

# Approaches to supporting young people not in education, employment or training – a review

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## Introducing The NFER Research Programme From Education to Employment

NFER has a worldwide reputation for excellence in research in education and children's services, built up over 65 years of working with a wide range of partners to produce independent evidence to drive change.

As a charity, the Foundation exists to improve the education and life chances of learners through the provision of independent evidence aimed at influencing policy, informing practice in the learning environment and directly impacting learners. To help achieve this, The NFER Research Programme was set up in 2011. Funded by NFER, it is developing partnerships with organisations and individuals who share our commitment to solving unanswered challenges young people face in education. The Programme targets key areas of education, highlighting gaps in existing evidence and conducting new research to provide the evidence to fill the gaps. Current areas of focus are *From Education to Employment*, *Developing the Education Workforce* and *Innovation in Education*.

*From Education to Employment* examines approaches that could help the over one million young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) carve a route to meaningful and sustainable employment. It builds on NFER research carried out in 2009 which highlighted discrete groups within the NEET population likely to benefit from different forms of intervention.

The initial phase is a suite of four reviews that identify strategies that can assist young people with the potential to disengage from education, employment or training to 'stay on track'. It comprises:

- effective approaches to supporting young NEET people
- careers professionals' involvement with schools
- employer involvement in schools
- curriculum and qualification needs of young people who are open to learning, or undecided about their futures.

These reviews offer a unique perspective on the research and evidence-based practice of the last five years in this area and identify the gaps for future research. A series of easy-to-use guides for practitioners, school leaders and local authorities based on the findings will also be available.

**Sarah Maughan**  
Research Director, NFER

## Executive summary

This review forms one of a suite of four literature reviews that have been completed under the *From Education to Employment* theme. These reviews collectively identify strategies for assisting young people at risk of becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training) to make effective transitions into learning or employment post 16.<sup>1</sup> In 2011 one in five (22.3 per cent) young people aged 16–24 were unemployed (a total of 1.04 million) (Rhodes, 2011). A slightly lower, but still large, proportion (19.2 per cent) of young people aged 16–24 were NEET (DfE, 2011). All four reviews build upon a large body of research on the reasons why young people are NEET, and on recent NFER research (Spielhofer *et al.*, 2009), which presented a ‘segmentation’ analysis identifying three discrete sub-categories of NEET young people aged 16–17.

- **‘Open to learning’ NEETs** – young people most likely to re-engage in education or training in the short term and with higher levels of attainment and better attitudes towards school than other NEET young people.
- **‘Sustained’ NEETs** – young people characterised by their negative experience of school, higher levels of truancy and exclusion, and lower academic attainment than other NEET young people. They are most likely to remain NEET in the medium term.
- **‘Undecided’ NEETs** – young people similar in some respects, such as their attainment levels, to those who are ‘open to learning’ NEET, but dissatisfied with available opportunities and their inability to access what they want to do.

This report explores what the best available research tells us about successful approaches to tackling the NEET problem at a general level as well as at the level of the different NEET sub-groups. The *From Education to Employment* theme within The NFER Research Programme has a particular interest in young people who are ‘open to learning’ or ‘undecided’ NEET, as there is the potential to make a substantial difference to these groups, if they can be effectively identified and supported.

## Key findings

This review discusses approaches, at a variety of different levels, for assisting young people at risk of becoming NEET. These include strategic-level (national and local-level policy) approaches and practice-level (preventative and reintegration) methods. These are presented within the context of economic recession, high youth unemployment, and a sustained reduction in public funding, all of which compound to make the task of supporting young people to make effective transitions post-16 highly challenging.

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<sup>1</sup> This review focuses upon all NEET young people in the 16–24 age range. However, the *From Education to Employment* theme will focus specifically on the 16–19 year old age group in the future.

## National policy-level strategies

Research identifies three core elements of effective national policy-level strategy.

- **Macro-economic funding** for youth training and employment opportunities is crucial. Governments must maintain adequate resources to invest in cost-effective youth labour market programmes, but such programmes must offer tailored and bespoke, rather than 'broad brush', provision.
- **Fiscal stimuli** (such as a waiving of employers' national insurance contributions for young people aged under 25) can help to incentivise employers to employ young people. Research also suggests that government should do more to increase the supply of apprenticeships. The government announcement in 2011 of a new intervention, the Youth Contract, which will make cash payments to employers to recruit young people, may go some way towards meeting this goal.
- **Central responsibility** for, and coordination of, efforts to reduce the number of NEET young people is needed. Evidence points to the importance of having dedicated national leadership to monitor the NEET agenda, and a lead partner at a local policy level to galvanise and coordinate the actions of all local partners.

## Local policy-level strategies

At a strategic level, it is important for local authorities (LAs) to have a whole-area plan for NEET reduction that is closely tied in to other area-wide strategies. Political commitment (at council and strategic levels) is of key importance to the success of the strategy. Commissioning should be based upon a needs analysis and there must be good data sharing between agencies and a well-coordinated multi-agency response. At a practice level, there should be an action plan with clear targets and a timetable for implementation as well as good systems for monitoring progress and impact. There are a number of strategic approaches that LAs should be taking to tackle the NEET issue. These can be applied as preventative strategies with young people aged under 17 or as remedial measures with young people who have already disconnected from learning.

- Identify need early.
- Intervene early with families at risk of poor outcomes.
- Develop informal learning and volunteering opportunities for young people whose personal barriers to learning are not necessarily entrenched, but who lack clarity about their personal goals.
- Develop alternative and flexible learning opportunities for young people who do not benefit from a conventional classroom experience.
- Offer financial support. Most evidence shows that young people generally respond well to financial incentives to continue in learning.

In addition to local-level strategic approaches that focus on tackling disengagement at the level of the young person, research also focuses on what LAs need to do to improve the 'supply' of employment opportunities for young people.

- At a strategic level – LAs need to engage local employers in strategy development and the design of offers.
- At a practice level – LAs need to raise awareness of what local employers can offer; identify links between initiatives for vulnerable young people, enterprise development and employer support; and involve local employers in information, advice and guidance (IAG) in schools.

## Practice-level preventative approaches

Many of the reviewed items focus on strategies that can be adopted by schools to prevent young people disengaging from learning or losing direction, in order to lessen the likelihood of them becoming NEET in future.

- **Ongoing early intervention.** It is important that early intervention strategies are sustained and continue throughout primary and secondary education to keep young people 'on track'. There should be careful and continuous monitoring of young people's attendance, behaviour and achievement patterns, and targeted support should be provided if problems are identified.
- **A varied and flexible curriculum** that is focused on learner needs and styles, uses innovative and experiential teaching methods, offers a variety of qualifications and routes, and is relevant to the world of work. In countries where combined study and work is common, through, for example, work experience placements, internships, apprenticeships and job shadowing, transition is reportedly easier. Current curriculum refocusing as a result of the introduction of the English Baccalaureate and the recommendations of the Wolf report mean that such flexibility may be difficult to achieve in practice.
- **IAG** that is impartial, realistic, responsive, and available to all young people, but tailored to the specific needs of the individual. It should be delivered to young people at an earlier age than is currently the case (from at least year 9), by fully independent and impartial staff.
- **High-quality, sustained, one-to-one support**, both academic and pastoral. Such support should be provided at key transition points when young people are more likely to become disengaged. Ideally, external professionals should be involved. A positive relationship with even one teacher or support worker can make a difference to how 'at risk' young people feel about school.
- **Parental involvement and support.** Parents and families are a key influence on young people's decisions and it is important that schools support them and engage them in the interventions being used with their children.



## Practice-level reintegration approaches

Currently, once a young person has failed to make a successful transition at 16, there are a range of youth engagement programmes and interventions attempting to help them get 'back on track'. Although research addresses the complexity of providing successful interventions for young people because they are a heterogeneous group, very few studies break down evidence on effective reintegration strategies according to the needs of specific NEET sub-groups such as 'sustained', 'open to learning' or 'undecided'. The main distinction in the literature is between 'informal learning programmes' and 'alternative provision'.

- **Informal learning programmes** are typically most beneficial for young people whose NEET status is not deeply entrenched, and who do not necessarily have substantial barriers to learning. They are most effective when they have flexible programme features (such as frequent start dates), offer young people a range of pathways, including good quality vocational options that have labour market currency, and incorporate excellent IAG. The use of individual action plans, or learner agreements, and the presence of a mentor are also important components.
- **Alternative provision** is most typically offered to young people who fall within the 'sustained' NEET group. It is most effective when it is centred on the development of a positive trust relationship between a young person and an adult 'role model'. There needs to be a high ratio of staff to young people and a learning environment that is very different from formal schooling. Access to targeted support can be provided through brokerage and, in some cases, an outreach capacity is available for vulnerable young people. From a learning perspective, there needs to be good initial assessment with realistic, measurable and motivating targets properly tracked, and a focus upon basic skills and a mix of practical and theoretical learning.

In addition to these generic success factors, this review also considers the outcomes of four specific programme evaluations, which reportedly had positive outcomes.

- **Activity Agreement (AA) pilots** for young people aged over 16 intervened early (after 13 weeks NEET). They were successful because they offered a personalised and flexible programme; involved young people in the design of their learning; offered the intensive support of an AA advisor; and provided a financial incentive.
- **Key Stage 4 Engagement Programme (KS4EP)** for young people aged 14–16 was a well-resourced programme that was integrated into the school curriculum. It was successful because there was effective management and quality assurance of the provision; well-sourced out-of-school provision; a range of provision to meet differing pupil needs; and holistic approaches to the delivery of programme elements.
- **vTalent Year programme** for young people aged 16–24 was reportedly successful because it focused on building young people's capabilities, such as confidence and

initiative, as well as giving them experience of the world of work over a long duration, combined with mentoring and pastoral support.

