

## Young People and Work Report: Call for Evidence

Submission from the Centre for Young Lives

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### About the Centre for Young Lives

The Centre for Young Lives, founded by Baroness Anne Longfield CBE in February 2024, is an independent think tank and delivery unit working to improve the lives of children, young people, and families across the UK - with a particular focus on those facing the greatest challenges. Our team combines decades of experience in Westminster, Whitehall and beyond with a relentless commitment and drive to breaking down the barriers that hold back some children, and to ensuring that every child and young person can thrive. We use high quality research and evidence to advocate and campaign for innovative solutions and new models that improve the lives of children, young people and their families.

The Centre for Young Lives is currently undertaking a research project with the support of McDonald's to better understand the recent rise in young people who are NEET. We are due to publish our report in Spring 2026. The focus of this work will be on the strong partnerships that can be built between local employers, education providers, and wider local community partners to build networks of support and so reverse the rising number of young people who are NEET. As the largest private sector employer of young people in the UK, McDonald's has extensive experience of attracting and supporting young people to take up employment and start new careers. Our work includes engaging with young people, practitioners, and employers to better understand the drivers of NEET and to develop actionable solutions for Government and employers.

### Overview

The Centre for Young Lives' strongly welcomes the focus of the Milburn Review. We echo Alan Milburn's comments that if "we're not investing in young people, we're not investing in our country's future." Too often young people have been an afterthought in policy making, with interventions to support them seen as a "nice to have" rather than essential to our economic success and social cohesion. The Milburn Review is a welcome opportunity to identify the many overlapping drivers of the trend of rising NEET young people, including mental health and lack of support. The Centre for Young Lives has been calling for a cross-departmental strategy for vulnerable young people, backed by investment of the scale provided in the early 2000s to break down siloes and put children and young people at the heart of policy making.

### The problem

The proportion of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) has risen sharply in recent years, signalling a pressing social and economic challenge. The most recent figures show 946,00 young people aged 16–24 – around one in eight – are NEET, compared with one in ten before the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> This increase is unfolding against a backdrop of significant challenges facing children and young people, including: a youth mental health crisis

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<sup>1</sup> Office for National Statistics. Young people not in education, employment or training.

affecting one in five children and <sup>2</sup>young people, impact of deep cuts to youth services; an education system that is not adequately preparing our young people to enter the workforce; <sup>3</sup>rapid integration of AI displacing entry-level jobs,<sup>2</sup> and the long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

Most NEET young people are economically inactive rather than unemployed – making them ineligible for unemployment benefits and unknown to many support services. Long-term health problems are now the most common reason for economic inactivity, above caring responsibilities, temporary sickness, or not looking for work because of the belief that there are no jobs available.

This shift is particularly evident among 18–24-year-olds, many of whom have never held paid employment, reflecting a deepening detachment from the labour market. The profile of NEETs points to several, often overlapping drivers, emphasising the need for effective support that goes far beyond conventional job-seeking interventions.

Spending time NEET can reduce life chances and have a detrimental impact on their physical and mental health. It can also increase the likelihood of becoming involved in the criminal justice system.<sup>5</sup> These are harms which have wide reaching economic and personal costs.<sup>6</sup>

### The solution

To reverse these trends of rising numbers of young people who are NEET, there needs to be a shift from late, crisis-driven responses to earlier, joined-up, and community-based support. This needs to be supported by a cross-government strategy aligning education, employment, health, and youth policy, alongside the expansion of locally delivered Young Futures Hubs that provide open-access mental health support, careers guidance, mentoring, and youth provision in one place. Together, early identification of risk factors for NEET and coordinated local provision would make the biggest difference in preventing young people from becoming NEET, and supporting young people already NEET back into education, employment or training.

Below we set out an overview of our recommendations. Our detailed policy recommendations are set out in full after each section in part 2.

**1. Stronger cross-government coordination around young people:** Government departments should stop working in silos and align strategy, funding, and delivery around shared ambition to improve youth outcomes and reduce the number of NEET young people as a result.

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<sup>2</sup> NHS England. Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 - wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey. <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2023-wave-4-follow-up>

<sup>3</sup> Financial Times. The graduate ‘jobpocalypse’: Where have all the entry-level jobs gone? <https://www.ft.com/content/62e7cf87-1ebe-41fd-9d15-dd0a75ad4d86>

<sup>4</sup> Education Policy Institute. Examining post-pandemic absences in England.

<https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/examining-post-pandemic-absences-in-england-5/>

<sup>5</sup> Public Health England (2014) [Reducing the number of young people not in employment, education or training.](#)

- A cross-departmental Young Futures Plan bringing together DWP, DfE, DHSC and DCMS to align policy and funding behind Young Futures Hubs and related programmes.
- Joint guidance from co-signatory departments to define a shared core offer delivered through Young Futures Hubs.
- DWP–DHSC partnerships to jointly fund and deliver mental health and employment support for young people who are NEET.
- A cross-government working group to coordinate long-term outcomes tracking and understand NEET risk across the life course.

**2. Integrated local support models:** Young people should be able to access multiple types of support in one place, in their community, particularly through coordinated local hubs.

- Young Futures Hubs delivering a centrally mandated core offer plus open-access enrichment activities throughout the week.
- Strong partnerships between DWP Youth Hubs and Best Start Family Hubs to connect young parents with childcare and employment support.
- Mental health provision embedded into hubs, including links with Early Support Hubs and Mental Health Support Teams.
- Use of hubs as delivery points for Individual Placement and Support (IPS) for young people with mental health needs.

**3. Targeted support for groups disproportionately likely to become NEET:** Support and specific pathways should be implemented to provide targeted support to groups of young people that may be facing additional barriers to entering education, employment or training.

- A requirement for specialist support for girls and young women within the Young Futures Hub core offer.
- DWP research focused specifically on young female NEETs to understand gendered drivers.
- Targeted outreach and employment support designed to engage young women who are NEET.
- Joint DWP–DHSC specialist mental health support for young women to address mental-health-related barriers to participation.
- Formal partnerships between DWP Youth Hubs and Best Start Family Hubs to provide joined-up childcare and employment pathways.
- Piloting dedicated support staff in Employment or Family Hubs to work specifically with young parents and links with child-friendly employers, such as supporting young parents into childcare sector jobs.

**5. Earlier identification and prevention through education:** Stronger join up across services is crucial to earlier identification of the risk factors of NEET to deliver early and preventative support from early childhood.

