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**The Centre for Excellence and Outcomes
in Children and Young People's Services**

Strategies to re-engage young people not in
education, employment or training
A Rapid Review

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1. Summary

The 16 items of literature examined for this rapid review tell us that, whether strategies to re-engage those not in education, employment or training (NEET) are at national-, local-, programme-, or school-level, the most effective approaches are those that:

- are supported by funding and a commitment to a reduction in youth unemployment

- adopt a 'whole-area' approach to planning and delivery, backed by political commitment

- involve young people, and employers and local businesses, in strategic development, implementation and review

- are flexible and offer a range of pathways for young people with different needs, attributes and skills levels

- are personalised and include effective and enhanced information, advice and guidance

- provide viable vocational learning options, which clearly link to labour market opportunity and workplace progression

- focus on the development of positive adult-young person relationships based on trust, responsibility and respect

- offer support at key transitions, often through intensive support from a key worker, mentor or adviser, who acts as a 'role model' as well as providing practical guidance, support and brokerage

- are multi-agency and co-located where possible

- have an early intervention focus, in particular focusing on transitions to primary school and on early skills development

- engage parents, who are a critical influencing factor in the decisions that young people make and the opportunities that are available to them.

2. Introduction

This short report presents preliminary findings from a larger review being conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). This review will examine evidence regarding effective strategies to keep young people at risk of disengagement from learning on track to make positive transitions, and will identify critical success factors in re-engaging young people who are already NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training). This report will be published by NFER in December 2011. The evidence provided here is based on an initial assessment of 16 items of literature. Systematic searching of key databases and websites, and rapid screening of sources took place in late September and assessment and analysis of identified key items took place in early October.

2.1 Background to the review

Research recently conducted by NFER (Spielhofer *et al*., 2009) examined, in detail, the underlying causes of NEET status in the United Kingdom (UK). This research explored a complex interplay between structural, cultural, educational, and familial factors that can culminate in lost opportunity or hope for large numbers of young people. It also undertook a 'segmentation' analysis, which identified three 'types' of NEET young person – 'sustained NEETs' (those with entrenched barriers to engagement), 'open to learning NEETs' (those with no discernable barriers to engagement) and 'undecided NEETs' (similar to open to learning NEETs in terms of achievement levels but dissatisfied with the opportunities available to them). This review sets out to explore what the best available research tells us about successful approaches to tackling the NEET problem. This is assessed within the context of what is already known about the complex range of factors that can contribute to young people becoming NEET, and the diverse range of young people represented by the NEET categorisation.

2.2 Strength and nature of the evidence base

The sources appraised for this review comprise research reports, literature reviews, programme evaluations and academic journal articles. The quality of the evidence is high, with most items based upon a strong to moderate evidence base, that tends to be qualitative rather than based on statistical measurement (see Appendix 1 for a definition of these terms). Although many of the authors identify the heterogeneity of young people in the NEET 'group' and contend that a variety of strategies are needed to meet their diverse needs, very few of the items differentiate effective

strategies according to the 'reasons' for the young people's NEET status. Most of the studies concern themselves with the hardest to reach young people, those defined by Speilhofer *et al.* (2009) as the 'sustained NEET' group.

From an initial assessment of the literature, it would seem, therefore, that there is currently a gap in research around effective strategies to engage or to re-engage young people who are NEET, but who are 'open to learning', a group that, in principle, might be easier to get back into education or training if the right strategies are put in place. For the purposes of this interim report, all of the evidence has been considered, irrespective of the 'type' of young people's NEET status, where that is defined.

3. Effective strategies

Analysis of the items included in this rapid evidence review suggest that strategies to engage those at risk of becoming NEET, or to re-engage those who have already become NEET, can be considered at four levels:

1. Macro-economic (national policy-level) strategies.
2. Local Authority-level strategies.
3. Programme-level strategies.
4. School-level strategies.

Additionally, the evidence points to a number of agencies or individuals, and styles of approach that appear to lead to particularly positive outcomes (defined both in hard terms such as improved retention or progression to learning or employment, and in softer terms such as improved inter-personal relationships, enhanced confidence, and improved attitude to learning and progression). These findings are discussed in greater detail below.

