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OUT OF SIGHT

**HOW WE LOST TRACK OF THOUSANDS OF NEETS,
AND HOW WE CAN TRANSFORM THEIR PROSPECTS**

Richard Brooks

Fabian Ideas 639

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Fabian Society
61 Petty France
London SW1H 9EU
www.fabians.org.uk

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Out of Sight

How we lost track of thousands of NEETs,
and how we can transform their prospects

Richard Brooks

About the Author

Richard Brooks was senior policy adviser to the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families from 2007 to 09. In this role he was responsible for advising on education policy, further education and skills, qualifications, education funding, accountability and local delivery. He then became director of strategy at Ofsted from 2009-13.

Richard was previously associate director for public services at IPPR and research director at the Fabian Society. He led the Secretariat for the Fabian Commission on Child Poverty and Life Chances. He is the author, co-author or project director for numerous publications on public services, welfare and especially education. These include Ofsted's report 'Unseen Children' on the achievement of pupils from low-income families.

Richard is now an independent consultant, working on a range of strategic issues for public and third sector organisations. Over the past year he has been working in Coventry for the cabinet member for education with the objective of reducing the number of young people in that city who become NEET.

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Unite the Union in the West Midlands – especially Gerard Coyne, the Regional Secretary – has taken a far-sighted view of its role in promoting the skills and employability of its future members, and Impetus-PEF is providing a much needed focus on the NEETs issue nationally. Without the material support of Unite the Union and Impetus-PEF, this publication would not have been possible. My personal thanks also go to Hopi Sen. The indefatigable Fabian team have been a pleasure to work with: thank you Andrew Harrop, Ed Wallis and Richard Speight.

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The government may tell us the economy is fixed, but it certainly does not feel that way. Families everywhere continue to suffer from the cost of living crisis, with real wages still far below their level of five years ago. Unemployment is down, but many people have left the labour market entirely, forcing them to rely on support such as foodbanks. Now this pamphlet highlights another failure that we must bring back into public debate: the many young people who are not in employment, education or training.

One in eight young people are now NEET at the age of 18. That's the equivalent of 25 young people every year from the average secondary school: a shocking waste of potential. Many go on to become long-term unemployed and suffer poor health or other problems. Few things would make such a big difference to our economy and society than bringing their number down.

As this pamphlet explains, since 2010 the tracking of young people leaving school has broken down. We used to have a good idea of how many young people were not in employment, education or training in each local area. Since the Connexions service was cut, that is no longer the case, and the official data grossly understates NEET numbers in many local areas. As a result we have lost track of over 50,000 young people who are NEET. So for a start we need a proper

count in every area, and the government figures should be withdrawn and corrected.

No single organisation or individual controls all the levers necessary to bring down NEET numbers in a systematic and sustained way. Schools, colleges, businesses and third sector organisations all have a part to play. We are writing this foreword jointly precisely to illustrate the importance of working across those boundaries. Until schools and colleges are more responsive to the real needs of employers, and until employers play a bigger role in the education and training of young people, we won't make the progress we need to.

This pamphlet makes three things clear. First, there are many more young people who are NEET than we thought in towns, cities and communities across the country. Second, these young people are not all deprived, socially excluded and hard to help: most simply lack good basic qualifications. Third, this is a problem that we can tackle successfully, not one that is too hard to solve. It is one we can't afford not to.

**Ed Balls, Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, and
Tristram Hunt, Shadow Secretary of State for Education**

Impetus – The Private Equity Foundation

At Impetus-PEF we direct our expertise and resources towards helping charities become more effective at supporting disadvantaged young people to succeed in education and employment. It is crucial work that we believe is building a suite of truly impactful services that will massively improve the life chances of these young people.

But if we want all young people, especially those from low-income backgrounds, to meet their potential, we need change at local and national government level too – changes to policy and practice, and changes to the focus of resources.

This research powerfully makes the case for all three. There has been much talk recently that youth unemployment, and young people not in employment education or training (NEET) in particular, is a small and declining problem, solved by the return to economic growth. The findings in this report show this to be completely untrue – the number of young people NEET at 18 is the same now as 15 years ago, much higher than we think, and current policies will not solve the problem.

Further, the majority of young people who spend significant time NEET – with all the long-term effects this has on their earnings and employment prospects over their lives – are far from the hard-to-crack tough nuts they are often portrayed as being. Most are simply young people, eager to do well, but failed by education and employment services, both pre- and post-16.

Impetus-PEF has called for a secretary of state with responsibility for driving down the NEET numbers once and for all. Currently, responsibility and resources are split across three departments, and young people making the transition from school to work fall through the cracks between them. Both this report and our previous work identify changes needed to schools, FE colleges, and local authorities. Both call for a secretary of state to be given accountability for ending our NEET crisis.

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Young people not in employment, education or training are not an insoluble problem – rather, they are an asset that we have yet to realise. But doing so requires focus, co-ordinated action and the proper use of our existing resources. The latter is particularly hard to get right if we don't even have an accurate idea of how many young people are affected, and it is imperative that we get the counting right. Beyond that there are clear policy priorities to be taken to make NEETs history once and for all, and this report outlines them compellingly.

Daniela Barone Soares, Chief Executive

Unite West Midlands

Unite's members see every day the profound consequences of a failure to give young people the skills, qualifications and training they need to succeed. Young people who begin their adult lives as NEETs are more likely to be paid low wages and to be in unstable employment in later life. If we want to help our future members - and our current members' families - we need to give young people a better foundation to build on.

First, we have to know who needs help. This report shows we lose track of tens of thousands of young people when they leave school. Many of these young people have low qualifications and are very likely to be NEET. Coventry is one of just a few cities that are working hard to identify the young people who need help, but there is little incentive to do so across the country. Being identified as NEET can trigger support, but the 'hidden NEETs' miss out: if no one knows they need help, they don't get it. We need to find out who they are, locally and nationally.

When you see these young people clearly, you see they are not media stereotypes. By and large, what sets them apart is simply a lack of the skills that lead to good, stable employment. To change this, we need to make sure every young person has the qualifications to do A-Levels or start a Level 3 apprenticeship – for example in one of the areas of skills shortage in the West Midlands, which include manufacturing and construction.

We must give communities, employers, colleges and unions the chance to act together to meet the needs of young people locally. This pamphlet proposes creating Young People’s Employment and Education Partnership Boards with a single objective: to increase the proportion of young people in employment or education. By working together, we can address educational and training needs, help solve the problems young people face in the workplace, and build employer–school links.

In a typical city, there are perhaps 500 young people each year who need such help. Given the proper focus and support, each could have a mentor, a career path to follow and the support to achieve their goals, whether in school, college, work or apprenticeship.

This is a challenge we must meet. At Unite in the West Midlands we are proud to be sponsoring this research, because we believe all our young people deserve a better future.

Gerard Coyne, Regional Secretary

We have lost track of over 150,000 young people nationally, including over 50,000 NEETs

One in eight young people are NEET (not in education, employment or training) at the age of 18. This huge issue has far reaching consequences for our economy and society. Yet over the course of this parliament the quality of local data on these young people has broken down completely. It is now systematically and grossly understating the true scale of the problem, misleading local decision makers and pushing the issue down the public agenda.

We have lost track of over 150,000 young people aged 16-18 in England. Their working or education status is now 'unknown'. When local NEET data is published an assumption is made that one in eight of these 'unknowns' is actually NEET, and the other seven are in education, employment or training. We can see how badly wrong this is by comparing the much more accurate national statistics with the sum total of the local statistics. There are over 50,000 NEETs missing from the local numbers.

So this apparently innocuous technical assumption has major implications: it leads to the systematic and gross understatement of the true scale of the NEET issue at a local level, which is where it needs to be tackled. And it means that the many 'missing NEETs' do not get the help and

support they so badly need. New field research in this report, using matched data in Coventry, confirms that many of the 'unknowns' are likely to be NEET.

We need a proper count in every area. We should start by recognising that the published statistics are disastrously wrong, changing the assumptions that create them, and reworking them on a more realistic basis. The right number of unknowns to count as NEET – on average – is not one eighth, rather at the end of 2013 it was between a third and a half. The chair of the UK Statistics Authority should review this issue and make recommendations to the Department for Education.

Who are the NEETs?

Young people who are NEET are often thought of as deprived, excluded, hard to help and on the edge of trouble. Some of them are indeed like this. However, most of the young people who become unemployed at 18 are not from low-income families and do not have special educational needs. Instead their defining characteristic is simply low qualifications, especially in English and mathematics. We must not set out by thinking that we are principally trying to solve a problem of multiple disadvantage and severe social exclusion. The majority of the unemployed 18-year-olds are simply not like this at all.

Qualitative evidence from case studies backs up the story that is told by the data. Only the hard cases dropped out of education at the age of 16. Most of the unemployed 18-year-olds had received two years of fully funded education and training after leaving school. Very few of them reached the age of 16 with much understanding or experience of the world of work, or an idea of the career direction they wanted to follow. Almost all of them lacked decent qualifications in literacy or numeracy when they left school, and almost none

of them had gained any new qualifications in these skills subsequently. As a result, when they found themselves in the labour market, they did not have the skills and qualifications they needed to get a decent job.

The four building blocks for success

1. Strong foundations: pre-16 literacy and numeracy at school

Raising literacy and numeracy performance by the age of 16 is the single most important building block for increasing employment at 18. When a young person achieves GCSE grade C or better in both English and mathematics, they have secured what many employers consider to be the baseline level of qualification in these core skills. C grades in English and maths – the core ‘Level 2’ qualifications – are not arbitrary boundaries. Their achievement marks a level of skill with real consequences in the labour market. These qualifications have also become the gateway to higher ‘Level 3’ courses such as A levels and Advanced Apprenticeships.

