

# YOUNG, FEMALE & FORGOTTEN?

**FULL REPORT**

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## Executive Summary

In the UK, there are alarmingly high levels of young women who are economically inactive (EI) and 'NEET' (not in education, employment or training). Beyond an assumption that most young women who are NEET and EI are caring for others, there is limited research and policy which addresses this issue.

Previous research by Professor Maguire and Young Women's Trust (YWT) has highlighted this problem. In this two-year study (2015-17), with the support of the Barrow Cadbury Trust, they now seek to:

- understand the reasons why so many young women are NEET and EI;
- enable young women to tell their own stories about their experiences of being NEET and EI; and
- find new ways of supporting NEET and EI young women into work.

The first year comprised: i) a literature review; ii) in-depth interviews with ten key experts; iii) analysis of data from the Labour Force Survey and NOMIS; and iv) case studies in five areas in England. This report presents its findings and policy recommendations.

Definitions of the key groupings used in this report are:

- NEET - young people (16-24-year olds) not in education, employment or training
- NEET and economically active (EA) - young people who are unemployed and actively seeking work
- NEET and economically inactive (EI) - young people who are not seeking work. Reasons for inactivity include sickness (temporary and long-term), and looking after family or home
- The 'Unknown' Group - young people (16-18-year olds) who are classified as NEET because their post-16 destinations are not recorded and 18-24-year-olds who do not register for welfare support.

## What the literature has to say

The term 'NEET' covers 16-24-year-olds in the UK (15-29-year-olds internationally) who are conventionally unemployed or 'available for work', as well as those who are 'inactive', i.e. unavailable for work, often due to family responsibilities, sickness or disability. This extended use of 'NEET' has raised questions about its continued applicability to capture the scope and scale of social disengagement and economic exclusion. Crucially, there is group of young people who fall outside the NEET category altogether because their destinations are not captured: they form an 'unknown' group.

Across a range of countries, young women are more likely than young men to be NEET.

The most frequently cited characteristics of those who are NEET and EI are: low educational attainment; parenthood (early motherhood); caring responsibilities; benefit entitlement; ethnicity; and lack of attachment to the labour market.

Policy intervention tends to be targeted at young people who are 'available for work', as opposed to those who are defined as NEET and EI, with distinctions being made between:

- strategic level responses, which are coordinated within an overall framework;
- preventive strategies, which identify those deemed to be 'at risk' of dropping out; and
- reintegration strategies, which target those who have already dropped out.

The literature confirms that little is known about the economically inactive, especially young women, and that further research is urgently needed about: the size of the problem; how young women are differentiated from young men within the NEET and EI group; and policy interventions and measures to support or engage with this group.

## The statistical evidence

Data from the January-March quarter of the 2016 Labour Force Survey (LFS) and the National Online Manpower Information System (NOMIS) highlighted differences between NEET females and NEET males:

- NEET young women outnumbered NEET young men (432,000 to 376,000);
- 66% of the young women were EI, compared to 43% of the young men;

### Being NEET is concentrated in the 22-24 age group, especially for young women.

White women had the highest NEET and EI rates (8.5%) followed by Bangladeshi women (2.9%), and those from other Asian backgrounds (1.8%).

A quarter of NEET and EI young women were lone parents, and a quarter were living with a partner and children. The largest proportion (38%) were living with other relatives.

Two thirds of the 177,960 16-24-year-olds in Great Britain in the claimant count, i.e. NEET and EA and claiming Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA), were male. For both sexes, the numbers in the claimant count were much smaller than those in the overall NEET population. Crucially, a significant number of young people, notably those who are NEET and EA, are not claiming benefits and are largely unsupported by statutory services.

Differences were also apparent in the types of benefits received by males and females in the NEET and EI group, with young women claiming Income Support (IS) in larger numbers, as a result of caring responsibilities. Most (86%) NEET and EI young women expected to work in the future. Those in lone parent households or living with their partner and children were more likely to say that they definitely or probably expect to work in the future than young women in other types of households, which clearly indicates that they view their inactive status as temporary.

## The key informant and case study respondents' perspective

The key informant and case study responses confirmed that there was a dearth of recent research evidence on NEET and EI young people.

Notable concerns identified about the current policy perspective were:

- Concentration of policy intervention on JSA claimants, at the expense of other groups;
- The large volume of young JSA recipients being sanctioned;
- The assumption that all NEET and EI young women, as a consequence of early motherhood or caring responsibilities, will remain inactive.
- Young people who have NEET and EI status tend to be 'written off', because of the types of benefits they claim (Income Support/Carer's Allowance or Employment and Support Allowance) and receive limited and standardised support or intervention;
- A more proactive approach would include targeted and tailored support and be devoid of both the threat of sanctions for non-compliance and rigorous individual targets being placed on young people;
- Large numbers of young people do not appear in the 'system' and are effectively 'unknown', with the lack of tracking or monitoring of this group, especially following their 18th birthday, being a key issue. Suggested reasons for their detachment included: an unwillingness to cooperate with benefit regulations; fear of statutory bodies; family support which allows young people to avoid registration; the stigma of benefit receipt; and informal or casual working arrangements. This 'hidden' population remains largely unquantifiable in many localities and detached from statutory services;
- A major concern is future funding beyond 2018 for initiatives that have received EU financial support.
- NEET and EI young women's isolation within their households and communities, often combined with low self-confidence, low self-esteem and mental health issues, was a prevalent finding.
- Notable challenges to the participation of young mothers who are NEET and EI in participating in education, employment or training were: childcare issues; emotional barriers (e.g. 'leaving their children'); access to affordable transport; and the availability of quality employment and training provision.

## Young women's perspective

Common features of the young women respondents were:

- Being in receipt of IS due to their caring responsibilities, or ESA due to a diagnosis of anxiety and depression;
- A reliance on a parent and/or family members for: emotional, practical and financial advice and support; practical help with childcare, food, clothing and personal care costs; and assisting with application forms for housing or benefit receipt;
- Those who lived at home depended on their family and were reluctant to move out.

On other aspects of their lives, key findings were:

- The degree to which family networks appeared to both insulate and isolate them from the outside world;
- The overriding significance of money management, with budgeting revolving round benefit payments;
- Their acceptance of having to manage on limited means, with little self-entitlement;
- An acceptance of responsibility for their children and putting their children first.

As to the future, all respondents expressed an ambition to find work, leave the benefits system and secure financial independence, despite an overriding concern about the lack of 'decent' jobs and their ability to find work due to immense competition.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Significant findings emanating from this first year are:

- There is a dearth of research evidence about EI young women, and, crucially, about appropriate interventions which may address this issue;
- High levels of NEET and EI are largely attributed to early motherhood and household responsibilities. While these are certainly contributory factors, they can too easily be used to excuse policymakers from examining both the causes and symptoms in greater depth;
- There is a need to distinguish between the differing groups within the NEET and EI category;
- NEET and EI young women remain on welfare support for much longer than those who are NEET and EA, and receive limited positive support or intervention;
- NEET and EI young women are isolated, disconnected, hard to reach, and lack self-confidence, access to childcare and job opportunities;
- In some localities, strong and effective partnership working was producing positive results, despite the lack of central government supported programmes and the short-term nature of funded initiatives.

Key recommendations from the findings of the first year are:

- i. The need for a better understanding and knowledge of the NEET population;
- ii. Targeted research and greater policy focus on those who have 'unknown' destinations;
- iii. A government department (and Minister) having strategic responsibility for overseeing key policy areas within education, skills, employment, local government and welfare;
- iv. Offering NEET and EI young women one-to-one personalised support/mentorship to engender external contact and to promote wider social and economic engagement;
- v. The availability of affordable, accessible and sustainable childcare to support young mothers should be a top priority;
- vi. Establishing: early intervention programmes in schools; access to impartial information, advice and guidance (IAG); work experience; and the availability of mentors.
- vii. Re-integration programmes should be underpinned by streamlined and sustainable funding sources, rather than by 'quick fixes'.
- viii. The alarming numbers of NEET and EI young people suffering from anxiety and depression requires urgent policy attention and intervention;
- ix. The creation of sustainable employment opportunities for economically and socially excluded young people should be a policy priority.

## 1. Setting the Scene

### 1.1 Background and context to the research

In 2015, when Young Women's Trust and Professor Sue Maguire first came together to design this research, young women who were NEET and EI far outnumbered young men who were in this position. In the UK, 348,000 women aged 16-24 were NEET and EI, compared to 162,000 young men, continuing a trend of over a decade. During its Scarred for Life inquiry (2015), Young Women's Trust reported this, and raised concerns about the assumptions which surrounded the numbers. Pregnancy, parenting and caring were too often cited as reasons for economic inactivity, alongside the view that young women caring 'chose' not to work. Yet none of the interviewees claiming this presented us with any firm evidence in support of their beliefs. Perhaps, then, it is unsurprising that the research we have conducted during 2016 has exposed how employment policy for young people – at local and national level – largely ignores gender. The data we have gathered depicts a diverse group of young women from all socio-economic backgrounds. Caring responsibilities and ill health are only two of the reasons which prevent them from seeking work; but what unites these young women is that they are wholly neglected by policy and practice.

It is fair that government applauds the rising employment rate and falling unemployment rate among young people. But with 274,000 young women NEET and EI in the second quarter of 2016, it is disappointing that still no government strategy names or targets either young women or the economically inactive as a group requiring support. Meanwhile, the Department for Work and Pensions is busy with a number of policy initiatives to increase the numbers in work. With the Work and Health Programme still in development, the publication of the 'Work, health and disability green paper: improving lives', and Universal Credit rolling out nationwide, it is essential that the government uses these projects as opportunities to consider: who are economically inactive young women? And how can policy and practice reduce their numbers?

### 1.2 Aims

This study aims over the course of two years:

- To understand the reasons why so many young women are economically inactive (EI)
- To enable young women to tell their own stories about their experiences of being EI
- To find new ways of supporting EI young women into work

This report marks the first complete year of research and presents its findings and policy recommendations.

### 1.3 Methodology

The first year of research comprised four elements:

- A literature review
- Interviews with key informants
- Data analysis
- Case studies.

### 1.4 Definitions of the key groupings used in this report are:

- NEET - young people (16-24-year olds) not in education, employment or training
- NEET and economically active (EA) - young people who are unemployed and actively seeking work
- NEET and economically inactive (EI) - young people who are not seeking work. Reasons for inactivity include sickness (temporary and long-term), and looking after family or home
- The 'Unknown' Group - young people (16-18-year olds) who are classified as NEET because their post-16 destinations are not recorded and 18-24-year-olds who do not register for welfare support.

## **1.5 Literature review**

A review of the existing academic literature about NEET and EI among young women was conducted to:

- develop a statistical picture of recent trends;
- examine relevant evidence;
- identify lessons which have been learned and which can be applied in a UK context;
- identify evidence that provides greater understanding of what current and future interventions can potentially achieve in relation to improving re-engagement, especially with the labour market, for those who are currently defined as economically inactive.

The review found 112 relevant published pieces of literature, with no parameters set on the publication dates, including grey literature, as well as academic publications. The gaps in this literature provided a basis for the questions and themes explored in the three other elements of the research design.

## **1.6 Interviews with key informants**

In-depth interviews with ten experts, from eight organisations, including the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and (what was then) the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS), were conducted face-to-face or over the telephone. Interviews were designed to establish current understanding of the NEET and EI group: who it comprises; relevant data and research; benefits entitlement; policy interventions affecting NEET and EI young women; and views on effective future policy.

## **1.7 Data analysis**

The January-March quarter of the 2016 Labour Force Survey (LFS) was interrogated to provide a more detailed picture of young people who were NEET and EI than is available in the published bulletins and associated data material. This analysis sought to establish how economic inactivity among men and women aged 16-24 varied by age, ethnicity, government region and household type. It also examined reasons for inactivity, desire to work, and whether and when respondents expected to work in the future. Some analysis of NOMIS data was undertaken to derive claimant numbers for 16-24-year-olds.

## **1.8 Case studies**

Case studies were undertaken in five areas in England, which were chosen to cover areas with contrasting NEET rates, mixes of ethnicity, industries and rural / city settings. The selected localities were Norwich, Kent, Hull, Birmingham and Oldham. In each area, semi-structured interviews were conducted with local stakeholders involved in devising and delivering employment interventions. These stakeholders typically included local authorities, Jobcentre Plus, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), education and training providers, and voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations. The interview discussion guide was designed to uncover interviewees' awareness of economic activity as an issue, their understanding of the NEET and EI group, and the employment and skills interventions and initiatives available for NEET and EI young women in each area. In Birmingham and Hull, further individual interviews and focus groups were conducted with economically inactive young women.

In the second year of research, running from December 2016 – November 2017, researchers will carry out further analysis of the Understanding Society dataset to establish more about the pathways taken by young women which result in their NEET and EI status. In addition, in-depth interviews will be conducted with NEET and EI young women, who will be brought together with policy makers at a co-creation event to develop new policy solutions to economic inactivity.

## **1.9 Report Structure**

The next section of this report (Chapter 2) describes the key messages from the literature review. Chapter 3 presents the statistical analysis. Chapter 4 reports the evidence from the key informant interviews and the findings from the case studies. Chapter 5 gives the findings from the interviews that were conducted with young women. Finally, Chapter 6 reports the conclusions and recommendations emerging from the research.



