nfer

Evidence for Excellence in Education

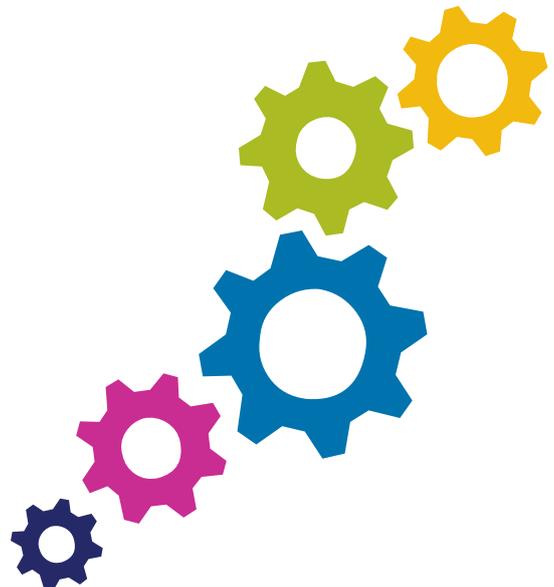# Indicators to identify the disengaged

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● independent ● insights ● breadth ● connections ● outcomes

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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 inform 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 the NFER and its partners, it is developing relationships 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 of the research was a suite of four reviews that identified existing evidence of strategies that appear to assist young people with the potential to disengage from education, employment or training to 'stay on track'.

We are now conducting two strands of research to provide new evidence where we have found there to be significant gaps. The first strand of work is testing out a number of possible 'indicators' that practitioners can use to help identify young people at risk of disengaging from education, before they have disengaged (this publication). The second strand of the research is collecting evidence about what interventions really make an impact, and if it is possible, to identify different interventions that work with different 'at risk' groups.

Sarah Maughan

Sarah Maughan
Research Director, NFER

Executive summary

Introduction

From 2015, young people in England will be required to stay in education or training until they reach eighteen years old. This development has highlighted the importance of keeping young people fully engaged in learning from an early age. Guidance on Raising the Participation Age (RPA) (DfE, 2013) has been provided to local authorities to ensure that they promote effective participation in education or training of young people in their local authority and that they identify those that are not participating and make appropriate arrangements for them.

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) carried out a scoping study (Filmer-Sankey and McCrone, 2012) to explore ways to further improve the system of identification of young people at risk of disengagement from learning but who do not face multiple and complex barriers. It is NFER's aim to provide the evidence to make possible the improvement in the system so that young people at risk of disengaging (particularly those who do not face multiple and complex barriers), and the reasons why they are at risk of disengagement, can more effectively be identified. This research builds on the scoping study and provides new evidence which will inform the development of practical tools to support practitioners to identify and understand the reasons why young people are at risk of disengagement.

The research involved the recruitment of representatives to participate in a consultation panel set up to enable knowledge development and discussion about the list of indicators under development following the initial scoping study. In addition, an online and paper-based survey was carried out with local authority staff and school respondents. We achieved a 27 per cent response rate from schools (216 out of a potential 800 respondents) and a 51 per cent response rate from local authorities (78 out of a potential 152 respondents).

In order to gain a better understanding of the responses received through the survey, we also undertook 20 telephone interviews with a sample of school and local authority respondents.

Key Findings

What are the approaches used to identify young people at risk of disengagement?

- The evidence shows that local authorities typically collect and analyse readily accessible, measurable data which is strongly correlated with young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) at the local, and often national, level. Schools use their own records and knowledge of young people to moderate the local authority's 'at risk of NEET' list. Key Stage 4 data is most commonly used to identify young people at risk of disengagement, although there was some indication to suggest that some young people can be identified much earlier (in Year 7 or Year 8).

- Nearly all school and local authority respondents recognise that young people are at risk of disengaging for different reasons and that it is helpful to understand these reasons. More emphasis should be placed on understanding these reasons for disengagement as a starting point to identification, in contrast to relying on the available data on NEET-related characteristics.

How effective are the identification strategies and support provided?

- The limitations of NEET indicator tools to identify young people at risk of disengagement (particularly those that do not face multiple and complex barriers) commonly relate to accessing and coordinating potentially multiple data sources, with limited inclusion, completeness and timeliness of data.

- Schools have mixed views on the usefulness of the local authority NEET indicator analysis. Both schools and local authorities recognise that schools are best placed to use 'soft data', such as attitudes to education and progression, to identify vulnerable young people.

- The majority of school survey respondents (81 per cent) reported that currently, they tailor support to specific 'types' of young people at risk of disengagement. This included learning mentors, careers information, advice and guidance (IAG) and alternative curriculum provision.

Would schools find the development of a 'checklist' of NEET risk factors useful?

- Overall, the factors included in the NFER 'checklist' were considered useful by school survey respondents.

- All local authority respondents felt that it would be useful for schools to have a checklist of factors associated with the reasons why young people disengage alongside strategies to re-engage the young person. Responses by school respondents were similar.

- Suggestions for ways in which the checklist could be used included: to act as a prompt for schools moderating the list provided by the local authority; to raise awareness amongst all staff of the wide range of potential reasons for disengagement and support a consistent approach to identifying potential NEET young people; to facilitate conversations with other agencies about interventions; or as a discussion tool with young people.