- **Community-based youth organisations (CBYOs)** in the US were for young people aged over 16 and were reportedly beneficial because they offered the ability to gain qualifications while earning money undertaking work provided by the programme; a non-hierarchical and trusting relationship with CBYO staff; appropriate and consistent forms of discipline; and the viewing of mistakes as opportunities for development.

## Summary and next steps

This review provides an overview of approaches to supporting young people at risk of becoming, or who are already, NEET. However, it has only been able to go so far in disentangling the approaches that are most effective with young people at different ends of the NEET spectrum, because most research is concerned with the strategies that have greatest impact with young people in the ‘sustained NEET’ group. Although research into the most effective reintegration approaches tends to be differentiated by ‘informal’ and ‘alternative’ provision – approaches that, loosely speaking, may be more appropriate for ‘open to learning/undecided’ and ‘sustained’ NEETs respectively, the literature rarely makes explicit links between specific elements of the NEET population and different types of provision.

This suggests that there is currently a gap in research around effective strategies to engage or to re-engage those who are ‘open to learning’, or ‘undecided’ NEET. This gap will be the focus of the *From Education to Employment* theme within NFER’s Research Programme. Key features will be:

- the development and implementation of indicators that can assist in the identification of young people who are ‘open to learning’ or ‘undecided’ NEET
- the trialling and evaluation of specific strategies that aim to support these groups
- the validation and dissemination of good practice.

Through this programme of research, we hope to go some way towards reducing the gap in what is known about effective NEET prevention strategies, and to make a difference to the lives of learners.

# 1. Introduction

This report presents the findings of a literature review conducted as part of The NFER Research Programme. The programme currently consists of two major thematic areas: *From Education to Employment* and *Developing the Education Workforce*.

This review forms one of a suite of four literature reviews that have been completed under the *From Education to Employment* theme. These reviews collectively identify strategies to assist young people at risk of becoming NEET so that they can make effective transitions into learning or employment post 16. The three additional reviews in this series focus on: the role of careers professionals within schools, the role of employer engagement in schools and the role of curriculum and qualifications in supporting NEET young people. This review examines a wide range of evidence related to strategies encouraging young people at risk of disengagement from learning to make positive transitions (preventative strategies). It also identifies critical success factors for re-engaging young people who are already NEET (reintegration strategies).

While the end of compulsory schooling is at the age of 16, young people aged 16–19 have the potential to be engaged in *either* learning *or* employment. However, this demographic will change as the Raising the Participation Age legislation comes into force. From 2013, all young people aged to up 17 will be required to be in education, training or work-based learning (including work with part-time study), with only those aged 18–19 allowed to work full-time. From 2015, all young people up to the age of 18–19, will be required to be in education, training or work-based learning. A focus on ‘prevention’ of disconnection (as opposed to reintegration into learning among the 16–19 age group) will therefore become all the more relevant among those aged 17–19 who are NEET in the coming years.

The findings of this and the other three reviews will support the *From Education to Employment* theme within The NFER Research Programme by providing a solid evidence base for ongoing and future primary research into NEET prevention. They will also be of interest to national and local-level policy makers focusing on NEET identification, prevention or mitigation. The timeliness of this research is apparent in recent statistics: In 2011 one in five (22.3 per cent) young people aged 16–24 were reportedly unemployed (a total of 1.04 million) (Rhodes, 2011). A slightly lower, but still large, proportion (19.2 per cent) of young people aged 16–24 were NEET (DfE, 2011). A recent government conference paper outlines concerns about the rising numbers of young people who are NEET, and the personal and social implications that this can have:

*The on-going consequences [of unemployment] impact not only on the individual but also on the state: young people who are NEET are more likely to suffer health problems and are five times more likely to enter the criminal justice system, with the life-time cost to the state of each young person who is NEET standing at £97,000. (see <http://www.insidegovernment.co.uk/children/neet-employment/>)*

## 1.1 Background to the review

In order to provide evidence for the most timely and current approaches to supporting young people who are NEET, this review focuses upon literature published since 2009 (see section 1.2 for details of the review's parameters). It focuses specifically on effective approaches to supporting NEET young people, rather than exploring in detail the extensive body of current and historical literature that discusses the characteristics and needs of young people falling into this category, the reasons for their status and the historical complexities of policy making in this area (see, for example: Coffield, 2000; Fergusson, 2004; Fergusson *et al.*, 2000; Furlong, 2006; Gleeson *et al.*, 1996; Maguire and Rennison, 2005; Payne, 2001; Spielhofer *et al.*, 2009; Stone *et al.*, 2000). Although the *From Education to Employment* theme within The NFER Research Programme will focus primarily upon the younger end of the NEET population due to a focus upon preventative strategies, this review is broader in its remit and has considered literature related to strategies that can support all NEET young people aged 16–24.

This review's focus upon effective support strategies builds upon recent research conducted by the NFER (Spielhofer *et al.*, 2009) that examined in detail the underlying causes of NEET status in the UK. This research explored a complex interplay between structural, cultural, educational, and familial factors that can culminate in lost opportunity and a lack of hope for large numbers of young people. In recognition of the fact that young people classified as NEET are a heterogeneous 'group', the research undertook a 'segmentation' analysis, with the aim of identifying discrete sub-categories of young people within the overarching NEET umbrella. The research identified three 'types' of NEET young people.

- **'Open to learning' NEETs** – the largest sub-group (around 41 per cent of the NEET group). These young people were the most likely to re-engage in education or training in the short term and generally had higher levels of attainment and better attitudes towards school than most other NEET young people.
- **'Sustained' NEETs** – around 38 per cent of the NEET group. These young people were characterised by their negative experience of school, higher levels of truancy and exclusion, and lower academic attainment than other NEET young people. They were most likely to remain NEET in the medium term.
- **'Undecided' NEETs** – around 22 per cent of the NEET group. These young people were similar in some respects, such as their attainment levels, to those who were 'open to learning' NEETs, but they were dissatisfied with available opportunities and their inability to access what they wanted to do.

This and the other reviews within the *From Education to Employment* theme, therefore, explore what the best available research tells us about successful approaches to supporting young people at risk of becoming NEET both at a general level, and also at the level of these different identified NEET sub-groups. The NFER Research

Programme has a particular interest in young people who are or are at risk of becoming, 'open to learning' or 'undecided' NEETs. Most studies, and indeed strategic approaches, focus upon the sustained NEET group. This is because this group is often the easiest to identify and presents with the most acute needs. However, it is a resource intensive and challenging group of young people to support and it only represents a minority (under two-fifths) of all NEET young people.

It is crucially important that 'sustained' NEET young people continue to receive bespoke and intensive support. Additionally, we argue that through an effective identification of young people who are 'open to learning' or 'undecided' NEETs, and through tailored support to meet their specific needs, it may be possible to make a difference to the post-16 trajectories of large numbers of young people. This ambition necessarily needs to be set within the context of economic recession, public sector budgetary reductions, and a constricted labour market. Part of the story is about effective preparedness and aspirations, but the other element is about availability and opportunity of employment and work-based learning for young people. It is important not to present a deficit model that 'blames' NEET young people for their situation. Indeed, the context within which they are trying to progress and the structural obstacles that many young people are currently facing are of crucial importance in determining 'success' (see chapter 2 for further discussion on this).

