Developing indicators for early identification of young people at risk of temporary disconnection from learning

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From Education to Employment

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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

Background

In recent years the numbers of young people described as NEET (not in education, employment or training) have grown. As NFER has conducted research exploring the characteristics of young people defined as NEET, we know that they are a heterogeneous group with different characteristics, needs, attributes and ambitions.

Recent research by NFER (Spielhofer *et al.*, 2009) presented a statistical segmentation of the NEET classification, and identified three broad subgroups within the overall category. These were described respectively as: *sustained*; *open to learning*; and *undecided* NEETs. Further research endorses this view that young people described as NEET are not a homogeneous group (Allen *et al.*, 2012). They 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'* (p. 1).

The Local Government Association (LGA) and the Children's Improvement Board (CIB) have supported The NFER Research Programme, *From Education to Employment*, by financing this scoping project to gather evidence to help practitioners to identify the *floating or 'at risk'* and the *cyclical or in transition* young people (i.e. those at risk of temporary disconnection from learning).This report is also published as part of the LGA's programme of research. Through further research we aim to provide evidence of strategies that may prevent disengagement at all. This will benefit young people and society and free resources to concentrate on the *sustained or core* young people who are NEET.

Key findings

How are young people at risk of temporary disconnection from learning currently being identified?

The research evidence suggests that some LAs are developing predominantly 'hard', measurable indicators or risk factors associated with young people who might be at risk of disconnection from learning. Although these 'hard' indicators or factors may be a starting point, local circumstances appear to influence the weight of their relevance at

LA or institutional level. Additionally, the research suggests that 'softer' indicators are also sometimes used (such as personal and family circumstances and young people's attitudes and aspirations).

Is it possible to diffentiate between young people who are likely to become temporarily disconnected from learning and those who might become more sustained long-term NEETs?

Interviewees felt that young people may become NEET for different reasons, and that it is possible to distinguish between the characteristics of young people who are likely to become temporarily disconnected from learning in contrast to those who might become more sustained long-term NEETs. Although the evidence suggests that LAs are using tools to score young people on risk indicators in terms of **level** of risk and of interventions required, there is limited evidence to suggest that these tools can be used to distinguish between different **types** of NEETs in order to determine the **type** of intervention required.

Is there a need for a list of indicators?

The evidence suggests that LAs and schools would welcome a list of indicators or characteristics to **guide** them in their identification of young people at risk of becoming NEET, and which give them flexibility to include local factors. This would be useful as a basis for their own, more tailored, data collection exercises or risk of NEET indicators (RONIs).

It appears that LAs (and schools) are at very different stages in engaging, understanding and developing indicators or factors to identify young people at risk of disconnection, and in identifying, for example, the emerging differences between *levels* of risk and *types* of young people at risk. A national set of indicators is not perceived to be workable as there is considerable variation by, and within, LAs. This exploratory research appears to point to different kinds of indicators, i.e. 'hard' ones that describe more measurable, factual information and 'softer' factors that include more attitudinal and personal information. This encompasses subjective judgement that needs to be considered.

The evidence gathered for this report suggests that the development of a list of factors or indicators of risk of disengagement would be useful, not so much as a quantitative tool to be completed objectively early on in secondary school, but to be used as an ongoing record of a young person's profile to be completed by a member of staff who knows the young person. As such a list of indicators/factors could be used for guidance to help staff to identify the '**causes**' of potential disengagement (i.e. 'hard' and 'softer' indicators), the '**effect'** (i.e. types of disengagement, for example, dissatisfaction with options, qualifications or indecision about future pathways) and the **solution** (i.e. the appropriate intervention that could be used to re-engage the young person, for example, careers guidance, employer involvement, a suitable learning environment and qualifications or support programmes to enhance mental resilience or 'stickability', etc.).

1. Introduction

Introduction

The NFER Research Programme, launched in 2012, has recognised, through its strand *From Education to Employment,* that there is widespread benefit in improving the system of identification of young people at risk of temporary disconnection from learning at an early stage in their secondary education and in intervening to prevent disengagement. It is NFER's aim to provide the evidence to make possible the improvement in this system and facilitate early intervention.

