

Exploring the capacity of the FE system to engage and support  
19-24 year olds Not in Education, Employment or Training (19-  
24 NEETs) – Provider and Stakeholder perspectives

A Report by Aspire-igen Group Limited on behalf of York and  
North Yorkshire Local Enterprise Partnership

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## **Executive summary**

In January 2021, the York & North Yorkshire Local Enterprise Partnership (Y&NY LEP) commissioned Aspire-igen Group Limited to undertake research to understand how the Further Education system across York and North Yorkshire is supporting 19-24 year old NEETs, and to make recommendations on how this might be strengthened.

In February and March 2021 we engaged with 13 NEET providers (including Further Education (FE) organisations and networks, and Job Centres) and 11 NEETs in interviews and surveys where they shared their experiences and views about the sector. These interviews and surveys looked to:

- Identify the underlying causes of 19-24 year old NEETs
- Gain an overview of the impact of COVID-19 on the scale of NEETs across York and North Yorkshire, as well as any local trends – e.g. categories of young people, educational attainment patterns and instances of local and regional deprivation.
- Understand how providers engage and support 19-24 year olds who are/at risk of becoming NEET since leaving statutory education, and their approaches to re-engaging NEETs who have recently dropped out of previous learning or work, in particular during the COVID-19 pandemic with all its associated restrictions.
- Seek provider recommendations on how to strengthen the sector's capacity to improve the overall offer to NEETs or those at risk
- Collate best practice case studies in provider-led engagement, retention and progression of NEETs or supporting those at risk.

The majority of 19-24 year old NEETs have low educational attainment; little to no work experience or employability skills; low confidence, aspirations and resilience; and a lack of a plan for the future. This has meant that many disengaged from education and struggle to find a job. This has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as employers have not been able to offer the usual variety of workplace opportunities available pre-pandemic, and with large numbers of the population losing their jobs, those with higher qualifications and more experience have been obtaining jobs that low skilled NEETs would normally apply for.

Further Education providers stated that Job Centres are their main contact point for NEETs, with most referrals coming from this source. However, ensuring that courses are attractive, accessible, non-intimidatory and linked to labour market information (LMI) is also a key part of FE recruitment. COVID-19 has had a significantly adverse effect on recruitment with fewer referrals from the Job Centre due to increased workload. It has also meant that the majority of recruitment has moved online, with increased use of social media and many providers running virtual open days.

Course delivery has also been heavily impacted, which resulted in online learning becoming compulsory from March to July 2020 and January to March 2021. In general tutors and learners adapted well to online learning with training in the use of online video software and virtual learning environments (VLEs) offered to all. In Autumn 2020, when face-to-face learning was permitted, many providers front-loaded the practical aspects of their courses to

ensure that learners had gained all the necessary skills associated with their courses in the event of further lockdowns, as happened in January 2021.

However, although many learners have adapted to online provision, others have struggled due to a lack of internet access, home lives that are not conducive to remote learning and having needs that require them to be onsite. Therefore, some learners did say that they would like to attend their course when it can be delivered face-to-face again.

All Further Education providers agreed that for both face-to-face and online learning, the most effective retention method is to develop individual learning plans and regular one-to-one support. This ensures that each individual feels fully supported and that tutors can resolve any issues and difficulties, increasing retention rates. Developing individual learning plans was seen as most effective in retaining learners during the pandemic as greater flexibility could be provided to suit individual needs. For example, if a learner had a part time job or childcare responsibilities, they could catch up on recorded classes at a time that best suited them or attend evening classes.

As well as reflecting on the experiences of Further Education providers in supporting NEETs, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, we also asked for their recommendations on how the sector could be strengthened to improve the offer for this particular 19-24 year old cohort. In total, we identified eleven recommendations, which encompass communicating information and opportunities, strengthening provider and employer networks, developing a whole York & North Yorkshire NEET strategy, and ensuring stereotypical views of individuals within this category are challenged and a greater awareness prevails of the range of different young people who fall into it.

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## **1. Key findings**

### **19-24 year old NEETs – The big picture.**

- The majority of NEETs have low educational attainment and little to no work experience. Many also have low confidence, aspirations and resilience levels and may also experience some mental health challenges.
- The main causes of NEETs are: not having a sufficiently clear route-map of their future; being unaware of the opportunities available to them; the lack of jobs available to those with few or no qualifications; having poor employability skills; and either facing transport difficulties or being unwilling to travel beyond their local area.
- Strengthening careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) to focus on careers and how to build employability skills from a younger age is likely to mean that more people have a clear plan, increased confidence and careers aspirations, and therefore, less likely to become NEET. Offering this to recent school leavers would also be beneficial.

### **The impact of COVID-19 on NEETs**

- COVID-19 has had an impact on NEET levels with many young people losing their jobs and struggling to find employment or engage in online courses. In addition, more highly qualified people are becoming NEET and engaging with NEET services in order to retrain or upskill.
- The impact of COVID-19 on NEETs varies across different LA districts within the LEP area. For example, in Scarborough NEETs were heavily impacted due to the hospitality and tourism industries suspending operations or even closing. NEET levels in Selby have risen negligibly due to COVID-19 as the main industries there is logistics and food manufacturing, which has remained in high demand.
- COVID-19 has led to a decrease in the number of workplace opportunities available, such as work experience, traineeships and apprenticeships, which means that NEETs have not had the opportunity to develop critical employability skills resulting in further gaps in their education or CVs.
- The pandemic has provided challenges for those with no internet access, mental health issues or additional needs that need addressing so they can engage with further education.

### **Recruitment and Retention of NEETs into Further education**

- The Job Centre is the largest source of referring NEETs into Further Education, and providers often offer sessions or stalls at the Job Centre to strengthen this. These referrals are heavily dependent on existing relationships with the Job Centre, so increasing and improving collaborative arrangements between providers and Job Centres will undoubtedly strengthen referrals.
- Many providers also use social media, local media and links with groups who may engage with NEETs for recruitment, such as food banks, housing associations and mental health organisations.

- An integral part of recruitment is ensuring that courses are marketed to NEETs in a way that highlights their benefits without being perceived as too daunting. Some providers have therefore focussed on local labour market information, to link courses to job routes, and emphasised the availability of short courses.
- The main challenges to recruitment centre on providers not having direct links with NEETs and that NEETs are unaware of the opportunities available to them.
- Offering individual support, adapting learning to individual needs, and providing pastoral support are critical for retention. This ensures that learners are supported in Further Education and that they feel listened to and valued.