3.1 Macro-economic (national policy-level) strategies

Four of the reviewed items identify the importance of a national government commitment to macro-economic funding for youth training and employment opportunities, especially within the context of rising youth unemployment and structural decline in some geographical areas. Although the date parameters of this review are very current (we considered items published from 2009 onwards only), many of the reports were written before the change of government in the UK in May 2010 and hence discuss funding strategies and decisions that are no longer live or viable.

Local Government Association (LGA) research, for example, argues that Local Authorities (LAs) should have greater freedom to vary Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) payments according to need (LGA, 2009a), and research conducted by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (Benetto, 2009) goes as far as to suggest that EMA payments should be increased from £30 to £45-£50 per week to greater incentivise disadvantaged young people to stay in learning. Recognising the abolition of EMAs and their replacement with the new Discretionary Learner Support Fund, a recent submission of evidence to the Education Committee New Inquiry by NFER suggests that this new fund is not yet well known or understood by young people. As it is a hardship fund, it is not as widely publicised, nor as available as the EMA (NFER, 2011). This may have implications for the willingness of young people at risk of disengagement to consider post-16 learning as an option. The new fund may, however, allow greater flexibility for the size of the awards made and greater targeting of resource, depending on the particular needs of the young person involved.

Finally, research by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) presents an interesting perspective. This research, which considers the extent of youth unemployment across 16 OECD countries, maintains that governments must maintain adequate resources to invest in cost-effective youth labour market programmes. The authors note that: *'facilitating the school-to-work transition and improving labour market prospects for all youth should remain at the top of the political agenda in all OECD countries* (OECD, 2010, p. 5). However, the authors note that this is not the responsibility of governments alone. Other stakeholders such as employers, trade unions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and young people themselves, also have a crucial role to play.

3.2 Local authority-level strategies

Research by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, 2010) on LA good practice in NEET reduction identifies the following factors as success criteria in effective LAs that are making inroads into NEET reduction. As with the national level strategies above, a number of these will be impacted by structural and funding changes since the election of the new government.

- **At a strategic level** – LAs have a whole-area strategic plan for NEET reduction and ensure that young people's engagement in education, employment and training is a feature of key strategy documents such as the Local Area Agreement, the Children and Young People's Plan, the 14-19 Strategy, and the local regeneration plan; they ensure that there is political commitment (at council and strategic levels); and they encourage good data sharing between agencies – in particular, making good use of Connexions Service data.
- **At a practice level** – Good systems are in place to monitor progress and impact; effective preventative measures are in place (for example, good working between schools and the Connexions Service, especially at transition phases, and a flexible curriculum offer is in place). Finally, young people are closely involved in developing, reviewing and revising the content of programmes.

A number of the reviewed items also provide categorisations of the strategic approaches that they believe LAs should be taking to tackle the NEET issue in their areas. Research undertaken by the LGA (LGA, 2009a), for example, identifies four levels of approach:

- **Intervening early with families at risk of poor outcomes** – this is particularly relevant in disadvantaged areas, or where there is a high proportion of young people in the 'sustained NEET' category – what the OECD research refers to as 'Left Behind Youth' (OECD, 2010). Intervention needs to be considered as early as pre-school, and certainly at primary school, to boost personal and social skills and literacy and numeracy levels.

- **Developing informal learning and volunteering opportunities** – this approach can be particularly beneficial for young people whose personal barriers to learning are less entrenched, but who, perhaps, had a negative experience at school. In such cases, the young people need help to develop skills and qualifications in order to make the transition to the labour market. The OECD calls this group 'Poorly Integrated New Entrants' (OECD, 2010).

- **Developing alternative and flexible learning opportunities** – such approaches are particularly relevant to young people who do not benefit from a conventional classroom experience. They can provide targeted or specialised support, and seek to develop soft skills such as confidence, self esteem, trust and responsibility.

