

**Investing in the Future:**  
Evaluating the Effectiveness  
of an Early Intervention  
Programme for Young People  
at Risk of Becoming NEET



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**After several years where the number of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET) remained stable, it has recently started rising again. A large component of this are young people who are not ready to seek employment, further education, or training, and require support to get them to this point.**

While the factors that increase risk of NEET are reasonably well-evidenced, and early interventions have been identified as part of the solution to NEET, there is relatively little evidence available of what an early intervention approach means in practice, and what the impact of this is.

This short report summarises our learning from evidence generation around an early intervention programme for young people in Sefton, Merseyside. Using programme generated data, national data, and interviews with delivery teams, the commissioning team at Sefton Council, and young people using the service, we sought to answer three questions:

- I. Did the early intervention approach reduce NEET and time spent NEET for those most at risk?
- II. How did intervention patterns with young people at risk change because of a change to early interventions?
- III. What are the factors that make early interventions effective for this group of young people, and what are the wider success factors that could be applied at scale to other locations?

## Summary of key findings

1. Targeted early intervention reduces both NEET and the time spent NEET among those most at risk. We saw reductions of between 1%-16.8% pts in the percentage of at-risk young people that are NEET upon leaving school, and between 53-78 days reduction in the average number of days spent NEET. Sefton is ranked as the highest performing local authority on NEET reduction in the Liverpool City Region (LCR) and across the Northwest and performs better than the average performance of all authorities in England. Sefton consistently ranks in the top 2 compared with its Statistical Neighbours. Early intervention is essential to maintain NEET levels at a time when there is a growing number of young people with characteristics that place them at risk of NEET and long-term unemployment.
2. Targeted intervention has a substantial impact on the number of young people whose status is 'Not Known' at the beginning of year 12. In October 2022, only 0.1% of young people in Sefton had a Not Known status. This compares with an average of 1.2% across the Northwest and 2.8% across England. Reducing the number of young people whose status is Not Known post 16 is critical in enabling services to identify and target those most in need.

3. The funding available for the interventions did not change between 2019-2022. This said, we have not in this report looked at Sefton's overall investment compared with other authorities, but adequate funding is going to be a key factor in the provision of impactful early interventions. Sefton's was an 'invest to save' model, funding a proactive approach that ensured greater effectiveness longer-term.
4. There are two key success factors that make interventions from year 9 onwards effective. First, is that it addresses the need for longer-term support and preparation for post-school pathways among those most at risk before the point at which they become NEET, which has typically been the 'trigger' for support to be provided. Secondly, it provides the time required to establish the relationships of trust between advisers and young people that are essential to meaningful support being provided.
5. We identified several additional features supporting the success of a proactive approach:
  - o Continued support post-16 for young people who are most at risk but are in some form of EET provision.
  - o Expanded use of data to target services and track performance.
  - o Close working between all agencies involved in providing wraparound support for young people and their families: case workers, schools, mental health services, housing services, child safeguarding services.
  - o Key Performance Indicator (KPI) frameworks that place an emphasis on outcomes rather than outputs and process.
6. These results were achieved during a period of severe disruption to school attendance brought about by the restrictions resulting from the Covid pandemic, with poor school attendance lasting beyond those restrictions. Further, in 2022, there was a rapid rise in the cost of living causing economic difficulties for many families. The results achieved in this challenging context further emphasise the potential impact of approaches that are responsive to need and which are preventative rather than reactive.

## Recommendations

From these findings we make five recommendations for service delivery, resourcing, and the scaling of best practice.

- I. Funding allocation for authorities should support the provision of fair and equitable access to Careers Services to all young people. Schools have a statutory to provider services which should reflect the Gatsby benchmarks<sup>1</sup>, but these services are often insufficient for vulnerable young people and those with low or no school attendance. Local authority funded interventions for those with additional needs from Year 9 should be the default provision for those most at risk of NEET, allowing for continuity of support for those most in need from age 14-18, or to 24 for those young people who are SEND.
- II. Funding allocation to and within local authorities should be based on evidence of emerging risk levels in school leaver cohorts. An 'invest to save model' should be the default, addressing risk and preventing the longer-term personal and societal costs of not addressing the careers needs of those most at risk, while maintaining support to those that become NEET.
- III. High quality data should play a much greater role in the provision of careers services to young people most at risk. It can greatly increase the efficiency of resources through targeting support where risk is highest, it is critical to the ongoing tracking of outcomes, and it allows for the identification of emerging issues which services will need to pivot towards. There is great potential for more sophisticated modelling of risk and use of risk models to direct services.
- IV. There should be much greater sharing of evidence and learning of what works in supporting most at risk young people into EET provision, between local authorities, delivery partners and agencies such as Youth Futures Foundation- that promote the use of evidence in the design and delivery of services.
- V. There should be a greater investment in the production of evidence that has operational value, and which can guide more impactful services. Evidence production should focus on not just impact but what specifically drives impact that is transferable to other settings.

<sup>1</sup> Holman, J. (2014). Good Career Guidance: The Report of the Aims Professional Development Advisory Group. The Gatsby Charitable Foundation.

