

REPORT

Entry and Retention in the labour market:

Narratives and solutions for NEET and
care leaver employment support

Henry Foulkes, Madeleine Winnard
and Jack Farnhill-Bain

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About the Authors

Henry Foulkes is the Policy and Public Affairs Lead at the Employment Related Services Association.

Maddy Winnard was a Senior Research Officer at Education Development Trust at the time of writing.

Jack Farnhill-Bain is Youth Employment Labour Market, Policy and Research Officer at the Employment Related Services Association.



About Employment Related Services Association

The Employment Related Services Association (ERSA) is the trade association for the employment support sector in the United Kingdom. Our membership comprises diverse organisations, including charities, local authorities, housing associations, social enterprises, funding bodies, and private sector entities. Together, we strive to transform the lives of individuals seeking employment opportunities and career advancement, making a positive impact on families and communities nationwide.

Recognised as the voice of the employment support sector, ERSA plays a crucial role in promoting best practices, enhancing understanding of our sector's value, and fostering collaboration among our members. We actively engage with policymakers, commissioners, and central government to shape and influence policies and programmes. As a not-for-profit organisation, ERSA receives no funding from the government and relies entirely on membership subscriptions, conference sponsorship and grant funding. This enables us to work independently and advocate effectively for the interests of our members.

With a membership base exceeding 300 organisations, ERSA takes immense pride in our members' commitment to offering inclusive, innovative and inspiring employment support that puts people first. They consistently create solutions for a fairer labour market, leading to positive outcomes for individuals while securing great value for taxpayers. Through ERSA membership, organisations forge connections, sustain nationwide communities of good practice, and continually improve the support available to jobseekers. Their knowledge is invaluable and we always aim to convey their experience through participation in research.

Please visit www.ersa.org.uk for more information.



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Executive summary

The Employment Related Services Association (ERSA) and Education Development Trust (EDT) have undertaken research to understand the barriers faced by young people in the UK not in education, employment, or training (NEET), and the support that is currently available to them. At the time of writing, the percentage of all young people who were NEET was estimated at 11.5% (around 788,000 people), which was up 0.5 percentage points from before the COVID-19-pandemic.¹ The prevalence of NEET young people in the UK has remained structurally high over the last 20 years, with levels of NEET 16-to-24-year-olds never falling below 10%.²

Various research has highlighted the short-term and long-term impacts of being NEET and there is a need for the support provided to young people to be grounded in evidence of what works, in order to facilitate their efficient reintegration into employment, education or training (EET).³ This research contributes to this body of evidence. In this study, we look at the barriers that NEET youth face to reintegrating into EET; what is currently offered to support them in tackling these barriers; and what best practice looks like in breaking down these barriers and supporting young people as they enter and continue in EET. Combining answers to these three questions allows us to identify gaps in services and provision, and external barriers to overcome.

'NEET' as a concept has garnered criticism on the grounds that it defines young people 'by what they are not'.⁴ This is often referred to as a 'deficit model' of thought, whereby wider inequalities are perceived as being a result of problems with the individual—the structures and barriers that create a difficult environment for progression to EET are neglected in favour of a focus on the plans a young person has for their future. This language of deficit often arises from a lack of consultation with young people themselves, when assumptions are made about young people in place of engaging with them about their realities.⁵ We wanted to move beyond this in our research and sought to include young people's perspectives within our study, as they are ultimately the experts on what works for individuals in their situation. We have included verbatim quotations from our participants to express our findings in their own words.

1 ONS (2023)

2 Ibid

3 See Russell and Thompson (2022); Maguire (2021); Youth Employment UK (2022)

4 Nudzor (2010)

5 McPherson (2021)



Greatest perceived barriers to NEET young people

(as reported by employability organisations) (N = 112)



92%
Mental health



90%
Lack of confidence



78%
Lack of formal qualification



58%
Lack of employer understanding



58%
Lack of stable/secure housing



52%
Lack of financial stability



38%
Lack of transport



26%
Childcare



20%
Lack of vacancies in local area

Source: ERSA and EDT survey (2023)

Barriers to employment, education and training

In the survey, employability organisations were asked “what are the biggest barriers facing the young people on your caseloads for entry into employment, education or training?” The most notable finding from our survey was how many organisations reported mental health issues being a barrier for the young people they support. This was the most frequently selected barrier and was chosen by 92% of respondents. Although diagnosis of mental health conditions has been on an upward trend for all young people, the rate has been increasing more quickly for NEET young people than the wider population.⁶ Data also indicates that waiting times to access services can vary considerably between young people, with some waiting one week, and others almost three years.⁷

An interesting nuance that we found in our qualitative work is that those supporting care-experienced young people reported that although mental health issues are extremely common amongst these cohorts, they also find that other factors, such as, for example, neurological conditions and learning difficulties, are often misdiagnosed as mental health conditions due to young people ‘presenting chaotically’.

The second most prevalent perceived barrier amongst organisations responding to the survey was ‘a lack of confidence’ (90% of organisations selected this). For care-experienced young people, this was often a result of having a lack of familial support network to provide encouragement and support them in persevering when they are finding EET difficult and contemplating their next steps.

In speaking to young people and the practitioners who support them, we found that although NEET young people may not have concrete plans for their futures, they do have a wide variety of aspirations and hopes for what they want to do in terms of EET. It is important to note that the barriers were not motivational but instead were related to capability or opportunity – that is, they are factors outside of the young person’s control and require structural-level solutions.

6 ONS (2023)

7 Tidman (2022)

Entry into employment, education and training

We asked organisations how they decide what types of support to offer their NEET young people. A total of 83% said that they are guided by young people's voices in what to offer, 59% reported they engage with evidence as to what to offer, 51% responded that they are guided by contractual obligations, and 42% informally share best practice amongst other organisations.

The survey asked respondents to select the types of support they provide to the young people on their caseloads. The most common type of support was one-to-one information, advice and guidance, which was selected by 95% of respondents to this question. This was followed by information about apprenticeships (85%) and information about traineeships (75%).

Mental health support was selected by only 49% of respondents, despite it being considered as a barrier by the majority of respondents.

Retention in employment, education and training

In this study, we sought to determine the type and duration of support offered to young people once they are in employment. A total of 53% of survey respondents said they continue support to young people whilst they are in work.⁸ We thematically coded responses into five main categories: continuation of young person support received prior to entering EET (88%); financial support (23%); employer training (21%); mediation between the young person and employer (10%); and referral to other services (6%).

The duration of support in employment varied greatly, ranging from just one month to indefinite support. The most common timeframe for support was between four and six months, and several respondents expressed a desire to offer support for longer, emphasising its importance for helping young people to remain in work.

What works

The survey asked organisations to choose what form of support they perceive to work best when supporting young people in entering EET. One-to-one support was overwhelmingly the most common response to this question in the survey, with almost a third of responses including reference to this in some form. Responses also made clear that it is important to ensure that IAG is tailored and relevant to the young person, grounding discussion and materials in what they would like to find out more about.

A common survey response was the importance of exposure to the working environment, but this was prefaced by saying that this needed to be with a sympathetic and understanding employer. Practitioners described how establishing good, working connections with understanding employers ensured that there was flexibility in the employers' expectations of young people. Organisations had successfully developed partnerships which had been developed by 'door knocking'

⁸ Open-ended survey response

on employers and directly 'selling' the opportunities to the employer. More formal approaches included identifying larger corporate organisations which have social value targets and requirements that they want to meet via employing NEET young people or care leavers specifically.

One important finding was the mismatch between the practitioner survey responses and young people's perspectives with regard to the importance they place on peer mentoring. Only one survey respondent out of 87 mentioned peer mentoring when asked about effective strategies, however, care-experienced young people indicated that, for them, it needs to be a priority.⁹

It was clear from speaking to practitioners and young people that EET exposure needs to be broken into 'bitesize' chunks and 'interwoven' throughout other provision, such as leisure and group activities. Currently, it seems that organisations do this ad hoc and informally outside of contractual or programme requirements, although the support they provide should formally end at the EET entry point, they believe that young people need this extended support.



⁹ It is important to note that the sample size of young people was small, so direct comparisons should be treated with caution (i.e., young people were not interviewed from all service providers, so this emphasis on peer mentoring may not be important to all young people, depending on what support they receive).

Recommendations

For policy:	For practice:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » While waiting times for NHS mental health services remain long, funding for NEET programmes should include allocations for young people to access private mental health support, such as talking therapies. As we explain in section one, the negative effects of being NEET can cause longer-term negative effects across the life course and cause or exacerbate mental health conditions. Providing mental health interventions for this young age group should therefore be a priority to prevent the severity of conditions increasing and reduce demand on services later on. » The fees and funding structures of supported/semi-independent accommodation should be evaluated to ensure they do not act to directly prohibit young people from entering or staying in employment. Such evaluations should include consultations with young people who live in foyers to gain insights from their first-hand expertise. » Accommodation allocation for care leavers in each local authority (LA) should be reviewed to ensure that young people are, as far as possible, able to stay within their local area after age 18 or 21, to enable them to apply their knowledge of the local area to find suitable next steps in EET. » Develop a national network of corporate employers who can accommodate employing NEET young people who may require a role tailored to their needs, allowing flexibility with routine, and undergoing trauma-informed training. » All local authorities should consistently provide ring-fenced employment opportunities for care leavers within their organisation or partner organisations. » Fully funded trauma-informed and mental health training should be provided for small-to-medium businesses to equip them with the tools to take on and support NEET young people who may have mental health issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Young people or individuals whose backgrounds match that of the typical caseload should be employed to act as consultants in development/design of services, or as peer mentors. » Where possible, flexible geographical eligibility requirements should be employed for programme participants to ensure that young people who move outside of the catchment area boundaries can continue accessing information, advice and guidance. » Employment and skills providers who operate in similar geographies should create and share local networks of smaller employers who may not have formalised social value commitments but are nonetheless sympathetic and open-minded about hiring NEET young people.

01

Rationale for the research

In the autumn of 2022, the Employment Related Services Association and Education Development Trust decided to undertake this research to understand available types of provision and best practice in employment support for young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET). This was in recognition of the fact that although existing research has importantly focused on how to identify young people at risk of becoming NEET, and what works to prevent these young people from becoming NEET whilst they are in compulsory education, there is little that tells us what is currently offered and what best practice looks like in terms of when early intervention fails and reintegration of the older NEET cohort into EET is required.¹⁰

More than one in ten young people between the ages of 16 and 24 were classified as not in employment, education or training (NEET) in the United Kingdom between October and December 2022.¹¹ We know that being NEET can have immediate negative consequences for a young person, such as decreasing levels of self-esteem, increasing the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviours such as substance misuse and criminal activities, and increasing the chances of living in poverty.¹² There are also long-term ramifications across the course of a person's life – it has been shown to be negatively associated with earnings, health and wellbeing ratings, and life satisfaction scores later on in life too.¹³ This

'scarring' effect is shown to be greater the longer a young person remains NEET.¹⁴ In addition, some of the most disadvantaged demographic groups of young people experience being NEET at much higher rates, which in turn exacerbates social inequalities.¹⁵

There is a strong need for support provided to young people to be grounded in evidence of what works, in order to facilitate their efficient reintegration into employment, education or training. However, as Maguire¹⁶ points out, currently there is 'a paucity of evidence about what works, and when and where to support young people who are defined as "NEET"' and the landscape of reintegrative support is complex and fragmented across the country. This research seeks to contribute to filling this evidence gap. To do this, we look at the barriers that NEET young people face in reintegrating into EET, what is currently offered to support them in overcoming these barriers, and what best practice looks like in breaking down these barriers and supporting young people as they enter and remain in EET. Combining answers to these three questions allows us to identify gaps in provision.