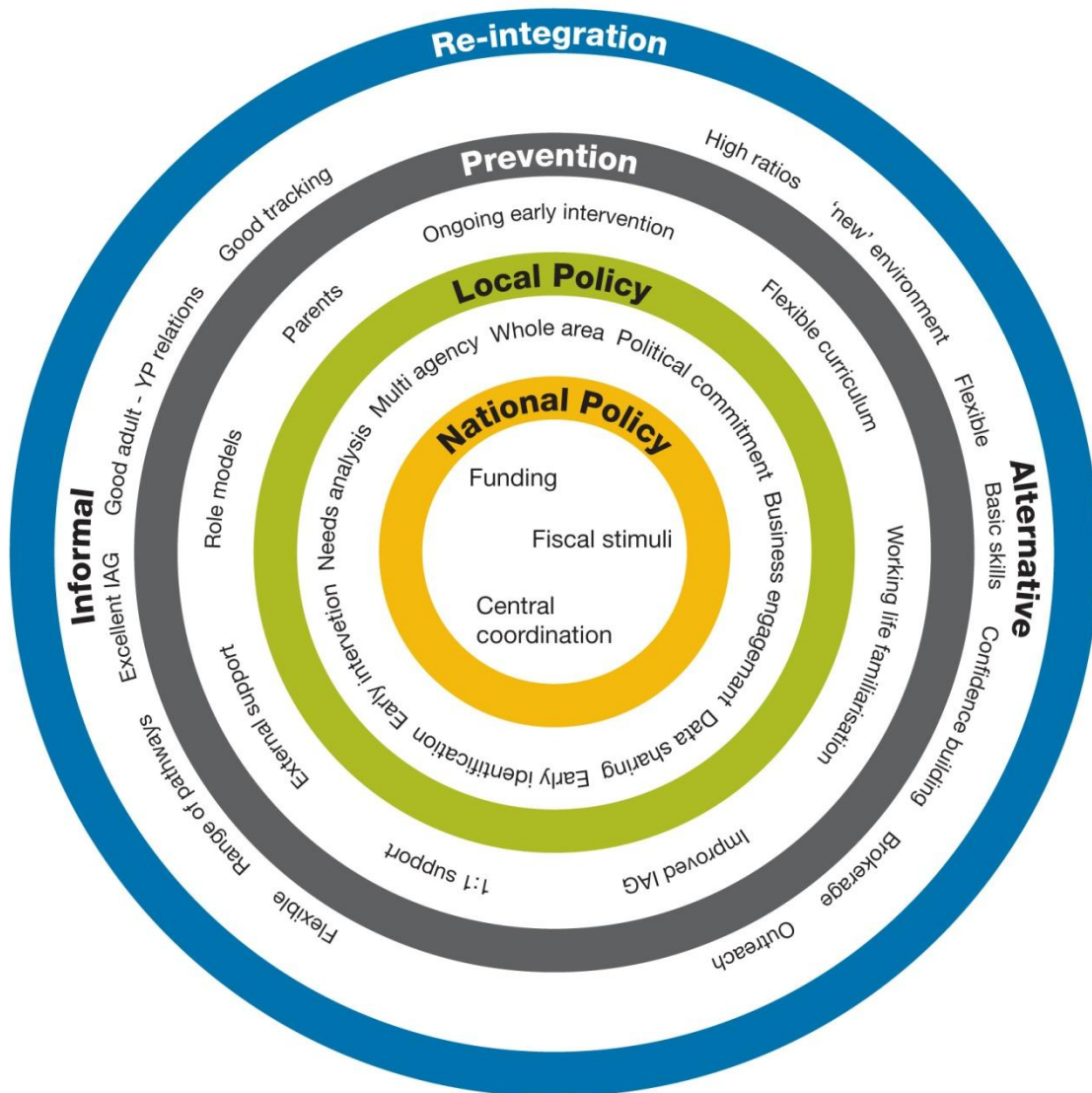
Although many of the authors cited in this review comment that NEET young people are not a homogeneous group, and contend that a variety of strategies are needed to meet their diverse needs, little of the literature differentiates effective strategies according to the 'reasons' for the young people's NEET status. Most of the studies concern themselves with the hardest to reach young people, those defined by Speilhofer *et al.* (2009) as 'sustained' NEETs. From an initial assessment of the literature, it would seem, therefore, that there is currently a gap in research about effective strategies to engage or re-engage those who are 'open to learning', or 'undecided'. This strengthens the rationale for the *From Education to Employment* theme within The NFER Research Programme as it develops and attempts to identify and address the needs of such young people.

## **1.2 Strength and nature of the evidence base**

The evidence provided here is based on a review of 31 items of literature, comprising research reports, literature reviews, programme evaluations and academic journal articles. In September 2011, we undertook systematic searching of key databases and websites, followed by rapid screening and coding of sources in order to identify key items for review. Our inclusion criteria were that each item must be: concerned with engagement or re-engagement strategies specifically; robust in research design; and published recently (since 2009 – the year of NFER's NEET segmentation analysis). The quality of the evidence is high, with most items based upon a strong to moderate evidence base that tends to be qualitative rather than based on statistical measurement (see the appendix for a definition of these terms).

The following chapters discuss approaches to addressing the NEET problem at a variety of different levels. These include strategic-level (national- and local-level policy) approaches and practice-level (preventative and reintegration) methods. Figure 1 shows these key review findings diagrammatically. The figure does not provide details of all potential approaches – these are discussed in the following chapters – rather it gives an overview of the range of desirable approaches to addressing the NEET issue identified within the literature. In the current era of austerity, it is unlikely that a holistic approach such as that described in the figure will be practicable, with different stakeholders – national and local policy makers and practitioners – adopting relevant elements of the evidence and developing it as appropriate in their contexts. There is evidence within the literature that many of these approaches – particularly at the practice level – are already being implemented in spite of fiscal challenges.

**Figure 1** Approaches to supporting NEET young people



## 2. Strategic-level approaches

While the majority of the reviewed items concentrate on approaches adopted at the practice level to prevent and mitigate the effects of youth inactivity, over one-third also make reference to the importance of national- and local-level strategic responses to the current structural training and employment challenges facing young people.

### 2.1 National policy-level strategies

Research that concentrates on the importance of a national investment in youth opportunity identifies three core elements of effective national policy-level strategy.

1. Macro-economic funding for youth training and employment opportunities is crucial.
2. There must be fiscal stimuli to encourage employers to employ young people.
3. There must be central responsibility for, and coordination of, efforts to reduce the number of young people who are NEET.

#### 2.1.1 Macro-economic funding

Six of the reviewed items identify the importance of a national government commitment to funding for youth training and employment opportunities, especially within the context of rising youth unemployment and structural decline in some geographical areas (Benetto, 2009; GHK Consulting Ltd, 2009; International Labour Office, 2011; LGA, 2009a; NFER, 2011; OECD, 2010). Horgan *et al.* (2010, p.5) warn, however, against government falling into 'traps of broad stroke programmes such as the old Youth Training Programme...that try to be a catch all, when experience of successful projects consistently highlight the need for tailored, holistic provision for young people'.

Research by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which considers the extent of youth unemployment across 16 OECD countries, agrees that governments must maintain adequate resources to invest in cost-effective youth labour market programmes. The organisation (2010, p.5) notes that 'facilitating the school-to-work transition and improving labour market prospects for all youth should remain at the top of the political agenda in all OECD countries'. This is consistent with a recommendation by the International Labour Office (ILO), which argues that:

*Sustained support of young people, through expansion of the social protection system, long-term investment in education and training, hiring subsidies to promote employment of young people, employment intensive investment, sectoral policy etc. is needed now more than ever.*

**ILO (2011, p.7)**



Both research reports stress that this is not the responsibility of governments alone. Other stakeholders such as employers, trade unions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), schools, colleges, and young people themselves, also have a crucial role to play.

The date parameters of this review are very current (we considered items published from 2009 onwards, the year of NFER's research, which presented a segmentation analysis of the NEET classification). In spite of this, many of the reports were nevertheless written before the change of government in the UK in May 2010 and, hence, discuss funding strategies and decisions that are no longer live or viable. Local Government Association (LGA) research, for example, argues that LAs should have greater freedom to vary the education maintenance allowance (EMA) payments according to need (LGA, 2009a), and research conducted by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (Benetto, 2009) goes as far as to suggest that EMA payments should be increased from £30 to £45–£50 per week to greater incentivise disadvantaged young people to stay in learning.

Recognising the abolition of the EMA and its replacement with the new discretionary learner support fund, a recent submission of evidence to the Education Committee New Inquiry by the NFER suggests that this new fund is not yet well known or understood by young people. As it is a hardship fund, it is not as widely publicised, nor as available as the EMA (NFER, 2011). This may have further implications for the willingness of young people at risk of disengagement to consider post-16 learning as an option. However, the new hardship fund may allow greater flexibility for the size of the awards made and greater targeting of resources, depending on the particular needs of the young person involved.

### **2.1.2 Fiscal stimuli**

Related to the view that governments must take responsibility for funding youth training and employment programmes, and the view that they must provide individualised funding for disadvantaged young people to enable them to remain in learning, is the view that governments must also incentivise the employer community to take on young people as apprentices, or as part of their workforce.

Birdwell *et al.* (2011) stress that government could do much to increase the attractiveness to an employer of employing a young person through mechanisms such as a waiving of employers' national insurance contributions for young people aged under 25. Calls from the business community for an abandonment of minimum wage legislation (an alternative means of incentivising employers to take on young recruits) runs the risk of exacerbating poverty rates that are already on the increase, and specifically increasing the proportion of young people living in 'in work' poverty. Birdwell *et al.* (2011) also believe that government should do more to increase the supply of apprenticeships, ideally making them at least two years in length, by supporting the

development of ‘group training areas’ to encourage employers to offer apprenticeships at a local level.

The government appears to have risen to this challenge, at least in part, through the announcement in November 2011 of a new Youth Contract as part of its participation strategy, *Building Engagement, Building Futures* (HM Government, 2011a). This strategy aims to provide a strong, rich offer of further learning from age 18. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) lists key measures of this contract (DWP, 2011). See Box 1.

#### **Box 1 (adapted from DWP, 2011)**

- Cash payments to encourage employers to recruit young people. There will be 160,000 job subsidies available worth up to £2,275 each for businesses who take on an 18–24 year-old from the Work Programme, enough to cover an employer’s National Insurance contributions for a year.
- An extra 250,000 Work Experience places over three years, taking the total to at least 100,000 per year. This will come with an offer of a Work Experience place for every 18 to 24-year-old who wants one, before they enter the Work Programme.
- At least 20,000 extra incentive payments worth £1500 each for employers to take on young people as apprentices, taking the total number of payments available to 40,000 next year.
- Extra support through Jobcentre Plus in the form of weekly, rather than fortnightly, signing-on meetings, more time to talk to an adviser and a National Careers Service interview.

The Government has also announced a new £150 million programme to provide support from 2012 to vulnerable 16 to 17-year-olds who are NEET. This will provide vital support to help them to get back into education, an apprenticeship or a job with training. The total amount of money available for the new initiatives will be almost £1 billion, which is in addition to existing funding for employment services. The programme will take a payment-by-results approach, providing payments on the basis of young people sustainably engaging in education or training through full-time education, an apprenticeship or work with training. This approach is ever more essential in light of the raising of the compulsory participation age in education to 17 from 2013.