## 2. What the literature has to say

The purpose of the policy and evidence review was to undertake an examination of literature relating to the key factors to be addressed in the study. This would then underpin and inform the subsequent empirical research. In particular, it aimed to identify evidence that would provide a greater understanding of the factors impinging on individual young women's status as economically inactive, and their implications for appropriate policy interventions, incorporating material from both UK and international sources. This section provides a summary of the main findings of the literature review.

### 2.1 Defining NEET and economic inactivity

The term 'NEET', which was originally coined in the UK to define young people between the ages of 16-18 years who were no longer eligible to be classified as unemployed, is now used internationally to classify a much wider cohort of young people between the ages of 15-29 years, with varying age definitions existing between specific countries (House of Lords, 2014). Within the broader age spectrum, the NEET group typically includes the conventionally unemployed or 'available for work' group, as well as the 'inactive group', which includes young people who are unavailable for work because of family responsibilities, sickness or disability. Therefore, the young 'unemployed' co-exist in NEET status with young people who are defined as economically inactive. Their classification and entitlement to welfare support, as well as access to support services, depends on country specific policies.

The International Labour Office (ILO) standard definitions make a distinction between the unemployed and the economically inactive by whether or not an individual is actively seeking work. According to their classification, the economically inactive group includes those who:

- a. want a job but have not been seeking work in the last four weeks
- b. want a job and are seeking work but are not available to start, and
- c. do not want a job.

Eurofound (2016) classifies NEETs in Europe in seven main categories:

- re-entrants, who are on the verge of entering employment or training (8%);
- short-term unemployed, who are ready and available to work, out of work for less than a year (30%)
- long-term unemployed, who are ready and available to work, but unemployed for over a year (22%)
- unavailable due to illness or disability (7%)
- unavailable due to family responsibilities (15%)
- discouraged workers, who have given up looking for jobs because of a perceived lack of opportunities (6%)
- other inactive, which is a residual group, including, for instance, the very 'hard to reach' and privileged young people who choose not to work (13%)(Eurofound, 2016: 32).

In similar vein, Bardak et al (2015, pp. 9-10) make the distinction between two sub-groups of the NEET group: the 'unemployed', who are "without work, currently available for work, and seeking work during a reference period", and 'inactive youth', whose inactivity can be attributed to being:

- disengaged or discouraged, as they are not looking for a job, mainly because they have lost any hope of finding one;
- family carers, who care for somebody in the household (e.g. children, elderly, disabled) or remain out of the labour force due to family duties;
- sick and/or disabled; and
- voluntary NEET, as they are engaged in travelling and/or artistic activities.

The extended use of the term 'NEET', as far as age range, welfare access and activity status are concerned, has raised questions about its continued applicability to capture either the scope and scale of social disengagement and economic exclusion, or the propensity of young people to (re)engage in education, employment or training (EET).

“NEET is a residual statistical category. It tells us who are NEET but it doesn't tell us why and how they became NEET. It doesn't tell us how many people are vulnerable to becoming NEET in the future. We need to develop a terminology that identifies distinct groups, facilitating a more targeted policy response. ‘Disengaged’, ‘undecided’ and ‘unable to find work or training’ would help provide a sharper policy focus.”  
(Gracey and Kelly, 2010, p 2)

The lack of an international standard for the definition of NEETs makes valid comparisons across different countries extremely difficult (ILO, 2015). Another challenge for cross-national comparisons is that different countries use varying criteria to define unemployment, in particular with regard to whether or not an individual is actively seeking work and the length of a required job search period (Assaad and Levison, 2013).

In the UK, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) defines economic activity and economic inactivity and their rates in the following way:

Economically active: People who are either in employment or unemployed (actively seeking work).

Economic activity rate: The number of people who are in employment or unemployed expressed as a percentage of the relevant population.

Economically inactive: People who are not in employment but are not seeking work. Reasons for inactivity include sickness (temporary and long-term), looking after family or home, student, retired and believes there are no jobs available.

Economic inactivity rate: The number of economically inactive people expressed as a percentage of the relevant population (ONS, 2016).

Significantly, the unemployment rate fails to capture the levels of social and economic inactivity that exist across the UK, as the data suggest that the potential labour pool is wider than just those who are actively looking for work.

## **2.2 Trends in young women's NEET economic inactivity**

“NEET is a female condition” – (Bardak, 2016)

The above statement comes from a study which draws on evidence from a range of Eastern European, North African and Middle Eastern countries, and attributes this position largely to females' involvement in caring responsibilities. Although the scale may differ, it is also the case that women in the UK are more likely than men to be NEET. In the UK, the female NEET and EI population is nearly double that of males, while far greater numbers of young men are defined as actively seeking work. Therefore, women are more likely to be economically inactive, while men are more likely to be unemployed. This is a long-term trend.

OECD data confirms that young women are much more likely to be NEET, compared to young men, with the OECD average NEET rate for young women being 4.4 percentage points higher than for young men (OECD, 2015). The average NEET rate among OECD countries stood at 15 per cent, although this overall figure masks the considerable variation between individual countries.

A report by Eurostat (2015), based on their longer-term data, shows that, between 2002 and 2014, the proportion of women who were EI fell from 39.5 per cent to 33.5 per cent, reflecting the increasing participation of women in the labour market. However, the younger age groups were more prone to being EI, with over half of the 15-24 group being in this status, partly due to escalating numbers remaining in education and training.

The financial crisis of 2008 clearly had an impact on levels of youth unemployment internationally. The ILO stated that “since 2009, little progress has been made in reducing youth unemployment in the advanced economies” (ILO, 2013: p. 3), with both the level and duration of unemployment increasing significantly. However, as Thompson (2013) points out, youth unemployment across Europe had “been rising relative to the unemployed rate of older adults for far longer”, thus questioning the notion that there was a ‘regular’ relationship between economic growth (as measured by GDP) and youth unemployment. He attributed this to shifts in the structure of the economy and the labour market.

Mosca (2013) argues that, while more young women are NEET across EU states, in comparison to young men, it was the male NEET rate that rose more rapidly as a result of the economic crisis. This may be attributable to greater numbers of young men registering with statutory services as being available and/or actively seeking work and to the inclination of young women to assume caring or domestic responsibilities as an alternative to registered unemployment. This is supported by Assaad and Levison (2013: 19), who contend that young females assume such roles “in the absence of labor market demand”.

Looking to the future, concerns have been raised about the possible scarring effects of being unemployed at a young age (ACEVO, 2012). In addition, the increasing participation of older age groups, particularly women, in the labour market has been cited as a factor in the rising levels of unemployment among young people (Mourshed et al, 2014), as it has enhanced the degree of competition for jobs. More optimistically, Dolphin (2014: 19) suggests that, while this is certainly the case, the increased spending of these adults in jobs will lead to more jobs being created overall, to the benefit of young people.

## **2.3 Characteristics of economically inactive young women**

A wide range of factors can be identified as being characteristic of those who are NEET and EI. For example, a comprehensive OECD report (OECD, 2013) identified twelve key characteristics of the economically inactive. These are a combination of a) underlying or prior factors, such as low educational attainment and/or being from an economically disadvantaged household; b) characteristics which were evident while in EI status, such as parenthood and caring responsibilities; and c) the effects of being EI, such as having a higher propensity to be in poverty, “lower satisfaction with life”, “having less trust in people”, and being “less confident in the ability of society to help them”.

### **a. Educational attainment**

In an analysis of inactivity rates among young people (aged 18 to 24) in the UK between 1992 and 2008, Leaker (2009) found a strong correlation between low qualification attainment and being economically inactive. Moreover, young women with no qualifications were found to be more likely to be inactive than young men with no qualifications. This increased likelihood of young women with low levels of educational attainment to be NEET and inactive was also found in studies in Italy (Franzosi, 2014) and Austria (Tamesberger and Bacher, 2014).

### **b. Parenthood**

As indicated in the OECD report cited above, parenthood is frequently put forward as a factor in young women’s economic inactivity, and is closely related to socio-economic status (Fernandes and Gabe, 2009). Thus, an association is made between economic exclusion and early motherhood.

In terms of income levels, an interesting finding relating to the UK, using survey evidence from ‘Understanding Britain’, is that young women aged 16-21 report higher levels of income than men of the same age (Berrington et al, 2014). These higher income levels among young women are attributed to their additional welfare benefits, as a result of their responsibility for dependent children.

It should be stated here that there is considerable overlap between this category and the following one of ‘caring responsibilities’, as, for many, the caring is for their own children.

### **c. Caring responsibilities**

Looking after family/home is the most frequently cited reason for economic inactivity among women. Younger women tend to have more caring duties than men (ONS, 2015). Among women aged 18-24 who are NEET, those who are undertaking family care are much less likely to live with their parent(s) when compared with the other economic categories, as many will have left home and formed their own families. Berrington et al (2014) suggest that if NEET status is taken as an indicator of vulnerability, the higher proportion of women undertaking family care means that females are much more likely than men to be classified as vulnerable.

These findings are reinforced by a study of EU member states (Eurofound, 2014), which estimated that “30% of young women and 13% of young men are involved in childcare at least weekly, while 11% and 10% respectively are involved in weekly care for elderly or disabled relatives” (p 9). In Austria, where NEET rates are among the lowest across EU and OECD countries, childcare responsibilities were the most commonly cited reason for NEET status (Tamesberger & Bacher, 2014).

This disparity between males and females who are EI, in terms of the likelihood of them being involved in caring responsibilities, was highlighted by Sissons and Jones (2012, p 20) “The persistence of the gender gap (albeit significantly reduced) indicates continued barriers to employment, education or training for young women – these are primarily associated with the greater likelihood of young women to be carers”.

### **d. Benefit entitlement**

In the UK, young people who claim inactivity benefits (the majority of whom are women) tend to be welfare dependent for much longer periods than their counterparts on Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA). Research by Cooke (2013) found that over half (52 per cent) of young people claiming Employment Support Allowance (ESA) had been in benefit receipt for over a year, as had 61 per cent of under 25s on Income Support (IS). However, perhaps more significantly, 43 per cent of young people were not claiming any type of out-of-work benefit and were, in effect, marginalised from formal employment and support services (Cooke, 2013).

### **e. Ethnicity**

Although there is a scarcity of literature focusing on economic activity among different ethnic groups, a literature review of the NEET group undertaken for the Scottish Executive (York Consulting, 2005) identified the following factors which adversely affected ethnic minorities: living in deprived areas; higher incidence of poor health; lack of fluency in English; lower educational achievement; low uptake of formal childcare; and employers' attitudes (p 67).

Moreover, ethnicity has been found to be a factor in determining the propensity to claim benefits on the part of 'inactive' women. A study of the participation of women in the labour market in Leicester found that the relatively large number of Asian women who were economically inactive or unemployed did not access the benefit system (Beatty et al, 2010).

An earlier study of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women in the UK (Dale et al, 2002) suggested that, while young women aspired to remaining economically active after getting married, this was something which would have to be negotiated with their husband and mother-in-law.

### **f. Attachment to the labour market**

It has long been established that disengagement from the labour market and education has a negative effect on the adult outcomes associated with identity capital formation, particularly for young women (Bynner & Parsons, 2002). For them, this disengagement not only affects their labour market outcomes, but is also linked to early marriage or cohabiting, feelings of dissatisfaction with life, lack of a sense of control and other problems in life (Eurofound, 2015, p 13). Dorsett and Lucchino (2015) suggest that short prior inactive NEET spells have little effect on unemployment exits but that prior inactive NEET spells of more than a year reduce transitions from unemployment into work.



This longer-term impact is also emphasised in the OECD report, which states that :

“NEET status does not appear to be a temporary state on the way from school into the labour market, but rather a long-lasting one ... the risk of remaining a jobseeker or dropping out of the labour force for several years is positively associated with bad health, low educational attainment (including that of parents) and poverty”  
(OECD, 2013, p 6).

## 2.4 Policy interventions

Over recent years, there has been a proliferation of interest and concern among policy-makers, both in the UK and internationally, about significant increases in the numbers of young people who are NEET or unemployed. However, policy intervention tends to be primarily targeted at young people who are ‘available for work’, i.e. the NEET and EA group, as opposed to those who are defined as economically inactive. From an overview of Europe as a whole, Bardak et al (2015, p 47) conclude that “inactive youth and young girls receive little attention from policy makers”.

Research undertaken across EU states suggests that there is no common solution to address youth unemployment and that tailor-made interventions are needed to address country specific issues (ILO, 2013). For example, while some countries, including the UK, propose the expansion of vocational learning in order to replicate the success of Germany’s long-established vocational system, this may not be appropriate, due to differing social, cultural and economic conditions, as well as institutional structures (Euler, 2013).