# Introduction

## NEET trends in England

A young person being 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' (NEET) can be particularly harmful and have long-term 'scarring' effects. Individuals who spend time NEET are more likely to be unemployed, receive lower wages, have a criminal record, report lower levels of life satisfaction and suffer from health problems such as depression. At the end of 2021 there were over 700,000 16-to 24-year-olds classified as NEET in England – equivalent to one in ten young people. A recent report from the Youth Futures Foundation (YFF) estimates that there would be potential savings of £38bn for the UK economy from the reduction of NEET rates to levels the same as Germany – the benchmark country for the Youth Employment Index (PWC, 2022).

A 2022 analysis of NEET trends highlights how the make-up of youth worklessness has been transformed, with economic activity (particularly among young men) almost doubling between 1995 and 2021. Two other trends identified in the analysis are a substantial fall in the number of young women who are inactive for family care reasons, and a rise in the number of young people who are inactive due to health problems, with mental health having an increasing prominence within this.

Most of the evidence about what works in reducing NEET points to the types of interventions and support that can be effective, including acting early before the age of 16, but there is very little that details what this looks like in practice or the specific impact that this has. This is a hinderance both to those designing and commissioning services and those delivering them. This short report aims to fill that gap by looking at an approach that made a positive impact on NEET and Not Known in Sefton, Merseyside.

<sup>2</sup>The long-term NEET population. Impetus Research Briefing, 2019. <https://www.impetus.org.uk/assets/publications/Youth-Jobs-Gap-The-Long-Term-NEET-Population.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>Youth Employment Index 2022, PWC and Youth Futures Foundation, 2022 <https://www.pwc.co.uk/services/economics/insights/youth-employment-index.html>

<sup>4</sup>Not working. Exploring changing trends in youth worklessness in the UK, from the 1990s to the Covid-19 pandemic. L.Murphy, 2022. Resolution Foundation and The Health Foundation. <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2022/06/Not-working.pdf>

<sup>5</sup>Local action on health inequalities: Reducing the number of young people not in employment, education, or training (NEET), Public Health England and UCL Institute of Health Equity. Health Equity Evidence Review 3: September 2014. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7dd2a040f0b65d88634a03/Review3\\_NEETs\\_health\\_inequalities.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7dd2a040f0b65d88634a03/Review3_NEETs_health_inequalities.pdf)

## Statutory responsibilities of local authorities

In England, local authorities have several statutory duties regarding young people who are NEET at age 16.<sup>6</sup>

- Identify and track NEET young people: Local authorities must identify and track young people who are NEET at age 16, and keep records of their progress towards education, employment, or training.
- Provide support and guidance: Local authorities have a duty to provide appropriate support and guidance to NEET young people to help them re-engage in education, employment, or training. This includes offering information about local opportunities and helping them access relevant services.
- Arrange suitable education or training: Local authorities must ensure that suitable education or training is available to NEET young people who want it and take steps to encourage their participation.
- Monitor participation: Local authorities are required to monitor the participation of NEET young people in education, employment, or training until they reach the age of 18.
- Report on progress: Local authorities must report on their progress in reducing the number of NEET young people in their area and provide information on the support and services available to help them.

The aim of these statutory duties is to ensure that young people who are NEET at age 16 have the support and guidance they need to re-engage in education, employment, or training, and to prevent them from becoming long-term NEET.

There is a separate regime covering the provision of Careers support to school-aged children, which is the responsibility of individual schools and Careers Hubs, operating under the guidance of the Careers and Enterprise Company and the Department for Education (DfE). The Gatsby Benchmarks provide the best practice framework for this provision. We do not cover these arrangements in detail in this report, although our findings and recommendations should be seen in their context.

<sup>6</sup> Participation of young people in education, employment or training. Statutory guidance for local authorities. Department for Education, September 2016.

## Sefton early intervention approach: from reactive to proactive support

In 2019, Sefton Council decided on a different approach to tackling the growing problem of young people in Sefton who are NEET. Prior to 2019, the approach was typical of many local authorities in that it was primarily a reactive service with a separation between the responsibilities of individual schools to provide careers support and support with transitions at the end of academic Year 11, when young people turn 16 years of age, and the responsibilities of local authorities to ensure that all young people aged 16-18 are engaged in either further education, employment with accredited training, or accredited training alone. For most young people, local authority funded services to this end were triggered by a young person becoming NEET between the ages of 16-18, or 16-24 for young people with a special educational need (SEND).

From 2019 onwards, the approach in Sefton changed along several lines:

- Introducing an Early intervention model for those young people most at risk of becoming NEET and monitoring the impact of this model on NEET levels.
- Close working with Social Care, Education Services, Youth Justice, Early Help, and Elective Home Education services to provide targeted services from school Year 9 (academic age 14) for those young people identified as being most at risk of becoming NEET.
- Ongoing provision of support to post-16 young people once they enter EET, as a preventative measure against them becoming NEET.
- Closer collaboration and information sharing between all young people's services within the local authority and providers of training, further education, and employment.

This report explores the collective impact of these changes. We hope that it will be a useful contribution to evidence based practice in reducing NEET and serves as a guide for service design, commissioning and delivery of services that make a positive impact for young people at a stage of their life that is critical for their future career paths.

