

Education to Employment - Supporting Youth Participation



In November 2020 the Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned York Consulting LLP to undertake a project to support the sector through action learning; to better understand those not in education, employment, or training (NEET); and those at risk of becoming NEET.

[Employment and skills](#)

20 May 2021

Introduction

Background and context



In November 2020 the Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned York Consulting LLP to undertake a project to support the sector through action learning; to better understand those not in education, employment, or training (NEET); and those at risk of becoming NEET.

The LGA commissioned this work to promote a more integrated and localised system for youth participation. It acknowledges the important role that councils and combined authorities play in the local economy and in ensuring that employers have a skilled workforce.

Project aims

The project aimed to support the local government sector through an action learning approach to:

- better understand the barriers and challenges for councils in fulfilling their statutory duties for young people
- identify solutions to delivering effective support for young people at risk of becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training) or who are NEET.

The project had four outcomes. The project aims and outcomes were met through activities that incorporated action learning, research, development of datasets, two workshops, and consultations.

- 1) Supporting the sector to identify the challenges and barriers to supporting youth participation and ways to work more effectively on this agenda.
- 2) Better understanding of the potential benefits of improving youth participation.
- 3) Sharing learning and emerging findings with participating councils.
- 4) Consideration of how the learning could be developed into an online resource and toolkit to support councils to commission and deliver services that enhance the current offer for young people.

The Action Learning Approach

Action learning provides a problem-solving approach to the implementation of innovation and organisational change. The World Institute for Action Learning offers the following definition:

“Action Learning is a process that involves a small group working on real problems, taking action, and learning as individuals, as a team, and as an organisation. It helps organisations develop creative, flexible and successful strategies to pressing problems.”

Our approach was based on a consecutive and cyclical process of: Planning, Action, Review and Revise.

Project delivery and approach

The project involved five distinct phases that took place between December 2020 and March 2021. Workshops were delivered virtually using Microsoft Teams. Each stage has been outlined below:

Stage One: Proforma to support collation of feedback from participating authorities.

- Proforma agreed with LGA
- Councils invited to provide feedback on their approach to youth participation
- Collation and summary of proforma feedback

Stage Two: Action Learning Workshop One

- Outlining the project and setting the scene
- Summary of proforma feedback
- Facilitated discussion
- Outline of next steps and the action planning process

Stage Three: Implementation of Action Plans

- Consultation with each authority to support the development and review of individual action plans
- Authorities commence implementation
- Testing out solutions and innovations in the real-world setting

Stage Four: Action learning stakeholder. Workshop Two

- Overview of action plans
- Profiling useful practice
- Facilitated discussion of the learning process
- Process of planned change and agreed timescale

Stage Five: Reporting

- Reporting in collaboration with the LGA
- Compilation of case studies to showcase useful practice
- Review of approaches to facilitated networking and sharing of learning and experiences
- Set of recommendations developed with the LGA

Participants

Councils and/or combined authorities were contacted and asked to express an interest to be involved in the project outlining their challenges or barriers; and to explore and identify potential solutions. The areas for the project were jointly agreed by LGA and York Consulting with a number of considerations including the number of NEETs, the number of ‘not knowns’, and location.

Eleven councils, or groups of councils, participated in the project. This included Peterborough and Cambridgeshire working together plus groupings of Liverpool City Region and Manchester Combined Authority.

- Blackpool Council
- Birmingham City Council
- Derbyshire County Council
- Hampshire County Council
- Isle of Wight Council

- Liverpool City Region (including Halton BC, Liverpool City Council, Knowsley Council, Sefton Council, St Helen's Council and Wirral Council)
- Norfolk County Council
- Peterborough and Cambridgeshire Councils
- Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council
- Southampton City Council
- Wigan Council (representing Greater Manchester Combined Authority)
- Wolverhampton City Council

All stages of the project were conducted through virtual sessions and via email communication. Participation across different stages of the project is shown below:

Participation across different stages

Stage	Responses and participants
One: Proforma feedback	14 proforma completed
Two: Workshop One	24 participants
Three: Action planning	10 action plans
Four: Workshop Two	29 participants

What works in promoting youth participation: a review of the literature

The role of councils in youth participation

In England, councils have a statutory duty to provide a range of services to their communities. The LGA's 2018 report, *Guidance for New Councillors*, states that councils are subject to 1,300 different statutory duties and responsibilities such as education, children's safeguarding and social care, and community care for the elderly and disabled.

In total, there are 353 councils in England (two-tier or single tier). The structure of local government in England determines the statutory duties applicable to particular councils. Some councils are part of combined authorities, in which service provision may be shared with neighbouring councils. For example, the Liverpool City Region (LCR) is a combined authority centred on Liverpool and incorporating the council districts of Knowsley, St Helens, Sefton, Halton and Wirral. LCR has more devolved control over elements of skills, employment, business support, and transport.

In September 2016, the Department for Education (DfE) released statutory guidance for all councils in England relating to the participation of young people in education, employment, or training. The guidance set out a range of statutory duties aimed to help councils to encourage, enable and assist young people up to the age of 18 (25 for individuals with learning difficulties) to participate in education or training, following on from the Raising the Participation Age (RPA) policy being introduced.

Central to the statutory guidance are responsibilities to both prevent and manage young people who are NEET. Firstly, councils have the responsibility to prevent young people who are currently moving through the education system from becoming NEET and to ensure there is a suitable place secured in education or training for all 16 and 17-year-olds, under the September Guarantee.

To fulfil this duty, councils are expected to employ a range of strategies, in partnership with local schools and education providers, including but not limited to: building their employability skills; the creation of pathways from school to further and higher education; career advice and guidance; the creation of learning opportunities designed for the NEET cohort such as apprenticeships or traineeships, basic skills programmes; enhancing support infrastructures for young people with social and health issues; increasing individualised support for those most vulnerable; and volunteering and intermediate labour markets.

Secondly, councils have the responsibility to manage or reduce the size of the existing NEET population through a range of engagement and transition support strategies. Councils are expected to work with partners from across education, training, business and support services to develop indicators that shows a young person is at risk of becoming NEET (RONIs), such as high levels of absence or truancy, and a tailored strategy to reduce the number of NEET young people in their area. The main focus of this duty is to undertake effective monitoring of destinations and maintaining contact with individuals after they

have left education, which is a key element in reducing the number of post-16 unknown destinations for young people in the area. Once councils have identified a young person at risk of NEET status or are NEET, they must engage and provide personalised programmes of support, with action planning well-documented as a key feature of the approach and the means to individualise the support for those with higher or more complex barriers and disadvantaged groups.

National devolution developments and local implications

Councils and combined authorities play an important local leadership role, and their leadership can lead to more effectively targeted services and skills provision that is connected to local communities and the local economy; particularly in addressing local employment challenges and skill shortages. In December 2019, the Learning and Work Institute published a report to model potential skills gaps in England and for eight local areas within England by 2030. It is estimated that by 2030, there could be a shortage of two and a half million high-skilled people and a surplus of six million intermediate or low-skilled people to available jobs. To support the relationship between local labour market, need and skills provision, a bottom-up regional approach means that skill shortages and issues can be tackled at a local level, as proposed by LGA's Work Local model.

Challenges and barriers

Given that the responsibility for addressing NEET and employment and skills provision resides with so many organisations (including councils), there have been concerns that the commissioning and co-ordination of service provision is too complex and often fails to meet local needs and respond to local priorities.

As a response to these concerns, the LGA published the report Work Local in 2017. The report drew together evidence from existing literature on good employment and skills service delivery with international examples. It examined current and historic initiatives of employment and skills provision in the UK and engaged with councils on the extent in which services meet local needs and are joined up. The report provided an evidence-informed case highlighting the significant challenges facing the employment and skills landscape and UK labour market, what constituted good employment and skills services provision, and the potential benefits of devolution. This informed a new model and key recommendations to Government to develop an integrated and devolved employment and skills service.

Characteristics of participating councils

The participating councils were from six different regions of England: East Midlands, West Midlands, North West, North East, East of England, and the South East. Councils were from both urban and rural localities.