### **Course delivery during COVID-19**

- A range of recruitment experiences have been seen across FE – some have reported higher rates of recruitment and lower drop-out rates whereas others have reported lower rates of recruitment with higher drop-out rates.
- It is evident that there is increased demand for courses that have defined career paths – e.g., care, plumbing and construction – so enrolment on these courses is higher.
- Online marketing has been the main source of recruitment as Job Centres have had reduced capacity to refer NEETs. Providers have updated their websites, increased their use of social media and offered online open days to promote their courses.
- Providers have adapted well to online delivery, with many considering developing blended learning courses as we emerge from the pandemic, as many learners have thrived through the online learning experience. Tutors and learners have received adequate training on how to use video learning software and VLEs.
- Many providers front-loaded their courses in Autumn 2020 so that most of the practical work and assessments were undertaken over the period when learning was delivered face-to-face. This has meant that the lockdown at the start of 2021 has had a reduced impact.
- Similar to pre-pandemic times, a highly individual approach has been key to retaining learners on courses. Providers have increased the amount of individual support offered to learners individuals and have made their courses as flexible and accessible as possible by recording sessions, running evening classes or posting information to learners so that they can still access learning.
- However, there are still some who would prefer face-to-face learning. As a consequence drop-out rates have increased, but many of those who have dropped out did confirm that they would sign up to courses once direct tutor-learner interaction resumed.
- Although many learners have thrived learning from home, anecdotal evidence suggests others have not. Internet and device accessibility has been an issue for many, and providers have tried to help with this as much as possible by offering laptops and dongles to those in need. In addition, many learners do not have home lives that are conducive to effective learning, so whilst they have been participating on-line, they may not be progressing as much as they would in a face-to-face setting.

## **2. Recommendations**

In total, the following eleven recommendations have been identified relating to communicating information, developing networks and creating a whole York and North Yorkshire NEET strategy:

1. To develop a York and North Yorkshire wide directory of Further Education providers who can support NEETs, with details of available opportunities.
2. To develop a York and North Yorkshire NEET strategy to facilitate better communication and collaboration between NEETs, Job Centres, Further Education providers and other organisations who work with this cohort such as mental health organisations, housing associations and food banks.
3. To present the needs and concerns of Further Education providers to Local Authorities and government to ensure that adequate resources are available to support NEETs.
4. To ensure that LEP area NEET groups have a clear focus on driving change as well as collating and sharing experiences.
5. To identify and plan responses to upcoming trends in the LEP area and local labour markets including both growth sectors and those in decline, and employers entering and leaving the area.
6. Providers to share NEET data to help them adapt their provision to better address at-risk NEETs and reduce the number falling into the category.
7. To clearly outline the variety of work experience opportunities available, including those outside of traditional norms, with a focus on the benefits and differences, both for NEETs as well as for employers.
8. To develop employer networks that clearly explain and discuss the benefits for SMEs of engaging with Further Education and offering work placements to young people.
9. To develop employer and Further Education networks to exchange sector needs and strengthen the further education offer.
10. To reassess and recommunicate the meaning of 'NEET' to ensure awareness of full range of young people affected.
11. To strengthen the CEIAG offer to learners and their support networks to help prevent young people falling into the NEET category.

### **3. Glossary**

CEIAG	Careers education, information, advice and guidance.
COVID-19	The current pandemic and associated social distancing regulations which has led to lockdowns and triggered a significant increase in remote learning.
Employability skills	Non-technical skills essential for employment and working with others. This includes communication, interpersonal, problem solving, timekeeping etc. These can also be referred to as soft skills.
FE	Further Education.
Learners	Reference to learner means anyone who engages with Further Education.
LMI	Labour market information.
NEET	Those who are not in education, employment or training. In the context of this report, NEET refers to 19-24 year old NEETs.
Providers / NEET providers	This refers to organisations who work with and support NEETs, including Further Education providers and networks, and job centres.
Tutor	Reference to tutor means any individuals providing learning, including teachers.
VLE	Virtual learning environment.
Y&NY LEP	York & North Yorkshire Local Enterprise Partnership

#### **4. Introduction and context**

The York and North Yorkshire Local Enterprise Partnerships (Y&NY LEP), on behalf of the Skills and Employability Board (SEB), commissioned this report to investigate the provision available for 19 to 24 year old NEETs across York and North Yorkshire, as well as the underlying causes of 19-24 year olds falling into the NEET category, the impact of COVID-19 and recommendations on how to strengthen the FE sector's support for NEETs. This will improve the LEP's understanding of skills and wider intervention support services for NEETs or for those at risk of becoming NEET, providing evidence-based contributions to the future skills priorities and planning of its own Skills Advisory Partnership.

In order to understand the NEET situation, the LEP commissioned Aspire-igen Group (researchers Emma Campbell and Lauren van Heel) to undertake this study, which is based on information collected from a series of surveys and interviews to:

- Identify the underlying causes of 19-24 year olds falling into the NEET category
- Gain an overview of the impact of COVID-19 on the scale of the 19-24 NEET challenge across York and North Yorkshire, as well as any local trends or factors – for example, categories of young people, educational attainment patterns and instances of local level deprivation
- Understand how providers engage and support 19-24 year olds who are or who are at risk of becoming NEET since leaving statutory education, and their approaches to re-engaging NEETs who have recently dropped out of previous learning or work, in particular during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Seek provider recommendations on how to strengthen the FE sector's capacity to improve the overall offer to NEETs or those at risk.
- Collate best practice case studies in provider-led engagement, retention and progression of NEETs or those at risk.

Whilst undertaking this research, a primary focus was on the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions on engagement and learning this triggered, together with wider labour market impacts. The pandemic has had an adverse effect on Further Education provision as well as 19 - 24 year olds themselves, with this age group at increased risk of losing their jobs or being unable to find work due to lack of experience. Between October and December 2020, 13.8% of 18 – 24 year olds nationally were classified as NEET, 0.8% higher than over the same period in 2019 and the highest level since 2014<sup>1</sup>. This increase further highlighted trends and skills gaps of this age group.

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<sup>1</sup> Gov.uk, 2021, *NEET annual brief*, accessed 19<sup>th</sup> March 2021, [https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/neet-statistics-annual-brief/2020#releaseHeadlines-tables]

## **5. Research methodology**

To meet the objectives of this research, we contacted NEETs and NEET providers operating in the LEP area to collect their experiences and perspectives through interviews and surveys. Therefore, this report is based on anecdotal evidence from those interviewed, rather than large data sets. As a result, the trends, practices and recommendations presented highlight the topics that those in the FE sector believe are most important as well as reflecting the views of the primary service users.

A range of providers from across York and North Yorkshire were identified by Aspire-igen and the LEP and these were invited to take part in remote interviews via video-conferencing platforms and asked to complete an online survey. With the small number of providers needed for this research, a geographic spread of providers were selected for interview so that the perspectives collected represented the whole of the LEP area rather than focusing on a few larger towns and cities. In total, 13 providers across York and North Yorkshire took part in this research, with some providers delivering in specific towns and others offering provision across the whole of the LEP area.

The interviews took place in February and March 2021 and addressed the reasons why 19-24 year olds fall into the NEET category, recruitment and retention strategies, impacts and adaptations to COVID-19 and their recommendations for the FE sector. Although the same questions were asked to each provider, they were designed to be open ended, allowing for respondents to focus on the areas they felt were most important. As a result, the information collected was broad in nature and many chose to feature the impact of the pandemic as exacerbating the NEET challenge and their recruitment and retention strategies. Respondents were also asked to complete a survey around the causes of NEETs, the opportunities available for them and the impact of COVID-19. In total 9 providers completed the survey, with 4 providers opting out of this element of the research.