Three factors which have been advocated as being fundamental to policies targeted at NEET or economically inactive young people are:

- “the need to distinguish between ‘preventive’ and ‘reintegration’ strategies;
- a recognition that, rather than being ‘vulnerable’ or ‘marginalised’, many have average or just below average levels of attainment, live at home supported by their family and, as such, can become ‘invisible’ ; and
- rising numbers of young people whose destinations are ‘unknown’, rather than NEET”. (Maguire, 2013a)

This was echoed in an assessment of the appropriate response to the problems of early school leaving (EU, 2011), where the appraisal of approaches adopted in a wide range of European countries distinguished between:

- “Strategic level responses – wherein policies are coordinated within an overall framework
- Preventive strategies – early interventions designed to reduce the likelihood of drop-out at a later stage. ‘At risk’ young people are identified on the basis of their neighbourhood, school, family background etc.
- Reintegration strategies – targeted at those who have already dropped out of the education and training system”.

As Dale (2010) indicates, early intervention relies on school-based data to be collected and analysed to identify those deemed to be ‘at risk’ of dropping out or becoming NEET, whereas reintegration is likely to require the input of a range of agencies and takes place once an individual has fallen out of the system.

Examples of early intervention measures include:

- Investment in good quality Early Childhood Education and Care to reduce the likelihood of ESL/NEET status (Reynolds et al, 2004).
- Identifying, targeting and supporting 'at risk' students, especially through the use of assessment tools and one-to-one intensive mentoring support.
- Offering financial support to those from lower income households and other vulnerable groups to encourage and sustain their participation in learning (Maguire and Rennison, 2005).
- Within schools, the introduction of alternative curricula, the provision of more vocational and technical education, and working in partnership with other organisations to support delivery.
- Identifying the triggers of disengagement from school. In the Netherlands, local programmes to prevent drop-out have been agreed between schools, local and national government, business and youth care workers (De Witte and Cabus, 2013).
- Raising the participation age at which young people can leave education or training (Maguire, 2013b).

Another commonly used mechanism for tackling youth unemployment has been active labour market policies (ALMPs), which seek to stimulate the demand for young people in the labour market, usually by offering wage and training subsidies or tax and national insurance breaks/credits to employers (ILO, 2013: pp 61-69).

They also include programmes which offer a bridge between education and work, through training and work experience, the broadening of apprenticeship programmes, entrepreneurship, and interpersonal skills and work preparation courses. They may also include job search and job placement assistance (ETF, 2014). In some countries, notably in Europe, Youth Guarantees are in place. However, Bardak et al (2015, p 50) describe them as being "quite general and ad hoc" and being "mainly directed toward 'registered unemployed' and to exclude other NEET groups such as the inactive, discouraged and family carers." Young women who are early school leavers, inactive and/or carers are specifically mentioned as being an 'at risk' group which is often excluded from such policies.

As far as the future direction of policy in the UK is concerned, a study by ACEVO (2012) emphasised the need for NEET policies and interventions to support access to employment, as well as access to flexible education and training provision. Of particular relevance for economically inactive young women, Beatty et al (2010) advocated that service delivery and support should be: locally focused, one-to-one, voluntary and flexible. Sissons and Jones (2012, p 4) advocated: an immediate emphasis on those who are already NEET, but with a longer-term focus on NEET prevention; the provision of support during precarious 'transition' periods; better coordination of local services to support young people; recognition of the critical importance of the education system; and improving the routes into service sector occupations.

More generally, Crowley and Cominetti (2014) state that "an understanding of the local characteristics of young people who are unemployed or NEET, as well as the barriers they face, is crucial if services are to be properly targeted and responsive to local circumstances" (p. 23).

In Europe, the Youth Guarantee seeks to address youth unemployment by ensuring that all young people under 25 receive a good-quality, concrete offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship, or training, within four months of them leaving formal education or becoming unemployed. The offer should be adapted to each individual's need and situation. While plans were developed by the devolved administrations within the UK (i.e. Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland), the measure was rejected within England on the basis that most young people stopped claiming Job Seeker's Allowance within six months; an argument which was questioned by the House of Lords inquiry into youth unemployment (House of Lords, 2013: para 63).

Youth Guarantees were identified as the most effective type of intervention available to disadvantaged groups by the OECD (Careillo et al, 2015), although there are no cited examples of such programmes being targeted at the hardest to reach/hardest to help groups, including NEET inactive groups.

## 2.5 What we need to know

In a study of the NEET inactive group in Sweden, Franzén and Kassman (2005, p 422) stated that “we do not really know what the economically inactive groups actually do”. Furthermore, they contended that this group was essentially an under-researched ‘black box’, which is categorised in terms of what young people are not doing, as opposed to understanding the propensity of young people within the overall group or subgroups to (re)engage with education, employment or training (EET). This chimes with our own review of the literature, which identified a dearth of evidence specifically relating to EI young women.

First and foremost, there is the problem of identifying, with any degree of accuracy, the size of the group.


Relevant questions here are:

- Do NEET inactive rates adequately capture the scale of female economic disengagement across the UK?
- How many young women are unregistered and does this vary between age groups/localities?
- Instead of looking across the spectrum of the group between the ages of 16 and 24, should we divide it into sub-groups (16-18, 19-21 and 22+) to test for homogeneity?

It is also evident that how young women are differentiated from young men within the wider EI group requires further investigation. For example:

- What distinguishes young women from young men in terms of becoming NEET inactive, apart from the differences in the size of the group and young women’s role as carers?
- Do they differ in other ways, such as in terms of their educational attainment, special educational needs, family formation etc.?
- In what other ways are the NEET inactive group different from the young unemployed and why (apart from gender differences and caring responsibilities)?
- To what extent do the personal, social and economic characteristics, length of stay in the NEET group, and issues faced by young women in the NEET and EI group vary by age, geographical location and country?

In terms of policy interventions and specific measures to support or engage with the NEET and EI group, there is a need for more evidence which focuses on young women:

- How should NEET and EI young women be best recognised and supported, and by whom?
  - What works best, when and how in terms of supporting NEET and EI young women to (re)engage with education, employment or training (EET)?
  - What additional support mechanisms are needed to attain an EET outcome?
  - Should these include, when required, help with childcare, developing self-confidence and self-awareness and offering ‘stepping stones’ towards an EET outcome?
  - What impact will the introduction of Universal Credit have on the future trajectories of NEET and EI young women?
  - What further research is required to understand the contact that this group has with Public Employment Services (PES), as well as the effectiveness of PES (e.g. DWP in the UK) interventions?
  - What do young mothers require to help them avoid long-term social and economic exclusion?
- 

## 2.6 Summary

'NEET' is a label used for young people (16-24-year-olds in the UK) who are conventionally 'unemployed' (the EA group) or 'inactive' (the EI group, including those who are unavailable for work due to family responsibilities, sickness or disability). Therefore, the young 'unemployed' co-exist in NEET status with young people who are defined as EI. However, questions are increasingly being raised about whether the term 'NEET' captures the scope and scale of social disengagement and economic exclusion.

Data from countries around the world confirms that young women are much more likely to be NEET, compared to young men. They are also more likely to be economically inactive, while men are more likely to be unemployed. This is a long-term trend.

The most frequently cited characteristic of those who are NEET and EI are: low educational attainment; parenthood (early motherhood); caring responsibilities; longer-term welfare dependency; ethnicity; and attachment to the labour market.

Caring responsibilities and parenthood are frequently put forward as significant factors in young women's EI. In the UK, young people who claim inactivity benefits (the majority of whom are women) tend to be welfare dependent for much longer periods. Evidence suggests that inactive NEET spells of more than a year have scarring effects.

Policy intervention tends to be primarily targeted at young people who are 'available for work', i.e. NEET and EA, as opposed to those who are NEET and EI.

The dearth of information about the EI group points to further research being urgently needed. In relation to EI young women, notable gaps in knowledge are: NEET/ EI trends; how young women are differentiated from young men within the EI group; and effective policy interventions and measures to support or engage with the NEET and EI group.



### 3 Young people NEET and EI – statistical analysis

This section draws on statistical data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) and NOMIS (the National Online Manpower Information System, [www.nomisweb.co.uk](http://www.nomisweb.co.uk)). It demonstrates the disparity between young women and young men in the proportions who are defined as economically active and inactive within the NEET population (16-24 years), as well as the much lower numbers of young people (both young men and young women) who are claiming welfare benefits.

Nearly two thirds of young women who are NEET are classified as EI, while over 50 per cent of young men who are NEET are EA (ILO unemployed). An analysis of NOMIS data shows stark differences in the types of benefits received by males and females. Overall, a smaller percentage of the female population who are NEET active (ILO unemployed) are benefit claimants (42 per cent), compared to their male counterparts (54 per cent). However, within the NEET inactive population, an equal and much higher proportion of both males and females (74 per cent) are estimated to claim benefits. The differences lie in the type of benefits claimed, with young women claiming Income Support (IS) in far greater numbers, which is largely attributable to their childcare responsibilities. The data analysis exposes the reality that a significant number of young people, in particular those who are NEET and EA (ILO unemployed), are unknown and unsupported by statutory services.

#### 3.1 The economically inactive group within the NEET population

The analysis uses data from the January to March quarter of the 2016 LFS, which is managed by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and covers households living at private addresses in the UK. Interviews are carried out with around 40,000 households every quarter. The ONS regularly publishes high level statistics on the number of young people who are NEET and whether they are economically inactive or ILO unemployed by gender and age. The analysis here seeks to provide a more detailed picture of young people who are NEET and EI than is available from the regularly published information.

The LFS shows that there were 7.2 million people aged 16-24 in the UK in January to March 2016 (Table 3.1), with slightly more men than women (3.7 million compared with 3.5 million). 808,000 of those were identified as being NEET, with 55 per cent (447,000) being EI, and 45 per cent (361,000) ILO unemployed (Table 3.2). Overall, young women (432,000) outnumbered young men (376,000) and had a higher proportion who were NEET and EI (66%, compared to 43% of young men). The majority (63%) of 16-24-year-olds who were NEET and EI were women, whilst young people who were NEET and ILO unemployed were mostly men (59%).

**Table 3.1: Population aged 16-24 by age and gender (thousands)**

Age	Male	Female	Total
16	370	353	723
17	379	361	740
18	387	370	756
19	400	382	782
20	407	389	796
21	416	401	818
22	431	416	847
23	438	429	868
24	453	447	899
Total	3,681	3,548	7,229

Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey, January to March 2016

Table 3.2: Economic activity by gender among people who were NEET aged 16-24

Economic Activity	Female %	Male %	All %
Per cent ILO Unemployed	34	57	45
Per cent Economically Inactive	66	43	55
All NEET (thousands)	432	376	808

Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey, January to March 2016

Figure 3.1 shows the age distribution of the NEET population by gender. For both males and females, very few were aged below 18: just four per cent of women and eight per cent of men. Much of this gender difference is accounted for by levels of unemployment being higher for young men than for young women, particularly for those aged 17. Thereafter, while for males, certainly from the age of 19, there is a relatively even distribution for each year, for females there is a concentration from 22 to 24, accounting for 54 per cent of the total numbers, whereas this applies to 43 per cent of males.

**Figure 3.1: The age distribution of NEETs aged 16-24**

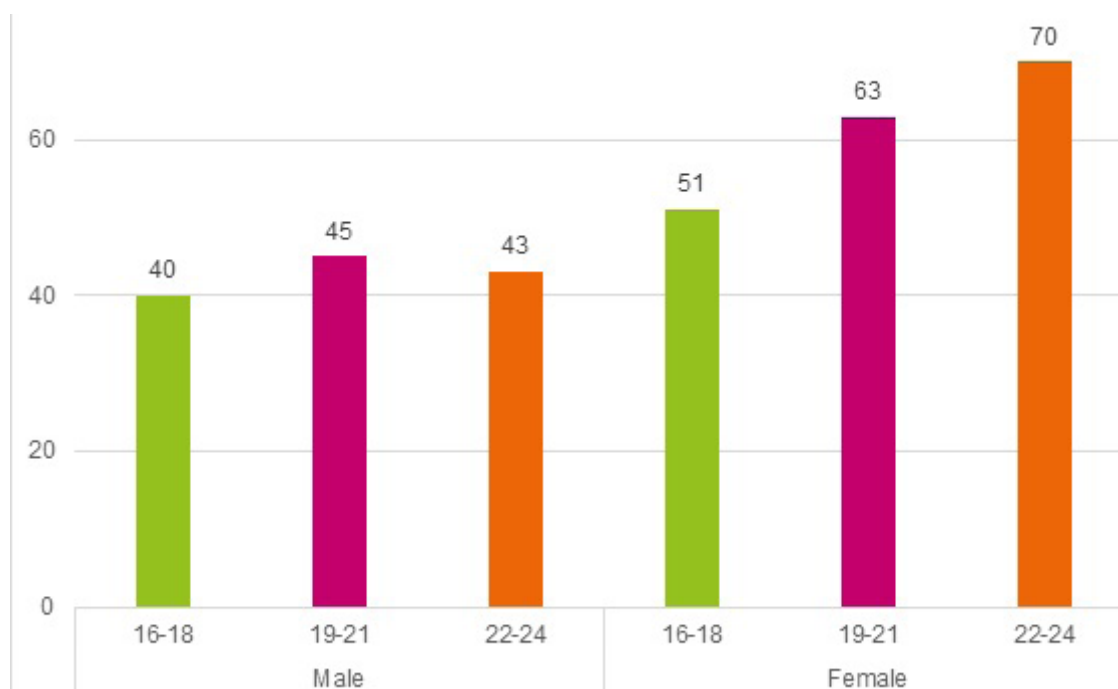


Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey, January to March 2016

As Figure 3.2 illustrates, females who are NEET are much more likely to be classified as EI than are males across all age bands (16-18, 19-21 and 22-24). This also means that young men who were NEET were more likely than young women to be ILO unemployed.