- Ensuring children who do not reach a Good Level of Development at age 5 are referred to Best Start Family Hubs for early support.
- The upcoming SEND White Paper strengthening early identification and intervention in mainstream schools.
- DWP–DfE partnership to identify and support young people at risk of becoming NEET before they disengage.

**6. A more inclusive education system:** School exclusion, unmet needs, and non-inclusive practices are key pathways into later NEET status. A more inclusive education system would ensure children are kept in school for longer, and every child is supported to overcome barriers to achieve their potential and thriving throughout their life.

- A proposed Green Paper on whole-system school reform with inclusion at the centre, including accountability reform.
- Expanding the Pupil Attendance dashboard to monitor school rolls and detect off-rolling or non-inclusive admissions.
- Mandatory CPD for teachers on inclusive, relational and trauma-informed practice and identifying additional needs.
- Statutory guidance on Managed Moves to ensure fair and supportive transitions rather than informal exclusion.

**7. Stronger links between education and employment:** Young people need to access to vital support at key transition points in their childhood, such as leaving school. Transition support should be joined up with community and local partners to ensure that young people already disengaged with the education system have pathways to support.

- A DfE–DWP partnerships programme to expand work experience and employer engagement.
- Youth support workers linked to attendance teams to re-engage persistently absent pupils with education and work pathways.
- Broader employment outreach through community, education, and voluntary sector partners, not just Jobcentres.

**8. Poor mental health:** We welcome this review’s recognition of the role of poor mental health in rising rates of young NEETs. Government must deliver a joined-up, cross-departmental approach to mental health and unemployment to address both issues and break the link between them.

- A joint DWP–DHSC funding pot for targeted mental health support for young people who are NEET.

- Expansion of Individual Placement and Support (IPS) through early support hubs.
- Targeted outreach from Early Support Hubs and Mental Health Support Teams to young people at risk of disengagement.
- Strengthening the mental health offer within Youth and Young Futures Hubs.

## **1. What is stopping more young people from participating in employment, education or training?**

Young people's risk of being NEET can be shaped by multiple, overlapping disadvantages that accumulate across adolescence and early adulthood. A failure to tackle these risks through an aligned, cross-government strategy has left gaps in support for children and young people and misses the opportunity to intervene early in children's lives, when they can already be on a path to being NEET. The most salient predictors of becoming NEET are low academic attainment, special educational needs (SEN), poor mental health, limiting long-term disability or health conditions, and young parenthood, all of which remain strongly associated with NEET status even after accounting for other disadvantages.<sup>7</sup> A child's likelihood of becoming NEET can be predicted from their early years, demonstrating the importance of the government's Best Start in Life strategy in achieving positive long-term impacts through to adulthood.

### **Health trends: Mental health and unemployment**

The most common reason given for being NEET is now long-term or temporary sickness, with one-in-six NEET young people specifically citing mental health problems.<sup>8</sup> Across 2018 to 2022, 21% of 18–24-year-olds with a common mental health disorder were neither in education nor employment, compared to 13% of those without.<sup>9</sup>

This is symptomatic of a generation increasingly likely to struggle with mental health problems, and a system which is failing to intervene early enough, allowing those problems to escalate. One in five children aged between eight and 25 have a probable mental health condition, rising to nearly one in four (23.3%) of those aged 17-19.<sup>10</sup> This alarming trend is not unique to the UK, although the UK has the lowest overall life satisfaction among 15-year-olds out of 27 European countries, and the largest gap for disadvantaged young people.<sup>11</sup>

31% of young people identified as NEET cite poor mental health as a major challenge both for entering and progressing within the workplace, and 50% feel hopeless about the future due to unemployment – thus demonstrating the cyclical relationship between living with poor mental health and limited job prospects, both reinforcing negative outcomes for young people.<sup>12,13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Department for Education. [NEET age 16 to 24](#).

<sup>9</sup> Resolution Foundation (2025) [Youth mental health: 18-24 year olds more likely to be out of work](#)

<sup>10</sup> NHS England. [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 – wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey](#). Accessed: 01.04.25

<sup>11</sup> The Children's Society (2024) [The Good Childhood Report 2024](#)

<sup>12</sup> Youth Futures Foundation (2024)

Efforts to reduce the number of NEETs must work to break the cyclical link between these two things.

Mental health services have failed to keep up with the scale of need, leaving many young people without help and with their problems growing more severe. At the end of March 2024, over 958,200 children in England had an active referral to Children and Young People’s Mental Health Services (CYPMHS), with 320,000 of these still waiting for treatment at this time.<sup>14</sup> Of those who did receive two direct contacts, they waited a median average of 45 days.<sup>15</sup> At the point of crisis, a third of young people do not know who to even contact and, when they do, more than a third believe this crisis care does not provide the necessary support.<sup>16</sup>

The scars of poor mental health also impact employment in adulthood, with adults who suffered with poor mental health during their childhood are more likely to work fewer hours and earn less money, losing out on more than £300,000 on average during their life, costing the UK £550 billion in lost earnings.<sup>17</sup><sup>18</sup>

### **The Early Years**

Inequalities between disadvantaged children and their peers are baked in from the early years and continue throughout childhood unless the right support is provided – meaning some children will continue to fall behind their peers simply because of the circumstances they were born into.

Risk factors can be identified as early as age 5 and can often become entrenched if left unaddressed. Studies suggest that 11% of children who were not school ready became NEET, compared to 4% of those who were school ready.<sup>13</sup> The study also found that 65% of the association between early school readiness and NEET could be explained by the academic pathway (whereby GLD at 4-5 is linked to better performance in school assessments).<sup>14</sup> Even after accounting for academic attainment, school readiness still had an independent direct association with later NEET, suggesting that non-academic skills such as social and emotional development can act as a protective factor in mitigating the risk of NEET.<sup>15</sup> Targeted early intervention to address the early years disadvantage gap is necessary to reduce the risks of becoming NEET.

A recent report by the Centre for Young Lives called for fresh legislation to place Best Start Family Hubs on stable and long-term statutory footing, embedding support into communities and preventing in future the cuts that we saw to Sure Start Children’s Centres across the 2010s.<sup>19</sup> We also called for long term sustainable funding over the next decade to boost the support available to families, bringing overall investment closer in line to what was spent on

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<sup>14</sup> Children’s Commissioner (2025) [Children’s mental health services 2023-24](#)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Care Quality Commission. [High demand, long waits, and insufficient support, mean people with mental health issues still not getting the support they need.](#) Accessed: 04.04.24

<sup>17</sup> Future Minds (2025) [Why investing in children’s mental health will unlock economic growth](#)

<sup>19</sup> Centre for Young Lives (2025) Best Start: A Fresh Start for Family Support

family support at the peak of Sure Start – where significant long-term benefits were evidenced for children.