- **Offering financial support** – a review by Tunnard *et al.* (2008), found that young people generally respond well to 'financial hooks and incentives'.[1] Kewin *et al* (2009), however, stress that wage subsidies may need to be provided to employers who can struggle to meet the costs of employing apprentices. They also note that wage allowances need to be raised in order to incentivise 17-year olds, who generally have higher inactivity rates, or levels of jobs without training, than young people aged 16.

Generally, most of the items appraised for this review focus on what LAs and other agencies, or the young people themselves, need to do to overcome various obstacles (which are often assumed to be personal or cultural), rather than considering what local labour markets, employers and businesses can offer. Hayward and Williams (2011) describe as a policy failure the tendency to focus on raising young people's aspirations, with no explicit matching of aspiration to opportunity. They argue that governments are unwilling to acknowledge the radically changed nature of local employment opportunities that have resulted from historical deindustrialisation and, as a result, tend to 'problematise' NEET young people as the *'undesirable product of educational underachievement, long-term unemployment, low aspiration and social exclusion'* (Hayward and Williams, 2011, p. 176).

Research undertaken for the LGA (Bramley *et al.*, 2011), however, outlines nine key goals that LA policy makers need to be working towards in order to improve outcomes for young people and employers, focusing on developing the 'supply' of employment opportunity. These focus on building links with the local labour market and are:

- **At a strategic level** – to simplify opportunities for the business community to work with NEET young people; to engage local businesses in strategy development and the design of offers; to support planning officers to work with businesses to create opportunities; to research the local drivers of NEET status; and to develop better targeted support.

- **At a practice level** – to use communication processes to improve opportunities for NEET young people; to raise awareness of what local employers can offer; to identify links between initiatives for vulnerable young people, enterprise

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[1] Their review assessed evidence related to EMA, Care to Learn, Activity Agreements, Learning Agreements, Entry to Employment (E2E), Apprenticeships, Key Stage 4 Engagement Programme and New Deal for Young People.

development and business support; and to involve local businesses in careers Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) in schools.

Research by the OECD (2010) similarly talks about the importance of getting employers involved in the strategic-level planning of policies to reduce levels of youth unemployment, subsidising them if necessary in order to gain their involvement and support.

3.3 Programme-level strategies

The majority of the reviewed items consider strategies that are most effective in engaging or re-engaging NEET young people 'on the ground' – that is, at school level (if they are pre-16), or through various youth engagement programmes if they are aged 16 or over or have left mainstream education before the age of 16. This section considers strategies that research has identified as effective at the programme level. The following section considers effective developments within school-based learning.

Clearly there are a wide range of youth engagement programmes, which focus upon different aspects of need according to the young person's prior experiences and ambitions for the future. Some (generally referred to as 'alternative provision') offer tailored support to nurture young people who are likely to fall within the 'sustained NEET' group, who often have a raft of personal challenges and 'super barriers' to engagement, such as homelessness or lone parenting (Evans *et al.*, 2009). These challenges often need to be overcome and solutions put in place before any work can begin on developing skills, acquiring qualifications or thinking about making a transition to work. Other programmes focus on providing a non-formal approach to learning to enable young people who had a poor experience at school to follow a range of potential pathways to develop qualifications for work and employability skills. These are usually referred to as non-formal or informal learning programmes. They may cater, more typically, for young people who are 'open to learning' or 'undecided' NEET, although they may also be a useful approach with young people in the 'sustained NEET' category.

Various authors have identified positive features of effective informal learning programmes. These include:

- **A flexible approach** – which includes having an open door enrolment policy; frequent course start dates; and allowing young people various amounts of time to complete a qualification (Evans *et al.*, 2009; Kewin *et al.*, 2009).