2. Careers advice and guidance that looks ahead to 18

Many unemployed 18-year-olds were never even taking the courses that would have addressed their major educational needs, especially in literacy and numeracy. Many of them took several successive courses at the same level of difficulty and skill, in different vocational areas, and never entered any of those professions. Careers advice must look further ahead than the next course or year of learning. It is not enough for a young person to be participating in ‘something’ between the ages of 16 and 18: even something for which they have a weak preference or interest. They must be working towards the time when they will need to succeed in the competitive jobs market. Careers advice always needs to recognise young people’s fundamental skills needs in literacy and numeracy.

3. Engaging employers with young people and learning

Employers are essential partners in young people's education: through their involvement in careers guidance; their provision of work experience, training and apprenticeship places; as mentors for young people; and as governors of schools and colleges. But for employers to be properly engaged with this agenda, someone must take a lead in every local area. Local authorities are the obvious candidate, probably working through the local enterprise partnerships (LEPs). As well as private sector employers, there are almost always large publicly funded bodies including local authorities, universities or colleges, and NHS trusts in every local area. What is needed is a systematic approach to engaging all these organisations, and the local business representative organisations, in a way that reduces complexity and difficulty for them, and allows them to contribute meaningfully to the education of young people. Local authorities could co-ordinate this work with minimal resources, but at the moment there is often no such activity.

4. Post-16 education and training that helps young people secure work

Most of the 18-year-old NEETs are not invisible when they are 16 and 17. Most are in some form of educational provision, and many are attending a further education college. They are sitting in front of lecturers, in classrooms and workshops, following their courses. In a sense, FE colleges are the main 'suppliers' of 18-year-old NEETs. So this is an incredibly important moment at which a relatively small number of publicly funded institutions have direct access to many of the young people who will subsequently end up unemployed. A key priority is to make sure that every such young person is

studying for suitably challenging English and maths qualifications while they are 16 and 17.

Governance – making it happen

No one person or organisation is held accountable for success and failure in relation to young people who are NEET and then unemployed, either at local or national level. No one gets fired or promoted because of NEET numbers going up or down. As a result no one at the most senior level of national or local government wakes up every day worrying about this issue.

At the national level, responsibility for the main relevant areas of government currently sits across the Department for Education and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. One key issue is further education colleges, for which responsibility currently sits within BIS. Their most important function is as the main provider of education to 16-18-year-olds. As such they should sit with the Department for Education.

There is no question of any one national cabinet member having direct responsibility for all the aspects of this agenda. However, the lack of a single cabinet level figure who is *accountable* for the success or failure of reducing youth unemployment is a problem that can be solved. It's clear who this person should be: the Secretary of State for Education.

At the local level, it is crucial that a single senior council officer and a single cabinet member has clear accountability and leadership for the NEETs agenda in every local authority.

To coordinate all of the organisations that affect the issues, what is needed in every area is a local body with clear oversight of the issue, senior representation from all the necessary partners, and a manageably specific remit.

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One possible local governance model would be a Young People's Employment and Education Partnership Board. These boards would have a single objective: to increase the proportion of young people locally who are in employment or education. Their intermediate objective would be to increase the number of young people who achieve both literacy and numeracy qualifications at the equivalent of GCSE C grade by the age of 18. These boards would be small, would include members from the key sectors necessary for success and could be chaired by an independent person. Membership would be senior in level – senior enough to get things done at scale and pace. The board would oversee implementation of local action planning, and would be sharply focused on action and holding all partners to account.

A matter of leadership, not money or policy

NEETs are not a 'wicked' issue, but one that can be tackled successfully. This agenda does not require major new resources, and in particular there is already national funding available for full time study for all young people up to the age of 19. We do not have to wait for changes to national legislation or policy, and none of the key proposals in this report are premised on these things. However, it does require local authorities to take action they are not taking now, to exercise leadership and form partnerships in the absence of formal and bureaucratic control, and to prioritise a small amount of resource towards this issue – with a huge long term pay-off.

Around 15 years ago a new tribe entered our lexicon: the NEETs, young people who are not in education, employment or training. Reducing their number was a priority for the Labour government of the day. The Social Exclusion Unit was tasked by the prime minister to drive progress, and he personally authored the foreword to their landmark 1999 report on the subject.

What was true then is true now: being NEET has very serious consequences. At the ages of 16 and 17 it means missing education, and at the age of 18 it means being unemployed. A combination of the two can mean the start of long-term unemployment, poverty and poor health, early single parenthood and the iniquitous cycle of inherited disadvantage.

In recent years the issue has fallen down the public agenda, but it has absolutely not gone away. One in eight of all the 18 year olds in England were NEET in 2013, and the rate was much higher in many large cities. More than 80,000 young people effectively joined the ranks of the unemployed that year alone. This is a huge problem with major consequences for our society and economy.

There are two basic reasons we have stopped talking about NEETs. The first is that for a long time the problem looked intractable. There were almost exactly the same number of 16-18 year olds NEET in 1999 as there are now. We have got

used to thinking of this being a ‘wicked problem’ about a group of young people who are too hard to help.

The other reason is that the NEET numbers are terribly confusing. The good news is more young people now stay on in education after they finish their GCSEs, and the overall 16-18 NEET numbers have finally started to fall. But this apparently benign picture is misleading. The number of young people who are NEET doubles between the ages of 17 and 18 and, ultimately, what really matters is how many young people end up unemployed or in low skill, insecure jobs.

Even worse, the official NEET numbers grossly understate the scale of the problem at a local level. As a result it has much less visibility and priority than it should. To be clear:

Many local authorities have a much bigger NEET problem in reality than their official data suggests

many local authorities have a much bigger NEET problem in reality than their official data suggests. As new research for this report shows, we have lost track of tens of thousands of young people, including over 50,000 NEETs across England.

As a result they are neither getting the help they need individually, nor the priority they need collectively. We need a proper count, at both local and national level.

Almost nothing would have so great an impact on our society in the long term as seriously reducing the number of young people who are NEET. In order to crack the problem, we also need to change fundamentally the way we think about young people who are NEET. The key is understanding who they are and the journey they make into unemployment. We are in thrall to a profoundly misleading idea that they are troubled, excluded and even dangerous. So we wrongly think the solution must lie in expensive specialist services.

In fact, most young people who become NEET at the age of 18 look very average in most respects. Only a small number 'drop out' after leaving school. Most stay on, usually at further education (FE) colleges, for two more years of education. Most don't come from low-income families or have special educational needs, and very few face more serious challenges such as being looked after or getting in trouble with the police at an early age.

Instead their defining characteristic is the lack of skills and qualifications – especially in English and mathematics – that are the passport to secure and decent employment. This only becomes apparent when they finally move into the labour market and can't get a job. Of course those young people who face more significant challenges need special help. But the key to really reducing NEET numbers lies in ensuring that many more young people develop their core skills and qualifications.

Most importantly, this means dramatically improving literacy and numeracy through the education system. At the moment fully one third of young people in England reach the age of 19 without decent English and maths qualifications at the equivalent of GCSE C grades. We simply cannot be a productive country where prosperity is shared widely on this basis.

At the moment very few of those who reach the age of 16 without good literacy and numeracy skills gain them over the course of another two years of further education. In 2013 just one in six of the 19 year olds who had left school without decent English and maths GCSEs had gained these skills subsequently. Most were not even studying for such qualifications. Turning round this dismal record is now the most important mission for the further education sector. We must also do much more to improve careers guidance and the involvement of employers with schools, colleges and young people.

None of these building blocks for success requires major new resources. In particular, public funding is available

for full-time education or training all the way up to 18. But success will require determined and energetic leadership, especially at the local level. Someone needs to bring together the schools, colleges, employers, advice services and third sector organisations around a clear mission.

The compelling candidates to lead this agenda are the local authorities. They have the legitimacy to prioritise the issue and convene the key partners. They will never control all the resources or organisations, but they can use public leadership and influence. They certainly need to rediscover their appetite for leading the local education and skills agenda, including with FE colleges and academy schools.

At the moment, accountability for NEETs and for youth employment is weak at both local and national levels. No one person or organisation is held sufficiently accountable for success and failure. No one gets fired or promoted because of youth unemployment numbers going up or down. As a result no one at the most senior level of national or local government wakes up every day worrying about this issue.

This needs to change. At the national level a single cabinet member should be accountable for the success or failure of reducing the number of 18 year old NEETs. Similarly, in every local authority a single senior council officer and a single cabinet member should have clear accountability and leadership for this agenda. In the absence of this clarity, there will always be a lack of urgency in the face of other competing priorities.

We could dramatically reduce NEET numbers across England, transforming our economy, public finances and local communities in the process. The additional cost in terms of resources is negligible. We don't even need to wait for a general election before we start. It's time to bring skills and youth employment back onto the progressive political agenda.

1: A HIDDEN ISSUE, A CHANGING ISSUE

Education and employment

How many young people in England are not in education, employment or training? How big is this problem, and how has it changed over the long term? In short: it's a very serious problem, and has been for a long time. As the number of young people staying on in education rises, the overall numbers are coming down. But we must not be fooled that this is really solving the problem.

The chart below shows the headline 16-18-year-old NEET rate for the past 20 years.¹ The thing that jumps out is the extraordinary stability of this measure, at between 8 and 10 per cent for pretty much the entire period. The stability of the data is completely counterintuitive. Just think about what was happening in our society and economy over these two decades.

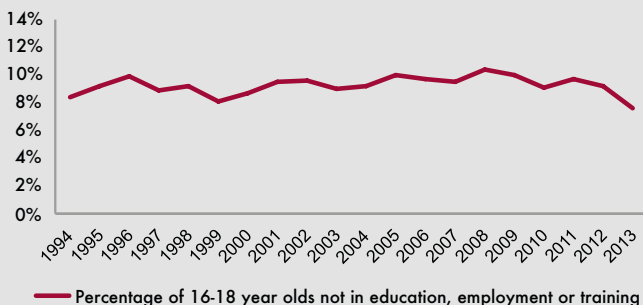
The long period of economic expansion from the early 1990s until 2008 had no perceptible impact: the NEET rate remained impervious to an unprecedented period of economic growth. Then the huge recession of 2008 onwards, and the continued crunch in public service budgets, appears to correlate with a reduction in the NEET numbers. What on earth is going on?