## Education

We welcome the Government's Opportunity Mission. The evidence is clear that good qualifications and a positive experience of education are the most protective factors in reducing the risk of a young person becoming NEET, yet education system is failing too many young people. Schools are not incentivised to prioritise the most vulnerable. Around one in five young people leave school without basic qualifications, while forty percent of children and young people say they didn't feel a sense of belonging at school. Over recent years, there have also been increased rates of lost learning through rising absence, exclusions, suspensions, and off-rolling – and many more families are turning to elective home education. This is evidence of a system that too often sees thousands of children falling through the gaps and being left behind.

Most NEETs report challenges or barriers they face in education including exclusionary practices, and high absence.<sup>20</sup> Young people aged 22-24 whose highest qualification is at GCSE level or below are three-times more likely (30%) to be NEET than graduates (9%). Fewer than one-in-three (28%) NEETs hold a degree compared to over four-in-ten (42%) young people overall. These qualification gaps, especially among older NEETs, highlight the vital role schools play in reducing NEETs. In our *Everyone Included* report published in Spring 2025, we called for the education system to redefine what we see as a 'successful school', measuring schools by their success in giving a good education to vulnerable children; by pupils' outcomes at 25, including NEETs; and by low rates of lost learning like exclusions, absence, and off-rolling, which may increase the likelihood that a child becomes NEET.

## Absence

Of the almost 1 million young people who are NEET, almost 70,000 are young people between the aged of 16 and 18. Young people within this age bracket are legally required to be in some form of formal education, employment or training, meaning for these who are NEET have slipped through the cracks and become invisible to services. Efforts to reduce the number of NEET young people should start with keeping these young people in school.

School absence has sky-rocketed since the pandemic and is yet to fully recover. Nearly one in five pupils are now missing 10% or more of school (defined as persistent absence).<sup>21 22 23</sup> Persistent absence was associated with 3.9 times greater risk of being NEET and 6.3 times greater risk of being persistently NEET.<sup>24</sup> Children eligible for FSM were nearly four-times more

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<sup>20</sup> Impetus (2025) Youth Jobs Gap: Exploring compound disadvantage

<sup>21</sup> Department for Education. Pupil absence in schools in England: Autumn and spring term 2024/25

<sup>22</sup> Free School Meals is often used as a proxy measure for child poverty.

<sup>23</sup> Connell, E et al (2024) School absence and Not in Education, Employment or Training; [School absence and Not in Education, Employment or Training - Vulnerability & Policing Futures Research Centre](#)

<sup>24</sup> [School absence and Not in Education, Employment or Training - Vulnerability & Policing Futures Research Centre](#)

likely to be severely absent than their peers, while children with an EHCP were seven times more likely.<sup>25 2627</sup>

In 2024, severe absence reached record highs, rising by 3.6% between Autumn Term 2023 – 2024.<sup>28</sup> For girls, there has been a 257% rise in severe absence since before the pandemic.

Regularly missing more than half of education means that young people are not just missing out on vital qualifications, careers advice or work-experience - but that are unable to retain a basic routine necessary to enter the world of work. These young people should be seen as a priority group for any interventions to reduce NEETS, with targeted support as early as the primary to secondary transition. This support should include targeted outreach, careers advice and support and pathways to further education.

## SEND

While qualifications can still act as a protective factor against a young person with SEND becoming NEET, young people with SEND who have mid-level qualifications are still 9% more likely to be NEET than<sup>2930</sup>

The number of children and young people with Special education needs and disabilities, including neurodiverse conditions like ADHD and autism spectrum disorder, has risen significantly over the past decade. The evidence is clear that children and young people with SEND are at a higher risk of becoming NEET.<sup>31</sup> Children with SEND have poorer attainment<sup>32</sup>, attendance<sup>33</sup> and achieve fewer qualifications<sup>34</sup> than their peers, across all age groups – all factors associated with an increased risk of becoming NEET.

The SEND system is under significant strain with long waiting times for assessment and support, and schools over-stretched and often under-qualified to deliver sufficient, timely support. Children and young people with SEND are more likely to have poorer outcomes, increasing the risk that they disengage with the education system and the likelihood that they become NEET. Supporting young people at risk of NEET should be a key thematic focus of the upcoming Schools White Paper and SEND reforms.

## Geographic and socio-economic inequalities

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<sup>25</sup> [School absence crisis now “entrenched”, new data reveals - The Centre for Social Justice](#)

<sup>27</sup> Centre for Young Lives (2024) [Too Skint for School: Breaking the link between poverty and attendance](#)

<sup>28</sup> CSJ (2025) [School absence crisis now “entrenched”, new data reveals - The Centre for Social Justice](#)

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Education Policy Institute (2025) Annual report; <https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2025-send/>

<sup>32</sup> Gov UK \*(2025) Pupil Attendance; [Pupil absence in schools in England, Autumn and spring term 2024/25 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

<sup>33</sup> Daniel, J. (2025). The academic achievement gap between students with and without special educational needs and disabilities. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 40(3), 539–556. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2024.2400771>

Disadvantage cuts across every NEET risk factor, further exacerbating a young person's likelihood of becoming NEET. Approximately one-in-four young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are currently NEET, compared to the average.<sup>34</sup>

This geographical disparity is also present in outcomes at school and in higher education. At school, there is a 30-percentage point different in achievement of GCSE grade 5 in English and maths.<sup>35</sup>

While disparity in educational outcomes and qualifications can explain in part higher rates of NEET in areas of the country, this can also be attributed to availability and access to job opportunities. DfE analysis of data from 2018 to 2024 shows a clear north–south divide in young people's labour market opportunities, with the most favourable outcomes concentrated in London, Bristol and parts of southern England.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, many Northern and rural areas offered fewer professional, higher-paid opportunities, with limited exceptions in major cities.

