

Second Chances:

Re-engaging young
people in education
and training

Believe in
children



Barnardo's

Executive Summary
March 2009

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Introduction

This research was prompted by Government policy in England which will require young people to continue in education or training until they are 18¹. The policy is intended to reduce to a minimum the number of 16 to 18-year-olds not in education, employment or training (NEET) and, more importantly, to improve the skills, job prospects and life-chances of these young people.

Barnardo's education, training and support services across the UK work with young people who, for diverse reasons, are – or have recently been – NEET. Most are from disadvantaged communities and many face barriers to participation in education. The *Second Chances* report gives prominence to their views and experiences to shed light on what can help restore young people to learning and enable them to take their first steps towards employment and active citizenship.



¹ Department for Education and Skills (2007) *Raising Expectations: staying in education and training post-16* and subsequent policy papers; *Education and Skills Act (2008)*

UK policy context

During 2008, Barnardo's lobbied on this ambitious programme of reform to ensure that it improves opportunities for the young people our services work with. For example, how will it work for:

- the young man with challenging behaviour and no qualifications
- the young woman who refused to go to school because she was bullied
- the teenage mother whose main concern is for her newborn child
- disabled young people, wanting to learn the skills for work and independent living, but unable to find suitable training locally
- homeless young people living in temporary accommodation
- young people with mental health difficulties whose education has been disrupted by illness and time in hospital
- young offenders who have spent time in custody?

While the research was prompted by policy in England, it is relevant to all the UK nations. The Welsh Assembly Government recently consulted on a national strategy on reducing the proportion of young people who are NEET². In Scotland, successive reforms since the Beattie report in 1999 have sought to improve learning and employment opportunities for young people facing barriers to participation³. While Northern Ireland currently has no national strategy to improve opportunities for young people who are NEET, the experience of Barnardo's services working there suggests that young people NEET in Northern Ireland are as much in need of policy solutions as elsewhere.

Research base

The research was conducted in 19 Barnardo's services across the UK, working with young people who were – or had recently been – NEET. The services were selected to illustrate the diverse barriers to participation faced by young people.

The research aimed to learn from local practice and is solution-focused. Seventy-five young people were interviewed to explore their experiences of education and how they were re-engaging through Barnardo's services, gaining new skills and confidence to help them move on to further learning or work. Separate interviews were held with project workers and managers to gain a wider perspective.

The young men and women interviewed were predominantly from poor, white backgrounds (characteristic of the NEET population as a whole⁴). The majority had left school with few qualifications and many had been excluded. While the main focus of the research was on re-engagement, it is also relevant to understand why young people drop out or get excluded from education. A literature review and a small survey were used to explore these issues.



² Welsh Assembly Government (2008) *Delivering Skills that Work for Wales: Reducing the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training in Wales* (consultation paper).

³ Scottish Executive (1999) *The Beattie Committee report: Implementing Inclusiveness, Realising Potential*.

⁴ Analysis by the New Policy Institute shows that white, working class boys outnumber every other group amongst young people NEET. See www.poverty.org.uk/32/index.shtml#def (accessed 4 February 2009).

Research findings

Why do young people ‘drop out’ of education?

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 challenging behaviour, truancy and exclusion. Young people often acknowledged they’d been ‘no angels’ and now they regretted ‘getting in with the wrong crowd’ and wasting the opportunities available to them in school.