- **Offering a range of pathways** – including vocational and work-based learning options (Evans *et al*, 2009.; NFER, 2011). Short courses such as first aid, or ASDAN qualifications, can be a good starting point. Evans *et al.* (2009) report that young people like vocational options, because they have a practical feel and

mark a difference from school. However, other authors (Hayward and Williams, 2011) argue that such pathways are only useful if they provide a genuine vocational learning opportunity. They are critical of what they call 'pseudo vocational' programmes that act as little more than 'warehousing' for young people with few other options at the age of 16. Their point is that the vocational learning must provide real opportunities for workplace progression in the future. This point has also been made strongly in the recent review of vocational education by Alison Wolf (Wolf, 2011). Benetto (2009, p. 37) notes: *'Young people are more likely to engage if they are told about the direct benefits of vocational options and how they link to their chances of finding work.'*

- **An excellent IAG service** – that avoids gender, class-based, or other stereotyping; that is aspirational for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds; is clear about different pathways and options; is realistic about local employment opportunities; and gives equal weight to vocational and work-based training and academic qualifications (Benetto, 2009; Kewin *et al.*, 2009; NFER, 2011). Kewin *et al.* (2009) also add that individual action plans, containing incremental achievable targets, or learner agreements, are an effective means of engaging young people and rewarding them for progress.

- **Developing positive relations** between project workers and young people is pivotal (Evans *et al.*, 2009; Kewin *et al.*, 2009). The best informal learning programmes are based around mutual trust, respect and clear boundaries (more information about relationship development is provided in Section 2.5 below).

Positive features of alternative provision programmes are similar, but tend to focus more on nurturing personal development and developing trust and positive attitudes. Tunnard *et al.* (2008) suggest that alternative provision is best offered through universal settings where possible, to avoid the stigma that can be associated with 'targeted' provision. The same authors suggest that it can be empowering to involve young people in the design of activities, building on their strengths and interests. Additional success factors (Evans *et al.*, 2009) are identified as:

- Having a high ratio of staff to young people, to enable one-to-one support and small group work.
- Having an outreach capacity to reach young people who are reluctant to visit a learning setting.
- Having a flexible approach such as that mentioned in relation to informal learning above.
- Providing access (through brokerage) to targeted support as necessary.

In addition to the generic success factors identified above, this review also considers the reported outcomes of two specific programme evaluations – Activity Agreement (AA) Pilots in the UK (Maguire *et al.*, 2010) and Community-Based Youth Organisations (CBYOs) in the USA (Baldridge *et al.*, 2011). Both programmes reportedly had positive outcomes, for many of the reasons outlined above. Factors specific to these two programmes were:

AA Pilots offered young people a weekly allowance of £30 for 20 weeks in return for agreeing to a plan and activities for re-integration into learning. A personally negotiated contract (the Agreement) was developed between the young person and their AA adviser. The national evaluation of AA pilots (Maguire *et al.*, 2010) identified the following reasons for success:

- A personalised and flexible approach – activities could be tailored to the needs of different groups of young people.
- Intensive support provided by AA advisers was highly valued by young people and cited as one of the main reasons for their continued engagement.
- The financial incentive was a 'powerful engagement tool'.

CBYOs offer job training alongside education and life skills. The organisations also tackle major issues affecting low-income neighbourhoods in the USA, such as poor housing, crime and unemployment. Positive features identified by young black men involved in the programmes included:

- The ability to gain qualifications while earning money undertaking work provided by the programme.
- A non-hierarchical, trusting relationship with CBYO staff.
- Appropriate and consistent forms of discipline. A focus on hard work and punctuality.
- The fact that mistakes are viewed as opportunities for development rather than as cause for punishment.

Common themes running through these evaluations and the generic success criteria identified above are that effective youth engagement programmes tend to be flexible; based on trusting and respectful relationships; and personalised in approach.

3.4   School-level strategies

Fewer of the items appraised for this review focused upon strategies at the school level, and those that did tended to have been established less to consider strategies to prevent young people becoming NEET *per se*, than to consider the reasons for young people's disengagement or disaffection from school. The two issues are not unrelated, of course, although disengagement from school will not necessarily result in a young person becoming NEET.

In one school, where young people described as 'disaffected' by school staff were interviewed by researchers, students expressed views about their current school offer, as juxtaposed with their ambitions and desires:

> *Students expressed concerns with regard to curriculum orientation and the structure and content of lessons. They felt most curriculum areas have a purely academic content, and are irrelevant to their interests and future career prospects. They expressed an interest in vocational options, a menu of lessons with choices related to jobs/apprenticeships, geared towards the acquisition of vocational skills* (Hartas, 2011, p.109).