In addition to providers, 19-24 year old NEETs from across the area were also interviewed to gain an overview of why they are NEET, their awareness of the opportunities and support available to them and the impact of COVID-19 on them as individuals. Providers promoted the purpose of the research to the NEETs they work with and encouraged them to take part. Part way through the research one provider recommended that we offer online shopping vouchers to incentivise participation, so from this point onwards we agreed to offer the next 10 participants a £10 voucher to boost participation rates. In total 11 NEETs took part in this research, which was below the 15-25 target, despite the best efforts of the researchers.

Whilst conducting the research for this project, we worked closely alongside organisations undertaking two similar projects also commissioned by the YNY LEP: 'Exploring the capacity of the FE system to delivery Digital Skills – Provider and Stakeholder perspectives' and 'Exploring the capacity of the FE system to deliver re-skilling and up-skilling – Provider and Stakeholder perspectives'. As all three projects are related to FE, we worked together to coordinate stakeholder communication. We also shared key findings and recommendations that could be beneficial for each research report.

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## **6. Consultation findings**

### **6.1 The situation and causes of 19-24 year old NEETs**

The situation and causes of NEETs vary across the LEP area due to differences in the labour market and access to opportunities. However, there are key trends that can be clearly identified.

NEETs in York and North Yorkshire tend to be those who have little to no work experience alongside low educational attainment, with many of them reporting that they struggled or had negative experiences at school. In addition to having few qualifications, no work experience or demonstrable employability skills, many NEETs also have low confidence, resilience and aspirations and many also experience mental health issues. It is unclear whether low confidence, aspirations, resilience, mental health, or a combination of these is a driving factor of these young people becoming NEET, or a consequence of being NEET. However, it is clear that these are real barriers to re-entering the labour market or effectively engaging with education and training.

Interviews with a variety of providers highlighted that a perceived lack of access to high quality CEIAG was a key driver of the NEET challenge. This, in turn, means that young people may be unaware of opportunities in their area and lacking in a clear plan on what to do after leaving school. Some providers referred to a focus of the education system over the last 10-15 years on achieving qualifications, which, although acknowledged as important, may, arguably, be at the expense of thinking about career goals, how to translate exam results into employability skills and the kinds of jobs and careers young people may want to pursue. As a result, some may drift into college or Sixth Form as they are mainstream routes, but if they are not suited to this learning environment or direction that the courses are taking them in, they may drop out and become NEET.

Closely related to offering young people quality CEIAG so that they are aware of the opportunities available to them, there is widespread anecdotal evidence that young people also seek the opinions of their friends and family when making choices. As a result, offering CEIAG to parents and carers, as well as the whole school community, could help to reduce NEET levels as all learners would have a trusted network of people who are aware of career and education routes and able to support and advise them, rather than input from just a single careers advisor.

Other young people may desire to enter the labour market straight from school, either through a full-time job or apprenticeship. However, many young people become NEET as they either do not have employability skills, or do not know how to communicate that they have them. Some providers attributed this to a possible lack of attention in some schools settings on how pupils might effectively market their skills. As a result, young people may struggle to effectively write CVs or complete job applications. In addition, once someone has left education there is a perception that insufficient support is available to help them actually find a job, and this is something that both providers and NEETs themselves have stated would be useful. For example, GCSE Maths will provide young people with problem solving

skills, and non-academic activities such as owning a pet shows commitment, responsibility and timekeeping. However, young people are often not aware of how to demonstrate and market this and if they have not achieved academically, they may not have some of these key skills and few opportunities are available for those with low levels of qualifications.

In addition, many providers have stated that they are increasingly observing low levels of resilience, with NEETs quickly giving up and not being able to deal with obstacles in their path. As a result, several NEET courses address resilience and coping skills which, in turn, give NEETs the confidence to pursue job opportunities and many providers recommended that these employability skills should be embedded earlier in education.

The experiences described above are common among the majority of NEETs across England. However, North Yorkshire in particular has a dispersed population across several small rural communities. Public transport links to larger towns are poor which means that whilst growing up, young people can be unaccustomed to leaving their home villages or towns. This presents some challenges for NEETs across York and North Yorkshire as many are unwilling or unable to travel far for training or employment, as multiple buses would be required, and many do not have the confidence and independence needed to leave their locality. For example, one provider in Selby said that three work placements were offered to one of their students, but all were turned down due to them not being in the local area and requiring the use of multiple means of transport. This has raised the issue that young people may not be as independent and confident as previous generations, contributing to them being NEET. Respondents to the provider survey were unanimous in their call for greater consistency with respect to embedding self-reliance and personal responsibility in the personal, social, health education elements of the school curriculum.

Although these are some general causes of NEETs, there are some geographically specific causes within the York and North Yorkshire LEP area. For example, in Scarborough there is plenty of low skilled seasonal work available in seaside arcades, hotels and restaurants and young people will take these jobs when they have the opportunity to do so, as earning money is a priority for many. As a result, at the start of the season in April some young people will drop out of education to pursue these jobs and by October - when the season has ended - they acquire NEET status as they do not have a job and are not enrolled on a course, the majority of which would have begun in September.

## **6.2 The impact of COVID-19 on NEETs**

The impact of COVID-19 has not been fully felt or measured by the sector yet, but there is already evidence emerging of an increase in NEET numbers across most of York and North Yorkshire, with some clear geographical variances influenced by the labour market and dominant sectors in each area.

Most notably, the pandemic has led to business closures and job losses. Therefore, there are fewer job opportunities with more people applying for them, and more applying for jobs for which they are overqualified. As a result, graduates have been accessing low skilled jobs that most NEETs would usually apply for. This has left a gap where those with lower levels

of qualification have been finding it harder to obtain work and compete against those with higher qualifications. In addition, increasing numbers of those with high level qualifications return to education to retrain or gain further qualifications for when more job opportunities are available. This in turn may make it even harder for low skilled NEETs to obtain work once the pandemic has subsided, as many have been using this time to upskill.

It is also important to mention that it is societally assumed that everyone has access to the internet. This is not the case for everyone and this assumption has meant that provision is not available to everyone. In 2020 4% of households did not have internet access and those without internet access are most likely to be low income families. In addition, many of the providers spoken to in this research mentioned that some of the young people they interact with do not have internet access at home. Consequently, those without internet access have struggled to engage with education. Even though education organisations can offer free laptops and dongles, in order to obtain them, a young person must have first enrolled on their course and engaged with learning. This is difficult if you have no internet access. Similarly, all job applications have moved online which means that many NEETs may not even be able to apply for jobs as they have no internet at home and have been unable to go to the Job Centre or library to use a public computer. This has led to an increase in NEET numbers because of the inability to access learning or apply for jobs online. In addition, some may have internet access via a smartphone, but online learning and job applications have not been set up to optimise mobile applications. Therefore, those using such devices to engage in learning or apply for jobs may be at a significant disadvantage, even though they are able to access the internet.