Chart 2 below shows what has happened beneath the headlines. 20 years ago many more young people left education and training before they were 18, and many of them found employment. Even among the 16-year-olds who left

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school and didn't start any kind of training, around half were employed. Today that option is all but gone for 16-year-olds, and the overall employment rate for 16-18-year-olds has fallen sharply. Young people leaving school can't just walk into jobs any more.

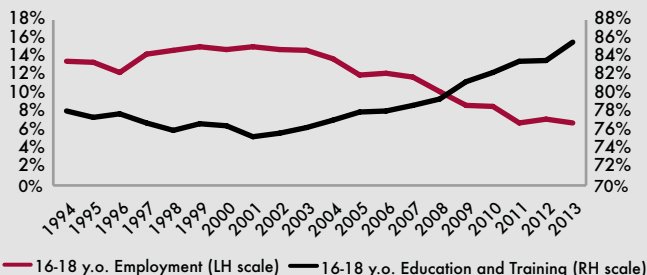
Chart 1: The proportion of 16-18 year olds who are NEET has been remarkably stable over the past 20 years



Source: Statistical First Release 18/2014, Participation in Education, Training and Employment by 16-18 year olds in England

Over the same period the proportion of those in education and training has risen significantly. Full time education in particular has grown strongly since around 2001. For 16 and 17-year-olds this is about sixth forms and FE colleges. Labour's 2008 legislation to raise the education age to 18, and that government's insistence on all young people having an offer of somewhere to study after their GCSEs, are still important drivers of participation for this age group. Meanwhile, more and more 18-year-olds went to university each year from around 2001 onwards. Even the recent jump in tuition fees to £9000 per year seems to have had little visible effect on the numbers starting degrees.

Chart 2: Over the last 20 years employment for young people has fallen to almost the same degree as education has increased.



Source: Statistical First Release 18/2014, Participation in Education, Training and Employment by 16-18 year olds in England

The balance between these two trends – employment falling and education rising – is what accounts for the long-term trend in the NEET numbers. It is not that the situation is stable. Rather, two huge and opposing forces are at work beneath the surface.

NEET: an idea that is about to become obsolete

Once up on a time – not very long ago – we used to talk about young people ‘staying on’ in education after they had finished school. This made sense when many young people left education at 16, and policy rightly focused on increasing the number of young people staying on in education or training.

But we have moved from a world where many young people left school to start work, to one where almost all young people continue their education. Labour’s decision to raise the education and training participation age to 18 can

be seen as the culmination of this trend. For the first time ever, the young people who took their GCSEs in the summer of 2014 will be required to stay in education or training until they are 18. The expectation will become established that this is what all young people should do.

So in a way the very concept of being NEET will increasingly become obsolete. The 16 and 17 year olds who are currently classified as NEET should in future be thought of as 'missing from education and training'. Meanwhile 18 year olds who are not in education, employment or training should be thought of as unemployed.² We should stop reporting the numbers of 16-18 year olds together, as it amalgamates two very different groups of young people facing very different problems.

We have lost track of over 150,000 young people nationally, including over 50,000 NEETs

The national NEET numbers are robust: derived from reliable data, backed up by sampling from the Labour Force Survey, and classified as National Statistics.³ But at the local level we have lost track of tens of thousands of young people. As a result we are massively understating the scale of the problem at local level where it matters the most, and depriving many young people who are out of sight of the help and support they need.

Every local authority has duties designed to ensure young people do indeed continue their education or training. As part of this they are required to track what each young person is doing for the three years after they take their GCSEs, and return this data to the Department for Education, which publishes it as official statistics.⁴ This information is used in local authorities as

a key measure of the severity of the NEET problem locally, and of their success in reducing NEET numbers.

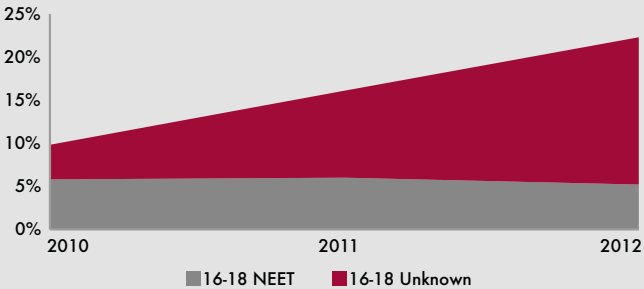
Over the course of this parliament, the quality of local NEET data has broken down completely. This is not a dry issue for statisticians. The point is that this official data is used to inform local political priorities and plans. At the moment it systematically and grossly understates the true scale of the problem, misleading local decision makers and pushing the issue down the agenda.

Take the example of Coventry. I became involved with Coventry City Council in the summer of 2013. The political leadership in the city had identified reducing 16-24-year-old NEET numbers as a priority. They could see at first hand that it was a major problem for their young people, who were turning to them in large numbers, desperate to find work in the face of benefit sanctions.

But their NEET data did not make sense. Coventry's NEET rate for 2010-12 is shown by the lower area in the chart below. It looked low and stable, even improving slightly over three years: 6 per cent in 2010, 6 per cent again in 2011, and down to 5 per cent in 2011. So the data suggested this was not really such a high priority. But was it really true? Were NEET numbers really falling, despite the recession, cuts to services and evidence that could be seen across the city of many young people being out of work?

The explanation lies in the upper area of the chart, which shows the proportion of young people whose NEET status was unknown over this period. In these three years the number of such 'unknowns' quadrupled: from 4 per cent to 17 per cent. By the end of the period the number of young people whose status was unknown dwarfed the number of known NEETs. The obvious question was: how many of the unknowns were actually NEET?

Chart 3. NEET and 'unknown' in Coventry, 2010-12



Source: Department for Education, NEET data by local authority, 2010-2012 releases

At this point we need to focus on how these numbers are collected. Back in 2010 the data about what young people were doing was collected through the Connexions advice and guidance service for young people in every local area, supported by a ring-fenced grant and backed up by a range of duties on local authorities.⁵ The coalition government removed the ring-fenced grant, cut funding and removed most of the duties. The requirements to submit data to the department remained in place.

In every local area there is now either a team directly employed by the council collecting the information, or more often an organisation doing this on its behalf, almost always with greatly reduced resources compared to 2010. They start each year with a long list of all the young people known to live in the area. Then they try and find out what each of them is doing. Some of the data comes from lists of learners supplied by school sixth forms, colleges and other providers of education and training. Some of it comes from the DWP and its local job centre plus offices. A lot of it comes from the

grinding slog of directly contacting thousands of individual young people and asking them what they are doing.

Some young people are hard to track down. Those who don't show up on any of the lists get letters and emails and phone calls. Some of the email addresses and mobile numbers turn out to be wrong, and some of the young people have moved. Some of them don't answer their emails or return phone calls. All these young people end up classified as 'unknown'.

Of course in reality, all young people are either NEET or not NEET. So when the data is published an assumption is made about the proportion of 'unknowns' who are actually NEET. That assumption is currently that one in eight of the unknowns are actually NEET, and the other seven are actually in education, employment or training.⁶ This apparently innocuous technical assumption has major implications: it leads to the systematic and gross understatement of the true scale of the NEET issue at local level.

We can see this is true by comparing the national statistics, which don't suffer from the same problems,⁷ with the sum total of the local statistics at the same moment in time. At the end of 2013, the national statistics identify 148,000 NEET 16-18-year-olds. For the same period, the total of all the 16-18-year-old NEETs identified at local level – including 1/8 of the unknown group – was 92,000. That indicates 56,000 NEETs missing from the local statistics.

Across all local areas put together there were a staggering 162,000 young people classified as unknown, compared to 71,000 at the end of 2010. So nationally, just as in the example of Coventry, the unknown group dwarfs the numbers known to be NEET.

We can certainly come up with a more realistic estimate of how many of the unknowns are actually NEET: 56,000 missing NEETs divided by 162,000 unknowns is just over one third, and then add the 1/8 already included to reach 47

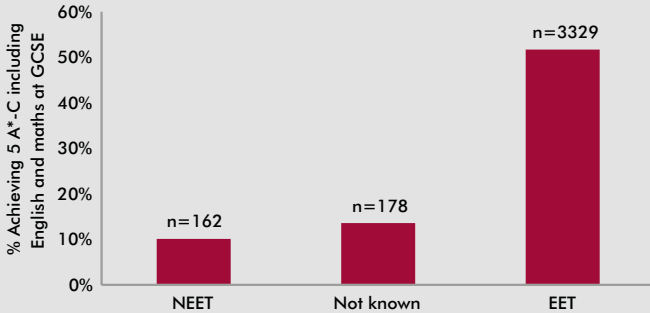
per cent. An alternative methodology, which compares the proportion of young people known to be NEET nationally and locally, generates a slightly lower estimate of just over a third (38 per cent).⁸ So a more realistic estimate of the proportion of ‘unknowns’ who are actually NEET is between a third and a half. This is hugely different to one-eighth.⁹

To check the logic, we can ask the Donald Rumsfeld question: what do we know about the unknowns? The answer turns out to be quite a lot. Even when local areas don’t know the education and employment status of a young person, they often know things that indicate their risk of being NEET. These include recorded special educational needs, income deprivation and other characteristics. Most importantly we can match data to compare the educational qualifications achieved by the young people who are known to be NEET, known to be in education, employment or training, and those whose status is unknown.

The chart below shows this data for the 17-year-old group in Coventry at the end of summer 2013. The three bars from left to right represent the three groups: known to be NEET, unknown, and known to be in education, employment or training (EET). The numbers above the bars indicate the size of each group: so there were 162 known NEETs, 178 unknowns, and 3329 young people known to be in education, employment or training (EET). The height of the bar shows what proportion of each group had achieved five GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and mathematics.

The main point is that the group whose status is not known looks very similar indeed to the known NEETs. Just 14 per cent of the unknowns had achieved the GCSE benchmark, compared to 52 per cent of the EETs and 10 per cent of the known NEETs. So it would be reasonable to assume that all or most these young people whose status was ‘unknown’ – and note they are a bigger group than the known NEETs – are actually NEET.