This report sets out the findings from initial exploratory research conducted to inform the best way to carry out further large-scale research to meet our aim outlined above. We are grateful to the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Children's Improvement Board (CIB) for supporting and sponsoring this research project. This report is also published as part of the LGA's programme of research.

Background

Over recent years, public awareness of the predicament of young people described as NEET (not in education, employment or training) has grown as the numbers of young people falling into this 'category' increase, and as youth unemployment figures climb. There is both public and political interest in identifying strategies that can help to tackle this persistent and growing societal problem.

NFER has a track record in research exploring the characteristics of young people defined in official documentation as NEET. We know that the NEET umbrella masks a vast array of characteristics, needs, attributes and ambitions, and that young people who are placed together as NEET for administrative purposes are a heterogeneous group. Recent research by NFER (Spielhofer *et al.*, 2009) presented a statistical segmentation of the NEET classification, and identified three broad subgroups within the overall category. These were described respectively as: *sustained*; *open to learning*; and *undecided* NEETs. Further research endorses this view that young people described as NEET are not a homogeneous group (Allen *et al.*, 2012). They 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'* (p. 1).

Through research evidence gathered by The NFER Research Programme, *From Education to Employment*, we intend to help practitioners to identify the *floating or 'at risk'* and the *cyclical or in transition* young people (i.e. those at risk of temporary disconnection from learning) and through tailored intervention provide evidence of strategies that may prevent disengagement at all. This will benefit young people and society and free resources to concentrate on the *sustained or core* young people who are NEET.

Objectives of the research

This exploratory research aimed to address the following research questions:

- How do local authorities (LAs) and schools identify young people who are in danger of becoming NEET at age 16, as compared with those not at risk of becoming NEET? What characteristics, attributes, behaviours and needs do these young people display?

- Are LAs developing a set of indicators to identify young people at risk of becoming NEET? If so, how far advanced is the work?

- Do LAs make a distinction between young people who are sustained NEET in contrast to those who are 'open to learning' or 'undecided' NEET? What information is needed on the characteristics of these young people to determine to which of these subcategories they belong? Is it possible to differentiate between young people who are 'open to learning' as compared with those who are 'undecided'?

- How useful do schools find the indicators in identifying those at risk of becoming NEET? Do the indicators enable schools to identify between young people in the NEET subcategories? At what age can schools identify the young people who are likely to become 'open to learning' or 'undecided' NEETs?

- Is it feasible (and useful) to develop a universal set of indicators which could form the basis of a tool for schools nationally to identify at an early age those young people who are at risk of disengaging post 16 (or post 17 in 2013), or is it more appropriate to develop a set of indicators which places more emphasis on local characteristics of schools but also includes a few core national indicators?

Methodology

From an examination of official and LA websites and through LA contacts, we identified a small opportunity sample of seven LAs across England who are already making progress in the development of 'Risk of NEET Indicators'. We conducted short strategic telephone interviews in February and March 2012 with key people in these areas, to explore their views on ways of identifying young people at risk of becoming disengaged

from learning, in particular those who potentially might be 'open to learning' or 'undecided' NEETs.

Our interviewees include six LA managers working on participation and engagement of 11–19 young people and one chief executive of an independent charity, delivering the Connexions service for the LA. All seven of our interviewees are or have been involved in work to develop indicators to identify potential NEETs, and in five LAs this work has been part of their involvement in the Raising the Participation Age (RPA) trials for the Department for Education (DfE).

In addition to our LA contacts we also spoke to senior leaders in three schools, including an 11–19 coeducational secondary school (in one of the seven LAs), an 11–16 secondary school for boys and a short stay school, in order to seek their views on using a set of indicators to identify young people at risk of becoming NEET.

2. How are young people at risk of becoming NEET being identified?

All seven of the LAs in our sample are currently working on developing a data collection exercise to identify young people in their authority who might be at risk of disconnection from learning. This comprises a set of indicators or risk factors, which are known in some authorities as 'risk of NEET indicators' (RONIs). This term will be used throughout the report.

Most of the LAs are at an early stage in their development work, and two authorities continue to use Connexions data as the prime source of intelligence on the characteristics of their young people. In two LAs in our sample the work is more advanced and their lists of indicators have been developed into a tool for LAs and schools to use.