### **Rising rates of female NEETs**

According to the latest data, although male unemployment fell marginally, the overall increase in NEET rates was driven by rising female inactivity, which is emerging as a growing concern. ONS data from 2025 revealed that the increase in NEET up to August 2025 was driven primarily by young women, with female NEETs rising by 25,000, while the number of young men NEET fell slightly by 1,000. Overall, 450,000 young women are NEET, compared to 497,000 young men.<sup>37</sup> The pattern indicates that more young women are withdrawing from both education and the labour market.<sup>38,39</sup>

While there are likely several overlapping factors driving the rise in female NEETs, the rise in poor mental health among girls and young women can in part explain this emerging trend. Evidence indicates that girls and young women are experiencing worsening mental health, with rising anxiety, poor wellbeing, and common mental disorders emerging early and intensifying through adolescence and early adulthood.<sup>40</sup> While rates of probable mental health disorders<sup>41</sup> are similar for boys and girls between the ages of eight and sixteen, by ages seventeen to twenty-five, young women are twice as likely as young men to experience such disorders.<sup>42</sup> Data from the Millennium Cohort Study suggests that this gender disparity begins even earlier,

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<sup>34</sup> Impetus (2025) Youth Jobs Gap: Exploring compound disadvantage

<sup>35</sup> The Sutton Trust (2025) The Opportunity Index

<sup>36</sup> Social Mobility Commission (2025) [Labour market opportunities for young people - Social Mobility Commission State of the Nation - GOV.UK](#)

<sup>37</sup> ONS (2025) Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) UK August; [Young people not in education, employment or training \(NEET\), UK - Office for National Statistics](#)

<sup>39</sup> [FE News | August ONS: NEETs Rise to 948k, But Female Inactivity Increases](#)

<sup>40</sup> Newlove-Delgado T, Marcheselli F, Williams T, Mandalia D, Dennes M, McManus S, Savic M, Treloar W, Croft K, Ford T. Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023. NHS England, Leeds. 2023.

<sup>41</sup> Probable mental health disorder refers to an estimate of mental disorder prevalence. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) was used to assess different aspects of mental health, including problems with emotions, behaviour, relationships, hyperactivity and concentration. Responses from parents, children and young people were used to estimate the likelihood that a child might have a mental disorder, this was classified as either 'unlikely', 'possible' or 'probable'. (NHS England, 2023)

<sup>42</sup> NHS England (2023) [NHS England » One in five children and young people had a probable mental disorder in 2023](#)

around age fourteen.<sup>43</sup> Common Mental Disorders<sup>44</sup>, including anxiety and depression, affect around 26% of women aged sixteen to twenty-four, compared with 9% of men of the same age, reflecting a global trend of poorer mental health among adolescent girls from age fifteen.<sup>45</sup> <sup>46</sup> For young parents, as set out in more detail below, young mothers are more likely to be NEETs than young men, citing family responsibilities as the main cause.<sup>47</sup>

## Young Parenthood

Youth Futures Foundation identified young parenthood as being strongly linked to being NEET. Among young people who had a child before the age of 21, more than half (57%).<sup>48</sup> During the last Labour Government, the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (1999) reduced the teenage pregnancy rate by half over 10 years.<sup>49</sup> If teenage pregnancy rates continue on an upwards trajectory, resulting higher rates of young parents is likely to increase the number of young NEETs unless targeted support is provided to support young parents into EET.

## Skills gap

While young people increasingly recognise the importance of work experience - 74% say it helps them understand what work is really like - opportunities remain limited.<sup>50</sup> Just 26% of young people currently in education, from secondary school through to university, undertook work experience in the past year, highlighting a disconnect between aspiration and access. A further survey revealed only 47% of 18- to 24-year-olds felt ready for work when they left education, compared with 60% over-26s.<sup>51</sup> In more disadvantaged areas where there may be less opportunity for young people to enter the workforce, opportunities for high-quality work experience may also be more limited compared to their peers.

Not only is there a significant gap in practical skills, young people's social skills are also deemed to be lacking by employers. Over half (52%) of employers disagree that young people making the transition from education to work are well prepared for the world of work. The majority of employers agree that young workers lack important social skills (64%) and do not always know how to behave in the workplace (71%).<sup>52</sup> Research by the National Foundation for Educational Research has found that young people in England typically have worse socio-emotional skills at the end of lower secondary school (age 15/16) than the OECD average, and

<sup>43</sup> Crenna-Jennings, W. (2021) Young People's mental and emotional health: Trajectories and drivers in childhood and adolescence; Education Policy Institute; [Young people's mental and emotional health: Trajectories and drivers in childhood and adolescence - Education Policy Institute](#)

<sup>44</sup> Common mental disorders (CMDs) comprise different types of depression and anxiety, which cause marked emotional distress and interfere with daily function, but do not usually affect insight or cognition. (McManus, 2016)

<sup>45</sup> McManus et al (2016) Mental health and wellbeing in England: Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey 2014; <http://digital.nhs.uk/catalogue/PUB21748>

<sup>46</sup> Campbell OLK, Bann D, Patalay P. The gender gap in adolescent mental health: A cross-national investigation of 566,829 adolescents across 73 countries. *SSM Popul Health*. 2021 Jan 26;13:100742. doi: 10.1016/j.ssmph.2021.100742. PMID: 33748389; PMCID: PMC7960541.

<sup>47</sup> Eurofound (2024) Becoming adults: Young people in a post-pandemic world; [Becoming adults: Young people in a post-pandemic world | CEDEFOP](#)

<sup>48</sup> Youth Futures Foundation (2025)

<sup>49</sup> Public Health Scotland (2025) [Teenage pregnancies - Year of conception, ending 31 December 2023 - Teenage pregnancies - Publications - Public Health Scotland](#)

<sup>50</sup> Department for Education (2025) Post-16 education and skills white paper

<sup>51</sup> IPPR (2025) Toward universal opportunity for young people; [Towards universal opportunity for young people](#)

<sup>52</sup> CIPD (2024) Changing face of the youth labour market

inequalities in these skills are also greater in England than any other country in the dataset of 31 countries.<sup>53</sup>

## Youth services

Youth services play a critical role in supporting young people’s transitions from education into employment. They provide trusted adults, safe out-of-school spaces, and structured activities through which young people can build confidence, skills and social capital. Effective youth services commonly integrate careers guidance, mentoring and targeted support, recognising that access to work is shaped not only by qualifications but also by information, networks and self-belief. By helping young people understand their options, navigate choices about education and work, and overcome personal or structural barriers, youth services can reduce the risk of disengagement and support more successful entry into the labour market.