Conclusions

Understanding *the reasons why* a young person might be at risk of disengaging from learning, as well as their likelihood of disengagement is critically important to reducing the number of young people who are NEET in this country. The evidence from this research shows that using a mix of hard, measurable and soft, attitudinal data is important to allow a more holistic approach to the identification and understanding of young people at risk of disengaging. Schools reported that they value the opportunity to moderate the measurable data provided by the local authority with their own knowledge of working with the young

people.

The evidence shows that schools would find the NFER checklist of indicators useful, particularly if it links to strategies to re-engage young people, as the checklist enables staff to understand the reasons why a young person is at risk of disengaging. Schools can then use the appropriate intervention or support most appropriate to the type of disengagement, for example, due to a lack of understanding of progression routes or the need for alternative pedagogy or curricula or the need for mentoring to encourage mental resilience.

Suggestions provided by interviewees for ways in which it could be further developed included the creation of a CPD tool and a discussion aid for use with young people.

Next steps for NFER

The NFER checklist of indicators will be available alongside this report in PDF and interactive format. In addition, we are developing a range of other tools for use by practitioners including a CPD tool and a discussion aid for use with young people. These tools will be available shortly on the NFER website.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and context

From 2015, young people in England will be required to stay in education or training until they reach eighteen years old. This development has highlighted the importance of keeping young people fully engaged in learning from an early age. Guidance on Raising the Participation Age (RPA) (DfE, 2013) has been provided to local authorities to ensure that they promote effective participation in education or training of young people in their local authority and that they identify those that are not participating and make appropriate arrangements for them.

Other recent key national developments that have affected 14-19 education and training include the following:

- changes to the careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) regime were implemented in 2012 with schools now taking responsibility for ensuring access to impartial and independent careers guidance (England and Wales. Statutes, 2012)

- increases to the number of Apprenticeships

- increases to the number of Academies and Free Schools

- the introduction of University Technical Colleges (UTCs) and Studio Schools

- the Government's acceptance of the recommendations of the Wolf report (2011) calling for major changes in the content and certification of vocational education.

These changes have increased the complexity of the 14 to 19 landscape at a time when young people are expected to stay in education or training for longer; when the United Kingdom is experiencing record numbers of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET)[1] (Evans, 2013); and when there is a constricted labour market due to recent economic recessions.

In order to enable more young people to remain engaged in learning we need firstly, to better understand the different types of young people who become NEET. Research by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) (Spielhofer *et al.,* 2009) recognised that young people who are NEET are a heterogeneous group. The research identified three broad subgroups within the overall category: *sustained; open to learning;* and *undecided* NEETs. While the first of these groups face multiple and complex barriers to engagement in learning, the latter two groups, representing just under two-thirds of the NEET cohort, do not. They generally have higher levels of attainment than the *sustained* segment and are characterised, in the case of the *open-to-learning* segment, by their willingness to re-engage and, in the case of the *undecided* subgroup, their dissatisfaction with the options available to

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[1] 21.1 per cent of young people aged 16-24 were unemployed between December 2012 and February 2013.

them.

Further research endorses this view that young people described as NEET are not a homogeneous group (Allen *et al.,* 2012). Allen *et al.* describe core or sustained young people who experience long term disengagement; floating or 'at risk' young people (akin to 'undecided', see above) who may be dissatisfied with opportunities or are most vulnerable to economic downturn and shifting labour market requirements; and cyclical or in transition young people (akin to 'open to learning', see above) who are likely to re-engage in education, training and the workforce in the short term, and who tend to have a more positive outlook. The report observes that current Government statistics are not 'helpful in informing the targeted and locally tailored action needed to successfully respond to the problem' (Allen *et al.*, 2012, p.1).

Secondly, having recognised that there are different types of young people who are NEET, it is helpful to understand the reasons why some young people are more at risk of becoming NEET. One element of NFER's Programme of Research strand *From Education to Employment* draws together evidence about what works in terms of identifying young people at risk of becoming NEET, but who do not face multiple and complex barriers to engagement in learning. NFER believes that by understanding young people's *reasons* for disengaging and by providing evidence about the appropriate support that may be useful, these particular young people can be prevented from disengaging and ever becoming NEET. This change would mean that resources can be directed at those young people who are facing multiple and complex barriers and who are most in need of support.

Evidence from RPA trial work for the Department for Education (DfE) (East Riding of Yorkshire Council, n.d) has progressed our understanding of the approaches used to identify young people at risk of becoming NEET through, for example, the development of Risk of NEET Indicators (RONIs). These tools help to assist secondary schools in identifying students at risk of becoming NEET.

The development of RONIs is a significant step towards identifying young people at risk of disengagement. Recognising not only the local differences young people experience at school and at locality level but also the individual complexity of young people's lives is key to understanding the likelihood of, and reasons why, young people disengage. If this can be done then the appropriate support can be used to re-engage the young people.