Chart 4: 'Unknowns' look very similar to the known NEETs



Source: Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire Partnership, end of academic year 2012/2013 data

Similar analysis was carried out in Coventry separately for the 16, 17 and 18 year olds. The 16 and 17 year old 'unknowns' looked very similar to the known NEETs, whilst the 18 year olds had a qualification level midway between that of the NEETs and those known to be in education, employment or training. The overall picture suggests around half of the unknowns were actually NEET: very much in line with what the national analysis of missing NEETs implies.

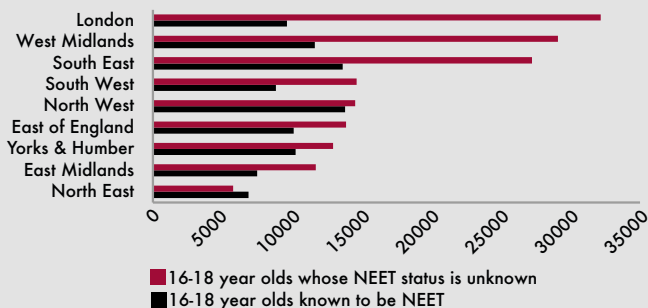
This kind of analysis could be carried out for every age group in every local area by using the existing data sets. Similar work in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire supports the conclusion from the detailed study in Coventry.¹⁰ So the local analysis supports the argument that local NEET numbers are large underestimates.

Coventry is taking these issues seriously, and might come to lead the country in terms of its approach to reducing NEET numbers. But this has a political sting in its tail. A concerted

effort in Coventry has brought the unknown numbers down from 17 per cent in 2012 to 9 per cent in 2013. But this has pushed their NEET numbers up from 5 to 7 per cent. On the face of it, it looks like their NEET problem has got worse, but in fact the reverse is true. They are shining a light on it, in a way that will allow them to tackle it more effectively.

One consequence of the understatement of NEET numbers is the reduced priority that the issue gets locally. But there is another damaging consequence. In most areas, being identified as NEET triggers additional help for the young person. Very often the same organisations that are tracking destinations are also providing this support. But the 'unknown NEETs' miss out: if no one knows they need help, they don't get it. The chart below shows how this is an issue across the country, with some regions performing particularly badly. London, the West Midlands and the South East all do particularly badly both in proportionate terms and in the absolute numbers shown in the chart here.

Chart 5. The South East, West Midlands and London regions have each lost track of more than 25,000 young people



Source: Department for Education, NEET data by local authority, 2013 release

So, to return to our earlier question in a slightly different form: why has there not been more local debate about this issue over the past four years? Because the local data grossly understates the scale of the problem. We need a proper count in every area. We should start by recognising that the published statistics are disastrously wrong, changing the assumptions that create them, and reworking them on a more realistic basis. The right number of unknowns to count as NEET – on average – is not one eighth, rather at the end of 2013 it was between a third and a half. The chair of the UK Statistics Authority should review this issue urgently, and make recommendations to the Department for Education.

2: THE ROAD TO UNEMPLOYMENT

Who are the NEETs?

After reading this sentence, shut your eyes for a moment and bring to mind the image of two young people who are NEET: imagine what they look like and where they are.

Many readers will have imagined a pair of male teenagers leaning on an estate wall or standing on a street corner. They are probably wearing hoodies, tracksuit bottoms and trainers. There might be a tower block, chain-link fence or a battered playground in the background, under a grey sky or neon lights. It's likely to be a pretty desolate scene.

This is the kind of image the media serves up alongside articles about young people who are NEET. According to editors' taste, they might include graffiti, litter, vandalized cars, alcohol or dangerous looking dogs. The implication is clear: young people who are NEET are deprived, excluded, hard to help and on the edge of trouble. They sit on the cusp of our compassion towards children, just as it tips over into fear of young adults.

Many readers will rightly object to the denigration of young people in these stereotypes. So do I, but my point is a different one. This kind of imagery has a powerful hold not just on the public mind, but also on the people working with young people, and the politicians who serve them. These images condition who we think the NEETs are, and influence

how we respond to the problem. Because they misrepresent what most young people who are NEET are actually like, they mislead us.

To give an example of what I mean, ask any politician, councillor, civil servant or council officer about 'services for NEETs'. They will start talking about outreach services, youth services, and projects to re-engage those with very low or no qualifications. School and college leaders will often talk about 'alternative provision', about entry-level educational courses, and about what they are doing to reach excluded communities. All of this work may be good and useful, but it is focused on just a small proportion of those who become NEET.

Of course young people who are severely disadvantaged have a much higher risk of becoming NEET and need special help. Those who are in trouble with the law while still at school, or who become parents at an early age, are at particularly high risk. Missing a lot of school or being repeatedly excluded is a major warning sign. The risk of being NEET is higher for young people who are from low-income families, or have special educational needs and disabilities.

Most of the young people who become unemployed at 18 are not from low-income families

However, most of the young people who become unemployed at 18 are not from low-income families. Most don't have special educational needs. Most are of white British heritage. Very few of them are remotely like the hard cases we instinctively bring to mind when discussing NEETs. Instead their defining characteristic is simply low qualifications, especially in English and mathematics.

The micro data helps illustrate this point. Fewer than one in four of the 18-year-old NEETs in Coventry at the

end of academic year 2012/13 were from low-income families.¹¹ Fewer than one in four of the 18-year-old NEETs in Nottingham had 'statements' of special educational need or were identified as needing the School Action Plus intervention scheme.¹² By contrast 80 per cent of the 18-year-old NEETs in Coventry lacked five GCSE A*-C grades including English and maths. Really it's no wonder that they are unemployed: they lack the benchmark skills that are widely recognised by employers as the passport to a decent job in the modern economy.

We must not set out by thinking that we are principally trying to solve a problem of multiple disadvantage and severe social exclusion. The majority of the unemployed 18-year-olds are simply not like this. If we want to make a serious impact on the overall numbers, we have to think about why so many 18-year-olds don't secure employment. Because whatever their background, once they become long-term unemployed or discouraged from the labour market, their future becomes increasingly difficult.

The journey into unemployment

Only a small minority of young people are NEET at the age of 16, the year after they leave their secondary school.¹³ Nationally this figure has fallen to just 4 per cent in 2013. This makes sense: a lot of effort goes into ensuring every young person has an offer of continuing education for when they leave school, and that they take up these offers. Almost all young people are in full time schooling just before this point, so they have good visibility and accessibility to public services. So the small number of 16-year-olds who are NEET are more likely to be the genuinely difficult cases, facing more serious barriers to taking part in further education.

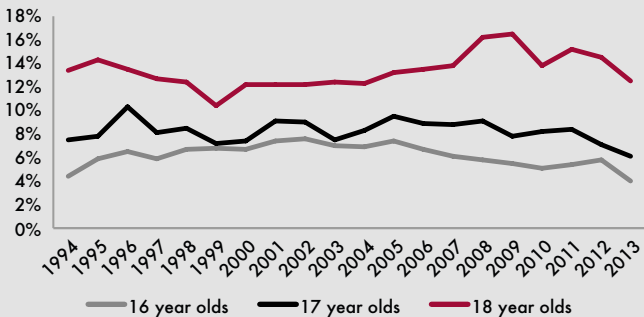
Out of Sight

The numbers who are NEET at 17, two years after they leave school, are a little higher. Most people of this age are in the second year of a two-year course such as A-levels, or taking a series of shorter courses. But not all young people successfully continue their studies in this way, and some drop out and join the group that is already NEET. The result is that 6 per cent of 17 year olds in England were NEET at the end of 2013.

At the age of 18, everything changes. This group is now three years out of school. Given that most young people take two years to complete their A-levels or further education courses, these young people are now likely to be either in higher education or in the labour market. This is the moment of truth. Do they have the skills and qualifications to progress to university or find employment?

The answer can be seen in the chart below, where the top line shows the 18-year-old NEET rate, the middle line the

Chart 6. The NEET rate is low at 16, rises a little at 17, then jumps dramatically at 18



Source: Statistical First Release 18/2014, Participation in Education, Training and Employment by 16-18 year olds in England

rate for 17-year-olds, and the lower line the 16-year-old rate. In every year, a large group of young people who are not NEET at 17 become NEET the following year. The national rate doubled from 6 per cent at 17 to 13 per cent at 18 in the most recent 2013 figures. These are young people who have been in full time education for 14 years, including two years after their GCSEs, and then find themselves without the skills and qualifications they need to get a job.

This reinforces the earlier point that we should stop grouping 16, 17 and 18 year olds together. What does the average 16-18-year-old NEET rate of 8 per cent tell us? Nothing really. It certainly matters how many young people are missing education when they are 16 and 17 (the answer is 5 per cent, one in 20). But what really matters is how many young people become unemployed at the age of 18. This number is 13 per cent, one in eight young people. So another reason the NEET debate has faded from view is that we have been deriving a false sense of security from looking at the wrong numbers.

During the course of my work for Coventry City Council I reviewed around 50 individual case histories of young people who were unemployed at the age of 18. I wanted to get a feel for the journey they had followed, to see if it matched the story being told by the data. A few of these case histories represented the 'hard end' of the NEET spectrum. These were often young people who had been looked after children, or had very challenging personal and family circumstances, and achieved few or no formal qualifications.

In every such case there had been significant efforts to contact and support the young person, and to encourage them into some kind of provision after they finished school. Very often the young person in question was hard to track down, and even harder to engage. In most cases they had

tried a few taster courses, but didn't stay long. They ended up NEET from the age of 16.

But these were the exceptions. Most of the 18-year-olds had not travelled this kind of road at all. I will give two portraits to illustrate. These are not real people, but realistic composites closely based on elements from real case histories.

Alysha was a young woman who knew, before she had finished school, what kind of job she wanted to do. She wanted to work in childcare. She had no special circumstances such as special educational needs (SEN). She achieved five GCSEs at grades D-G. She was advised to take a vocational course in childcare at a further education college at 'Level 2', which is the equivalent of GCSEs. She completed her year of study and gained the qualification.