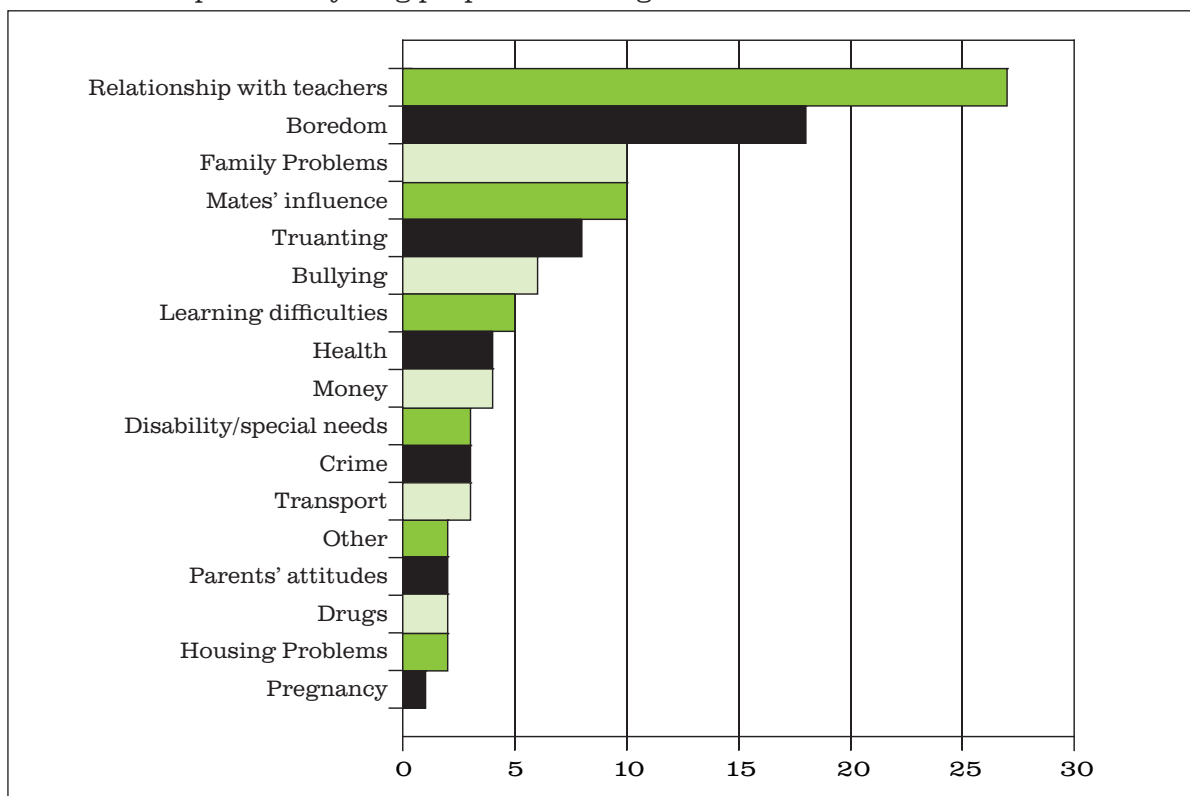
Disengagement tended to be a cumulative process, starting with difficulties in primary school and becoming entrenched by negative experiences in secondary school. Young people who lacked confidence or struggled in class seemed to have lost their way in large secondary schools, where their difficulties were

either not noticed or insufficiently addressed. A narrow emphasis on academic achievement and gaining A* to 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 if they had 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.

Chart 1: What prevented young people from doing well at school?



Source: Survey of young people in Barnardo’s services (N= 34)



Case study 1

Brian had always been quite shy and often found school worrying, especially during times of change. He admitted to being a bit of a comfort eater. He had a habit of hiding away – at infants' school he remembers hiding under a table. Secondary school came as a shock. He'd fallen behind in the last year of juniors' and found the work at secondary school challenging, but worse was the name-calling and teasing. Sometimes he tried to retaliate, but he felt that the school didn't hear his side of the story about being bullied every day. His angry outbursts and poor attendance got him referred to the pupil referral unit or as he put it, 'the school for naughty kids'. There things went from bad to worse. He was anxious about the smoking – he didn't like smoking, so once again he felt different to the other students and intimidated by them. Eventually he retreated to the security of his family home.

Brian's mother realised things weren't going well for him and took him to Connexions. The personal adviser referred him to a Barnardo's vocational training centre where he started an NVQ in retail. His work placement was just right for him, as it was only a two-minute walk from home. He made two friends amongst his new colleagues and because they were adults, he felt secure that they wouldn't bully him. The vocational training centre had a support worker who regularly visited him at his placement to make sure things were going well. He knew she would help him. 'I've got no worries now,' he said of his life today.

Getting back on track in learning – the young people's perspective

Our research shows that young people's poor experiences at school exerted an on-going influence. Project workers aimed to build young people's confidence and turn around attitudes to learning. Many young people needed to improve their social skills before they could embark on a course or work placement. Work-based learning (such as an Entry to Employment course or an apprenticeship) was motivating because it was so different to school, and rules and routines in a workplace setting were easier to accept.

Some young people faced barriers to participation, but were helped by different ways of working and extra support. For instance, young people with learning difficulties and disabilities benefited from being able to take more time to learn the skills of a trade in small, achievable steps. Teenage mothers with access to childcare and financial support were able to resume their education and some aspired to go to university; without such support, they were an isolated and vulnerable group.

