

## Young People not in Education, Employment or Training

*Goretti Horgan, Ann Marie Gray and Clare Conlon*

**This brief focuses on issues relating to young people, aged 16-25, not in employment, education or training in Northern Ireland. It draws on published research evidence and the discussion at a Roundtable event organised by ARK and YouthAction NI and held on 6 October 2010. Roundtable participants included officials from a number of government departments, representatives from a range of NGOs and academics. The event was conducted under the anonymity of reporting allowed under the Chatham House Rule to encourage open debate.**

### Introduction and context

In this brief the term 'NEET' is used to refer to young people who spend a substantial amount of time outside any form of education, employment or training. While we are conscious that the use of any label can

be insulting to young people, it is used commonly in policy discussions and research, so is used here as a shorthand term in the absence of a more appropriate alternative.

The economic downturn has further increased concerns about young people who are NEET as unemployment levels have grown significantly in the UK and Ireland in the past three years. Young people have been disproportionately affected by the recession. Recent research from the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) (2010) indicates that overall youth unemployment in the UK stands at 18% of 16-24 year olds, the highest level in 15 years. Their research also found that among 16 to 24 year olds, unemployment is highest for those with no qualifications. While young men fare worse in general, the findings show that worst affected were young women

with no qualifications. For these young women unemployment had increased by nearly 18% since March 2008.

The Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland estimates that of the 24,000 newly unemployed in the region last year, approximately 9,000 (37.5%) were aged between 18 and 24. Compared to the UK average, youth unemployment is now a bigger problem in Northern Ireland with the rate above the UK average for July-September 2009 (Bennett, 2010). Figures for Northern Ireland also compare unfavourably with many OECD countries (OECD, 2009).

In 2009, in response to an Assembly question the Minister for the Department of Employment and Learning reported a figure of 19% (45,000 young people) of 16-24 year olds not in employment,

education or training during the period July-September 2008 (AQW 4822/09). A Department of Employment and Learning scoping study (2010) suggests there are 3,000 – 3,500 young people with multiple barriers.

Policy interest has focused on concern about the how the disengagement of young people contributes to social and economic exclusion and the negative impact on the ability of young people to make successful transitions, with adverse outcomes that can extend well into adulthood. The British Birth Cohort Study has shown that if a young man has been NEET for six months, by the age of 21 he is four times more likely to be out of work, three times more likely to have mental health issues and five times more likely to have a criminal record. Other research has shown that youth unemployment has a harmful impact on later life – including a negative effect on happiness and life satisfaction (Bell and Blanchflower, 2010).

This roundtable was held just as the Department for Employment and Learning Committee was concluding an inquiry into young people not in education or training. The Department for Employment and Learning has published a scoping study (DEL, 2010) and has been asked by the

Northern Ireland Executive to take the lead in the development of a strategy for NEET young people but other departments will have input into the process and have responsibility for actions linked to it.

### Who are the young people most likely to be NEET?

#### *Poverty and disadvantage*

The reasons for young people becoming NEET are varied but key factors are:

- educational disadvantage – in particular young people who have been suspended or excluded from school;
- young people with disabilities or special educational needs;
- those with difficult personal circumstances;
- young people affected by external structural factors, including poverty, becoming a young mother, being in care and being a young carer.

Young people who grow up in poverty are considerably more likely to be NEET. Research published by the Social Exclusion Unit (1999) identified educational under-achievement, family disadvantage and family poverty as the three main factors associated with being NEET (Cabinet Office, 1999). Using longitudinal data from the 1970 British Birth Cohort Study, Bynner and Parsons (2002) identified key

characteristics of NEET young people as: “likely to have low birth weight and to have grown up in inner city public housing estates in homes marked by poverty (free school meals and state benefits) and lacking cultural capital (parents not reading to the children and lacking interest in their children’s education.”

Research in Northern Ireland by Hargie et al (2006) looked at three groups of young people- never employed, once employed and now unemployed and employed. They found evidence of a vicious circle where unemployed young people would have to travel to poorly paid jobs but could not afford the associated travel costs. They also refer to young people being affected by a ‘bubble syndrome’, whereby they feel comfortable and secure in the micro-society of their own community.