This chapter will examine the key characteristics of the indicators that LAs use and give some examples of the tools that LAs have developed for early identification of young people who are likely to become NEET (including both in the short and long term).

2.1 What are the key characteristics of indicators to identify those at risk of disconnection from learning?

A key feature of the lists of risk indicators that LAs are currently developing is that they are, predominantly, what might be termed 'hard' indicators (i.e. the characteristics of young people that can be measured), and that they use information that is already available in schools' information management systems (SIMS). The number of indicators included on LAs' lists varies considerably, but might include information on the following characteristics of young people:

- gender, ethnicity and English as an additional language (EAL)

- attainment at key stages 1 to 4

- attendance and exclusion rates

- eligibility for free school meals (FSM)

- special educational needs (SEN)

- looked-after children (LAC)

- traveller

- asylum seeker/refugee

- whether the young person has a CAF (Common Assessment Framework)

- whether the young person has been referred to professional agencies

- medical conditions (if it affects learning/attendance).

Some of the LAs are aware that certain indicators (e.g. gender, ethnicity, EAL and attainment) are not characteristics of NEET young people in their area, and thus not useful predictors of future disengagement. For this reason they have not included them in their list of risk factors. Others have devised a weighting system when scoring young people on their indicators, in order to reflect the importance of some risk factors in their local area in predicting which young people are more likely to become NEET (see, for example, the work in LA 1, which is described below).

In addition to the 'hard' indicators listed above, we also asked the LAs if they would include any additional indicators in their 'Risk of NEET Indicators' to pick up on information that is not as easily accessed. This could include information on personal and family circumstances (e.g. family breakup, parental employment, poverty), as well as more qualitative information on young people's attitudes and aspirations (e.g. self-esteem, mental resilience, willingness to engage in lessons). Four of the seven LAs affirm that they would **not** wish to include this kind of information in a formal list of NEETs indicators (with one LA commenting that they want to include data in their RONI which is *'hard, fast, and measurable'*), but that they would glean it from discussions with personal tutors and Connexions personal advisors.

Three LAs, however, are exploring the possibility of including additional 'softer' indicators in a tool for schools and LAs to use. Their methods are described in more detail in section 2.2.

2.2 Examples of different methods of identification

The LAs and one school in our sample have devised different methods of identifying young people at risk of disconnection from learning and are at varying stages in the work. In this section, we will focus on those who are incorporating 'soft' factors into their list of indicators. In addition to this, we will examine a tool devised by the short stay school in our sample, which combines academic scores with a numerical value for social factors, in order to place young people in a number of 'risk of NEET' bands.

The first example is from a LA with some years' experience of developing NEETs indicators that has incorporated a more qualitative indicator into its established list of 'hard' indicators:

Local Authority 1, which has been involved in all three phases of the RPA trials, has had a RONI, based on a long list of 'hard' indicators, since 2008. It has recently reissued its RONI to schools with the indicators grouped into **basic characteristics, SEN** and **attendance and exclusion data** and weighted to reflect the characteristics of the local NEET cohort. For example, their research has shown that young people in their authority with a learning disability and/or difficulty are more prone to becoming NEET, so these young people are awarded a higher points rating. Points awarded on a weighted scale result in a cumulative score that identifies overall vulnerability and risk for each student on a rising scale, similar to the RAG (red/amber/green) scale used by Connexions.

Their new RONI also has the facility for form tutors to assign their students a point score in a 'tutor identification' field/tick box, if they are aware of other risk factors which would not be recorded in SIMS (e.g. personal, family or attitudinal problems). Schools do not have to specify what the problem is (and this is useful for reasons of confidentiality), but are issued with guidance on the kinds of additional factors that might put the student at risk. These include: difficult social relationships; lack of involvement in school activities, clubs, enrichment and work experience opportunities; lack of active and supportive parental involvement; lack of engagement with careers advice or interest in post -16 opportunities; personal and/or family problems; substance misuse; youth offending, and teenage pregnancy/parent.