## Methods

This report draws on three sources of data:

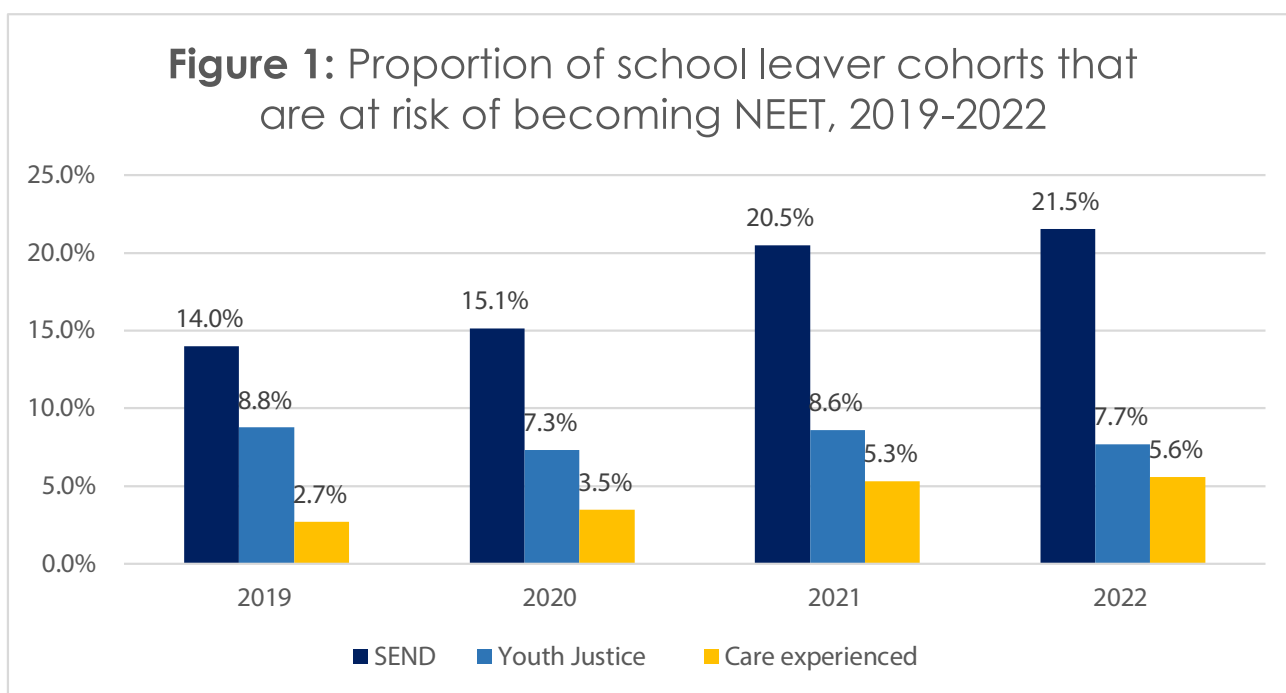
- i) National Client Caseload Information System (NCCIS) data reporting on NEET and EET among 16–24-year-olds nationally. We compare data from Sefton with other Liverpool City Region authorities, with its statistical neighbours (as specified by DfE), regionally (Northwest) and nationally.
- ii) Anonymised data from four cohorts of young people that left school in successive years 2019-2022, providing their risk profile and their NEET/EET status in the October of the year in which they are academic age 16, and again six months later.

- iii) Interviews with staff, stakeholders, and young people that have used the service since 2019. These focused on four questions:
  - What were the reasons for the switch to targeted early intervention?
  - What are the key components of the programme in addition to early intervention and why are these important?
  - What do you think makes it work? What are the scalable features that could work in other geographies?

## Findings

### The proportion of school leaver cohorts that are in one of the three RONI (risk of NEET indicator) categories increased between 2019-2022.

The percentage that are SEND increased from 14% to 21.5%; the percentage that are care experienced increased from 2.7% to 5.6%; the percentage that are engaged with youth justice services reduced from 8.8% to 7.7%. (Figure 1).