Structural factors, such as living in a deprived area and poor public transport, created further barriers and eroded aspirations. Practical support and encouragement from a key worker, the opportunity to learn new skills, gain work experience and qualifications, and access to social activities helped young people to make progress. 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.

Case study 2

Harry had been training at Dr B's restaurant in Harrogate for 12 weeks. He reflected on how much he had grown up and calmed down in that time. The idea that he would eventually be able to apply for a job in a restaurant kitchen motivated him to work hard. He was even prepared to get up early every morning to be ready to clean the kitchens. This hadn't always been the case.

Harry was left to his own devices from a young age. When he was 10 years old he threw a chair at the head teacher of his primary school and was excluded for the whole of Year 6. He did not return to school until he started secondary school, when he was unprepared for the transition. He admitted he'd got in with the wrong crowd and engaged in offending behaviour, but was pleased to say he'd 'never been arrested.' A home tutor refused to call because his mother was never in, so he was referred to the pupil referral unit. A taxi was sent to collect him, but he would ignore the door bell. When the driver left, he went back to bed.

Harry heard about Dr B's through a friend who had been on the Entry to Employment (E2E) programme. He signed up to the 22-week course himself and was able to transfer to training at Dr B's restaurant when he had completed the course. Being able to see a clear pathway to the chef's training course motivated him to gain maths and literacy skills and he acknowledged that his behaviour and social skills had improved as well.

Harry now saw his future in catering. His signature dish was lasagne and he was writing his CV ready to start looking for jobs when he'd completed his NVQ.

How do Barnardo's services help young people to re-engage?

Barnardo's provides two main types of service for young people who are – or have recently been – NEET:

- support services for vulnerable young people facing barriers to participation – such as young mothers, homeless young people, care leavers and young people with mental health problems
- vocational training and work-based learning services.

Both types of service combine elements of education and support. Some young people needed much more individual attention to build their confidence and develop the interpersonal and life skills that they would need to take the next steps towards more formal learning or work; others coped well with just a little advice and support from project workers.



“The staff are really nice and you can talk to them about anything that's on your mind, and they just listen.”

Service user, Dr B's, Harrogate

A common set of values was evident in every service, underpinning their work in getting young people 'back on track'. These were:

- flexibility – including '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 when they behaved badly, made mistakes or thought about giving up.

Funding and reporting requirements could run counter to working in this way: imposing limits on the time allowed to complete a course and specifying success measures which were unrealistic for some young people, given their starting point and the challenges they faced.



“You just get opportunities. B's bring you places, to meet other people, tell you about jobs, tell you things you need to know.”

Service user, The Hub, Stepney Green

Case study 3

Chloë and Ella became friends after being involved with Barnardo's Young Families project in Wakefield (WYF). Ella is 20 and Chloë 18, and each has a little boy. They live independently and initially needed support with housing. The girls liked school and hoped to do well when they moved to college to take 'A' levels. However they had both become pregnant at 16. Ella said 'I really didn't like college' and Chloë believed that moving house in year 10 had disrupted her education, so she got into the 'usual teenage stuff'.

Both girls were confident in their aspirations. Ella had spent time doing voluntary work and trained as a youth worker. She had accessed Care to Learn funding to continue her studies at college and WYF had provided advice and guidance about continuing in education. A benefits adviser had helped her to calculate that she would be better off working than on Job Seekers' Allowance, so she had found a job as a healthcare assistant at the local hospital. She was proud that she had learnt how to plaster a broken limb. She was about to take up a university place, but she knew that healthcare was flexible work that she could always return to.

After having a year off to settle down in a hostel with her baby, Chloë took an NVQ level 2 in childcare. Receiving Care to Learn meant that she could return to 'A' level study and resit her maths and English GCSEs. Eventually she hoped to take an Open University degree; she had worked out she could fit this in with employment and childcare responsibilities. Both girls agreed: 'If you're sat at home doing nowt, you're never going to get anywhere.'

Conclusions and recommendations

Enabling participation

Caricatures of young people who are NEET portray them as 'idle' and 'feckless', and sometimes view them with suspicion. This research reveals a different picture: young people who had a difficult time in school left with few, if any, qualifications and now found that their opportunities were very limited. Some faced specific barriers to continuing in education or finding a job, such as having a baby, becoming homeless or experiencing mental health problems. Despite such challenges, almost all were motivated by having a second chance to gain qualifications and improve their employment prospects.

