



Nacro's response to the Young People and Work Report: Call for Evidence

About Nacro

Nacro is a social justice charity delivering services across England and Wales to around 33,000 people every year. We work with some of the most disadvantaged [young people](#) in our [education centres](#), supported housing, and substance misuse services. Nacro Education is one of the country's largest Independent Training Providers, working with around 2,000 16-19 year olds a year to help them gain qualifications and get them on a pathway to success. Many of our students have previously disengaged with learning and have been not in education, employment or training (NEET) or at risk of becoming NEET. A significant majority have multiple barriers to learning. More than half declare a learning difficulty or disability at enrolment, and 60% are from the 27% most disadvantaged wards. Despite this, we work with our students to help them fulfil their potential, with achievement rates above national averages, and to help the progress confidently onto their next steps, be that further education, training or work.

Our response to this call for evidence is based on our direct experience and the nature of our service delivery.

If you require any further information about this response please contact Andrea Coady, Head of Policy and Service User Involvement at andrea.coady@nacro.org.uk

Our response

Question 1: What is stopping more young people from participating in employment, education or training?

The challenge of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) is not a new one, but the significant recent increases and strong correlation to ill health and Special Educational Need and Disability (SEND) pose new challenges. We know that youth unemployment can be both a cause and a consequence of poor mental health, and it is therefore critical to develop solutions to these together. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are in some places now only responding to acute and crisis cases leading to increasing need and young people remaining unwell, and NEET, for longer. Yet many young people are undiagnosed or are below the threshold for additional support but have significant needs. As a social justice charity, our focus is not just on getting young people into education training and employment, but on how they can build a fulfilling life.

Nacro's own research¹ showed that many of the young people we support are ambitious and want to achieve, and understand the value of hard work. We support young people to nurture that ambition and belief and help give them the skills to succeed. But there are barriers which hold them back. Below we set out some of the key barriers we see from our own experience working with young people with significant needs, which are often multifaceted and interrelated. Of the young people who attend a Nacro Education Centre:

¹ [Nacro: The Truth About Youth: The Challenges and Aspirations of Young People \(2024\)](#)

- 80% are considered socially disadvantaged
- 55% have a special educational need or disability (SEND)
- 30% have an Education and Healthcare Plan (EHCP)²

While Nacro tends to start working with young people from the age of 16, we recognise that for many, disengagement and pathways to becoming NEET start much earlier and is often rooted in family poverty and financial insecurity, and undiagnosed and unmet need. For example, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to have special educational needs and disabilities but face significant barriers to receiving adequate support, obtaining an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), or get special school placements, leading to worse outcomes than their more affluent peers.³

By removing some of the barriers identified, economic inactivity will be reduced for those with significant needs, including those who don't currently meet definitions or thresholds for additional support. For brevity, we have not included many of the wider factors we know to impact such as caring responsibilities, care-experience, ethnicity and gender disparities, impact of reduction in youth services etc as we know other stakeholders will submit evidence on these. We have also not included specific recommendations on the SEND system as we note this is out of scope of this review. We would however be happy to share further insight and experience on these.

16-19 systems-change

- a) Large numbers of young people who are not "Level 3 ready" cannot find a suitable place in the system; we need to see greater support of independent training providers and more tailored and specialist provision beyond mainstream providers who can engage those falling through the gaps.
- b) Many young people Nacro work with are the furthest away from engagement and need higher support and tailored approach. This requires a flexible response that education funding does not adequately support, rather all too often financial disincentives are built into the system. There is no reward or incentive for providers to take on someone who is more disengaged, only risk.
- c) Funding for post-16 providers is dependent on enrolment in and delivery of 100 hours English and/or Maths. While these subjects are important, for some of the most disengaged young people, enforcing this from the beginning of their re-engagement journey can be a significant barrier to participation. This requirement can also mean that general FE colleges are less likely to enrol those students who are most disengaged because of potential financial penalty, and specialist providers risk being even more financially disadvantaged. Mandatory repeat GCSE English or maths resits have contributed heavily to disengagement and we are pleased to see changes may be coming to this policy.

² [Nacro: The Truth About Youth: The Challenges and Aspirations of Young People \(2024\)](#)