Northern Ireland has a much higher proportion of children living in persistent poverty than is the case in Britain and poverty is experienced at some point by a lot more families. Over one in five (21%) of children and young people in the region live in persistent poverty, twice the proportion in Britain (9%) (Monteith et al, 2008). The links between poverty and educational disadvantage and between poor performance in national

qualifications and a young person's risk of becoming NEET are well-established (Spielhofer et al, 2009). Barnes et al (2008) found no statistical difference in educational outcomes for children living in persistently poor, compared with temporary poor families. However, secondary school children living in a family in persistent poverty were twice as likely as children in temporary poor families to be suspended or expelled (13% compared to six%).

An important issue is the lack of data on the proportion of 16 and 17 year old children living in poverty, whether temporarily or persistently. It is unlikely that the family of a child growing up in persistent poverty would somehow escape poverty when s/he turned 16 or 17. However, many of the figures relating to child poverty are concerned only with children under the age of 16 years. Indeed, Lifetime Opportunities, the anti-poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland, does not include young people aged 16-17 as children. The Strategy defines specific goals and targets for four key stages in life – Early Years (0-4), Children and Young People (5-16), Working Age Adults and Older Citizens.

#### *School experiences*

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)

analysis of the Youth Cohort Study found that neither NEET young people, nor young people in Jobs Without Training (JWT) are homogenous groups. However, it did find that both young people who were likely to remain NEET in the medium-term and those in JWT who were at risk of becoming NEET shared some characteristics. These were negative experiences of school and higher levels of truancy and exclusion, with those who were already NEET likely to lack educational attainment (Spielhofer et al 2009). That report also noted that, in 2008, of those young people who failed to gain any GCSE passes, 39 per cent were recorded as being NEET subsequently. This compares to only two per cent of those who attained five or more GCSEs at grades A\* to C. However, they also note, the majority (61 per cent) of young people who failed to achieve any GCSE passes at the age of 16 did not subsequently become NEET.

The Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study found that low-attaining and low-engaged young people coming towards the end of Key Stage 3 are highly critical of the relevance of the curriculum for their lives and of teaching methods used. Harland and Moor (2001) noted that young people from schools with high levels of Free School Meals

(FSM) had started Key Stage 3 with great enthusiasm and had been far more likely than young people in schools with low levels of FSMs to say they enjoyed school. All the young people found school less enjoyable as they moved through the three years of KS3 but young people in schools with a higher rate of FSMs “showed a greater decrease in enjoyment through Key Stage 3, suggesting disengagement could be a more deeply felt experience, particularly in the key areas of numeracy and literacy” (ibid, p.13).

Children and young people have identified a lack of respect from teachers as an contributing factor to their disengagement from school (Hirsch, 2006; Barnado's, 2007; Horgan, 2007; Horgan and Monteith, 2009; Spielhofer et al, 2009) because they feel they are 'looked down on' by teachers. Another issue faced by young people who were NEET identified by the NFER report was disruption to their education through either permanent or temporary exclusion, self-exclusion or truancy. As we have seen above, this is a particular issue for young people growing up in persistent poverty.

#### *Reasons for School*

##### *Disengagement*

Concerns about disengagement from school were voiced by



many roundtable participants. The point was made that boys in particular can disengage in primary school, sometimes leading to serious problems with literacy and numeracy as highlighted by Northern Ireland Audit Office reports. Work with primary school aged boys suggests that simple things like more breaks and being able to move around more can help boys stay engaged (Horgan, 2007). Pupils across a range of studies say they want more interesting teaching methods and more “learning by doing”. In the words of one roundtable participant we need to ‘stop children learning to hate school’.

Educational difficulties experienced by children often stem from issues in their life outside school and a number of participants felt that schools ignore the reality of children and young people’s lives. Housing issues and especially homelessness are major issues for many NEET young people often creating disruption in attending school, the lack of an appropriate space to do homework and substantial stress on young people affecting their well-being. Yet it was felt that there was limited appreciation of these issues by schools and teachers.

The role and attitudes of teachers caused some debate. There was discussion of qualitative research

findings with young people which show that, as well as respect from teachers and more learning by doing, they want more effective anti-bullying strategies and more informal learning opportunities. It was reported that some essential skills tutors refused to work with some young people who had been in trouble with the law. The organization in question had to recruit its own tutors and involve the young person in the selection process as a way around this problem. It was agreed that teachers in disadvantaged schools face particular difficulties and that they need training and support to improve the educational experience for children and young people.

