

NEETs - Understanding the issues and effective solutions by Paul Fletcher Director of Youth Engagement Rathbone

Good Morning – the purpose of today’s workshop is to explore the issue of young people who are NEET. To look at strategies for re-engagement with education, training and employment and to discuss Raising the Participation Age.

Before we get into the workshop I would like to take a few minutes to say something about Rathbone. We are a UK wide voluntary youth organisation whose core business is youth training – focused on the Entry to Employment programme and apprenticeships. Last year we worked with over 15,000 young people the majority of whom were between 16 and 18 and were NEET when they came to Rathbone.

We believe passionately that all young people can learn, make progress and achieve and this is very much the ethos of our work today.

Policy Context

NEET has been a policy concern since 1979 following the collapse of the youth labour market, growing youth unemployment and perceived associated rising youth crime.

The term NEET was formally created by SEU in 1999 – It is a residual category when you cannot place a person anywhere else. The term generally has a negative connotation to describe those outside of mainstream programmes.

On a personal level what I particularly do not like is that NEET is a deficit model which is about what young people are not doing, what they have not got and what programme they are not on. I would much prefer an asset model where we start with what young people already have and how we can support them more to reach their potential.

Today we have the highest recorded numbers of young people NEET. For 16- 18 year olds this figure is approaching a quarter of a million or 11% and the figure is about 1 million if we include 18 – 24s – so it is a massive problem. It is interesting to note that quite

a few politicians are now referring to NEET as youth unemployment as this term is much more easily understood rather than the term NEET, which the man in the street would not usually recognise.

Historical Context

To understand why we have such high numbers of NEET YP today we need to take an historical perspective. It is worth remembering that it is only 40 years ago that more than 80% of young people did not attend a grammar school. The majority of these young people left school with low level qualifications. A sizeable number entered an apprenticeship, with the rest moving into low or semi skilled jobs, primarily in manufacturing, heavy industry and construction. These jobs are now mostly gone and new industries are not evenly distributed. The result is localised structural unemployment which has had a disproportionate impact on young people.

What has also occurred alongside this structural unemployment is a loss of the family and community structures which traditionally provided informal support networks and positive role models, where young people see their parents going out to work.

Something I recall from my teenage years was going into pubs. When I was 18 the pubs you went into had people from all the generations – if you had too much to drink someone, maybe a neighbour or friend of the family would have a word with you. Today all the old people drink in one pub, middle age people are in another and all the young people are in the same place. What we now have is young people whose only role model is a another 18 year old usually suffering the effects of a happy hour.

Nuffield Foundation – Engaging Youth Enquiry

To understand more about young people who are NEET, Rathbone and the Nuffield Foundation conducted a year long Enquiry into NEET. What we believed was most important in undertaking this research was that we talked with NEET young people directly. We did this by hosting 35 workshops around the country specifically to allow young people to share their experiences. This gave us first hand information about what young people felt were the reasons leading to them being NEET and what worked in supporting them out of being NEET. We also

hosted 5 seminars for practitioners who work with young people Not in Education Training or Employment.

The headline finding from this research is that we believe the policy focus on getting the number of young people NEET down per say is flawed. We say this because more than half the number of young people are on the 'revolving door' of NEET status; many as multiply re-joiners in relatively short periods of time. The issue and therefore the policy focus should be about sustainability of progression out of NEET, as much as it is about getting the overall number down.

So what do we know about young people who are NEET

Who are they?

They are a heterogeneous group with common and individual characteristics. Generally, they are united by social and economic disadvantage, by poor school achievement and an alienation from the formal education and training system.

However, many also have additional barriers such as poor health, learning disabilities, offending backgrounds, housing problems, care responsibilities, alcohol and substance abuse. Therefore we know that a one size solution does not fit all.

We learned a great deal from the young people workshops. Firstly, the vast majority of young people said they enjoyed learning, including subjects like English, Geography and Science. It is an inability to cope with the institution of the school or college which is the problem rather than a rejection of learning.

We need to understand dropping out as a rational response to this inability to cope with the institution and to better understand this rejection in designing strategies for reducing NEET. We also need to give it further consideration in Raising the Participation Age. If young people have not attended school in year 11 its unlikely they will attend at 16,17 or 18yrs, even with compulsion.

Alongside issues with the institution, young people also referred to issues of bullying, low expectations placed upon them and messages of failure, as reasons for dropping out.

Raising the Participation Age

I would like to take a few minutes to look at Raising the Participation Age. I have just read a very interesting report undertaken by the Youth Commission. In the foreword by Barry Sherman, Chair of the Education and Skills Select Committee, he says and I quote:

‘There needs to be a renewed focus on learning outside of the classroom and more emphasis on personal and social development for young people.’