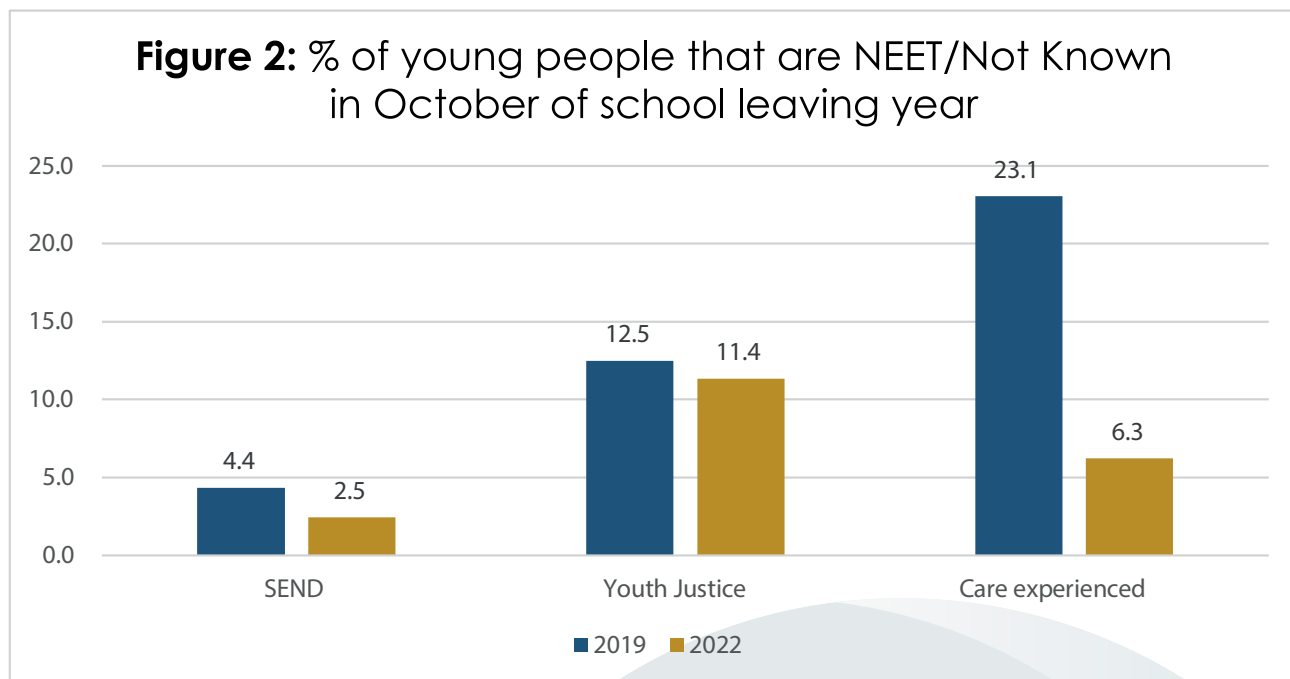


<sup>7</sup> Local Authority Interactive Tool. User guide. Department for Education, 2021.



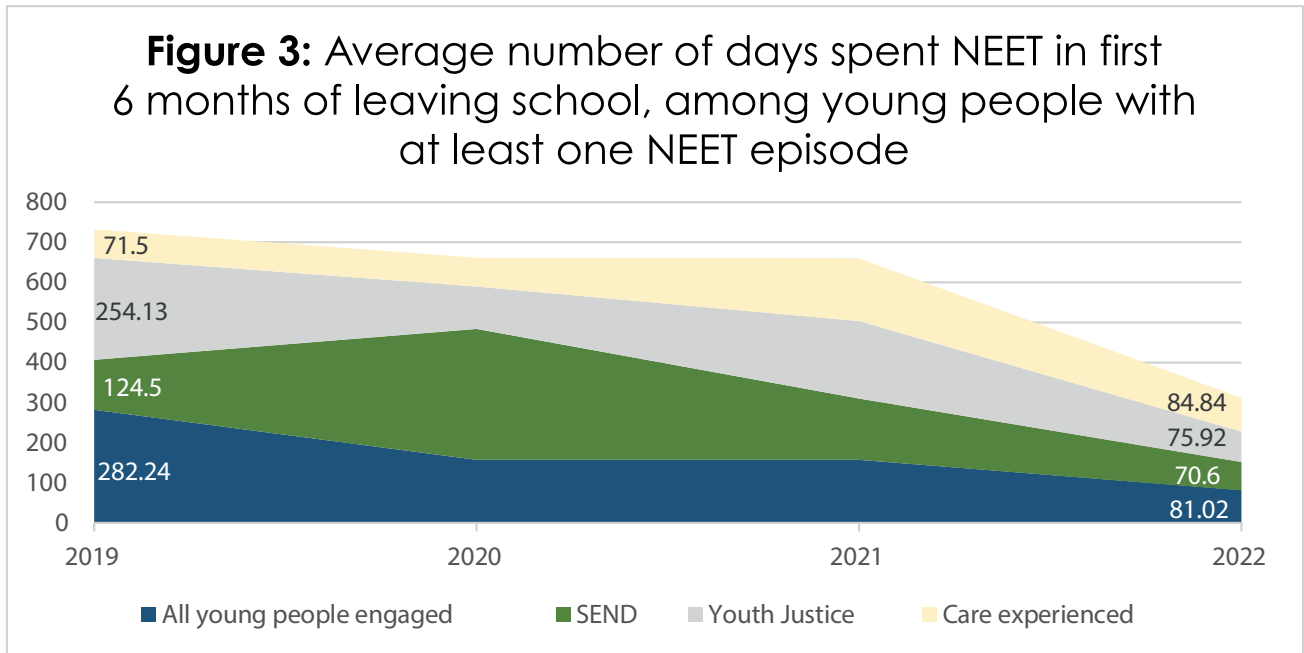
**There are reductions between 2019-2022 in the percentage of those most at risk that are NEET in the October of their school leaving year.**

NEET reduced for each of the three RONI groups targeted: 4.4% to 2.5% for SEND, 12.5% to 11.4% for youth justice engaged, and from 23.1% to 6.3% for care experienced young people.