She then discovered that to become a registered childcare professional she would need a qualification at 'Level 3', the equivalent of A-levels. As a precondition of starting this course, she would need literacy and numeracy qualifications at the equivalent of GCSE C grade, which she didn't have. But she had not been told this at the outset, and she had not been studying for any such qualifications. So instead of pursuing childcare, she switched to a beauty therapy course, again at Level 2. She completed that course and gained the qualification. But she didn't find work, and within six months she became pregnant and joined the NEET register.

Mohammed was a young man who had no idea what kind of work he wanted to do as he approached the end of secondary school. Like Alysha, he had no special circumstances such as SEN. He achieved seven GCSEs and equivalents, all at grades D-G, including English and maths qualifications at Level 1.

Mohammed signed up at college for a year of sports science at Level 2. He attended regularly and gained his qualification. The next

year he started another Level 2 course, this time in motor mechanics. Again he completed the course and achieved the qualification.

At no point was he studying for any further literacy or numeracy qualifications. As a result he was never in a position to start a Level 3 apprenticeship – for example in one of the skills shortage areas of manufacturing or the construction industry in this region – because he didn't meet the pre-conditions. When he left college he found a low-paid job in an unrelated area, working for a logistics firm. But the job didn't last, and he became unemployed within the year.

The qualitative evidence from the case studies backs up the story that is told by the data. Only the hard cases dropped out of education at the age of 16. Most of the unemployed 18 year olds had received two years of fully funded education and training after leaving school. Very few of them reached the age of 16 with much understanding or experience of the world of work, or an idea of the career direction they wanted to follow. Almost all of them lacked decent qualifications in literacy or numeracy when they left school, and almost none of them had gained any new qualifications in these skills subsequently. As a result, when they found themselves in the labour market, they did not have the skills and qualifications they needed to get a decent job.

Now we can see more clearly who the NEETs are, and why so many 18 year olds – one in eight – end up effectively unemployed.

3: THE FOUR BUILDING BLOCKS FOR SUCCESS

Looking at the journey young people so often make into unemployment, four main issues stand out as the key to turning things around. Fundamentally, too many young people don't secure the right skills at school, make poor choices about what to do next, have little engagement with the world of work until it is too late, and don't gain enough from their education after the age of 16. That is how most young people become NEET. This chapter takes these four issues in turn, and makes a range of proposals for policy and practice at both local and national level.

If a local authority wants to reduce its number of NEETs and increase its level of youth employment, then what follows could form the headings of an action plan, to be developed locally with partner organisations like schools, colleges and employers.

However, this chapter is not a checklist or a cookbook. Significant change in large organisations and complex systems comes about through leadership, understanding and ownership. To make real progress a critical mass of people in each local area need to prioritise reducing NEET numbers, think about the problem differently; and work together to design and implement the solutions. This chapter is really trying to motivate more people to do these things.

1. Strong foundations: pre-16 literacy and numeracy at school

Raising literacy and numeracy performance by the age of 16 is the single most important building block for increasing employment at 18. When a young person achieves GCSE grade C or better in both English and mathematics,

When a young person achieves GCSE grade C or better in both English and mathematics, they have secured what many employers consider to be the baseline level of qualification in these core skills

they have secured what many employers consider to be the baseline level of qualification in these core skills. C grades in English and maths – the core ‘Level 2’ qualifications – are not arbitrary boundaries. Their achievement marks a level of skill with real consequences in the labour market.

These qualifications have also become the gateway to higher ‘Level 3’ courses such as A-levels and Advanced Apprenticeships, as the case studies of Alysha and Mohammed illustrated. Qualifications at Level 3 make a substantial difference to the security and quality of employment, the productivity of the employee, and their level of remuneration. Many young people used to acquire such qualifications through work-based learning, without having to succeed at English and maths first. But this route is open to fewer and fewer young people.

One reason is that the total amount of employer-funded training and work-based learning for 16-18-year-olds has fallen by just over 40 per cent in the past 20 years.¹⁴ The much-trumpeted recent increase in apprenticeship starts has had no meaningful impact on 16-18-year-olds whatsoever, because the growth in numbers has all been for older age

groups.¹⁵ There is a wider argument about the responsibilities of employers to engage with young people at school and college, to train young people at the start of their careers, and to continue educating and re-training their older workers.

Almost all further education providers now make GCSE C grades in English and maths a pre-condition of starting higher-level courses. This is primarily because the institutional accountability arrangements penalise them for students who do not succeed in their courses. So they want to be confident their learners have skills that are strong enough before they start. We have probably got this balance wrong now, and should revisit the possibility of young people starting more demanding training as part of which they achieve the literacy and numeracy qualifications they lacked at the outset.

In any case, if more young people achieved the benchmark qualifications at 16 when they first took their GCSEs, proportionately fewer would go on to be NEET at 18. In fact, just 59 per cent of 16-year-olds nationally achieved five A*-C grades including English and maths in 2013, and this fell to 53 per cent in 2014 when more demanding examinations and calculation methodology were introduced.¹⁶ Arguing about a few per cent here and there would be missing the point. The real point is that almost half our young people currently reach the age of 16 lacking the core skills they need for work, more advanced training, or higher level education. This is a national challenge of the first magnitude.

There is a huge amount of solid research now on how to improve young people's achievement in literacy and numeracy.¹⁷ It is well understood that the foundations are laid in the early years and then primary school. Those pupils who are not secure in reading, writing and maths at the end of primary school stand a much worse chance of engaging successfully with the secondary curriculum. In turn, the

early years before primary school have a huge impact on the ease with which young children acquire these skills. The way parents interact and talk with their infants, and the extent to which they read to them, plays a central role and explains a lot of the gap in achievement between children from different backgrounds.

There is an equally extensive, if more contested, literature about school improvement.¹⁸ The fundamental cause of good school performance is good school leadership: leadership that sets very high expectations for every single child, establishes this culture throughout the school, and focuses relentlessly on improving the quality of teaching by every teacher in every lesson for every pupil. To achieve this, groups of schools are increasingly working together in formal federations, where executive heads hold individual schools sharply to account for their performance, and where the best teachers are deployed strategically across the federation to help develop the rest.

Of course this is all much easier said than done, and this is not the place for a detailed review of this huge policy agenda. I just want to make two points: about how high we should aim, and about the role of local government.

Too often people talk about those who ‘cannot’ achieve a given level of qualifications, often out of a sense that we should not denigrate individual achievements. But we should instead talk about those who ‘do not’, and aim for all young people to succeed by 16, excepting only those facing very significant barriers. Low expectations are the true enemy of social justice. They are what sort young people from housing estates into lower sets and less demanding qualifications, while the children with nicer shoes get put in the more stretching classes and end up with university degrees.

The best schools run a steamroller over this invidious logic. In my former role at Ofsted I saw schools serving the most disadvantaged populations achieving results that put them among the very top performers in the entire country – and I mean absolute results, not measured by pupil progress. At some primary schools in tough inner city areas every single pupil reaches the nationally expected level at the age of 11. At some secondary schools in similar areas, GCSE results are better than in most leafy suburb schools serving much more affluent communities. It is hard, not impossible.

Another lens through which to set expectations is that of international comparisons. For all the heat and noise about our standing in the PISA league tables, what you really need to know is this: 15-year-olds in the United Kingdom perform at the OECD average in reading and mathematics, and slightly above it in science.¹⁹ We're not languishing at the bottom with Indonesia and Peru. But numerous countries outperform us, including the familiar names from the Far East (Singapore, Korea, Japan, and large regions of China), plus many of our Northern European neighbours (Netherlands, Estonia, Finland, Poland, Germany etc). Unless we are content to end up at the OECD average in terms of our national income and quality of life, we need to do much better.

So what would be the right level of ambition? I suggest we consider first which young people face the most serious barriers to achieving both a C grade in GCSE English and a C grade in GCSE maths by the age of 16. Those with complex and profound special educational needs and disabilities are probably the clearest cut case – although we should guard vigilantly against low expectations for this group also²⁰ – and they account for around 3 per cent of the population. Another 2 or 3 per cent experience personal or family situations that set considerable barriers in their way.

Let's be 'generous' and assume that 10 per cent of young people will not, in the foreseeable future, achieve the benchmark at the age of 16 after 12 years of full-time education. So the objective nationally should be 90 per cent. Remember we're currently at 53 per cent and you can see the importance of re-setting our expectations.

The other point I want to make in relation to school standards is about the role of local authorities. Most secondary schools, and a small but growing proportion of primary schools, are now academies. The Department for Education under Michael Gove encouraged academies to consider themselves not just as independent but completely detached from local authorities and indeed their wider local education system. Meanwhile local authorities have seen their budgets hugely cut, and some have heard the message that they should withdraw from the field of school improvement.

Yet local authorities retain key leadership responsibilities in relation to all schools in their area. The national accountability arrangements for academies are simply too weak for them to do otherwise, and local authorities also retain important legal duties to secure the quality and sufficiency of education for all the young people in their area.

At the moment, thousands of academy schools are formally accountable directly to the Secretary of State for Education. This is obviously a fiction, and it is one with serious consequences when academy performance slips, as has now been demonstrated on numerous occasions. Ofsted is not enough: it can only inspect relatively infrequently, and it can't stay close enough to every school to ensure performance is sustained.

The department has recognised the gap by appointing eight regional schools commissioners to monitor the performance of academy schools and take action when they are underperforming.²¹ But the commissioners are spread across

a wide area and have very limited resources relative to the hundreds of schools they must each cover.

So local authorities must exercise their duties and work actively and intelligently with all their schools including academies. Many do this already, and the rest need to rediscover their confidence and step forward, rather than allowing themselves to be further marginalised.

2. Careers advice and guidance that looks ahead to 18

Too often the focus of careers advice is on what a young person will do next, for example immediately after they leave school. But in many cases the problems only become apparent when that young person actually enters the labour market some years later and tries to find themselves a job. At that point it often becomes clear they lack the skills and qualifications that are necessary to secure employment.