Seven councils had an unemployment rate among 16 to 24 years old that was equal to or above the rate across England. Birmingham City Council and Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council had the highest unemployment rates at 27 per cent and 22 per cent respectively. Table 1.1 below details some key statistics for the 11 councils, or groups of councils, that participated in this project.

Table 1.1: Key statistics for the participating councils (n=11), 2019

Authority	Region	IMD 2019 LA rank	Population aged 16-17 years	Unemployed rate aged 16-24 (%)
Derbyshire County Council	East Midlands	58 to 258	16,537	13
Birmingham City Council	West Midlands	6	28,622	27
Liverpool City Region	North West	3 to 89	31,837	10
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough	East of England	51 to 300	18,390	11
Greater Manchester Combined Authority	North West	2 to 209	62,818	15
Norfolk County Council	East of England	24 to 257	16,645	11

Authority	Region	IMD 2019 LA rank	Population aged 16-17 years	Unemployed rate aged 16-24 (%)
Blackpool Council	North West	1	2,984	12
Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council	North East	62	2,832	22
Southampton City Council	South East	55	4,534	13
Hampshire County Council	South East	130-137	29,853	9
Wolverhampton City Council	West Midlands	19	5,773	17
England	1.2m	12		

NEET Data

Eight of the eleven councils had a higher percentage of NEET young people (16-17 years) compared to national levels (Table 2.2). Liverpool City Region, Greater Manchester Combined Authority and Blackpool Council had the highest proportions of NEET young people (16-17 years) overall. Birmingham City Council (6 per cent), Derbyshire County Council (5 per cent) and Blackpool Council (5 per cent) had the highest proportion of 16-17 years olds in the 'not known' group.

Most of the councils (9 of 11) had a higher proportion of NEET young people (16-17 years) with either special education needs and disabilities (SEND) or an EHCP. The rate of children looked after by the council was highest in Blackpool (197 per 100,000) followed by Liverpool City Region (140 per 100,000 in Liverpool City) and Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council (108 per 100,000).

Table 1.2: NEET and LAC date for participating authorities (n=11), 2019

Authority	% 16-17 years - NEET	% 16-17 years - 'not known'	% NEET 16-17 years - SEND/EHCP	LAC rates per 100,000
Derbyshire County Council	3	5	12	52
Birmingham City Council	2	6	8	67
Liverpool City Region	3 to 6	0.3 to 3	2.4 to 16.2	90 to 140
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough	2 to 4	0.6 to 2.5	4.6 to 8.4	57 to 72
Greater Manchester Combined Authority	2 to 5	0.3 to 3.3	5.3 to 17.2	57 to 132
Norfolk County Council	4	1	10	70
Blackpool Council	5	5	16	197
Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council	4	2	15	108

Authority	% 16-17 years - NEET	% 16-17 years - 'not known'	% NEET 16-17 years - SEND/EHCP	LAC rates per 100,000
Southampton City Council	4	2	18	95
Hampshire County Council	2	2	6	59
Wolverhampton City Council	2	1	13	102
England	2.7	2.8	9.4	65

Free School Meals

Across all 11 councils, the proportion of secondary school pupils in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) ranged from 10 per cent to 39 per cent. Most councils (7 of 11) had levels higher than the national average (16 per cent in England). Councils with greater than 30 per cent of secondary school pupils in receipt of FSM included Liverpool City Region (Knowsley – 39 per cent) and Blackpool Council (33 per cent).

Key challenges identified by councils

At the beginning of the project YCL researchers engaged with the councils to establish the key challenges and barriers that they and their young people faced.

Barriers and challenges to youth participation

Councils provided feedback on a range of barriers for NEET young people or those at risk of NEET in accessing employment, training, or education opportunities in their area.

Barriers and challenges for young people

The barriers and challenges that young people faced were wide ranging and were mentioned by six or more of councils. They included: the poor emotional or mental health of young people; too few or unsuitable education, training and employment (EET) opportunities; and low levels of aspiration among young people.

Poor emotional or mental health

Many councils identified mental health problems experienced by young people as a barrier to engagement with support services. Some councils identified that such difficulties had been ongoing throughout a young person's education creating a compound effect, others highlighted the more recent effects caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Mental Health problems have been a main barrier. EEO's have all stated that a number of young people are 'not in the right head space' confidence and self-esteem is an issue – a big part does tend to be due to Covid.”

“A number of the young people who are NEET state mental health issues as barriers to accessing employment, education or training. Some young people are experiencing issues with their mental health earlier on in education. For some, by the time they have left mainstream education, become NEET and entered academic year 12, the level of support they have had for this may have been minimal. For some in this cohort building new and trusting relationships to support the young people moving from NEET to EET is taking longer and the young person's issues are more complex.”

Even when mental health needs are identified, there is evidence that it may not be soon enough, or not the right type of support, to avoid young people becoming NEET:

“The availability of mental health support for young people can be delayed. Once support is available it may not meet a young person’s needs. This can result in the young person not having explored their issues in any great depth which means they still may not be prepared to move into EET.”

Too few EET opportunities

Too few opportunities for the NEET group was consistently identified as a barrier. There was perceived to be a mismatch between the needs of NEET young people and the available EET provision. In some instances, a lack of qualifications was holding young people back:

“[A] ‘fixation’ by some young people to just retake maths and English GCSEs in order to get back into education or apprenticeship, but with no provider to just deliver this.”

The impact of COVID-19 and related changes to the range of jobs available were also an issue.

“Market Shrinkage we have had a number of providers pull out of the marketplace and leave some significant gaps in the sorts of provision a lot of our existing NEET young people are looking for.”

Low levels of aspiration

Negative experiences of school and a history of exclusion were a significant barrier. This group of young people had few aspirations and were highly likely to withdraw from EET opportunities:

“Many of our NEET young people have had a poor experience of school. They may have had several fixed-term exclusions or been permanently excluded and/or have attended alternative provision and leave secondary school with very few qualifications. These young people are more likely to withdraw early from post-16 provision.”

The most common barriers and challenges for NEET young people

Access to EET provision is the most commonly cited barrier by the LAs (Table 2.1), followed by poor mental health and low aspirations.

Table 2.1: Most common barriers for engaging NEET young people

Barriers	Number of councils
Access to EET (few opportunities or unsuitable provision)	9
Poor mental and/or emotional health	7
Low aspiration and/or parental guidance	6
Disengagement with/poor experience of learning and education	4
Disabilities/special needs/mental health problems that are undiagnosed	3
Young people unreceptive to being contacted	2
Reluctance to travel	2

Reluctance to take action to change situation	2
Not having transport	2
Too few personal development opportunities for young people	2
Bullying and abuse	1
Criminal activity more attractive than employment	1
Too much emphasis on qualifications	1
Employers not understanding specific needs	1
Impact of social and/or rural isolation	1
Absence of basic skills (literacy and numeracy)	1
Careers advice seen as non-essential by school(s)	1

The barriers faced by councils and delivery partners

Participating authorities provided details of the barriers they have faced in delivering services and providing support for NEET young people and those at risk of NEET.

Having insufficient resources (both finances and staff capacity) was identified by nearly all of the councils. Other key barriers related to limited opportunities and the suitability of apprenticeships and/or jobs, and the lack of suitable provision locally. This was seen by some to be inflexible and not well matched to the needs of the NEET group.

Finance and resources

Councils reported facing resource challenges. Internal budgets had been stretched and this had impacted on the staff resource and capacity to deliver engagement activity. One council outlined a reduction to SEND support resulting from limited budgets:

“We have seen the team reduced by 50 per cent. We also previously had specialist SEND Careers Advisers. This has impacted on our ability to deliver more preventative work, which is required; focussing on those children who are at risk of NEET through earlier/targeted intervention.”

External funding sources had been reduced and restricted. One council discussed the impact of a historical reliance on ESF and ESFA funding sources:

“ESFA Issues - Restrictive funding regimes - Historically we have relied on ESFA and ESF funding which is a barrier to a co-ordinated approach across prevention and response to NEET.”