Understanding this has never been more important ahead of the imminent removal of European Social Fund (ESF) funding from the UK and its replacement with the Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF). Third-sector, local provision has become the cornerstone of NEET provision.

10 For more detail on this related but distinct issue of NEET identification and early intervention, see Learning & Work Institute (2020) and the work of Lisa Russell and Ronald Thompson (2022)

11 ONS (2023)

12 Prince's Trust (2021); Public Health England (2014)

13 De Fraja et al. (2017); Bell and Blanchflower (2011); Wilson and Finch (2021)

14 Ralston et al. (2021)

15 Public Health England (2014); Russell and Thompson (2022)

16 Maguire (2021, p.10)

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) youth provision – e.g., Youth Hubs—is limited almost exclusively to those young people who claim benefits, but Youth Employment UK (2022) data indicates that the majority of NEET young people have not knowingly had any contact with DWP via Jobcentre Plus.^{17,18} The most recent Budget, entitled ‘Back to Work’ and focused on lowering rates of economic inactivity in the UK, mentioned no new support for NEET young people, despite the fact that NEET young people account for 12% of the UK’s total number of economically inactive residents.¹⁹

ERSA has previously shown that those employability support providers who work with the under-25s are pessimistic about whether their support will be able to continue after the ending of ESF funding.²⁰ Geographical disparities in provision are also predicted to widen following this due to differences in local authorities’ investment plans for the UKSPF, and the gap between the ending of the ESF and the introduction of the UKSPF People and Skills strand.²¹ Understanding what works, for whom, and how is important so that future provision following this funding cliff-edge can be built to provide the most effective support and ensure that young people are not further disadvantaged by virtue of where they live.

It was determined that ERSA and Education Development Trust were in a unique position to explore these important issues through access to ERSA’s network of organisations, which spans charities to LAs to private sector businesses working in the employment support space. Through speaking to and surveying this wide range of support providers, we felt we were able to provide insight into the complex and fragmented landscape of current provision and gain expert opinions on what ‘good’ looks like. Snowballing (asking organisations to reach out to young people on our behalf) out of these local organisations to young people in their networks also allowed us to understand the opinions of

young people who are experts on this topic through their lived experience.

As our research developed, we decided to include a particular focus on care-experienced NEET young people, to reflect their over-representation in the NEET population and particularly marginalised circumstances that can lead to numerous barriers to EET. As an illustration, just 22% of young care leavers are in employment aged 27, compared with 57% of non-care-experienced adults.²² We used purposive sampling to speak to care-experienced young people and organisations who support them to understand what the barriers and best practice look like for this group, considering where their needs may be unique and require specialised support, and where support needs overlap and are comparable with the wider NEET population.

Our report is structured as follows:

First, we outline the context of the NEET issue and then provide an overview of the four-pronged data collection strategy we used to explore these issues.

We structure our findings thematically, presenting findings from all methods according to barriers to EET faced by NEET young people; types of entry to EET support available and best practice; types of in-work support available and best practice.

Within these, we discuss our findings relating firstly to the wider group of NEET young people and secondly to care-experienced NEET young people.

Throughout, we draw out where findings indicate interesting similarities or differences between the two groups.

17 Maguire (2021); Youth Employment UK (2022)

18 Jobcentre Plus is a UK Government service which helps people move from benefits into work and helps employers advertise jobs. It also deals with benefits for people who are unemployed or unable to work because of a health condition or disability.

19 Taylor and Farnhill-Bain (2023)

20 ERSA (2023)

21 Ibid.

22 Education Committee (2022)

02

Context: rates and prevalence

2.1 NEET young people

The category of 'NEET' is used in research, policy and practice when measuring the number and rate of young people aged 16 to 24 in the population who are not participating in either educational programmes (such as college or university), training programmes (such as apprenticeships) or employment. In this section, we provide a key overview of the statistical picture of NEET trends.

The headline points include:

- » The prevalence of NEET young people in the UK has remained structurally high over the last 20 years, with levels of NEET 16–24-year-olds never falling below 10%
- » Rates peaked at a two-decade high in 2011 (16.5%), following the impact of the 2008 financial crisis on the labour market
- » Although the NEET rate has fallen following this 2011 peak, there has been a variation in rates since 2019.

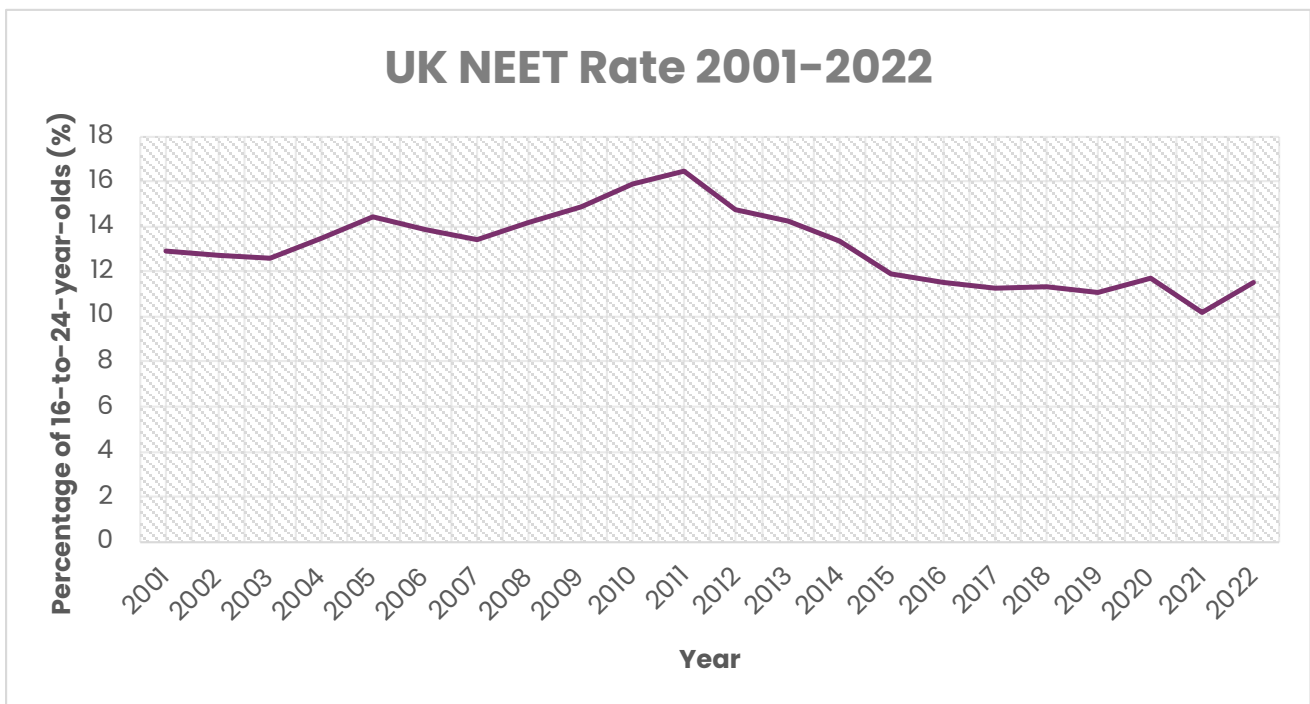


Figure 1: UK NEET rates, 2001 to 2022. Source: Office for National Statistics – Labour Force Survey

As articulated above, the ‘NEET’ category is a ‘catch all’ concept that includes young people who are out of EET due to unemployment or inactivity.

To be classified as unemployed, a young person must be out of work and have actively looked for work in the last four weeks. Unemployed young people account for approximately 32% of the NEET population.²³

To be classified as ‘economically inactive’, a young person must be out of work and not considered to have actively looked for work in the last four weeks. Reasons for inactivity include being a full-time student, taking time out of the labour market due to pregnancy or childcare, or being unable to work due to mental or physical health conditions. Economically inactive young people account for 62% of the NEET population.²⁴

Historically, NEET rates have been marginally higher in young women than young men, as demonstrated in the figure below. For instance, in 2000, the female rate was six percentage points higher than that of men. This gap closed in 2016, where both male and female NEET rates were approximately 11%. The male NEET rate surpassed the female NEET rate by 3.7 percentage points in 2020. Between 2021 and 2022, the NEET rate rose for both men and women, with the gap closing to only one percentage point difference between men and women.

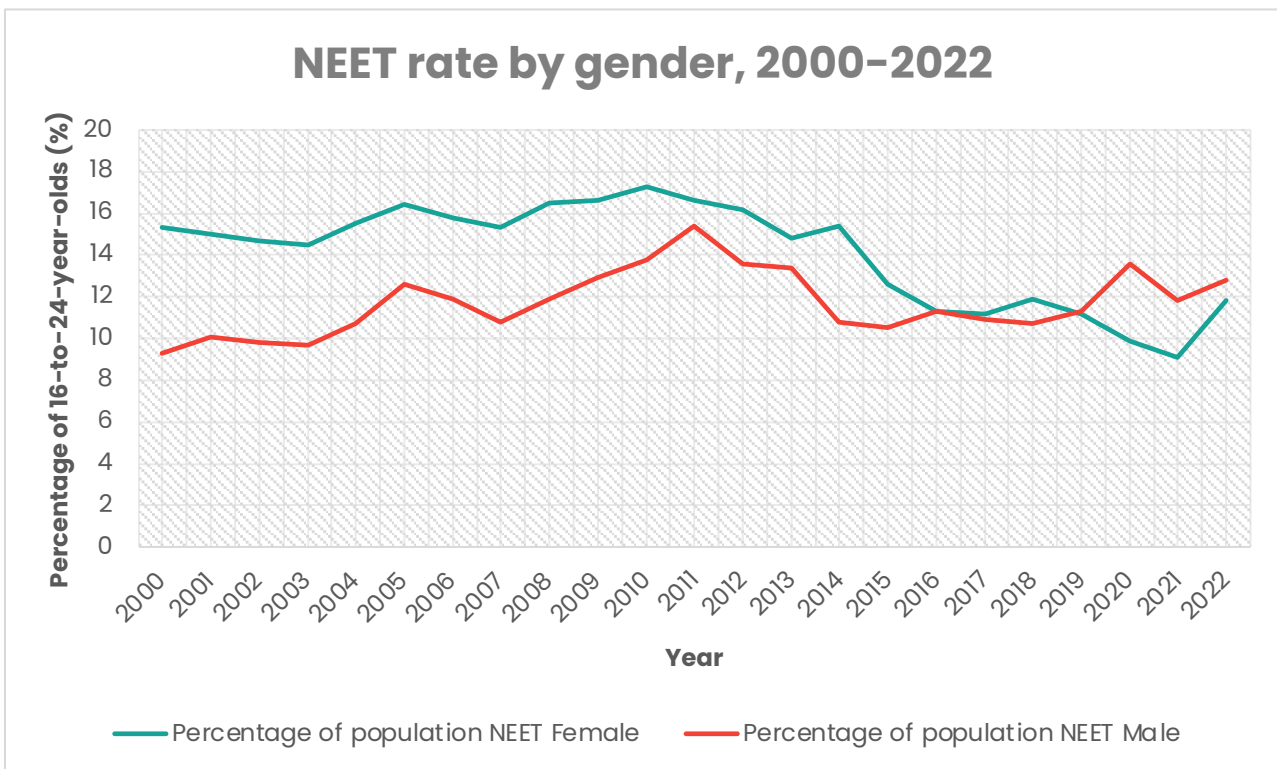


Figure 2: NEET rate by gender, 2000-2022. Source: Office for National Statistics – Labour Force Survey

There is a great deal of regional variation in NEET rates. Taking English regions as an example, Labour Force Survey (LFS) data shows that whilst 2022 national average NEET rates were lower than those of 2011, in the North East, the NEET rate remained at 17.2%, higher than the UK-wide peak in 2011 (16.5%). In comparison, in London and the South West, NEET rates were much lower, at 9.8% and 7.8%, respectively, in 2022. Furthermore, whilst rates have risen by up to five percentage points in most regions of England between 2021 and 2022, they have fallen in the East Midlands, London and the South West.