³ <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/double-disadvantage/>

- d) Most Post-16 providers maintain a traditional September to July academic year which doesn't work for people who have started with one provider but found it unsuitable, or have been NEET for some time or have been unable to start in September for other reasons (such as ill health, difficulty finding a suitable placement etc). Nacro has more flexible year-round enrolment points in order to ensure that we are best supporting the most disadvantaged students at a time that works best for them, but the funding system works against us and this can be a cost to the provider, which means many providers don't offer flexible enrolment.
- e) Work placement opportunities for young people on Level 2 pathways or below, and for young people with additional learning needs, have become harder to secure due to increased competition with T-level placements. Often, those students on Level 2 pathways or below have the most to gain from workplace opportunities. Many of the students we support are among the most disadvantaged young people and have often had limited exposure to a range of life experiences in their previous education. As a result, they may lack the social capital that enables others to form clear aspirations or understand the opportunities available to them. Well-designed enrichment, including encounters with employers, cultural and community experiences, outdoor learning and wider social opportunities, helps students build confidence, broaden horizons and develop a sense of possibility. For students with chaotic or disrupted lives, these experiences can be pivotal in creating aspiration and anchoring learning to a meaningful future.
- f) We welcome announcements in recent post-16 education and skills white paper⁴ to track attendance at school and college. However, there are still too many transition points without support where people drop out of schools and colleges with little follow up. We have strong collaboration with some colleges when someone is at risk of disengaging so we can support and help transition a young person to Nacro, but this is not consistent in other areas and young people are not always picked up and supported into provision that meets their needs.
- g) There is significant variation in local authority approaches to tracking, follow-up and outreach. In some areas local authorities share NEET information with Nacro so we can proactively reach out to people, or local authorities proactively track those at risk of becoming NEET themselves and then refer people to us. In other areas local authorities do not share information and do little to no outreach and engagement.

Support for transitions

- h) We need better data systems, information sharing and joint working across education, health, local authorities, combined authorities and government. These should support a cohesive approach and alignment across trailblazers, the Youth Guarantee, DWP youth hubs, Young Futures, family hubs, mental health and prevention partnerships, community safety and safeguarding.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-education-and-skills-white-paper/post-16-education-and-skills-white-paper>

- i) Nacro staff across all our services tell us how the thresholds for support have been getting higher. And that young people who don't fall into the categories which lead to additional support, but are on the edge of the system, are more likely to fall through the gaps. Increasing professional assessment and flexibility around the definitions of need which lead to additional support, could help earlier identification of those at risk of becoming NEET. Examples of where this has happened include: the Holiday Activities and Food programme has flexibility built into eligibility beyond free school meals; the pandemic response allowing school and youth centre attendance for some children based on professional assessment and judgement in addition to set definitions. This assessment might for example allow for a young person, who professionals believe has a particular need and is at risk of being NEET, to have automatic access to a Youth Work Coach to support with jobs and training, as Care Leavers do.
- j) Young people in supported housing face a cliff edge and little financial advantage to taking up work as they lose other financial support. While at Nacro we encourage people to see the positive benefits of work beyond the financial we know that these barriers put many off and lead to more young people relying solely on benefits, and wasted potential. We were pleased that the Budget announced that changes will be made in this area and we will be looking closely at the detail.
- k) The loss of Child Benefit for families of 16 year olds wanting to take up an Apprenticeship leads to young people not taking up what would be their preferred and most appropriate pathway, leading to lower engagement.

Question 2: What would make the biggest difference to support more young people to participate?

There is no single solution to supporting more young people to participate in education, employment or training, but it is vital that there is a relentless focus on those who are the most disadvantaged and the furthest from engaging if we are to turn the tide on this growing issue. Arguably this is the group that has the greatest economic and social cost if they become NEET. Focusing on the most disadvantaged will not only benefit those young people but will also benefit those who are closer to the labour market. We have seen some recent positive moves, such as from the Curriculum and Assessment Review and Post-16 education and skills white paper, which we believe will help tackle some of the barriers highlighted above. In addition, we would recommend:

- 1. Review the professional assessment of "in need"** to support real life experiences of young people who are the furthest away from engagement and need higher support and tailored approach.
- 2. Recognise the role of 16-19 education and skills centres** and ensure funding has the flexibility to ensure that the system does not disadvantage those young people for whom this type of provision is most suitable, nor the providers who are best placed to provide a more tailored and supported approach. Smaller class sizes, skilled teachers, one to one support and a practical approach to learning, together with programmes that are flexible, coherent and confidence-building are evidenced to foster, and sustain, engagement.

3. **Ensure availability of modular qualifications or courses** which act as stepping stones into other learning, training or employment to support re-engagement in post-16 education.
4. **Remove unrealistic entry requirements** for newer initiatives which close down opportunities which might better suit young people who are disengaged.
5. **Incentivise employers to offer work placements** or work experience to young people on lower-level qualifications to help give them essential experience and exposure to employment opportunities.
6. **Increase apprenticeships take up** by overcoming the loss of child benefit barrier currently preventing some young people from taking one up.
7. **Adequately fund enrichment activity for disadvantaged students** which supports engagement with vocational learning, strengthens self-esteem and contributes directly to successful progression into further study, apprenticeships or employment.
8. **Drive a joined up approach** to tracking, collaboration and outreach to ensure that all statutory and provider bodies share information, identify people at risk early, and collaborate to achieve the best result.