ILO unemployment identifies people who want to work, are available to work and are actively seeking employment. Many young women may want to work, but would not be classified as ILO unemployed. This is largely attributed to their 'caring responsibilities', which remove significant numbers from the 'actively seeking work' category. These caring responsibilities also largely account for female inactivity rates increasing with age to a greater extent than for men.

Figure 3.2: Inactivity rates of young people who were NEET by gender and age group



Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey, January to March 2016

The percentage of the population who were NEET also varies by Government Office Region, partly reflecting regional variations in labour market conditions. The percentage who were NEET in the North East (16.8%) was almost double the proportion who were NEET in London (8.6%); and for young women the NEET rate was more than double in the North East than in London and the South East (19.7% compared with 9.5% and 9.4% respectively).

In most regions, the percentage of young women who were NEET was higher than the percentage for young men. However, in a few regions, notably the West Midlands, Wales, Northern Ireland and the South West, there was little difference in the NEET percentage by gender.

In the UK, 8.1 per cent of young women were EI, compared with 4.5 per cent of young men, with these rates varying by region in a similar way to the rates for those who were NEET. The East Midlands (12.6%) and the North East (12.5%) had the highest inactivity rates for young women.

### 3.2 NEET and economic inactivity by ethnic group

There was also variation by ethnic group, rising from 3.0 per cent of young Chinese, to 11.5 per cent of the White population, and 14.7 per cent of young people from multiple or mixed ethnic groups. For young women, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women (18.4% and 17.3% respectively) had the highest percentage who were NEET, in line with these groups having high unemployment rates across all ages. In contrast, no Chinese women were recorded as NEET, while 6.6 per cent of Indian women, 7.1 per cent from Other Asian backgrounds and 12.6 per cent of young White women were NEET.

Within most ethnic groups, young women were more likely to be NEET than young men. However, Black, African, Caribbean and Black British women were less likely to be NEET than men from these ethnic groups (9.6%, compared with 13.4%). Similarly, young women from multiple or mixed ethnic groups were much less likely to be NEET than men from these groups (10.9%, compared with 18.7%).

Patterns of economic inactivity are similar to those among the NEET population. The highest female inactivity rates were among White women (8.5%), with inactivity rates of 2.9 per cent for Bangladeshi women and 1.8 per cent for women from Other Asian backgrounds.

### 3.3 Living arrangements

The vast majority of young people in the UK were living with other relatives, typically their parents. A relatively small percentage of young women (5%) were lone parents living with their children, and a further five per cent were married or cohabiting with their partner and children.

However, when only young people who were NEET are considered, the profile among young women changes significantly, whilst differences for men are relatively small. Young women who were NEET were much more likely than young women in general to be living in lone parent households (20%, compared with 5%). There was a similar difference in the percentage of young women living with their partner and children (19% who were NEET and 5% of all young women). In addition, just under half of young women who were NEET were living with other relatives, compared to around two-thirds of all young women.

Restricting the sample further by looking at young people who were NEET and EI further changes this profile for young women (Table 3.3). Around a quarter of EI young women were in lone parent households and a further one-quarter were living with their partner and children. However, the largest group of EI young women (38 per cent) were living with other relatives.

Table 3.3: Percentage of people aged 16-24 who were NEET and economically inactive by household type and gender

Household type	Female %	Male %	All %
Single person	3	9	5
Lone parent	25	1	16
With partner and children	25	5	18
With partner, no children	4	4	4
With other relatives	38	80	53
With other non-relatives	5	2	4
All NEET (thousands)	284	163	447

Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey, January to March 2016

### 3.4 Reasons for inactivity

Overall, 193,000 young people who were NEET reported that they had not looked for work in the last four weeks because they were looking after their family and/or home. 96% per cent of these were women. While 61% of young women cited this reason, only five per cent of men in the same category said this. Instead, they were more likely to state that they were long-term sick or disabled (49%, compared with 18% of young women).

In terms of geographical differences, the proportions of young women reporting that they did not look for work because they were looking after the family / home ranged from 85 per cent in Wales to 49 per cent in Scotland. The vast majority of young women who were looking after their family and/or home were caring for children: 92 per cent were caring for children below school age, with two per cent caring for other children, three per cent caring for a dependent adult relative and the other three per cent citing another reason as to why they were looking after their family and/or home. The survey question does not allow identification of whether these young women were caring for their own children or other children in the household. Furthermore, given that only one-fifth of LFS respondents were asked this question in each quarter, sample sizes do not allow for any subgroup analysis.



### 3.5 Desire to work

Questions concerning the desire to work among young people who were NEET and EI (163,000 men and 284,000 women) were also explored. The majority of young people who were NEET and EI said that they would not like to work (64 per cent), with a higher percentage of women (69 per cent) than men (56 per cent) who would not like to work (Table 3.4). Again, this difference reflects the lack of availability for work for young women with caring responsibilities, as discussed above.

Among both men and women, roughly three out of ten reported that they would like to work at the time of the survey. The gender difference was small, with a slightly lower percentage of women (29%) than men (34%) who would like to work.

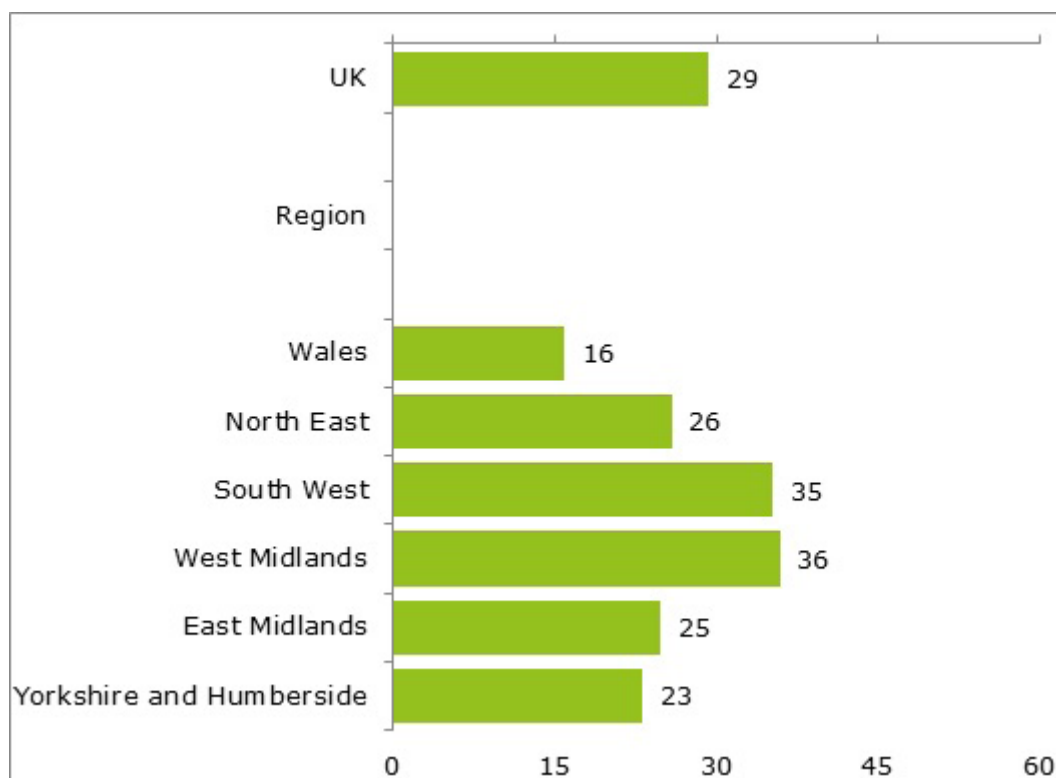
Table 3.4: Percentage of economically inactive NEETs who would like to work by gender

	Female	Male	All
Would like to work	29%	34%	31%
Would not like to work	69%	56%	64%
Unavailable for work	2%	10%	5%
Inactive NEETs	284,000	163,000	447,000

Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey, January to March 2016

Figure 3.3 shows how the desire to work varies, quite dramatically in some cases, by region and household type for NEET and EI young women. The desire to work was highest in Scotland (45 per cent would like to work) and lowest in Wales (16 per cent would like to work). However, there was relatively little variation by household type, suggesting that young women with children were just as likely to want to work as young women without children.

Figure 3.3: Percentage of economically inactive NEETS who would like to work by Government Office Region and by Household type



Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey, January to March 2016

Most NEET and EI young people reported that they think they will work in the future (86% for women and 70% for men, Table 3.5), with most of these having reported that they thought they would definitely work in the future (69% for women and 49% for men), rather than probably work in the future (17% for women and 21% for men). In contrast, five per cent of NEET and EI women said that they would definitely or probably not work in the future (the equivalent figure for men was 16 per cent).

Table 3.5: Whether economically inactive NEETs expect to work in the future by gender

	Female	Male	All
Definitely	69%	49%	61%
Probably	17%	21%	18%
Probably not	2%	7%	4%
Definitely not	3%	9%	6%
Don't know / Can't say	10%	14%	11%
All	277,000	158,000	435,000

Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey, January to March 2016

There was slight variation in the percentage of young women who definitely or probably expect to work by region and household type. Young women in lone parent households (97%) or living with their partner and children (93%) were more likely to say that they definitely or probably expect to work in the future than young women in other types of households, which clearly indicates that they view their inactivity status as a temporary phenomenon.

Similarly, almost all women who were looking after the family / home think they will work in the future. The only group who were uncertain about future work, not surprisingly, were those who reported that they were long-term sick or disabled.

Respondents who thought that they definitely or probably would work in the future, or did not know or could not say whether they would work in the future, were asked when they thought they might work. Almost four-in-five NEET and EI women expected to work within the next five years, with 31 per cent expecting to work within a year. For men, the figures expecting to work in the next five years are similar (80%), although more young men than young women expect to work within the next year (53%, compared with 31%).

### 3.6 16-24 year old welfare benefit recipients

The claimant count is the number of people who are receiving benefits principally for the reason of being unemployed and who are 'actively seeking work'. Since Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) was introduced in October 1996, this has consisted of those people claiming JSA or National Insurance (NI) credits. From April 2013, those people receiving Universal Credit (UC) principally for the reason of being unemployed also meet the definition of the claimant count.

Table 6 shows that, at March 2016, 116,605 young men aged 16-24 years in Great Britain were included in the claimant count, compared to 61,355 young women. While these figures demonstrate that a much lower number of young women are actively seeking work and claiming related benefits, which is consistent with the NEET active/inactive statistics presented above, what is alarming is the much lower numbers of young people in the claimant count compared to the overall size of the NEET active population.

For example, while 214,320 (57%) of the male NEET population were classified as being NEET and EA (ILO unemployed) between January and March 2016 (see Table 3.2 and Table 3.6), a much smaller number were included in the claimant count (116,605) in March 2016. Similarly, among young women, while 146,000 (34%) in the NEET population were classified as being NEET and EA between January and March 2016 (see Table 3.2 and Table 3.7), 61,355 were included in the claimant count.

Therefore, the number of young people in the claimant count falls far short of the estimated NEET and EA rates for both males and females. Based on these figures, it can be estimated that 42 per cent of the female NEET and EA population are included in the claimant count, compared to 54 per cent of young men. While some young people will be ineligible to claim benefits because they are living with a spouse or partner who is in employment, this fails to account for the differences, in particular within the NEET and EA figures.

Table 3.6: Claimant Count by sex and age (United Kingdom) at March 2016

Age	Male	Female
Aged 16-17	435	395
Aged 18-24	116,165	60,960
Column total	116,605	61,355

Source: Claimant Count (JSA and Universal Credit required to see work), NOMIS (downloaded from NOMIS on 11 October 2016)

Table 3.7: Claimant Count and NEET Active Population by sex and age (United Kingdom) at March 2016  
Classification

Male aged 16-24	Female aged 16-24	
NEET economically active population	214,320	146,880
Claimant Count	116,605	61,355
Proportion of NEET active population as claimants	54%	42%

Source: Claimant Count at March 2016 (JSA and Universal Credit required to see work), NOMIS (downloaded from NOMIS on 11 October 2016) and Quarterly Labour Force Survey, January to March 2016.

With regard to the NEET and EI population, Tables 3.8 and 3.9 highlight the significant variation between males and females in their receipt of Income Support (IS). This is largely attributable to the much larger volume of young women who are claiming IS as lone parents and, to a lesser extent, as carers. In total, there were 13,640 males aged 16-24 in receipt of IS in February 2016 (Table 3.8), compared to 130,020 young women in the same age group (Table 3.9).