23 ONS (2023)

24 Ibid.

2.2 NEET care leavers

Care leavers are defined by the Care Leavers' Association as 'any adult who spent time in care as a child' and this category encapsulates those who were classed as Looked-After Children under all types of LA care, such as foster and residential.²⁵ In this report, we use the terms 'care leavers' and 'care-experienced young people' interchangeably. Care-experienced young people are almost four times more likely to end up being NEET than non-looked-after groups, with 41% of care-experienced 19-to-21-year-olds being classified as such.²⁶ These particularly high rates amongst this demographic group are not unique to the UK, with research indicating that care-experienced young people are substantially more likely to become NEET in the Nordic countries, Germany and South Africa, to name some international examples.²⁷

In the UK, Harrison et al.²⁸ found that even when other demographic characteristics and NEET risk factors, such as highest qualification level, are controlled for, there remains a statistically significant difference in NEET rates between young people with care experience and those without.²⁹ This indicates that care experience is a key differentiating factor in young people's experience in education and the labour market, with care leavers facing marginalisation that cannot be accounted for by their social class or educational attainment.



25 Care Leavers' Association (2023)

26 Department for Education (2021)

27 Berlin et al. (2021) ; Cameron et al. (2018) ; Dickens and Marx (2020)

28 Harrison et al. (2023)

29 Ibid

03

Methods

Our research sought to answer the following questions:

- » What are the key barriers to EET for young people and care leavers who are NEET?
- » What is currently offered in terms of entry to EET support for young people and care leavers?
- » What is currently offered in terms of in-work support for young people and care leavers?
- » What types of provision are most effective at dealing with these barriers?

We took a four-pronged approach to data collection, employing the below methods:

1. Literature review of UK-based studies
2. Survey of employability organisations on the ERSA mailing list
3. Qualitative interviews with organisations who have NEET caseloads
4. Qualitative, in-depth interviews with young people who are or were NEET

3.1 Literature review

We searched for literature related to NEET rates, barriers and employment interventions, scanning the abstracts to refine the corpus of literature to those with findings that relate to our research questions.

Defining 'success' or what counts as a 'good' outcome in terms of what works in employability support for NEET young people is a key consideration when identifying best practice. Limiting this to 'hard' outcomes such as entries into employment can be reductive—as we explain in the next section, for the most marginalised young people who are furthest from the labour market/mainstream education, entry into EET may not be the most suitable outcome with long-term success in mind. Our report starts with the assumption that smaller increases in such outcomes as confidence, self-esteem and other personal attributes may be the greatest form of success for some individuals.

Moreover, as Russell and Thompson point out, programmes need to be considered 'within current political and policy climates'.³⁰ Success is therefore contextually dependent on the needs of a young person being helped, but also the structures and systems within which they are situated. In the absence of a clear, consistent and fair universal definition of 'success', we ground our determination of 'what works' in the perspectives of practitioners who work closely with young people and, most importantly, in the viewpoints of young people themselves. This is important in moving beyond assumptions of the needs of this group to evidence-based decisions.

³⁰ Russell and Thompson (2022, p.2)



Russell and Thompson point out in their comprehensive review of NEET literature that effects found in robust evaluations can often be extremely small despite representing benefits to 'significant numbers of young people' and effects are likely to vary according to the type of participant, for example by gender and age.³¹ To understand these more nuanced impacts, we include smaller-scale, in-depth qualitative studies as well as evaluations with experimental designs.

3.2 Survey

In February 2023, the survey was disseminated across the ERSA mailing list, including organisations and LAs who are currently members of ERSA and those who are not. This strategy was complemented by advertising the survey on ERSA and EDT social media accounts. The survey was advertised as being suitable for organisations who specifically worked with young people (aged 16 to 24). We also included a question related to whether they provide support for this group in the survey and discounted the responses of those who selected 'no', to ensure that we only had responses from providers who work with this age range.

In total, 131 eligible organisations completed the survey, which attempted to find out what providers perceived as the main barriers to entry into education, employment or training, the most effective support when helping young people enter the labour market, and the different types of support around retention. As this study is exploratory in nature, we sought a convenience/volunteer sample over probability-based methods. As such, the responses cannot be said to be nationally representative; they are more a basis for drawing out indicative similarities and differences across the different LAs, areas and regions across the UK.

Respondents were a mixture of third-sector organisations (41%), LAs (36.6%), private sector businesses (16%) and 'other' (6%) organisations. All regions and nations in the United

³¹ Ibid (p.2)

Kingdom were represented in the responses. The majority of responses came from organisations based in England, with three responses in Scotland and Wales and four from Northern Ireland, which generally reflects the distribution of ERSA's membership. North West England was the region with the greatest number of responses (n = 39).

Of the 131 organisations to respond to the survey, 112 respondents reported that they support care-experienced young people. For 12 organisations (11%), this cohort represents their entire caseload, with the rest answering that care-experienced young people do or may comprise some of their caseload, but the provision they offer is not specifically targeted at care leavers. No organisations who responded to this question said that they do not have care leavers on their caseloads.

3.3 Qualitative interviews with organisations

We supplemented the broader survey data with in-depth qualitative case studies built from interviews with certain employment organisations. These were identified via the survey or snowball sampling methods. The case study organisations were selected for their interesting approach to provision and how they provide support particularly attuned to the local needs of the young people within their catchment areas. Organisations that participated were allowed to select whether they remained anonymous or were named in the report. We thank all organisations that took part, who include:

- » Carefree Cornwall
- » Career Connect
- » Catch22
- » Pure Insight
- » Wigan Council.

3.4 Qualitative research with young people

'NEET' as a concept has garnered criticism on the grounds that it defines young people 'by what they are not'.³² This is often referred to as a 'deficit model' of thought, whereby wider inequalities are perceived as being a result of problems with the individual. The structures and barriers that create a difficult environment for progression to EET are neglected in favour of a focus on the plans a young person has for their future. This language of deficit often arises from a lack of consultation with young people themselves, when assumptions are made about young people in place of engaging with them about their realities.³³ We wanted to move beyond this in our research and sought to include young people's perspectives within our study, as they are ultimately the experts on what works for individuals in their situation. We have included verbatim quotations from our participants to express our findings in their own words.

We spoke to young people via a combination of methods, dependent on their preferences. Due to the evidence that indicates anxiety is a prevalent issue amongst NEET young people, we provided the option for young people to provide their thoughts over WhatsApp or text, as an alternative to speaking over the phone, allowing them to reflect on their answers for as long as they needed at a time that suited them. All young people remain anonymous in this report and all potentially identifying characteristics, such as their location, age and programmes they have participated in, have been redacted to protect their identities.

³² Nudzor (2010)

³³ McPherson (2021)

04

Key findings: barriers to EET

We wanted to understand the barriers faced by young people face when reintegrating into EET. This is the vital first step to understanding how to build effective NEET reintegrative strategies that meet young people's needs. In the survey, organisations were asked 'what are the biggest barriers facing the young people on your caseloads for entry into employment, education or training?' and were allowed to select all that applied. We combine this data with insights from literature and our qualitative data collection.

Studies in the literature have found that the factors underpinning why a young person becomes NEET are numerous and 'intersect' across multiple barriers, such as 'disadvantaged family backgrounds, low educational attainment, negative school experiences, mental and physical ill-health and disability', as well as wider, contextual factors like 'depressed local labour markets and poverty-induced living circumstances'.³⁴ The barriers a particular young person faces will therefore be unique and not uniform across the NEET cohort. Our mixed-method approach, using the survey and qualitative data, allows us to unpack both prevalence of barriers and nuances in how these intersect and overlap.

Firstly, it should be emphasised that we found from speaking to young people and the practitioners who support them that although NEET young people may not have concrete plans for their futures, they do have a wide variety of aspirations and hopes for what they want to do in terms of EET. For instance, when asked where he hopes to be in five years' time, one care-experienced young person said he hopes to be 'just an ideal, standard person', with 'a good house, decent income, a job that's enjoyable'. A practitioner we interviewed said that the young people he works with 'want to be out there doing stuff' but are often prevented from doing so. The barriers were not motivational but instead were related to capability or opportunity – i.e., they are factors outside of the young person's control and require structural-level solutions.

34 Russell and Thompson (2022), p.2

Figure 3 outlines the proportion of survey respondents from employability services who selected each type of barrier as being a key contributing factor to being NEET for the young people they support. The sections that follow explore each of these elements in more depth.

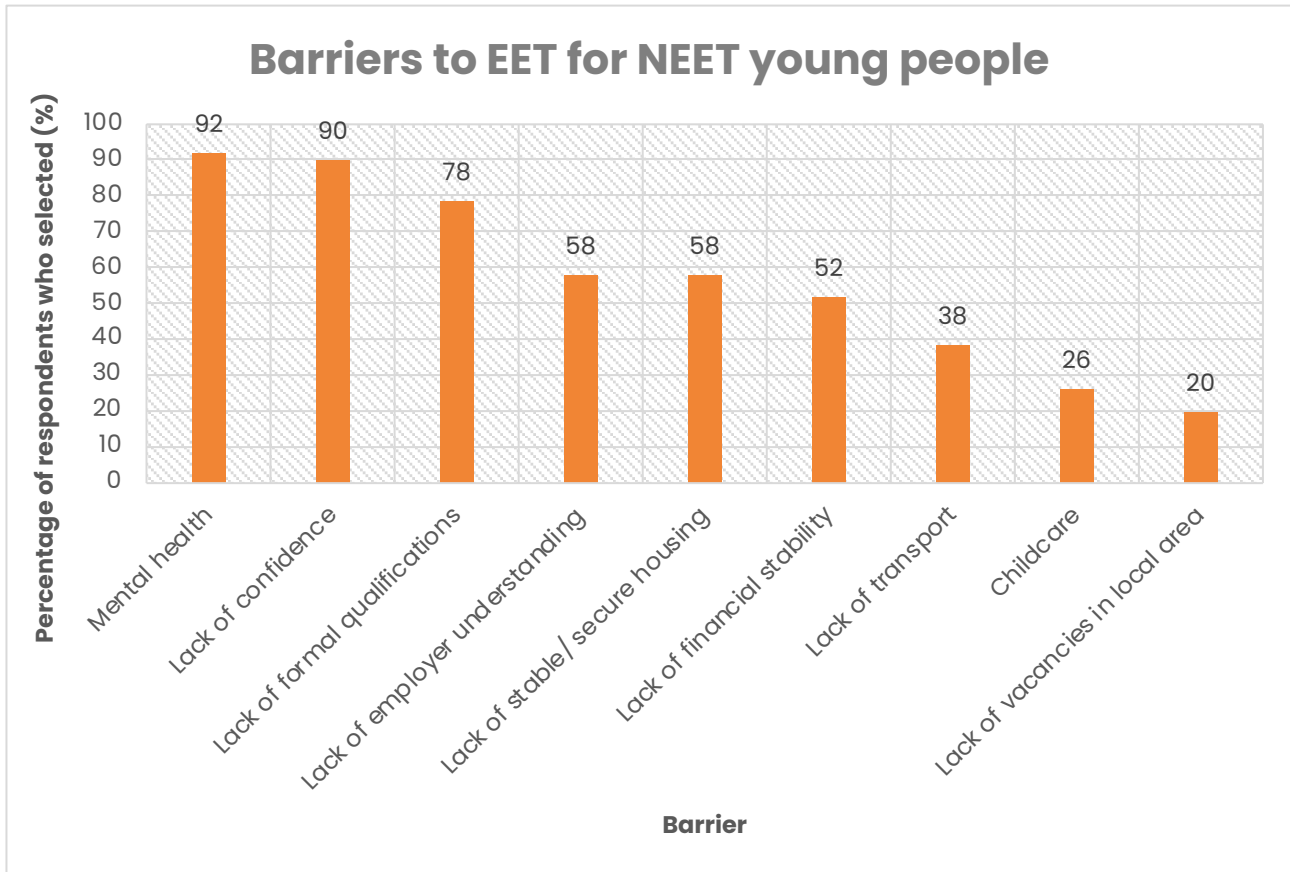


Figure 3: Barriers to EET. Source: ERSA and EDT 2023 survey

92% of respondents selected **mental-health-related reasons** as one of the biggest barriers to EET for the young people they support.