A second LA takes a similar view of the kinds of additional indicators that might be useful in identifying potential NEETs:

Local Authority 2, which is not involved in the RPA trials, has developed a screening tool to identify potential NEETs, using a combination of 'hard' and 'soft' indicators. In order to identify a small group of young people in one school to work with in years 10 and 11, they have collected hard information from the school database and administered a questionnaire to young people. This explored 'soft' characteristics such as: happiness at school; confidence; 'stickability' to a task; happiness with relationships, how important work was considered to be, individual knowledge of strengths and weaknesses, and whether the young person had moved schools. They hope that interventions targeted at this group of young people, in particular one-to-one mentoring, will reduce the risk that they will become NEET at age 16.

A third LA takes a different approach to identifying the characteristics of young people at risk of becoming NEET, using dedicated software to 'data mine' existing Connexions data:

Local Authority 3, which has been involved in the RPA trials since phase 3, has commissioned an independent organisation to deliver its reengagement programmes and to develop a tool to identify potential NEETs. This uses a combination of the data that schools already have on SIMS with textual analysis of free text derived from Connexions meetings with young people. They are developing software that will look at correlations between characteristics of individual young people on a set of 'hard' indicators, and search qualitative information by key word (e.g. alcohol abuse, murder), in order to generate an individual 'propensity of NEET score' for each young person. The interviewee emphasised that it is the interaction between 'hard' and 'soft' indicators which determines whether a young person is likely to become NEET. For example, their work has shown that drugs and alcohol are a greater risk factor in their authority's more affluent wards, but this is mitigated by more supportive family structures and better access to private healthcare there.

Finally, the short stay school in our sample has developed a system which aims to demonstrate students' academic achievements and progress within a social context:

By definition, this **short stay school** works with the most vulnerable young people, and has access to highly detailed intelligence on their personal and family backgrounds. It has incorporated this information into a screening tool which combines an Average Point Score (APS) for learners' attainment levels in English, Mathematics and Science, with a numerical score derived from scoring its pupils on an index of social factors. Some of these are included in our list of 'hard' indicators in section 2.1 (e.g. SEN, attendance and exclusion rate, whether the student is LAC); other indicators include: whether the student has a social worker, a physical or mental health issue (e.g. working with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, alcohol and drug abuse), or is on a Child Protection Plan, pregnant, a teenage parent, young carer or young offender. It also looks at whether the student's parents are in prison, are alcohol dependent, or have mental health issues. As with the RONI used by LA 1, this tool enables the school to rank its students according to vulnerability and risk on a rising scale, similar to the RAG scale used by Connexions.

These examples show that some LAs are developing tools which will bring to schools' attention the factors in young people's personal and family lives, and in their personalities, which might put them at risk of becoming NEET. Chapter 3 will now consider whether LAs and schools make a distinction between different **types** of young people at risk of becoming NEET.

3. What evidence is there that different types of NEETs are being identified?

This chapter will explore the extent to which LAs and schools acknowledge that there are different types of NEET young people, and examine the ways in which they distinguish between them.

3.1 Do LAs and schools recognise that there are different types of NEETs?

Our discussions with LAs and schools show us that they acknowledge that their young people may become NEET for different reasons, and that it is possible to distinguish between those young people who are likely to become 'open to learning' or 'undecided', as compared with those who will be 'sustained' NEETs. There is no evidence, however, that LAs and schools make a particular distinction between the subcategories of 'open to learning' and 'undecided' NEETs, as defined in the recent research literature (Spielhofer *et al.*, 2009).

One LA, for example, which calls the 'open to learning' and 'undecided' subgroups 'self-helpers', lists their characteristics as follows:

- they have done well enough at school and have a quite high level of basic skills
- they have not been brought to anyone's attention
- they have not had a CAF
- they do not have high rates of exclusion or absence, and
- their parents are supportive.

LA 3, on the other hand, which is using textual analysis of Connexions information to identify potential NEETs, acknowledged that there are different subgroups of NEETs but they do not 'label' their NEETs as such, or assign them to any one category. They prefer to consider each young person individually and tailor their approaches accordingly (though our interviewee understood that this is expensive in terms of resources).

