Briefing 2

Career Connect

Connecting to Opportunity

The Career Connect Way

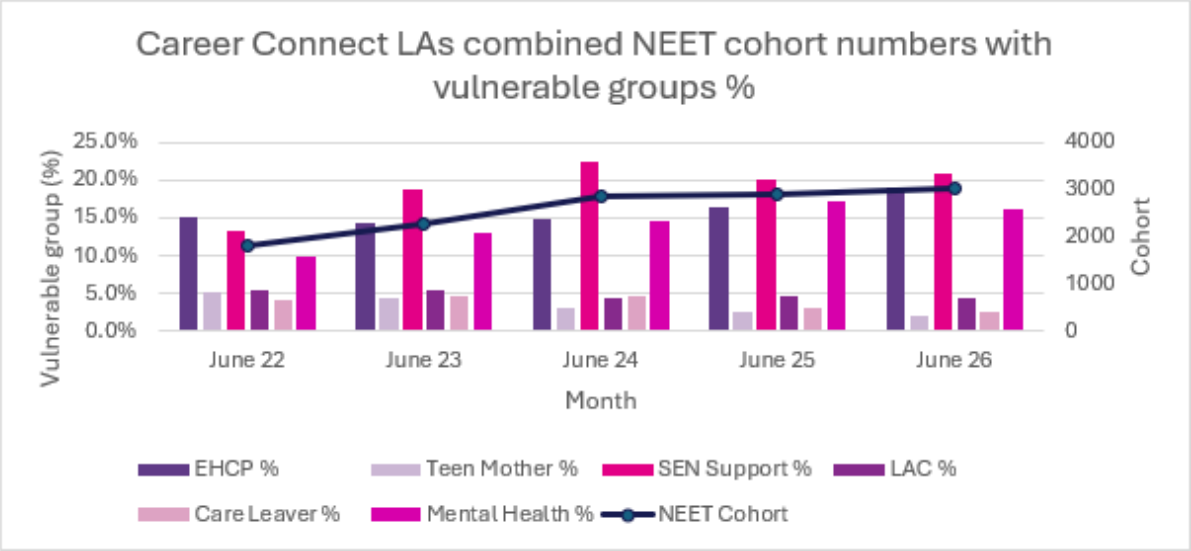
Briefing 2: Reaching out, not hard-to-reach: a tested approach for increasing young people's engagement with careers support

In our second briefing, we're presenting a model for achieving improved, sustained participation – turning engagement into connection. We believe this model should inform policy, commissioning and investment.

This model addresses all five elements of our design for system change – prevention, participation, integration, opportunity and accountability- and is underpinned by the questions we believe can change mindsets and actions.

What our data tells us

Across the areas where we deliver young people's careers services - Liverpool City Region and Manchester - vulnerable cohorts are increasing in size and complexity.



The combined NEET cohort has grown from around 1,800 young people in June 2022 to over 3,000 in June 2026. SEND and mental health needs feature prominently. By June 2026, around one in five young people had an EHCP and a

similar proportion were receiving SEN support, while mental health needs remain notably higher than in 2022. This reinforces the need for early identification and timely, personalised support in response to the variety of barriers that can increase the risk of NEET.

Meaningful first contact

Our experience shows that meaningful engagement requires persistent, personalised outreach — not simply an offer of support. The first Milburn report made it clear that the majority of young people want to connect to opportunities. But services are not always visible, accessible or easy to navigate. For those facing multiple and complex challenges, even contemplating next steps can feel impossible. **The responsibility is ours to reach out, build trust and keep the door to support open. We welcome Alan Milburn's recent comments on the power of community outreach; physically knocking on doors to engage with young people is as important as having a Youth Hub nearby.**

The average number of successful interventions before meaningful trust begins to be established:

5

The scale of Career Connect's home-visiting and localised outreach activity demonstrates our commitment to ensuring that the most vulnerable young people have equitable access to opportunities.

In 2025-2026 we provided tracking and support services for 43,245 young people, including identifying those who were NEET or at risk of NEET. The insight opposite shows the need for persistence.

The responsibility to be proactive lies with the system - to prioritise persistent, tailored engagement and heightened visibility of careers support services.

The first phone call, text, card through the letterbox, or knock on the door – done in the right way - can be the start of transforming a life.

And, once the young person connects into that support system, they must feel confident it will work for them.

The Career Connect model for sustained participation in careers support

Early Identification and Prevention + Persistent Outreach and Building Trusted Relationships

+ Personalised, Impartial Support + Multi-Agency Collaboration

+ Employer Engagement

underpinned by young people's voices and feedback

= Improved education, employment and training outcomes

Take one element away, more young people fall through the cracks. Any full system reset must support each of these to work together – with accountability.

The model in action

Early identification and prevention

To enable high-quality, early identification, organisations should combine data intelligence, transition information, and local insight so that intervention takes place before disengagement becomes entrenched.

Identification should include proactive youth voice activity – in a number of localities it has helped us to uncover young people who were hidden NEET and to identify unknown barriers to participation.

Career Connect works with Sefton Council to embed and deliver an early intervention model for young people from age 14.