He goes on *‘there is too much emphasis on passing exams and not enough on learning. What young people want is inspiration’* – not being pressured into exam techniques.

The report interviewed 1,600 young people of school age who said the following:

- 31% were against being forced to stay on until 18 and would prefer to have a choice.
- 64% said the best learning for life takes place outside the classroom.
- 50% of teachers interviewed said they were worried by increased behaviour issues and disruption by Raising the Participation Age.

David Blunkett has said, for a significant minority, school from 14yrs, serves no useful purpose. They want to be in the workplace and the workplace provides a good learning environment for these young people.

Connor Ryan, Advisor to Blair and Blunkett has said Raising the Participation Age will become a cause for resentment, rather than an opportunity, unless we significantly offer the right advice, incentives and choices to YP.

Even David Cameron has said that compelling young people to stay on is just a 'stunt'. If the government has had to drop its truancy target for 12 and 13 year olds it's hard to imagine that it is going to be possible to enforce attendance for 17 and 18 year olds.

Various commentators have described RPA as warehousing young people until they are 18yrs. I think there is a lot more work to be done to make the offer to young people attractive, if we are to increase the number above the 90% who stay on of their own volition. For me, we cannot merely increase the offer which a significant minority have rejected. I believe what they want is employment in the real work place.

Returning to the Rathbone / Nuffield workshops a consistent message was that short term courses that did not lead to further training or a job were highly demotivating. Moreover, training which young people felt compelled to attend, which is not in their chosen career pathway, was viewed as wasting their time. I remember vividly a young man telling me his dream was to be a chef but he was training to be a carpet fitter because there were no chef courses available. He was thinking of leaving because the carpet fitting course was not 'doing it' for him. And we wonder why so many young people are churning in and out of NEET.

NEET does not equate to inactivity. Young people are savvy; they lead busy and productive lives. Many are involved in casual work, many are involved in volunteering and many are undertaking their own learning using web based technologies.

Young people spoke at length of the importance of a trusted adult or significant other, mostly outside the family. This was usually a youth worker or Connexions worker, who gave them time, valued them and believed in them.

The key success factor of the significant other is their ability to broker the appropriate training and to provide transitional support to sustain the placement.

Young people NEET – what do they want?

The vast majority are modestly ambitious. They want the same things as you and me - a job, a car, a home, a family. For the overwhelming majority what matters most is getting a job. Many of the young people in the workshops had experience of being placed on training schemes which raised their expectations of employment, only for those expectations to be unfulfilled.

What we now have is not a poverty of aspiration but a poverty of hope and achievement.

What works and what does not work?

We know you cannot reach the most disengaged by sending them letters or using compulsion. Re-engaging young people who have been out of the mainstream for some time needs to be on their terms, focused on what interests them and with the necessary support structures.

We need to be careful about offering short term initiatives that do not translate into further training or jobs, as this can re-enforce failure and actually do more damage than good. Anything less than 6 months was viewed as too short.

We also know that the earlier intervention occur, the more successful it is; this means more work in schools with young people at risk of NEET.

We have a good supply of training programmes, particularly apprenticeships. The trick we need to get right is that of connecting young people with these opportunities. This is the very area, that of engagement and transitional support, that is not seriously funded or understood in terms of its essential role in reducing NEET numbers.

We know that being in education, training and employment is the best protective factor for young people and that being NEET exposes young people to risky behaviour and potentially offending. Most young people who are convicted of offending, have been recently NEET.

We know the number of young people 16-18yrs who are NEET, has remained stubbornly high for the last 30 years. We can safely assume the figure is much higher if we include unknowns.

Is there a Solution?

So what works? The best example I have is the Community Programme of the 1980s. The key ingredients were that it provided training for up to two years and it gave a non means tested allowance, equivalent to today's minimum allowance. This gave young dignity and it provided real work experience which gave a realistic prospect of securing a job. Young people thrive on structure, routine and security.

Recommendations:

From our work on the Engaging Youth Enquiry I would make the following recommendations:

- Stimulate the demand side by giving tax breaks and incentives to employers to provide work placements for young people
- Strongly recommend a new Community Programme providing real work and real work based training with placements of 12 months as the norm
- Involve the 3rd Sector much more in reaching and supporting young people who are NEET. They have demonstrated high levels of success in delivering sustainable NEET reduction programmes
- Involve the young people who are the target beneficiaries of programmes in designing them. They know what works.

We talked to over 500 young people during the research. They told us many things which challenged many of the assumptions upon which the policy for reducing NEET is based

My overall recommendation is we need all of these things to be happening together if we are serious about reducing the number of NEET young people.