NFER carried out a scoping study (Filmer-Sankey and McCrone, 2012) to explore ways to further improve the system of identification of young people at risk of disengagement from learning but who do not face multiple and complex barriers. It is NFER's aim to provide the evidence to make possible the improvement in the system so that young people at risk of disengaging, and the reasons why they are at risk of disengagement, can more effectively be identified. This research builds on the scoping study and provides new evidence which will inform the development of practical tools to support practitioners to identify and understand the reasons why young people are at risk of disengagement. Further research being carried out by the NFER (Kettlewell *et al.,* 2012) is exploring interventions that work to re-engage young people back into learning.

1.2   Aims of the research

The findings from the scoping study suggested that local authorities and schools would welcome the creation of a list of indicators that will help provide guidance to identify those young people who are at risk of becoming NEET.

The central aim of this research was to develop a comprehensive list of 'hard' (measurable) and 'soft' (attitudinal and personal) indicators of potential disengagement. More specifically the objectives were to collect views on:

- which indicators practitioners find most useful and why

- how practitioners anticipate using the indicators within their institutions

- the extent to which these indicators can be grouped together in order to determine the 'type' of potentially disengaged young person, and therefore, the most appropriate intervention to re-engage them

- what further indicators, if any, should be included

- the extent to which schools are currently developing or using a list of indicators and their perceptions of 'what works' to re-engage those young people at risk of temporary disengagement from learning.

1.3   Methodology

The research comprised three main strands; a consultation panel, online and paper-based surveys with local authority staff and school representatives, and telephone interviews with a sample of practitioners who responded to the survey.

Consultation panel

Strand one of the research involved the recruitment of representatives to participate in a consultation panel set up to enable knowledge development and discussion about the list of indicators under development following the initial scoping study. The consultation panel was conducted through a virtual research environment (VRE)[2].

In order to recruit participants, a general call was made to local authorities. In total, 29 local authorities expressed an interest in the study and ten were selected to participate in the main consultation panel or wider panel. Local authorities were selected based on geography and the progress of the development of their NEET indicator tool. Activities included sharing information about progress in creating a NEET indicator tool, participation in an online focus group to gain an understanding of how tools were being developed and used across local authorities and schools, or commenting on the video discussion posted on the VRE. This exercise was used to inform the development of the survey instruments which were also posted on the VRE for comment by the panel.

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[2] A VRE is a space on the web that provides a number of tools which aid collaborative networks to form.

Online and paper-based surveys

A paper survey was distributed to 800 schools; half the surveys were sent to heads of Key Stage 3 and half to heads of Key Stage 4 (see Table A7 in Appendix 2 for a breakdown of the role of respondents). We also sent an online version to local authority contacts involved in reducing the number of young people who are NEET or RPA. In total, we achieved a 27 per cent response rate from schools (216 out of a potential 800 respondents) and a 51 per cent response rate from local authorities (78 out of a potential 152 respondents). Further details about the representativeness of the survey sample can be found in Appendix 2.

In order to gain a better understanding of the responses received through the survey, we also carried out 20 telephone interviews with a sample of school and local authority respondents. Interviewees were selected based on a range of criteria. Local authorities were selected using the index of multiple deprivation, region and level of progress in developing their NEET indicator tool. Levels of free school meals (FSM), region and how young people are identified as at risk were used to identify school representatives.

1.4 Structure of the report

Chapter two explores the approaches used to identify young people at risk of disengagement. Chapter three examines the support offered to different types of students at risk. Participants' views on the development of a NEET indicator checklist are discussed in Chapter four. Finally, Chapter five concludes the report, provides recommendations for schools and local authorities and outlines next steps.

2.   Approaches used to identify young people at risk of disengagement

> **Key findings**
>
> - Local authorities typically collect and analyse readily accessible, measurable data which is strongly correlated with becoming NEET at the local, and often national, level. Schools use their own records and knowledge of young people to moderate the local authority's 'at risk of NEET' list.
>
> - Schools and local authorities more commonly focus on Key Stage 4 data to identify young people at risk of disengagement, although there was some evidence to suggest that some young people can be identified much earlier (in Year 7 or Year 8).
>
> - Nearly all school and local authority respondents recognise that young people are at risk of disengaging for different reasons and that it is helpful to understand these reasons. More emphasis should be placed on understanding these reasons for disengagement as a starting point to identification in contrast to relying on the available data on NEET-related characteristics.

This chapter outlines the approaches used by local authorities and schools to identify young people at risk of disengagement from learning, and the extent to which practitioners identify the different reasons for disengagement. The effectiveness of approaches used to identify young people at risk is also explored.

2.1 Overview of approaches

School approaches

Schools commonly use a mixture of hard, measurable data such as attendance, progress and attainment (86 per cent) and 'softer' data such as staff knowledge of the young person (92 per cent) to identify young people at risk of becoming NEET. Around one-third of school respondents (31 per cent) use information from student feedback surveys related to, for example, their attitudes to school and reflections on their own progress. Some school interviewees mentioned that, wherever possible, they gain pertinent information from other agencies (such as health services or the youth offending team) via 'inclusion panel' discussions or similar.

Signs that a young person is disengaging might be, for example, several recorded incidences of poor behaviour. In other cases, certain identifiers highlight that a young person is potentially at high risk of disengaging (for example, having siblings who are NEET). For other young people, identification is based on general observations and data. Schools use the information to identify a need for intervention.