The young people in this study also wanted their academic subjects to be more closely connected to 'real life' requirements such as budgeting and banking. Essentially, the young people approached school learning as 'training for employment' and were disappointed when it did not meet this expectation. This finding (albeit based on one school case-study only) needs to be borne in mind when considering curriculum accessibility for all young people. Benetto (2009), Sodha and Guglielmi (2009) and Tunnard *et al.* (2008), suggest a number of positive interventions that schools can make to mitigate against disengagement and to aid positive transitions:

- Ensure that there is an early focus on reading and writing, with primary-level interventions for young people not making progress. Stand alone literacy and numeracy programmes should also be offered to young people who struggle with reading and writing at secondary school.

- Provide opportunities for students to build trusting relations with adults and develop a genuinely holistic approach to student care (nurturing both personal and academic potential).

- Use flexible approaches to learning where possible (for example, learning experientially, through football, dance or drama, or providing informal learning opportunities outside the normal school day).

- Combine a universal approach to student development (through whole-school ethos) as well as a targeted approach for young people with specific needs (through self-referral, for example). Provide an alternative curriculum for young people at risk of disengagement or exclusion.

- Offer vocational tasters, work experience and vocational options where possible, and ideally earlier than presently (at age 12-13, where disengagement typically begins).
- Provide support at key transition stages, particularly primary to secondary school. Such support needs to be sustained and not regarded as a 'one off' activity.
- Engage parents in the life and work of the school, using school-home support liaison officers where possible).

3.5 The role of key agencies and individuals

The analysis carried out to identify the themes discussed above also drew attention to a range of key agencies or individuals that appear to have a crucial role to play in successful strategies to engage young people at risk of 'dropping out' or re-engaging those who have already become NEET. These can broadly be categorised as follows:

- Adult role models providing personalised support.
- Parents and families.
- Multi-agency support.

3.5.1 Adult role models providing personalised report

The presence of adult role models, of different types, in many of the settings identified in the sections above is described in the research as of pivotal importance to the success of many strategies (Benetto, 2009; Baldridge *et al.*, 2011; LGA, 2009b; Ogletree and Hancock, 2010). The schools that are most successful in keeping their students engaged, for example, are those that draw on the support of outside professionals, such as trained counsellors, to work alongside teaching staff to meet the needs of students (Sodha and Guglielmi, 2009). Connexions Personal Advisers, a role that shortly will no longer exist, have also been found to provide invaluable one-to-one support to young people in schools, or in other learning environments, particularly where they have a specialist focus (Ofsted, 2010).

The use of mentors or key workers is also reported to be a highly effective means of keeping a young person on track and can be a particularly effective strategy with vulnerable young people (Kewin *et al.*, 2009; LGA, 2009b). In alternative learning environments, project workers often need to adopt the combined role of mentor, motivator, facilitator, and even parent figure, if parental support is lacking (Tunnard *et al.*, 2008; Baldridge *et al.*, 2011). In such instances, project workers provide holistic support that, by necessity, is much broader than a focus on employability or vocational training alone. Continuity of contact in such circumstances is of crucial importance. Research by Evans *et al.* (2009) reports the views of a service manager working with young people with disrupted lives who said:

Some of these young people won't engage with any other service, but they will engage with us. That's because we work at their pace. But we don't collude with them. It's about trying to build a relationship of trust. (p. 52).

3.5.2 Parents and families

According to LGA research, the context of the family is often overlooked in discussions about effective youth engagement or re-engagement strategies. Parents and families, however, are important in the debate, because they influence young people's decisions about education, training and work (LGA, 2009a; Tunnard *et al.*, 2008). For this reason, it is vitally important to support parents and to attempt to engage them in the interventions being used with their children. As the LGA research comments: *'A young person's risk of dropping out of work and learning is shaped years before they face the crucial choices of work and training'* (LGA, 2009a, p. 16). Tunnard *et al.* (2008) make a similar point: '*Parents influence not only young people's attitudes towards education, but also decisions on whether or not to engage with other positive social and learning activities.'* (p. 59).