4.1.1 Mental health

One of the most notable findings from our survey was how many respondents reported mental health issues being a barrier for the young people they support. This was the most frequently selected barrier and was chosen by 91.8% of respondents. As shown in Figure 4, the prevalence of mental health conditions has increased for all young people in the 16-to-24 age range over the past decade. Existing research has consistently found this is hindering their progress in EET. For instance, the most recent wave of the Youth Voice Census found that over half of those currently in work and those looking for work reported anxiety being their single biggest barrier to EET.³⁵

35 Youth Employment UK (2022)

Although the rate of diagnosis with a mental health condition has risen for all young people over the past decade, the increase in rate amongst NEET young people is steeper than that in the wider population (Figure 4). Amongst the general population, there was a 6.1% rise in the proportion of young people with mental health conditions between 2012 and 2022, with a rise of 12.6% amongst NEET young people. One in five NEET young people in England are now classified as having a mental health condition and, as shown in Figure 4, the percentage-point difference between NEET young people with a mental health condition and the general population of young people has increased from 5.2 in 2012 to 11.7 in 2022. The direction of causality between mental health and NEET status is difficult to determine, with pre-existing issues affecting work or study capability, but becoming NEET also being likely to increase a young person’s predisposition to having a mental health condition. Regardless of which came first, mental health is clearly a significant factor for young people entering and staying in EET.

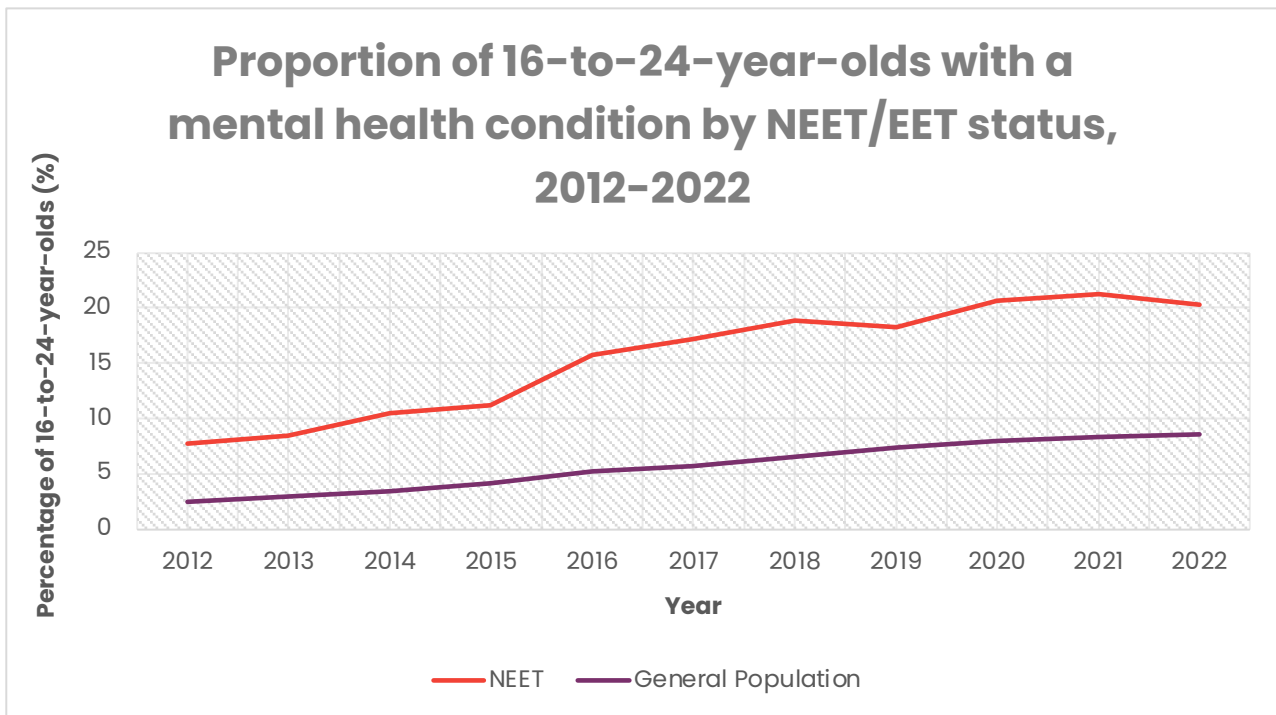


Figure 4: Proportion of 16-to-24-year-olds with a mental health condition by NEET/EET status, 2012-2022. Source: Office for National Statistics - Annual Population Survey

Previous research has found that care-experienced young people are more likely to have mental health problems than the rest of the population, with this often stemming from childhood trauma and instability.³⁶ Indeed, in our survey, the rate of selection of this barrier was higher amongst those who support care leavers specifically than those with a broader NEET caseload (100% of respondents versus 91%).



36 Sanders (2020)



4.1.2 Self-belief and confidence

The second most prevalent barrier in the survey was 'a lack of confidence' (90% of organisations selected this). Again, this reflects the findings of wider literature. For instance, a City and Guilds report stated that almost a quarter of young people did not feel confident or mentally ready for work.³⁷

Through our literature review and qualitative data collection, it became clear that for care-experienced young people, this often resulted from a lack of familial support network to provide encouragement and support them in persevering when they were finding EET difficult and contemplating their next steps.³⁸ Developing a sense of who they are as adults and forging a new life for themselves away from care was the priority for the younger care leavers we spoke to:

'I'm not thinking about that [employment] yet, I'm just trying to find myself to be honest.'

Although the LA advisers provide this support loco parentis, there was a recurrent narrative amongst young people of a lack of trust towards some of those whose remit was to support them. Two young people said:

'Sometimes it feels like they're just trying to keep you occupied until you're no longer their problem. There's nothing actually meaningful, it's all just "let's keep them busy, so we can say that we are doing our job"'.

'The Council say, "we're the corporate parent and will look after you", but it just feels as though as soon as you get to a certain age, it's like, "well, yeah you're not our responsibility anymore"'.

A practitioner told us that 'so many young people have had social workers for four months and then they've got a new social worker without even being told that the old one had left'. This results in young people not knowing who to turn to for support when they need it and feeling as

³⁷ City and Guilds (2022)

³⁸ Allen (2003); Crawford et al. (2011)



though they were an inconvenience to those in positions of authority. Moreover, young people felt that those who did work with them in a support capacity often insinuated that they were not capable of or suited to many EET options, and should have narrow expectations for their future:

‘I was told by my PA [Progression Adviser] that I should join the army because there was probably nothing else out there for me’.

As we go on to articulate in a later section, the young people we spoke to had often ended up in their EET opportunities through perseverance ‘in spite of’ guidance from practitioners. It should be noted that many of them had very positive encounters with Progression Advisers who supported them consistently over a period of years, but these were often described as being the odd ones out in a history of turbulent support.

4.1.3 Lack of formal qualifications

The third most frequently selected barrier in the survey was lack of qualifications which was selected by 78.4% of organisations.

There is a significant difference in the levels of educational achievement for care-experienced

young people and their peers, with care leavers performing worse at GCSE level and in terms of access to higher education.³⁹ Indeed, none of the young people we spoke to had formal secondary qualifications and had taken ‘bumpy’ roads to securing their EET, through access courses or apprenticeships later on in life.

An interesting nuance that we found in our qualitative work is that those supporting care-experienced young people reported that although mental health issues were extremely common amongst their cohorts, they also find that other conditions, such as, for example, neurological conditions and learning difficulties, were often misdiagnosed as mental health conditions due to young people presenting ‘chaotically’. In turn, this can mean that prescribed medication does not effectively work for them in dealing with the root issue and affects their ability to engage in further learning. In fact, we spoke to one young person who would not have been able to continue in her apprenticeship without intervention from a third-sector provider, who helped her understand learning materials as a result of suspected, but undiagnosed, dyslexia.



4.1.4 Insecure housing and supported accommodation

Insecure or unstable housing was selected as a barrier by 58% of respondents, making it the joint fourth most common perceived barrier to EET. Russell and Thompson point out that for all NEET young people it ‘may be necessary to address immediate challenges such as homelessness ... before attempting to engage participants in education or employment’.⁴⁰

It was clear that this was a particular issue for care-experienced young people, who often face a housing ‘crisis’ at key transition points, the timing of which varies according to the LA and the type of care they are placed within. The rates of selection of this barrier were 77.78% for organisations with a caseload entirely comprising care leavers, compared with 55.68% of those with a mixed NEET caseload. At the time of writing, the average age for non-care-experienced people leaving home in England was 23, whereas people who have been in the care system leave at 18 or even younger, as was the case with one young person we spoke to.⁴¹ Some LAs require young people to leave foster placements at 18, whereas others allow young people to continue on to age 21 as part of the ‘staying put’ programme. As such, a council that we spoke to felt that independent living is often the priority for their young people before they can contemplate EET.

Securing housing can be problematic and directly prohibit young people from securing an EET place. A lack of suitable follow-on accommodation often requires young people to move outside of the LA within which they have grown up, meaning they often have limited knowledge and understanding of available opportunities local to them. Any opportunities they had begun to secure as they

reached adulthood may no longer be viable due to being too far or too expensive to commute to. This is also the case for access to EET information, advice and guidance (IAG), and support. Although provision for IAG is a legislated requirement for NEET care-experienced young people, young people’s access to this is in reality constrained by their transience.

Moreover, payment requirements for supported accommodation often negate the benefits of work for the young people. Foyers charge high levels of rent to their residents who work over a certain number of hours per week, whereas young people in receipt of benefits have the lodging costs automatically covered. One practitioner described how they worked with one young person whose foyer took £1000 out of their monthly income, leaving them with £300 for all other costs. Young people who work over the threshold of hours may therefore be forced into a choice of:

- » staying in both work and supported accommodation but with very reduced means for other expenditure
- » staying in work but moving out of the supported accommodation, putting them at risk of homelessness if that employment or accommodation falls through
- » leaving their employment so that foyer costs can be covered by benefits.

Care leavers are disproportionately impacted by the risk of homelessness—it is estimated that 26% of the homeless population are care experienced.⁴² If we conceptualise choices in ‘rationalist’ terms, it is clear that opting for the latter of the three above choices is a rational decision and encouraged by the design of structures within which a young person is placed.

Payment requirements for supported accommodation often negate the benefits of work for young people.

⁴⁰ Russell and Thompson (2022, p.34)

⁴¹ Fortune and Smith (2021)

⁴² MacAlister (2022)

Practitioners we spoke to advised that young people who are able to stay in foster care until they are 21 tend to have more positive EET outcomes. Although there will be NEET young people who are not care experienced but also have housing issues in young adulthood, the typical ‘safety net’ of their family/parental home means that for the wider cohort, issues related to transience may not be as pronounced.

Within the cohort of care-experienced young people who went to university, many faced difficulty over the university holidays when other students would return to their families, leaving them alone for weeks at a time. As they had moved away from the support they accessed prior to university, they lost this support network. Practitioners described how these feelings of loneliness and isolation led to many leaving their courses prematurely.