In 2025/26, the team worked with 846 under-16s at Risk of NEET, providing a total of 2,594 interventions. This included vulnerable groups, Cared For young people, young people with SEN and SEMH needs, and school non-attenders.

In March 2026, just 3.8% of 16-to 17-year-olds in Sefton were NEET, a figure that has halved since the model began in 2019 – **read the BBC report: "How a borough in Merseyside is bucking the UK's youth unemployment trend**."

Read a report on our website about the design and effectiveness of Sefton's early intervention approach.

Persistent outreach and building trusted relationships

A 'place-based, right place, right time' approach brings support to young people rather than expecting them to access services independently. Home visits, community outreach, co-location with trusted partners, text and WhatsApp messaging, and flexible appointments are proven ways to build relationships and reconnect with young people who are Hidden NEET or Not Known.

Vulnerable young people should be prioritised, and every young person offered a named adviser and at least one face-to-face meeting. The focus of engagement should be on developing sustained, relationship-based support with a trusted adult, rather than transactional interventions. Regular attempts to engage **must** continue as long as the young person is eligible.

Careers Adviser Margy offers place-based support from a Care Leavers Hub, allowing her to build long-term relationships informally and on young people's terms.

The Hub has meeting and social spaces, and laundry facilities for young people to use. Margy has engaged care leavers in employability, digital inclusion (including access to free laptops) and budgeting programmes - who would otherwise not have participated. Feedback has shown direct impact on young people's next steps. It also allows her to work closely with Personal Assistants and other support services such as CAMHS.

"Margy is someone who never gives up on you. Even when I stopped answering messages, she kept checking in." **- Care Leaver who worked with Margy at the Hub.**

Personalised, impartial support

Caseload models help foster consistent, trusted, long-term relationships – critical for young people facing multiple and complex barriers. This empowers careers advisers to broker suitable learning, confidence, skills building and employment opportunities. Impartiality ensures young people have full agency and are the ultimate decision makers.

Support must address goals and wider barriers such as mental health, anxiety,

SEND, confidence, life skills, poverty and social isolation. This relationship must evolve into in-work or in-education/training support - vital to sustaining progress.

Michael was isolated, overwhelmed in new situations, and was anxious about public transport.

Careers Adviser Wiktoria connected Michael to an emotional wellbeing and mental health support programme and delivered travel training – including helping him apply for and use a travel pass. With Michael aspiring to work in tourism, Wiktoria helped him secure a three-month placement at a heritage railway attraction - further supporting his ambition and skills building – as he awaited the start of his travel and tourism course. Read Michael's full story

"My placement helped me feel what it's like to have an actual job. I'm more confident in talking to people now, and in adapting. [Wiktoria] is the reason why I'm where I am now. I'd like to work in a role like cabin crew or other role in tourism…I'd say I've learned that I have potential."

Multi-agency collaboration

Careers services must work with local authorities, schools, colleges, social care, SEND teams, Youth Justice Services, health partners, employers and the voluntary sector to provide coordinated support around the young person. Systems must be connected, information shared, and support must be data-led and evidence based. Support must be easy to navigate.

Employer engagement

Connecting more young people to meaningful opportunities through employers, colleges, training providers, apprenticeships, supported internships and sector-based programmes aligned to local labour market demand. Guaranteed 'Bridge the Gap' opportunities for young people to 'try and test' training, education and employment opportunities – leading to softer outcomes that move a young person towards career readiness.

Any new system design must invest in every element of this model – and create a framework that makes it easy for each one to work together seamlessly, with the flexibility to respond to data insights and young people's voices.

Manchester Pathways is built on close collaboration with Manchester

City Council, agencies, partners, young people and employers.

Designed with young people, the 12-week hyperlocal programme includes weekly two-day work placements, a training day and development day, weekly £80 bursary, and intensive careers support and planning. Participation has grown by 542% since launching in 2023, with 45 young people (including 21 with SEMH needs), taking part between April 2025-April 2026 – and around 80% progressing into positive destinations including apprenticeships. Pathways has grown from one employer to 14 this year, and will be further expanded for 2026/27.

"Career Connect helped me to get a work placement on Pathways and build up my skills. Made me believe in myself and think 'I can do this.'"

"They basically teach us long term life skills that will help us after the programme. With the people that I've met, and the skills that they've taught me, I'll be able to stay in work instead of just doing nothing."

Recent media reports have stated that Alan Milburn's upcoming report will call for "increased and sustained investment at scale," into the £billions, for employment schemes. This is of course the news we want to hear.

When a young person is facing barriers, building trust before next steps takes time and persistence – and that means human resource. We hope to see investment in community models with a focus on outreach, and dedicated funds for every element of the model we propose, including sustained in-work/in-training/in-education support.

The test of success for any new system should not be whether a young person enters education, employment or training - but whether they are equipped and supported to stay, progress and thrive.

Learn more:

Impact: Career Connect's 2025/26 impact report

Career Connect in the News: (BBC) How a borough in Merseyside is bucking the UK's youth unemployment trend

Research: Lost in transition: the impact of social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs on educational continuity

Analysis: Elective Home Education: A growing concern