### **2.1.3 Central responsibility and coordination**

A recent report by the National Assembly for Wales Enterprise and Learning Committee argues that central, as well as local, government must take responsibility for NEET reduction policy and coordination:

*We are convinced of the need for clearer, dedicated leadership – first at a national level to bring together, account for, and monitor this agenda, and secondly at local*

*levels to galvanise and coordinate action between the different parties involved and to provide strong, consistent, long-term intervention and support.*

**National Assembly for Wales Enterprise and Learning Committee  
(2010, p.41)**

The report, based on extensive consultation and evidence-based submissions, calls for one government minister to have responsibility for national strategy and implementation, ideally nominating a 'lead agency' to coordinate effort at the local level.

The ILO (2011), in its report on *Global Employment Trends for Youth*, also highlights the need for central coordination in tackling youth unemployment. It recommends that governments should develop an integrated strategy for growth and job creation, consisting of a coherent policy framework, with measurable targets and achievable outcomes, which prioritises youth employment in national development strategies and employment policies.

## **2.2 Local policy-level strategies**

A range of local policy-level success criteria are evidenced in a number of studies that consider the ways in which effective LAs are making inroads into NEET reduction. As with the national level strategies above, some of these success criteria will have been impacted by structural and funding changes since the election of the new government (Arad Research, 2011; Audit Commission 2010; Cedefop, 2010; GHK Consulting Ltd, 2009; Horgan *et al.*, 2010; HMIE, 2010; Ofsted, 2010).

At a strategic level, LAs have a whole-area plan for NEET reduction and ensure that young people's engagement in education, employment and training is a feature of key strategy documents such as the local area agreement, the children and young people's plan, the 14–19 strategy, the local poverty strategy; and the local regeneration plan. These ensure that there is political commitment (at council and strategic levels); and they encourage good data sharing between agencies. Commissioning is based upon a needs analysis so that the local issue is understood and services are effectively deployed.

At a practice level, there are good systems to monitor progress and impact; effective preventative measures are in place (for example, good working between schools, LAs, the Connexions Service and Job Centre Plus, especially at transition phases); there is a resourced action plan with clear targets and a timetable for implementation; a flexible curriculum offer is in place; and young people are closely involved in developing, reviewing and revising local-level plans.

A number of the items reviewed make the point that no one agency or individual can effectively develop a strategy for engagement or re-engagement, especially where the young people in question have deeply entrenched barriers to learning or employment (LGA, 2009a and b; NFER, 2011). In such instances, there is a need for a well-

coordinated, multi-agency response. It is important that there is not over-reliance on a single provider, as a joined-up approach can help to ensure that no young person ‘slips through the net’ (Cedefop, 2010). Evidence submitted to the National Assembly for Wales Enterprise and Learning Committee leads the authors to comment:

*The key point that struck us was how the local authority was bringing together all these different strands and focusing on the individual needs of the young person. We believe that the targeted, multi-agency and interventionist approach developed in the city and county of Swansea...has achieved positive outcomes.*

**National Assembly for Wales Enterprise and Learning Committee  
(2010, p. 20)**

The proportion of year 11 school leavers in Swansea who are NEET had fallen from 10.8 per cent in 2006 to 6.7 per cent in 2009. Ofsted (2010) and Horgan *et al.* (2010) additionally advocate that services should ideally be co-located in a ‘one stop shop’ providing an easy point of access for young people and their families. Connexions Service personal advisers, or those in a similar role once this service is removed, should be an integral aspect of any such support (Ofsted, 2010; Tunnard *et al.*, 2008<sup>2</sup>), being in a strong position to broker support from other agencies as necessary.

A number of the reviewed items also provide categorisations of the strategic approaches that they believe LAs should be taking to tackle the NEET issue in their areas. Research undertaken by the LGA (LGA, 2009a) and others (GHK Consulting, 2009; Horgan *et al.*, 2010) identify five levels of approach.

- Identifying need early – it is important that agencies join together to develop risk indicators and to identify young people who may find it difficult to make a positive transition. A preventative approach is potentially far less costly than the long-term costs to society of attempting to ‘cure’ future problems once they are deeply entrenched.
- Intervening early with families at risk of poor outcomes – this is particularly relevant in disadvantaged areas, where indicators suggest there are individual young people at risk, or where there is a high proportion of young people in the ‘sustained NEET’ category. The OECD research refers to these people as the ‘left behind youth’ (OECD, 2010). Intervention needs to be considered as early as pre-school level, and certainly at primary school, to boost personal and social skills, and literacy and numeracy levels.
- Developing informal learning and volunteering opportunities – this approach can be particularly beneficial for young people whose personal barriers to learning are less entrenched, but who, perhaps, have had a negative experience at school or lack clarity about their personal goals. In such cases, the young people need help to develop skills, qualifications and experience, in order to make the transition to the

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<sup>2</sup> This item has been included in the review because it was identified in the search database as being a 2009 publication although, in practice, it was published in 2008.

labour market. The OECD calls this group ‘poorly integrated new entrants’ (OECD, 2010).

- Developing alternative and flexible learning opportunities – such approaches are particularly relevant to young people who do not benefit from a conventional classroom experience. They can provide targeted or specialised support, and seek to develop soft skills such as confidence, self esteem, trust and responsibility.
- Offering financial support – a review by Tunnard *et al.* (2008) found that young people generally respond well to ‘financial hooks and incentives’. Kewin *et al.* (2009) note that wage allowances need to be raised in order to incentivise 17-year-olds, who generally have higher inactivity rates, or levels of jobs without training, than young people aged 16. However, the authors stress that wage subsidies, or other fiscal incentives such as those discussed in section 2.1.2, may need to be provided to employers who can struggle to meet the costs of employing apprentices.

Generally, most of the items appraised for this review focus on what LAs and other agencies, or the young people themselves, need to do to overcome various obstacles (which are often assumed to be personal or cultural), rather than considering what local labour markets, employers and businesses can offer, for example through local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) between businesses and local authorities. LEPs have the potential to provide the vision and strategic leadership to drive sustainable private sector-led growth and job creation in their areas. Hayward and Williams (2011) describe as a policy failure the tendency to focus on raising young people’s aspirations, with no explicit matching of aspiration to opportunity. They argue that governments are unwilling to acknowledge the radically changed nature of local employment opportunities that have resulted from historical deindustrialisation and, as a result, tend to ‘problematise’ young people who are NEET as the *‘undesirable product of educational underachievement, long-term unemployment, low aspiration and social exclusion’* (p. 176).

Research undertaken for the LGA (Bramley *et al.*, 2011), however, outlines nine goals that LA policy makers need to be working towards in order to improve outcomes for young people and employers, focusing on developing the ‘supply’ of employment opportunity. These focus on building links with the local labour market.

- At a strategic level – to simplify opportunities for employers to work with young people who are NEET, engage local employers in strategy development and the design of offers, support planning officers to work with employers to create opportunities, research the local drivers of NEET status, and develop better targeted support.
- At a practice level – to use communication processes to improve opportunities for NEET young people, raise awareness of what local employers can offer, identify links between initiatives for vulnerable young people, enterprise development and employer support, and involve local employers in careers IAG in schools.

Research by the OECD (2010) similarly talks about the importance of getting employers involved in the strategic-level planning of policies to reduce levels of youth unemployment, subsidising them if necessary in order to gain their involvement and support.

## 2.3 Summing up

This chapter has demonstrated the importance of a coordinated national- and local-level policy response to the growing NEET problem. There is much that practitioners can do to put in place strategies to prevent, or mitigate, the worst effects of poor youth transitions (the subject of chapter 3). However, it is unlikely that youth inactivity levels will begin to fall within the current economic climate unless there is a major macro-economic, fiscal stimulus, or an enhancement of opportunity through national youth training offers, or through the commitment and engagement of local employer communities. Research suggests that a multi-faceted approach to tackling the NEET issue is required.

*Measures at a purely structural level involving solely systemic change at a macro level may have an indirect impact on the drop-out rate...However, on the whole, the measures that do not target more specifically the students themselves and the underlying causes for dropout, through action both within and outside of school seem to have a very low success rate.*

**Lyche (2010, p.7)**

Such practice-level approaches are discussed in chapter 3.

## 3. Practice-level approaches

The majority of the items reviewed consider strategies that are most effective in engaging or re-engaging young people who are NEET 'on the ground'. They tend to focus on two different practice-level approaches: prevention and reintegration. This chapter describes such approaches, focusing firstly on strategies that can be adopted in mainstream schooling or within 14–19 further education (FE) provision to help 'prevent' young people disconnecting from education, and secondly on approaches that have proved successful in 'reintegrating' young people once they have become disconnected and/or NEET. Such approaches need to be interpreted within the context of economic recession, structural decline in some regional areas and a sustained reduction in public funding. These economic realities mean that disconnection is often not a result of any 'deficits' on the part of the young person. They also mean that practitioners may only be able to have a mitigating effect on young people's NEET status.

### 3.1 Preventative approaches

As indicated in section 2.2, a local-level preventative approach to reducing disengagement and inactivity among young people is important. Strategies need to be in place within LAs to identify young people at risk of disconnection, and to provide appropriate interventions for them from an early age.