The Connexions Service, established in England in 2001, is an example of how broader youth provision can be combined with targeted careers and employment support to improve employment outcomes. Connexions provided a “one-stop shop” that combined information, advice, and guidance on education and employment with personal support, delivered through local partnerships and Personal Advisers. This model recognised that many young people at risk of unemployment needed more than simple job listings; they needed tailored guidance that considered personal, social, and educational factors influencing their ability to engage with work or further learning. Early evaluations suggested Connexions contributed to reducing the proportion of 16- to 18-year-olds not in education, employment or training (NEET) and helped many young people make decisions about their futures.<sup>54</sup>

The loss of Connexions reflected a wider hollowing out of the youth sector. Between 2010 and 2023, local spending on youth services in England fell by 73%, amounting to £1.2bn. Over the same period, more than 1,000 youth centres closed and more than 4,500 youth worker roles were lost.<sup>55</sup>

Research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies reveals the impact that the closures of youth centres had on young people’s attainment. Young people who lost access to a youth club in London, where 30% of youth clubs closed between 2010 and 2019, were found to have performed worse in their GCSE exams. Test scores fell by approximately half a grade, with the impact on pupils eligible for FSM significantly higher: these students’ attainment fell by over a grade at GCSE level.<sup>56</sup> These findings underline that youth services are not peripheral, but pivotal to young people’s ability to move into education, training, or employment. When these services are lost, the consequences are evident within educational outcomes and attainment, but also young people’s wider preparedness for work.

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<sup>53</sup> National Foundation for Educational Research (2025) International comparisons: Investigating cross-country differences in young people’s skill development and identifying factors associated with high-performance

<sup>54</sup> National Audit Office (2004) Department of Education and Skills – Connexions Service for all Young People

<sup>55</sup> Department for Culture, Media & Sport (2025) Youth Matters: Your National Youth Strategy

<sup>56</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies. How cuts to youth clubs affected teen crime and education.

## Transition Support

Currently, support for education-to-employment transitions in England is complex and fragmented, making it difficult for young people to navigate and benefit from in a sustained way. Despite a large number of government-funded programmes and initiatives that exist to support young people, they are spread across different departments, policy objectives, age thresholds and delivery systems, with little overarching coordination.<sup>57</sup> Support is often tied to specific settings like schools, colleges, training providers, Jobcentre Plus or local authorities, rather than following the young person across transitions, meaning assistance can fall away precisely at the time it is most needed, such as leaving education or moving between services. We welcome steps from across government to expand support through hubs in communities - primarily DWP Youth Hubs, Young Futures Hubs, and Best Start Family Hubs – but greater alignment is needed to ensure that young people can access a joined-up network of services and support, rather than feeling that they are being passed between services and having to re-tell their story.

Provision is also commonly time-limited or short-term, reflecting funding cycles rather than the realities of young people's journeys, particularly for those facing multiple or intersecting barriers to employment.<sup>58</sup> As a result, young people may have to repeatedly re-engage, re-disclose personal circumstances, or meet new eligibility criteria as they move through the system. This fragmentation is compounded by significant local variation, with the availability, quality and accessibility of support differing widely between areas, creating a 'postcode lottery' in which outcomes depend heavily on where a young person lives rather than on their level of need.

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<sup>57</sup> Youth Futures Foundation (2025) Education to employment transitions: support in 2024; [Research-report\\_Education-to-employment-transitions-support-in-2024\\_December-2025\\_IES\\_YFF.pdf](#)

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

## **2. What would make the biggest difference to support more young people to participate?**

The evidence set out in this response highlights how the lives of young NEETs are shaped by multiple overlapping systems. The Centre for Young Lives is calling for a cross-departmental strategy to support vulnerable young people, supported by joint funding similar to the 2000 Spending Review on at-risk young people, to integrate support locally and stop young people from falling through the gaps.

DWP should work with DfE, DHSC and DCMS to provide early support for young people at risk of being NEET through mental health support teams, youth provision, play, and school inclusion policies to prevent and reduce exclusions and school absence. Support should be provided as early as possible – with evidence available from the early years of a child’s likelihood of becoming NEET.

Recent commitments and investment from the DWP, including the Youth Guarantee have been welcome in strengthening the offer of support for young people and tackling the trend of rising NEETs. To ensure these policies have the desired impact on improving outcomes for young people, cross-departmental partnerships and collaboration will be key to ensuring effective delivery and joined up support for young people who are or are at risk of becoming NEET. Strong national and local partnerships will enable delivery of support through multiple avenues across services and in the community to ensure every young person has access to support when they need it.

### **Young Futures**

In November 2022, Baroness Anne Longfield’s Commission on Young Lives – the precursor to the Centre for Young Lives - published its final report highlighting the paucity of support for vulnerable teenagers, and a systemic lack of join-up within government.<sup>59</sup> The same month, the National Audit Office (NAO) published its assessment of the government’s support for vulnerable adolescents. It found that “there is no overall strategic approach, so government does not know whether there are gaps or overlaps in the support for vulnerable adolescents”.<sup>60</sup>

Throughout the Commission on Young Lives’ inquiry, we found systems and statutory services that didn’t have the trust of young people, were over-stretched, simply unable to meet the needs of many vulnerable children, and unable to stop them falling through the gaps and into danger. We heard from young people who were able to identify the moment where their life changed for the worse, where they knew they needed support, but it wasn’t there. It was clear to us that not just more support needed but the right kind of support – understanding and supporting young people’s needs.

To change this, the Commission put forward a ‘Sure Start for Teenagers’ model of early intervention and support to stop vulnerable young people from falling through the gaps. We have been pleased to work with the Government to develop this into the Young Futures programme, which is a new intervention model to prevent at risk young people from falling

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<sup>59</sup> Commission on Young Lives (2022) Hidden in Plain Sight

<sup>60</sup> National Audit Office (2022) Support for vulnerable adolescents. Available at: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Support-for-vulnerable-adolescents.pdf>

through the gaps in support systems by providing the necessary support and opportunities to succeed. The programme comprises two core components:

1. Prevention Partnerships, led by the Home Office.
2. Young Futures Hubs, led by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), with eight early adopters launching in 2025–26 and a further 42 by the end of the Parliament. We welcome the recent commitment of £70 million over three years to transform local youth services and establish a network of 50 Young Futures Hubs by the end of this Parliament.

Hubs will be open-access, youth-friendly spaces where young people can meet friends, take part in activities, and build positive relationships with trusted adults, as well as receive early help without formal referral or diagnosis. The aim is to offer access to a core package of support — including mental health provision, mentoring, counselling, education, employment, advice and information — integrated under one roof. We welcome the inclusion of the widening of access to opportunities as one of three core aims of Young Futures Hubs but would again highlight the importance of join-up between DCMS and DWP in achieving this, which we are pleased to see has begun to take place between officials.