One council had experienced a significant reduction in their staff resource in recent years:

“Dramatic reduction in NEET worker cohort over the last three years – from 6.8 to 1.8.”

Another council referenced the more general limitations of budgets and pointed out their lack of influence over 16-18 providers and provision, which constrains the availability of training opportunities.

“Limited resources – as with all councils, budgets are very tight, this limits resources. Influence over 16-18 provision - The council has no direct financial lever to support 16-18 providers locally. Lack of routes to apprenticeships.”

Availability and quality of EET opportunities

The availability and quality of EET opportunities was mentioned frequently. There was seen to be a lack of routes to apprenticeships and appropriate support in place:

“Apprenticeships are good, high quality vocational opportunities for young people, there need to be a range of routes into these for those who are NEET, for some this may be through Traineeships, but others respond well to supported employment /intermediate labour market programmes.”

Some councils outlined barriers due to the limited provision in their area. There was discussion of how well this aligned with the needs of NEET young people and the location of provision:

“Limited provision types (geographical/special/providers). Lack of apprenticeship opportunities.”

Meeting the needs of NEET groups

Particularly for young people with additional barriers and/or needs, many councils felt that available pathways to EET were unsuitable. One council noted the lack of pathways for young people with a SEND, the offer for the post 16 years group and suitable employment opportunities:

“Post 16 education offer and quality – including Lack of training at Level 1-2 / employment opportunities / SEND pathways.”

Across all stages of the project there was discussion of the challenges for NEET young people who have additional issues and barriers. This included young people with mental health problems, those with a SEND and those who have been in care. Barriers associated with meeting their specific needs were a key focus. Many felt that employers were reluctant or misunderstood these NEET sub-groups:

“Lack of employer cooperation. For young people with learning difficulties and disabilities it is the age-old problem of employers unwilling to offer them opportunities or to understand their needs.”

It was noted that young people with mental health problems, disabilities and/or undiagnosed special needs were not able to access appropriate EET provision. The limited availability of mental health services was an additional barrier for young people in moving forwards:

“These have been heightened and increased during COVID-19. Alongside this we have a lack of specialist post-16 SEMH provision and young people often have to wait for too long, in order to access specialist support services, eg, CAMHS.”

The most important barriers and challenges for councils

The most important barriers related to funding and/or resources available to councils (Table 2.2), followed by limited EET opportunities linked to lack of provision.

Table 2.2: The most important barriers for delivery identified by councils and their partners

Barriers	Number of councils
Finances/resources/limited staff capacity	10
Limited providers in locality (suitability and flexibility)	8
Limited job/ apprenticeship opportunities	5
Young people impacted by deprivation and vulnerability to criminal activities	2
Insufficient support for young people with vulnerabilities/additional needs	2
COVID-19 constraints	1

Barriers	Number of councils
Contacting schools	1
Skills of advisers	1
Risks for staff to contact young people	1
Impact of GDPR rules	1
Disjointed/fragmented offer for post 16	1

The challenge of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic had resulted in additional challenges and barriers for councils over the 12 months from March 2020. It had impacted negatively on the delivery of services and support as well as on NEET young people themselves in a variety of different ways.

COVID-19 barriers and challenges for councils

The COVID-19 regulations had significantly reduced opportunities to access and engage with young people. In the absence of face-to-face dialogue with NEET young people, the authorities and providers had moved online. However, it was noted that levels of engagement with the online provision varied, with those already in the 'harder to reach' group being the least likely to participate in online activity.

“Advisers unable to carry out face to face interventions and struggling to engage virtually.”

“Unable to carry out ‘Door Knocks’ – an effective way of engaging young people who have slipped through the net.”

“Some of the courses/provision run by the council for this cohort ceased in the interim whilst delivery was moved to on-line and/or a blended learning approach that was deployed during 2020.”

Telephone and online communication were often regarded as less effective than face to face contact. Many felt that the amount of contact they had with young people had reduced overall and had been less intensive. Some young people did not want to use the technology and had declined to take part:

“Very difficult for our commissioned service to get young people to engage over the phone.”

However, in some instances the online approach was embraced alongside other channels of communication. Councils had put a lot of effort into providing an online service and reaching out to young people via a range of communication channels:

“Although since March there has been not face to face work with our NEET or Not Known cohorts, we have provided a remote service ensuring young people have access to us via phone, text, email, Facebook, regular mailshots/letters.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant and on-going impacts on service delivery and the engagement of young people. Some councils re-instated face to face activity when this was possible, explaining that this was critical to the initial engagement of young people.

“Some young people won’t speak on the phone or engage in virtual meetings. Face to face meetings have started to be re-introduced but transporting young people in cars is not allowable (the initial hand holding).”

During the periods of lockdown, it was noted that some young people became de-motivated and lost their normal routine and structure. This had resulted in much lower levels of engagement. A key result of limited face to face contact was rising levels of unknowns.

“Tracking not knowns has been a challenge with limited door knocking and face to face contact.”

COVID-19 Barriers and challenges for NEET young people

The COVID-19 pandemic had thrown up many barriers for young people, these primarily related to the availability of support and provision, and young people’s own sense of wellbeing and self-worth.

Many of the participating councils outlined that the number of employment and training opportunities had reduced and become more limited than had previously been the case. This reflects the negative impact that pandemic has had on local economies and the struggle for many businesses to remain viable (in particular in the retail and hospitality sectors where jobs for young people are common):

“There have been less employment opportunities or apprenticeships. We have found more young people are attempting to go onto sixth form or college than in previous years but those where this is not appropriate and may in the past have got employment without training, are now finding themselves NEET and so our NEET figures are slightly higher.”

“We know that there has been an overall reduction in available employment (eg apprenticeships) and access to traditional methods (eg face-to-face) of delivering training, or education opportunities for 16 – 17-year-olds.”

Councils were aware that moving services online would result in some young people being unable to access the provision. This was seen to be due both to a lack of IT skills and access to the internet (described as digital poverty). There were particular challenges for providers delivering vocational training who were unable to deliver courses because of restrictions:

“Some learning providers [are] unable to provide vocational element of learning ie vocational tasters, due to a lack of placement availability and/or regulations around class/group bubbles.”

The wellbeing and mental health of young people was perceived to have deteriorated as a consequence of COVID-19 and the associated regulations. An increase in mental health problems, apathetic attitudes, low motivation levels, and fear and anxiety, all impacted on and affected young people. This had resulted in disengagement with services and support, a reluctance to attend provision, and poor decision-making:

““For those young people who were previously nervous about leaving their home and mixing with others, this has exasperated their issue.”

“Nervousness [among young people] in relation to attending college and training due to COVID (although some prefer online programmes).”

“Family and/or young person anxious about being outside home.”

Furthermore, the isolation of young people had resulted in lost social connections and for some help was required to meet a need for food and/or other basics. This was acknowledged by one council:

“Increased need levels to support with other actions including food and other essentials.”

Some councils considered that the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted negatively on decision making and resilience. Examples include expectations of courses and training not being met, lower levels of interest in accessing support, and poor decision making that led to withdrawal from courses:



“Post 16 education not always meeting young people’s expectations and limited support provided by some providers.”

“Motivation - during lockdown young people seem less interested in accessing support.”

“2020 GCSE process has resulted in young people enrolling on the wrong level course. In addition, undertaking challenging subjects with less support, leading to early leavers.”

Current activity and innovations implemented by councils

Through the dialogue with authorities, we were able to outline their current activities and specifically those that they regarded as innovative. In general, these had already been implemented, although some were planned. Activities related to four main areas: project and programmes; specialist staff and teams; marketing and events; and monitoring and reporting systems. Some examples have been included below:

Projects and programmes: including work experience programmes, projects aimed at specific groups – Get Real (aimed at care leavers) and offering support for young people at risk of being NEET – Pathways for All.

Specialist staff and teams: including dedicated Family Workers, SEND additional needs Personal Advisers, and Career Coaches.

Marketing and events: including newsletters, careers events, and a Post 16 Forum.

Monitoring and reporting: including visiting young people in EHE, reviews of destination data and collation of Year 11 September Guarantee data.