Many unemployed 18-year-olds were never even taking the courses that would have addressed their most important educational needs, especially in literacy and numeracy. Many of them took several successive courses at the same level of difficulty and skill, in different vocational areas, and never entered any of those professions. Careers advice must therefore look further ahead than the next course or year of learning. It is not enough for a young person to be participating in 'something' between the ages of 16 and 18; even something for which they have a weak preference or interest. They must be working towards the time when they need to succeed in the competitive jobs market.

Careers advice always needs to recognise young people's fundamental skills requirements in literacy and numeracy. In every case where young people do not already have C grades in both GCSE English and maths, this is likely to mean they should be taking stretching literacy and numeracy courses

either before or alongside vocational courses. No young person should be left in any doubt about the consequences of not securing these core skills. Let's be honest with them: if you want to get a skilled apprenticeship, or a job in child-care, then you'd better get your English and maths sorted out now.

Careers advice is now the statutory responsibility of schools. Unfortunately, careers advice in schools is systematically weak, as the trenchant 2013 Ofsted survey report on the subject makes clear.²² That report found just one in five secondary schools were giving their students effective careers advice.

Ofsted's list of concerns was long: advice being given too late in the school career and too close to GCSEs; advice biased towards school sixth forms rather than more appropriate vocational provision; poorly trained teachers being left to provide careers advice in tutorial periods and assemblies; and weak links between schools and other providers of advice. This is an area that Ofsted and its chief inspector is turning more and more attention towards, including in its mainstream school inspection activity.

Colleges are another major source of advice. Many young people make critical choices that are informed by careers fairs, open evenings, and 'sign up' events organised or attended by colleges. Indeed quite a few sign up on the spot at such events. When young people are taking a college course of less than two years' duration, they are bound to get advice within the college about what to do next when their first course finishes.

There are many other local and national organisations providing careers advice, especially to young people who have already left school. Many of the local successor organisations to Connexions continue to provide advice under contract to local authorities, particularly for young people

who are NEET or considered at risk of becoming NEET. Another important source of advice are the numerous third sector organisations that provide services and support for young people.

The point is that we do not think enough about this as a system. There are some networks of advice providers at local level, but neither local nor national government sees it as a key role to ensure the quality and sufficiency of advice in a given area. There is little meaningful accountability, very weak incentives for quality, and the major providers – schools and colleges – have obvious interests at stake in terms of filling their courses and sixth forms. It's no wonder that young people often end up with poor advice and in provision that doesn't really suit their needs.

In fact there is a lot that local authorities – or a partnership including the local authority, schools, colleges and the third sector – could do to secure both sufficiency and quality. For a start these parties could be brought

Young people often end up with poor advice and in provision that doesn't really suit their needs

together in every local area to ensure that every single person providing advice is clear about the primacy of literacy and numeracy. Then there are huge opportunities to share skills and knowledge among key staff, to create common tools and platforms for use by both advisers and young people, and to build knowledge about the market for skills. It is a complex business staying abreast of local and national skills needs, employment growth areas, job profiles, salaries and qualification requirements. Yet how many local areas share this kind of information effectively between all those who are providing advice – advice that is given to fundamentally the same group of young people in the same local context?

There is also an important role for local scrutiny and accountability, where a local authority takes on the role of challenging the quality of advice and the consequences it leads to. How many local authorities really know how good the careers advice is in their schools and colleges? Do they look at the qualifications young people choose, to see if they broadly make sense in terms of the balance of skills being supplied and demanded locally? Does anyone else do this?

Finally there are important brokering roles to be carried out in a local skills economy, ensuring that different providers have access to all young people. In particular schools should be ensuring better understanding by their pupils of the vocational options available to them, and enabling better access to their learners by colleges, apprenticeship providers, and employers.

3. Engaging employers with young people and learning

Many young people reach the end of secondary school with little idea of what work they want to do, little understanding or experience of the world of work, and little awareness of what qualifications they need for different jobs. As a result they don't know how to study and train towards rewarding employment. In any case, why would they be motivated if they don't know what they are working towards? Conversely, employers say many young people lack the skills and aptitudes they are looking for in their employees.

But employers often do want to contribute to the skills agenda and to help young people – and so they should, both as part of their contribution to society, and to ensure their own supply of skilled workers. There is a wide range of things they can do, from providing work placements, mentors, traineeships and apprenticeships; to visiting schools and colleges to engage with young people; to becoming governors of schools

and colleges and leading the skills agenda locally and regionally. But too often employers find this kind of thing burdensome and administratively difficult, and often no one asks for their help in the first place. We need to bridge this gap.

For employers to be properly engaged with this agenda, someone must take a lead in every local area. Local authorities are the obvious candidate, probably working through the local enterprise partnerships (LEPs). As well as private sector employers, there are almost always large public sector organisations including local authorities and NHS organisations in every local area.

What is needed is a systematic approach to engaging all these organisations, and the local business representative organisations, in a way that reduces complexity and difficulty for them, and allows them to contribute meaningfully to achieving the shared objective. Local authorities could co-ordinate this work with minimal resources, but at the moment very often there is no such activity.

The kind of activity this would involve would start as simply as listing all the large employers in an area and all the business organisations, and finding out what they are each doing in relation to young people, education and employment. Some will be doing a lot, some little or nothing. Then start exploring whether they are prepared to do more, on the basis of a clear 'ask': the school visits, the traineeships, the work placements etc, then start supporting them.

To see the missed opportunity here, simply consider the large publicly funded employers. In most cities public sector organisations are in fact the largest employers, often with the council being the single largest body, but with large NHS trusts, universities, colleges and government agencies close behind. How often are these organisations brought around the table and focused on what they can do – without harming any of their primary objectives – to improve the skills and

employment prospects of local young people? Do they all provide a reasonable number of apprenticeships, and require their own publicly-funded contractors to do so?

There are examples of some very innovative approaches at the local level. Birmingham City Council has recognised a serious gap in its skills economy between the employers who want to recruit and its young people. As a result it is leading discussions with the city's main further education colleges, the local enterprise partnership and others to establish a Birmingham Apprenticeship, Internship and Recruitment Agency. They intend to draw together the recruitment activity of the city council, its suppliers and local businesses, and provide a service to employers who are offering work experience, traineeships and apprenticeships.

In every local area there will be some business people who want to take a leadership role in relation to this agenda. They are the bridgehead into the wider business community: the people who organise meetings and dinners and invitations to the local Chamber of Commerce. We need to start talking to them, and build on their goodwill to convene others. But this has to be done with seriousness. It will take senior political investment and some small-scale resources to manage relationships properly: to respond to questions and concerns, and to provide the small but essential layer of support that will enable businesses to engage better with young people.

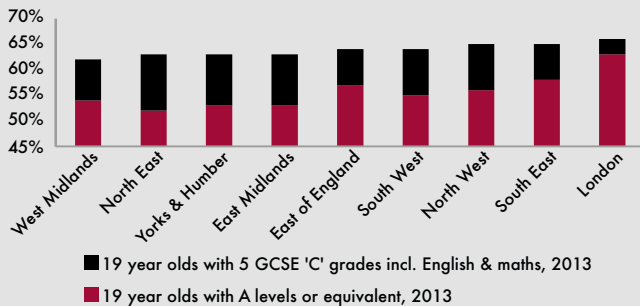
4. Post-16 education and training that helps young people secure work

Very few young people are NEET from 16. Instead, most of those who are NEET at 18 continue their education for two further years, only to become unemployed when they have completed their courses. The problem is not to ensure they

are doing ‘something’ between 16 and 18, but to ensure that what they are doing is really valuable and is going to help them secure employment. This is why simply raising the education participation age will not solve the problem.

At present the level of achievement by 19 is not high enough anywhere in the country. Over a third of young people nationally reach the age of 19 without the qualifications needed for secure employment – the equivalent of five GCSEs at grades A*-C including English and maths.²³

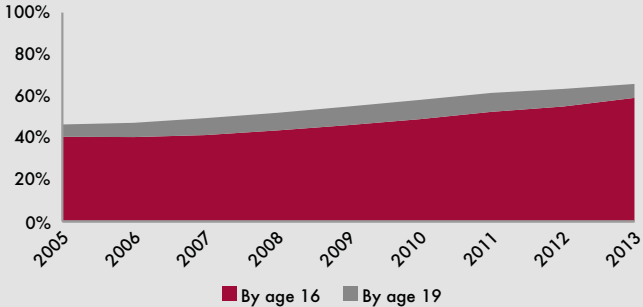
Chart 7. Over a third of young people nationally reach the age of 19 without the qualifications needed for good, secure employment



Source: National Statistics, Level 2 and 3 attainment by young people aged 19 in 2013

The good news is this situation has been improving over the past decade. The chart below shows the proportion of young people reaching GCSE C grades in both English and maths. Each year provides data on the people who were 19 in that year. The lower section shows how many had reached C grades or their equivalent by the time they were 16. The upper section shows how many did so between 16 and 19.

Chart 8: Achievement of both English and maths qualifications at the equivalent of GCSE A*C grades, at ages 16 and 19



Note: the data used in this series is calculated on a different basis to that used in the previous chart [X: regional L2&3] and is not exactly comparable

Source: National Statistics, Level 2 and 3 attainment by young people aged 19 in 2013

Seven years ago less than half reached the GCSE benchmark by 19, and that has improved significantly. But what the chart also shows is the relatively poor contribution of the 16-18 further education sector. Almost all the improvement at the age of 19 reflects improvements already made by the age of 16.

In 2013 just one in six of the 19 year olds who had left school without decent English and maths GCSEs had gained these skills subsequently. The large majority of young people who enter further education without good literacy and numeracy still lack these key skills when they leave it two years later.

It is only fair at this point to make some arguments from the perspective of the FE sector. Some of these young people were not in any kind of provision at all between the ages of 16 and 18: they were NEET. Fair enough, we can't criticise

the quality of educational provision that was not actually delivered. But we know the proportion of 16 and 17 year old NEETs at 5 per cent is much smaller than the 30 per cent who don't make the grades by 19. So the great majority were actually in some form of further educational provision.

