

Written evidence submitted by Equalise: ESRC Centre for Lifecourse Health Equity on 5th February 2026

Work and Pensions Committee

Inquiry: Youth employment, education and training

Equalise: ESRC Centre for Lifecourse Health Equity is a £9 million ESRC-funded project (2024-2029) based in UCL's Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, with academic partners at City St George's University London, University of Essex, University of Glasgow, University of Strathclyde and Universite Toulouse III. Led by Professors Yvonne Kelly and Anne McMunn in partnership with experts in local and national government and third sector representatives, **Equalise** tackles avoidable health inequalities across four key themes: Learning, Care, Work and Place. The Work theme focuses on job quality, health and workforce participation/economic inactivity, and variations in work.

A. Executive Summary

- Mental ill-health is a major causal driver of NEET status, with difficulties often beginning in childhood and continuing into early adulthood, preceding disengagement from education, employment or training.
- Young women with caring responsibilities face compounded barriers, where isolation, low self-esteem and high rates of anxiety/depression hinder their return to education or work.
- Educational attainment remains the strongest predictor of NEET risk, with early disadvantage, low school readiness, and school exclusions significantly increasing the likelihood of later economic inactivity.
- Family employment patterns, social disadvantage, and limited access to high-quality training shape young people's risk of becoming NEET, often delaying rather than preventing disengagement.
- Regional labour markets play a crucial role, with high adult unemployment, part-time work, and limited entry-level jobs - particularly in rural areas - contributing to higher NEET rates.
- Effective prevention requires integrated mental health support, strong careers guidance, early intervention in schools, and policies that target cumulative disadvantage rather than relying solely on post-16 or post-18 interventions.
- Place-sensitive, locally tailored support is essential, emphasising job creation, employer engagement, and alignment with local opportunity structures rather than uniform national programmes.

B. Young people who are NEET

What factors lead to a young person not being in education, employment or training (NEET)? Are there some young people who are more likely to be NEET than others?

B.1. Robust longitudinal and meta-analytic evidence shows that mental ill-health and substance use problems consistently precede NEET status rather than arise because of it (Gariépy et al., 2021). NEET young people are substantially more likely to have experienced mental health problems in childhood and to experience concurrent mental health and substance use difficulties in early adulthood (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016). Rising rates of mental ill-health have prevented longer-term reductions in NEET rates (Holmes et al., 2021), with mental wellbeing also identified as a key underlying mechanism in disadvantaged and rural contexts (Sadler et al., 2015).

B.2. Mental health also often acts as a secondary contributor to NEET status for young women who have become economically inactive due to caring responsibilities (Danner et al., 2021). Isolation, low self-esteem, and a high prevalence of anxiety and depression result in multiple overlapping barriers preventing re-entries into education or employment.

B.3. Educational attainment is the strongest single predictor of NEET status, with many other risk factors operating primarily through their influence on attainment (Gladwell et al., 2022). Disadvantage emerges early: lack of school readiness at age 4-5 is strongly associated with later NEET status (Warburton et al., 2024), and school exclusion increases the likelihood of persistent economic inactivity and poorer labour market outcomes into the mid-twenties (Madia et al., 2022). Social disadvantage leads to school disengagement and low-quality education or training often just delays, but does not prevent, NEET status (Thompson, 2017). Family employment structures further shape risk, though effects vary across ethnic and gender groups (Zuccotti & O'Reilly, 2018).

B.4. Regional labour market conditions strongly shape NEET risk. Higher adult unemployment, a greater prevalence of part-time work, and limited availability of entry-level jobs are associated with higher NEET rates (Bradley et al., 2020). These constraints are particularly pronounced in rural areas (Sadler et al., 2015). Regions with stronger youth employment rates, higher proportions of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and industry structures such as manufacturing and construction show lower NEET rates.

B.5. Neighbourhood conditions also shape NEET risk. Longitudinal evidence from England shows that young people living in disadvantaged and high-crime neighbourhoods are more likely to experience sustained NEET status, even after accounting for individual, family and educational factors (Karyda and Jenkins, 2018; Karyda, 2020). Disadvantaged areas are also associated with poorer-quality first jobs and greater early employment instability, which can increase the risk of disengagement from education and work (Tomaszewski and Cebulla, 2014).