Local authority approaches

All the local authorities that responded to the survey seek to identify young people at risk of becoming NEET. Most local authorities (62 of 76) have developed, or were in the process of developing, a tool to collate and analyse data. Local authorities primarily focus on collecting and analysing readily accessible, measurable data which is strongly correlated with becoming NEET at the local, and often national, level. Typically, this includes data related to school attendance and exclusion, attainment, receipt of FSM or local index of deprivation, statement of special educational needs (SEN), and whether the young person is looked after (LAC) or has a Common Assessment Framework (CAF)[3]. Local authorities most commonly reported that data is collated for review annually (36 of 76), while a small proportion collect information each school term (15 of 76).

School moderation of local authority 'at risk of NEET' list

Around two-thirds of local authorities who have developed, or were in the process of developing, a NEET indicator tool consulted schools in its development; the same proportion involved schools in moderating the list they produce (43 of 62 in both cases).

Of those schools which stated that they had provided data to the local authority's risk of NEET analysis (28 per cent), around four-fifths (48 of 61) indicated that they use their own knowledge of the students to moderate the local authority's list. Local authority interviewees reported that any amendments to the list are agreed in discussion with the school, or schools can notify the local authority that they believe a young person's personal circumstances put them at risk of NEET by ticking a box on the data spreadsheet (avoiding the need to record and share sensitive personal information). Additionally, based on documents provided by local authorities participating in the consultation panel, in some areas, the local authority encourages a multi-agency approach to moderating the list.

Year groups targeted for identification of potential NEET young people

Schools more commonly focus on Key Stage 4 data (93 per cent) than Key Stage 3 (60 per cent) to identify young people at risk of disengagement. School interviewees felt they can identify young people at risk as early as Year 7 or 8 (and recognised the potential benefits of doing so) but noted that Key Stage 4 is a critical period for tracking progress towards their target GCSE or equivalent grades and post-16 transition plans. Overall, schools are more likely to look at Year 11 than Year 10 data (91 per cent compared with 81 per cent), and more likely to look at Year 9 data than Year 7 or Year 8 data (in advance of Key Stage 4 options decisions). Findings from local authority respondents were similar.

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[3] Local authorities access data from their own Client Caseload Information System (CCIS) (which schools and school improvement services feed into, and which contains information on young people's current activities and progression plans) and other sources such as Fischer Family Trust.

2.2 Identification of different 'types' of young people at risk of becoming NEET and the reasons why they are at risk

School respondents were almost unanimous in agreeing that 'young people are at risk of disengaging for different reasons' (99 per cent) and all felt that 'it is helpful to understand why a young person may disengage'. Findings from local authority respondents were similar.

Most schools (90 per cent) try to identify those most at risk; a large proportion (80 per cent) also tries to identify the reasons why a young person may disengage. Local authority responses were similar (73 out of 76 and 63 out of 76 respectively). Broadly, schools try to identify vulnerable young people, regardless of the reason behind their disengagement, in order to introduce appropriate support. They particularly try to identify those who may disengage due to educational needs (95 per cent), but are less likely to identify young people who disengage due to:

- structural/environmental factors (70 per cent)
- lack of understanding of, or satisfaction with, progression routes (64 per cent)
- accessibility/provision of local education services (56 per cent).

School interviewees indicated that in some cases, reported reasons were not related to the local context. For instance, one school that did not try to identify young people who lacked understanding of, or satisfaction with, progression routes explained that they believe they provide high quality CEIAG and maintain good links with post-16 providers. As a result, it was considered unlikely that students would *not* have a firm post-16 plan in place. In other cases, individual reasons were not considered because schools did not have the relevant information (for example, relating to students' economic and cultural backgrounds).

Local authority respondents commonly indicated that they try to identify young people who disengage due to complex barriers to engagement (68 out of 76) and educational needs (64 out of 76). They were comparatively less likely to identify reasons related to family or personal circumstances (52 out of 76), aspirations/attitudes (43 out of 76) or a lack of understanding of, or satisfaction with, progression routes (36 out of 76).

Based on the interview findings, this pattern of 'types' of at-risk young people that are identified reflects the nature of the data that can be accessed by the local authority and the groups of young people that the local authority has capacity to support (i.e. vulnerable children and those who could benefit from targeted CEIAG). There was a general consensus amongst local authorities that schools are best placed to identify young people who are at risk of disengaging (but have perhaps not been highlighted as at risk in the local authority's analysis), or do not have a clear progression plan, and to ensure they are supported effectively.

Based on the evidence from this research, it seems that the combined approaches used by local authorities and schools are not always sensitive enough to the reasons why some young people disengage, and therefore, potentially miss the opportunity to identify these

young people at the earliest opportunity. Local authority NEET indicator tools are, to a large extent, driven by the availability or accessibility of data (and the characteristics of their target support group), rather than young people's needs. Schools recognise their responsibility to identify vulnerable young people who are not detected by their local authority's NEET indicator analysis. It is important therefore, that practitioners are helped to understand the range of underlying reasons for disengagement.