Such preventative approaches are also crucial at the practice level. Many of the appraised items focus on the strategies that schools and, to a lesser extent FE colleges,<sup>3</sup> can adopt to keep young people engaged in their education, and to ensure they make a successful transition from education to employment and so avoid becoming NEET. Birdwell *et al.* (2011), for instance, argue that more effective strategies need to be adopted while young people are still in the education system, rather than once they are unemployed or in fragile employment. Dissatisfaction and difficulties with school-level processes are key reasons why young people become disengaged from education (Cedefop, 2010). It is important to note that although disengagement from school will not necessarily result in a young person becoming NEET, the two issues are, of course, related.

Around half of the items reviewed focus on preventative approaches to tackling disengagement and/or young people becoming NEET. The findings from these studies suggest a number of positive interventions that schools can make to mitigate against disengagement and to aid positive transitions. Many of these items focus on strategies that could be adopted by schools for all young people, however, some also highlight approaches that are required specifically for those young people at risk of becoming

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<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that FE colleges cannot do much to engage young people of compulsory education age in learning. Rather, it is the case that little recent research has been undertaken into this issue.

disengaged (and thus potentially NEET in the future). These preventative approaches are discussed in detail in this chapter.

### **3.1.1 Ongoing early intervention**

Several of the reviewed items highlight the need for preventative approaches to begin at an early age, from pre-school level, and to continue through primary and secondary education to counteract the cumulative process of disengagement that can occur over time (Lyche, 2010). Cedefop, for example, argues that early interventions should begin as soon as signs of difficulty at school or in home life are detected.

*[They] are critical to avoid the cumulative development of problems that increase the chances of a young person dropping out. It is increasingly argued that prevention begins with providing high quality pre-school education, accessible for all.*

**Cedefop (2010, p.141)**

An OECD review of policies in 16 countries (OECD, 2010) also shows that attendance at high-quality early-childhood education and care programmes has positive effects on children's school achievement, and subsequently on their school-to-work transitions. The authors conclude that greater emphasis should be placed on reaching children at an early age (before the age of six), with the aim of helping those from disadvantaged groups and ensuring their regular participation in high-quality services.

It is important, however, that early intervention strategies are ongoing and continue throughout primary and secondary education to keep young people 'on track'. There should be careful and continuous monitoring of young people's attendance, behaviour and achievement patterns, and targeted support should be provided if problems are identified. Early intervention should also include a focus on reading and writing, with primary-level and secondary-level interventions for children and young people not making appropriate progress. The government's strategy for social mobility, *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers* (HM Government, 2011b), highlights the importance of early intervention as a strategy for preventing young people's disconnection from learning and/or employment.

### **3.1.2 A varied and flexible curriculum**

A number of authors point to the importance of schools and other education providers offering a varied and flexible curriculum to meet young people's differing needs. Some of this evidence is explored in this chapter. However, this evidence needs to be set within the context of current curriculum and vocational learning reform. The introduction of the English Baccalaureate, for example, is encouraging schools to promote an increasingly academically focussed curriculum, while the recommendations of the Wolf review (Wolf, 2011), are that schools should emphasise core learning, especially English and mathematics, at key stage 4. The combined effects of these reforms are



that curriculum flexibility is becoming increasingly more difficult for schools and other education providers to achieve in practice.

Birdwell *et al.* (2011), for example, argue that the current education system is failing to engage many young people and to prepare them to make positive transitions. Similarly, in one school, where young people described as ‘disaffected’ by school staff were interviewed:

*Students expressed concerns with regard to curriculum orientation and the structure and content of lessons. They felt most curriculum areas have a purely academic content, and are irrelevant to their interests and future career prospects.*  
**Hartas (2011, p. 109)**

Essentially, the young people in this study approached school learning as ‘training for employment’ and were disappointed when it did not meet this expectation. This finding (albeit only based on a single school case-study) is interesting to bear in mind when considering curriculum accessibility for all young people. Birdwell *et al.* (2011) recommend that radical changes are required within the school curriculum to make it more appropriate and accessible to all young people. This argument is consistent with the findings from several other items appraised (including Gracey and Kelly, 2010; Horgan *et al.*, 2010). The research suggests that, in order to prevent disengagement and future youth inactivity, the curriculum should encompass a number of factors.

- It should be focused on learner needs and provide learning opportunities that are appropriate for different learning styles, and tailored to the needs of the individual.
- It should be flexible to the needs and interests of the individual, with opportunities for young people to study the most appropriate qualifications for them at the most appropriate place. Curriculum flexibility is particularly crucial at key stage 4, as research has shown that young people are vulnerable to becoming disengaged at the end of key stage 3. In order to prevent this, young people should be offered a carousel of options at the age of 14, with exposure to many different courses and long-term tasters and projects, including vocational options (Gracey and Kelly, 2010).
- Informal learning opportunities should be provided with varied, creative and innovative teaching methods. For example, learning experientially through football, dance or drama, and providing informal learning and extra-curricular activities outside the normal school day (HMIE, 2010; Horgan *et al.*, 2010).
- Relevance to the world of work is important, and the curriculum should be closely linked to local economic/labour market opportunities (GHK Consulting Ltd, 2009).

These goals are likely to become ever more difficult to achieve as schools are encouraged to focus their curriculum on a core set of academic subjects.

### **3.1.3 Working-life familiarisation**

Many of the reviewed items recommend that young people should have greater opportunities to familiarise themselves with the world of work from an earlier age (for example, from key stage 3), and that such opportunities should be integrated within the school curriculum. An international review by OECD (2010), for example, argues that school-to-work transition is more difficult in countries where the dominant transition model is 'study first, then work'. In contrast, where combined study and work is more common, through, for example, work experience placements, internships and apprenticeships, job shadowing, and summer/part-time jobs, transition is reportedly easier.

Recommendations for approaches in England to provide greater working-life familiarisation for young people include: structured and systematic work experience; careers fairs and company visits; entrepreneurship education; vocational training; apprenticeships; volunteering programmes; and greater involvement from employers in schools (Gracey and Kelly, 2010; Birdwell *et al.*, 2011; Cedefop, 2010; Grist and Cheetham, 2011). A review by Cedefop (2010) of guidance policies and practices in Europe also recommends that young people should be given opportunities to develop career management skills to enable them to make appropriate career decisions. Such skills should include young people being able to understand their own abilities, competencies and aspirations, and to match these to available opportunities.

### **3.1.4 Improved information, advice and guidance**

According to Gracey and Kelly (2010, p.61) 'professional advice and guidance should be at the heart of the strategy to engage young people'. This is consistent with recommendations from several other studies, which emphasise that IAG should be impartial, realistic, responsive, and available to all young people, but should be tailored to the specific needs of the individual (Cedefop, 2010; GHK Consulting Ltd, 2009). IAG should also be delivered to young people at an earlier age than is currently the case (from at least year 9), by fully independent and impartial staff. The provision of guidance is found to be particularly effective when provided by a trusted support worker, such as a mentor or personal adviser. However, the current budgetary cuts within the Connexions Service, and the loss of the key personal adviser role, will have serious implications for the future provision of IAG to young people.

One important aspect of IAG provision is a focus on the relationship between the qualifications that young people achieve and their future earnings (Ross, 2009). Such focus can motivate young people and help them see the purpose of their education. Ross (2009, p.24) argues that 'part of a general strategy to engaging young people is to convince them of the importance of gaining a good education for their future prospects'.

### 3.1.5 High-quality, sustained, one-to-one support

In addition to high-quality IAG, evidence suggests that schools can develop a genuinely holistic approach to student care by nurturing both personal and academic potential in order to keep young people engaged, and prepare them for positive transitions to further learning and employment. Ideally, individual support should be sustained, rather than regarded as a 'one-off' activity. It is needed at key transition points when young people are more likely to become disengaged (for example, from primary to secondary school, from year 9 to year 10, and from year 11 to further education or work). For those at greatest risk of becoming NEET, support should ideally continue after they leave school and progress into further learning or employment to ensure their continued engagement (Birdwell *et al.*, 2011). The following types of support (many of which are routinely undertaken within schools) are identified within the literature as important in engaging young people.

- **Academic support:** Ross highlights the importance of study support in maintaining a young person's engagement:

*Attending additional teacher-led classes in preparation for exams, simple 'drop-in' classes where young people could study on their own or with a friend, or attending classes in school holidays were all associated with a reduced risk of disengagement.*

**Ross (2009, p. 64)**

- **Pastoral support:** It is important that schools and other agencies deal with any difficulties within school or home life that might act as barriers to engagement, including effective policies for identifying and dealing with instances of bullying (Horgan *et al.*, 2010; Ross, 2009).

Schools that are most successful in keeping their students engaged are those that draw on the support of outside professionals, such as trained counsellors, to work alongside teaching staff to support students (Sodha and Guglielmi, 2009). The use of mentors or key workers is also reported to be a highly effective means of keeping a young person on track and can be a particularly effective strategy with vulnerable young people (Kewin *et al.*, 2009; LGA, 2009b). Such approaches are becoming increasingly difficult for schools to achieve, however, as LAs reconfigure their services and move to hub models of regional support for large numbers of schools. Similarly, although Connexions personal advisers have also been found to provide invaluable one-to-one support to young people in schools or other learning environments, particularly where they have a specialist focus (Ofsted, 2010), this is also a role that shortly will no longer exist, although the new National Careers Service will come into force in April 2012.