A number of factors contribute to young mothers becoming NEET. Pregnancy can be a cause and a result of educational exclusion. The point was made that the lack of provision by schools and inadequacy of childcare means that young mothers end up in NEET category by default.

### **Policy and practice – a range of approaches**

In developing a NEET strategy, Northern Ireland can draw on and learn from the experiences of other regions of the UK and from international experience. Strategies in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2006) and in England and Wales (Department

for Children, Schools and Families, 2008) include measures aimed at creating teaching and learning experiences more tailored to the need of the individual and better advice and support for young people to access appropriate provision post 16. Key aspects of the Scottish strategy include an acknowledged need to address aspects of the education system for under 16s and an emphasis on collaborative action, with local partners expected to develop plans and infrastructure to address needs. In Wales the NEET strategy has been accompanied by a comprehensive Action Plan. Measures in Wales include a £7m preventative targeted at 11-13 year olds. It is a multi-disciplinary approach involving local authorities, teachers, youth services and careers services.

In England, a report by the Children, Schools and Families Select Committee earlier this year (House of Commons, 2010) concluded that a more radical approach to addressing the issues experienced by many young people was needed. It called for the co-location of services such as healthcare, housing support, access to benefits and financial support and careers advice and guidance in a joined-up approach (para 44). It also called on the government to examine the provision made for 16 and 17 year olds in severe hardship to

ensure ‘that these young people are not deterred from pursuing opportunities in education and training by the constraints of the benefits system (Paragraph 53).

Participants at the Roundtable discussed using a multi-dimensional approach. There was much agreement about the need to assess young people’s needs early and provide resources to meet those needs. There was a strong view that it the focus should not be just about containing and managing young people but including them in society –so the outcomes of any initiatives should go beyond the acquisition of educational or training qualifications. There was considerable discussion about the fact that young people who are in the NEET group often come from vulnerable families and that communities also need support. This was seen as another example of the need for strategies such as the anti-poverty strategy, family and parenting strategies to be interlinked.

The need to support transitions at key points was advocated by a number of participants who pointed out that the most vulnerable young people experience difficulty moving from primary to post primary education and may disengage even at that point. Another critical time was the transition from secondary

school to work/further education. An important dimension for this age group is the lack of state support provided for those 16 and 17 year olds NEET, leaving families to find money from their already meagre resources to feed, clothe and provide pocket money for such youngsters. Thus, there are about a quarter of a million 16 and 17 year olds in the UK (Scottish Executive, 2005), who have, and whose family receive, no income of any kind from any (legal) source on their behalf.

Discussions of what needs to be done in terms of training provision focused on the need to significantly depart from previous government programmes. In the words of one participant ‘We have to be careful not to end up with broad stroke programmes such as the old Youth Training Programme ... that try to be a catch-all’ , when experience of successful projects consistently highlight the need for tailored holistic provision for young people. The view was strongly expressed that the innovative and good practice in the Youth Sector should form the basis for future strategy and action. At the heart of future policy development should be an understanding that traditional methods of formal training are not appropriate or what is needed for these young people, but rather informal education and training using

youth work methods. Achieving this in a comprehensive way requires long term vision and resource investment.

While there was general agreement about the need to evaluate and to agree and meet outcomes, there was a warning that work could be skewed by over emphasis on ‘hard’ quantitative outcomes which can be easily measured. This, some participants argued, would result in organisations engaging those young people who are more likely to achieve these outcomes rather than harder to reach and more vulnerable young people. It was noted that work is underway to develop softer outcomes that measure, for example, distance travelled, increased self-esteem, capacity to sit in a group situation etc . Policy makers and funders need to be persuaded of the value of this.

#### *Alternative education and training provision*

There was much discussion of the difficulties presented by the current decline in labour market opportunities and the negative impact of public sector spending cuts in Northern Ireland. Research carried by YouthAction NI showed that experience of work is absolutely necessary for young people but there was concern about how increasing unemployment

may impact on young people's motivation. Young people, it was argued, need to be able to have some optimism about what they can gain from education and training. That isn't to say that young people have unrealistic expectations: participants from the youth sector spoke of how young people can be motivated to value work which did not pay a lot. There was also evidence of how volunteering opportunities can make a huge difference to young people's lives, allowing them to build self-esteem and demonstrate skills. It was suggested the CBI and other business organizations should be more involved and encouraged to provide employment opportunities.