3. Perceived effectiveness of identification strategies and support provided

> **Key findings**
>
> - The limitations of NEET indicator tools to identify young people at risk of disengagement commonly relate to accessing and coordinating potentially multiple data sources, with limited inclusion, completeness and timeliness of data.
>
> - Schools have mixed views on the usefulness of the local authority NEET indicator analysis. Both schools and local authorities recognise that schools are best placed to use 'soft data' to identify vulnerable young people.
>
> - The majority of school survey respondents (81 per cent) reported that currently, they tailor support to specific 'types' of young people at risk of disengagement. Support included learning mentors, careers IAG and alternative curriculum provision.

This chapter looks at the perceived effectiveness of local authority approaches to identifying young people at risk of disengagement as well as the support strategies put in place by schools.

3.1 Perceived effectiveness of local authority approaches to identifying young people at risk of disengaging

Local authority perceptions

Many local authority respondents felt there was some limitation to the NEET indicator tool they were using (57 of 61 who responded to the item). Often this was because it was in the early stages of development. Most local authority interviewees were therefore unable to comment on whether their own tool was effective in enabling early identification and appropriate interventions to be put in place. Local authority interviewees seemed confident that the risk of NEET analysis had proven, or would prove, useful in supporting schools' identification of at-risk young people; indeed, some local authority interviewees and focus group participants commented that schools which had moderated the local authority's list had found it to be largely accurate. One local authority interviewee stated that schools which had used the NEET indicator tool to target interventions had seen a significant reduction in the number of young people who became NEET.

Local authority interviewees mentioned a number of positive features or facilitators of their approach; briefly these included:

- the tool is not overly complex and uses readily accessible data

- the tool readily identifies young people with particular needs

- having buy in from, and good communication between, different stakeholders including schools, post-16 providers and local authority services. This helps to ensure all agencies understand their role in tracking young people and the importance of sharing data

- having a dedicated local authority staff resource to maintain databases and promote school use of, and input into, tracking tools.

The limitations of NEET indicator tools to identify young people at risk of disengagement commonly related to accessing and coordinating potentially multiple data sources, with limited inclusion, completeness and timeliness of data. Local authority interviewees felt that soft data in particular quickly becomes outdated and young people's changes in circumstances may not be recorded. Some stated that, partly due to these limitations, the tool significantly under-identifies young people at risk of disengaging (by as much as 50 per cent), compared to the numbers expected given previous years' NEET rates. Even with a complex risk calculation, a young person flagged as high-risk might not become NEET, as a local authority respondent observed:

> [We] *can't calculate the true risk level - at the end of the day, young people follow their own paths and can change direction or their minds quite easily. Some low risk* [young people] *become NEET and* [some] *high risk don't.*

Local authorities' suggested improvements to their analysis approaches included the ability to access more robust historical data on which to base their risk modelling[4], along with more comprehensive and timely data on the target cohort (potentially linking up risk of NEET datasets with troubled families data), and enhanced reporting capability. School-specific tools were also preferred because of the potential variations in characteristics (such as deprivation and attainment) across the local authority. Some local authorities are considering adapting the tool for different educational stages (for example, Key Stage 2 and post-16). Local authority interviewees would like to improve the flows of information between different agencies, including schools, children's health services and other local authorities.

School perceptions of the information provided by the local authority

Some school interviewees found the information provided by the local authority that highlights students who are at risk of disengagement to be inaccurate and incomplete. They reasoned that this is due to the narrow range of factors included in the local authorities' analysis (and lack of personal knowledge of their students) or the use of out-of-date data.

Nonetheless, schools value the opportunity to review the data provided by the local authority in order to highlight any discrepancies and identify any students who might have otherwise 'slipped through the net'. Local authority interviewees, in turn, thought it was very important to involve schools in moderating their suggested list of young people as staff can draw on

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[4] Risk modelling in this instance refers to the process of identifying which factors are locally associated with becoming long-term NEET and, often, applying a weighting to each factor or group of factors based on how much they are perceived to add to a person's risk of becoming NEET. This enables calculation of risk for individuals in the current school-age cohort.

their professional knowledge. The importance of school input was highlighted by one local authority respondent:

> *Analysis has shown that the tool itself will only identify about 50 per cent of the* [number of young people] *we would expect to be at risk - it is the soft indicators that schools use to moderate the lists we provide them with that make the tool worthwhile.*

Some local authority interviewees recognised that there is work to do to get some schools 'on board' with discussions about the list of young people perceived to be at risk; one interviewee suggested that schools are concerned about children on the list being 'labelled' as potentially NEET.

In terms of schools' own approaches to identifying young people at risk of becoming NEET, interviewees felt they can often readily identify students who are disengaging, so have turned their focus to implementing effective interventions. On the other hand, a few school interviewees mentioned that they would be better able to identify issues if they got more timely data from other agencies, for instance data on attendance and progress from off-site education providers, or local intelligence from the young people's own communities. Some interviewees acknowledged that they store only a limited range of school-based information, and that with more recording and sharing of information, staff might be able to recognise issues more promptly. However, some commented that relevant intelligence may also be personal and confidential, and it would not be appropriate to record this in a central school database[5]; staff rely on communication between themselves to share this information where necessary.