### **3.1.6 Positive relationships with adult role models**

Building on the points outlined in this chapter regarding the importance of one-to-one support, many of the reviewed items highlight the pivotal importance of young people's relationships with adult role models on their levels of engagement, particularly with school. Recommendations are that young people need to be given opportunities to build positive, trusting relationships with teachers and other adult role models that are based on mutual trust and respect. Ross (2009, p.63) comments: 'If teachers are able to foster positive relationships where pupils feel they are fairly treated and are given appropriate praise, this may contribute to their engagement with school.' Furthermore, research by both Lyche (2010) and Archer *et al.* (2010, p.122) found that the relationship with even one teacher or support worker can make a difference to how 'at risk' young people feel about school, and 'when young people felt safe, respected, cared about and understood, this had a positive impact on their engagement with education and enjoyment in school'.

### **3.1.7 Parental involvement and support**

According to LGA research, the context of the family is often overlooked in discussions about effective youth engagement or re-engagement strategies. Parents and families, however, are important in the debate because they influence young people's decisions about education, training and work (LGA, 2009a; Tunnard *et al.*, 2008). For this reason, it is vitally important to support parents and to attempt to engage them in the interventions being used with their children. As the LGA research comments: 'A young person's risk of dropping out of work and learning is shaped years before they face the crucial choices of work and training' (p.16). Tunnard *et al.* (2008, p.59) make a similar point: 'Parents influence not only young people's attitudes towards education, but also decisions on whether or not to engage with other positive social and learning activities.'

Schools need to work hard to involve parents in the life of the school and to make school a place that parents feel comfortable visiting. School-home support workers can help in this regard (Sodha and Guglielmi, 2009). Schools should also ensure that they provide regular information about their child's progress, and on schools' expectations of parents, and give parents (particularly those of young people at most risk of becoming NEET) greater advice and guidance to help them support their children in making positive transitions (Audit Commission, 2010).

## **3.2 Reintegration approaches**

Currently, once a young person has failed to make a transition to learning or employment at the age of 16, there are a range of youth engagement programmes and interventions attempting to provide support and guidance, skills and qualifications, with a view to helping young people get 'back on track'.

A number of authors draw attention to the complexity of providing successful intervention for young people who are NEET (Audit Commission, 2010; Cedefop, 2010; National Assembly for Wales Enterprise and Learning Committee, 2010; GHK Consulting Ltd, 2009; Grist and Cheetham, 2011) because they are a heterogeneous group. With this in mind, they argue that strategies must consider the specific situation of each individual, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach. This, however, is often difficult to achieve without a detailed understanding of the characteristics and needs of the different sub-groups of young people who present as NEET. GHK Consulting Ltd (2009) talk about 'frictional' (short-term) as opposed to 'long-term' NEETs, while Gracey and Kelly (2010) use the categories 'disengaged', 'unsure' and 'unable to find work'. These categories are not dissimilar to those adopted by the NFER of 'sustained', 'undecided' and 'open to learning' (Spielhofer *et al.*, 2009).

Research by the Audit Commission (2010), and Gracey and Kelly (2010) make the following points about the above categories.

- **The 'sustained'** (or disengaged) group face multiple barriers and require high-cost targeted support.
- **The 'undecided'** (or unsure) group need appropriate and timely IAG and resilience building to help develop a sense of determination, focus and direction.
- **The 'open to learning'** (or unable to find work) group have few barriers to engagement and may simply be waiting for a course to begin or to find employment. They are likely to engage in the short to medium term and require only low-level or no support. They represent a large component of the NEET group, and are a 'savings target' for councils (Audit Commission, 2010, p.18). Fiscal incentives to employers, such as tax breaks or subsidies, may also help to open up opportunities for this group (Gracey and Kelly, 2010).

While a number of studies recognise that the NEET group is not homogeneous, very few of the same studies break down evidence on effective reintegration strategies according to the needs of the sub-groups. One notable exception to this is a report by Grist and Cheetham (2011), which suggests that, at one end of the spectrum, is the small proportion of the NEET group who have complex needs and require a more targeted psychological approach that includes counselling, mentoring and motivational interviewing. At the other end of the spectrum, some young people simply need practical support in applying for jobs. In the middle, the authors argue, is the largest proportion of young people who are NEET, who have no discernable barriers but tend to 'churn' in and out of education and employment, and simply require 'a set of positive experiences that build skills and confidence connecting them to further opportunities' (p12). The authors recommend that capability-building programmes (such as volunteering programmes), which promote and build life- and work-readiness, are an effective means of supporting these young people's transition into further education or employment.

The literature identifies two distinct reintegration approaches.

- **Informal learning** programmes that enable young people, who had a poor experience at school or are lacking direction, to follow a range of potential pathways to develop qualifications for work and employability skills. These programmes potentially cater, more typically, for young people who are 'open to learning' or 'undecided' NEETs, although they may also be useful for some 'sustained' NEETs.
- **Alternative provision** approaches that offer tailored support to nurture young people who are likely to fall within the 'sustained' NEET group. These young people often have a raft of personal challenges and 'super barriers' to engagement, such as homelessness or being a lone parent (Evans *et al.*, 2009). These challenges often need to be overcome and solutions put in place before any work can begin on developing skills, acquiring qualifications or thinking about making a transition to work.

Details of successful approaches across both types of provision are outlined in sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2.

### 3.2.1 Informal learning programmes

Various authors have identified positive features of effective informal learning programmes. Many of these mirror the good practice examples for school-based preventative practice outlined in section 3.1.

- **A flexible approach** that includes having an open, non-discriminatory, approach to enrolment; frequent course start dates; and allowing young people varying amounts of time to complete a qualification (Evans *et al.*, 2009; Kewin *et al.*, 2009).
- **A range of pathways** that include vocational and work-based learning options (Evans *et al.*, 2009; NFER, 2011; HMIE, 2010). Short courses such as first aid and ASDAN skills for learning, employment and life qualifications can be a good starting point. Evans *et al.* (2009) report that young people like vocational options, because they have a practical feel and mark a difference from school. However, other authors (Hayward and Williams, 2011) argue that such pathways are only useful if they provide a genuine vocational learning opportunity. They are critical of what they call 'pseudo-vocational' programmes that act as little more than 'warehousing' for young people with few other options at the age of 16. Their point is that the vocational learning must provide real opportunities for workplace progression in the future. This point has also been made strongly in the recent review of vocational education by Wolf (2011). Benetto (2009, p.37) notes: 'Young people are more likely to engage if they are told about the direct benefits of vocational options and how they link to their chances of finding work.'

- **An excellent IAG service** that avoids gender, class-based, or other stereotyping; is aspirational for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds; is clear about different pathways and options; is realistic about local employment opportunities; and gives equal weight to vocational and work-based training and academic qualifications (Benetto, 2009; Kewin *et al.*, 2009; NFER, 2011). Kewin *et al.* (2009) also add that individual action plans, containing incremental achievable targets, or learner agreements, are an effective means of engaging young people and rewarding them for progress.
- **Developing positive relations** between project workers and young people is pivotal (Evans *et al.*, 2009; Kewin *et al.*, 2009), as they can help to build the confidence, motivation and resilience of participants (Lyche, 2010). The best informal learning programmes are based around mutual trust, respect and clear boundaries.

### 3.2.2 Alternative provision

Positive features of alternative provision programmes are similar but tend to focus on nurturing personal development and developing trust and positive attitudes. Strong interpersonal relationships between staff and young people, especially those who are vulnerable, are often key to the success of such programmes (Kewin *et al.*, 2009; HMIE, 2010; LGA, 2009b; Maguire *et al.*, 2010a). In alternative learning environments, project workers often need to adopt the combined role of mentor, motivator, facilitator, and even parent figure if parental support is lacking (Tunnard *et al.*, 2008; Baldrige *et al.*, 2011; Maguire *et al.*, 2010a). In such instances, project workers provide holistic support that, by necessity, is much broader than a focus on employability or vocational training alone. Continuity of contact in such circumstances is of crucial importance. Research by Horgan *et al.* (2010, p.6) reports that: 'A key factor influencing outcomes was relationships: that there is someone...with whom they can relate and get support. The need for stability was stressed, particularly for young people who have disruptive family lives.'

Tunnard *et al.* (2008) suggest that alternative provision is best offered through universal settings where possible, to avoid the stigma that can be associated with 'targeted' provision. The same authors suggest that it can be empowering to involve young people in the design of activities, building on their strengths and interests. Additional success factors (Arad Research, 2011; Audit Commission, 2010; Cedefop, 2010; Evans *et al.*, 2009; GHK Consulting Ltd, 2009; HMIE, 2010; Horgan *et al.*, 2010) have also been identified.

- A high ratio of staff to young people should be in operation, which enables holistic one-to-one support and small group work. Often the team will be multi-disciplinary.
- The learning environment should be very different from formal schooling and the young people should experience trust, respect, responsibility and freedom. Cedefop (2010, p.147) says: 'Young people need to be empowered through a relationship

which sees them as resourceful individuals with a lot of untapped potential, rather than as trouble-makers or underachievers.’

- A flexible approach should be adopted.
- An initial assessment should take place to establish realistic, measurable and motivating targets that are properly tracked.
- Basic skills should be focused on through a mix of practical and theoretical learning. Ideally, there should be minimal assessment by examination.
- Young people’s motivation and self-confidence needs to be developed as well as their resilience to dealing with problems and barriers to participation.
- Access (through brokerage) should be provided to targeted support as necessary.
- Outreach capacity should be available through detached youth workers, for example, to reach young people who are reluctant to visit a learning setting. Such young people may need to be visited in their homes, community centres or public places such as cafés.