Below, examples of **current activities** and innovations in place to reduce the number of NEET and ‘not known’ figures in local areas have been included under three key headings: working with providers; engaging NEET young people, and meeting employment and skills needs. Discussion during Workshop One provided further information about implemented activities and highlighted specific examples.

Working with providers

One council has established a NEET Provider Forum. This included representatives from a wide range of agencies including education and training providers, YOS and third sector partners.

“DWP / YOS / Early Help / Housing all sit on the multi-agency NEET Provider Forum, alongside education and specialist third sector organisations.”

A proactive approach in one council had helped to increase the skills of NEET staff who had not had formal IAG training. This has been undertaken alongside a network meeting and contact building, to improve relationships and communication with training providers

“[The council] carried out a Training Provider (TP) Network meeting where 23 training providers attended the meeting. We now have an understanding of what provision is available for young people. This has upskilled EEO’s and they can now sign post any NEET young people to an appropriate provider.”

Engaging NEET young people

In one council improvements to the NEET Communication Strategy have been put in place. This included an online jobs club, webinars and drop-in sessions (three times per week) alongside a more joined up approach to working with training providers. A virtual workshop was delivered to NEET young people by a small consultancy company in another council. This included healthy living activities and inspirational speakers alongside follow-up engagement activities.

A Young Chamber programme in conjunction with the Chamber of Commerce included behind the scenes events for young people in Years 10 and 11. This provision was moved online in response to COVID-19.

In Blackpool (case study 1) they have developed a new vision to support NEET young people as described below.

Case Study 1: Blackpool's vision for supporting youth participation

Blackpool Council is a unitary authority in the county of Lancashire. Compared to national levels, Blackpool has a large proportion of young people on Free School Meals (33.3 per cent in Blackpool compared to 15.9 per cent for England); and young people 16-24 years who are NEET (11.6 per cent in Blackpool compared to 12 per cent for England). Furthermore, the rate of young people under 18 in council care is high at 197 per 10,000; compared to England (2.7 per 10,000).

Challenges for promoting participation. The authority identified five challenges for improving youth participation in Blackpool. These include:

- that the current delivery for NEET young people is fragmented
- a recognition of the need for a strategic, cross-departmental approach
- a pressing need to addressing the very negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on support for young people, and the number of EET opportunities available
- the high number of young people whose progress post-16 is 'not known'
- the high number of young people with experience of care who are also NEET.

While there are currently many projects in Blackpool to support the town's most vulnerable young people (including projects funded through the DfE Opportunity Area programme), they will all benefit from being delivered through a strategic and joined up approach. Without such an approach there is a risk of duplication of support, and that areas of specific need will be overlooked.

A new vision for NEET support. Further to an initial exploratory meeting, an appetite for working together across council departments was identified. Setting up regular meetings with strategic leads (from Economic Development, the Opportunity Area team, the Adolescent Service, and Education) was agreed as the best approach to supporting the development of a NEET Strategy for the council. There was consensus that this would offer a clear, joined up and focused approach to supporting youth participation.

With the ambition to have the NEET strategy agreed by June 2021, the Head of Adolescent services will oversee the meetings and drive the process forward. Features of the strategy crucial to its success include:

- a clear understanding of the NEET and related datasets held across the council
- drawing on useful practice from other councils that have developed their own NEET strateg
- an approach that incorporates consultation and co-production with NEET young people.

Meeting employment and skills needs

Labour market information has been sourced from the Chambers of Commerce and utilised to gain insights and understanding of the local economy and skills needed in one council area. Insights from this exercise had subsequently been shared with local schools to improve the match between skills and demand.

Solutions and innovations

Councils provided feedback on the solutions and actions they had either implemented or planned, to overcome barriers and challenges for service provision and support (Table 2.3). Many of these addressed different or enhanced approaches to communication utilising both new and existing channels and digital tools or resources.

Table 2.3: Solution and innovations reported by participating councils

Activities	Councils
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Activities	Councils
Enhanced levels of liaison and communication. This included a specific focus on transition to adulthood, enhanced communication with and between providers, schools, and with other council teams and departments	8
Social media, video and smartphone campaigns.	7
Sending letters to parents/carers in the 'not known' group	5
Development of online resources and blended learning. This was delivered through one to one and group sessions or activities.	5
Positive activities programme that addresses healthy lifestyles, adulthood and/or the creative arts.	4
Enhanced information sharing with other agencies (such as Children's Social Care)	2
Apprenticeship workshops and promotion (for employers)	2
Multi-agency approach (working with youth services, EET providers, establishing a Youth Employment Hub and embedded advisers)	2
Apprenticeships and opportunities targeted and specifically for NEET group (eg with council)	2
Specific work to reduce school exclusions and moves to EHE – early intervention	2

Participating councils outlined local actions to promote engagement of NEET young people and specific NEET sub-groups, many had developed new online resources, and implemented campaigns using social media and phone technology. Effective communication with young people was recognised as vital in achieving engagement and inspiring young people to seek and take up EET opportunities.

For some groups (care leavers and young people with a SEND) a personalised and tailored approach offering intensive one to one support was deemed to be the most effective. For example, in some cases this involved one-to-one sessions with a coach and/or wrap around support that addressed wider issues such as housing. However, it was acknowledged that such an approach is demanding of staff time and resources. Nonetheless, many participants reported that this was central to reducing ever widening inequalities among the most vulnerable young people.

Another area of focus was on employer and/or provider engagement. New meetings, forums and partnerships were planned or already in place. Plans were made to raise awareness of apprenticeships and to support key sectors in providing opportunities for young people. Some councils identified in-house opportunities specifically for NEET sub-groups such as care. This included ring-fencing a proportion of council apprenticeships specifically for young people with experience of care. Efforts were made to match young people with opportunities and to provide support during the initial phase of their training, work experience or employment.

The need to intervene earlier to provide support and identification of young people at risk of NEET was an area for action. This generally involved enhanced work with schools, liaison with school contacts, improvements to data collection, and system reviews.

Improved approaches to communicating with young people were the most frequent activities outlined by authorities, followed by new interventions, projects and approaches to delivering support and/or engagement. Further details on the activities reported by participants are discussed below.

Videos have been used to promote services and to support young people in taking up opportunities. Examples include First Day Nerves (focused on starting a new job) and the use of You Tube as a platform for promotional material.

Social media campaigns constitute an area for action. In one council this was based around results day and called 'You Do You'. Facebook has been used to circulate newsletters and promote opportunities to young people.

In one council a WhatsApp group aimed to support young parents by encouraging self-help, helping with home schooling, providing wellbeing information and offering advice and support in relation to parenting and relationships.

Resource development

In Hampshire and the Isle of Wight (IoW) a package of online provision and support was made available to young people. Online engagement with employers was a focus of this package of activities. Case study 2 below outlines the range of activities and online resources developed by the council. In this case, after initial challenges, the move to remote delivery in schools and young people's homes worked well, enabling Hampshire County Council (HCC) to continue to identify and support the most vulnerable young people and the wider cohorts. It also increased adviser capacity, enabled young people to access opportunities across the whole of Hampshire, reduced rural isolation, and increased engagement from harder to reach cohorts.

Case Study 2: Developing online opportunities in Hampshire

Hampshire is a large rural county authority with a high number of young people 16-17 years. Around 2 per cent of this group are known to be NEET with an equal proportion (2 per cent) for whom their activity is not known.

Over the past year, Hampshire have developed and enhanced the online and

remote offer to support young people through a series of activities including increased online opportunities, such as:

- Virtual WEX (work experience) programmes delivered by the council in collaboration with Speakers for Schools, local and national organisations such as IBM and Jackson Rowe.
- Online employer engagement, including virtual careers fairs.
- **Ted Education interactive videos** [<https://www.hampshirefutures.co.uk/course/view.php?id=570§ion=9>] exploring career sectors and pathways.
- Careers, Remote 1:1 and group sessions delivered to 43 schools and colleges - **Hampshire Futures Careers Information Service** [<https://www.hampshirefutures.co.uk/course/view.php?id=570>].
- 1:1 remote delivery to post 16 NEET cohort through ESF funded Programme STEP.