3.2 Support provided

The majority of school survey respondents (81 per cent) reported that currently they tailor support to specific 'types' of young people at risk of disengagement. School interviewees highlighted a range of support including:

- **Learning mentors** were commonly mentioned by school interviewees as a support approach offered to students. This included one-to-one support with specific subjects such as English and mathematics or small group work. In one instance, this approach was perceived to provide respite for students and facilitated conversations which could reveal issues that young people were experiencing.

- In other cases, **careers information, advice and guidance (IAG)** were used to help young people make decisions about future options. One school which adopted a universal approach to support noted the importance of managing students' expectations of future choices and ensuring that they apply for an appropriate level of education. The school tightened their sixth form entry requirements to ensure students were able to

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[5] To overcome this, data could be collated in an anonymised format (for example, student ID number) and password protected. This could then be linked to a separate document (also password protected) containing details of the student and their ID number.

cope with the academic demands of their course. The school encourages students to attend open days and trips to colleges to learn about the courses that are on offer and to try and encourage them to apply for an appropriate level of education. In contrast, another school particularly encourages students who are not able to make decisions independently about their destinations or who need significant pastoral support for example, to stay on in the sixth form in an attempt to reduce dropout rates.

- Examples of other support offered to students included **alternative curriculum provision**. For example, one school developed a seamless transition plan involving offsite provision for challenging students. In a few cases, students attended a training provider one day a week in order to help build a relationship. In this instance, learning mentors were involved in monitoring attendance and undertaking visits to the provider.

The findings suggest that there is a need to collate more evidence about 'what works' in terms of support strategies that are tailored to the different reasons why young people are at risk of disengagement.

4. Development of a 'checklist' of NEET risk factors

> **Key findings**
>
> - Overall, the factors included in the NFER 'checklist' were considered useful by school survey respondents.
>
> - Encouragingly, all local authority respondents felt that it would be useful for schools to have a checklist of factors associated with the reasons why young people disengage alongside strategies to re-engage the young person. Responses by school respondents were similar.
>
> - Suggestions for ways in which the checklist could be used included: to act as a prompt for schools moderating the list provided by the local authority; to raise awareness amongst all staff of the wide range of potential reasons for disengagement and support a consistent approach to identifying potential NEET young people; to facilitate conversations with other agencies about interventions; or as a discussion tool with young people.

This chapter draws on survey and interview responses to explore the development of a checklist of NEET risk factors.

4.1 Perceived relevance of different factors to young people's risk of becoming NEET

Themes

As mentioned in Chapter 1, through previous research, NFER identified that a checklist could be useful in helping to identify young people at risk of becoming NEET and, more importantly, the reasons why they disengage. For the purposes of this study, we grouped these factors into six Themes (see Appendix 1 for the full list). These are:

- Theme 1: Factors associated with structure/environment

- Theme 2: Factors associated with level of attainment/educational needs

- Theme 3: Factors associated with local education services

- Theme 4: Factors associated with personal/family circumstances

- Theme 5: Factors associated with attitude/aspirations

- Theme 6: Factors associated with progression routes.

School respondents were asked to report how useful they found each of the factors in helping to identify young people at risk of becoming NEET and the reasons why they disengage. Average ratings of the usefulness of each theme were calculated to aid comparison. This ranged from 'not at all useful' (rating of one) to 'very useful' (rating of four). Analysis of the survey data indicated that overall, schools found Themes 2, 4 and 5 most

useful[6] (mean = 3.4[7]).

The numbers of local authorities collecting data related to Theme 5 (factors associated with attitudes/aspirations) and Theme 6 (factors associated with progression routes) were lower than those collecting data on Theme 2 (factors associated with level of attainment/educational needs), although some respondents felt that they would be worth considering for inclusion (given access to the data).

It is also interesting to note that over half of local authority survey respondents ([N=40] reported that they did not currently collect data on the local employment rate but that it would be worth considering for inclusion in the future; a factor which is particularly pertinent in the current economic climate. One school interviewee highlighted the importance of having knowledge of the local economy, employment opportunities and regional growth planning:

> *Part of the problem in young people making choices and providers providing the courses that they do is that they* **[the young people]** *want to basically know what jobs there are going to ultimately be for them.*

In general, local authorities appreciated the value of using soft and hard data to identify young people at risk of disengagement. However, they questioned the *feasibility* of collecting data related to various factors, and in particular, softer factors (particularly those related to Themes 4 -6) This finding is perhaps attributable to the local authorities' limited knowledge about individual young people; the subjective nature of some of the factors and concerns around the ways in which information can be collated.

Furthermore, comments from local authority and school interviewees highlighted that some factors are context specific and therefore, might not be relevant to some schools or local authorities. Factors most commonly identified as not useful (either not very useful or not at all useful) by school survey respondents included gender (49 per cent); ethnicity (39 per cent); geographical location (29 per cent) and English as an additional language (EAL) (28 per cent). In some cases, interviewees also questioned the subjective nature of some factors such as 'has a negative family culture' or 'has enough money to live'[8].