The local dominant sectors have also had a large impact on NEET levels because of COVID. For example, in Scarborough the pandemic has been a leading cause of NEETs due to the prevalence of the hospitality sector, which has been particularly hard hit. This has resulted in an increased number of 19-24 year olds becoming NEET and increased numbers of those in this age group enrolling onto Further Education courses. Providers have highlighted that courses with a clear “pandemic-proof” employment route, such as health and social care and construction, have seen increased enrolments. On the other hand, in areas such as Selby, where the main industry is logistics and food production, there has been little to no impact in the number of NEETs as these sectors have remained resilient throughout the crisis and have therefor maintained a stable demand for workers throughout the period.

Although there are local differences concerning the impact of the pandemic on NEET numbers, one of the biggest impacts evident across all areas is a decrease in the number of workplace opportunities available for NEETs. Across all areas of York and North Yorkshire, employers have been unable to offer work experience placements, apprenticeships or traineeships at the level they used to before the COVID-19 crisis. For example, in Scarborough one training provider could reliably obtain 10-15 high quality apprenticeships with a single employer each year, but this year was not able to offer any. This has meant that NEETs have been denied essential workplace experience where they can foster their employability skills, which is vital for many to be able to progress into long-term employment. Therefore, this may be one area where the full extent of the impact of the pandemic cannot yet be fully assessed.

Another impact that can be seen across the whole LEP area is that for many providers, fewer people are enrolling on or fully engaging in FE courses due to remote learning. Although many NEETs have found that remote learning has been beneficial for them, there are also those who want and need to be on premises to effectively learn, and as a result, they are disengaged and are waiting until restrictions are lifted before they are willing to consider resuming their studies. This may be another area where the full extent of the impact is yet to be felt. One provider mentioned how for those with mental health issues, behavioural issues or unstable home lives, the opportunity to be at college for training provided a nurturing and welcoming environment, free from distractions at home that were preventing effective learning. Another provider mentioned that remote learning was not what some people signed up for, especially for practical courses where large changes to course delivery methods have been made to suit online learning. As a result, their numbers have been lower during the pandemic, but they have a large list of NEETs who want to be contacted and enrolled on a course when it can be offered face-to-face again.

Finally, there is a fear that the pandemic has further worsened the aspirations and confidence of NEETs. Furthermore, as the academic catch up will be a priority when schools return, there is a concern that even less attention will be given to careers guidance and developing employment skills, which in turn, may lead to more pupils becoming NEET when they leave mandatory education at the age of 18.

### **6.3 Further Education provision**

#### **6.3.1 Recruitment of NEETs**

Recruitment strategies of Further Education providers across York and North Yorkshire tend to be similar, with no clear geographic variances. All providers are trying to market their offer as creatively as possible so that NEETs are aware of and can access their courses.

Providers and NEETs involved in this research highlighted the large role of the Job Centre in referring NEETs onto Further Education courses. For many NEETs, the Job Centre will be their main contact point who will signpost them onto education and employment opportunities. Therefore, having strong relationships with the Job Centre is key for recruitment across the LEP area. In particular, having personal contacts at a Job Centre who also have established links with a particular college tutor is important for recruitment, as work coaches are more likely to refer someone onto a course if they personally know and trust the tutor to deliver a high quality offer. To strengthen this, some providers will also run sessions or set up information points within Job Centres to increase engagement and recruitment of NEETs. The York Job Centre is developing youth hubs, so many providers in the LEP area are pursuing links to hubs to allow NEETs to have a better understanding of the provision available and to facilitate improved referral rates.

Although Job Centres account for the majority of NEET recruitment many providers also directly market their provision, through, for example social media, the local press, posters in public places and sharing information with organisations who interact with NEETs such as food banks, housing support and mental health organisations in order to reach their target group. This year, due to the pandemic, social media has been the primary source of

recruitment. Many providers have invested in increasing their online strategies and have developed videos and delivered online open days to promote their provision, which have been very successful.

An integral part of recruitment is ensuring that courses are attractive to NEETs and that the enrolment process is not seen as over daunting. As a result, providers have created their courses and adapted marketing strategies to suit this target group. One provider detailed how they market their courses as smaller qualifications, so instead of requiring NEETs to sign up for a full year, they are invited to complete a couple of units over a few weeks, which they can then extend to the full course if they wish. This makes it sound like a less daunting and more manageable prospect than having to sign up for a full year straight away. Another provider has adapted their recruitment and course promotion to heavily focus on links to the labour market. Instead of simply marketing the course and what learners will be taught, part of the promotion and recruitment process focuses on what industries a course will qualify an individual for and provides LMI to the target groups. That way a clear path and route to employment is provided, which gives additional security and confirmation that the course will be beneficial.

### **6.3.2 Challenges around recruitment**

There are also a variety of challenges associated with recruitment. Firstly, despite efforts and working closely with the Job Centres, recruiting can still be very difficult due to the lack of direct contact with NEETs. In addition, one of the providers stated that outreach is not a primary objective of theirs. Overcoming these difficulties requires financial investment and time that they do not have. Many Further Education colleges also offer courses for 16-18 year olds, so 19-24 year old NEETs may not consider them an option by assuming that provision is only available for 16-18 year olds.

Additionally, due to the wide range of provision available, NEETs and their friends, family and Job Centre work coaches may not be aware of the different opportunities available to them and which are most suited to their needs. For example, many people do not know the differences between an apprenticeship, a traineeship and Kickstart<sup>2</sup> (funding to employers to create job placements for 16-24 year olds), and the different experiences they offer. One provider highlighted that in 2020, employers had offered 16 traineeship vacancies to them. However, only 2 people applied for these vacancies, which is likely a result of traineeships having a low profile and therefore young people not understanding the opportunities available and how to access them.

### **6.3.3 Retention of NEETs and those at risk of becoming NEET**

Retention strategies tend to be more specific to individual FE providers; however all providers contacted for this research unanimously agreed that the best method for retention

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<sup>2</sup> Gov.uk, 2021, *Kickstart Scheme*, accessed 16<sup>th</sup> April 2021, [<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/kickstart-scheme>]

is to develop an individual plan for each learner which ensures that their specific learning needs are taken into account rather than having a general approach for all learners. This ensures that each learner's course fits aligns with their expectations and that personalised support can be offered. Closely related to this is having staff members who are approachable and engaging to create a supportive learning environment.

One provider observed that offering personalised support from the day a learner joins a course is most important to ensure that it is the right one for them. Learners will have regular catch-up meetings with their tutor to discuss their expectations, how they are finding the course and if they are encountering any difficulties. If a learner is not happy, tutors will encourage and support them to swap courses until they find the right pathway for them, and offering individual support is key to this being successful and ensuring that learners do not drop out. This is part of their 'swap, don't drop' retention strategy.

Providing pastoral support is a priority for Further Education providers as well as being a critical part of learner retention and helping them realise their full potential. Mental health and wellbeing are becoming increasingly important, in particular during the pandemic, where evidence is emerging of increasing isolation experienced by many young people. Therefore, many providers have a mental health and wellbeing team, provide staff training in these areas, and have good access to resources and links with mental health organisations. Many providers have also noticed how the NEETs they support have poor employability skills and low levels of independence and resilience. Therefore, included within the overall pastoral support are specific sessions that address these issues. For many learners, the costs associated with attending a course can be a limiting factor, especially if they live in remote areas and need to use multiple public transport routes each day. As a result, some providers are able to offer a weekly allowance to cover subsistence and transport costs.

