90% of young people who join a Rathbone programme at 16 have left school having achieved no formal qualifications at all. The majority of young people Rathbone encounters who have failed in school, will also have had lifetime experiences from the age of 5 or 7 of being regarded as poor learners, as trouble-makers, as truants, as anything other than a great prospect for the future.

A possible alternative is to provide more appropriate learning opportunities for young people, which are more effective than Pupil Referral Units. After all, these replicate some of the institutional structures that young people may reject. This indicates the potential contribution of small schools, for example, that can offer small-scale learning communities providing personalised learning strategies. Another alternative is, of course, work, which can provide a strong socialising element for young people, particularly if their learning at work is supported. However, apprenticeship type work-based learning is unlikely to be appropriate for many of the young people who participated in the Engaging Youth Enquiry, at least as an initial step, because they cannot cope with the demands of a complete apprenticeship framework. There is an urgent need for more flexible forms of work-based learning, amongst other forms of provision. The goal of engaging far more

young people in learning up to the age of 18 is unlikely to be achieved without a significant investment in, and expansion of, work based learning opportunities for young people that are other than apprenticeships. We need to think harder about what form these might take. We have, therefore, reservations that either the new Diplomas or the Foundation Learning Tier, when it is eventually introduced, will have much positive impact on young people at risk of becoming 'NEET' unless there is some deeper thinking about institutional structures and the nature of learning opportunities.

6.3 Listening and caring: Youth work matters

The Engaging Youth Enquiry's evidence indicates the need to create opportunities for young people to imagine their futures, not as a bleak prospect, but as a positive one. To this end, the young people who participated in the Engaging Youth Enquiry highlighted the importance of the support of a trusted adult, or 'significant other', and the role of detached youth work. This is not just a question of investing in more facilities, bricks and mortar. Rather, it is a question of building up sustainable capacity at a local level to ensure that detached youth workers are present, on the street corners or wherever the young people are, encouraging them to re-engage with education, employment and training, and thereby with the wider social context. Developing capacity will require a move away from employing such workers on contracts linked to initiative-led funding.

The Government is committing £190m to new youth facilities as part of the Ten Year Youth Strategy. This investment is a positive step, but if more young people are to be diverted from anti-social behaviour, crime, gangs and other difficulties, it is people on the ground that will make the difference. They need the funding and support necessary to remain involved with and committed to individual young people over time and not just, as is all too often the case, over the life of short-term initiative or project.

6.4 Intelligent commissioning

In trying to develop services to meet the needs of young people who are disengaged commissioners face a variety of challenges. The EYE, for example, suggests that many young people have perceptions of their 'needs' that differ considerably from those of the

policy-makers and professionals tasked with structuring the “interventions” intended to get them back on track. Commissioning bodies are often under pressure to deliver outcome targets that result in either volume or process change, such as reductions in the headcount of young people who are ‘NEET’, or the integration of youth support services. There is a risk, therefore, that commissioning plans can be, and often are, developed without the direct involvement of end-users. That is to say, commissioners design and procure services in response to top-down targets based on their own assumptions about what does or might work, rather than with the active involvement either of those who are the intended beneficiaries/users of such services or those who will provide them. How to engage young people in the design and development of services aimed to address their often very complex needs is therefore a huge challenge. To the extent that intelligent commissioning requires a high level of service user involvement, it is important to recognise the potential contribution that intermediary organisations (say, from the voluntary sector) can make to the process as advocates, mentors and facilitators. More often than not, the real practical knowledge of ‘what works’ resides also in those organisations who have track records of working on the ground with such young people. Many of these organisations will want to contest opportunities to be providers to the same commissioners that require their input at the design and development stage. How this level of involvement in developing a specification is achieved raises important governance issues. Realising the objective of greater provider and end user involvement in commissioning processes that rely more on consultation and negotiation, rather than blind tendering, is probably essential to ensuring better, more fit for purpose and higher quality youth services.