Together, these points indicate that the age-rather than needs-based cliff-edge of access to accommodation is a highly restrictive barrier to EET, and is uniquely constraining for the care-experienced subset of the NEET population, requiring specialised support. A quote from Ly-Chambers illustrates this: ‘25 is the age the system left me, but 25 is not the age I stop being a “care leaver”’.⁴³

4.1.5 Lack of employer understanding, flexibility and work routine

Over half of respondents (58%) selected ‘lack of employer understanding’ as a barrier their young people face, the same rate of selection as housing issues. The rate of response varied geographically—the frequency of selection for ‘lack of employer understanding’ was much higher in the East Midlands (78%), North East (71%) and Yorkshire and the Humber (70%), compared with the South West (50%) and the North West (44%).

The care-experienced young people that we spoke to articulated difficulties they faced with fitting in with the rigidity of work. For instance, one young person said:

‘It’s hard going from fixed hours of school to college, which is flexible, and then back to nine to five again in work.’

For this reason, young people had started opportunities but failed to complete them, as the jump from having no fixed structure to the expectation of immediately adopting a rigid one was too difficult. This included very short-term EET options like skills courses.



43 Ly-Chambers (2020)



One young person we spoke to also struggled to retain her apprenticeship without support from a third-sector provider due to her challenges with course and work content, due to dyslexia. Without the involvement of the third-sector provider, she feels she would have struggled to stay in the apprenticeship due to inflexibility from the training provider.

Literature also indicated that the chances of being involved with the criminal justice system is increased for care leavers.⁴⁴ Almost a quarter of the prison population in England have spent time in care and 52% of looked-after children had had a criminal conviction by age 24 compared with 13% of children who were not care experienced.⁴⁵ This presents the additional difficulty of securing employment with known convictions and requires flexibility on the part of the employer to look beyond this. Research has also indicated that employers can stigmatise their employees when they are known to be care leavers.⁴⁶

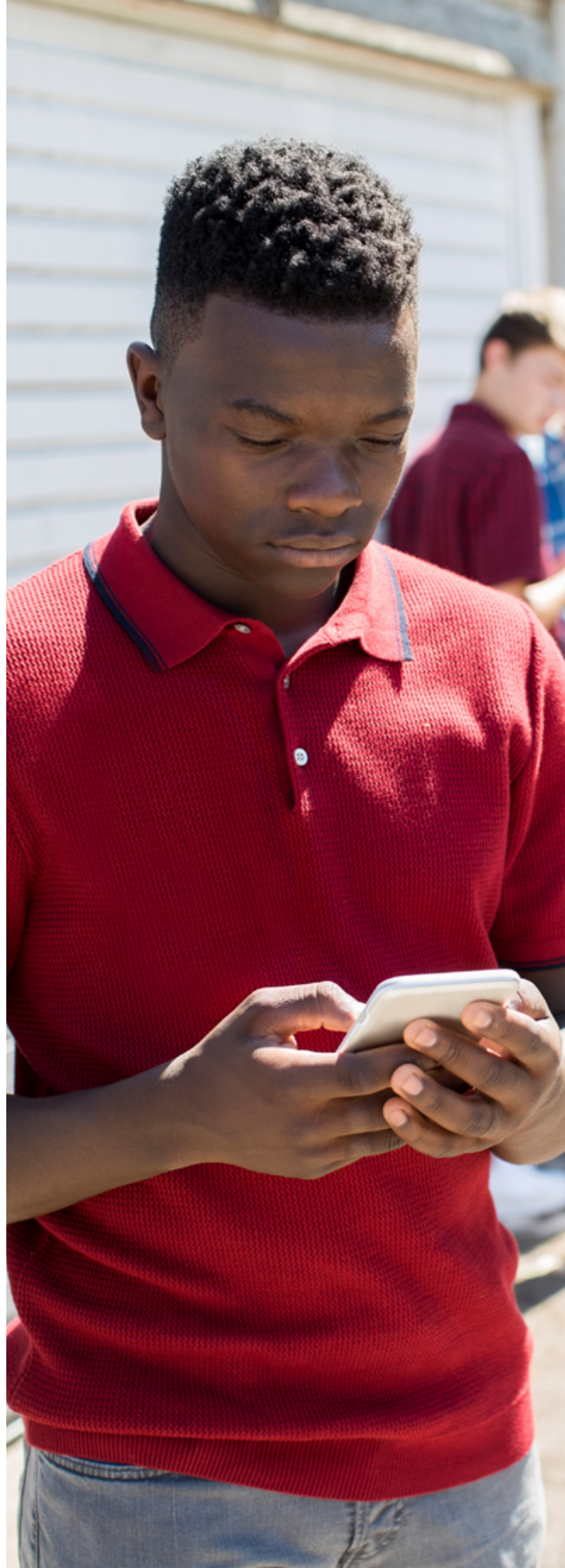
4.1.6 Financial instability

Financial instability as a perceived barrier to EET was selected by 52% of respondents. It was clear from speaking to practitioners that many of the training programmes young people can access as a step into longer term EET opportunities do not provide adequate financial remuneration for participants and are only accessible to those with a financial safety net. For instance, interviews revealed that apprenticeship wages are often too low for young people, particularly those with families themselves, to contemplate. For those young people who claim benefits, short-term courses can cause problems with claiming and leave participants worse off than before they started. Young people in education claiming benefits are expected to look for work over the summer holidays when they should be working on assignments or taking a break. A recurrent narrative was the assumption in the design of these programmes that young people have

44 MacAlister (2022); ONS (2022)

45 Ibid

46 Sanders (2020)





access to alternative sources of finance within their family:

‘Systems and structures are designed around the idea of a parent being there, that’s the assumption.’

Practitioners spoke about the responsibility they felt to ensure that young people were not worse off having entered opportunities recommended to them. Young people we spoke to described the difficulty they faced with budgeting when they entered independent living and their inexperience with budgeting, which reflects existing research by Ofsted (2022), which found that many care leavers themselves believe that they are not sufficiently financially prepared before they leave care.⁴⁷ This is obviously an issue for young people who have left care and are estranged from their families, but also those whose parents cannot afford to support them. However, the discrepancies between LAs are particularly pronounced in terms of the financial support they offer to their care-experienced young people. Support offered to care leavers is dictated by LAs and it differs depending on where you live in the country. The Children and Social Work Act 2017 requires all LAs to establish a Corporate Parenting Board and publish a ‘local offer for care leavers’, but despite some national framework, there are differences across LAs in a variety of areas. This can result in confusing differences for care leavers and cause inequalities between LAs. For example, 130 out of 151 LAs exempt care leavers from paying council tax or offer a discount, meaning that 21 do not offer this.⁴⁸ Wales has recently introduced a Universal Basic Income for their care leavers, but this is not replicated in other UK jurisdictions. There are other discrepancies, (some LAs fund Masters programmes, for example, whereas others do not).

4.1.7 Transport issues

‘Lack of transport’ was selected as a barrier to young people by 38% of respondents to the survey. This was selected at a much higher rate in

the North East (71%), East of England (57%), and the East Midlands (56%), compared with the average across all respondents (38%). In our qualitative data collection, it became clear that this was particularly an issue in rural areas. We spoke to one practitioner in Cornwall who said that the lack of trains and buses in the area meant that many opportunities were impractical for young people to reach.

4.1.8 Childcare

Childcare was selected by 25.8% of organisations. None of the young people we spoke to had children and further research is required to explore issues from the perspectives of young people who are parents. Practitioners did have a wide range of solutions for this, and this is covered in the following sections.

4.1.9 Lack of vacancies in the local area

The least frequently selected barrier was ‘lack of vacancies in the local area’, selected by one in five respondents (20%). This reflects the state of the current labour market, with vacancies reaching a record high in May 2022. Despite falling since, they remain high relative to pre-pandemic levels. However, it is clear that high vacancy rates are not uniform across the country, with some practitioners articulating that their young people are struggling to find vacancies in the areas within which they work. For instance, a practitioner in Cornwall explained how much of the work is seasonal, leaving young people with extremely limited opportunities in off-peak seasons. More consistent opportunities are heavily over-subscribed:

‘We have an Audi [dealership] down here where a job came available and about 600 applicants applied. If a couple of young people applied, they probably won’t get a look in.’

The narrative of high vacancy rate may therefore mask the localised nuances within this national picture. Where vacancies remain few, young

47 Ofsted (2022)

48 Evans (2022)



people are likely to be disadvantaged by virtue of their relative lack of experience compared with older people.

4.1.10 Lack of knowledge

Outside of the survey in our qualitative data collection, an additional barrier came through as an important hindrance – a lack of knowledge about available options and how to pursue those that appeal. This is undoubtedly linked to the lack of self-confidence young people have in relation to EET.

As we articulated above in relation to housing issues and transience, councils have a legal obligation to provide IAG for NEET care leavers, but from the perspective of young participants, this had not been sufficient to equip them with adequate knowledge.

‘I didn’t know that I could get grants to go to university, I didn’t know that I could even get on an access course. There was nothing there to say: “Look, here’s what’s available, and here’s the routes you can take, and even though you’ve had these, you know these setbacks with no

education. That doesn’t stop you.” There was none of that.’

‘When I’m speaking to other people who have been in care, the common factors are “no one told me nothing”’.

The lack of formalised IAG for young people was reflected in the fact that when we asked young people how they accessed any training, work or education that they were currently in, it was often due to serendipity in gaining access to that pathway. For instance, one young person walked past a further education building and saw courses advertised. After this, he walked in and asked for information. Others spoke of particular people – including those who were not formally assigned advisers—they had come across who had helped them:

‘It’s very rare you might get a good PA here or there, or you might get a good someone. I was very lucky. I had some really good mentors who didn’t come from the care sector who just happened to be life mentors who sort of happened to tell me to sort of like, help, you know.’



05

Key findings: current provision

We asked survey respondents about the types of support that they currently offer, and their answers are the main source of information in this section. We supplement and contextualise these findings with insights from wider literature where available.

5.1. Caseloads

The majority of respondents to the survey allow young people to refer themselves into the provision they offer (67%), whereas 22% only receive referrals via the local authority, with 41.67% receiving referrals from school or college.

The most common length of intervention (time on caseload) was four to six months, selected by 30% of respondents. This was followed by support of over a year, selected by 23%.

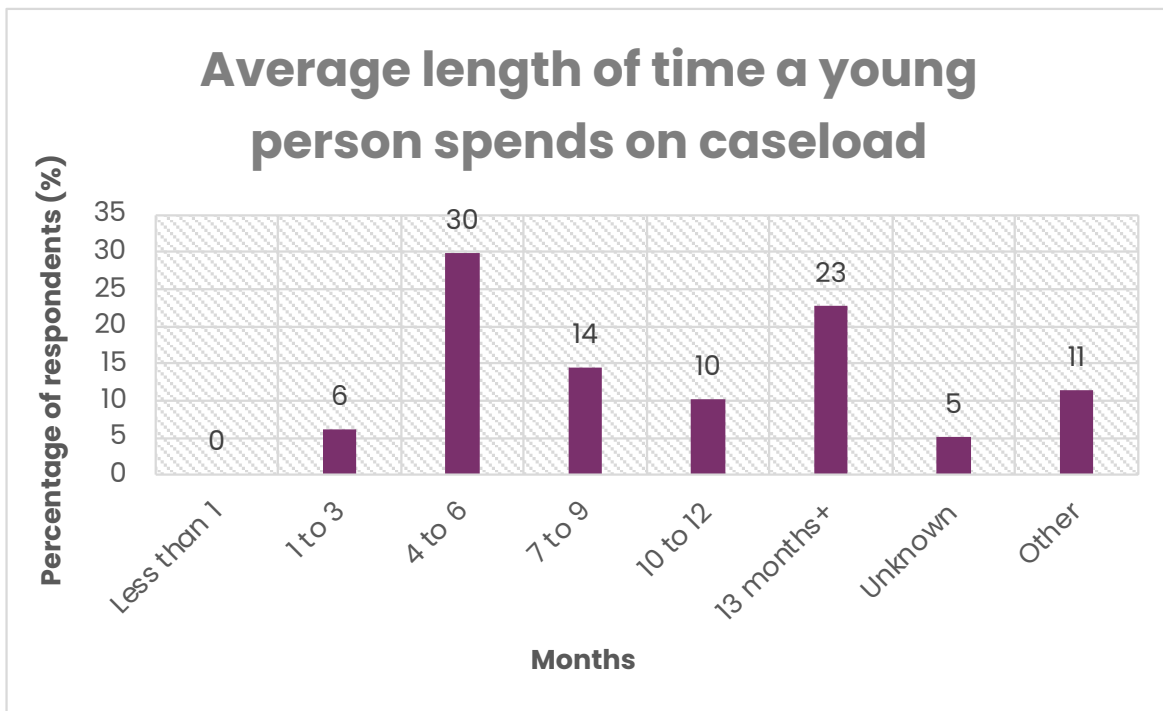


Figure 5: Average length of time a young person remains on caseload. Source: ERSA and EDT 2023 survey.