Table 3.8: Income Support (IS) Male Recipients in Great Britain (February 2016)

	16/17 years	18/24 years
Total	1,630	12,010
Incapacity Benefits	-	-
Lone parent	10	900
Carer	50	6,100
Others on income related benefit	1,560	5,000

Source: Benefit Payments - Income Support (from NOMIS on 11th October, 2016)

Table 3.9: Income Support (IS) Female Recipients in Great Britain (February 2016)

	16/17 years	18/24 years
Total	5,300	124,720
Incapacity Benefits	-	-
Lone parent	2,370	108,060
Carer	120	5,950
Others on income related benefit	2,800	10,710

Source: Benefit Payments - Income Support (from NOMIS on 11th October, 2016)

The number of males under 18 and between the ages of 18-24 years claiming Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) was 106,160 in February 2016, compared to 81,770 females in the same age category (Table 3.10).

Table 3.10: Employment and Support Allowance Claimants (16-24 years) in Great Britain in February 2016

Gender	Aged under 18	Aged 18-24	Total
Male	2,120	104,040	106,160
Female	1,940	79,830	81,770

Source: Benefit Claimants - Employment and Support Allowance (from NOMIS on 11th October, 2016)

Again, it is interesting to compare and contrast the differences in the estimated numbers of young people (both male and female) who are defined as NEET and EI with the numbers who are claiming Income Support (IS) and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). However, what is unavailable is the number of NEET and EA young people who are claiming Universal Credit and a true estimate of the number of young people on ESA who may be classified as being EA because they are undertaking work-related activities. Table 3.11 shows that nearly three-quarters of the NEET and EI population (both males and females) are claiming either IS or ESA and that the numbers claiming benefits are much higher among the NEET and EI population compared to the NEET and EA population.

Table 3.11: NEET and EI Population and IS and ESA Receipt

Classification	Male 16-24	Female 16-24
NEET economically inactive (EI)	161,680	285,120
Income support receipt	13,640	130,020
ESA receipt	106,160	81,770
NEET EI claiming IS or ESA (%)	74%	74%

### 3.7 Summary

Statistical data identifies disparities between females and males in the proportions who are defined as EA and EI within the NEET population (16-24 years):

- females account for two thirds of the NEET and EI group;
- males account for three fifths of the NEET and EA group;
- young women claim IS in larger numbers, due to caring responsibilities;
- far greater numbers of young men claim JSA/UC;
- young men who are NEET and EI tend to claim ESA, due to illness or disability;
- a significant number of NEET and EI young women are also in receipt of ESA.

Differences are also apparent between the size of the NEET population and the number (both young men and young women) who are claiming welfare benefits, especially in the NEET and EA group.

Among young women, although Pakistani and Bangladeshi young women had the highest NEET rates (18.4% and 17.3% respectively), White women had the highest inactivity rates (8.5%) followed by 2.9% among Bangladeshi women, and 1.8% for those from other Asian backgrounds.

A quarter of NEET and EI young women were lone parents, and a further quarter were living with a partner and children. The largest group (38%) were living with other relatives.

Most NEET and EI young people (including 86% of women) expected to work in the future. Those in lone parent households (97%) or living with their partner and children (93%) were more likely to say that they definitely or probably expect to work in the future than young women in other types of households. This clearly indicates that they view their inactive status as a temporary phenomenon.



## 4 Key informant and case study respondents' perspective

This section provides an analysis of the evidence from: a) the key informants (policymakers and academics); and b) case study respondents (representatives of local government, DWP, voluntary organisations etc). The analysis is presented to highlight what is known and understood about EI young women in Britain. It is clear from this qualitative research that, while the concept of NEET is widely understood, it masks crucial disparities in our knowledge and understanding about young people who are categorised as NEET 'active', as opposed to those who are NEET 'inactive', and, most importantly, in the types and level of support and interventions they receive.

### 4.1 What is understood about being EI within the NEET group

A key element of this research was to test how the concept of 'NEET' is applied and understood by policymakers and practitioners at local and national levels, as well as by the research community. Also, it was important to elicit the key differences between how young people are defined as economically active and inactive within the umbrella term of 'NEET'. Broadly, the NEET label is widely applied and defined to include 16-24-year-olds (up to 29 year olds within EU programmes) who are not participating in education, employment or training.

As far as our current study is concerned, it was significant that some policymakers commented on the fact that, while the term NEET has been extended over recent years to include a much wider cohort, the research evidence largely relates to the younger age group (16-18-year-olds) and is therefore somewhat dated. Another important assertion by some national policymakers was that, although the umbrella term 'NEET' captures rates of young people's economic and social disengagement, policy intervention tends to focus on specific groups within it, as a result of a shift away from general policy.

'Any evidence that we have on the NEET group is dated. We have pockets to support different types of policy development, but no way do we have good evidence ... It is easier to prove if you target specific groups.'

(Key informant)

It was widely recognised that the NEET population tended to be associated with certain groups of disadvantaged young people who were included in it, such as educational low-achievers, care leavers, young offenders, carers and those with disabilities. Furthermore, the terms 'economically active' and 'economically inactive' are traditionally related to young people's eligibility for, and receipt of, welfare benefits, and crucially, the type of benefits they are eligible to claim. Thus, those who are actively seeking work are job seekers and are eligible to claim Jobseeker's Allowance, while those who are economically inactive are either sick or caring and are eligible to claim ESA or IS. As a result, there are considerable differences in the types of support and intervention each group receives, as well as in their tenure within the welfare system. In the future, Universal Credit (UC) will link receipt of benefits to similar categories of active and inactive economic status, but will be derived by household rather than by individual claims. The fact that young women are over-represented within the NEET and EI group, due to their caring responsibilities, particularly 'caring' roles beyond motherhood, was perceived to be an agenda that was in urgent need of 'unpacking'. Concern was also expressed about the much lower rates of benefits paid to young people on the basis that higher payments would act as a disincentive to engage with the world of work. This was felt to disregard the fact that living costs are not necessarily dependent on age.

Moreover, the research evidence has exposed widespread concern about significant and growing numbers of young people (both males and females) who fail to register or engage with statutory services. This applies both up to and beyond the age of 18 (when their mainstream entitlement to welfare support begins), and, whether they are economically active or inactive, they remain hidden. The scale, identity and needs of this 'unknown' group was perceived to warrant urgent policy attention.

An underlying issue, which was said to be prevalent across the 'active', the 'inactive' and the 'unknown' alike, was the mental health problems experienced by young women and men. Representatives from case study areas expressed growing concern about levels of anxiety and depression, particularly among young women, and how this is exacerbated by their isolation and disconnectedness from both statutory and voluntary support services.

## 4.2 The economically active within the NEET group

The under-representation of young women among JSA claimants was widely acknowledged, and was attributed, in part, to the persistence of social norms, whereby young men have more of a social expectation to find or seek work, while young women, in the absence of seeking work, will assume household responsibilities. This is particularly the case when all they can acquire is low skilled work. Additional, potential barriers cited were the complexities of completing the registration procedure, the length of time taken to process claims and, in some instances, trepidation about dealing with and travelling to local Job Centres.

'Some have false notions about what claiming benefits entails. The process of five weeks to process a claim is a barrier - they want everything instantly. They can get a tenner here for babysitting and 'if I kick off to my mum and dad they might give me 20 quid'. They think they would rather survive on that than actually commit to something that actually has an end process. I think some of them will say that they will commit to it by say doing the online forms but, as soon as it comes to face-to-face interaction, it will break down. It is a fear of agency or agencies ... There is an issue about travelling, as it is a long way to the Job Centre ... They won't walk and they do not have the bus fare to get to the office in the first place. A lot of them are very isolated anyway. It all adds to the trauma.'

(Youth Worker)

Some DWP staff commented on the disparity between the low rates of NEET that exist among the under 18 population and the surge in the number of job seekers that emerge at the age of 18, when mainstream entitlement to JSA begins. The level of new JSA claimants is determined solely by the number of young people who decide to claim, but there is a lack of research, analysis or action in relation to the size of the eligible cohort and JSA take-up rates.

'We see a mixture within the 18-year old population of both young people who have completed post-16 education and those who have been drifting around until they are eligible to claim. We see a surge in claimant applications in September, the minute Child Benefit ends, then claims are made. Some appear late, in particular among those who have been supported by their parents.'

(DWP Manager)

Several respondents commented on the focus and attention given to JSA claimants, in comparison to other types of claimant. There was an assertion that government funding is geared towards the needs of JSA claimants and reducing the ILO unemployment count, with other types of benefit claimants receiving comparatively scant attention. Also, the targets set for young job seekers by Job Coaches in Job Centres, such as the number and type of weekly job applications, were perceived by some to be too onerous, resulting in the largest number of sanctions being experienced by the young unemployed.

'The Job Centre don't do anything to help young people get jobs - they adopt a system of control and punishment.'

(Key Informant)

Representatives in two case study areas expressed regret at the withdrawal of Jobcentre Plus (JCP) staff from co-location offices, where local authority staff and JCP staff had worked alongside each other to support young people. This move was attributed to the roll-out of UC, where work coaches will be expected to work with all ages and be multi-skilled. This comes at a time when local authorities are no longer responsible for 18-year olds (unless they have a vulnerable group classification) and young job seekers are expected to seek support from the Job Centre, if they wish to do so.

'Local authorities do not have a statutory responsibility for 18-year olds or have a mandate to work with them ... 18 year olds are still in that void - in a transient world where they are not getting any support and dipping in and out ... A lot of kids come out of education and they will go to the Job Centre and it is a world about benefits. That is not what they need.'

(Local Authority Representative)

'A lack of support is a real issue at the moment. DWP used to do weekly surgeries etc and we have lost all that. It is causing so much poverty.'

(Voluntary Sector Representative)

These comments clearly point to there having been a diminution of the support available to 18-year-olds seeking employment or education.

#### **4.3 The economically inactive (EI) within the NEET group**

The assumption that all young women who are NEET and EI is a consequence of early motherhood or caring responsibilities and that they will remain inactive for several years was perceived to warrant further investigation. Concern was raised about the extent to which young women who have EI status are simply 'written off' because of the types of benefits they may claim (IS/Carer's Allowance or ESA) and that, as a result, they receive limited support or intervention. Women who are NEET and EI are typically 'lumped together', without any clear differentiation between the needs and expectations of young mothers, carers and those who have physical and/or mental health issues. This may be attributable to the pressures placed on DWP to concentrate on the NEET and EA group.

However, this concern was countered by a prevalent view that NEET and EI young women should not be exposed to the pressure to find work, fear of sanctioning and persistent follow-up by DWP that young job seekers currently face.

'Do the benefits of being economically inactive outweigh the benefits of claiming JSA? That is the question. I would prefer not to be on JSA so that I don't get harassed by the Job Centre, that would be my conclusion.'

(Key Informant)

NEET and EI young women who are in receipt of welfare support can expect six monthly reviews from Jobcentre Plus, which largely comprise checking if their circumstances have changed. This raised a demand that a more proactive approach without the risk of penalties to their welfare benefits, would offer the group better support and intervention. It should include a positive and sustained relationship with a case worker and evidence that different local agencies are working together to meet individual needs.

'If you are a young woman with a baby and getting along, no one is bothering you. But at the same time, no one is igniting you either.'

(Voluntary Sector Representative)

Of great concern for some informants was the degree to which young women who are NEET and EI are isolated within their households and their communities and, as a result of their circumstances, suffer from low self-confidence, low self-esteem and emerging mental health issues. In a number of case study areas, mental health issues were identified as a significant problem, which some areas are tackling through programmes and interventions targeted at identifying and supporting vulnerable groups. Integral to this issue, is the extent to which remoteness and isolation insulates NEET and EI young women from external and independent support and advice, which may lead to positive change.

'The isolation issue is massive. It is a complex issue. ... Most of the girls we work with have desperately low self-esteem and their connections/community are tiny. It is a small world that looks after itself and it forms a survival mode. They may have a mum who has mental health issues, who does not show you another way of being and although you may not be attached to that mum, there is no positive role model. It is much deeper rooted.'

(Youth worker)

With regard to young mothers in the NEET and EI group, three significant challenges were identified as barriers to participation in any form of education, employment or training. Firstly, childcare issues, in terms of being able to both access and afford childcare within their immediate localities, and at times of the day that fit in with increasingly fluid working patterns, were identified as a major obstacle. Secondly, and perhaps more difficult to overcome in terms of policy intervention, was the emotional barrier many young mothers are expected to overcome within their families and communities when confronted with the negative connotations surrounding 'leaving their children', in order to take up a job or training opportunity.

'There remains a stigma about women leaving their children to better themselves through education and work. It is seen as their responsibility to stay at home with their children ... That is our constant battle. If you have a child under 5, then you are not expected to be economically active. The village does what the village does and it is the village that has to change ... Young females who are white and working class, pregnancy seems to overtake them. The father may come or go, but it is the benefits that they survive on.'

(DWP Manager)

Thirdly, access to, and affordability of, transport to obtain support, training provision and employment opportunities poses another barrier, particularly in rural areas. Moreover, it was reported that, in some localities, and among some ethnic groups, young women travelling alone (not solely young mothers) is positively discouraged.

Finally in this section, data from one of the case study areas showed that, while the vast majority of 16-24-year-old IS claimants were young women (90%), most of whom were lone parents, they comprised 44 per cent of ESA claimants in that age group and 32 per cent of 16-24 year old JSA claimants. The most commonly stated reason for entitlement to ESA among both males and females was mental and behavioural disorders. Ninety per cent of females aged 16-24 in receipt of IS had been claiming for over six months, in contrast to 33 per cent of 16-24-year-old females who had been claiming JSA for 6 months or more. Another telling statistic, taken from the Annual Population Survey, revealed that, while 26 per cent of the adult population (aged 16-64) in the case study area were EI, among the 16-24 age group the figure stood at 40 per cent.