The senior leader at the 11–16 boys' school felt that the staff know all their boys well because the school is small (340 students). They hold behaviour and attendance meetings every week and highlight *acute cases* early on. Boys are either channelled down a pastoral route where they receive one-to-one in-house counselling, or they

meet with a Connexions' personal advisor if they need careers guidance. In addition, the school operates an academic mentoring system across all years where each form tutor identifies three *winnable* boys every half term and conducts a fortnightly 20 minute tutorial with them. These boys are described as *wallpaper* boys as they are not identified by any of the 'hard' indicators. They are, rather, *just below the radar:* for example, they may be academically able but not performing to a satisfactory level, or they may not be involving themselves in class discussions. These young people are felt to be showing signs of disengagement and the tutorials enable staff to re-engage them and prevent the future possibility of NEEThood developing. Our interviewee acknowledged that it is more possible to consider each young person individually (as does LA 3) because the school is small.

3.2 How do LAs and schools distinguish between different types of NEETs?

In recognising that there are different kinds of NEETs, LAs use information from Connexions personal advisors and from discussions with form tutors to 'pick up' on young people, other than 'sustained' NEETs, who would not be identified by the 'hard' risk of NEET indicators. In addition to this, a few (as discussed in section 2.2) have incorporated some more qualitative indicators into their RONIs or data collection exercises for this purpose. The evidence suggests that the tools they are using enable them to score their young people on their risk indicators in terms of **level** of risk and of interventions required, in that the information they collect ranks young people in a similar way to the RAG system used by Connexions. There is, however, limited evidence to suggest that these tools can be used to distinguish between different **types** of NEETs (for example, a generally more negative young person who is dissatisfied with the options open to him, or a more positive young person who is in need of focused careers guidance), in order to determine the **type** of intervention required.

In LA 1, for example, schools are able to give young people an additional five points if they know that there are factors and issues additional to SIMS data, which might put a young person at risk of becoming NEET. This score may then assign the young person to the group where the highest level of intervention is required, along with other young people who have been scored highly on the 'hard' indicators (but the score in itself does not give an indication of the characteristics of the young person, or the type of intervention that might be appropriate).

4. How useful are current methods of identification perceived to be?

This chapter will examine LAs' and schools' views on the usefulness of various methods of identifying young people at risk of disconnection from learning and elaborate on some of the reservations they express about the 'workability' of a set of risk of NEET indicators.

4.1 How useful do LAs and schools perceive a set of indicators to be?

The LAs and schools that we spoke to agree that current methods of identifying young people at risk of becoming NEET, either through a set of risk indicators or through a combination of indicators and one-to-one discussions with personal tutors and/or advisors are useful, and **in theory**, workable. There are differing views, however, on what a useful set of indicators looks like, how long it should be and which factors should be included. As discussed in section 2.1, some authorities prefer to restrict their data collection to a short list of 'hard' indicators, using available data from SIMS; others are in favour of including a longer list of indicators and some information on vulnerable groups. There is also some support for exploring the possibility of developing a set of indicators which can record other personal and family issues, as well as information on mindset, which might impact on a young person's future engagement in learning. For example, LA 2, described in section 2.2, is very clear that the inclusion of qualitative data in a set of indicators can enable them to identify potential NEETs whom schools would otherwise miss because they are *'difficult to spot'*. The senior leader at the 11–16 years old boys' schools endorsed this view, and described *'wallpaper boys'* who could easily be missed (see section 3.1).

Our interviewees expressed, however, a number of reservations about how a set of indicators can work in practice. These are some of their concerns, in no particular order:

- Risk of NEET indicators are only as good as the data that schools have uploaded onto their information management systems. This will vary from school to school and can lead to inconsistency across the authority.

- A set of indicators must not be too long and complicated to complete, because schools do not have the time and resources for a lengthy exercise. A list of indicators which includes qualitative as well as statistical data might be cumbersome and impractical for LAs and schools to use.

- If a set of indicators includes those that relate to personal and family circumstances, and to attitudinal or aspirational factors, there is a risk of subjectivity, according to who fills the information in.

- LAs and schools will still have to discuss information on the more qualitative indicators with personal tutors or advisors in order to fill in these fields on a set of indicators. They query whether it is necessary to formalise this information, or whether it would be quicker and more efficient to rely on the 'gut feeling' of those who know the young people best when drawing up a list of those at risk of becoming NEET.

- Timing is crucial when completing the risk indicators. A young person can go from being **not at risk** of becoming NEET to becoming **at risk** overnight because of a one-off event, such as bereavement or a family split. It would be difficult and time-consuming to capture this kind of information on a database, and the information would need to be updated regularly.