5.2 Support with entry to EET

We asked organisations how they decide what types of support to offer their NEET young people. Of these respondents, 83% said that they are guided by young people’s voices in what to offer, 59% reported they engage with evidence as to what to offer, 51% responded that they are guided by contractual obligations, and 42% informally share best practice amongst other organisations.

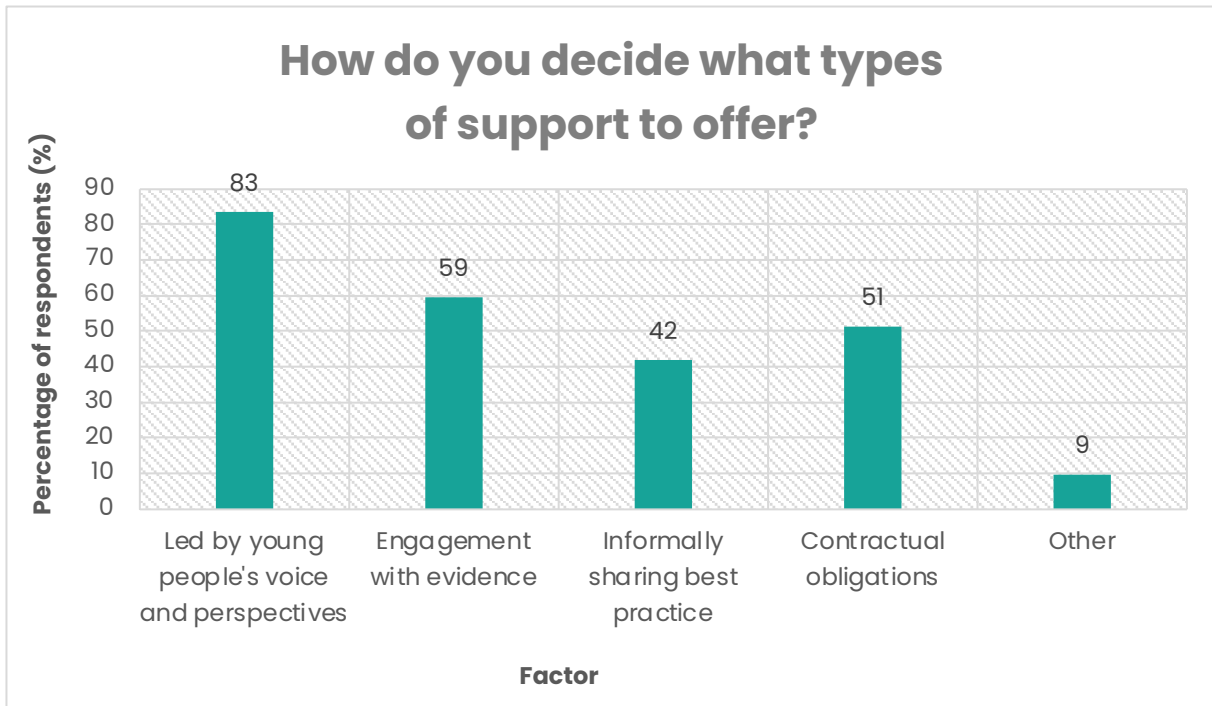


Figure 6: Methods used to decide on forms of provision. Source: ERSA and EDT 2023 survey.

The survey also asked respondents to select the types of support they provide to the young people on their caseloads. The most common type of support was one-to-one information, advice and guidance, which was selected by 95% of respondents. This was followed by information about apprenticeships (85%) and information about traineeships (75%).

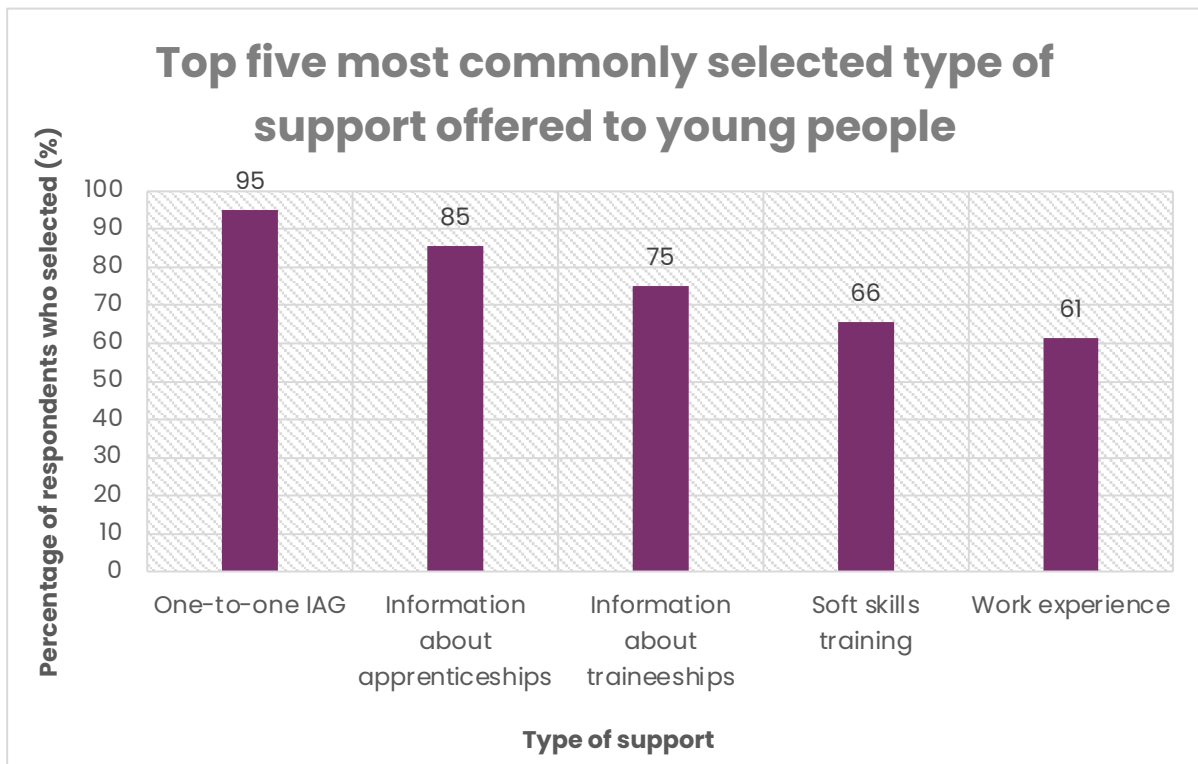


Figure 7: Five most common types of support. Source: ERSA and EDT 2023 survey.

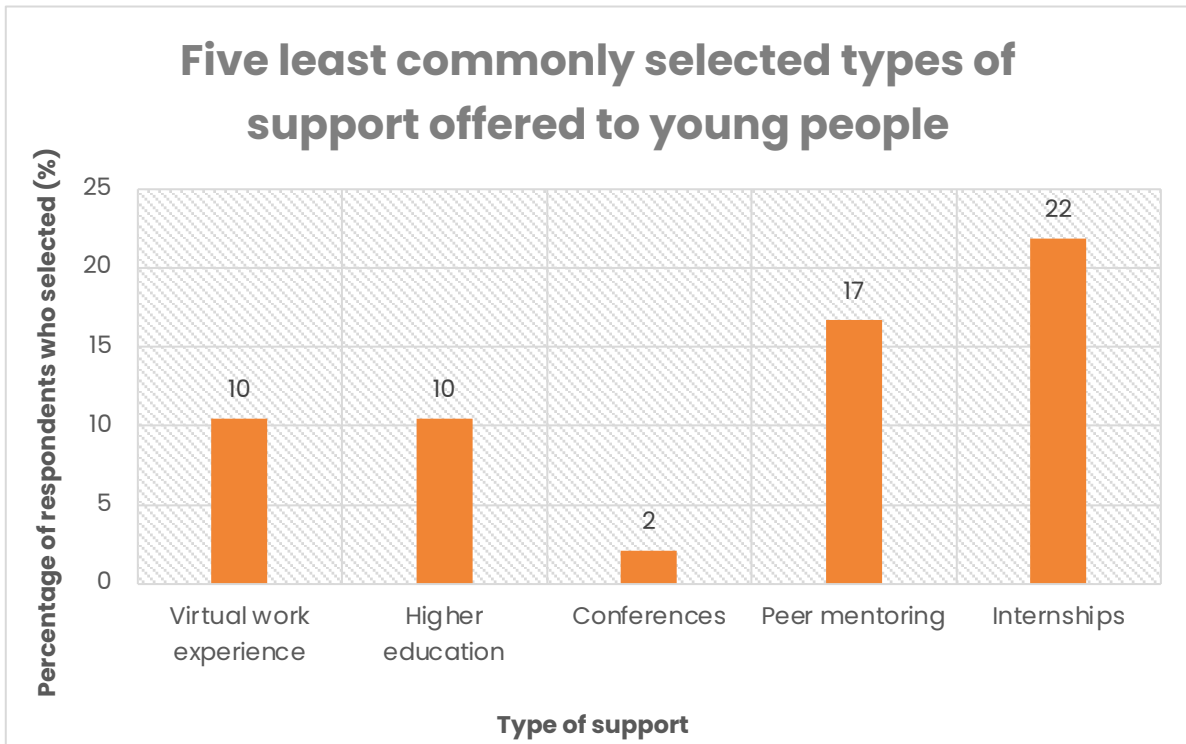


Figure 8: Five least common types of support. Source: ERSA and EDT 2023 survey.

Mental health support was selected by 49% of respondents. Organisations also reported that they signpost young people to specialist provision, such as mental health support, indicating that organisations tend not to have this provision in-house but may try to ensure that young people know where to access it. Organisations we spoke to also indicated that they often advocate on behalf of the young person in primary care settings, such as assisting with requests for referral from diagnoses of suspected conditions such as dyslexia and ADHD.

In terms of provision that exposes young people to the working environment, work experience was the most common (62%), followed by supported employment (47%), training schemes within their own organisation and placements (both 44%), and internships (22%). Virtual work experience was the least commonly selected type of provision (10%).

Many of the young people we spoke to had been encouraged to attend short-term courses to build skills run by other organisations, such as those run by the Prince’s Trust. This was described by one young person as an attempt to ‘keep them busy’ whilst on their caseloads.

‘Organisations, they try and keep you busy so they’re very good for putting you on things like National Citizen Service, you know, Prince’s Trust, or whatever is the local version’.