Cedefop (2010) note that the initial re-engagement of young people is only the first step. Continued support is essential to ensure that they remain engaged and ultimately become reintegrated into learning or employment. However, across Europe such after-care support is not always the norm. The authors (2010, p.143) also note that, ultimately, while support workers can influence a young person’s re-engagement, reintegration only happens when a young person takes responsibility for their own learning and career development: ‘Professionals and others can support young people, but cannot force participation.’

### 3.2.3 Specific programme interventions

In addition to the generic success factors that have been identified, this review also considers the reported outcomes of four specific programme evaluations:

- Activity Agreement (AA) pilots in England (Maguire et al., 2010a, 2010b and 2011)
- Key Stage 4 Engagement Programme (KS4EP) in England (Cowen and Burgess, 2009)
- vTalent Year programme (Grist and Cheetham, 2011)
- Community-based youth organisations (CBYOs) in the US (Baldrige *et al.*, 2011)

All programmes reportedly had positive outcomes, for many of the reasons outlined above. Factors specific to these four programmes were:

**AA pilots** offered young people aged over 16 a weekly allowance of £30 for 20 weeks in return for agreeing to a plan and activities for reintegration into learning. A personally negotiated contract (the agreement) was developed between the young person and



their AA adviser. National evaluations of AA pilots (Maguire *et al.*, 2010a, 2010b and 2011) confirm various positive impacts. Around half of programme participants achieved a positive outcome immediately following completion of the programme. This level was higher than among a control group of young people. Young people involved in AA were also more likely than the control group to progress to learning, work-based learning or apprenticeships, as opposed to employment. Many also reportedly increased their confidence and developed a range of personal skills including keeping to routine, and managing their time. There were a number of explanations for the pilots' success.

- An 'early intervention' approach (after 13 weeks of being NEET) prevented young people becoming 'entrenched' in inactivity. A short period of intensive activity reportedly facilitated their transition into learning or employment.
- A personalised and flexible approach with activities that could be tailored to the needs of different groups of young people.
- The opportunity for young people to design, in consultation with their advisers, bespoke packages of learning.
- Intensive support provided by AA advisers was highly valued by young people and cited as one of the main reasons for their continued engagement.
- The financial incentive was a powerful engagement tool.

Notably, the highest proportion of positive outcomes were achieved by the silent and hidden majority within the NEET group, those who generally still lived at home and were neither entitled to benefits nor classed as vulnerable. With these young people, a successful outcome was usually achieved through early and short-term intervention (Maguire *et al.*, 2010a). Such young people would typically fall within the 'open to learning' or 'undecided' NEET categories.

**KS4EP** was a personalised programme for key stage 4 learners aged 14–16 identified as being at high risk of disengagement with an emphasis on the development of personal, social and functional skills. It included a work-focused component and was underpinned by support and IAG from a trusted adult. The national evaluation of KS4EP reported that the majority of year 11 students involved in the programme progressed to positive first destinations, with 77 per cent in learning, 6 per cent in employment, and only 15 per cent identified as 'unsettled'. Their attendance at school also improved. Much like the AA pilots, the programme also reportedly contributed to improvements in confidence, self esteem, interpersonal and practical skills. Explanations for success include:

- a well-resourced programme that was well integrated into the school curriculum
- effective management of the programme and quality assurance of the provision

- well-sourced out-of-school provision and a range of provision to meet differing pupil needs
- holistic approaches to the delivery of programme elements.

**vTalent Year programme** was a 44-week full-time volunteering programme aimed at giving young people aged 16–24 who are NEET, opportunities to gain positive social experiences and work experience, and to study for qualifications. The programme was designed and coordinated centrally by v (National Young Volunteers' Service), and delivered through local public service partners and education institutions. It gave volunteers opportunities to undertake a range of placements within a college or other provider as well as to work together on shared tasks (for example, organising a fundraising event).

A small-scale evaluation of the vTalent Year programme suggests that:

*[The programme] positively affected some of the capabilities of participants, notably their confidence to navigate different work and social environments, ability to empathise and sense of being able to influence their own futures positively.*

**Grist and Cheetham (2011, p.12)**

It also improved young people's confidence, and their feelings about the future. The authors argue that the combination of work experience over a long duration and giving young people the opportunity to take responsibility and use their initiative, along with mentoring and pastoral support, contributed to the programme's success. They recommend that a similar volunteering programme should be rolled out nationally, to better prepare young people for life and work, and counteract the negative effects of long-term unemployment.

**CBYOs** offer job training alongside education and life skills to young people aged over 16 in the US. The organisations also tackle major issues affecting low-income neighbourhoods, such as poor housing, crime and unemployment. Positive features identified by young black men involved in the programmes included:

- the ability to gain qualifications while earning money undertaking work provided by the programme
- a non-hierarchical, trusting relationship with CBYO staff
- appropriate and consistent forms of discipline
- a focus on hard work and punctuality
- mistakes being viewed as opportunities for development rather than as cause for punishment.

### 3.3 Summing up

This chapter has highlighted the importance of both preventative and reintegration approaches at practice level. It is crucial that there are early and ongoing engagement approaches within schools, ensuring that the school curriculum offer is varied, flexible and accessible to all, and includes appropriate work experience and use of employers. It is also essential that all young people receive high-quality IAG and one-to-one support.

For young people who have failed to make a positive transition, it is vitally important that attempts at reintegration take into account the specific needs of the young people and appreciate that the NEET categorisation masks a complex array of needs, aspirations and competencies.

While it is difficult to generalise about effective approaches, successful youth engagement programmes tend to be flexible; offer a range of pathway options; be based on trusting and respectful relationships; and personalised in approach. Establishing positive relationships with teachers and other adult role models also appears to be a crucial element of preventing disengagement at school level.

## 4. Discussion

This review has demonstrated that supporting young people into education, employment or training is not straightforward. There is no one-size-fits-all approach and intervention is needed at many different levels. It is clear that, within the current economic climate, there needs to be some level of national and local-level economic stimulus to boost the supply of youth employment and good quality work-based learning opportunities in order to tackle the structural obstacles to activity faced by many young people. National government needs to do its part to incentivise employers to provide this opportunity, while LAs and local employers need to work closely together to plan local-level economic strategy, and to boost the role and representation of the business community within education. One of the NEET sub-groups that we are particularly interested in, the 'open to learning' NEETs, have few discernable personal barriers to learning and, therefore, potentially have much to gain from a buoyant labour market.

At the same time, there needs to be a coordinated, local-level response to the NEET issue, to ensure that it is everyone's business. Evidence points to the importance of a whole-area response to the NEET challenge, through a thorough needs assessment, a joint local strategy, effective data sharing and multi-agency working through a co-located model, where possible. All of this strategic-level support needs to be in place if practitioners working in schools and other providers of youth-based learning are to have more than a mitigating effect on youth inactivity. In other words, all attempts to raise aspiration, achievement, focus and direction need to be matched by genuine labour market opportunity.

It is generally accepted that the reasons for young people becoming NEET are not solely the result of labour market constraint or of young people's prior achievement or qualifications. Rather, their situation also reflects low cultural expectation, inter-generational deprivation and low levels of personal agency. Consequently, it is important that all those working with young people, whether prior to disengagement, or once young people have failed to make a successful transition, are focused upon methods of developing essential skills, attributes and competencies in all young people.

It is well known that the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) argued that young people are not always adequately equipped for work on leaving school, college or university, and that the education system needs to meet the challenge of better preparing young people for the future. However, further research (Shury *et al.*, 2010) has shown that evidence from employer surveys is mixed around the issue of school leavers' preparedness for work. For example, the large-scale National Employer Skills Survey (NESS) viewed this issue as less of a concern than did the Confederation of British Industry's Employment Trends Survey or the UK Commission for Employment and Skill's (UKCES) Employer Perspectives Survey. Where concerns are raised, these are

identified only by the very small percentage of employers that recruit young people direct from school at the age of 16 (in the NESS survey this is just six per cent of employers). Employers' concerns tend to focus on attitude, motivation or personality, rather than on perceived deficits in specific technical skills. The proportion of employers reporting dissatisfaction falls as new recruits increase in age, suggesting that maturation has an important role to play (UKCES, 2010; Shury *et al.*, 2010). This suggests that there is more to the issue of preparation for work than a development of generic employability skills. Rather, issues such as confidence, capacity, capability and resilience may be relevant.

It is important that educational establishments begin to think about preparing young people for their futures from the earliest possible opportunity, and that they intervene early if a young person appears to be falling behind or losing interest. Whether or not young people have been identified as at risk of disengagement, or have already disengaged from learning, there are a range of approaches that appear to have a positive impact upon most young people. These include having variety and flexibility within the curriculum (in terms of subject content, pedagogical approach, and learning and qualification routes). Vocational learning opportunities can be motivating for some young people of school age, but these must be genuine and provide real workplace progression opportunities. Similarly early work familiarisation opportunities and earlier and high-quality IAG are essential to help young people navigate their way through the complexities of decision making. For young people with more entrenched barriers to learning, a targeted approach through personalised intervention appears to be key, as is the nurturing role of a trusted adult who can offer consistent and sustained support and brokerage to a range of other services.