Another defence might be that these young people are very hard to help. The schools have done such a terrible job, and the young people are so disaffected, that it is impossible to educate many of them in literacy and numeracy to GCSE C grade. Apart from being an awful counsel of despair, this just does not reflect that we are talking about almost half the population here. There will be some hard cases, but most are not.

Where are these 16-18-year-olds actually being educated? Many people assume that most 16-year-olds go on to study in school sixth forms after taking their GCSEs. In fact school sixth forms educate around one in three 16-18 year olds. Sixth form colleges account for another one in ten. Over 80 per cent of these young people studying in schools and sixth form colleges are taking A and AS level courses, which means they will have already achieved five good GCSEs as entry requirements.

The largest number of young people nationally, around half of all 16-18 year olds, attend further education colleges. 80 per cent of them are studying vocational programmes; around half at the equivalent of A-level standard, and around half at the equivalent of GCSE level or below. Compared to sixth forms, FE colleges provide for a much higher share of young people who are previously low-attaining, come from disadvantaged backgrounds, or face learning difficulties.

There are relatively few FE colleges – just over 230 in 2013/14 – so given that they are educating half the cohort of young people, in addition to many adults, they are large institutions. The largest, like Manchester College and

Newcastle College, educate tens of thousands of young people each. In many places, one FE college will serve not just its town but a wide surrounding area, and in all but the biggest cities there will be no more than two or three. They each have huge impact on their local community.

So FE colleges are big and very important. Yet the FE sector rarely makes the national news, and its ministers do not resign or achieve recognition because of their success or failure. Why don't FE colleges occupy a more prominent place in our national debates about education? Why is there not more political capital at stake here? The answer probably lies in the fact that most senior politicians, journalists and civil servants neither attended FE colleges themselves, nor send their children there.

Let me state a simple, crucial fact in the NEET debate. Most of the young people who become NEET at 18 were studying at FE colleges the previous year. This can be put in a more striking way: FE colleges are the main suppliers of 18-year-old NEETs. For example, of those 18 year olds who became NEET in Nottingham in 2013, over half (58 per cent) were attending a further education college the previous year. In Coventry the equivalent figure was almost exactly half (49 per cent).²⁴

This in itself is not a criticism of FE colleges. For a start, it reflects the simple fact that colleges provide half of all the 16-18 education. In addition, because colleges on average cater for those who do less well at school, they are very likely to contain a higher proportion of those who will go on to become unemployed.

The point I want to emphasise is that most of the 18-year-old NEETs are not invisible when they are 16 and 17. Many are attending an FE college. They are sitting in front of lecturers, in classrooms and workshops, following their courses. So this is an incredibly important moment at which a relatively

small number of publicly funded institutions have direct access to many of the young people who will subsequently end up unemployed.

The FE sector has improved its performance in relation to equipping young people with the core skills they need in literacy and numeracy. Back in 2005 it was succeeding with just one in ten young people who needed to gain these skills, and that has risen to one in six.²⁵ But we simply have to aim higher than one in six, and the evidence from the case studies shows how much more we could do. In particular we could make sure that every young person is at least studying for suitably challenging English and maths qualifications. We know many in the past were not.

The coalition government has taken some good and honourable steps in this area, especially with the introduction of what is known as the 16-19 Study Programme²⁶ which emerged from the Wolf Review of Vocational Education.²⁷ From this year (as part of the Study Programme reforms) all young people who miss out on GCSE C grades in English or in mathematics will need to study these subjects from 16-18 in order to secure public funding for the rest of their course. This is a big step forward and something for which the government deserves credit.

The Study Programme is an attempt to move us away from the pattern described in the two case studies of Alysha and Mohammed: young people churning through nominally 'vocational' qualifications, without improving their highest level of achievement, and without gaining the skills they really need. The reason this pattern has been so prevalent for so long is that the further education funding system incentivised colleges to attract and retain young people, and penalised them if they did not complete their courses. So colleges systematically provided the courses that young

people wanted and could successfully complete. Not the ones that they needed and might be challenging.

Changes to the further education funding are a key part of the Study Programme. I will not go into the detail here, but we should be very, very wary of relying too much on this single mechanism for achieving the desired objective. One of the great lessons of public service reform is that good intentions don't work if the system incentives are wrong: too many people shade their decisions (chase the money) and justify it to themselves. Conversely, apparently reasonable incentives rarely work without good leadership and intelligent accountability: rigid mechanisms are likely to cause unexpected and unwelcome consequences (hitting the target and missing the point).

The temptation for colleges will always be to put students on a less demanding course if it meets the funding criteria, and to manage risk by ensuring they don't take tests for qualifications whilst funding is still at stake. More fundamentally, the FE sector is being asked to dramatically increase the quantity of its literacy and numeracy provision in short order. There needs to be strong scrutiny on the quality and nature of this expanding provision in every local area and in every college.

Ofsted inspects all further education colleges. But there are a range of reasons why its inspection of these institutions has not until now had the kind of impact it should have done. Firstly, inspection grades have historically been strongly driven by 'success rates': the proportion of young people who completed and achieved their qualification, regardless of whether these were the right qualifications for them to take in the first place. This hardly provided a counterweight to the funding system.

Second, FE colleges are often serving many adults as well as young people, across a huge range of courses and quali-

fications, often on several physical sites, with hundreds of instructors. It is hard to boil this down to a single meaningful inspection grade, and especially hard to reflect the interests of different groups of learners who may experience very different quality of provision.

Finally, the inspection reports for colleges simply do not drive choice in the way that school inspection reports do. Many people move home on the basis of an Ofsted school inspection report (the top referrer to Ofsted's website is a property search engine), but no one does so on the basis of a college inspection report. In any case the choice available to learners is drastically limited by the small number of colleges nationally and the fact that many are almost local monopolies. The growth of university technical colleges and other such providers will hopefully change this.

Ofsted is now rightly increasing the focus, within its college inspections, on the quality of teaching and achievement in English and maths. A more fundamental reform would involve them providing separate reports on the 16-19 and adult provi-

Ofsted is now rightly increasing the focus, within its college inspections, on the quality of teaching and achievement in English and maths

sion. My own view is that it should be virtually impossible for a college to be judged good if the quality of its literacy and numeracy provision, and the literacy and numeracy outcomes for 16-19 year old learners, are not good.

But as with schools, Ofsted and national government are not enough on their own: they are too distant and their touch too infrequent. Local bodies have a vital role, and in particular need to have strong and supportive relationships with every local FE college. In every local area there should be a strong focus on ensuring that further education literacy and

numeracy provision is of good quality, at the right level, and that it leads to success.

At the moment most local authorities do have at least some relationship with their school sixth forms, because these are part of the wider schools system. However, many don't have anything like this kind of closeness with their FE colleges, despite them being the biggest providers of post 16 education, and the largest individual institutions, and the most important providers for those at risk of becoming unemployed at 18.

This needs to change across the country. In some areas this will feel counter-cultural: the FE institutions were incorporated as private institutions 20 years ago, and guard their independence. So the right approach is one of partnership with the colleges, engagement and intelligent – and public – accountability. Most importantly, local authorities need to rediscover their appetite for leading the whole education system from 0-19, not just the parts of it that they still feel they control directly.

4: GOVERNANCE – MAKING IT HAPPEN

If this is such an important issue, and the solutions are within our grasp, then why has it been so difficult to reduce NEET numbers until now? One reason is that the national numbers are hard to understand, and the local numbers so significantly understate the scale of the issue. Another is that we have been captured by the idea of the young people who are NEET as severely disadvantaged, and too ready to consider the whole issue as ‘wicked’ and impossible to solve.

Another reason is that the NEET issue is ‘important’ but never ‘urgent’. There is no sudden crisis that forces us to take action, instead there is a steady flow of young people into unemployment. Many of the most persistent political and policy problems are like this, from environmental change, to our low-investment economy, to our slow-burn housing shortage.

But another reason is that no one person or organisation is held sufficiently accountable for success and failure in relation to young people who become unemployed, either at local or national level. No one gets fired or promoted because of NEET numbers going up or down. As a result no one at the most senior level of national or local government wakes up every day worrying about this issue.

Accountability is not the same thing as responsibility for every element of what needs to happen. No one organisation controls all the levers that are necessary to reduce youth

unemployment, and no one person could possibly oversee them all. As the previous chapter makes clear, the key organisations include councils, schools, colleges, and employers as well as other public services, voluntary organisations and community groups.

National accountability and leadership

At the national level, responsibility for the main relevant areas of government sits across the Department for Education and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. The Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions have a keen interest in reducing the number of benefit claimants, whilst other departments like Health would see longer term benefits that should at least incentivise some co-operation, and Communities has responsibility for local government.

But the main national services are schools and colleges. The hard issue is further education colleges, for which responsibility currently sits within BIS. I am arguing that their most important function is as the main provider of education to 16-18-year-olds. As such they should sit with the Department for Education.

Even with this change, there is no question of any one national cabinet member having direct responsibility for all the aspects of this agenda. No one is going to propose merging the roles of the education and business secretary. However, the lack of a single cabinet level figure who is accountable for the success or failure of reducing youth unemployment is a problem that can be solved. It's clear who this person should be: the Secretary of State for Education. The key determinant of whether someone is unemployed at the age of 18 is their level of skills and qualifications. How many young people succeed in this respect should be a key measure of the education secretary's success.

Local accountability, leadership and partnership

At the local level, accountability for different aspects of the agenda I have set out are divided between cabinet portfolios and senior council officers. In many cases there will be a cabinet member responsible for education or children's services, and another responsible for business and the economy. The officer structures generally follow similar lines.

It is crucial that a single senior council officer and a single cabinet member has clear accountability and leadership for the NEETs agenda in every local authority. This does not mean that all relevant responsibilities within the council can flow directly to these individuals, because the necessary span of activity is too wide. However, named individuals can be accountable for exercising leadership and ensuring progress is made across the full range of issues. In the absence of this clarity, there will always be a lack of urgency in the face of other competing priorities.