6.5 Capacity building and the importance of time

Finally we wish to consider the issues of time and capacity building. If our argument that the ‘NEET’ issue is as much about profound structural economic change as it is about improving young people’s agency in the face of adversity through improving their educational outcomes holds true, then time becomes a crucial dimension of the policy

problem. The economics of institutions literature⁷⁵ informs us that processes of change at the level of social and cultural foundations of a society take place very slowly. Given that change at this level constrains the choice of basic institutional arrangements then this places limits on the speed with which changes to the basic “modern” institutions of capitalism can be adopted and made to work well. Accepting this argument suggests that we should not be looking for a quick fix for the ‘NEET’ issue. Rather it is going to be a long process.

The evidence collected from the Enquiry overwhelmingly tells us about the need for stability in the policy terrain if effective interventions, such as the now defunct Neighbourhood Support Fund, are to have time to deliver the desired outcomes. Such insights imply a fundamental shift in the types of policy instruments used in this area. In common with other areas there is, in our view, an over-reliance on inducements – the short-term provision of money to achieve closely targeted results. Such instruments assume that the system has spare capacity and the willingness to respond in the desired way, given the right inducement. Short-lived initiatives are symptomatic of such a strategy, as is the continual rebranding of the same intervention to give the impression it is innovative.

The evidence from the Engaging Youth Enquiry is that long-term capacity building instruments are needed. These involve sustained investment into carefully formulated initiatives, with clearly articulated theories of action - how an intervention is supposed to work and why - that are tested as the initiative develops. Control is given to those on the ground who are trusted to develop the programmes. There is some evidence in recent policy around the Every Child Matters agenda and the Ten Year Youth Strategy that such a longer term vision is beginning to develop. But policy makers have to have the patience to allow the programmes to develop and not to expect miraculous results over short time scales. This requires considerable political courage and the depoliticisation of this area of social provision to encourage a sense of collective responsibility for these young people

⁷⁵ See for example, Éric Brousseau and Jean-Michel Glachant (eds.) (2008) *New Institutional Economics: A guidebook*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

at both national and local levels. How this can be achieved also requires harder thinking and deep consideration.

Suggested consultation questions

Draft consultation questions

- How is the ‘NEET problem’ best characterised: as the product of individual educational failure; as the result of structural economic change leading to youth unemployment, as an interaction between education and the economy; or in some other way? What are the policy implications of these different characterisations?
- How can a wide range of institutional stakeholders and actors – employers, education providers, communities, voluntary sector organisations – be incentivised to engage constructively with young people who are classified as ‘NEET’?
- What would a more effective ‘second chance’ education and training pathway look like? How could such a pathway be established at local and regional levels?
- What is the minimum education and training platform needed for young people to gain access to entry level jobs? How can attainment of such a minimum be assured?
- How can increased opportunity be created for teachers, and teaching assistants, to work with young people who are at risk of becoming classified as ‘NEET’ constructively and in a way that is publicly acknowledged and rewarded?
- How could work-based learning pathways be made more flexible so that young people can have funded opportunities outside of apprenticeship?
- How can we best capture the experiences and aspirations of young people to avoid stereotyping them?
- What sort of labour market protection do young people need when they enter employment? How can this be improved without an over-burdening level of regulation?
- How should different levels of the education and training system address the issues surrounding the ‘NEET’ rate? What are the costs and benefits of inter-agency working to support young people at risk of becoming ‘NEET’? What is the role of different actors in helping these young people?

- How should resources best be developed and money invested to support the re-engagement of young people?
- In what ways and to what extent do solutions need to involve a radical restructuring of the education and training system and to what extent should reform be achieved through more focussed initiatives?
- What is the role of employers in providing learning opportunities? How can they best be supported to provide such opportunities?
- To what extent can the affordances provided by work be utilised in more formal educational settings to engage a wide variety of learners?
- What are the potential opportunities and problematic issues of raising the participation age? How can these issues best be addressed?
- What are the effects of a ‘qualifications first strategy’ on young people classified as ‘NEET’? What steps could be taken to redress these effects?
- What are the effects of the current features of the youth labour market on young people classified as ‘NEET’? How could young people be better supported into sustainable employment?
- What kinds of support need to be available to young people who are reluctant to engage with learning within institutional authority structures?
- How could young people classified as ‘NEET’ better be supported to engage with apprenticeship provision, particularly if their prior attainment is below Level 2?
- To what extent can detached youth work support young people classified as ‘NEET’ to re-engage? What nature should this youth work take?
- To what extent are the funding structures a barrier to sustainable work to support young people classified as ‘NEET’?