4.2 Perceived usefulness of a developed NFER checklist of factors

Overall, the factors included in the NFER 'checklist' were considered useful by school survey respondents. Eighty nine per cent of school respondents and 75 per cent of local authority respondents (N=57) agreed that 'soft' indicators/factors should be collected alongside 'hard' data to help identify the reasons for a young person disengaging. Practitioners' knowledge of young people's individual circumstances, as well as their ability to observe changes in

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[6] The mean was 3.2 for Themes 3 and 6 and 2.9 for Theme 1.
[7] To calculate mean scores for the themes, the 'no response' and 'don't know' categories were removed from the items so that the remaining values ranged between 1 and 4. The scales were reversed if necessary so that a high score meant that the item was considered to be more useful.
[8] The wording of these factors has been amended in the final version included in Appendix 1.

behaviour were considered important to the potential identification. For example, one school interviewee noted that relying on hard data alone could be misleading, reasoning that just because a young person receives free school meals for example, does not necessarily mean that they are at risk of becoming NEET.

Encouragingly, all local authority respondents (N=76) felt that it would be useful (either very useful or somewhat useful) for schools to have a checklist of factors associated with the reasons why young people disengage (hard, measurable factors and soft, attitudinal factors) *alongside* strategies to re-engage the young person. Responses by school respondents were similar (89 per cent and 96 per cent respectively). Interviewees also spoke positively about the creation of a checklist. For example, one local authority representative reasoned: *'it's this sort of thing that triggers somebody to put in the correct intervention or initiate an action'.*

Suggestions for ways in which the checklist could be used included:

- To act as a prompt for other factors to consider - one school representative reasoned: 'you can get into a mindset about all of this; it would actually be helpful in that it would give you other things to think about'.

- To act as a prompt for schools moderating the list provided by the local authority or to facilitate conversations with other agencies about interventions.

- To provide consistency for school-based identification of potential NEET young people, through for example, staff continuing professional development (CPD) INSET days to ensure an awareness of potential factors amongst all staff.

- As a discussion tool with young people – in order to facilitate conversation; learning mentors could play a key role in this process.

In some cases, local authorities expressed concern about the length of the checklist in its current format. However, schools appeared to appreciate the need for a comprehensive list to ensure they consider all the potential factors that could result in a young person disengaging from education. The ability to tailor the checklist was welcomed in light of the fact that some factors are universally important and others are context specific. If produced electronically, it was suggested that filtering could be applied.

5.   Conclusions and next steps

Understanding *the reasons why* a young person might be at risk of disengaging from learning, as well as their likelihood of disengagement is critically important to reducing the number of young people who are NEET in this country. The evidence from this research shows that using a mix of hard, measurable and soft, attitudinal data is important to allow a more holistic approach to the identification and understanding of young people at risk of disengaging. Schools reported that they value the opportunity to moderate the measurable data provided by the local authority with their own knowledge of working with the young people.

Schools and local authorities generally focus on identifying young people at risk of disengagement at Key Stage 4 but do recognise the importance of identifying young people as early as possible (i.e. in Key Stage 3) in order to facilitate their progression through the curriculum. However, the approaches and tools used so far are largely driven by analysis of data rather than drawing on young people's needs as a starting point for identification.

The evidence shows that schools would find the NFER checklist of indicators useful, particularly if it links to strategies to re-engage young people, as the checklist enables school staff to understand the reasons why a young person is at risk of disengaging. Schools can then use the appropriate intervention or support according to the type of disengagement, for example, providing mentoring to young people to help raise their aspirations.

Suggestions provided by interviewees for ways in which the checklist could be further developed included the creation of a CPD tool and a discussion aid for use with young people. In addition, the ability for schools to tailor the checklist to their own context was welcomed by interviewees.

Recommendations for schools

- Teachers and careers advisers are best placed to identify those young people who are at risk of disengaging from learning at the earliest opportunity, and to identify the *reasons why* they are at risk of disengagement.

- Alongside local authority NEET indicator tools (if available), schools can use the NFER checklist as a basis to understand why a young person is at risk of disengaging from learning. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of reasons for disengagement will help schools to ensure that appropriate support is in place.

- Further to the use of the checklist, schools will be able to use the NFER CPD tool (forthcoming) to increase awareness of the diverse reasons young people disengage and the NFER discussion aid (forthcoming) to promote more self-awareness amongst young people (see next steps for NFER below for further details).

Recommendations for local authorities

- Agencies (such as schools, local authorities, careers consultancies and youth services) need to work together and strengthen links, to facilitate information sharing and further develop their knowledge and understanding of potential risk factors.

- Regularly updating information on young people showing signs of disengaging is important. Protocols need to be put in place to facilitate this process amongst all agencies.

- Local authorities may wish to encourage the use of the NFER checklist amongst schools that have high numbers of disengaged or NEET young people, to help them better understand the reasons for disengagement.

Next steps for NFER

The NFER checklist of indicators will be available alongside this report in PDF and interactive format. In addition, we are developing a range of other tools for use by practitioners including a CPD tool and a discussion aid for use with young people. These tools will be available shortly on the NFER website.

As previously discussed, once practitioners have identified the reasons why a young person is at risk of disengaging, it is important that the appropriate intervention is put in place. NFER is currently undertaking a longitudinal project to establish the types of interventions that have greatest impact in preventing students from disengaging from education and thus in turn, reduce the number of students vulnerable to becoming NEET.