But for those who had already spent months or years outside the education system, the path back to learning was rarely straightforward – and in the context of an economic downturn, their motivation to work risked turning to disaffection.

Recommendation 1: To engage 'hard to reach' young people and support their transition back to education, training or work, local authorities need to plan for an expansion in provision with the following characteristics:

- a high ratio of staff to young people to enable 1-1 support from keyworkers and small group activities
- outreach capacity to engage young people and sustain their participation
- flexibility – for example, allowing more time to complete modules and occasional breaks in participation if crises occur
- informal learning opportunities to develop new skills and build confidence
- access to targeted support for young people who face specific barriers.

Recommendation 2: Government and local authorities should map the support needs of the 'NEET' population and plan growth in services to enable their participation in learning. Government should identify and disseminate models of effective practice for vulnerable groups such as teenage mothers and care leavers.

Recommendation 3: Further research is needed to identify 'what works' in supporting participation for young people who face 'super barriers' – such as young offenders, homeless young people and those with severe mental health difficulties – whose education is often put on hold indefinitely.



Extending alternative, vocational and work-based learning

There is a need to think creatively about what would work better for those young people who leave school as soon as they can, with few qualifications and lacking confidence in their own ability to learn and succeed. This research points to the value of alternative and vocational courses offered alongside school, such as those provided by two Barnardo's services in London, the Hub and Windermere.

Recommendation 4: Alternative and vocational pathways should be available in every area as a positive 14-19 option, for the many young people whose potential is not unlocked by mainstream education. Barnardo's would like to work with others in central and local government and third sector partners to develop this concept further, drawing on the experience of our services.

The young people involved in this research were strongly motivated by the possibility of improving their job prospects and many aspired to gain an apprenticeship. But labour market opportunities for unskilled young people are limited and competition for apprenticeships is keen. Most needed help to improve their skills and grow in confidence to have a chance of making a successful transition to work or an employed apprenticeship.

Recommendation 5: Government needs to drive a growth in work-based learning and vocational opportunities (including apprenticeships) for 14-19 year olds, with more supported opportunities for young people working at entry level or level one. In particular, action is needed to generate more work-based learning opportunities in areas of economic decline. The current economic downturn makes this task all the more urgent.



Commissioning, funding and reporting arrangements

Government policy in England, Wales and Scotland to encourage young people to carry on learning until they are 18 will necessitate an expansion in provision for those young people historically lost to the education system at 16. Vulnerable and disadvantaged young people are over-represented in the NEET population.

Third sector organisations such as Barnardo's play an important role in supporting such groups and facilitating their transition back to education, training or into work, often in partnership with statutory services. Growth in capacity will be required to support the goal of full participation. Funding disincentives for working with young people who need more time or support to achieve a qualification or make a successful transition must be addressed.

Recommendation 6: Growth in third sector provision for young people who are NEET or at risk of being so would be facilitated by:

- realistic assessment of the additional costs of working with the most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people
- greater funding flexibility to deliver learning packages tailored to individual needs and to allow more time to complete modules
- 'intelligent commissioning'⁵ by local authorities, involving third sector partners in shaping provision for 'hard-to-reach' young people who tend not to use statutory services
- access to capital funding to create new services where there are none, including the development of outreach services

- integrated strategies (with joint planning and commissioning) to support the participation of the most vulnerable young people – including homeless young people, young people with mental health difficulties and young offenders.

Recommendation 7: 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.



“Five years down the line, I would like to see myself either having my own business or really going into politics. If I can achieve this I can achieve anything.”

Service user, The Hub, Stepney Green

⁵ See Audit Commission (2007) *Hearts and Minds: Commissioning from the voluntary sector*. Audit Commission, London.

*Second Chances:
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education and training*

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The research was carried out by Dr Jane Evans, Deborah Meyer and Barbara Robinson, directed by Anne Pinney. Barnardo's will build on this research over the coming year, to drive further improvements in policy and practice across the UK for young people who are NEET.

Download the full report from:
[www.barnardos.org.uk/
resources/research_and_
publications/books_and_tools_
school_and_education.htm](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/resources/research_and_publications/books_and_tools_school_and_education.htm)

Watch the *Second Chances* DVD of young people in Barnardo's services.
For further information, email jane.evans@barnardos.org.uk

Some images posed by models.
Names have been changed to protect identities.



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