Combining individual learning with pastoral support is a key part of effective retention. One of the Further Education providers contacted detailed their 'opportunity escalator' course which incorporates pastoral support through the enhancement of employability skills, and also adopts an individual, personalised approach. This personalised programme enables participants to discover more about themselves, including their skills, interests, motivators and challenges, and facilitates learning basic employability skills. The programme itself has four pathways, each with a different progression outcome, to ensure that the knowledge and employability skills obtained are relevant to each individual's aspirations. This highly individualised programme ensures that the needs and aspirations of each learner are met, and results in higher retention levels.

#### **6.3.4 Challenges in retaining NEETs and those at risk of becoming NEET**

External drivers can often frustrate the objectives of even the most robust retention strategies developed by providers. For the 19-24 year old category, getting any type of job and earning money represents a sufficient incentive to leave education and training. This is even the case for temporary work that may not lead to a lasting career. For example, in coastal towns where there is reliable seasonal work, it can be difficult to retain learners on programmes as some decide, particularly between April and October to drop out to pursue

this seasonal work. However, by October when the season is over and staff numbers need to be reduced, they can be left NEET as they have no job and have not enrolled on a course. Although people are aware of the length of the season and the potential to be without work when it ends, many will still drop out of education for what is often precarious employment, so trying to ensure that they complete their learning can be a challenge. In addition, many 19-24 year olds may have a part time job or young children, so care needs to be taken when designing their courses to ensure that they can successfully complete. This is where having individualised support and learning plans is really important.

19-24 year old learners who are in further education may also be in receipt of universal credit and attending the local Job Centre. Although this provides them with the support they need, it can be the case that by April, some learners feel compelled to terminate their current learning programme and enrol on a DWP course to retain their benefits. This can have a detrimental impact on the learners themselves and prevent them from achieving their preferred qualifications.

#### **6.4 Adaptions in recruitment, retention and course delivery during COVID-19**

COVID-19, and the associated social distancing rules, has meant that all providers needed to adapt their courses to be delivered online. In September 2020, face-to-face learning was allowed to re-start, but by January 2021 online learning was once again made compulsory until March 2021. This resulted in significant changes needing to be rapidly implemented in recruitment, retention, and delivery.

##### **6.4.1 Recruitment in COVID-19**

COVID-19 has had a varying impact on the numbers of NEETs enrolled on FE courses. It is not possible to make direct comparisons or determine LEP area trends due to variations in course start times and length. For example, courses starting in September 2020, when face-to-face learning was permissible, may have different levels of engagement compared to courses starting in January 2021 when all learning needed to be carried out remotely. As a result, a whole range of experiences were seen across the LEP area. Some providers found that course enrolment was very high, perhaps due to far fewer job opportunities, whereas others saw a decrease in numbers due to restrictions to usual marketing activities. Similarly, some providers reported increased retention as fewer learners dropped out for part time work, whereas other providers reported increased drop-out rates due to not being able to deliver the course as planned.

Providers contacted in this research highlighted that the courses with clear and “in demand” career routes associated with them are most popular – for example construction and care course have attracted considerable interest across the whole of York and North Yorkshire. In contrast, courses related to sectors that have been affected by the pandemic, such as hospitality and catering, have generally seen a decrease in numbers. At the present, it is unclear if these trends will persist, but this is a clear shift from pre-pandemic preferences.

Online marketing has been the primary route for recruitment for many providers as they have stated that increases to Job Centre workloads and the limitations on face-to-face sessions has led to fewer referrals. Providers have strengthened and updated information on their websites and increased their use of social media to attract more applicants. Many have also run online open days to give potential learners the opportunity to speak to tutors, watch videos and ask questions. These have been very effective, although a few providers have mentioned that for the more vocational and 'hands-on' courses, it is harder to get an idea of what the course fully entails online, as face-to-face open days are more conducive to this. It is not always possible to fully realise this remotely, particularly when course delivery is also online, so quite different to the 'original' course marketed. Similarly, the Job Centre has delivered online apprentice workshops for Apprenticeship Week 2021<sup>3</sup>, which were well attended and reported as very useful in effectively communicating what apprenticeships were, the application process and the opportunities available in the local area.

#### **6.4.2 Course delivery in COVID-19**

There was initially a steep learning curve at the end of the 2020 academic year as providers and learners adapted to online learning. However, this only resulted in minimal disruption for learners as the majority of their course content had been delivered via the original, face-to-face method. Consequently, most practical skills and assessments had been carried out, so online learning was focused on strengthening theoretical knowledge.

In September 2020, face-to-face learning was permitted again and many Further Education providers took the decision to front-load all of their vocational courses to ensure that all practical skills and assessments were carried out when face-to-face learning was guaranteed. This meant that by January 2021, when online learning once again became compulsory due to a rise in COVID-19 cases, most learners had already obtained the necessary practical skills required for their programmes and the online aspects could focus on theory.

Throughout the Autumn term of 2020, many providers implemented blended learning, allowing learners to develop skills onsite, whilst addressing theory and completing one-to-one sessions with tutors remotely. This blended delivery also meant that those who were self-isolating were not excluded from learning and all live classes were recorded or streamed online. Many of the Further Education providers we consulted advised us of their plans to implement blended learning as part of their standard offer in the future due to the advantages it presents. For learners who live a distance from learning sites, the facility to participate in lessons online ensures continued access, especially if they face transport issues. Some providers found that online assessments were more effective and that one-to-one sessions made the most sense online as it reduced inefficiency and expense associated with travel to centres for brief sessions, often lasting no more than 30 minutes. Therefore,

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<sup>3</sup> National Apprenticeship Week, 2021, accessed 16<sup>th</sup> April 2021, [<https://www.nationalapprenticeshipweek.co.uk/>]

plans are underway to offer these elements of their courses online, so each week would have a mixture of face-to-face days and online days.

Online delivery is a very different way of working and face-to-face methods cannot be directly translated into an online context. Sitting in front of a computer for extended periods of online learning does not offer the dynamism of classroom-based interaction, so tutors needed to be creative in delivering lessons to ensure that engagement remained high. A widely-adopted approach was to run lessons on an online platform such as Teams that would allow learners to still see the tutor. Tutors would then set work and also use the breakout room functions to facilitate discussions amongst learners to ensure they were actively learning and remaining engaged. Some vocational course tutors would implement practical activities that learners could do from home; however not everyone has the same access to materials, so this also needed to be delivered creatively to ensure that no one was excluded. In addition to offering live learning, providers strengthened their VLEs to further facilitate progress by setting activities and homework.

Providing individual learning and developing a personalised learning plan was deemed the most important retention strategy for face-to-face learning and this remained the case when delivery was online. Many NEETs entered Further Education with children or the intention of obtaining a part time job, so personalised learning to fit around these elements was essential to ensure they remained on the course. Furthermore, throughout the pandemic, many have experienced disruptions whilst learning in a home environment. As a result, providers adapted delivery to fit around the needs of these learners:

- Sessions were recorded or catch-up sessions were offered in the evenings
- More regular one-to-one sessions with tutors were offered
- In addition to email and Teams (or other similar video conferencing software) platforms such as WhatsApp were used and some providers even ensured that students could access lessons through their gaming consoles
- For those whose learners struggled with online learning, physical workbooks were sent out to them so that they could still learn

All providers emphasised the importance of being as flexible as possible to accommodate as many different home situations of learners as possible.