Would it be useful for the Government to set specific goals or target relating to the number or proportion of young people who are NEET? What might such a target be?

B.6. Whilst targets on the number of NEET young individuals can be helpful, research from Yates and Payne (2007) derived from reviewing the Labour Governments Connexions scheme highlights that performance targets can have perverse incentives. For instance, as unemployment is much simpler to address than economic inactivity, targets may incentivise support schemes to focus on ‘quick wins’ – returning young people only recently out of the labour market to work. Individuals who face much more pronounced challenges in returning to education, employment, or training who may be the most disadvantaged in the long-term, might be de-prioritised under such an approach. A more helpful means of setting targets for the number of NEET young people might involve disaggregating the group into those who are unemployed (a typically much more short-term phenomenon) and those who are economically inactive (which may be substantially more challenging to address). Targets will be more useful if they reflect the heterogeneity of the groups.

C. Preventing young people from becoming NEET

How can the Government, and the DWP, help to prevent young people becoming NEET in the first place?

C.1. Skills development alone is insufficient to support sustained participation. Effective support should combine qualifications and employability training with confidence-building, careers guidance, and well-supported transitions between education, benefits, and employment.

C.2. Mental health difficulties represent a structural constraint on participation, not a peripheral issue, and should be embedded as a core component of youth strategies rather than treated as optional or separate (Gariépy et al., 2021; Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016; Holmes et al., 2021). Participation cannot be improved at scale without integrating mental health provision into youth employment and education services, with clear pathways between health, education and work. Targeted mental health support is particularly important for women who are economically inactive due to caring responsibilities, to support re-entry into employment.

C.3. Barriers to participation are cumulative and often established well before young people enter the labour market; preventing disengagement is therefore more effective than attempting to reverse it. Investment in early childhood development, mental health support in schools, and exclusion prevention should be considered central to NEET reduction strategies rather than peripheral. Reliance on post-16 or post-18 employment interventions alone risks addressing symptoms rather than causes.

C.4. Non-participation frequently reflects constrained local opportunity rather than individual unwillingness or lack of employability. Place-based disadvantage can disrupt transitions into education and work even among motivated young people.

Policies to reduce non-participation should be place-sensitive, aligning support with local conditions and promoting job creation and employer engagement in sectors offering real entry-level roles, especially where youth labour markets are weak.

D. Support for young people who are NEET

What is the most effective way of delivering support to young people who are NEET? Are there any initiatives that can be learned from, domestically or internationally?

D.1. The Youth Futures Foundation (2025) highlighted that the best ways to support NEET young people include:

- 1) focused help for young people at high-risk transition stages (into secondary school, into sixth form, post-school transitions),
- 2) creating clear and accessible career pathways in technical and vocational education and training (TVET),
- 3) embedding health-related support into services to address the overlapping and multiple barriers that young people face in returning to education/ employment
- 4) developing locally delivered programmes that link training opportunities to jobs.

They draw attention to France's Youth Guarantee, where young people receive coaching, mentoring, and access to mental and physical health services, and where local government works with local employers to ensure that appropriate entry level work is available.

How does support for young people who are NEET differ between the UK's four nations? How might the transfer of Skills to DWP impact the delivery of support for young people across the UK?

D.2. Research from Maguire (2021) outlines in significant detail how support for NEET young people differs between the UK's four nations. Models of funding and implementation are considered – highlighting substantial differences. Her research also draws attention to how cuts to locally delivered services under austerity led to a dependence on European funding which is now not available. In England, Department for Education are responsible for the NEET agenda, while in Scotland it is Skills Development Scotland/ Scottish Government, Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland and Welsh Government in Wales. This management via different departments and institutions results in differing models of delivery and variable aims to schemes.

E. Employment and the labour market

What are the main barriers to employers supporting young people into employment and how can the Government better work with employers to address these?

E.1. Research from the **Precarious Pathways** project indicates that employers increasingly expect prior work experience from young people, and that unpaid work placements have become more common (Maguire, 2021). This may disadvantage young people who lack access to informal networks that facilitate such experience. These findings highlight the role of employer practices in shaping young people's transitions into employment, with obtaining the initial role that allows for the development of experience to be particularly challenging.

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