This is still not enough. Local authorities do not control all or even most of the organisations that affect the issues. Most obviously employers have to be engaged on the basis of an equal partnership, but the colleges are independent corporations as well, and the third sector will play an important role. Every one of the 230 FE college principals has a leadership role to play here: they control the largest and most important institutions educating many of the relevant young people. What is needed in every area is a local body with clear oversight of the issue, senior representation from all the necessary partners, and a manageably specific remit.

It is crucial that a single senior council officer and a single cabinet member has clear accountability and leadership for the NEETs agenda in every local authority

One possible local governance model would be a Young People's Employment and Education Partnership Board. These boards would have a single objective: to increase the proportion of young people locally who are in employment or education at the age of 18. Their intermediate objective would be to increase the number of young people who achieve both literacy and numeracy qualifications at the equivalent of GCSE C grade by the age of 18.

These boards would be small, would include members from the key sectors necessary for success (the council, schools, colleges, employers, and the voluntary sector), and could be chaired by an independent person. Membership would be senior in level – senior enough to get things done at scale and pace. The board would oversee implementation of local action planning, and their meetings would be sharply focused on action and holding all partners to account.

Councils' scrutiny boards would continue to have an important role, and their work would be complementary to the partnership board. Whilst a partnership board might, for example, meet four times a year and be focused exclusively on NEETs, a council scrutiny board is unlikely to be able to devote this much time to a single issue. But they would have a particularly important role in holding the named cabinet member to account for their leadership role.

POSTSCRIPT:
A MATTER OF LEADERSHIP, NOT MONEY OR POLICY

NEETs are not a wicked issue, but one that can be tackled successfully once we understand the young people we are talking about. This agenda does not require major new resources, and in particular there is already national funding available for full time study for all young people up to the age of 19. We do not have to wait for changes to national legislation or policy. None of the key proposals in this report are premised on these things.

However, success does require local authorities to take action they are not taking now: to exercise leadership and form partnerships in the absence of formal and bureaucratic control. Local authorities have suffered huge budget cuts over the course of this parliament, and some will hear this as another thing they can't afford to do.

Taking this issue seriously at local level would require some resources. It requires people to lead, to manage relationships, to track down and help those who are NEET, and to hold other partners to account. But really this is an agenda local authorities can't afford not to take seriously. Otherwise they will continue to pay a much greater price in terms of their local economy, their own budgets, and costs to their own communities.

Finally, it is worth thinking about the scale of this issue in context. In a city of 300,000 people, there might be say 500 young people in each cohort who are at serious risk of

becoming NEET at the age of 18. This is not an unmanageable number, not a sea of humanity. You could put them all in a medium-sized theatre. We could find every one of them a mentor among a population that large. It's not impossible to imagine every one of them spending time with a good local employer, and every one of them getting good advice about what they should be studying and doing next. We can certainly aspire to giving every one of them a good education.

We can significantly raise the employment rate for young people, and in the process boost the economy as a whole. The consequence will be less pressure on public services and welfare budgets, as well as less deprivation and inherited disadvantage in the longer term. If this is not a public policy issue that is currently seen as urgent, this is a mistake. There can be few that are more fundamentally important.

- 1** This Official Statistics data series is published by the Department for Education each summer and provides the authoritative picture of what 16-18 year old young people are doing in terms of education, training and employment.
- 2** Technically, many will be inactive, but the distinction between unemployment and inactivity is breaking down.
- 3** National Statistics are a subset of official statistics which have been certified by the UK Statistics Authority as compliant with its Code of Practice for Official Statistics.
- 4** This data can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/neet-data-by-local-authority-2012-16-to-18-year-olds-not-in-education-employment-or-training>
- 5** Hooley, T and Watts, A.G (2011). *Careers Work with Young People: Collapse or Transition? An analysis of current developments in careers education and guidance for young people in England*, University of Derby, http://www.derby.ac.uk/files/careers_transition_paper.pdf
- 6** Because of this adjustment, in chart 3 above the NEET numbers include a small slice of the unknowns, and I haven't adjusted for this double counting. The scale of the issue makes this irrelevant.
- 7** The national numbers are based on centralised data returns from, for example, publicly funded education providers, which don't suffer from the problem of young people moving from one local area to another, and they are also backed up by a sample from the Labour Force Survey.
- 8** The national numbers are based on a 16-18 population of 1,955,100, whilst the local numbers add up to a 16-18 population

of 1,755,311. The local population numbers are thus missing 199,789 young people completely in addition to the 'known unknowns'. So if we apply the national 16-18 NEET rate of 7.6 per cent to the locally known base of 1,755,311 then we should see 133,404 NEETs rather than the actually recorded 92,240. This implies 41,164 more NEETs in the group of 161,992 whose activity status is 'unknown' and $41,164/161,992 = 25$ per cent, which when added to the 1/8 already included gets you 38 per cent.

- 9** The correct estimate will vary from one local area to another. For example, where the proportion of unknowns is very high – because tracking has broken down badly – it is very likely to be lower. This does not affect the accuracy of the 'national average' estimate.
- 10** Analysis carried out for the author by Futures, Advice Skills and Employment services provider for Nottingham and Nottinghamshire
- 11** 24 per cent. Source: Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire Partnership, end of academic year 2012/2013 data
- 12** Statements 3%, School Action+ 19%. Source: Futures Advice, end of academic year 2012/2013 data
- 13** '16 year olds' is shorthand for young people in the year after they have taken their GCSEs and left school. Most will actually turn 17 during this year. Similarly '17 year olds' are in the second and '18 year olds' in the third academic year after GCSEs.
- 14** Between 1994 and 2013 the proportion of 16-18 year olds in work-based learning fell from 11 per cent to 6 per cent, and the proportion in employer funded training fell from 5 per cent to 4 per cent. Source: Statistical First Release 18/2014, Participation in Education, Training and Employment by 16-18 year olds in England.
- 15** Most of the new apprenticeships are for over 25-year-olds who are already in work.
- 16** National Statistics SFR 41, Provisional GCSE and equivalent results in England: 2013 to 2014
- 17** For example, see the Institute for Effective Education's 'Best Evidence Encyclopaedia' <http://www.bestevidence.org.uk/reviews/index.html>
- 18** For example, see <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/about-us/annual-report>

- 19** OECD: PISA 2012
- 20** An Ofsted HMI whom I was accompanying on an inspection of a special school, said to me “‘A’ is not for ‘Aaah’ in a special school, it is for ‘Achievement!’” For young people with severe disabilities, the difference between achieving meaningful independence, and being the passive recipient of care, is worth fighting for.
- 21** <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/increasing-the-number-of-academies-and-free-schools-to-create-a-better-and-more-diverse-school-system/supporting-pages/regional-schools-commissioners-rscs>
- 22** Ofsted (2013). *Going in the right direction? Careers guidance in schools from September 2012* <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/going-right-direction-careers-guidance-schools-september-2012>
- 23** This data does raise an interesting challenge: if more than a third of 18 year olds don't have these qualifications, but only one in eight are unemployed, are the qualifications really so vital? The answer of course is that it's one thing to be employed, and another to be in a good job with decent remuneration, opportunities and security. If we don't mind large numbers of people competing with robots for low skilled work, then it doesn't matter so much.
- 24** Sources: Analysis for author by CSWP for Coventry and Futures for Nottingham
- 25** See chart 8 level 2 English and maths achievement at 16 and 19. One in ten in 2005 is the 60 per cent who lacked the skills at 16 divided by the 6 per cent who gained them by 19. One in six in 2013 is 41 per cent divided by 7 per cent.
- 26** <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/improving-the-quality-of-further-education-and-skills-training>
- 27** Wolf, A (2011). *Review of Vocational Education – The Wolf Report*, Department for Education and Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-vocational-education-the-wolf-report>



Discussion Guide: Out of Sight

How to use this Discussion Guide

The guide can be used in various ways by Fabian Local Societies, local political party meetings and trade union branches, student societies, NGOs and other groups.

- You might hold a discussion among local members or invite a guest speaker – for example, an MP, academic or local practitioner to lead a group discussion.
- Some different key themes are suggested. You might choose to spend 15–20 minutes on each area, or decide to focus the whole discussion on one of the issues for a more detailed discussion.

A discussion could address some or all of the following questions:

1. Do we misunderstand who NEETs are? How do we change perceptions of NEETs? What are the positive results to society from reducing the number of NEETs?
2. What more could local FE providers be doing to improve the outcomes for 16-18 year olds? What is the role of business in driving up employment outcomes for young people?
3. Is there enough national or local accountability for this issue? Who is the best placed to take on more responsibility for this? Are local authorities the right place to convene people to get on top of the NEETs issue?

Please let us know what you think

Whatever view you take of the issues, we would very much like to hear about your discussion. Please send us a summary of your debate (perhaps 300 words) to debate@fabians.org.uk.



A Convenient Truth

A Better Society for Us and the Planet

Richard Wilkinson
and Kate Pickett

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For real improvements in wellbeing, we need a more equal society, which is best achieved by putting democracy at the heart of the economy. Indeed, the authors see the extension of democracy into economic institutions as the next major step in the long project of human emancipation.

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Out of Sight

How we lost track of thousands of NEETs, and how we can transform their prospects

Almost nothing would have so great an impact on our society and economy in the long term as seriously reducing the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training. But in order to crack the problem, we need to know who they are and where they are. We have lost track of over 150,000 young people nationally, including over 50,000 NEETs, and are in thrall to a profoundly misleading idea that they are troubled, excluded and even dangerous.

NEETs are not a 'wicked' issue, but one that can be tackled successfully. This does not require major new resources or far-reaching changes to national legislation or policy. It does require a proper count, at both local and national level, to reflect the true scale of the problem and push the issue up the political agenda. It also requires proper accountability and determined leadership, especially at the local level, to bring together schools, colleges, employers, careers advice services and third sector organisations to ensure many more young people develop the skills and qualifications they need.

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