Other notable findings across the sample were:

- » The responses indicate that mentoring of young people by adults is much more commonly employed than peer (young people to young people) mentoring (51% versus 17%).
- » In terms of skills development, support with soft skills seems to be higher than functional skills or formal accreditation, with 66 % selecting the former, followed by 41.67% and 38.54% for the latter two, respectively.
- » More respondents reported providing information about Further Education routes than Higher Education (24% versus 10%).
- » Group activities was selected by over half (51%) but the function of these seems to be distinct from team-building exercises, which was selected by only 30% of participants, a difference of 21 percentage points.

Other free text responses included apprenticeships specifically for people with learning disabilities, signposting to other specialist services for mental health issues and substance dependency/misuse, support with tenancy/benefit issues, support with travel and commuting to enable the young person to learn new routes, support in accessing bursaries, and particular support when transitioning.

There were some notable differences in responses according to whether support is specifically tailored to care leavers only (Figure 9).

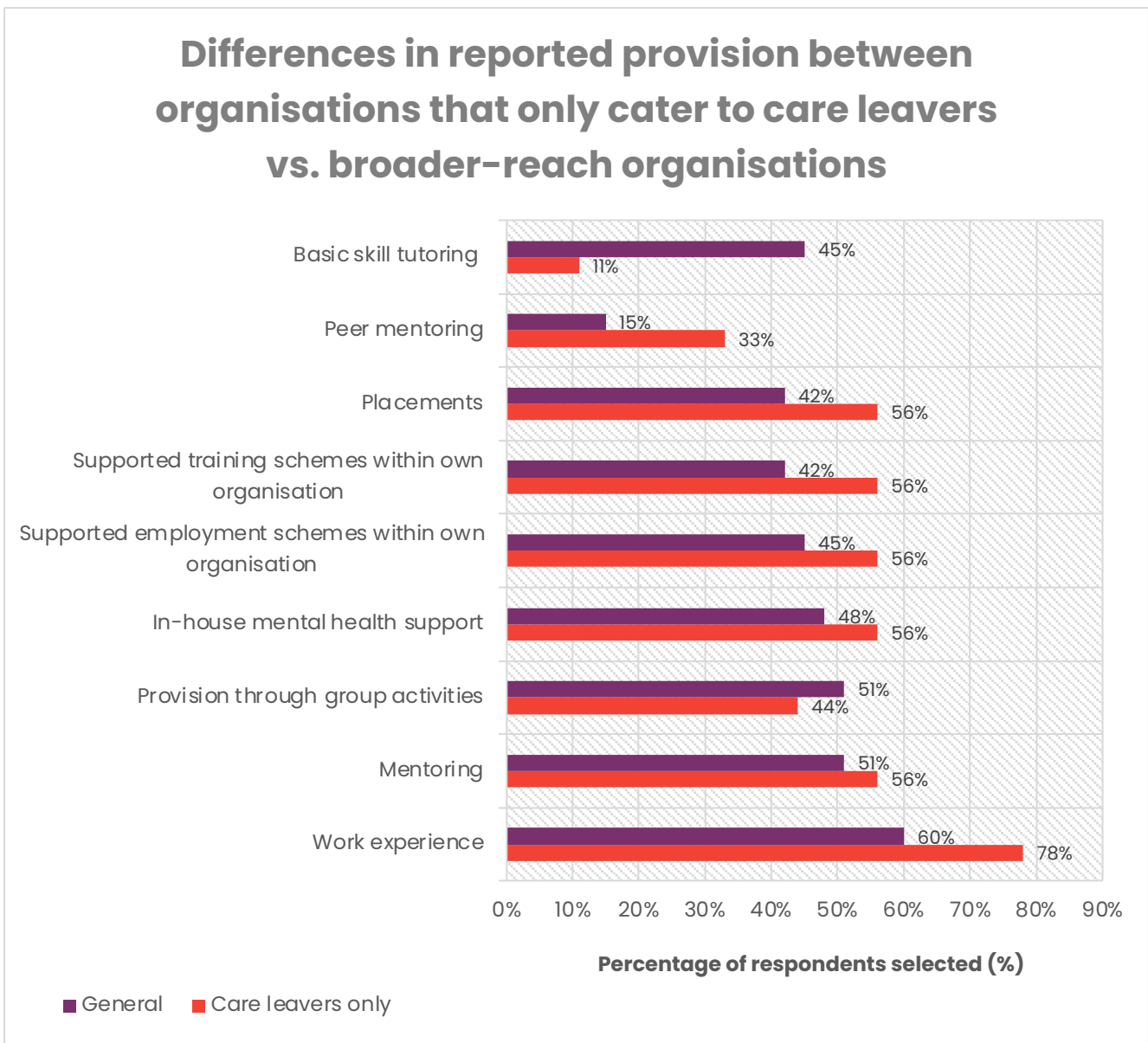


Figure 9: Differences in reported provision between organisations that only cater to care leavers vs. broader-reach organisations. Source: ERSA and EDT 2023 survey.

5.3 Support with retention in EET

As part of this study, we sought to determine the type and duration of support offered to young people once they are in employment. A total of 53% of survey respondents said they continue support to young people whilst they are in work. We thematically coded open responses into the five main categories explored below.

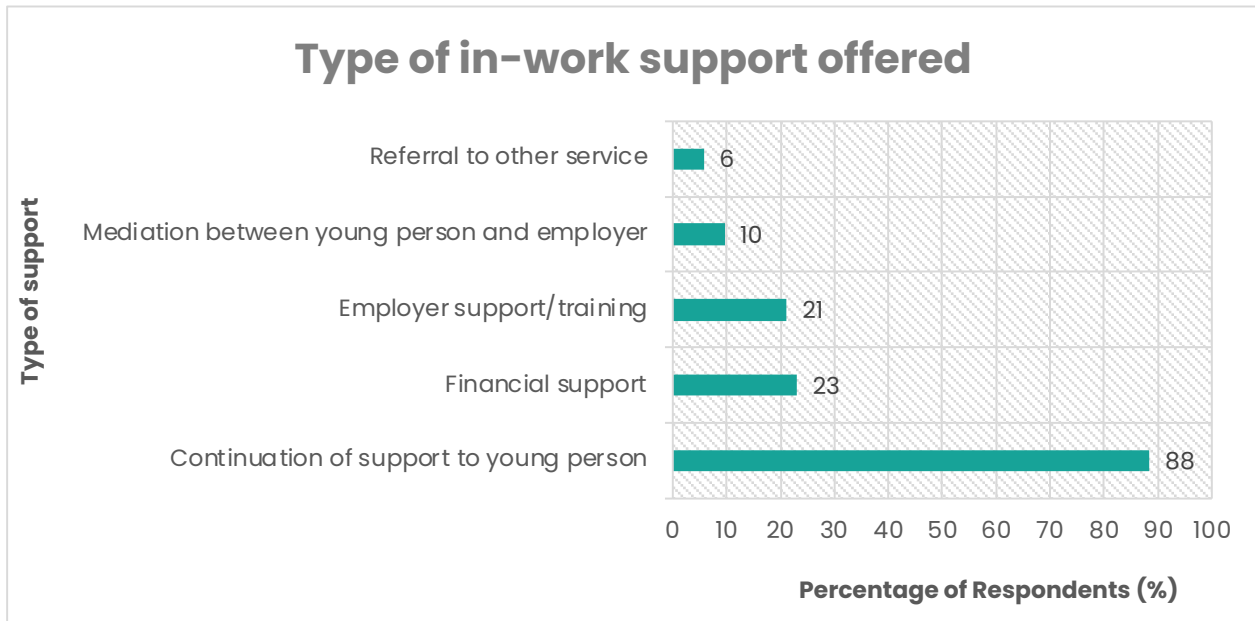


Figure 10: Types of in-work support offered to young people. Source: ERSA and EDT 2023 survey.

Continuation of young person support after entering EET

Organisations stated that they provide a continuation of support from the same service to the young person once they had been helped into a role. This kind of support was described by one respondent as ‘regular contact with a participant asking the right questions – i.e., how they are finding the job, any concerns in the role, and any further support they need’. Continued support to the young person was by far the most common type of support referenced in the survey, with 88% of responses indicating it. One practitioner we spoke to articulated the importance of this type of support:

‘We always provide the opportunity to carry on that relationship [between young person and the organisation], and I think it’s important cause young people can go into employment and three months later say it’s not for me’.

Employer training and financial support followed with 21% and 23% of responses, respectively. Mediation between employers and employees were less common, comprising 9% of responses from each cohort. In some cases, three or more of these types of support were offered by the same service, providing the most holistic approaches to in-work employment support. In many cases, the kind of support being offered by employment support organisations fills the gaps in vulnerable young people’s lives, providing the advice, financial support and checking in that other young people might receive from their families.

Financial support

Responses indicated that financial support is provided for immediate costs involved with starting work, such as a uniform and travel allowance. A transition allowance is often adopted, providing young people with an income between their final Universal Credit or other benefits payments and their first pay date from employment. Financial advice was also indicated as a type of support provided – for instance, helping service users to understand payslips. One response referenced a Youth Works Grant of £3,000 that was available to participants. Young people that we spoke to had used grants to purchase equipment, such as laptops for work or studying.

Employer training

Responses that referred to employer support in more detail outlined both disability and trauma-informed training for employers. The purpose of this training is to ensure that employers understand the complex needs of some of the young people on these programmes, with the hope that this will foster

long-term employment. The organisations we spoke to in our qualitative data collection indicated that the process for doing this often begins relatively informally by ‘door knocking’ employers and engaging in a ‘selling’ process of convincing them to bypass traditional, rigid recruitment processes. From there, relationships are established with employers with some developing a more flexible approach, for instance offering a phased start to employment that allows a young person to build up to full-time hours over a period of weeks to months.

Mediation between the young person and employer

In this type of support, responders indicated they ‘negotiated and acted as an intermediary if issues arise’ with a young person’s behaviour whilst in employment.

Referral to other services

A ‘joined-up’ approach to provide support within different organisations working in the same area was reported. Referrals either suggested a switch in provider to continue support once in work, or a wider in-work support programme to meet the specific needs of a young person. For example, one respondent stated that as part of their follow-up programme, ‘we also discuss solutions that can help – making referrals where necessary or including them in review meetings’.

5.3.1 Duration of support

The duration of support in employment varied greatly, ranging from just a month to indefinite support. The most common time frame for support was six months, and several responses expressed a desire to offer support for longer, emphasising its importance for retaining young people in work. The data on the duration of support continuation is displayed in the graph below.