Collaborative working between HCC/IoW and other councils/LEPs supported delivery of a Virtual Careers and Apprenticeship Show, with support materials adapted for staff to use online, such as:

- windmills I-can, a series of exercises designed to stimulate and challenge young people over their future plans
- new websites Flying Start, The Hampshire Futures/ Island Futures Online Careers Information Service
- monthly newsletter targeting NEET/risk of NEET
- postcards 'Choices' postcards designed and delivered to over 300 educated at home young people exploring and supporting possible career decisions.

Impacts and outcomes

Feedback and usage data for these online developments show positive engagement. For example, the Ted Educational Career Talks launched in Jan 21- received 1300 visits to the website in its first four weeks. There was an increase in the number of significant interventions with young people, this rose from 41683 in 2019 to 43519 in 2020. Overall, these activities have contributed to strong performance with the September Guarantee in Hampshire.

The Online Hampshire Careers Service webpage was positively received and well used. Feedback from partners indicated the content has enhanced careers packages, increased home learning opportunities, supported young people, parents and carers to explore options, and provided a valuable resource to advisers, teachers and other professionals.

Events and bringing young people together

Councils outlined a range of events and activities designed to bring groups of NEET young people together. In addition to apprenticeship workshops this included plans for one-stop-shop provision such as Youth Employment Hubs designed to engage both EET providers and young people. In one council, the weekly Work Club continued throughout the COVID-19 lockdown and had a very positive impact on the number of young people participating.

With an emphasis on building social connections and skills, one council had introduced buggy walks for young parents.

In Norfolk an innovative project using a wide range of engagement activities to bring young people together helped to build confidence and progression into EET opportunities. Case study 3 outlines how a positive activities project was delivered and the outcomes that it achieved for young people preparing for EET opportunities.

Work with providers and employers

Working with employers is important but increases demands on them. It was noted that being able to offer young people more flexible placements (such as part time opportunities) would be useful. Colleagues taking part in Workshop Two reported that some employers do not have a full understanding of skills among the NEET group and tend to solely focus on GCSE results. This can be a significant barrier to engagement and can result in young people feeling disaffected and demotivated. In one council, work with other departments (Economic Development) has been useful specifically in relation to sharing labour market and skills evidence.

Case Study 3: Innovative Youth Participation in Norfolk County Council (NCC)

Norfolk County Council has a high level of young people who are NEET compared to the national average (4 per cent compared to 2.7 per cent). Ten per cent of young people who are NEET or 'not known' also have a SEND or an EHCP (compared to the England average at 9.4 per cent).

As part of the Norwich Opportunity Area (funded by DfE) initiatives, the council identified a group of young people in year 11 and at risk of becoming NEET, who were keen to progress into employment but did not have the necessary 'soft' skills for progressing.

A **Positive Activities** programme was devised to encourage the development of social skills, team building, growth of confidence, self-esteem and a commitment to a regular activity. The programme used engagement in an activity of the young person's choice (for example, membership of a local gym, fencing, horse riding and music lessons) to provide an initial 'hook' and also included IAG and work experience which culminated in an Escape Rooms activity and awards session at the Norwich City Football Club. This proved to be extremely popular with the young people.

The programme sessions incorporated local inspiring speakers, practical activities such as cooking and a variety of 'nudge' techniques (personalised welcome letters to the participants, delivery of a box of cookery ingredients etc) to encourage engagement.

Recognising their lack of confidence to attend this programme in person, NCC commissioned a virtual programme. With the onset of the pandemic, the council realised that this would be a way of engaging with the wider NEET cohort as well.

The council commissioned an independent provider, "Clever Egg" to run the three sessions and develop the programme activities. NCC guidance advisers, young person advisers and mentors promoted the events, recruited the young people, and then kept in touch to develop progression opportunities after the events.

An Innovative Approach

Using Clever Egg to deliver the events meant that advisers could build closer working relationships with young people leading up to and during the events. Advisers had a reason to speak to young people three or more times a week: to check that their personal boxes had arrived, that they could use Zoom and they had received their access codes. This helped advisers to build a more informal rapport with young people. Conversations about a young person's EET plans came up as part of a wider discussion, almost without the young person realising. The intention was that this would make it easier for a young person to trust an adviser.

Impact and Outcomes

- Young people said that they were inspired by the guest speakers who were all from Norfolk and had achieved success in a chosen area. The speakers discussed how they had overcome barriers. Young people had enjoyed the activities, tips, advice about the importance of good habits, healthy eating, a good sleep routine and being 10 per cent braver.
- The art activity proved to be so popular that an eight-week arts award had been commissioned with eight new NEET young people participating. One young person who would not put his camera on in session one, shared his rap/poem with the group at the end of session 3. Another liked the cookie making session so much that he shared his career goal of being a baker with one adviser - he is now participating in a related online positive activity and working with his adviser to overcome barriers and return into full time learning in September.
- Half of participants have since moved into EET opportunities. There is evidence that among those still NEET many have more frequent communication with an adviser.

The project has led to young people feeling more confident, inspired and willing to engage with IAG services where previously they might not. The activities helped young people to identify and take “tiny” steps forward in tackling their issues. Furthermore, it has offered another ‘tool’ for advisers to promote engagement particularly with those furthest away from EET.

Intervening earlier

In order to challenge a culture of school exclusions (seen as contributing to the risk of becoming NEET) one authority outlined planned improvements to the Pupil Referral Panel; introducing greater scrutiny in relation to alternative provision, and elective home education.

An Education Improvement Partnership (School Heads and College Principals) is working together in one authority to improve outcomes for children and young people – such as revision of the transition strategy.

The Pathways for All project (NEET prevention) is an evidence-based approach to improving systems, and to pilot Engagement Coaches who will provide support over the key transition periods (Year 11 summer transition and early months at college).

Support for NEET groups and to meet specific needs

Provision of bespoke and intense one-to-one support for NEET sub-groups (including care leavers and those with a SEND status) is demanding of staff time. Workshop Two participants considered that perhaps it would be better to have a longer lead in time for these groups and for their support needs to be effectively funded and resourced. It was suggested that this should commence in Year 10 (14-15-year-olds). This development would enable identification of support needs; the involvement of other agencies; and address how the level of service can be maintained throughout each young person’s journey. One council has a Virtual College specifically for care leavers.

Additional support and cross partnership working for vulnerable young people has proven to be very successful in one authority. This includes those who are looked after, have left care, are attached to the youth offending service, or are supported by the SEND team. The council has been proactive in supporting these young people who are NEET or at risk of NEET, including effective use of virtual case conferences.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic another authority has continued to deliver its Young Parent Project, providing guidance and support via smart phones (preferred by most of the young people who don’t necessarily use laptops or always have good broadband). WhatsApp had been particularly successful in engaging this group and advisers have used it to support young people in completing welfare benefit and housing applications.

In case study 4 from Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, outlines how challenges to engaging young people who have been in care have been addressed. A variety of approaches have been successfully used including improved matching of care leavers to apprenticeship opportunities, an employability programme to initiate positive engagement, and using Employability Coaches to provide enhanced support.

Case Study 4: Liverpool City Region Combined Authority

Re-engaging young people who are care leavers and who have been NEET for a sustained period (12 months or more) has been a key challenge for Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA). The number of children who are Looked After (LAC) by the councils in LCRCA ranges from 90 to 140 per 10,000, this is higher than the national average (65 per 10,000). While further knowledge of the barriers and challenges experienced by this cohort is needed, the experience of the LCRCA was that care leavers tend to have lower educational attainment by the end of Key Stage 4 compared with non-care leavers.

