

# Work & Pensions Committee Call for Evidence on Young People who are NEET: Natspec response

## Introduction

### About Natspec

Natspec represents over 140 specialist further education (FE) colleges in England and Wales, that educate students aged 16–25 with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), almost all of whom have education, health and care plans (EHCPs). Our members provide high-quality programmes of learning, preparing learners for adulthood including progression to further education and/or employment. Natspec also provides expert guidance and professional development, sharing sector-leading practice across the wider FE and Skills sector.

Specialist colleges are playing an increasing role in supporting young people with SEND who were previously NEET to re-engage in education with some colleges being specifically established to reduce local NEET numbers.

### Scope of evidence

This submission focuses on learners with SEND who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), either prior to or following placement in specialist FE. Many of these learners have a combination of learning, physical and/or social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH), which cannot be met in a mainstream setting.

Evidence is drawn from students' own accounts of their experience of being NEET, information provided by staff in member colleges, and research on disabled young people who are NEET.

## Young people who are NEET

### Are there some young people who are more likely to be NEET than others?

Disabled young people are [three times more likely to be NEET](#) than their non-disabled peers, a proportion which [has grown significantly in the last decade](#), with the prevalence of SEMH needs increasing particularly rapidly. Included in this group are learners with EHCPs, perhaps surprisingly given the statutory duty on local authorities (LAs) to ensure they have access to appropriate provision. Our evidence focuses on these learners.

Common factors within this group include

- acute mental health needs, often exacerbated by excessive delays to accessing mental health support
- multiple adverse childhood experiences or childhood trauma
- growing up in a home where parents or carers were themselves out of work and/or had not attended school regularly, contributing to patterns of intergenerational disengagement.

Although young people are only classified as 'NEET' at 16, most do not disengage suddenly at this point. More often, they begin to drift out of education at a much younger age, often following repeated periods of absence from school including as a result of what colleges describe as 'emotionally based-school avoidance'. Without effective re-engagement strategies, young people with this pattern of disengagement are highly likely to become NEET at 16.

## **What factors lead to a young person not being in education, employment or training (NEET)?**

### **Unmet needs at earlier stages of education**

The most significant factor, identified by Natspec member colleges, in young people with SEND becoming NEET is that their needs have not been met at an earlier stage, leading to extended periods of disengagement. The young people themselves report that their physical, SEMH or learning needs were unmet throughout school and/or by a mainstream FE provider. Needs being identified late or not at all, insufficient support and rigid expectations around attendance and behaviour contributed to exclusion, persistent absence and prolonged disengagement. Over time, repeated failure has eroded their confidence making re-engagement increasingly difficult.

For example, one young person who was only diagnosed with autism and ADHD at a later stage described dropping out of school after year 4. Without any support or adaptations to meet their needs, they were unable to cope with the school environment. They spent three years out of education altogether and were then home educated. By the time they were 16 and classified as NEET, they had missed a considerable amount of schooling due to unmet needs.

### **Inflexibility of mainstream settings**

The rigidity of mainstream settings contributes to disengagement and withdrawal from education for some children and young people with SEND, where schools are not sufficiently adapting behaviour policies, curricula, teaching and assessment practices to make them inclusive. Standard assessment and qualification routes, such as written tests and inflexible exam timetables, also present barriers for some learners with SEND, leaving them feeling that their progress and achievements go unrecognised. The resulting sense of failure affects their motivation and causes them to disengage.

### **LA decision-making on transitions**

Poor management of transitions between school and college for learners with high needs on the part of LAs also causes some young people with EHCPs to be without provision for extended periods. Delays in making decisions about post-school placements, often well beyond the statutory deadline of 31 March, and inappropriate placements are two key factors. Young people can sometimes miss out on education while families dispute unsuitable placements, including through the lengthy third tier tribunal process, and where a placement breaks down and no alternative is available until the next academic year.

Transitioning out of college can also feel like a "cliff edge" for learners with SEND, with young people and families reporting little clarity about next steps, including access to adult services, housing or employment support. The lack of join-up between education and these sources of post-college support means that some learners "fall through the gap" and become NEET rather than making a positive progression.

Financial constraints mean that LAs sometimes cease an EHCP before a young person is ready to make a positive next step, resulting in them becoming NEET. For example, one college described an LA being unwilling to fund a further year for learners who have met their

qualification outcomes despite their still needing more educational input to ensure they could progress to employment.