- In principle, it would be useful to be able to share information on young people's risk factors with post-16 providers in order to ensure that they receive the support they need. However, this might lead to young people being stigmatised by the data and could give rise to confidentiality issues.

There are, therefore, some concerns among the people we interviewed about the usefulness of including 'soft' or more qualitative indicators as well as 'hard' indicators in a set of 'Risk of NEET Indicators'. Chapter 5 now explores whether it would be useful to establish a comprehensive set of indicators which would be useful for all LAs and schools.

5. What will help further with identification of NEETs?

This chapter considers whether it is feasible and/or useful to develop a universal set of indicators that applies to all LAs and schools, and which can be developed into a tool they can use, or whether it is more appropriate to include indicators which reflect the contexts of the local area.

5.1 Is it feasible to develop a universal set of risk of NEET indicators that includes hard and soft data?

The LAs and schools we spoke to agreed that it would be feasible to develop a universal set of 'Risk of NEET Indicators' (and, indeed some LAs are already using a standard list of 'hard' indicators) which they could use as the basis for a RONI or data collection exercise, in order to identify potential NEET young people in their authority. From our discussions with them, we have been able to develop a long list of risk indicators (see Appendix), which encompass a wide variety of data, ranging from 'hard' objective data to personal 'softer' data. The list includes:

- quantitative and factual data on young people that is readily accessible through schools' information databases

- statistical and factual data on the locality, on schools and on post-16 provision

- factual information on personal and family circumstances (which is not recorded on a database but is known to the school), and

- subjective data on young people's attitudes and aspirations (which could be gleaned from discussions with young people and families, or observations of their involvement in lessons).

LAs and schools agree, however, that a universal list would only be useful to them, and effective, if they could tailor it to the characteristics of their own authority and include some 'add-on' elements (which could be derived from a universal set of indicators) to reflect their local contexts. This would entail:

- adjusting weightings for the indicators which are important predictors of potential NEETs in their local area

- including information on local factors which will make a difference to whether young people are able to engage with learning post-16.

Section 5.2 considers some of the issues relating to the development of indicators which will work in the local context.

5.2 Is it feasible to develop a set of indicators which will work in the local context?

Apart from a few indicators (for example, attendance rate, eligibility for FSM), which consistently predict that a young person is at risk of becoming NEET, evidence from our discussions suggests that there are wide variations between LAs in terms of which indicators are good predictors of future disengagement from learning. Examples of this are teenage pregnancy and availability of transport:

- **Teenage pregnancy.** In one of the LAs, girls and boys are equally likely to become NEET, but in another, girls are more at risk because the authority has a high incidence of teenage pregnancy.

- **Transport:** In one rural LA, the cost and availability of transport to post-16 education provision is a significant barrier to engagement; in another, also rural, LA, transport can be an issue but the problem appears to be more to do with the 'mindset' of young people who have been brought up in small villages and do not want to travel far from home, as our interviewee explains: *'Many of those NEET young people don't even want to come out of their little street. It's very parochial. They are not too sure if they want to tip their toe in the water'.*

These are just two examples, but all those we interviewed listed indicators which they believe, from their knowledge of local context and the characteristics of their NEET cohort, to be important predictors of potential NEET young people in their authority. In addition to this, some of the interviewees believed that a list of indicators would need to be tailored to individual schools because of their individual characteristics (e.g. differences between city and rural schools, between different kinds of schools, between schools with different levels of pupils eligible for FSM, or between high- and low-achieving schools), though it was acknowledged that it is important to preserve some consistency across individual authorities. The senior leader at the boys' school pointed out that the list of indicators (see Appendix) would be *'enormously useful as an aide memoire'* of factors to consider when trying to understand a young person and considering appropriate support.

All this suggests that, in order to develop a useful tool for identifying these young people, LAs and schools need to make sure they have a good understanding of local characteristics (which might include the demographics of their authority and districts within it, the nature of post-16 provision, characteristics of schools, practical issues, such as transport availability, and other factors, such as the 'mindset' of the young people who live there). Some of this information may be readily available (e.g. on RAISEonline) but other information may be more difficult and time-consuming to collect.