As a result of a negative experience of education coupled with other issues, such as SEND and stability, this cohort can be difficult to engage. A range of programmes aim to support care leavers to re-engage and participate, including:

- **Apprenticeship and training provision:** one of the LCRCA authorities provides apprenticeship vacancies specifically aimed at care leavers which offers an alternative work-focused route. There are currently 4 care leavers on programme, however, this provision had temporarily been put on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Employability opportunities:** One authority runs a 12-week employability programme in 3 chosen areas of interest within the Council (usually 4 weeks at each placement). Once the successful applicant has shown a level of commitment, they are enrolled on a Traineeship, on completion of this, they are offered an apprenticeship within the council.
- **Providing support into EET:** in several councils, Employability Coaches have been recruited to specifically work in the Care Leaver team, whilst in others Employability Coaches work with their apprenticeship team or the Virtual School. Where these initiatives have had the time embed, a reduction of NEET rates within their care leaver cohorts has been seen.

While there are a variety of EET opportunities available to Care Leavers, a key issue is whether or not they can sustain engagement. For example, a few authorities have created several vacancies funded by the ESF, but found it to be very challenging to retain care leavers in the vacancies, resulting in a lower than expected retention rates. This emphasises the need for bespoke and tailored provision, including dedicated staff and support, to address the needs of care leavers.

To address some of these issues on EET provision for care leavers, Wirral Council are establishing a hub specifically to meet the needs of care leavers, called 'Our Space'. By setting up a hub, the council will be able to support a wider body of care leavers and provide more bespoke approaches with key stakeholders, (including health and DWP), beyond study and educational programmes, to increase retention. The impact of a care leavers hub is still emerging, but it is anticipated that it will increase the reach and engagement of Wirral's resident care leavers, leading to a reduction in NEETs among care leavers.

"...there remains a knowledge gap of 'the story behind the long-term NEETs' LCRCA

In Redcar and Cleveland, a range of actions are planned to address the rising number of young people who have been in council care and the often-complex challenges that this group face. Case study 5 below outlines how an approach that includes ring-fenced opportunities, mentoring, showcasing successes and improved co-ordination, will bring about significant improvements in services and support for care leavers.

Reviewing and research

Councils sought to gain insights into specific issues through a process of research and/or review. In one authority this was undertaken to better understand the reasons that lie behind long-term NEET. The focus was on two key questions: Are the right services in place for NEET young people? and What different kinds of support do these young people need to achieve better outcomes?

One council has commenced a process in response to a lack of EET provision that meets local needs. This involved sending out a Gaps in Learning Provision form to providers. The results from completed forms will be collated and there are plans to send these to the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA).

Data sharing

Schools and colleges are required to share destination data but not necessarily contact details. In one council it had been challenging to track the figures for those aged 18 and above. Participants noted that the number of 'not knowns' had increased among this older group.

Following up the 'not known' group during the COVID-19 pandemic (with regulations restricting face-to-face visits) had been challenging. In one area gaining the information flow from schools had in some instances been very difficult and particularly for those in Year 11 (aged 15 to 16).

The regulations around data sharing were regarded as unclear. Many of the Workshop Two participants concurred with the view, that clarity is needed regarding both the legality and validity of data sharing consents given.

Case Study 5: Promoting the participation of care leavers in Redcar and Cleveland

Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council (RCBC) is a unitary authority in the North East of England and part of the Tees Valley city-region. Among care leavers, rates of NEET were high (43 per cent for 17-21 years and 45 per cent all ages) in December 2020. The council has a dedicated Careers Adviser within the Virtual School for year 11s and, 16–17-year-old NEET 'children and young people in our care' (CioC) who focuses on supporting them to progress.

The Multi-Agency Looked After Partnership sub-group: Ambition for Children has a particular focus on aspiration, increasing participation in education, employment or training and increasing opportunities for CioC and care leavers. RCBC will be adopting the Care Leavers Covenant making a commitment to care leavers to support their transition to independence, over and above what they are doing already, and encouraging partners in the public and private sector to do the same.

Key challenges for driving forward change are funding for implementing plans; the impact of COVID-19 on the local economy; opportunities for apprenticeships, employment, or work-experience; and also, that all education and training and wider support services are currently online.

To lead by example the council have ringfenced 10 per cent of apprenticeship opportunities for care leavers. To explore this further the council undertook a review and consultation process. Recommendations for action from this included:

- giving all care leavers priority for RCBC jobs if they meet the essential criteria and are motivated to do the job
- the need to create a broader range of opportunities, flexible work-experience, work-shadowing, traineeships, and employment
- utilisation of the *Kickstart Scheme* (providing funding to employers to create job placements for young people 16-24 years on Universal Credit)
- awareness raising and training for recruitment managers
- focussing on progression from the outset (to keep young people engaged)
- in addition to their Personal Adviser, all care leavers will have dedicated careers and employability support through a specialist adviser.

Key actions to overcome barriers have been identified for implementation during 2021. In addition to implementing the recommendations detailed above, RCBC plan to develop additional activities and actions to promote participation:

Stories of success focused on care leaver journeys and marketed to private employers. These case studies are intended to inspire employers to consider care leavers for their apprenticeships and/or employment opportunities.

Business and peer mentors who will provide additional support and encouragement for care leavers and coach them as they progress.

Co-ordinated delivery of the care leaver action plan, overseen by the MALAP sub-groups with the intention of sourcing funding for a dedicated co-ordinator role to oversee and drive forward delivery. The COVID-19 local authority funding could be utilised for this purpose.

"We know that young people leaving our care will thrive if they are given the right level of support and are afforded a chance by an employer who understands their specific needs..." Andrea Hill – TARGET Leaving Care Manager at RCBC.

Many councils had formed new partnerships and collaborations to take forward their proposals. This, alongside reviews and research, offered a mechanism for identifying gaps, creating and implementing improvements, and progressing a more co-ordinated and strategic approach for councils.

In one council a targeted NEET project will be a jointly delivered between the council's Children's and Employment Services. This it is hoped will assist in building the capacity of the Children's Services workforce and will develop young people's employability skills.

Case Study 6 outlines how Birmingham City Council have worked with partners from different sectors to promote youth participation and to reduce the number of young people who are 'not known'. The council has been open minded in its approach and taken an innovative approach to engaging young people.

Case Study 6: Working in partnership to promote youth participation in Birmingham

In Birmingham City Council (BCC), the number of young people aged 16-17 years whose activity is not known is high at 6 per cent compared to an average for England of 2.8 per cent. Unemployment rates in the city among young people aged 16-24 years are also high, at 27 per cent compared to the national average of 12 per cent. In 2020, the number of young people 16-17 years and identified as NEET was 2 per cent and slightly lower than the England average (2.7 per cent).

However, a recent rise in the number of young people identified earlier as being at risk of NEET has been observed. In March 2021, The Office for National Statistics stated that "...11.6 per cent of 16-24 year olds in the UK were classed as NEET in the latest three months, up by 0.6 percentage points on July to September." In Birmingham, this observed increase has been because of schools referring more young people at an earlier stage, in part due to the COVID-19 crisis.

Key challenges for the council have been:

- Gaps in EET provision
- The flexibility of current funding arrangements for young people in Year 13.

The College Collaboration Fund (CCF) is a DfE peer support programme designed to help further education colleges to share good practice and to develop quality improvement priorities. Birmingham Metropolitan College is a partner with Dudley College of Technology and Walsall College, both of which received a CCF grant.

Further to participating in a CCF event across the region, BCC identified that resources or processes are lacking at the Year 13 stage. As a result, at transition, higher numbers of young had been people dropping out at 17 years of age. Consideration is now being given to how collectively BCC can support training providers to increase the levels of youth participation for the future. Furthermore, BCC has been considering how best to support the 'next steps' – additional my choices funding.

With an ambitious approach and 'thinking outside the box', BCC has been working with different professionals to reduce the NEET and 'not known' figures across the city. This has included outreach activities incorporating support from the West Midlands Police with door knocking activities, alongside web-based careers advice and guidance. A web chat facility has also been developed to provide an additional communication channel.

Responding to the challenge of COVID-19

Changes to approaches to communication were a central plank of the response from authorities to COVID-19 regulations. Creative approaches were essential to maximise young people's engagement.

Case study 7 outlines the response during the COVID-19 pandemic from Wolverhampton City Council whose approach, involving 'virtual duty advisers' aimed to address low levels of motivation and to offer more flexible services for NEET young people.