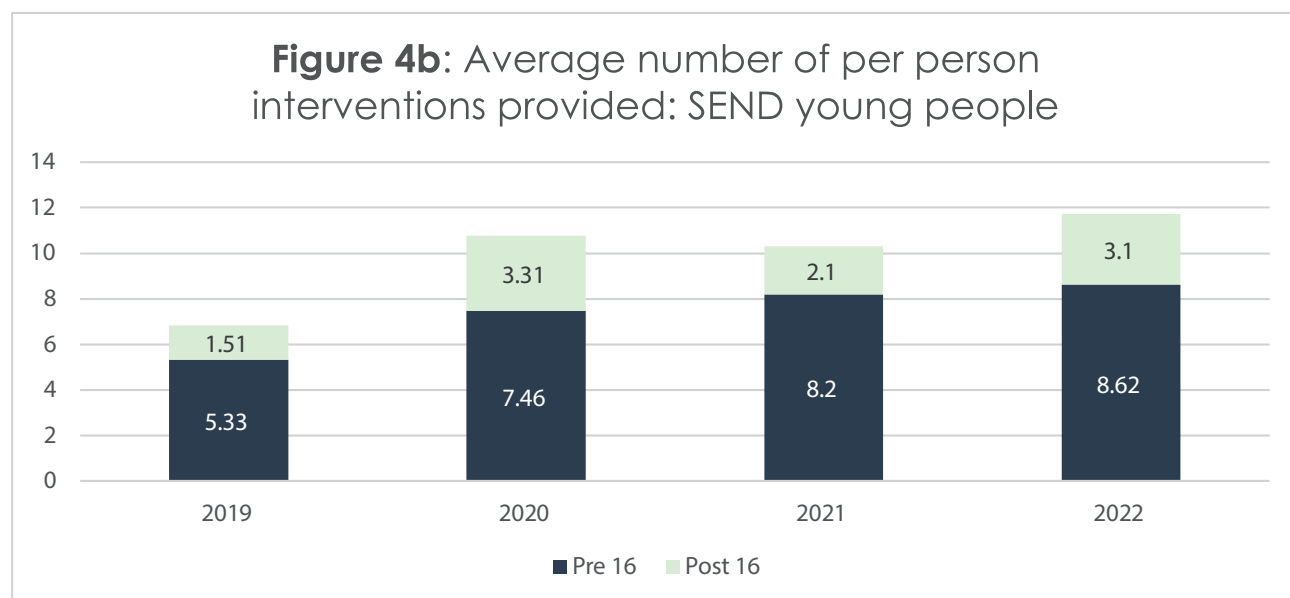
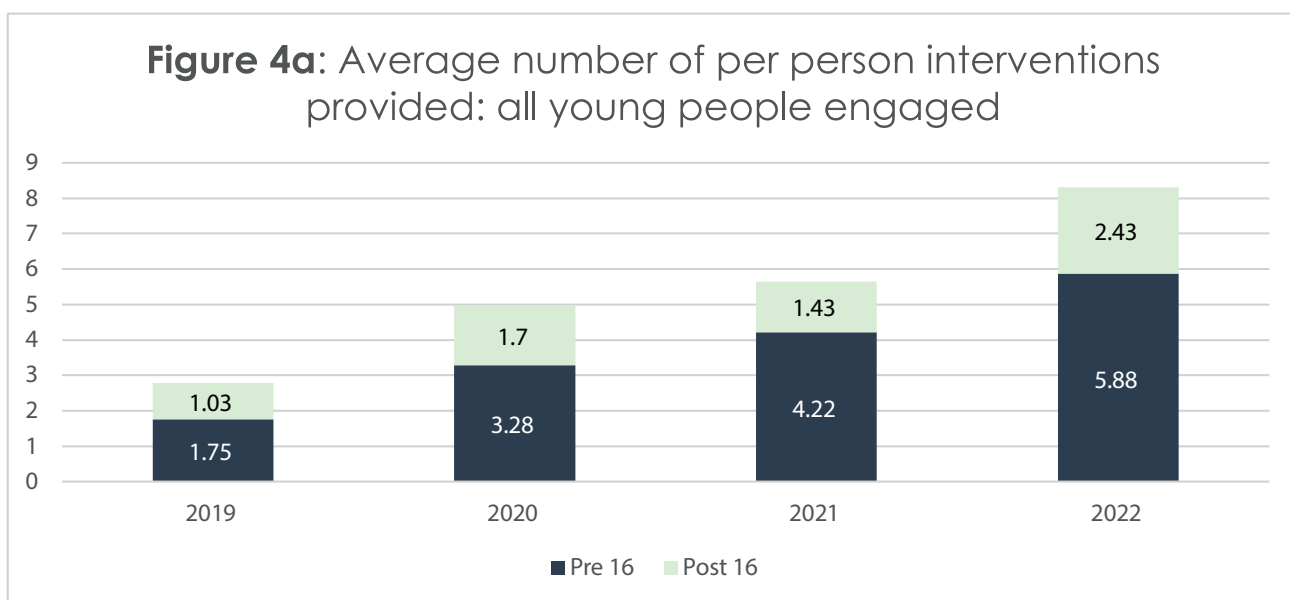
### The average time spent NEET has reduced substantially between 2019-2022.

For all young people engaged, average time spent NEET reduced from an average of 282.24 days to 81.02 days. For SEND it reduced from 124.5 days to 70.6 days; for those young people engaged with youth justice services it reduced from 254.13 days to 75.92 days; for care experienced young people it increased from 71.5 days to 84.84 days (Figure 3).

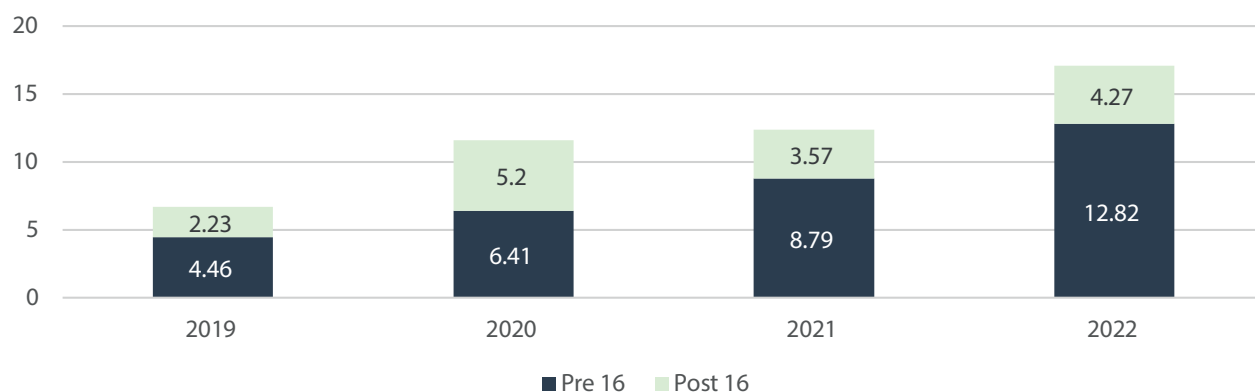


The average number of per person interventions increased between 2019-2022 with the largest growth being with interventions delivered before young people turned 16 years of age.

