Second Chances:
Re-engaging young people in education, employment and training

Believe in children

Barnardo’s
Northern Ireland

We do not let them drop out easily, essentially we try to get to the bottom of the decision to drop out and then adapt accordingly to deal with it and turn the decision around.’

(Barnardo’s Service Manager)
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Introduction
Barnardo’s practice starts from the premise that young people should be enabled to take up their entitlement to education and training, due to the social and economic benefits this brings to them as individuals and society generally. Our education, training and support services across the UK work with young people who for diverse reasons are, or have recently been, not in education, employment or training (NEET), as well as groups who without our intervention are at risk of becoming NEET. Most are from disadvantaged communities and many face barriers to participation in education.

Characteristics of young people who are NEET
The NEET population is diverse and continuously changing, including many young people with multiple, often complex needs and who face barriers to participation, for example:
- young people with challenging behaviour and no qualifications
- young people who refused to go to school because they were bullied
- disabled young people wanting to learn the skills for work and independent living, but unable to find suitable training locally
- young people who have spent time in care or custody
- young parents or carers whose main concern is for their families
- homeless young people living in temporary accommodation
- young people with mental health difficulties whose education has been disrupted by illness and time spent in hospital.

NEET in Northern Ireland
The term NEET is commonly applied to a broad age range of 16 to 24-year-olds. One in five of this age group are currently NEET in Northern Ireland representing 47,000 young people (DETI, August 2009), similar to figures in England (DCSF, August 2009). Existing datasets do not provide a comprehensive picture about the numbers or sub-groups of young people who are NEET in Northern Ireland and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) is currently undertaking a scoping study of the issue. The following Northern Ireland figures provide some useful background:
- Under 25s have an unemployment rate which, at 12 per cent, is four times that of people aged 25 and over (New Policy Institute, 2009)
- Young people under 25 now comprise one third of all people claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) (DETI, July 2009)
- The working age economic inactivity rate for NI stands at 29.5% which is significantly higher than the UK average rate (21.1%) and is the highest of the 12 UK regions (DETI, September 2009)
- Young people aged 16-24 make up almost 40

About this briefing
Tackling rapidly rising youth unemployment is a cross-party concern. With the aim of minimising the number of 16 to 18-year-olds who are NEET, government policy has been introduced in England which will require young people to continue in education or training until they are 18. In the Budget 2009, the Government further announced a guaranteed job, training or work placement for all 18 to 24-year-olds who have been unemployed for 12 months.

In comparison with other UK regions, Northern Ireland does not yet have a specific strategy to increase participation by young people aged 16 to 18 who are NEET or to reduce NEET rates amongst the broader 16 to 24 population. This policy gap is increasingly significant given that 20 per cent of 16-24-year-olds here are not in education, employment or training (DETI, August 2009) and the number of under-25s claiming welfare benefits has risen over one year by more than 90 per cent (DETI, July 2009).

This briefing highlights a range of issues relating to young people who are NEET and makes some key recommendations for policy and practice in Northern Ireland. In doing so it draws upon findings from Barnardo’s UK-wide research exploring young people’s experiences of education and how they re-engage through Barnardo’s services (Evans, J et al, 2009).
UK policy context

There are Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets in Northern Ireland to increase the proportion of care leavers in education, training or employment at age 19 by 50 per cent and to raise the participation rate of 16 to 17-year-olds in full-time education or vocational training to 95 per cent by 2011 (NI Executive, 2008). However, there are no targets to reduce the overall number of young people who are NEET and there is not a specific strategy in place. This is in stark contrast with other regions across the UK where it is a high level policy objective, with national targets:

- in England, to reduce the proportion of 16 to 18-year-olds who are NEET by two percentage points between 2004-2010 (CSR, 2004; 2007)
- in Wales, to reduce the proportion of young people aged 16 to 18 who are NEET by 7 per cent by 2010 (WAG, 2008)
- in Scotland, to reduce the proportion of 16 to 19-year-olds who are NEET by 2008 (Scottish Executive, 2006).

England: A NEET Strategy was published in 2008, followed by a Toolkit setting out the role of each delivery partner (DCSF, 2008). The Education and Skills Act (2008) places a new requirement on all 17-year-olds by 2013 and all 18-year-olds by 2015 to participate in some form of education or training. This legislation also requires post-16 learning providers to notify the system, for example, Connexions Direct, if a young person leaves, so that they get essential support to prevent them becoming NEET.

Wales: The Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) recently consulted on a national strategy on reducing the proportion of young people who are NEET (WAG, 2008). A three year project, Pre-VENT NEET, is being funded to provide a package of support and training for over 7,000 young people aged 11-13 who find it difficult to learn and are at future risk of leaving school without qualifications or the skills to find a job.

Scotland: Successive reforms since the Beattie report in 1999 have sought to improve learning and employment opportunities for young people facing barriers to participation, for example, through the introduction of a national strategy aimed at reducing the number of young people who are NEET (Scottish Executive, 2006).