Providing pastoral care was also a priority when offering blended or fully remote learning to ensure that learners were coping well. Throughout the pandemic, providers ensured that additional one-to-one support was available. This also extended to visiting homes if learners were absent to listen to their concerns and support them in whatever way possible. Increased attention was also given to mental health, so tutors were given additional training that enabled them to communicate the importance of good mental health and reaching out for help when needed to learners.

As well as providers needing to adapt their courses for online delivery, changes were also needed when face-to-face delivery resumed in Autumn 2020 to comply with social distancing regulations. One provider mentioned how they introduced a colour coding system in their

college to ensure that classroom bubbles did not mix as part of their strategy to contain any virus spread. Learners were also surveyed on how safe they felt in the adapted learning environment and to elicit their views on any areas for improvement. This helped with retention as learners felt listened to and knew that if safety concerns were raised, they would be responded to.

### **6.4.3 Difficulties in delivering courses in COVID-19**

Despite the efforts of providers to offer attractive online learning during the pandemic, it was not what a number of learners wanted, particularly with respect to more vocational courses with practical elements. As a result, many providers have seen increased drop-out rates, with NEETs then stating that they would like to enrol again when the course could be delivered fully face-to-face. Others have had learners remain on their courses but stated that some of the learners had expressed an interest in repeating the course so that they can obtain the full experience. In addition, some NEETs have struggled to engage as it is much harder to offer particular kinds of support virtually – for example if someone needs help with reading or handwriting, this is the type of support that is reliant on face-to-face interactions rather than via online methods.

It is an incorrect assumption that everyone has a computer or laptop at home with access to the internet. For many of the learners enrolled on NEET courses, providers have had to source laptops and dongles so that they could work from home. This was quite easy to arrange in September 2020 when learners could visit campuses in person and collect equipment but became much harder in March 2020 and January 2021 when learning was remote. As a result, it is feared that some learners disengaged from learning.

Moreover, access to online tuition does not guarantee that learning will not be chaotic at home or that the same quality of learning can be provided. Therefore, one provider stated that their learners are ‘plodding along’ in their learning from home rather than learning at pace. However other providers have reported that some learners are thriving online and developing confidence and demonstrating impressive progress. It is clear that learners are having very different experiences based on their individual circumstances and in the future, it will be important not to assume that everyone has had the same learning experience or obtained the same amount of knowledge and skills.

Many providers also noticed that learners were struggling in other ways besides simply having access to the internet during the pandemic. As a result, where possible, providers offered additional support such as bursary funds or sending food parcels to those most affected to help ensure they remained in learning rather than dis-engaging and focusing on getting a job in order to support themselves.

Regardless of the difficulties faced, most providers believe that they have adapted well to online delivery and that their learners have thrived. Therefore, many providers plan to embrace technology and increase their blended learning offer once the pandemic subsides.

#### **6.4.4 Online delivery training requirements**

Adapting to use technology in the delivery of online learning has required tutors to undergo significant training. More often than not, this training was delivered by internal staff members who had a good grasp of using VLEs and online video software. In addition, the summer break provided an opportunity for many Further Education providers to upskill their workforce and ensure that all staff members had the appropriate equipment to deliver online learning from September onwards. A positive result of lockdown is that Further Education has now embraced technology and accelerated many of their pre-pandemic technological plans. In addition to staff members, learners were also provided with training on how to use their laptops, VLEs and video learning software.

Due to the increased dependence on digital technologies, some providers have hired technical leads who organise and deliver staff and learner training around online learning and fix any technical issues. Many tutors were also given further training on safeguarding online and teaching learners how to safely use the internet. As mental health concerns have also risen during lockdowns, many providers have made it a priority to strengthen their mental health offer and provide more regular training for staff so that they can support their own mental health and wellbeing as well as that of learners.

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## **7. Recommendations**

Throughout the research, providers have described their different strategies to recruit and retain 19-24 year old NEETs and how their course delivery successfully meets the needs of this target group. However, they also emphasised how areas of their delivery could be strengthened so that they could better engage NEETs and offer them more opportunities to effectively integrate with the labour market.

Based on the interviews carried out with providers, eleven recommendations have been identified relating to communicating information, developing networks and creating a whole York and North Yorkshire NEET strategy.

### **Recommendation 1: To develop a York and North Yorkshire wide directory of Further Education providers who can support NEETs, with details of available opportunities.**

All providers and organisations contacted in this research highlighted how important networking is to understand the LEP area Further Education landscape. However, this often requires organisations to develop their own networks in order to understand the landscape, which under pressures of time and resources, can lead to providers who support NEETs not having a clear picture of all of the opportunities available for 19-24 year olds across the wider area. As a result, having a complete directory of all of the providers and opportunities available across York and North Yorkshire for NEETs would ensure they are provided with all of the necessary information, supporting informed decision-making

This would also support Job Centres to refer NEETs onto the most appropriate course rather than limiting referrals to providers they know. It would also allow Further Education providers themselves to better support 19-24 year olds – for example if their provision is unsuitable for the NEET in question, they could signpost them to a course or provider that may be better suited to meeting their needs. This direct referral, rather than having a NEET leaving and needing to find another course on their own or through the Job Centre, would ensure that their needs are more effectively met and prevent the numbers of NEETs who are not engaging with support services.

In addition, having this complete directory of opportunities across York and North Yorkshire would be beneficial for NEETs themselves as they could access information on all of the opportunities and support available to them, rather than only being aware of the organisations that they already know about or have been directed towards via the Job Centre.

### **Recommendation 2: To develop a York and North Yorkshire NEET strategy to facilitate better communication and collaboration between NEETs, Job Centres, Further Education providers and other organisations who work with this cohort such as mental health organisations, housing associations and food banks.**

For most Further Education providers, their main recruitment of NEETs is via referrals from the Job Centre. Although useful, it leaves few avenues for Further Education providers to directly engage with NEETs themselves, or to engage with new NEETs before they register with the Job Centre. More varied means of contact will lead to greater inclusion of NEETs

that fall through holes in the existing referral set-up. In addition, there are a variety of organisations besides Job Centres that engage with 19-24 year old NEETs. For example, mental health organisations, housing associations and food banks, and their inclusion in a strategy would ensure that all of those who are NEET have the opportunity to receive support. This is further justification of the importance of re-examining the definition of NEET in-line with recommendation 10.

If there were a clear NEET strategy in place across the LEP area, and additional channels to identify and signpost new NEETs into Further Education providers directly, the area could better support them. This coordinated strategy, utilised by all providers and supporting organisations, would prevent preferential treatment given to certain routes over others. It would also mean that the whole area has a coordinated and clear approach to assisting NEETs, in contrast to the fragmented systems currently in place.