#### **4.4 The 'Unknown' population**

While young people in receipt of welfare support can be categorised as economically active or inactive in accordance with the types of benefits they are receiving, the research exposed concern about the growing number of young people who do not appear 'in the system'. This includes both those under and those over the age 18.

As part of their responsibilities assumed under the Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) policy in England, local authorities (LAs) retained responsibility for mapping and tracking young people in Years 12-14 (up to the age of 19).

However, cuts to local services, including the demise of Connexions Services and the devolved responsibility for schools from LAs to Academy chains and Free Schools have weakened the capacity of LAs to fulfil this requirement. The net result, in many localities, has been a significant rise in 'unknown' rates, leading to them being higher than the overall NEET rate. For example, in one case study area, in June 2016, the NEET rate among young people in Years 12-14 stood at 4.6 per cent, while the 'unknown' or 'not known' destination rate was 10.4 per cent.

Representatives from two case study LAs expressed concern about the Department for Education's (DfE) intention to limit LAs' tracking responsibility to young people until they reach their 18th birthday (it was previously 19 years). While this will have the overall impact of reducing the 'not known' destination rate, as the numbers who fall into this category tend to increase among the older cohort, it will also greatly diminish what we know about young people's circumstances.

This reduction in LAs' responsibility for tracking the post-18 group has coincided with cuts to funding for 18-year-olds to access education and training provision. In one case study area, it was reported that cuts made by the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) had resulted in local Job Centres being unable to refer young people for local training courses, such as those for forklift driving, until they reach their nineteenth birthday. Thus, the result of two recent policy changes may be that increasing numbers of 18-year-olds simply 'slip through the net'.

'They knock around for a year and become institutionalised.'

(Local Authority Representative)

Of immediate concern is the growing numbers of young people between the ages of 18 and 24 who may be either NEET and EA or EI, but who fail to register at the Job Centre or with other agencies. There is no agency or organisation within the UK that has statutory responsibility for measuring the number of, or addressing the needs of, young people over the age of 18/19 who fail to apply for welfare support. This is despite the categorisation of the term 'NEET' having been extended to a much wider age cohort (16-24-year-olds) in recent years.

'We can say we have 5-8,000 young people who are NEET, but we do not know where they are. Their parents may not be claiming a benefit, so we cannot track them. They may not have claimed themselves. They may be on the books of an institution and not come off it, even though they are not attending. This is a huge problem for a city like ours.'

(DWP Manager)

'... one of the issues that we have been looking at was our assumption that one-third of young people were below the NEET radar. We estimate it to be between 6-9 per cent who are sofa surfing or relying on the bank of mum and dad.'

(Director of Voluntary Sector Organisation)

The reasons for young people's detachment were felt to include:

- an unwillingness to cooperate with benefit regulations;
- fear of statutory bodies, such as DWP;
- family support which allows young people to avoid registration; and
- informal or casual working arrangements.

It was argued by a number of respondents that non-registration for welfare benefits cuts across all social classes, with examples cited of many 'middle class' households providing support to their offspring, in order to avoid their son or daughter 'signing on'. In some ethnic minority communities, young women's inactivity was perceived to be managed within households, rather than facing the stigma of welfare receipt.



Also, it was put forward that among some vulnerable groups, young people may fail to register with statutory services because they lack the ID requirements to make a claim for welfare benefits.

This 'hidden' NEET population remains largely unquantifiable in many localities and out of the remit of statutory services. Hence, little is known about young people who fall into this category in terms of their characteristics, the reasons for their detachment and any barriers they may face.

'For that group who don't claim, it could be one end of the spectrum where young people are living with their parents and saying 'you won't catch me signing on' or whether it is at the other end of the spectrum, where they may be in gangs and living off the proceeds of drug dealing, theft, crime. They are doing well and would you claim? It is incredibly hard to tap into that cohort.'

(Local Authority Manager)

'Our difficulty is that we can only deal with those that present to us. There are those who are hidden within their families and communities.'

(DWP Manager)

#### **4.5 Local interventions and Initiatives to support NEET/EI/Unemployed groups**

Evidence from the five case study areas showed that, while local NEET initiatives exist, they are largely developed and funded on the basis of targeting specific thematic groups within the NEET population, such as the homeless, young offenders, lone parents, and those with learning and physical disabilities. The distinction between young people who are NEET and EA and those who are EI was rarely evident or of primary concern within programme design or operation. An exception was the Springboard Programme in the Humber LEP area, which started out with a target of reaching a cohort of 60 per cent of JSA claimants and 40 per cent of those who were not known/ economically inactive. While the overall net effect was to increase the number of young people claiming welfare benefits, it served to demonstrate the complex issue of finding and engaging with EI young women.

Despite widespread marketing and linking with a large network of voluntary and community sector organisations, difficulties were reported in encouraging young women to come forward to access the one-to-one mentoring support that was being offered. Low self-esteem, transport issues, and low level depression/anxiety were identified as prevalent barriers to participation, and were often underpinned by a lack of confidence about the viability of finding and sustaining suitable local employment. However, it was asserted that when young women did participate, they often responded more positively to support and intervention and made successful transitions.

The adequacy and continuity of funding was identified as a major area of concern. Funding for local NEET intervention programmes tends to be time-limited and increasingly supported by the charity sector, most notably the Prince's Trust, the Big Lottery's Talent Match programme, and other similar projects. The Work Programme remained the sole government funded initiative which is targeted at the economically active and referrals to it will end in April 2017. There was some awareness among key informants and case study respondents about the Youth Obligation scheme, which is scheduled to start in the same month and targets 18-21-year-old job seekers who are in receipt of Universal Credit, although there was a notable lack of understanding about the details of the scheme.

The fieldwork for our study coincided with the launch of the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI), which is funded jointly by the DWP and European Commission. In the case study areas which were in receipt of funding, YEI was viewed as an innovative initiative, which enables local consortia of statutory and voluntary sector organisations to work together to deliver solutions to youth unemployment and economic inactivity. One-to-one intensive support and intervention is offered to those who are NEET up to the age of 29. One respondent acknowledged that there remained a risk that recruitment to the initiative could be over-reliant on Job Centre referrals, due to the difficulties of trying to find young people who were unregistered and/or inactive.

'I recognise that there will be a structural imbalance in the referral process to YEI, as our referrals will come from the work coaches in Job Centres, who work primarily with JSA claimants, the majority of whom are male. This was not a conscious decision ... I would hope that our model will address some of this. Our community partners should be able to access referrals.'

(Voluntary Sector Manager)

An overriding concern surrounding the YEI was about future funding beyond 2018 for initiatives that have received EU financial support targeted at young people who are NEET in socially deprived areas.

'We don't know what's going to happen. These (ESF) contracts are quite short-term. It doesn't make sense that they'd be withdrawn straightaway. Losing these opportunities will be a sad loss.'

(Local Authority Representative)

'YEI is the youth engagement tool this year, but I'm not sure about beyond that. ESF provided the funding for a youth engagement programme and I'm not sure how we will move forward. So, unless there is a reform of post-16 education - not just technical or academic - we will struggle to fill the void. 2018 will be a very interesting time - the changes in post-16 assessment are also significant, as it will increasingly rely on final examinations. Our NEET figures may rocket. We are looking down the barrel of a gun.'

(Local Authority Manager)

This uncertainty about future funding streams, in particular current EU funded initiatives, cuts to local and central government services and an increased reliance on a diverse range of charitable funding sources challenges the ability of local areas to deliver a coordinated and consistent response to tackling youth unemployment and disengagement. There was evidence in each of the case study areas that inter-agency and partnership working relationships had been established to develop local strategy and interventions to support the NEET group.

'I do think that our LEP is proactive on the skills agenda and has picked up on the mental health issue. We have a contact at the Job Centre and there are a number of actors in the area who drive forward this partnership agenda. There is a culture within our area that is positive. It is not always that way, as there is an element of competition because of the funding streams. We do our best for the potential beneficiaries of specific programmes.'

(Voluntary sector representative)

## 4.6 Future Requirements

The research has exposed an urgent need to unpick the term NEET and EI among young women beyond the stereotypical perception of young parenthood, in order to garner a better understanding of the lives of young women (and young men) who fall outside this narrow definition. Moreover, the evidence has highlighted that the definitions of being NEET and EA or EI are largely associated with distinctions between different types of benefit recipient, which triggers contrasting types of support and intervention. Crucially, the allocation to a particular category means that young women (and men) who are defined as NEET and EA, i.e. JSA recipients, receive intensive intervention and remain welfare dependent for much shorter periods than those who are defined as EI.

Of equal concern, research evidence has identified a lack of recognition, support or intervention to address the needs of the large number who may be either NEET and EI or EA, but who fail to engage with local services or register for welfare support. This 'unknown' group has increasingly expanded as a result of 'NEET' being applied to a much wider age cohort (16-24-year-olds), yet it has failed to be accompanied with corresponding shifts in responsibilities between government departments or agencies to manage this change.

As a result, LAs continue to track the younger age group (with increased restrictions), while DWP maintains responsibility for young people who declare themselves available for work or eligible for inactivity welfare support.

'I suppose there is a flaw if they aren't claiming benefits. They go below the radar.'

(Local Authority Representative)

Respondents put forward their suggestions for the changes which were needed to address the issue of the disproportionate number of young women across the UK who become both NEET and EI. These included:

- Addressing the shortage of real opportunities in many local communities, notably the absence of meaningful and sustained job opportunities, which are accessible to school and college leavers;
- making available a universal and impartial information, advice and guidance service which is open to all young people. Disquiet was expressed about the inability or unwillingness of policymakers to 'grasp the nettle' over the inadequacy of careers
- guidance provision. It was asserted that the lack of impartial guidance impacts disproportionately on young women, especially when there is an absence of influential networks and positive role models within their household and communities, which may help to steer their decision-making and career trajectories;

'I think young people get less and less opportunity to try work. I had work experience. You can't get a Saturday job. There are not the jobs out there to give young people a chance. Families are isolated and parents do not have the contacts who will provide their children with work experience. The sense of connectedness is so small on the estate where I work. Young people do not have the life experiences to help them make informed decisions about their future. You have a mum who struggles to get by and that becomes your reality.'

(Youth Worker)

- Early intervention measures, such as mentoring, careers guidance and pre-employment support, in order to tackle the prevalence of low self-confidence and self-esteem. These were regarded as critical;
- Working with employers within local labour markets to encourage their recruitment, training and retention of young workers was identified as another area of need, delivered by advisers who were competent in understanding the needs of both young workers and their potential employers.

In terms of supporting young women who become NEET and EI, the feedback was consistent in suggesting that they needed the offer of personalised and continuous support with a named adviser who was trained to work with the specific needs of young people. Moreover, this service should be provided without either compulsion or penalties, in order to encourage greater numbers to come forward.

'There is not enough discussion about young women. There is lots of media attention given to young men in hoodies. It comes back to the point - do we expect anything from young women? Young women are written off - she will get pregnant, get a council flat. No expectations that she will get qualifications and a job.'

(Key Informant)

Existing services provided by the DWP to the young unemployed received particular criticism for the level of sanctioning that young people faced. This was seen as demonstrating that the system was failing. 'The emphasis should be on treating all people as individuals. Training should be given to advisers. High levels of sanctions suggest that your system is not working. Ideally, you want none, because people know what is expected of them.'

(Key Informant)

The availability of affordable and accessible childcare was another key requirement to encourage young mothers to start thinking about (re)entry into the world of work.

The case study evidence indicated that, in local communities where strong and established inter-agency working between statutory and voluntary sector bodies existed, this supported a coordinated response to youth disengagement, particularly with regard to bidding for funds to support and underpin local interventions. In one case study area, co-working between agencies and young people to design and implement programmes had been introduced, and was hailed as a huge success in terms of learning more about young people's needs and requirements.

The thorny issue of who should hold responsibility for young people who are defined as NEET, active/inactive, registered/unregistered attracted opposing viewpoints. Currently, there was perceived to be a lack of strategic ownership and direction, with this fragmentation resulting in different parts of (local and national) government having both contrasting and overlapping types of responsibility, rather than these being in alignment.

On the one hand, some respondents advocated that DWP was best placed to manage all groups within an extended NEET cohort, as it has a national network and is well-placed to work cooperatively with local partners. It also has expertise in employment placement and managing welfare entitlement.

On the other hand, it was argued that DWP is not equipped to deal with the specific needs of young people and that there should be a national strategy, led by a government minister, who coordinates responsibilities across education, welfare, and employment and skills to develop a national policy, which is ultimately devolved to regional or local level.

In terms of government-led NEET programme interventions, it was argued that an increased emphasis on 'payment by results' and the delivery of hard outcomes, which are largely based on securing employment outcome numbers, skews recruitment practices in favour of young people who are nearest to the labour market. By doing so, it often serves to exclude the most disadvantaged and disengaged, including too many young women who are NEET and EI.