Impact of being NEET

The social and financial costs of extended periods of NEET status are high, for both the young person and wider society. For an individual there are the direct costs of lost income from employment as well as the physiological and psychological impacts on levels of health, motivation and self-esteem (CMPO, 2004).

Taking into account unemployment, under employment, poor health, substance abuse, crime, premature death and early parenthood, the additional resource cost associated with being NEET has been previously estimated at almost £100,000 per person over a lifetime (DiES, 2002). On that basis therefore, failing to help 12,000 young people aged 16 to 18 out of NEET status would cost well over £1 billion (WAG, 2008). Youth unemployment costs the Northern Ireland economy around £1.6 million each week (NIA, 2008) while productivity loss to the UK economy is estimated at £10 million every day (London School of Economics, 2007).

Key facts

- working class boys outnumber every other group amongst young people who are NEET in the UK (New Policy Institute, 2008) and in Northern Ireland this is particularly relevant in disadvantaged areas (NIA, 2008)
- young care leavers are four times more likely to be unemployed or inactive than those of similar age in the general population (DHSSPS, 2009)
- young people with learning difficulties and disabilities are twice as likely to be NEET (DCSF, 2008)
- NEET young people are much more likely to have no or low qualification levels than the population as a whole and are also more likely to come from workless backgrounds (WAG, 2008)
- NEET young people are twice as likely as other young people to have caring responsibilities (WAG, 2008).
Why do young people ‘drop out’ of education?

The Second Chances research (Evans, J et al, 2009) was conducted with 75 young people in 19 Barnardo’s services across the UK, working with young people who were, or had recently been, NEET. As is characteristic of the NEET population, they were predominantly from poor, white backgrounds and the most marginalised groups, including teenage mothers, young homeless people, young people in conflict with the law and those with mental health difficulties. The majority had left school with few qualifications and many had been excluded.

Nearly all were able to articulate clear aspirations for the future – typically, a job with a decent wage, a home, a family, a car and holidays. However, most of the young people interviewed were alienated by their time in school. Key themes included poor relationships with teachers, boredom, bullying and an escalating cycle of poor behaviour, truancy and exclusion. Young people often acknowledged they had been ‘no angels’ and now they regretted ‘getting in with the wrong crowd’ and wasting the opportunities available to them in school.

Disengagement tended to be a cumulative process, starting with difficulties in primary school and becoming entrenched by negative experiences in secondary school. Young people who lacked confidence or struggled in class seemed to have lost their way in large secondary schools, where their difficulties were either not noticed or insufficiently addressed. A narrow emphasis on academic achievement and gaining A*-C grades at GCSE left many convinced they were failures. Many still had poor basic skills and lacked confidence in their abilities as learners.

These young people felt they would have done better in school if lessons had been more relevant to future work prospects, if they had more support and encouragement, and been subjected to less bullying and fewer rules. Life circumstances also had an impact, underlying and reinforcing some young people’s difficulties in school. Issues included early parenthood, frequent house moves, challenging family circumstances, and living in a community with long-term unemployment and a poor infrastructure.

I would tell my son not to leave school. I wouldn’t want him to go through what I went through. I want him to have a better education and better life than me. I left in year 9 at 14; I was being bullied. When I returned I got bullied again. Then I got pregnant and left.’ (Young person, one-to-one interview)

Re-engaging young people – what works?

Restorative approaches following on from exclusion and non-attendance; engagement with parents and carers through a family support worker or home school link worker; extended schools activities; an alternative curriculum; counselling and other holistic support services are all effective ways of re-engaging young people with learning. (Ofsted, 2008; Scottish Executive, 2006)

Timely intervention in the early years and at school before disengagement and disaffection set in can also have a positive impact on NEET numbers, for example:

- family support for vulnerable children and their families in the early years to improve social and cognitive development and address various barriers
- an intensive ‘nurturing’ approach in primary school on children’s social, emotional and behavioural skills
- ongoing support at key stages of transition
- effective monitoring systems so that young people likely to become NEET and those groups most ‘at risk’ are identified before they leave school, for example, via regular review of attendance, behaviour and attainment.

There is also a need to think creatively about what would work better for young people whose potential is not unlocked by mainstream education. Third sector organisations such as Barnardo’s play an important role in facilitating the transition of young people who are NEET back into education, training or employment, often working in partnership with statutory services.