### **Financial and benefits related anxiety**

Young people with SEND may not take up employment because they or - more often - their families feel anxious about the potential loss of benefits. Some families rely on disability benefits as a key source of household income; a reduction of financial support can mean securing employment feels too risky. One young person described being offered their “dream job,” but did not take it because it risked losing housing benefits for their family. This issue is worsened by the complexity of the benefits system, as well as limited guidance from DWP on how work affects entitlements. These concerns may sometimes be unfounded, yet they still prevent young people from pursuing employment opportunities.

### **What are the long-term consequences for young people who are NEET for an extended period?**

Many learners in specialist FE who were previously NEET have experienced prolonged and repeated absences from school or college during which their confidence, mental health and trust in education and health professionals have eroded and their sense of alienation has increased.

For those who re-engage at a point where they are still eligible for publicly funded further education, a considerable proportion of their time in FE may be spent on remedial activity. The focus is on rebuilding confidence and trust and helping them get physically, emotionally and mentally well enough to begin learning again. For example, one young person spent 18 months prior to the college’s intervention almost exclusively in their bedroom, communicating minimally with family members. The support began with one-to-one tutoring in the learner’s own home, followed by sessions in the community, before the young person built enough confidence to attend the specialist college premises. In the meantime, their peers with no experience of being NEET have attained GCSEs, A levels or T levels, and be on a course to higher education, training or employment. The long-term consequences of this attainment gap are likely to include reduced employment and earning prospects.

## **Preventing young people from becoming NEET**

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

Prevention is critical to solving ‘the NEET problem’. A focus on addressing the range of causes of young people becoming NEET, including at different points in the learner journey, must be at the heart of the government’s approach. While the recommendations below will particularly benefit learners with SEND, most will be more broadly applicable.

### **Improved SEND system and mental health services**

Many young people become NEET following a gradual accumulation of unmet SEND and mental health needs, driven by fragmented support across education, health and social care. Earlier identification and timely intervention are critical, requiring reform of the SEND system and action to address pressures in mental health services. Government departments, including the DfE, DWP and DHSC, must take a joined-up approach, recognising the close link between

systemic failures in SEND and mental health provision and rising NEET rates, with SEND reforms aligned with NEET prevention strategies.

### **NEET predictors & tracking**

More effective local and national systems for tracking young people at risk of becoming NEET are needed. This includes better use of datasets such as those for children missing education registers, exclusions, involvement in the youth justice system and, in some cases, formally registered elective home education (EHE), from which many children progress to being NEET. Existing tools such as the [Risk of NEET Indicator](#) need to be more widely used and understood, and need to include children pre-Key Stage 4. [Data on 14–16 year-old EHE students](#) in colleges is particularly opaque, with no single body holding responsibility. Such fragmentation of datasets results in young people 'falling through the cracks'. Better triangulation of the data across education, health and social care is required to identify risk earlier and intervene sooner.

### **Careers guidance**

More effective forward planning for post-16 pathways out of school for learners with SEND is essential. They need accessible specialist careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG). In a [survey of families of young people with EHCPs](#), two-thirds rated the information on post-16 options as poor. Compliance with provider access legislation remains inconsistent, as highlighted by the [Education Committee's report on FE and Skills](#). Stronger enforcement would ensure that all schools, provide meaningful access for providers to pupils in Years 8–13, enabling young people and their families to make better-informed decisions, more likely to lead to their continuing engagement in education.

### **Addressing concerns about loss of benefits**

Disabled young people must not be financially penalised by taking up employment. They and their families need better support to help them understand the impact on their benefits of getting a job. Many young people, particularly those with learning disabilities, find the complex benefits system confusing and difficult to navigate. The forthcoming 'Right to Try' guarantee should help disabled young people to take up work with fewer concerns about unintended financial consequences, but it must be accompanied by accessible information and guidance to ensure take-up.

## **How well supported are young people as they move from school to college and into education?**

Schools and colleges are able to facilitate positive transitions for young people funded through the high needs system when LAs make timely decisions based on young people's needs. This unfortunately, is not the case for some young people where placements are made after the statutory deadline or an unsuitable college is named. This is sometimes for financial reasons, including the LA misusing the Duty to Admit to force a mainstream setting to enrol a young person whose needs they cannot meet. This can lead to early placement breakdown. It is far more difficult to support transitions in these circumstances. There is also a lack of appropriate CEIAG about the full range post-16 options to support informed decision-making by young people and families.

## **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?**

## **Flexible, person-centred programmes**

Specialist colleges have developed and tested effective models of re-engagement, grounded in flexibility, personalisation and strong relationships, which demonstrate how young people can be supported back into education.