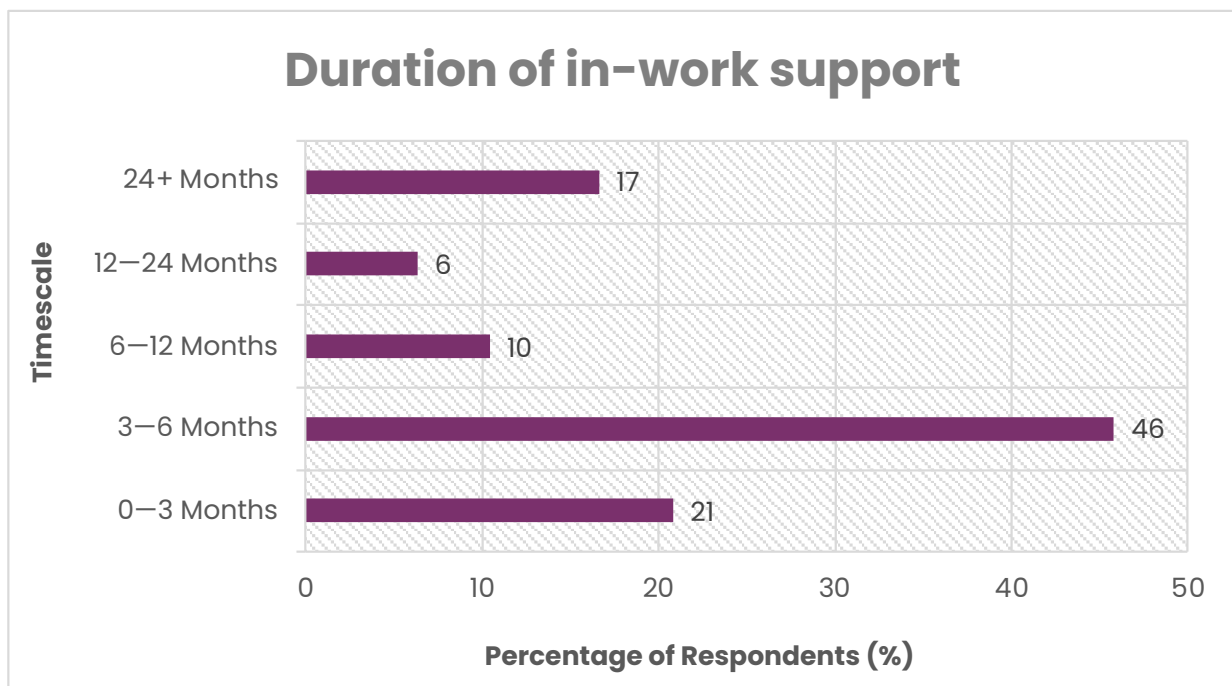


Figure 11: Duration of in-work support offered to young people. Source: ERSA and EDT 2023 survey.

06

Key findings: what works

In this section, we combine survey responses with qualitative insights to answer what works in this space. In the survey, we asked respondents what they found most effective for supporting young people to move closer to EET. We received 87 responses to this question, which was open-ended to allow respondents to describe what is most effective in their own words. We thematically coded these answers and categorised them along with our wider evidence.

6.1 One-to-one support and guidance

One-to-one support was overwhelmingly the most common response to this question in the survey, with almost a third of responses including reference to this. Answers differed in how they included their reference to this, with some saying that this mode is more effective than group-based activities – e.g., ‘121 rather than group’ – and others indicating that both one-to-one and group-based strategies work well together for different purposes. What was clear was many practitioners felt that EET provision should at least include a one-to-one component. As one practitioner told us in an interview, this is to ensure that ‘young people are made to feel like a priority instead of the paperwork and the targets.’

Responses also made clear that this is important to ensure that IAG is tailored and relevant to the young person, grounding discussion and materials in what they would like to find out more about. Prior research has shown that the opportunity to devise a personalised career plan with clear stages and actions, paired with ongoing support in pursuing these goals, has been valued

by young people themselves.⁴⁹ A 2022 Ofsted report revealed that for care leavers, a lack of involvement can have a long-term impact on their education or career path, as well as their wellbeing.⁵⁰ This is an aspect that group provision would struggle to address.

‘Nine times out of ten, it’s listening to them and understanding what they want from what we can offer.’

Ofsted (2022)

For care-experienced young people, one-to-one rather than group support allows the practitioner to show the young person that ‘working solely for them is important’ and that ‘they don’t have a revolving door’ like they may have experienced in the past. It is essential that this adviser remains consistent throughout their time on the programme to show the young person that ‘we’re not going away, when times are tough, we’re still going to be here.’ This is vital to ensure that the young person stays on the programme and is open to receiving advice and guidance.

It is also important for younger care leavers that they are able to retain access to IAG and consistent one-to-one support whilst relocating. As one organisation told us, they will ‘travel the lengths of the country’ to continue support for their young people, ensuring that they do not feel isolated.

49 Atkinson and Hyde (2019)

50 Ofsted (2022)

6.2 Connections with sympathetic employers

Many respondents highlighted the importance of exposure to the working environment, but this was prefaced by saying that this needed to be with a sympathetic and understanding employer. Existing research has found that the workplace can become a support network for young people in itself, with bosses and co-workers often providing emotional and personal support, helping them create meaningful relationships beyond work and supporting retention in work.⁵¹ Practitioners described how establishing good, working connections with understanding employers ensured that there was flexibility in the employers' expectations of young people. For instance, employers identified through this strategy were more likely to allow a phased approach to employment - for instance, allowing a young person to start on reduced hours and build up to full-time hours over a six-week period, or having a guaranteed interview at the end of a trial period.

Many organisations referenced the use of short-term upskilling courses that they could refer young people to. However, as we outlined in section four, speaking to young people indicated that even though these courses were short-term, they still remained too rigid in the hours they expected the young people to participate in and often resulted in attrition. Although establishing placements with employers may take longer, our research indicates that they are important to supplement formalised courses to ensure young people have opportunity to practice adopting a routine.

Organisations had successfully developed partnerships by 'door knocking' employers and directly 'selling' the opportunities to the employer. More formal approaches included identifying larger corporate organisations which have social value targets and requirements that they want to meet via employing NEET young people or care

leavers specifically. However, 'selling' this directly, as one practitioner outlined with reference to care-experienced young people, can result in young people being labelled, which has been shown to result in stigma from some employers.⁵² Ensuring that these employers engage in trauma-informed training was highlighted as an example practice to reduce the likelihood of this occurring.

One care-experienced young person we spoke to was in full-time work within a council as a result of the organisation ring-fencing this opportunity for a care leaver. Prior to this, she had been applying for multiple vacancies but had not been successful. She was thriving in her new role and reported that she 'love[s] the job'. She felt grateful for the fact that the council was a flexible employer, allowing her to take time out to attend mental health-related appointments. Our interviews suggested that without this ring-fenced opportunity with a sympathetic employer, this young person would likely still be NEET.

6.3 Mentoring from peers or those with similar backgrounds

One important finding was the mismatch between the practitioner survey responses and young people's perspectives with regard to the importance they place on peer mentoring. Only one survey respondent out of 87 indicated peer mentoring to be a core effective strategy. In contrast, care-experienced young people indicated that, for them, it needs to be a priority. One care-experienced practitioner explained that greater rapport and trust is built between practitioner and young person due to the fact that 'you understand their frustration and their worries.'

One care-experienced young person explained that they were more likely to receive relevant, useful advice from someone matched on background and characteristics:

'...you don't wanna listen to some, you know, some middle-aged white woman, middle class,

51 Gilligan, R., & Arnau-Sabatés, L. (2020).

52 Sanders (2020); Aylward (2017); Dixon (2016)

middle-aged white woman who's, you know, probably never seen weed and probably scared of the stuff. You don't wanna be taking advice from someone who's never had a hard rung in in their lives'.

One young person articulated his frustration with the fact that programmes and services often categorise participants or attendees by a distinct binary of professional or care-experienced, seeing them as mutually exclusive:

'Why so you see me as a young person, which is fine. I'm a care-experienced young person. That's cool. But why can I not be a professional at the same time? Why have I got come to your event as a care-experienced young person?'

We spoke to one organisation who employ a relationship-based model to structuring their provision for care leavers. Due to young people with care experience often having negative associations with group activities involving other young people, they can be reluctant to engage and have anxiety about engagements that are anything other than one-to-one. Our young people described really enjoying such activities that resulted in building their self-confidence:

'It built my confidence a bit more by them being straightforward with me, telling us we're allowed to make mistakes and don't stress if I do as there's ways and means around it'.

6.4 'Bitesize' careers and employability support

As we explained in section four, young people furthest from the labour market are often trying to 'find' meaning and direction in their lives after entering adulthood before they can contemplate planning their next steps in EET. It was clear from speaking to practitioners and young people that for these individuals, who tend to be towards the younger end of the age bracket and be care leavers, EET exposure needs to be broken into 'bitesize' chunks and 'interwoven' throughout other provision, such as leisure and group activities. By bringing employers to young people rather than vice versa, young people are not expected to behave in certain socially expected ways in exchange for EET experience.

6.5 Continuation of support after EET entry

All data indicated that any support offered should continue whilst the young person enters work. A practitioner explained that their organisation is 'officially meant to take a step back when they get into a role after a couple of weeks, but we don't do that, we call them and say "I'm in the area, shall we catch up on your day off?"' Currently, it seems that organisations do this ad hoc and informally outside of contractual or programme requirements, as they believe young people need this extended support (although formally their support should end at the EET entry point).



07

Conclusions and recommendations

This report has looked at the barriers, current provision and perceived best practice for supporting NEET young people and care leavers in transitioning to EET. It has done so by examining an evidence review, a survey of employability organisations and LAs, and interviews with practitioners and young people, giving us a holistic picture of the current offering and where the gaps lie. This section summarises these gaps and puts forward recommendations for policy and practice.

7.1 Barriers and gaps that need to be addressed

Mental health problems remain a frequently reported barrier for young people. Although some organisations provide mental health support in-house, the majority signpost to other services. Long waiting times to these external services are likely to affect a young person's ability to engage with them.

Young people (aged 16 to 24), particularly care leavers, are often highly transient, as this period of their lives spans several key transition points. However, available support is often restricted by programmes' catchment areas, leaving young people who move away without support at a time when they are building up knowledge of local EET opportunities from scratch.

Housing provision for care leavers directly prohibits the ability of young people to stay in employment, leading to not only a gap but a direct contradiction between care leaver housing policy and the onus on them to enter EET immediately upon leaving care.

Successful retention of young people in employment is often due to flexibility and empathy on the part of the employer, but establishing relationships with employers is currently built informally from the bottom up, requiring a lot of time expenditure on the part of practitioners to identify and persuade these employers to their cause.

Young people specify a preference for mentoring from peers and those from similar backgrounds to them, but this was not commonly employed or identified as effective from the viewpoint of practitioners. Relatedly, young people felt like they were often not consulted on their opinions of what constitutes effective practice.

7.2 Recommendations for policy

Whilst waiting times for NHS mental health services remain long, funding for NEET programmes should include allocations for young people to access private mental health support, such as talking therapies. As we explained in section one, the negative effects of being NEET can cause 'scars' across the life course and cause or exacerbate mental health conditions. Providing swift mental health intervention for this young age group should therefore be a priority to prevent the severity of conditions increasing and reduce the burden on services later on.

It is recommended that policymakers take the following actions:

- » Funding for NEET programmes should include allocations for young people to access private mental health support, such as talking therapies.
- » Evaluate the fees and funding structures of supported/semi-independent accommodation to ensure they do not act to prohibit young people from entering or staying in employment. When doing this, they should consult with young people who live in foyers to gain insights from their first-hand expertise.
- » Review accommodation allocation for care leavers in each LA to ensure that young people are, as far as possible, able to stay within their local area after age 18 or 21, to enable them to apply their knowledge of the local area to find suitable EET next steps.
- » Develop a national network of corporate employers who can accommodate employing NEET young people who may require a role tailored to their needs, allowing flexibility with routine, and undergoing trauma-informed training.
- » All local authorities should consistently provide ring-fenced employment opportunities for care leavers within their organisation or partner organisations.
- » Provide fully funded trauma-informed and mental health training for small-to-medium businesses, to equip them with the tools to take on and support NEET young people who may have mental health issues.

7.3 Recommendations for practice

It is recommended that organisations and practitioners take the following actions:

- » Employ young people or individuals whose backgrounds match that of the typical caseload to act as consultants in development and design of services, or as peer mentors.
- » Where possible, employ flexible geographical eligibility requirements for programme participants to ensure that young people who move outside of the catchment area boundaries can continue accessing IAG.
- » Employment and skills providers who operate in similar geographies should create and share local networks of smaller employers who may not have formalised social value commitments but are nonetheless sympathetic and open-minded about hiring NEET young people.



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Education Development Trust

Highbridge House, 16-18 Duke Street, Reading, Berkshire RG1 4RU

T +44 (0) 118 902 1000

E enquiries@edt.org

W edt.org