Barnardo’s services

Barnardo’s provides two main types of service for young people who are, or have recently been, NEET, as well as groups who without our intervention are at risk of becoming NEET:

- support services for vulnerable young people facing barriers to participation

Case Study

A few years ago, Glenn had dropped out of college and was in trouble. He recalls, ‘I was doing drugs and stuff… I was unemployed and I wasn’t sure what to do’. Glenn’s life changed when a friend told him about Barnardo’s Dr B’s project in Belfast. Despite never having cooked before, Glenn quickly revealed a natural talent and gained his Level 1 NVQ in catering. He went on to work at London’s fashionable L’Escargot restaurant before securing his current employment in a top Belfast hotel. Glenn says, ‘if it wasn’t for Dr B’s I would probably be in prison or dead… Barnardo’s really does change people’s lives’.
Case Study

With the support of Barnardo’s Newry and Armagh and Dungannon Adolescent Partnerships (NAP/ADAP) many young people have been able to continue with their education. Janette (16) for example had been refusing to attend school until intervention by Barnardo’s and the provision of an intensive support plan. This resulted in her re-engagement with school and she developed the confidence to undertake four core GCSEs. An intensive educational package is being provided for Janette in conjunction with E.O.T.A.S (Education Other Than At School) teachers.

Dr B’s is a Barnardo’s project in Belfast which trains young people with learning disabilities or support needs to gain industry recognised qualifications in all aspects of catering, including food preparation and front of house skills. Staff focus on confidence building with the young people in order to help turn around their attitudes to learning and they are given the opportunity to obtain literacy and numeracy qualifications. Practical support and encouragement from dedicated project workers, the opportunity to learn new skills, gain work experience and qualifications, as well as access to social activities, all help the young people to make progress.

The Newry Adolescent Partnership (NAP) and Armagh and Dungannon Adolescent Partnership (ADAP) provide support services for children and young people aged 13-18. A range of preventative and early intervention services are available for young people at risk of offending, of being looked after, involved in antisocial behaviour, misusing substances and experiencing difficulty within the formal education system. In addition to individual, family and activity-based work, the support includes development of an intervention plan which focuses not only on ‘at risk’ behaviour, but on all aspects of the young person’s life, including well-being, relationships, education and housing. An educational support worker provides one-to-one programmes based on individual need in order to maintain mainstream placement, encourage re-engagement with education/training and/or provide opportunities to achieve accredited qualifications.

The School Age Mothers (SAM) Programme, co-ordinated by Barnardo’s Young Parents’ Network, offers holistic support to young women in school to help them complete their education. Operating regionally, the programme is funded by the Department of Education working through local Co-ordinators in each Education and Library Board (ELB). Where required, these link young mothers with registered childcare providers through the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and the Department of Education then funds the childcare enabling them to return to study. This ensures that many young mothers in Northern Ireland continue to attend school and gain qualifications.

A common set of values underpins all Barnardo’s work in getting young people ‘back on track’. These are:

- flexibility eg ‘open door’ enrolment policies, frequent start dates and allowing more time to complete a qualification
- positive relationships with project workers, working individually and in small groups to support and encourage young people
- belief – building on young people’s strengths and ‘sticking with them’ even

Case Study

CB was 16 when she became pregnant. She had a good record of school attendance and her baby was due just as her GCSE exams were to begin. The ELB SAM Co-ordinator worked closely with CB, her parents and school to ensure her needs were considered, particularly her desire to continue with her education beyond compulsory school age. Home tuition, childcare and transport were all organised and were critical elements in enabling her to fulfil this wish and ease financial pressures on the family. Financial advice to support the family was provided by the Barnardo’s Young Parents’ Advice Worker. CB went on to achieve nine A-C grades at GCSE and has since returned to school to study for four A-levels.
when they behave badly, make mistakes or think about giving up.

**Recommendations for policy and practice**

- The development of a strategy with targets and indicators specific to young people in Northern Ireland who are NEET and aged between 16-24. (Action: DEL)

- The strategy should include a specific target to reduce by 2011 the proportion of young people who are NEET by 7 per cent. (Action: DEL)

- The strategy should also include preventative and support structures and specifically identify vulnerable young people who face ‘super barriers’ to participation, such as those in care or custody, young parents, young homeless people, disabled young people and those with mental health difficulties. (Action: DEL/DHSSPS)

- The strategy should incorporate development of a specific pre-NEET prevention programme that works with primary and post-primary school children, aged 9 to 11 and 12-14 respectively, who are identified as being particularly at risk of becoming NEET. (Action: DEL/DE)

- The support needs of the NEET population should be mapped and a subsequent growth in services planned to enable their participation in learning. (Action: DEL/DE)

- Alternative work-based learning and vocational pathways (including apprenticeships) should be made widely available as a positive option for the many young people aged 14-19 whose potential is not unlocked by mainstream education, particularly in areas of economic decline. (Action: DEL)

- The current poor childcare infrastructure must be urgently addressed in order to provide good quality childcare to enable young parents to take part in education, employment or training. (Action: OFMDFM)

- The Government should work with third sector partners to develop outcomes measures which fairly reflect the progress of young people who face significant barriers to participation and achievement.

**References**


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Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) (2008), Delivering Skills that Work for Wales: Reducing the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training in Wales (consultation paper)

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