Furthermore, some providers have stressed the importance of communicating to NEETs the need to take on more personal responsibility with respect to being pro-active. This has been highlighted by the pandemic, as many 19-24 year olds have largely been comparatively inactive, and as the economy starts to re-open, it will most likely be these individuals who will struggle to re-engage with training or work, and therefore remain NEETs. If this strategy were to also include an emphasis on this age group taking greater ownership of their skills development journey, this would help decrease long term NEETs and facilitate quicker labour market integration. For example, if Job Centres heavily discouraged NEETs from solely applying for jobs and strongly emphasised that enrolling on a course or volunteering would allow them to further strengthen their employability skills and boost their CV, this would increase the chances of finding a job and ensure that they are being supported. It is clear that the longer a person is NEET the harder it is for them to re-engage with training or obtain a job, so emphasising the importance of doing something, rather than leaving an unexplained gap in their CV, would reduce NEET levels.

**Recommendation 3: To present the needs and concerns of Further Education providers to Local Authorities and governments to ensure that adequate resources are available to support NEETs.**

The LEP and the bodies that administer it need to have an active role in listening to provider needs and driving sector responses. Some providers have expressed a view that the Government may be assuming all 16 year olds leave tertiary education with 5 A-C GCSE passes, and then go on to Further Education or an apprenticeship. In reality, the scenario is more complex and need to be communicated to government bodies to ensure that changes are not made that would further disengage and distance NEETs from education, training and the labour market.

For example, one provider highlighted that the government has removed the Level 2 Business Admin apprenticeship based on the assumption that this Level is common sense and therefore, a course is not required to teach such basic skills. However, this is not the case for many NEETs. Previously they have accessed such training and without it, there is no longer an entry point to come into a business environment apprenticeship. If the Government was made aware of the current situation and needs of the sector, policy changes such as these might be reviewed. Similarly, there is a threat of removing or

reducing funding for numerous Level 1 and 2 qualifications as, again, there is the assumption that by the age of 16, young people are ready to work towards a Level 3 qualification. This does not reflect reality as many NEETs need the first step of enrolling onto Level 1 and 2 qualifications. Therefore, the LEP can support them by speaking to providers around the real needs of the sector and communicating that to policy makers and funding agencies.

**Recommendation 4: To ensure that LEP area NEET groups have a clear focus on driving change as well as collating and sharing experiences.**

The organisations we consulted in this research have welcomed the existing formal groups to discuss the NEET situation and share best practices, observations and recommendations on how to deliver service improvements. However, views were expressed that suggest such groups are perceived to be very discussion-based, with little concrete action resulting from them. The perception from many members was that they did not have the authority to implement change.

As a result, inviting influential decision-makers to attend these groups would ensure that issues raised at these meetings are communicated at policy level, perhaps creating a clear path for change.

**Recommendation 5: To identify and plan responses to upcoming trends in the LEP area and local labour markets including both growth and shrinking sectors, and employers entering and leaving the area.**

Providers are keen to link their courses to the local labour market to outline clear potential career paths to their learners. One provider cited that this connection to the labour market is a key part of their recruitment strategy, and courses are marketed alongside labour market information as in their experience, it is a priority for 19-24 year old NEETs. Job Centres also stressed the importance of understanding the local labour market so that clients could be better supported.

Therefore, the LEP and Local authorities should ensure that emerging trends in the labour market, including growth and shrink sectors and key employers entering and leaving the area, are communicated to organisations who support NEETs. This would facilitate the communication of accurate LMI to the NEETs they engage with and help plan courses aligned to local labour market and skills needs. This could be another method of introducing new employers to NEET providers so that long-lasting connections can be made.

**Recommendation 6: To share NEET data with providers across the area to help them adapt their provision to better address at risk NEETs and reduce the number of NEETs.**

In order to ensure that the needs of NEETs are met, those who support them need to be aware of local NEET data. Although LEP area figures are presented, these are not specific enough to be beneficial and help providers adapt their provision to meet needs. For example, a LEP area assessment of 19-24 year old NEETs may show that NEET figures are remaining constant which obscures the fact that there may be significant variation at the local level. This further necessitates the need for recommendation 10 to be addressed so

that causes of NEETs are accurately identified and the resulting strategies to address them are more responsive at the local level.

Therefore, if the LEP were to share local data on NEET figures (statistics, causes, barriers), and their key priorities for each area in supporting NEETs, it would provide insight into how providers could adapt their provision to suit current and future needs. For example, if data shows that in some areas, it is the transition years that lead to NEETs, then providers can strengthen their transition support and target this age group. If in other areas NEET figures are reducing, research can be conducted to discover why and share findings with other areas.

**Recommendation 7: To clearly outline the variety of work experience opportunities available, including those outside of traditional norms, with a focus on the benefits and differences, both for NEETs as well as for employers.**

Workplace opportunities are a vital route for NEETs to obtain employability skills as well as to eventually enter the labour market. They are also important for employers to develop their workforce. However, with the wide variety of opportunities available such as apprenticeships, traineeships, work experience, internships and Kickstart, Further Education providers have found that the employers they engage with are unsure of the benefits and differences between each type and which they should offer. Equally, young people are confused about which route is best for them and the appropriate application process.

Developing a strategy to clearly outline the variety of opportunities available and their associated benefits to employers and NEETs, will ensure that employers understand which opportunities they would like to offer, and that young people understand which opportunities are best for them.

One example is traineeships; some providers have stated that employers are not offering traineeships in their LEP area even though young people are wanting them, due to employers not understanding what they are and how they differ from apprenticeships. Meanwhile in another part of North Yorkshire, providers have stated that employers have offered traineeships, but that not enough young people are applying for them as they do not know how and do not fully understand what they are. By having a clear strategy to communicate the variety of opportunities available and their differences, employers and NEETs will be able to find the right option for them.

**Recommendation 8: To develop employer networks that clearly explain and discuss the benefits of engaging with Further Education and offering work placements to young people.**

One of the key findings from this research is that NEETs, and those on NEET FE courses, are not getting enough workplace experience. As a result, they are struggling to develop adequate employability skills as well as experience and understanding of what workplaces and jobs are like. One provider stated that 50% of their 19-24 year olds are unable to obtain their realistic work experience expectations, and this is particularly the case for NEET graduates who struggle to achieve the level of work experience suited to their qualifications.

The development of employer networks would facilitate discussions around engaging with Further Education providers and NEETs, to provide different types of workplace opportunities. This would also allow employers to understand why they should work with Further Education providers and the multiple benefits that offering workplace opportunities will provide them.

**Recommendation 9: To develop employer and Further Education networks to exchange sector needs and strengthen the further education offer.**

All providers involved in this research emphasised the importance of their networks with employers and would like them to be strengthened and to grow in size and scope. These networks would allow a wider range of Further Education providers and employers to interact and respond to each other's needs.

This would facilitate the development of more effective work placements. Further Education providers would be more aware of the work placement opportunities that employers are interested in offering, for example traineeships or apprenticeships, and would enable Further Education providers to better fill these vacancies. It would also provide employers with a greater understanding of the needs of education – for example if there are increased demands for work experience in a particular area, or increased demand for traineeships in another.