In Wolverhampton, the city's **Workbox** online platform provides information about local support services and opportunities for anyone in Wolverhampton seeking EET, including targeted programmes and support for young people.

A key challenge identified by Wolverhampton City Council (WCC) was a lack of motivation among NEET young people. While a lack of provision in the city is not necessarily a key issue, as there are a range of support services and training opportunities available, young people were often reluctant to engage. The team had noted an increase in mental health issues and feelings of hopelessness amongst young people, leading to low levels motivation for engagement with EET.

The WCC team have found that face to face contact is generally the most effective way to engage NEET young people, so adapting to remote delivery of services during the COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging. The team reported less engagement with NEET young people at the start of the pandemic, alongside an increase in not known figures.

In response to this the team have been hosting live, virtual duty service drop-in sessions, enabling young people to continue to have a daily point of contact and to reach out for support. This virtual duty service has been promoted through the **Connexions Wolverhampton Facebook** page, with the adviser on duty sharing posts that outline the different ways that young people can get in touch. This approach was designed mimic the 'drop-in' approach of the pre-COVID-19 duty service and to allow young people to choose their preferred method of communicating with an adviser – phone, text, email or via Facebook messenger.

During the first COVID-19 lockdown, the Connexions team offered this virtual duty service every day, from 9am – 5pm. However, this has since been reduced to three afternoons per week, to ensure that advisers can manage their additional caseloads. Through October and November 2020, around 90 young people per month engaged with the virtual duty service.

"Connexions staff have worked tirelessly to ensure that we still offer a service to our young people, even if this hasn't been face-to-face." WCC

In Greater Manchester combined authority (case study 8) a Task Force was created in response to the challenges for young people arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. This included seeking the views and input of young people themselves and then acting on feedback received.

Case study 8: Working together in Greater Manchester in response to COVID-19

Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester, wanted a rapid response to the impact of COVID-19 on young people. He appointed Diane Modahl to chair a Task Force that would take action to develop and deliver a Young Person's Guarantee.

The Young Person's Guarantee (YPG) is a commitment to improving the lives and experiences of young people from across Greater Manchester (GM). It focused not only on the impact that COVID-19 has had on the city-region, but also on the worries that young people said they have for their future employment prospects.

Young people reported that they did not know where the opportunities were and were surprised to learn about the volume of support that already exists. The absence of a central information portal was a problem, so the Greater Manchester Careers and Apprenticeship (GMACS) platform was adapted, developing it into a wider resource for 11 to 30-year-olds. It became a home for information on health, activity, and community support to supplement existing resources around careers, education, and training.

The work in GM was driven by the voices of young people about their experiences of the pandemic – and their hopes regarding what the YPG could offer them. Initially the YPG was asked on what young people had said about the issues and barriers they were experiencing, through a series of consultation events and surveys, and with help from members of the Youth Combined Authority (YCA) who co-chaired some of the events. Young people have continued to guide the Guarantee's development beyond the initial consultation. Twenty-four people aged 11 to 30 have come

together to form the Youth Advisory Group (YAG), from every part of Greater Manchester. This group reflects the diversity of backgrounds and experiences in the city-region. The group, which includes members of the YCA, have had a central role in supporting and determining the work of the Youth Task Force.

Task Force members were asked to focus on three objectives:

1. To explore and determine how existing services and support programmes could be used to respond to the issues and challenges set out by young people.
2. To identify and commit to developing and delivering new opportunities and commitments that add value to the YPG.
3. To generate a clear set of recommendations that set out the additional activity, resources and investment needed to tackle systematic issues and inequalities faced by young people in Greater Manchester.

The YPG has now been launched with commitments under four main themes which are:

- **Keeping Connected**
- **Staying Well**
- **Making Effective Transitions**
- **Reducing Economic Inequalities.**

In essence, the Guarantee is a collective offer of support. It is intended to give young people a greater sense of hope and optimism that their voices are being heard and that a wide range of Greater Manchester partners and providers are stepping up to help secure their futures.

Planning action - taking ideas forward

York Consulting developed an action plan template to provide a framework for devising a local plan of action for improving youth participation. The fields in the template were: issues; consequences; barriers; current arrangements; actions/changes/adaptations; timescale; responsibility; resources; and measures.

Three example action plans have been included in Appendix 1 to illustrate the broad approach taken across all local authorities.

The issues identified across all of the ten action plans related to seven key areas (table 3.1). Most of the plans set out more than one issue (ranging up to five issues).

Our analysis has identified a set of cross-cutting themes that were identified and addressed across the action plans included:

- the need to improve communication with young people.
- work with employers and training providers to increase and/or improve available provision.
- the need to respond to the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people was a theme across many actions, as well as being identified as a single issue by four authorities.
- the impact of poor mental health among young people was highlighted. While this was widely seen to have been a problem before COVID-19, it has been exacerbated by the pandemic.
- enhanced networking (across councils) and higher levels of collaboration, partnership and co-operation across sectors, with school and colleges, and within councils.
- improvements in data collection and monitoring systems to create better alignment and co-ordination of NEET data.
- reviewing and researching of a specific issue or barrier to aid understanding and response eg gaps in training provision.

Table 3.1: Main issues, barriers and actions included in action plans.

Issues	Barriers	Actions
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Issues	Barriers	Actions
Tackling disengagement and/or withdrawal from EET	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A culture of underachievement. • Low levels of confidence and motivation among young people. • High levels of anxiety and mental health issues among young people, alongside limited access to mental health services. • Young people are often ill-informed and making the wrong choices. • Insufficient support at transition. • The impact of COVID-19. • Insufficient provision of EET. • High levels of inflexible provision. • Inter-generational poverty and worklessness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of online resources. • Work to ensure that more bespoke provision is available. • Coaching (one to one) introduced. • Improved assessment of the NEET group. • Use of virtual communication. • Embed a 'Trauma Informed' approach in the sourcing of opportunities. • Raising awareness among teams of mental health services – for signposting. • Role model journey – used to raise aspiration. • Workshop with employers/training providers to support creation of more part-time opportunities.
The availability and scope of training and education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too few opportunities. • Opportunities limited at Foundation level. • No single point of contact for young people. • The need to offer bespoke provision to match needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Youth Hub – one-stop-shop. • More flexible provision responsive to the circumstances of young people. • Use of the government's <i>Kickstart</i> scheme. • Improved assessment of NEET young people.
Access to opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people unable to engage in online provision. • The perception that there are too few opportunities available. • Limited to an online offer only. • Low levels of awareness of EET provision among young people and staff. • Young people not ready for the high levels of engagement required in mainstream provision. • Young people with poor communication skills – this holds them back. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sourcing IT equipment. • Youth Hubs (a one-stop-shop model) • Use and expansion of social media. • Use of a laptop recycling scheme. • Using the <i>Kickstart</i> scheme to support young people into opportunities.
The need to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on NEET young people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic hardship and reduced finances. • A reduction in available training provision for NEET young people. • Isolation and disengagement among young people, partly due to the move to online provision. • Existing services failing to meet current or future needs of NEET young people. • Lack of funding to address gaps and needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looking at volunteering opportunities as part of the COVID-19 response. • New characteristics added to CCIS database to track the impact of lockdown and changes to EET provision. • New NEET groups set up – maximising provision and the identification of new opportunities.
Targeting NEET sub- groups including young people leaving care and those with a SEND.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unsuitable EET provision. • The complexity of issues faced by this group of young people. • Long term NEET. • Employers/trainers – low levels of knowledge and understanding regarding needs and capabilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New marketing campaign aimed at employers. • Business mentors for young people in these groups. • Ringfenced opportunities for specific groups. • Encouraging young people to take a 'first step' prior to a move into full-time opportunities. • Bespoke commissioning of services to better meet the needs of sub-groups.