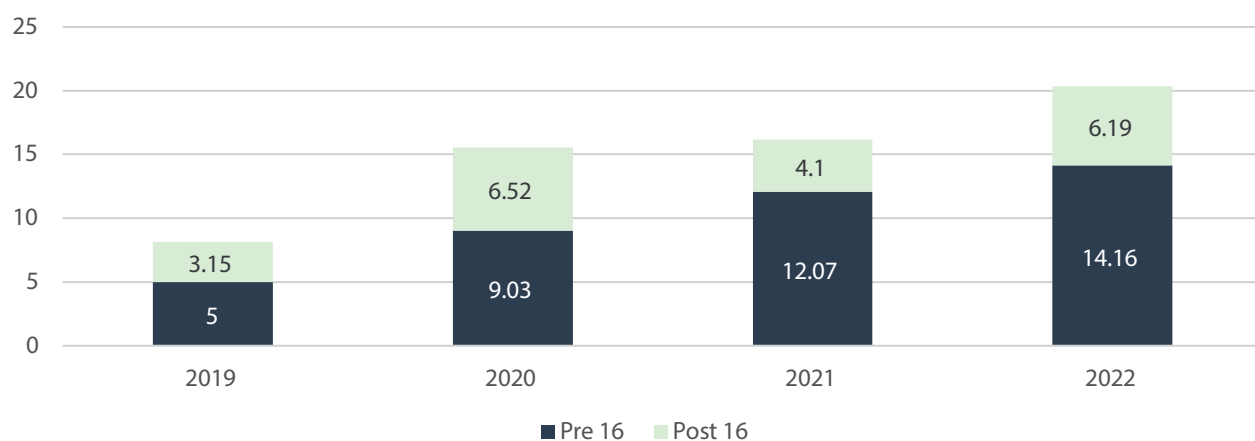
For SEND young people, there was an increase in the average number of interventions provided to those aged 14-15 years from 5.33 in 2019 to 8.62 in 2022 (Table 4b). For young people engaged with youth justice services there was an increase in interventions provided to those aged 14-15 years from an average of 4.66 pre-16 years interventions in 2019 to 12.82 interventions in 2022 (Table 4c). For young people with care experience there was an increase in pre-16 interventions from 5 in 2019 to 14.16 in 2022 (Figure 4d). There was also an increase in the average number of post 16 interventions for each of the three RONI targeted groups, but to a lesser extent than for pre-16 interventions (Figures 4a-4d).