Young Futures is an ambitious and transformative programme which, if successful, has the potential to bring together national and local policy for young people and establish dynamic anchor institutions and networks across our communities.

To do so, it should be at the heart of a cross-government plan to support young people who are currently falling through the gaps in the education, health, and employment support systems. These young people will often be the ‘inactive’ NEET young people who are cannot be reached through Job Centres.

### Recommendations

- Government should establish a cross-departmental Young Futures Plan, bringing together the Department for Work & Pensions, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Culture, Media & Sport, and the Department for Education. This Plan should establish a shared ambition for the Young Futures programme and join up existing and future policies and funds to maximise the role of Young Futures Hubs as a key means of delivering a range of ambitions, including the Youth Guarantee and the work of DWP Youth Hubs.
- Departments which are co-signatories to the Young Futures Plan should also publish a comprehensive, joint guidance document for Young Futures Hubs. Government should design and deliver a centrally mandated ‘core offer’ of services to be delivered through the Hubs, including separate, specialist support for girls and young women, and an offer of inspirational programmes of open-access activities and opportunities which is available throughout the week.

### **Community support with at-risk NEETs**

Support for young people at key points of transition – finishing school at 16 or transitioning from further or higher education at 18 and 21 respectively – is central to identifying young people who

are or are at risk of becoming NEET. Strengthening education-to-employment transition support can be achieved by improving coordination and integration across education, employment, and support services, ensuring young people can access timely, flexible, and sustained interventions. This should be focused on young people facing multiple disadvantage, who are at heightened risk of becoming NEET.

Crucially, support should be extended beyond rigid age or qualification thresholds to prevent cliff-edges and ensure that support is accessed by young people who have already become NEET or have disengaged from statutory services already. Support should encompass a more holistic, intersectional approach that combines upskilling young people, mental health and well-being support, and proactive employer engagement to create smoother, equitable pathways from education into meaningful work.<sup>61</sup>

The success of Connexions is evidence of the vital importance of trusted adults in supporting young people through transition periods and into education, training, or work. The Connexions Service, launched in April 2001, aimed to support young people to make informed choices and thereby ensure a successful transition to adulthood. A primary target of the Connexions Service was to reduce the proportion of 16–18-year-olds who are NEET. It did this through providing a network of Personal Advisers (PAs). This support was key in supporting young people to navigate what is a complex landscape of support at transition points.

An impact assessment of the programme revealed several key learnings, both about the value of trusted adult relationships but also the importance of youth provision which is universal and open access rather than targeted. The service produced a range of positive outcomes based on the success of PAs, which were the central mechanism of the programme which led to changes in reasoning, resources, and behaviour. The assessment highlights the importance of *trusted* adults, with young people’s likelihood of disclosing their issues contingent on them having a strong relationship with their PA.

### Recommendations

- We welcome the recent publication of the National Youth Strategy, which highlighted the severe lack of spaces, opportunities, and trusted adults to support young people, and set out a long-term vision for youth provision. The Department for Work and Pensions should harness this ambition by investing in a nationally coordinated, Connexions-style programme that provides early, personalised and youth-led support to prevent young people from becoming NEET and to support sustained transitions into education, employment or training.

### **Early Years Support**

Effective early years support can intervene early in the life of a child or young person and potentially prevent them from becoming NEET further down the line. The Government’s commitment to a new network of Best Start Family Hubs – one in every local authority – signals a welcome recognition of both the importance of the early years across a range of long-term outcomes, but also a recognition that to make lasting change in the outcomes of our young

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

people, investment into early intervention is key – even if the benefits of investment may only be realised over a decade from today.

Over the past year, the Centre for Young Lives has produced a programme of research into joined up family support. Our research highlighted the need to rebuild the network of support for children and families that was stripped away with the loss of Sure Start.<sup>62</sup> We set out a costed economic model for scaling up investment into joined up family support, reaching £1.25bn at the end of this Spending Review period. The £500m investment from Department for Education is welcome, however to deliver high-quality and consistent support to children and families in every area, more investment and ambition is required as rollout of new Hubs begins in the Spring. Government must realise the wide-reaching benefits of investing early, including tackling some of the key drivers of NEET later in life.

Best Start Family Hubs are well placed to provide additional early years support to young parents through direct support such as childcare and parenting support, but also through established links with employment support services. One of the primary roles of Sure Start Children’s Centres was in offering employment support to parents through strong links to Jobcentre Plus. Strengthening this link should be a key priority for Best Start Family Hubs, with DWP as a core partner and Hubs investing in strong working relationships with local Jobcentres to deliver employment support through Hubs.<sup>63</sup> More broadly, a new network of Best Start Family Hubs should enable early identification of young people at risk of becoming NEET and support putting in place timely support through referral pathways to other statutory services.

Given the strong association between caring responsibilities as an indicator of heightened risk of NEET, support for young parents – and young mothers in particular – should be included in Government’s plan to bring down NEET rates. Best Start Family Hubs can offer the support necessary to support young parents through signposting to local childcare and employment support. Strong partnerships between professionals supporting young parents – family support workers, health, education and employment support – when working effectively, is key to strengthening the offer of support to young parents.

### Recommendations

- DWP Youth Hubs should establish and maintain strong partnerships with their local Best Start Family Hubs to signpost young parents to employment support and childcare - to allow young people with young children to enter and maintain work. Partnerships may include join up with child-friendly employers e.g. young parents supported into employment in childcare settings.
- The Department for Education’s upcoming White paper on Schools should ensure children not reaching a Good Level of Development at 5 should have access to universal early support like Best Start Family Hubs through education referral pathways.

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<sup>62</sup> Centre for Young Lives (2025) Fresh Start for Children and Family Support – Part 1: Building from the Foundations

<sup>63</sup> Centre for Young Lives (2025) Best Start: A Fresh Start for Children and Family Support

- DWP should consider additional means to support young parents who are NEET including piloting the rollout of dedicated support staff either in DWP Employment Hubs or Best Start Family Hubs that provide targeted support for young parents.

### **Targeted support for female NEETs**

Targeted support, including targeted outreach, to young women is needed to address the rise in female NEETs. This should include consideration of the additional needs of young women who may have additional caring responsibilities, such as childcare or flexible support arrangements.

#### Recommendation:

- DWP should undertake further research with young female NEETs to understand specifically the drivers of rising female NEETs
- DWP support should include targeted support and outreach specifically designed to reach NEET females and support them into education, employment or training.
- DWP should work with DHSC to deliver specialist mental health support to young women to tackle the drivers of rising NEET among young women.