Chapter 5 has examined views on the usefulness of developing a set of indicators that includes universal risk factors and indicators appropriate to local context, as well as a mix of statistical and more qualitative indicators. The evidence suggests that LAs and schools would welcome a list of indicators to guide them in their identification of young people at risk of becoming NEET, and which gives them flexibility to include local characteristics. This would be useful as a basis for their own, more tailored, data collection exercises or RONIs.

Chapter 6 summarises the findings from the research and considers what further research evidence will help with early identification of young people at risk of becoming NEET, in particular those where local, family or personal characteristics may have an impact on their future engagement in learning.

6. Summary and next steps

6.1 Summary

The research evidence suggests that some LAs are developing predominantly 'hard', measurable indicators or risk factors associated with young people who might be at risk of disconnection from learning. Although these 'hard' indicators or factors may be a starting point, local circumstances appear to influence the weight of their relevance at LA or institutional level. Additionally, the research suggests that 'softer' indicators are also sometimes used (such as personal and family circumstances and young people's attitudes and aspirations).

Interviewees felt that young people may become NEET for different reasons, and that it is possible to distinguish between the characteristics of young people who are likely to become temporarily disconnected from learning in contrast to those who might become more sustained long-term NEETs. Although the evidence suggests that LAs are using tools to score young people on risk indicators in terms of **level** of risk and of interventions required, there is limited evidence to suggest that these tools can be used to distinguish between different **types** of NEETs in order to determine the **type** of intervention required.

The evidence suggests that LAs and schools would welcome a list of indicators or characteristics to **guide** them in their identification of young people at risk of becoming NEET, and which give them flexibility to include local factors. This would be useful as a basis for their own, more tailored, data collection exercises or RONIs.

This scoping exercise indicates that LAs and schools feel it is important to draw on both a national list of indicators or factors, as well as identifying local context and characteristics in order to develop a comprehensive system for identifying young people at risk of temporary disconnection from learning at their institutions. They also see the value of being able to identify different sub-groups within those at risk of becoming NEET.

6.2 Discussion

This exploratory research, conducted to ensure that subsequent research provides the evidence needed by practitioners to further their support for young people at risk of temporary disconnection from learning, has highlighted the complexity of the issues surrounding the current identification of the young people at risk (see figure 1).

Figure 1 Main dimensions of current identification of young people at risk of NEEThood
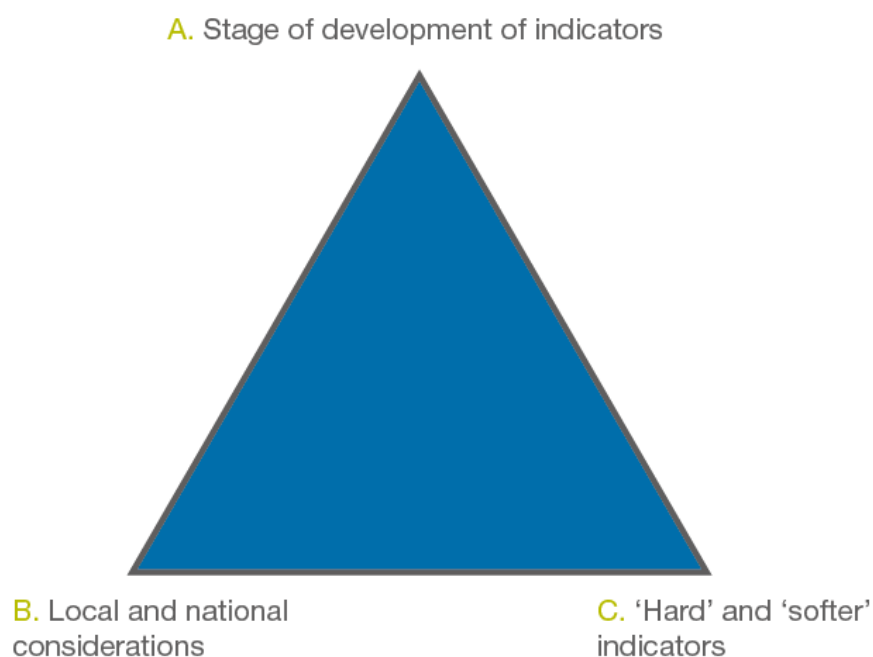
A. Stage of development of indicators

B. Local and national considerations

C. 'Hard' and 'softer' indicators

It appears that LAs (and schools) are at very different stages in engaging, understanding and developing indicators or factors to identify young people at risk of disconnection (point A), and in identifying, for example, the emerging differences between *levels* of risk and *types* of young people at risk. A national set of indicators is not perceived to be workable as there is considerable variation by, and within, LAs (point B). This exploratory research appears to point to different kinds of indicators, i.e. 'hard' ones that describe more measurable, factual information and 'softer' factors that include more attitudinal and personal information. This encompasses subjective judgement that needs to be considered (point C).