'We need to be helping before the crisis - that is a difficult nut to crack.'

(Local Government Representative)

## 4.7 Summary

The key informants and case study respondents recognised that there was a lack of research evidence and a depth of knowledge about the NEET group.

It was also acknowledged that policy interventions tend to be focused on specific groups within the NEET population. This emanated from NEET and EI and EA status encompassing two separate types of welfare claimant, which triggers contrasting degrees of intervention from DWP. A particular concern was the extent to which resources within DWP were focused on JSA claimants, i.e. the EA group, at the exclusion of other claimant types.

At the same time, there was disquiet about the disproportionately high level of sanctioning that young people claiming JSA face and about a system that, consequently, was viewed as punitive and unfit to meet the needs of many young people. It was felt that a more proactive approach, devoid of the threat of sanctions, would offer better support.

Other related issues which were deemed worthy of further investigation in order to inform policy formation were:

- Young women's over-representation in the NEET and EI group as a result of their caring responsibilities;
- The assumption that all NEET and EI young women who are parents or carers will remain inactive for several years;
- EI young women's isolation within their households and communities, which is often combined with low self-confidence, low self-esteem and mental health issues;
- The significant and growing numbers of young people who fail to engage or register with statutory services and remain 'hidden' or 'unknown'.

The detachment of this last group was attributed to factors which included: an unwillingness to cooperate with benefit regulations; fear of statutory bodies; family support which allows young people to avoid registration; the stigma of benefit receipt; and informal or casual working arrangements.

As a result, the 'hidden' NEET population remains largely unquantifiable in many localities and detached from statutory services.

Attempts by local NEET initiatives which targeted young women in order to address their needs were hampered by:

- the inability or unwillingness of young women to participate in programmes;
- low self-esteem;
- transport issues;
- anxiety and depression; and a lack of confidence about the viability of finding and sustaining suitable employment.

An overriding concern was future funding beyond 2018 for initiatives that have received EU financial support



## 5 Young women's perspective

This section presents the analysis from five face-to-face and two telephone interviews, as well as a focus group with three young women, conducted across two case study areas. The total sample comprised ten young women, of whom two were in receipt of ESA, six were in receipt of IS (one who was imminently moving from maternity payments to IS), one was a JSA recipient (who was about to move to IS due to pregnancy) and one young woman no longer claimed benefits. It presents an illuminating picture of their lives and experiences, particularly in relation to their school and post-school experiences, domestic circumstances, money management and, crucially, their hopes and aspirations. Notwithstanding the small size of the sample included in this first year of the study (the sample size will be increased to 40-50 in the second year), the findings support those from other elements of the research. Notable amongst these are:

- the high incidence of young women in receipt of IS due to their caring responsibilities (in this instance for their own children);
  - the receipt of ESA and mental health support due to a diagnosis of anxiety and depression; and
- It also reinforced evidence from other sources, with regard to the difficulties encountered by the research team in trying to locate and recruit young women to take part in the study.

### 5.1 Experiences of education, training and work

Every respondent had attended local secondary schools and had some experience of post-16 education, training or work. Their qualification levels ranged from two young women who left school early, due to their being bullied, without completing formal qualifications, to one young woman who gained 7 A\*s, 4 As and 2 Bs at GCSE. The majority had either completed or started a post-16 option, and the main reasons for non-progression were either pregnancy or mental health issues. One young mother was currently undertaking a qualification in youth work, with the goal of training to be a support worker before her youngest child reaches the age of five.

'To be honest, I am hoping to be in work before my youngest reaches five ... I just did the course, I am doing it now for myself and my children. I did not think about it (my children all reaching five). I want to help the people who have been through what I have been through, rather than an outsider coming in. That is what I used to feel like when social services used to come in and tell me. I did not agree with them.'

(Single parent, aged 26, living alone with 3 children)

'I did work experience at the Job Centre at (name of town). I done that for 4 weeks and then they asked me to stay for another 4 weeks. So all in all I did 8 weeks. I really, really enjoyed it - it was wicked. I am one of those people, as you can tell, I'm not very good with my words, but if you put me in a 'hands on' situation - I was always greeting and meeting people, I like to meet people and to interact. ... That was not long before I found out that I was pregnant.'

(Single parent, aged 21, living alone with her child)

### 5.2 Family/household composition

The sample was evenly split with regard to where young women lived. Five respondents lived with a parent, while the remaining five lived alone with their child or children (one lived alone). Three respondents had partners, all of whom worked. One young mother was supported by her partner but remained living with her mother, while another lived with her partner in her family home.

'My partner was here for a couple of months and then got a job ... we have been having the Universal Credit (UC) and his wages. His wages were fine but the UC messed us about because they did not know how much my partner was earning. ... My partner gets paid weekly and then we get the UC and we try to stretch it. I stopped my Income Supports and Tax Credits - I now get UC and Tax Credits. It's a lot more affordable than when I was on IS.'

(Single mother, aged 18, lives in parental home with partner and child, 18 months)

One young woman split her time between living with her father and with her boyfriend at his family's home. For financial support, she relied on handouts from her father and her boyfriend, in addition to money that she obtained from occasional babysitting.

'When we are at my dad's, we buy our own food, but if we are at his (boyfriend's) house, we wash up.' Money per week- it depends. If I have baby sat, it is about £20, depending on who it is. Normally, it is about a tenner, my Dad gives me a tenner. I will put it in with my boyfriend's money.'

(Single woman, aged 19, lives with the father/boyfriend)

A prevalent finding was the extent to which most of the young women interviewed continued to rely, first and foremost, on a parent and/or family members for emotional, practical and financial advice and support, irrespective of their circumstances. This included practical help with childcare, food, clothing and personal care costs and assisting with application forms for housing or benefit receipt. Some respondents had received help from other sources, most notably CPNs (Community Psychiatric Nurses), Family Support Workers, Health Visitors and Youth Workers. Those who lived at home contributed minimal amounts to the household budget and, in some cases, their dependence on their family resulted in a reluctance to move out of the family home, because of the perceived risks this posed to their established support networks.

'I'm on ESA, Well my mum did the thing over the 'phone where you have to apply for it. I go to the doctor's to get my tablets and the doctor gets me a sick note ... I spend my week in the house. Sometimes I walk to the shop with my mum.'

(Single woman, aged 18, who lives with her mum and siblings)

'I want to move out, but if I did I would struggle. For now, I could move out, but I would struggle with a baby, food etc.'

(Single woman, aged 19, pregnant and lives with her mum and siblings)

Another key finding was the degree to which family networks appeared to both insulate and isolate young women from the outside world. A scarcity of friendship networks, hobbies or interests and limited social activities was the norm. Their lives revolved around 'being at home', without any desire to move beyond their immediate surroundings. When asked to describe their 'typical' week, most remained locked in their households, some caring for their children or others, undertaking domestic responsibilities and watching the television.

'Monday morning, we wake up. I probably put the washing on and we go out. We walk up to see family members and I take the baby to the park. He goes to his nan's every other weekend. On those weekends, I stay at home and clean. I don't have any friends really - most people my age, they do not have kids and they want to go out and party. By the time it comes to the weekend and (name of baby) is away, I'm absolutely shattered. I'd rather sit at home with a cup of tea and a colouring book.'

(Single mother, aged 21, lives alone with baby)

'I don't go into shops or anything - pretty much do everything online. I avoid everything that is bad for me. I don't like going into the public. The only time that I go out is when the dogs are with me.'

(Single woman, aged 21, lives alone)

### 5.3 Finances/benefit receipt

Money management played a significant role in the lives of these women. They were asked to describe their experiences of claiming benefits, their expenditure patterns and the use of money received from partners and boyfriends. Despite their insistence about 'money being tight' in all circumstances, there was no expectation or frustration about entitlement to more financial resources, without a significant change to their immediate circumstances, i.e. their ability to move into employment.

Two respondents who had claimed JSA described how they felt under pressure to find a job while claiming their money, and their relief when they had moved onto alternative sources of funding.

'I was stressed to find out that I was pregnant and then I had the Job Centre saying 'get a job, get a job', do this course.' It was all new to me .... I am on JSA at the moment, but next week I will move on to Income Support. It is the same, £115 per fortnight, and I will get extra when the baby is born.'

(Single woman, aged 19, pregnant and lives with her mum and siblings)

'I claimed for a few months, I think. It was OK - I kind of needed the money but I did not want to take it 'cos I do not think sitting in front of a computer looking for jobs earns you that money. I do not cope well with pressure and I do not feel good enough and take it out on myself.'

(Single woman, aged 19, lives with the father/boyfriend)

Apart from securing assistance with the process of making an initial claim for benefit, respondents in receipt of IS and ESA reported few issues with regard to their payments or their dealings with DWP. Also, there was little concern or anxiety expressed about their six monthly benefit reviews at the Job Centre.

'It is just to see if anything changes, any voluntary work or paid work, partners come to live with you. It is to see how you are getting on. I used to worry about going but I've got used to it.'

(Single mother, aged 26, who lives alone with a three year old son)

In one instance, a young mother experienced difficulties obtaining her payments, due to problems with providing ID requirements in order to set up a bank account. This impacted on her ability to cope financially with a young child. Again, she depended on family support.

'I breastfed (name of baby), so I did not worry about milk. I mainly had help from my family. They bought (name of baby) nappies and wipes until I could afford to pay them back. With my bank as well, they did not accept birth certificates etc and I had to wait for my ID to come in. Because of my age and my bank, it was difficult to get an account. I could not get my benefits because I did not have a bank account.'

(Single mother, aged 18, lives in parental home with partner and child aged 18 months)

While there were three young mothers with partners (one couple lived together), there was a noticeable lack of reliance on their male partners, although all but one contributed financially. The young women felt that it was their responsibility to look after their children, with additional support from the child's father or their partner being subsidiary to the support they received from their family and benefit payments. To some degree, this was perceived to be a defence mechanism or reaction to their own childhood experiences.

'I have a boyfriend. My boyfriend helps me out. He pays half of everything. If I asked him for money, he would give it to me. He works for (name of warehouse) but he is applying for a job at another warehouse ... It is his responsibility as well (bringing up the baby), but everything else I do myself. I would get the house and he can move in with me.'

(Single mother, aged 20, lives with mother and siblings)

'I have watched my mum rely on my dad and when he left, she had nothing. We lost the house and everything and I have learnt. I will never depend on a man. If I move in with a man, I will always know that I can fend for myself and my daughter.'

(Single woman, aged 19, pregnant and lives with her mum and siblings)

Finally, in this section, the ways in which young women who are EI budget and prioritise their spending are considered. Unsurprisingly, budgeting revolved around welfare payments, which, in most cases (apart from Universal Credit), were paid on a fortnightly basis. Priorities included food, rent, fuel, children's clothing and toiletries. Those who lived independently relied on loans to buy furniture or goods which had been acquired from charity shops by support workers, who acted on their behalf. Transport costs were inconsequential, as most young women failed to leave their immediate vicinity. Buying clothes for themselves was infrequent and considered to be a luxury item. Two respondents had received assistance from money advice workers to help them cope with budgeting, which they viewed as a positive support intervention.

'I had a debt counsellor involved but I am OK now ... I keep my money separate from my kids' money and that is how I manage ... I get my money every 2 weeks so ... and, to be honest, I do use some of my kids' money, but that is for bills and stuff. I use my money for food and to top up the meters and whatever is left is for me and if I need 'owt. The girls get what they need. I manage but I struggled a bit at the beginning ... it is OK but it could be better. Sometimes, I have to sacrifice and go without shoes or clothes for a few weeks so that I can get things for the girls.'

(Single parent, aged 26, living alone with 3 children)

'The only thing that I get is a packet of sweets that I share with my son. I don't really treat myself, just to save money. Once that I have paid my rent, my council tax, things like that, the only money left I save. I'm trying to save up for Christmas, so that I can make it nice for him. I buy for people's birthdays and stuff.'

(Single mother, 18, lives with mother and partner)

While the priority among young mothers was spending on their children, in order to meet their needs, those living within their family households regarded buying a packet of sweets for their siblings, or themselves, as their fortnightly treat.

'I get my bits and bobs that I need when I get the £115 per fortnight, and I buy the twins (her brother's) an ice-cream. I try to go easy on it, so that it last longer. I give my mum £20 for my board. I just get the bits that I need, like my body washes and stuff and try to save it in case I need anything. I can't manage. I rely on my mum.'

(Single woman, aged 18, who lives at home with her mum and siblings)

## 5.4 Future aspirations and expectations

Feedback from the young women interviewed chimed with evidence provided by other case study respondents about the extent to which most young mothers were reluctant to find work or participate in education or training, because of the stigma, within their families and community, associated with 'leaving' their children. Also, most respondents felt reluctant to miss key aspects of the child's development, which they believed would be an inevitable outcome from leaving full-time motherhood.

However, these commitments and beliefs sat alongside a prevalent feeling that single parenthood, coupled with welfare support, continues to be regarded negatively in the public's stereotypical perception, which they were keen to dispel. They believed that they carried a label which associated them with low worth and poor parenting.

'People judge you as 'well, you are signing on and a bum'. It is hard to look after kids and work. I don't know how I am going to do it. I don't want people to judge me.'