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Appendix 1 – Checklist of indicators for identifying the reasons why young people may be at risk of disengaging

Theme 1: Factors associated with structure/environment

- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Eligibility for free school meals (FSM)
- Traveller
- Asylum seeker/refugee
- Geographical location (e.g. rural/urban)
- Local unemployment rate/deprivation indices

Theme 2: Factors associated with level of attainment /educational needs

- Attainment at Key Stage 1 &/or 2
- Attainment at Key Stage 3 &/or 4
- Attendance and exclusion rates
- English as an additional language (EAL)
- Special educational needs (SEN)

Theme 3: Factors associated with local education services

- Does not have access to and/or cannot afford transport
- Does not have access to quality local 16-19 provision
- Does not have access to a range of appropriate courses for 16-19 year olds
- Does not have access to independent and impartial careers information, advice and guidance (IAG)

Theme 4: Factors associated with personal/family circumstances

- Has social care involvement (e.g. is classed as a looked-after child (LAC), has a common assessment framework (CAF) or is a young carer on a child protection plan)
- Has been referred to other professional agencies
- Has suffered poor family relationships/breakup
- Has unemployed parents
- Has parents in prison

- Does not have a positive role model in the family

- Lives amongst domestic violence

- Appears to be living in poverty or shows signs of deprivation

- Has suffered a bereavement

- Has medical condition(s) which impact on school life

- Has misused or is misusing drugs and/or alcohol

- Is a teenage parent/pregnant

- Is a young offender

- Has moved schools

- Has difficult social relationships (e.g. gang culture or peer pressure)

Theme 5: Factors associated with attitude/aspirations

- Has a lack of involvement in school activities, clubs, enrichment and work experience opportunities

- Has a lack of active and supportive parental involvement

- Is not participating in lessons

- Has low confidence and self-esteem

- Is unhappy at school

- Lacks mental resilience

- Lacks 'stickability' to a task

- Does not understand how important work is considered to be

- Has a lack of engagement with careers advice or interest in post-16 opportunities

- Has low, unrealistic or no aspirations

- Lacks direction

Theme 6: Factors associated with progression routes

- Does not understand own strengths and weaknesses and how that informs progression

- Does not understand progression routes

- Is not satisfied with available progression routes

Appendix 2 – Representativeness of the survey sample

Overall, the sample of schools was broadly representative of all secondary schools in England by their government office region (GOR), percentage of pupils eligible for FSM and GCSE performance band. Detailed information[9] can be found below.

Table A1 – School type	School population		Sample population	
	N	%	N	%
Secondary Modern	67	2.2	2	0.9
Comprehensive to 16	682	22.5	52	24.1
Comprehensive to 18	758	25	52	24.1
Grammar	164	5.4	6	2.8
Other secondary school	6	0.2		
Academy	1357	44.7	104	48.1
Total	3034	100	216	100

Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100.

Table A2 – LA type	School population		Sample population	
	N	%	N	%
London Borough	419	13.8	29	13.4
Metropolitan Authorities	666	22.0	41	19.0
English Unitary Authorities	562	18.5	47	21.8
Counties	1387	45.7	99	45.8
Total	3034	100	216	100

Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100.

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[9] When Secondary schools convert into academies, some school characteristics change significantly. Therefore, it is not always possible to provide their historical data. These schools have been excluded from the tables.

Table A3 – Government office regions	School population		Sample population	
	N	%	N	%
North East	149	4.9	9	4.2
North West/Merseyside	431	14.2	29	13.6
Yorkshire and the Humber	294	9.7	19	8.9
East Midlands	277	9.1	18	8.4
West Midlands	365	12.0	28	13.1
Eastern	333	11.0	22	10.3
London	419	13.8	27	12.6
South East	465	15.3	38	17.8
South West	301	9.9	24	11.2
Total	3034	100	214	100

Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100.

Table A4 – School size	School population		Sample population	
	N	%	N	%
Small	601	20.0	49	22.7
Medium-small	600	20.0	37	17.1
Medium	595	19.8	42	19.4
Medium-large	605	20.1	45	20.8
Large	604	20.1	43	19.9
Total	3005	100	216	100

Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100.

Table A5 – GCSE performance band	School population		Sample population	
	N	%	N	%
Lowest 20%	529	18.4	45	21.4
2nd lowest 20%	572	19.9	45	21.4
Middle 20%	575	20.0	35	16.7
2nd highest 20%	560	19.5	37	17.6
Highest 20%	632	22.0	48	22.9
Total	2868	100	210	100

Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100.

	School population		Sample population	
Table A6 – Percentage of pupils eligible for FSM 2010/11				
	N	**%**	**N**	**%**
Lowest 20%	529	18.4	29	13.6
2nd lowest 20%	702	24.1	59	27.7
Middle 20%	690	23.7	47	22.1
2nd highest 20%	580	19.9	45	22.1
Highest 20%	411	14.1	33	15.5
Total	2912	100	213	100

Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100.

Table A7 – Role of school respondents

What is your role in school?	N	%
Head of Key Stage 3	3	1
Head of Key Stage 4	37	17
Other senior member of staff	151	70
Other - teacher	22	10
No response	3	1
Total	216	100

Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100.

NFER provides evidence for excellence through its independence and insights, the breadth of its work, its connections, and a focus on outcomes.

- independent
- insights
- breadth
- connections
- outcomes