### **Inclusive schools**

It is well established that education acts as a protective factor against young people becoming NEET. Inclusive education is crucial to ensuring that our education system is designed to meet the diverse needs of all learners and support all children to learn and thrive in school. Many young people who become NEET have previously experienced disengagement from education due to unmet special educational needs, disability, mental health challenges, poverty, caring responsibilities, adverse experiences or other exclusionary practices.

Inclusive education improves engagement and retention by providing the necessary support to overcome any barriers to learning and flexible pathways, enabling young people to remain in education for longer and achieve qualifications needed to enter the workforce.

A recent report from the Centre for Young Lives called for a whole-system shift to deliver an education system with inclusion at its core.<sup>64</sup> While recent steps from the Department for Education have been welcome in reforming the education system to encourage more inclusive culture, there is still a long way to go. Redefining what success looks like for schools is key, moving beyond exam results to include measures such as pupil wellbeing, belonging, absence, exclusions and longer-term destinations, including NEET outcomes into early adulthood. This should sit alongside a broader, more inclusive curriculum; stronger partnerships between schools, local authorities and community services.

#### Recommendations

- The Department for Education should continue to support schools to deliver inclusive practices that ensure no child falls through the gaps in the education system. This should include:

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<sup>64</sup> Centre for Young Lives (2025) Everyone Included

- A Green Paper on options for wholesale reform of the school system to become meaningfully inclusive, including the accountability system, with inclusion at its centre.
- Extend the live Pupil Attendance dashboard to include the school roll, monitoring the data to ensure that schools and Trusts have inclusive admissions policies and are serving the communities they are in. RISE teams should be tasked with monitoring school rolls and holding to account schools and Trusts that exhibit non-inclusive practice.
- Teacher training on inclusion and inclusive practice should be a mandatory part of teachers' CPD including training on relational and trauma-informed practice and identification of additional needs and risks.
- Statutory guidance for Schools and Trusts on Managed Moves protocol.
- The Department for Education should pilot a partnerships programme with the Department for Work and Pensions to encourage join up between education and employers to offer more young people opportunities for work experience and skills building. This should include dedicated youth support workers joining up with local authority attendance teas to deliver targeted support to young people who are absent from school.
- The Department for Work and Pensions should partner with the Department for Education to provide targeted support that goes beyond the universal offer through schools to support young people identified as at risk of becoming NEET and intervene early.

### **Support for children and young people with SEND**

The SEND system is in crisis, characterised by rapidly rising numbers of children identified with SEND, long and unlawful delays in Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans, stark regional inequalities, and poor educational, mental health, and attendance outcomes for affected children and young people. As set out elsewhere in this submission, children and young people with SEND are also at greater risk of becoming NEET because of the additional barriers they face.

Responsibilities for SEND are fragmented across education, health, and social care, inconsistent definitions and thresholds, limited workforce capacity and training, and weak data sharing place heavy burdens on families, often making access to support adversarial, stressful, and inequitable. As a result, the current system is reactive and late, failing to identify needs early and escalating costs and distress over time. The Centre for Young Lives, in partnership with Child of the North and N8 research partnership recommend earlier, broader, and more consistent identification of needs; clearer national standards to reduce postcode lotteries; better training and support for school staff; improved integration and data sharing across services; the use of evidence-based and digital tools to support assessment and classroom practice; and accessible, “one-stop” information for families.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Child of the North (2024) As evidence-based plan for addressing the special educational need and disabilities (SEND) assessment and support crisis; [Addressing the special educational needs and disabilities \(SEND\) assessment and support crisis - N8 Research Partnership](#)

## Recommendations

- The upcoming White paper on SEND should include measures to strengthen early identification and intervention for children and young people with SEND, including a universal offer in mainstream schools.

## **Mental health**

The link between high rates of poor mental health among children and young people, and the increase in NEET young people must not be overlooked. The Department of Health and Social Care should increase investment into children and young people's mental health support and partner with the Department for Work and Pensions to target support to young people who are NEET due to poor mental health.

Emerging pilots are exploring how Individual Placement and Support (IPS) could create new, cost-effective pathways into work that support recovery from mental ill health, build confidence and enhance wellbeing – helping break the cycle between poor mental health and youth unemployment. This programme is operating in early support hubs for young people in Manchester, Norwich and Southampton and is being evaluated by the NIHR School for Public Health Research and the model already has strong evidence underpinning it.

It is positive to see both DWP Youth Hubs and Young Futures Hubs have committed to providing wellbeing offers, but this risks only increasing the burden on already overstretched CAMHS if the hubs are only acting as a signpost to the young people with higher levels of need, rather than holding and meeting some of this need within the hubs. Mental health and employment support should also be aligned between DWP Youth Hubs and Young Futures Hubs and embedded in a co-signed cross-government plan for Young Futures.

To avoid this, both DWP and DCMS should work with DHSC to establish a meaningful mental health offer within the hubs. Our recent paper, published with the Future Minds and Fund the Hubs campaigns, called for NHS clinical oversight within Young Futures Hubs to ensure that children and young people with a wide range of needs can be appropriately supported with effective psychologically informed assessment and triage, safeguarding, and evidence-based interventions.<sup>66</sup>

In partnership with colleagues as part of the Future Minds Campaign, a recent report co-authored by the Centre for Young Lives highlights the great cost to both the individual and the economy if Government fails to address poor mental health among children and young people.<sup>67 68</sup> We called for a significant, sustained increase in investment in children and young people's mental health so that at least 70% of those with diagnosable conditions can access support within the current Parliament. This included full rollout of mental health support teams (MHSTs) and expansion of early support hubs. Both early support hubs and MHSTs should be

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<sup>66</sup> Future Minds & Fund the Hubs (2025) Embedding Young Future Hubs as part of a neighbourhood health vision for young people: A briefing paper

<sup>67</sup> Future Minds (2025)

<sup>68</sup> Future Minds (2025) Why investing in children and young people's mental health will unlock economic growth

effectively utilised to provide targeted support for young people who are or are at risk of becoming NEET.