In addition, strengthening ties between employers and education providers would help young people leave educational settings more work-ready and ensure that labour market needs and skills gaps currently experienced are better met. In stakeholder meetings, Further Education providers report how employers state that recent leavers they have engaged with are not work-ready and do not have the required employability skills for the role. There is therefore clearly greater scope for Further Education colleges and employers to develop a mutual understanding of the meaning of work-readiness and for courses to be adapted so they equip 19 – 24 year olds with the necessary skills.

**Recommendation 10: To reassess and recommunicate the meaning of 'NEET'**

The term NEET is loaded with negative connotations and misconceptions that may be detrimental for the FE sector and prevent some young people from being able to engage with the support available to them. This further contributes, as explained below, to the NEET challenge faced within York and North Yorkshire.

One provider mentioned how some work coaches at the Job Centre did not know that the 19-24 year old adults they worked with were eligible for their courses as they did not think of them as NEET but instead as unemployed adults. Another provider mentioned how their colleagues on occasion perceived that they worked with offenders and addicts because the course was designated for NEETs. Whilst not accurate, it illustrates the dangers of perception in regard to terminology, as NEETs are just those who are not in employment, education or training for a whole range of reasons.

Therefore, if there was a LEP area campaign to reassess and recommunicate what NEET means, providing real world examples of NEETs from all backgrounds and education attainment levels, it would:

- enable all of those who are NEET to identify as NEET
- enable those who support NEETs to recognise they support NEETs
- remove the negative stereotypes associated with NEETs which may further contribute to people not recognising themselves as NEET

This may, in turn, increase enrolment on NEET courses and expand NEET support, allowing York and North Yorkshire providers to better tackle this challenge.

**Recommendation 11: To strengthen the CEIAG offer to learners and their support networks to help prevent people becoming NEET.**

A driving cause of young people becoming NEET can be tied to a lack of high quality CEIAG. This has meant that many young people have left education with low levels of confidence, low aspirations, limited understanding of their employability skills, a lack of a plan of what to do next and the opportunities available to them. Strengthening the CEIAG offer to young people before they leave school at 18, particularly those identified as at-risk NEETs, as well as those engaged in NEET services such as the Job Centre or Further Education, could help them develop a clear plan of what to do next as well as increase their confidence and aspirations.

In addition to offering more CEIAG to young people themselves, it is important to ensure that everyone involved in a young person's life has access to CEIAG to be able to support them to make effective decisions. Therefore, offering CEIAG sessions to support networks (parents, carers, partners etc.), and emphasising the importance of discussing these topics at home, can help young people to think about and plan their future as well as increase their aspirations and confidence. This may particularly be the case for those under 18 at-risk of becoming NEET who are disengaged from education who may prefer to seek the opinions of family over school careers advisors. As a result, supporting families as well young people to make these decisions may contribute to decreased levels of NEETs as young people may have a better idea of what they want and are able to do.

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## **Acknowledgments**

Aspire-igen would like to thank the 11 young people Not in Employment, Education or Training who agreed to be interviewed as part of our research along with the following organisations, whose invaluable insights and perspectives enriched our understanding of the challenges and opportunities for the FE sector in serving 19-24 year old NEETs:

Askham Bryan College

Bishop Burton College

City of York Council

Darlington College

Scarborough TEC

Scarborough University Technical College

Selby College

Scarborough University Technical College

The Opportunity Centre, York

West Yorkshire Learning Providers (WYLP)

York Job Centre Plus - Department of Work and Pensions

## **Appendix 1: Provider Interview Template**

*Questions are in bold with follow up questions underneath:*

- 1. In your experience, what are the underlying causes of 19-24 year olds becoming NEET in your area? (i.e. mental health issues, economic shocks, quality of CEIAG, educational attainment).**
  - Have these changed due to the pandemic?
  
- 2. Describe the main challenges of supporting the target group into employment and training.**
  - What are their needs? What are the barriers to their success? Are there any new challenges due to the pandemic?
  
- 3. What are your main strategies for recruitment and retention of the target group?**
  - Which recruitment methods work the best? What additional support or follow up have you put in place to ensure the target group stays on track? Has this changed at all with the COVID-19 pandemic?
  
- 4. What sorts of methods/practices are working well?**
  
- 5. How have you adapted your delivery in response to the pandemic?**
  - Did this help to improve outcomes for the target group? Did you have any training needs? What training did you receive? What successful things and/or training have you found to have a strong positive impact on you as a professional and your work with NEETs?
  
- 6. How do you think the sector could improve support for 19-24 year old NEETs?**
  - What are your perceptions of the current landscape at local level? How important is networking with other partners and stakeholders? What kinds of initiatives work the best? Skills strategy\* LMI report\*
  
- 7. How do you view your council's role in supporting you as part of the Covid-19 recovery plan?**
  - What role does the council/LEP play in improving services for 19-24 NEETs? What role do wider stakeholders and employers play? What would help you / your organisation improve your services for the target group? Do you have any other recommendations?

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## **Appendix 2: Provider Survey Template**

### Your organisation

- Name
- Name of organisation
- Job title
- What type of organisation do you work for?
- Which geographical areas do you cover?
- How do you currently support 19-24 year old NEETs in your role?
- Do you implement any national initiatives at local level?
- If you do implement national initiatives at a local level, please provide details about what they are.

### NEET profiles

- What are the general characteristics of the 19-24 NEET people you primarily work with? (education level, skill level, gender, race, other characteristics)
- Do these people represent the general profile of 19-24 year old NEETs in your area?
- Have you seen a change in the characteristics of this group since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- If you have seen a change in characteristics, please explain what they are.

### Employment and Training context

- Do you think there is enough support for 19-24 NEETs in your area?
- Do you think there are enough opportunities for 19-24 NEETs in your area?
- How do you think the Covid-19 pandemic has, or will impact local employment opportunities?

### Adapting to the pandemic

- Do you think your recruitment rates have been affected by COVID-19?
- If you answered yes, please describe how they have changed.
- Do you think your retention rates have been affected by COVID-19?
- If you answered yes, please describe how they have changed.
- How else has the pandemic affected 19-24 year old NEETs in your area?

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## **Appendix 3: NEET interview Template**

### Background

- What are you doing at the moment and how long have you been doing it for? (e.g. training, unemployed, working, looking for work, looking for training etc.)
- What sort of things have you been doing since you left school?
- What would you like to do in the next five years? (course, college, job titles etc.)
- How do you spend your time? e.g., at home, computers, music, sports, at friends
- How do you engage with potential training and employment opportunities and employers? (e.g. Social media, email, face-to-face, jobs sites, government initiatives, etc.)
- What successful things and/or training have you found to have a strong positive impact on you as an individual to get into employment?

### Opportunities and COVID-19

- In your experience, what are the main issues which cause young people to become NEET in your area?
- How many of your friends and family are currently employed?
- What are the challenges you face to gaining employment? Has this changed since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How do you think the COVID19 pandemic has affected you and your home area in general, as well as local employment opportunities?
- What kind of support is available to help you find employment or training?
- How has it been impacted by the pandemic and are you aware of any COVID-19 specific support?
- How much support do you feel you received from the government and council to support you towards employment? How do you think they can help after COVID-19 / after lockdown ends?

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