

Written evidence submitted by UCL Equalise: ESRC Centre for Lifecourse Health Equity on 26 January 2026
Department for Work and Pensions
Young People and Work Report: Call for Evidence

Equalise: ESRC Centre for Lifecourse Health Equity is a £9 million ESRC-funded research centre (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 the third sector, **Equalise** tackles avoidable health inequalities across four key themes: Learning, Care, Work and Place. We are responding to this call for evidence as our *Work* theme addresses health and economic inactivity and our *Place* theme examines how local environments and place-based policy innovations can reduce health and social inequities.

Summary

- Motivation is rarely the issue: NEET young people are often motivated but held back by low confidence, pessimism, and poor recognition of their skills.
- Mental health is a central barrier: Mental ill-health typically precedes NEET status and significantly reduces sustained participation, especially when combined with caring responsibilities.
- Early disadvantage matters most: Low educational attainment, school exclusion, and poor early school readiness strongly predict later disengagement.
- Barriers are cumulative across the lifecourse: Disadvantage builds from childhood through adolescence, making prevention more effective than later intervention.
- Place shapes opportunity: Weak local labour markets, rurality, and neighbourhood deprivation limit access to stable entry-level jobs, sustaining non-participation.
- Effective responses must be holistic and place-based: Support should integrate mental health, confidence-building and skills with locally tailored employment opportunities.

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

Any changes in the aspirations and attitudes of young people and employers

NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) young people often report strong commitment to work and active job-search behaviour (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016). However, they are more likely to rate their soft skills negatively and feel pessimistic about their future prospects. Aspirations, confidence, and school engagement have effects on NEET risk comparable to educational attainment, and NEET young people frequently report low confidence despite high motivation (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016; Gladwell et al., 2022).

Changes in health trends (particularly mental health and neuro-developmental conditions)

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 acted against 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).

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

Childhood factors

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). Ethnographic research demonstrates how social disadvantage leads to school disengagement and cycling through low-quality education or training that 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).

Community and place

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). 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. Simulations suggest that local youth employment rates can influence NEET risk to a similar extent as improvements in educational attainment (Gladwell et al., 2022). These constraints are particularly pronounced in rural areas with limited opportunity structures (Sadler et al., 2015).

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).

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

Any changes in the aspirations and attitudes of young people and employers

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.

Motivation is rarely the primary barrier to participation. Interventions should focus on confidence-building, skills recognition, and realistic pathways into work, rather than assuming attitudinal deficits among NEET young people.

Changes in health trends (particularly mental health and neuro-developmental conditions)

Given the strong causal link between mental ill-health and NEET status, sustaining participation requires addressing mental health alongside education and employment support (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. 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. Without this, participation-focused interventions are unlikely to be effective or sustained. Targeted mental health support is particularly important for women who are economically inactive due to caring responsibilities, to support re-entry into employment.

Childhood factors

Preventing disengagement is 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.

Barriers to participation are cumulative and often established well before young people enter the labour market. Reducing NEET rates requires a lifecourse approach that prioritises early educational engagement, reduces exclusions, and supports sustained participation in learning. Reliance on post-16 or post-18 employment interventions alone risks addressing symptoms rather than causes.

Community and place

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 therefore be place-sensitive, aligning employment and skills support with local labour market and community conditions; nationally uniform programmes that do not account for regional opportunity structures risk uneven and limited impact.

Local opportunity structures matter more than national level employment statistics. Policy should support local job creation and employer engagement in sectors offering genuine entry-level roles, particularly in areas with weak youth labour markets.

Acknowledgments

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