Participants discussed the difference between young people who come through awful situations and do well and those who end up NEET. A key factor influencing outcomes was relationships: that there is someone – a teacher, youth worker, someone with whom they can relate and get support from. The need for stability was stressed, particularly for young people who have disruptive family lives.

### **What can be done?**

Roundtable participants suggested action on a number of levels and by a range of sectors and organizations.

There was consensus about the need for a NEET strategy which would take a long term approach. The importance of inter-departmental 'buy-in' was agreed, but there had to be clear leadership from one department. Some concern was expressed about agencies and departments being able to work together and take a holistic approach. This links to the need for the broader context of children's lives to be taken into account and to tackle issues such as mental health, housing, the impact of the conflict and the lack of jobs. It was strongly argued that a NEET strategy must relate to other strategies including the Anti Poverty Strategy and to welfare reform policies. It must include a resourced Action Plan with clear targets and a timetable for implementation

There was powerful testimony from young people at the roundtable who spoke about their own experiences and what support and help had been useful for them. They identified a need for more detached youth workers who could engage with young people who were hanging around in parks etc and support them back into some kind of education.

There needs to be a focus on preventative work and early and appropriate intervention. At post primary level, work is ongoing in

the Careers service which involves schools identifying young people who are at risk of becoming NEET at age 14. The Careers Service then intervene and aim to prevent this happening. Participants welcomed this development.

Teachers needs to be better informed about and have greater understanding of the range and complexity of issues facing children and young people (through enhanced curricula content for trainee teachers and CPD). More effective and structured multi-disciplinary working could be developed based on existing models of good practice. It was pointed out that some informal youth work IS being carried out in formal education sector by youth workers in schools. This is one approach which can be very useful particularly when there is a well thought and longer term partnership between schools and youth services.

Evaluation of Alternative Education Projects (AEP) have been generally very positive and Community-based AEPs provide a model of good practice that could be replicated and expanded since, at present, need outstrips supply. There is also potential for the sector to be organized more effectively.

The need for youth service

provision for NEET young people in the 16-25 year group was persuasively articulated. There is evidence that good tailored provision in the youth sector can achieve very positive outcomes (YouthAction NI, 2010). Problems with previous training programmes for young people have been well documented and participants argued that future provision needs to be high quality and linked to labour market opportunities. Existing projects in the voluntary youth sector, based on innovative models of training and support, have a good track record in achieving long term outcomes. These include: reaching disengaged young people; a needs based, flexible approach to learning; peer and individual mentoring, with individual goal setting;

and pastoral care and practical support systems for all, which could form the basis for future provision.

#### *Missing data and information*

The lack of data in Northern Ireland makes it difficult to accurately calculate the number of young people who are not in education, training or employment, to monitor progress and provide evidence about long term outcomes. To some extent this can be addressed through analysis of existing data. Information is also an issue. For example, the need for a database with all the providers of AEP, Careers Service etc was identified, so that young people can be signposted in an accessible way.

Information on the mental health disorders in the general child and adolescent population, as well as in relation to looked after children in the region, remains scarce. The incidence of mental health problems is disproportionately high amongst vulnerable groups, including children leaving care and children in conflict with the law. Such young people experience difficulty in accessing specialist support services essential if they are to achieve in an educational setting. The Bamford Review included a review of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Its report described the service as “wholly inadequate ....characterised by overwhelming need and chronic underinvestment.”

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## Authors:

Goretti Horgan is a lecturer in Social Policy and Administration at the University of Ulster and co-directs the ARK Policy Unit

Ann Marie Gray is Senior Lecturer in Social Policy and Administration at the University of Ulster and Policy Director of ARK

Clare Conlon is head of the Training Unit at YouthAction Northern Ireland

**ARK**  
INCORE, Magee campus  
University of Ulster  
Derry/Londonderry  
BT48 7JL

Tel: 028 7167 5513; Fax: 028 7167 5510  
E-mail: [info@ark.ac.uk](mailto:info@ark.ac.uk)

**ARK**  
School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work  
Queen's University Belfast  
Belfast  
BT7 1NN

Tel: 028 9097 3034; Fax: 028 9097 3943  
E-mail: [info@ark.ac.uk](mailto:info@ark.ac.uk)