(Single woman, aged 19, pregnant and lives with her mum and siblings)

'... people will say 'chavvy girl on benefits with a kid' but I am trying to do stuff ...'

(Single parent, aged 20, lives alone with child)

Two young mothers with pre-school children were navigating their way back into the world of work through accessing training provision. Despite a determination to retrain, they had experienced significant barriers, emanating from childcare issues. One respondent struggled during school holidays to find affordable childcare for her school age children, even though her pre-school child had a nursery place. She relied solely on her mother for support, which was sometimes unreliable, due to her mother's state of health. Despite the difficulties, she continued to attend her training course. Another young mother had attended the Job Centre to find out about training to be a security guard, but was unable to access full-time childcare for the eight week period required to complete the course, as her mother works full-time.

'Not so long ago, I had a Back to Work appointment at the Job Centre. I had my meeting and I took the baby and stuff. I want to go into security and I put my name down for that. It is an eight week course. With me being a single parent and my mum works, I do not hear from my dad and it all comes down to childcare issues. I mentioned it to my adviser and she said that I would have to sort childcare out. I can't because I have no one to ask for those eight weeks.'

(Single parent, aged 21, living alone with her child)

A young woman who lived alone and who suffered with anxiety and depression was trying to rebuild her life through participation in a social enterprise project, which was funded by a national charity and targeted at supporting entrepreneurship among young people. She had regained some self-confidence through dog walking and was starting her own business designing wall calendars, which featured photographs of animals that she had taken. The support that she had received from the project had enabled her to utilise her photographic and computer skills and to broker a contract with a local printer to publish her work.

'My goal is to complete the social enterprise ... it was crazy how it all came about. (name of support worker) was friends with Jo, who I walk with, and I took some photographs of her dog. It all just happened from there, from nowhere.'

(Single woman, aged 21, and lives alone)

Significantly, and perhaps in contrast to common perceptions, all respondents expressed an ambition to find work, leave the benefits system and secure financial independence. They were asked to offer suggestions of changes that could be made by themselves or by the mechanisms of support or intervention, to enable this to happen. The lack of 'decent' jobs and their ability to find work due to the immense competition that young workers face was a prevalent overriding concern.

With regard to their own needs, there was a strong voice for one-to-one personal support, which should be tailored to meet their individual needs. This call for intensive support included the need to access help with the demands of parenting and/or living alone, as well as assistance with navigating their way (back) into the labour market.



Some young mothers feared the expectation that, once their youngest child reached the age of five, they would be catapulted into finding a job, without any gradual reintroduction to active labour market status. This step-by-step approach might involve attending short courses to improve their skills etc. The overriding call for mentorship and personalised support is a significant finding, alongside the isolation and lack of external interaction with the outside world that many young women (and men) face.

'I do not want someone else to be closer to my baby than me. I do not know how I am going to do it. It would be helpful if I could sit down with someone to help me go through things when I am ready. I don't know how it works. I would love someone to tell me how it works. I have not got a clue. Make me understand how I can do it, how I can cope. The kid, me, work etc. My family would say 'you are better off with your mum, it is too hard to move out'. Someone external, who has been in our situation and done it. A young mum who is working now and has a house.'

(Single woman, aged 19, pregnant and lives with her mum and siblings)

'I would love this to develop into a career (photography) - to actually do something with it. I never thought I could.'

(Single woman, aged 21, and lives alone)

## 5.5 SUMMARY

The majority of young women were receiving IS, due to their caring responsibilities, while some received ESA and mental health support, having been diagnosed with anxiety and depression. A reliance on their family and/or partner/boyfriend was deemed preferable to claiming JSA.

Family networks served to both insulate and isolate young women from the outside world. The absence of friendship networks, hobbies or interests and social activities meant that their lives revolved around 'being at home' and their immediate surroundings.

As a result of money being 'tight', an overriding concern was to ensure that they managed to get by on their meagre resources. They were acutely aware that their income was unlikely to increase significantly unless they secured a job.

Once they had made an initial claim, IS and ESA recipients had experienced few difficulties in obtaining their payments from DWP, and showed little concern or anxiety about their six monthly benefit reviews at the Job Centre.

The young mothers with partners felt that it was their responsibility to look after their children. Moreover, they regarded any additional support from the child's father or their partner as subsidiary to the support they received from their family and their benefit payments.

Most young mothers were reluctant to find work or participate in education or training while their children were young. A contributory factor was a perceived stigma, within their families and community, which would be associated with 'leaving' their children. In addition, there was a feeling that, being a single parenthood and a benefit recipient, they would inevitably be labeled by some people as being of low worth and a poor parent. All respondents expressed an ambition that, in the future, they would find work, leave the benefits system and secure financial independence – although they were concerned about a lack of 'decent' jobs and their ability to find work in a highly competitive labour market.

Intensive personal support, mentoring and access to training, possibly through short courses, were seen as essential if they were to improve their skills and enhance their employability.

## 6 Conclusions and Recommendations

The primary objective of the Year 1 research was to gather evidence from a number of different perspectives (the literature; key informant interviews; quantitative data analysis; and case study research) in order to elicit a greater understanding of what constitutes economic inactivity within the NEET group and to explain why this status disproportionately impacts on the lives of young women.

Although it is apparent from the literature that high rates of NEET and EI among young women are prevalent in many countries, including the UK, there is a dearth of evidence about effective interventions which may help to reverse this trend. These high levels of NEET and EI are largely attributed to early motherhood and household responsibilities. While these are certainly contributory factors, they can too easily be used to excuse policymakers from examining both the causes and symptoms in greater depth, and, of equal importance, from offering solutions to tackle EI among young women.

Several strands of the research highlighted that, despite the term 'NEET' being expanded to cover a much wider age cohort, this has failed to be accompanied either by enhanced knowledge and understanding of the NEET and EI cohort as a whole, or by additional responsibilities being given to specific government departments or policymakers. Thus, the traditional segmentation of the group, with a focus on specific disadvantaged groups among the 16-18-year old cohort, still applies. Moreover, while definitions of EA and EI are applied in the statistical analysis of the NEET population within the Labour Force Survey, they have very little resonance with either policymakers or practitioners working with the NEET group, and with young people themselves. The assumption that all young women who are NEET and EI as a consequence of early motherhood or caring responsibilities will remain inactive for several years was perceived to warrant further investigation. Also, caring responsibilities imply a lack of value in this context, because they are inextricably linked to EI.

Crucially, however, being defined as NEET and EI or EA is an important demarcation with regard to the type of welfare benefit and intervention that young people receive. Young women who are EI typically remain on welfare support for much longer periods than those who are EA, and are also far less likely to receive any form of positive support or intervention.

Conversely, the support that young people who are actively seeking work and claiming JSA received was fiercely criticised for high levels of sanctioning, unrealistic target-setting and an emphasis on removing claimants from the register at the earliest opportunity. This difference between the two groups is reflected in the proportions in their respective claimant counts, with much lower numbers of young people (especially young women) being present in the NEET and EA category. In contrast, their counterparts who are NEET and EI are much more likely to seek welfare support (see Chapter 3).

These findings are important, in the light of the anticipated roll-out of UC, where household based assessments, which form an integral part of UC, will apply to young women who are defined as NEET and EI, and determine how their needs are supported.

A disturbing finding emanating from the research is the large number of young people who are not defined as NEET (inactive or active) and who operate under the radar of statutory or other support services. There was a notable disquiet among many respondents about the growing number of young people who fall into this category and about the extent to which the term 'NEET' accurately captures levels of social and economic exclusion across the UK. Even among those who are defined as NEET, there is a significant gulf between those who are supported and those who are unsupported financially by welfare payments. In addition, beyond the reduced statutory duties that local authorities continue to hold for the under-18 group, there is a notable absence of monitoring the whereabouts of the post-18 group beyond their self-referral registration with DWP.

Coupled with financial hardship, the evidence about young women who are NEET and EI being isolated, disconnected and hard to reach is a powerful finding. It highlights their reliance on small family networks within confined communities, with little access to external support or recognition. Unsurprisingly, among our sample, low self-worth and low self-esteem were commonplace.

To these young women, particularly those with children, their ability to navigate their way back into the world of work faced insurmountable obstacles, notably:

- their lack of self-confidence;
- the challenges of securing and funding reliable childcare; and
- finding employment in local economies where opportunity structures appeared to be stacked against them.

Anxiety and depression are prevalent among many groups of young people, especially the large number of young women (and young men) claiming ESA and therefore defined as NEET and EI for that reason. In localities where agencies had established strong and effective partnership working and were working together to identify the needs of young people within the confines of their local economy, examples of positive local initiatives were evident. At the same time, however, a picture was painted of there being a complex set of local arrangements and an absence of any long-term strategy or planning. Factors which were felt to inhibit the impact of collaborative partnerships were:

- the lack of central government supported programmes;
- the short-term nature of funded initiatives with a variety of outcome measures;
- the impending removal of EU structural funding; and
- a growing reliance on charitable and philanthropic funding to support NEET intervention projects.

The overriding finding highlighted by the first year of this research is the need for change. Key elements in this change were considered to be:

- a requirement to offer personalised, one-to-one support to young women who are EI (and possibly to other groups), within their communities, by trained staff without financial penalties or sanctions for withdrawal;
- the ability to (re)establish trust with external agencies;
- support which is accompanied with training provision and employment opportunities that are meaningful and long-term; and, If required,
- affordable and accessible childcare.

While the cost of such intervention may seem excessive, the net effect of, at best, 'sidelining', and, at worst, disregarding the potential of young women (and young men) who are defined as NEET and EI is both neglectful and wasteful.

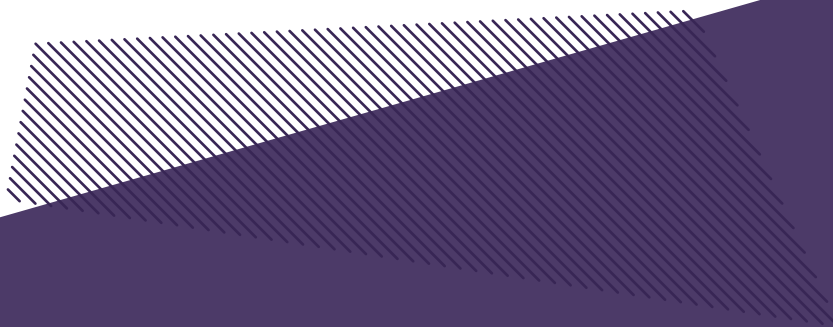
The second year of the study will include in-depth research with a larger cohort of EI young women across England. This will enable further exploration of the issues raised in Year 1, together with emerging evidence following the publication of the Year 1 report. It will be accompanied by an analysis of the Understanding Society dataset to examine family formation and household composition, and to test the impact of NEET and EI status on longer-term social and economic outcomes.

## **6.1 Key recommendations**

Key recommendations emanating from the findings of the first year are

- iv. The expansion of the term 'NEET' to a much wider age cohort across the UK and the distinction between the categories 'economically active' and 'economically inactive' must be accompanied by a far more in-depth understanding and knowledge of the population it is seeking to label.
- v. There needs to be targeted research and greater policy focus on the growing number of young people (18-24) who fall outside the category of NEET and have 'unknown' destinations.
- vi. The muddle that exists about the ownership of the NEET agenda at national government level must be replaced by direction from within one government department (and Minister), with strategic responsibility for overseeing key policy areas within education, skills, employment, local government and welfare. This recommendation was put forward by the YWT in 2015 .

- vii. The marginalisation of large numbers of NEET and EI young women to long-term welfare receipt and limited support or intervention should be replaced with the offer of one-to-one personalised support/mentorship to engender external contact and to promote wider social and economic engagement.
- viii. The availability of affordable, accessible and sustainable childcare, which takes account of different cultural expectations, to support young mothers' (re)engagement and to reduce isolation, is a baseline requirement.
- ix. The establishment of: early intervention programmes in schools; access to impartial information, advice and guidance (IAG); work experience; and the availability of mentors should be explored to reduce the high rates of NEET and EI among young women. Some of these recommendations were put forward by the YWT in 2016 .
- x. Re-integration programmes to support young women (and young men) who become NEET and EI should be underpinned by streamlined and sustainable funding sources, such as the European Social Fund (ESF), which recognise that positive outcomes from effective interventions cannot be solely measured and rewarded by 'quick fixes'.
- xi. Urgent policy attention and intervention is required to address the alarming number of young women (and young men) who are in the NEET and EI category due to anxiety and depression.
- xii. A fundamental requirement is investment in creating high quality and sustainable job opportunities. These needs to be underpinned by flexible working hours, adequate pay to justify coming off benefits, and affordable and flexible childcare, to encourage a greater number of young women to leave NEET and EI status.



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Statistics on reserved decisions and cancelled referrals are available within Stat-Xplore: <https://stat-xplore.dwp.gov.uk>

Lone Parent	Lone Parent - Yes	Lone Parent - No

**Notes:**

Cells in this table have been randomly adjusted to avoid the release of confidential data. Due to adjustments totals may not be the sum of the individual cells.

This category consists of decisions to apply a sanction to an ongoing USA claim.

A decision found in favour of the claimant, i.e. a sanction or disallowance is not applied.

“..” denotes a nil or negligible value





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