## **4.1 Implications for The NFER Research Programme**

While this review has provided a good overview of the approaches to supporting young people at risk of becoming, or who are already, NEET, we have only been able to go so far in disentangling the approaches that are most effective with young people at different ends of the NEET spectrum. It is fair to say that most available research is concerned with the strategies that have greatest impact with young people in the 'sustained' NEET group, even though we know that these young people form well under half of all young people who are identified as NEET. Although research into the most effective reintegration approaches tends to be differentiated by 'informal' and 'alternative' provision – approaches that, loosely speaking, may be more appropriate for 'open to learning'/'undecided' and 'sustained' NEETs respectively, the literature rarely makes explicit links between specific elements of the NEET population and different types of provision when discussing the most effective approaches.

As suggested in chapter 1, there is currently a gap in the research relating to effective strategies for engaging or re-engaging those who are 'open to learning', or 'undecided' NEET. This gap will be the focus of The NFER Research Programme. Indeed, key features of the research programme will be:

- the development and implementation of indicators that can assist in the identification of young people who are 'open to learning' or 'undecided' NEET
- the trialling and evaluation of specific strategies that aim to support these groups
- the validation and dissemination of good practice.

Through this programme of research, we hope to go some way towards reducing the gap in what is known about effective NEET prevention strategies, and to make a difference to the lives of learners.

In chapter 5 of this report, we extrapolate from our review findings to create a series of hypotheses about strategies that have the potential to have impact with young people who are 'open to learning' or, as yet, 'undecided' about their futures.

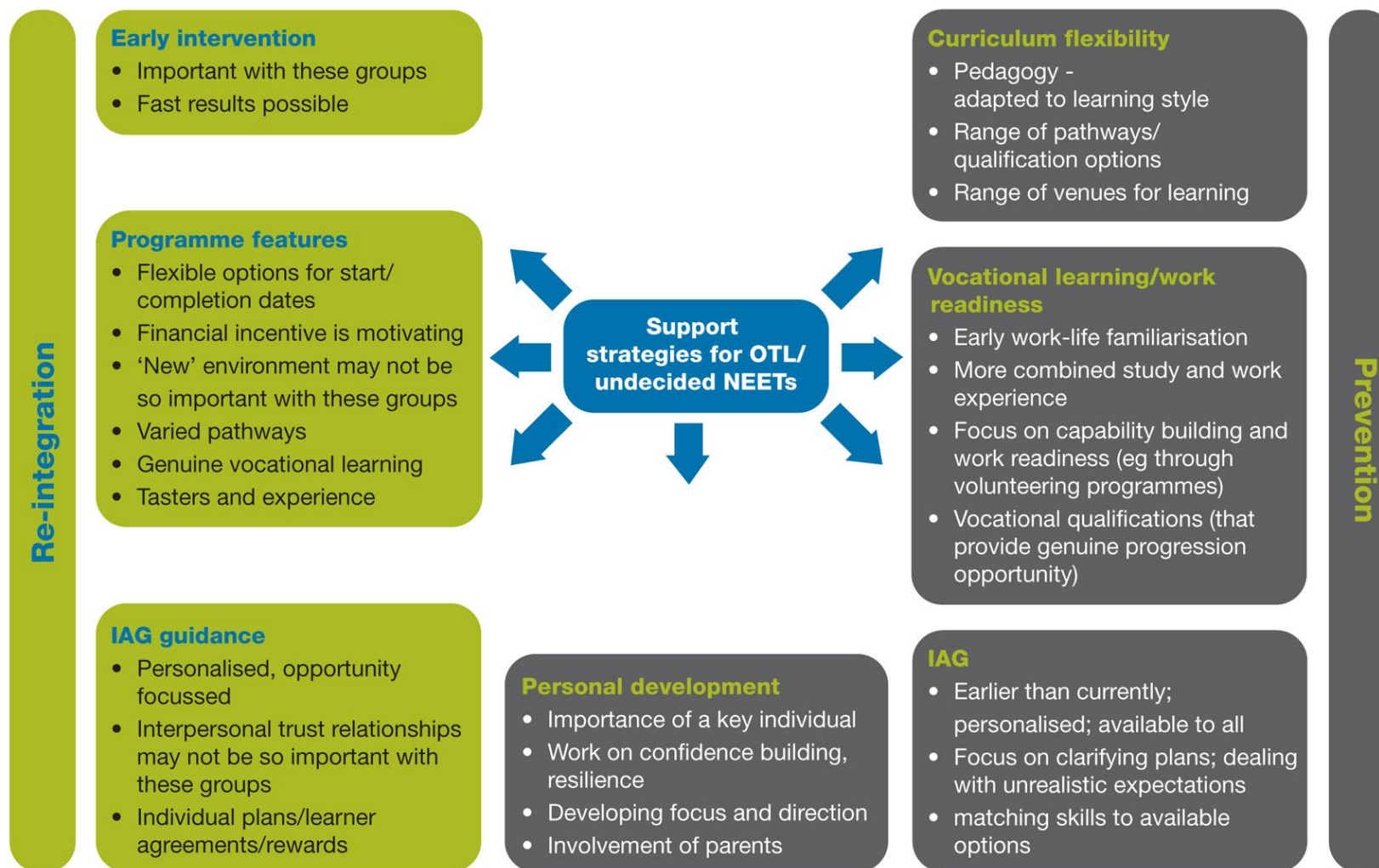
## 5. Where next?

Many of the findings of this review apply equally to all young people who are NEET, irrespective of the sub-group within which they fall. For example, national and local policy-level strategies to boost the supply of work-based learning and employment will benefit all young people hoping to make a positive post-16 transition. Many of the preventative approaches adopted at practice level are also generic and, if applied well, have the potential to have benefits for all young people, not only those at risk of becoming NEET.

In Figure 2, we attempt to draw out from the available evidence those approaches that appear most likely to be appropriate for use with young people at risk of becoming 'open to learning' or 'undecided' NEETs, or for young people who already fall within those categories. This is speculative at present. Part of the purpose of The NFER Research Programme will be to evaluate the effectiveness of these, and other, emerging approaches, once we have undertaken preparatory work into the development of indicators for these two groups of young people. Once we have undertaken more work to better understand the distinctions between these two groups, we will be able to hone our understanding of the approaches that can have the greatest impact on each group respectively and tailor our research accordingly. For now, 'open to learning' and 'undecided' NEETs are considered together, distinguished by the fact that all such young people tend to present with quite different characteristics to those in the 'sustained' NEET group.

It is clear from Figure 2, that a similar set of approaches can be applied both pre- and post- transition to achieve the aim of keeping a young person on track or reintegrating them post 16. Common themes are: the need for personalised, accurate and realistic IAG; and the importance of curriculum or programme flexibility – particularly in terms of providing a range of potential pathways and qualification routes linked to young people's skills and ambitions. Of lesser importance with 'open to learning' and 'undecided' NEETs is the development of interpersonal trust relationships with adult role models through targeted psychological approaches. Having said this, there needs to be at least one key individual who is carefully monitoring a young person's progress, and who is ready to intervene early with targeted support if the person appears to be losing direction, becoming confused or losing confidence. The development, monitoring and review of individually agreed action plans or learner agreements can help with this process, as can experiences such as volunteering, that build personal capacity and work-readiness skills.

**Figure 2** Potential strategies for supporting ‘open to learning’ and ‘undecided’ NEETs





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# Appendix

This review uses specific terminology to describe the robustness of the evidence appraised for the themes under discussion.

## Strong evidence

In order to make statements about there being a ‘strong’ evidence base on a particular theme, we seek to ensure that a number of studies have been produced that concur in their findings. We expect these studies to be sufficiently large in scale (for example adopting adequate sample sizes to enable robust statistical analysis) or based on sufficiently in-depth case studies to allow a full explanation of findings. Typically, ‘strong’ evidence will include quantitative and qualitative research.

- **Quantitative research** ‘measures’ impact. Such studies usually adopt experimental or quasi-experimental designs (QEDs) involving baseline and follow-up surveys, or treatment and control group designs, as well as statistical analysis.
- **Qualitative research** provides data on perceptions of impact. The most reliable studies of this type are those that have conducted a number of in-depth case studies, across a number of locations, drawing on the views of a wide range of stakeholders, and triangulating those views in order to assess the degree of agreement, or dissent, among different individuals in varying locations.

## Moderate evidence

The same types of evidence as those cited as strong evidence are included in this category. The distinction between a theme being described as having a ‘strong’ or a ‘moderate’ evidence base is related to two points.

- **The weight of evidence** – themes with ‘moderate’ evidence are likely to have only a small number of studies (typically two or three) that concur in their findings. There may also be some studies that present a contradictory view.
- **The quality of evidence** – themes with ‘moderate’ evidence may include studies with rather small sample sizes (for example, QED studies based in only one or two schools), or qualitative studies that have drawn on the views of certain, but not a full range of, stakeholders.



## **Impressionistic evidence**

As this title suggests, this category includes evidence that is based on the observation or opinion of practitioners, or upon a case-study in one organisation only, for example. Very often, we find impressionistic evidence of one particular benefit within a study that was established to evaluate an entirely different benefit. Such findings cannot be dismissed entirely, but they tend to be anecdotal, subjective or descriptive in nature.

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The NFER Research Programme

## From Education to Employment

### The NFER Research Programme

This Programme was set up in 2011. Funded by NFER, it is developing partnerships with organisations and individuals who share our commitment to solving unanswered challenges young people face in education. The Programme targets key areas of education, highlighting gaps in existing evidence and conducting new research to provide evidence to fill the gaps. Current areas of focus are: *From Education to Employment, Developing the Education Workforce and Innovation in Education.*

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