The following key ingredients have been effective in provision designed to re-engage young people who have been NEET:

- flexible delivery models, including phased starts, outreach or home-based learning and small group provision
- gradual re-engagement, with learners starting on low hours and building attendance as confidence and trust develop
- relational support, through a named mentor or key worker who understands the young person's interests and experiences, including trauma
- strengths-based curricula, embedding literacy, numeracy and employability within practical or vocational learning aligned to individual interests
- bespoke programmes, with personalised pathways and curricula designed around learners' needs
- use of specialist staff, working with colleges and within local communities to support access to education, training or work placements
- ambitious expectations, actively building learners' self-esteem and aspirations

## **Joined-up services**

Joined-up working across health, education and social care is also critical to effective and sustained reengagement. Where learners have access to coordinated wraparound support, including careers guidance, family support, health services, timely diagnosis, post-diagnostic support and therapeutic interventions, their needs are more likely to be met, and they are more likely to remain in education and progress to a positive next destination.

# **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?**

### **Barriers disabled young people face in getting a job**

Most specialist colleges leavers, capable of work, want a job but face a multitude of barriers to obtaining sustained, paid employment. [A recent Mencap survey](#) found that 86% of people with a learning disability wanted to work while only 5% have a paid job. Reasons contributing to this discrepancy include employer attitudes to disability, and inflexible employment and recruitment practices which means disabled young people are disproportionately excluded at the earliest stages of recruitment.

Lack of disability awareness means some employers are unsure how to offer the necessary support or make the reasonable adjustments that may be required. Some may underestimate disabled people's capabilities. Others may be unwilling to offer flexible working arrangements or job-carving approaches, all of which would help to increase disability employment.

## **Barriers disabled young people face in sustaining work**

While many specialist colleges have been successful in helping young people to secure employment on leaving college, particularly through supported internships, sustaining work over time remains more difficult. An [FE week article](#) identified that just a quarter of successful supported interns were still in employment 12 months after gaining work.

Access to Work (ATW) funding, designed to support more disabled people into work, are difficult to navigate and cannot provide the light-touch support that both a young person and employer needs to prevent small issues from escalating into job breakdown. [Disability Rights UK found from their survey on ATW](#) that there have been significant cuts in support hours, refusals to fund essential support for travel or personal care, and delays in payments or approvals, causing many people to lose their jobs or be at risk of doing so. The Government must rectify the shortcomings of disability employment support programmes to encourage more disabled young people to enter into and sustain employment.

## **Improved employer understanding of disability**

Employers need to understand disability better and recognise the capability of disabled young people to work. Many specialist colleges support employers to understand neurodivergence, SEND, mental health and reasonable adjustments, increasing their capacity to support young people with SEND. Bespoke training has led to a culture of 'real' employer readiness to recruit and retain disabled young people. As one young person put it,

“Without the incredible support from the staff at [college], I wouldn't have the job I do now at a jewellers... They not only introduced me to them but ran training for employers about neurodivergence in the workplace which the owner of the jewellery shop has attended.”

Employers need to understand reasonable adjustments and be more flexible in their employment and recruitment practices. For example, additional time may be required to arrange transport, personal assistance or accommodation before starting work. Employers should be more open to part-time working and job-carving to enable more young disabled people to contribute effectively to the workplace.

## **How well is support for young people tailored to local labour market conditions and how can this be improved?**

Young people with SEND are frequently left out of local skills planning with no consideration given within local skills improvement plans (LSIPs) to how disabled college leavers could contribute to meeting local skills needs. Local skills planning could include, for example, how a pipeline from college into employment could be built to support young people with learning disabilities into support-level roles as a solution to recruitment issues in industries such as hospitality and tourism.

## **What impact may developments in technologies, such as AI, have on the employment of young people? How should Government respond?**

While there are concerns about AI replacing entry-level roles, technology can also remove barriers to work, particularly for disabled young people. Well-established tools such as Immersive Reader and text recognition apps are not well-known but can make a direct

difference to employability. For example, a learner with low literacy secured a job, assisted by a phone app that read workplace instructions aloud. Another learner with a visual impairment continued training in motor mechanics after being permitted to use their iPhone as a magnification device, instead of a more stigmatising alternative.

Government should invest in digital skills and assistive technology (AT) training that reflects the technology, such as smartphones, used by young people and not just desktop tools as in [previous training initiatives](#). AI tools are now more accessible through speech recognition and text-to-speech, but guidance must be given so young people have the skills to ensure the outputs are accurate.

## **Conclusion**

Young people with SEND do not become NEET because of their needs, but because of systemic barriers that prevent them from gaining timely, effective support and accessing appropriate education, training or employment. Focused action from the DWP, DfE and DHSC is required to address the barriers, that occur at the different stages of the learner journey and break the cycle of children and young people disengaging.