### Recommendations

- The Department for Work and Pensions should partner with the Department of Health and Social Care to provide targeted support to young people who are NEET due to their mental health. The partnership should include:
  - A joint dedicated funding pot to deliver targeted mental health support for young NEETs.
  - DWP should fund Individual Placement and Support through early support hubs in partnership with DHSC.
- Join up of Government policies to strengthen the offer of support for young people with poor mental health who are NEET or who are at risk of becoming NEET and tackle the link between mental health and unemployment.
  - Targeted support and outreach from Early Support Hubs and Mental Health Support Teams.
  - Join-up between DWP Youth Hubs and Young Futures. This should include partnership with DHSC to strengthen the mental health offer in Hubs.
- Broaden the Mental Health Support Team model, offering tailored support for groups of children and young people who are currently underserved by MHSTs, such as neurodivergent young people. The model should also be further expanded to meet a wider range of needs, by integrating wider school-based provision, including school counselling and nursing services, and embed relational care approaches.

### **Reaching ‘inactive’ young people**

The focus of the Youth Guarantee on those claiming Universal Credit means ‘inactive’ young people who are not claiming benefits risk missing out on support without dedicated outreach. This excludes a significant and growing number of young people, with 400,000 young people disconnected from Jobcentres and mainstream employment services because they are not claiming unemployment benefits. In addition, those facing the greatest barriers, such as care-experienced young people, also require more targeted investment and interventions.

Reaching these young people requires welcoming and appealing youth spaces, where young people want to be. This includes Young Futures Hubs, where dedicated employment support will be available, but also a broader re-building of youth infrastructure and youth clubs.

In June 2025, we published *Ambitious for Young People: a new era of support and opportunities*, which set out a costed vision for youth provision. The report highlighted the transformative role that youth centres can play in improving education and employment outcomes.<sup>69</sup> A cost-benefit analysis developed by Alma Economics focused on the educational impacts of youth centres, and the potential higher future earnings and productivity that arise from greater educational attainment. The analysis estimated that increased productivity resulting from higher

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Centre for Young Lives (2025) *Ambitious for Young People: a new era of support and opportunities*

educational attainment among young people who access youth clubs would be worth £590 million after five years, rising to £2.6 billion by 2035. As productivity gains are likely to persist throughout participants' working lives, these figures are likely to represent a conservative estimate of the overall economic benefits of investing in youth centres.<sup>70</sup>

Well-funded youth services, sports, arts and community programmes give young people safe, structured spaces to build skills, routines and relationships that directly support re-engagement with learning and work, while also improving mental health and resilience. Early, local interventions help identify barriers such as poverty, caring responsibilities or low attainment before they become entrenched, reducing long-term costs to the welfare, health and justice systems. By meeting young people where they are and giving them purpose, mentors and pathways forward strengthens communities, boosts productivity, and creates a more resilient pipeline into education and employment.

### **Case Study – Premier League Foundation**

The Centre for Young Lives has been the Premier League Charitable Fund's Learning and Evaluation Partner since September 2024 to explore how football and football club charities are working with children, young people, and families to reach those children who might otherwise fall through the gaps.

Football is uniquely placed to tackle the challenges facing children and young people because of its reach, accessibility, and influence in young people's lives. For young people growing up in poverty, football club charities, support by the Premier League Foundation, provides free or low-cost opportunities to participate in positive activities, breaking down barriers that so often prevent disadvantaged children from accessing clubs and support. For those with special educational needs, football can provide inclusive environments where they can succeed, build confidence, and feel a sense of belonging often missing from school or mainstream settings.

By engaging those at risk of becoming NEET, football programmes can re-ignite aspirations, build confidence, and connect young people with opportunities, helping to unlock economic growth. Football also plays a vital role in early intervention, steering young people away from crime and serious violence by offering safe spaces, positive role models, and alternatives to risky behaviours. Football supports mental health by promoting physical activity, social connection, and a sense of belonging, easing pressures on overstretched health services.

With 106 football club charities across England and Wales supported by the Premier League Charitable Fund in 2024/25, a network of over 7,000 staff and infrastructure is already in place to support young people to reach their potential and positively impact communities. The Premier League is already a key Youth Guarantee partner of the Department of Work and Pensions, committing to providing skills and opportunities and using its influence to reach and engage young people.

<sup>70</sup> Centre for Young Lives (2025) *Ambitious for Young People: A new era of support and opportunities*

## Tracking long-term outcomes

Strengthening and expanding the collection of NEET data would allow for not only a better understanding of why more young people are becoming NEET but also support in identifying young people at risk and intervening before they become NEET in the first place.

The introduction of new guidance for Risk of NEET Indicators (RONI) to local authorities in 2025 was a welcome step towards strengthening our understanding and response to rising young NEETs – collected by educational institutions in collaboration with local authorities. While this offers a strong foundation for enhanced data collection around NEETs, the guidance lacks additional accompanying resource to rollout data collection and sharing effectively. Crucially, the focus on RONI is on students from Year 10 and 11 which is arguably too late as many of the risk factors for NEET can be observed from the early years.<sup>71</sup> This suggests that more effective data collection and monitoring would span from early years outcomes to destinations at 25, potentially building on pre-existing datasets such as the Longitudinal Education Outcomes dataset which tracks educational pathways and labour market outcomes.

## Recommendations

- Government should establish a cross-departmental working group to develop and rollout long-term outcomes tracking to better understand drivers of NEET and identify young people at risk. Plans should draw on the existing LEO dataset and Risk of NEET Indicators guidance and include outcomes data from early years to destinations. Government may consider the role of Single Unique Identifier to strengthen long term outcomes data.

## Conclusion

The concerning trend of the rising number of young people who are NEET is a warning sign of deeper system failure, with young people slipping through the gaps across systems where support is lacking. Heightened risk of becoming disengaged from education and work can be identified as early as age 5, with disadvantage baked in early in life. Rising rates of poor mental health without sufficient support to meet demand, unmet SEND needs, record levels of school absence, poverty, and weak transition support all exacerbate these risks for too many children.

Support is fragmented, reactive, and inflexible, meaning many young people, particularly those who are economically inactive or ‘hidden NEETs’, receive little or no help. Our submission argues for a fundamental shift toward earlier identification of risk factors and early intervention, stronger integrated, community-based provision – particularly around transition points and targeted support to disproportionately impacted groups of children and young people. This should be supported by cross-government coordination and strong partnerships between government, employers and business and wider local partners, to prevent more young people from becoming disconnected and to ensure they are supported to thrive into adulthood.

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<sup>71</sup> Warburton, M., Wood, M.L., Sohal, K. *et al.* Risk of not being in employment, education or training (NEET) in late adolescence is signalled by school readiness measures at 4–5 years. *BMC Public Health* **24**, 1375 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-18851-w>