The evidence gathered for this report suggests that the development of a list of factors or indicators of risk of disengagement would be useful, not so much as a quantitative tool to be completed objectively early on in secondary school, but to be used as an ongoing record of a young person's profile to be completed by a member of staff who knows the young person. As such, a list of indicators/factors could be used for guidance to help staff to identify the '**causes**' of potential disengagement (i.e. 'hard' and 'softer' indicators), the '**effect**' (i.e. types of disengagement, for example, dissatisfaction with options, qualifications or indecision about future pathways) and the **solution** (i.e. the appropriate intervention that could be used to re-engage the young person, for example, careers guidance, employer involvement, a suitable learning environment and qualifications or support programmes to enhance mental resilience or 'stickability', etc.).

6.3 Next steps

Based on the evidence collected for this report, it is recommended that two research projects are conducted next. The first would be a mixed methodology project which would encompass a survey with heads of key stage 3 in order to establish a comprehensive list of indicators (i.e. the '**causes'**) of potential disengagement, the linkages with types of disengagement (i.e the **'effect'**) and ratings of how useful and helpful such indicators might be. The sample would need to be large enough to cover variables such as geography, types of LAs, types of schools (for example both in terms of schools for 11–16 year olds and 11–18 year olds and in terms of academies, free schools and maintained schools), size of schools, varying degrees of socio-economic contexts (e.g. levels of FSM) and, if possible, in terms of destination data. A small number of case studies would also be carried out in order to explore the views of a wider range of staff (for example, the heads of key stage 4 and the member of staff responsible for employer engagement and ensuring young people receive impartial careers advice) and to obtain greater depth of information.

The second research project will explore the **'solutions'**, in terms of the interventions that could be used to re-engage the disengaged, and will identify good practice. This project has already been scoped out in detail and work is due to start shortly. Further information on this project is available.

Together these projects, that can run concurrently, will provide a coherent strategy both to identify different *types* of young people at risk of temporary disengagement from learning and also to identify the relevant different *types* of interventions that will help to re-engage them. Examples of good practice will be identified that will have the potential to be replicated within similar contexts at institutional and LA levels.

Appendix

List of indicators for identifying young people at risk of becoming NEET

'Hard' indicators (statistical or factual)

General indicators:

- gender, ethnicity, and English as an additional language (EAL)

- attainment at key stages 1 to 4

- attendance and exclusion rates

- eligibility for free school meals (FSM)

- special educational needs (SEN)

- looked-after children (LAC)

- traveller

- asylum seeker/refugee

- whether the young person has a CAF (Common Assessment Framework)

- whether the young person has been referred to professional agencies

- medical conditions (if it affects learning/attendance).

Local and school indicators:

- geographical location (rural/urban)

- availability and cost of transport

- structural arrangements for 16–19 provision

- quality and extent of 16–19 provision, and availability of information on post-16 options

- courses on offer, access to courses, quality of information, advice and guidance (IAG), etc.

- LA's employment/unemployment history.

Other personal indicators, including 'soft' indicators

Personal and family circumstances:

- family relationships

- family breakup

- parental employment

- family culture

- having enough money

- drug and alcohol misuse

- teenage parent/pregnancy

- young offender

- parents in prison

- whether the young person has moved schools

- bereavement

- young carer

- on a Child Protection Plan

- mental health issues

- domestic violence.

Attitudinal and aspirational factors:

- difficult social relationships/happiness with relationships

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

- lack of active and supportive parental involvement

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

- not participating in lessons

- low confidence and self-esteem

- knowledge of own strengths and weaknesses

- happiness at school

- mental resilience

- 'stickability' to a task

- aspirations

- how important work is considered to be

- lack of direction.

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Our thanks

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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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