**Figure 4c:** Average number of per person interventions provided: young people engaged with youth justice services



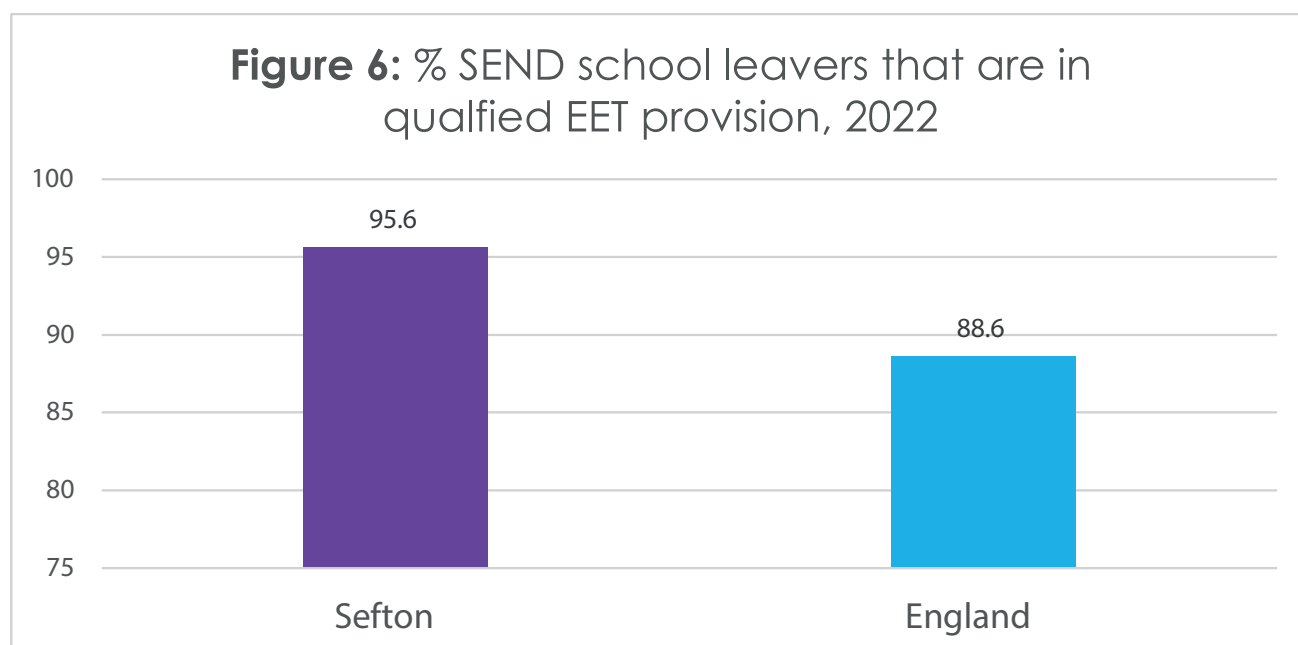
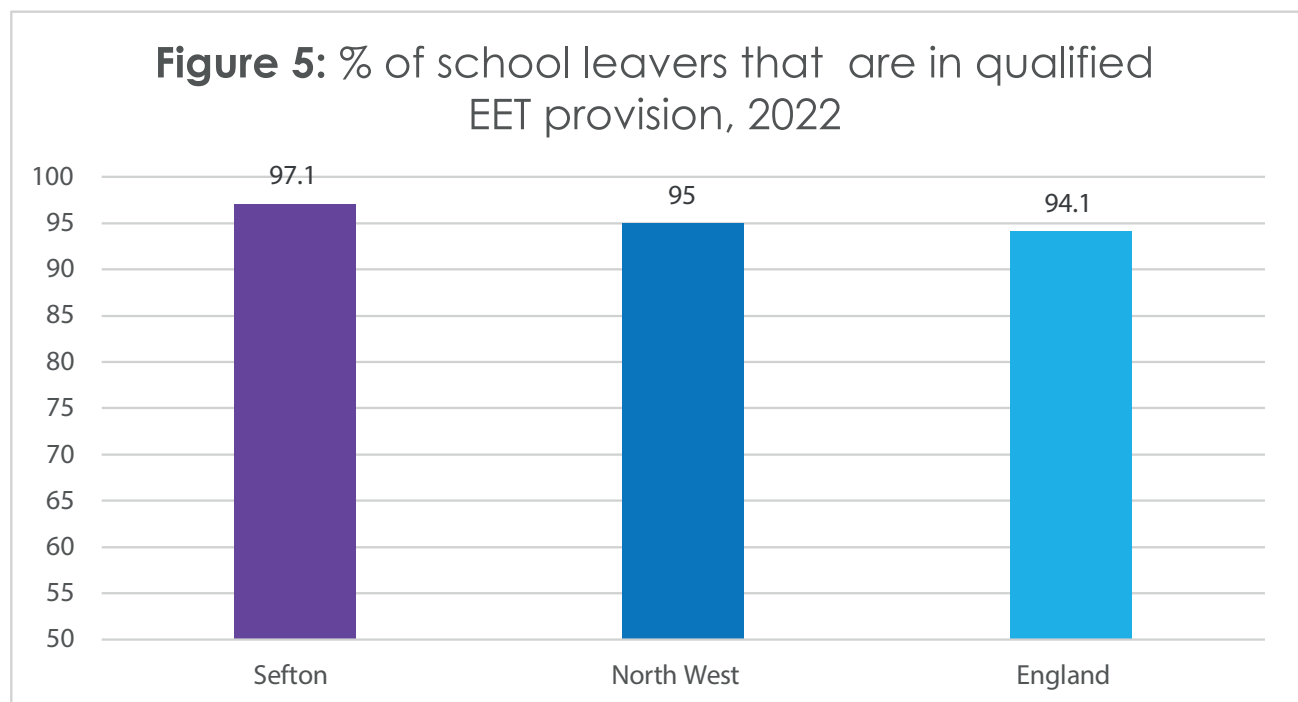
**Figure 4d:** Average number of per person interventions provided: care experienced young people