Issues	Barriers	Actions
Early identification of young people at risk of becoming NEET and/or tracking 'unknowns'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inconsistency in NEET measurements – lack of consistent identifiers. • Restrictions on data sharing. • Difficulties in gaining information from schools. • A lack of face-to-face engagement with young people. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of gaps. • New data sharing arrangements introduced. • Improve the monitoring and analysis of key NEET group eg young people with a CIN status. • Sharing useful practice from other authorities. • Research to identify a set of consistent indicators for the NEET group (that can be used in schools and across authorities). • Introduction of a Transition Support Worker.
The need for a more strategic approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fragmented provision and the lack of a shared vision. • Limited staff capacity. • Single view of NEET data. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a sub-group to • implement recommendations. • Conducting a consultation with young people.

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

As a result of undertaking this work we identified a range of conclusions. Many councils are facing some similar challenges particularly around high levels of disengagement, reduced funds and staff, young people who face complex barriers such as poor mental health and who rapidly become de-motivated or withdraw from EET. Other areas of challenge relate to the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns, and the identification of 'unknown' and at-risk young people.

Smaller numbers of councils are facing challenges linked to collaborating with schools, developing a strategic approach, and a reluctance among young people to travel for EET opportunities.

One council was considering the relationship between youth support services and careers support in the longer term, for those who are NEET or at risk of becoming NEET.

A particular consideration in some councils is the effectiveness of support for those in vulnerable sub-groups. In response to the mismatch between the mainstream EET offer and the specific needs of key NEET subgroups (care leavers, those with mental health problems and those with a SEND) there is a requirement for greater flexibility and a bespoke offer that will be vital in allowing these groups to progress. While it is acknowledged that this approach is more resource intensive, we propose that any investment would be worthwhile in terms of the long-term economic benefits for these groups, as a result of them accessing and taking up meaningful employment and experiencing a better quality of life ie an Invest to Save model.

There is a clear desire among councils to learn from each other and to share experiences of supporting youth participation through increased networking opportunities.

A proportion of NEET young people have been unable to or have chosen not to engage with online communication and provision of EET. This has significant implications, with the risk of a substantial 'left behind' group emerging in the near future. Furthermore, 'digital poverty' is a key concern that has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Action to address the skills and equipment gaps will be vital in successfully bringing this NEET group into positive EET opportunities.

The data gap for older NEET young people has been highlighted. This is of particular relevance for the 18 plus group who may have been unemployed for longer periods and for whom it is difficult to track and monitor. This then impacts on the scope for positive engagement. Specifically, this includes:

- work to resolve the policy inconsistencies between the DfE CCIS requirements (16- and 17-year-olds) and Gatsby Benchmark (16-, 17- and 18-year-olds) expectations on schools and colleges
- work with the DWP to share data will assist with tracking of this older group and provide a focus on their support needs.

The benefits of intervening earlier have been highlighted. Closer working with schools and colleges will be central to addressing this alongside a need for improved data capture systems for identifying young people at risk as soon as possible.

Looking forwards it will be interesting to see how councils progress in addressing their issues and the longer-term results of implementing their actions.

Recommendations

Following on from the conclusions we have outlined a series of recommendations.

Some examples of achievable and realistic changes that councils can implement in the short-term include:

- Continue to undertake existing work to assess skills needs locally through collaboration with large employers and other council departments.
- Develop online provision that is complementary to standard service delivery. This should include clear signposting, information and advice alongside the development of specific resources to support training and/or work experience as appropriate.
- Provide council ring-fenced opportunities for NEET young people in need of extra support.
- Meet with local EET providers to determine the possibility of flexible and blended learning provision.
- Convene a COVID-19 working group with EET providers and young people to consider creative solutions to barriers (existing and emerging).

Achievable and realistic changes that authorities can implement in the longer-term are:

- Provision of a centralised single point of contact for young people that can be promoted and marketed, and that can provide a venue for employers and training providers to recruit and meet young people. For example, this could be an employment and skills hub in a central location.
- Through a campaign or marketing, showcase the achievements of young people and particularly those who have faced disadvantage and overcome significant barriers, to potential employers.
- Consider sourcing funding for a specialist role (sometimes called a careers coach) to support NEET young people who face the greatest barriers to securing and sustaining EET. This offer can include initial intensive support and a tailored response that also addresses wider factors that impede progress such as mental health problems.
- Councils working together – learning, looking forward and building on this project.

Recommendations for the LGA include:

- The LGA could provide further support linked to this project with follow-up activity in three to six months' time, when councils will have had time to implement the action plans that they have developed. The time-period of five weeks for action learning was too short to incorporate implementation and meaningful reflective practice.
- There is an evident desire for increased opportunities to share and discuss approaches to youth participation. The LGA is in a position to support this through creating environments such as the K-Hub and through its convening power to draw councils together in short, focused projects such as this.
- Participating councils would value an opportunity to represent their experiences of data sharing with central government such as the DfE and DWP. This would support a more consistent and coordinated approach to the gaps in data sharing identified.

Useful links

World Institute for Action Learning [<https://wial.org/action-learning/>]

- Local Government Association. **Guidance for new councillors** [https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/11.101%20Councillors%27%20Guide%202018_v10_WEB.pdf] (2018) (PDF)
- A full list of functions of local authorities in England can be found in the Appendix of the UK Parliament's briefing, **Local government in England: structures** [<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn07104/>].
- **Skills and apprenticeships in the Liverpool City Region** [<https://www.liverpoolcityregion-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/skills-apprenticeships/>]
- **Participation of young people: education, employment and training: The September Guarantee** [<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/september-guarantee-offers-of-education-or-training-for-16-to-17-year-olds>] (DfE, 2014) requires local authorities to find education and training places for 16-17 year olds.
- **Institute for Employment Studies. Supporting disadvantaged young people into meaningful work** [<https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/supporting-disadvantaged-young-people-meaningful-work>]

(2020).

- Melville., D., Bivand., P. (2019). **Local Skills Deficits and Spare Capacity**. [\[https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/local-skills-deficits-and-spare-capacity/\]](https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/local-skills-deficits-and-spare-capacity/).
- Local Government Association. **Work Local: Our vision for an integrated and devolved employment and skills service** [\[https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/work-local-our-vision-integrated-and-devolved-employment-and-skills-services-full\]](https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/work-local-our-vision-integrated-and-devolved-employment-and-skills-services-full). (2017).
- Local Government Association. **Re-thinking youth participation for the present and next generation: education to employment** [\[https://www.local.gov.uk/re-thinking-youth-participation-present-and-next-generation-education-employment\]](https://www.local.gov.uk/re-thinking-youth-participation-present-and-next-generation-education-employment). (2020).
- Local Government Association. **Work Local: Making our vision a reality**. [\[publications/work-local-making-our-vision-reality\]](https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/work-local-making-our-vision-reality). (2019)

More publications about Employment and skills

Work Local: labour market analysis [\[/publications/work-local-labour-market-analysis\]](https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/work-local-labour-market-analysis)

Work Local: benefits of improving employment and skills outcomes [\[/publications/work-local-benefits-improving-employment-and-skills-outcomes\]](https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/work-local-benefits-improving-employment-and-skills-outcomes)

Work Local: Unlocking talent to level up [\[/publications/work-local-unlocking-talent-level\]](https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/work-local-unlocking-talent-level)

More publications in this topic [\[/publications?topic%5B2625%5D=2625\]](https://www.local.gov.uk/publications?topic%5B2625%5D=2625)

You may also be interested in

Work Local 2019 [\[/topics/employment-and-skills/work-local-2019\]](https://www.local.gov.uk/topics/employment-and-skills/work-local-2019)

Work Local - Our vision for an integrated and devolved employment and skills services - full report [\[/publications/work-local-our-vision-integrated-and-devolved-employment-and-skills-services-full\]](https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/work-local-our-vision-integrated-and-devolved-employment-and-skills-services-full)

Work Local - Making our vision a reality [\[/publications/work-local-making-our-vision-reality\]](https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/work-local-making-our-vision-reality)

Re-thinking youth participation for the present and next generation: education to employment [\[/publications/re-thinking-youth-participation-present-and-next-generation-education-employment\]](https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/re-thinking-youth-participation-present-and-next-generation-education-employment)