Schools need to work hard to involve parents in the life of the school and to make school a place that parents feel comfortable visiting. School-home support workers can help in this regard (Sodha and Guglielmi, 2009). Apart from this suggestion, there is little in the research appraised for this review that provides examples of positive parental engagement strategies, or suggestions for effective means of engaging parents.

3.5.3 Multi-agency support

Finally, a number of the items reviewed make the point that no one agency or individual can effectively develop a strategy for engagement or re-engagement, especially where the young people in question have deeply entrenched barriers to learning or employment (LGA, 2009a and b; NFER, 2011). In such instances, there is need for a well coordinated multi-agency response. Ofsted (2010) advocate that services should ideally be co-located – a 'one stop shop' providing an easy point of access for young people and their families. Connexions Service Personal Advisers, or those in a similar role once this service is removed, should be an integral aspect of any such support (Ofsted, 2010; Tunnard *et al.*, 2008), being in a strong position to broker support from other agencies as necessary.

3.6 Conclusions

This preliminary report has identified a number of strategies for engagement or re-engagement that can operate at a number of different levels: macro-economic; strategic; and practice. An overarching, macro-economic theme is that funding appears to be a key motivator for both young people and employers. In the current fiscal climate however, where reduced government spending is likely to become the norm, and in a period of rising youth unemployment, it is clear that LAs and providers will have to work even more creatively to tackle the persistence of the NEET problem, especially in areas of the country facing structural decline and high unemployment. This support will be made harder to deliver as the government's austerity measures additionally impact on the size of LA resource in terms of staffing and budgets.

This review has shown that there are a variety of strategies that LAs and educational providers can put in place to mitigate the risks of young people disengaging from learning. These focus around increased flexibility and personalisation, enhanced IAG and the development of positive adult-young person relationships of trust, responsibility and respect. It is also important to be mindful, however, that employers within the local labour market must also form part of the picture. LA-level policy makers need to do all that they can to engage local businesses, not only in whole-area strategy development, but also in the 'micro-level' business of working with schools and other educational providers to provide mentoring support, or to assist in the provision of timely and relevant IAG.

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Appendix A

This review uses specific terminology to describe the robustness of the evidence appraised for the themes under discussion. The terminology used is outlined and explained below:

A.1 Strong evidence

In order to make statements about there being a 'strong' evidence base on a particular theme, we seek to ensure that a number of studies have been produced that concur in their findings. We expect these studies to be sufficiently large in scale (for example adopting adequate sample sizes to enable robust statistical analysis), or based on sufficiently in-depth case studies to allow a full explanation of findings. Typically, 'strong' evidence will include:

- **Quantitative research** that 'measures' impact. Such studies usually adopt experimental or quasi-experimental designs (QEDs) involving baseline and follow-up surveys, or treatment and control group designs, as well as statistical analysis.
- **Qualitative research** that provides data on perceptions of impact. The most reliable studies of this type are those that have conducted a number of in-depth case studies, across a number of locations, drawing on the views of a wide range of stakeholders, and 'triangulating' those views in order to assess the degree of agreement, or dissent, among different individuals in varying locations.

A.2   Moderate evidence

The same types of evidence as those cited above are included in this category. The distinction between a theme being described as having a 'strong' or a 'moderate' evidence base is related to the following points:

- **The weight of evidence** – themes with 'moderate' evidence are likely to have only a small number of (typically two to three) studies that concur in their findings. There may also be some studies that present a contradictory view.
- **The quality of evidence** – themes with 'moderate' evidence may include studies with rather small sample sizes (for example, QED studies based in only one or two schools), or qualitative studies that have drawn on the views of certain, but not a full range of, stakeholders.

A.3   Impressionistic evidence

As this title suggests, this category includes evidence that is based on the observation or opinion of those involved NEET reduction strategies, or upon a case-study in one organisation only, for example. Very often, we find impressionistic evidence of one particular benefit within a study that was established to evaluate an entirely different benefit. Such findings cannot be dismissed entirely, but they tend to be anecdotal, subjective or descriptive in nature.

C4EO for the sector from the sector

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