**Activity Survey data from NCCIS: Sefton, Liverpool City Region (LCR), Northwest Region, England**

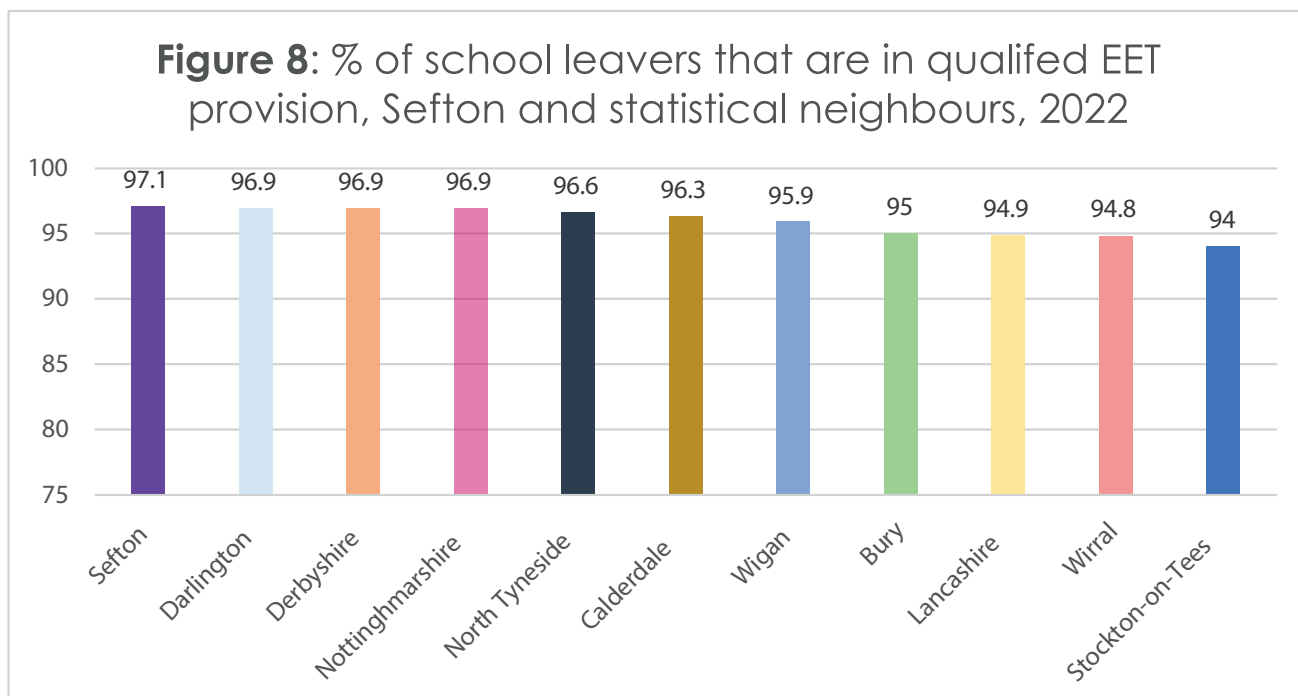
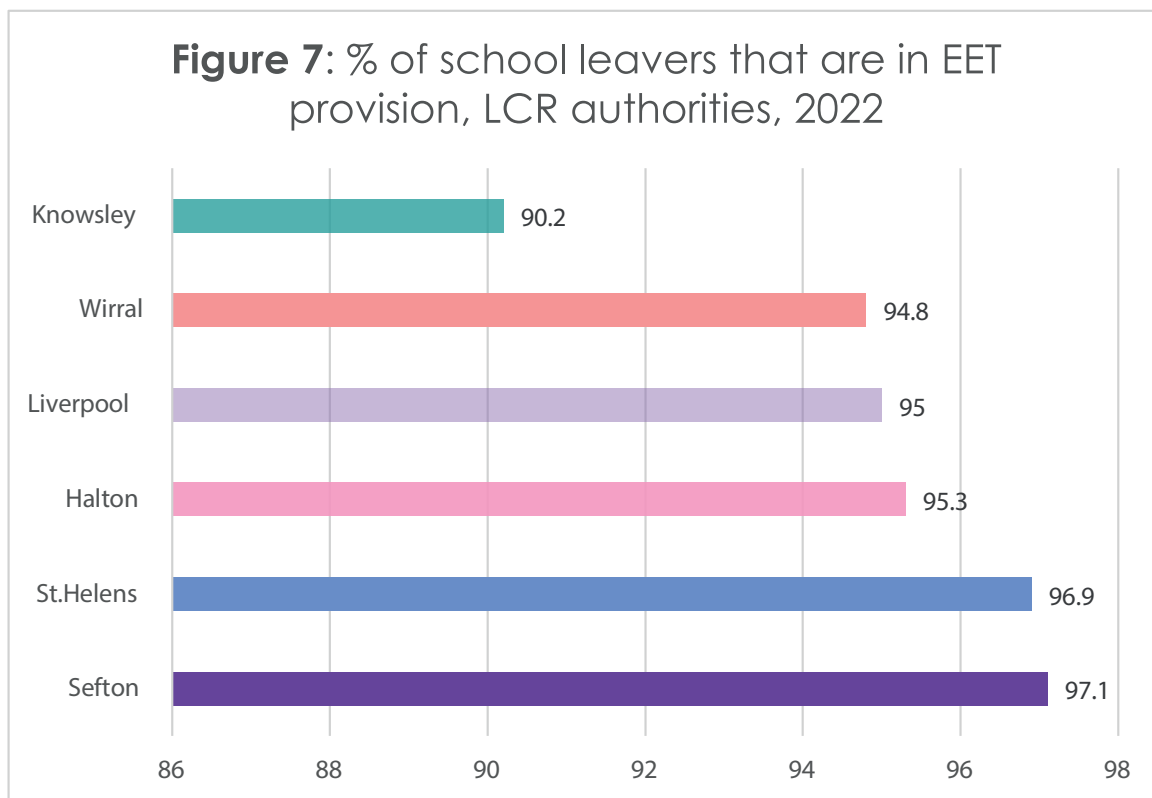
To contextualise findings from analysis of the 2019-2022 cohorts, the following presents data on Sefton’s performance compared with other councils within the LCR region, the Northwest, and among its statistical neighbours.<sup>8</sup> This uses data from the 2022 activity survey, completed by all local authorities each autumn to identify the destinations of all young people that reached the end of Year 11 in the previous school year (i.e., completed compulsory education). This data is reported into NCCIS.

In 2022, the overall percentage of Sefton young people in EET was 97.1%, compared with 95% among Northwest authorities and 94.1% in England as a whole (Figure 5). For SEND young people specifically, 95.6% of young people in Sefton were in qualified EET provision upon leaving school, compared with 88.6% in England as a whole (Figure 6). The proportion of SEND young people in EET provision in Sefton in October 2022 is higher than both the proportion of all school leavers in the Northwest, and the average for England.



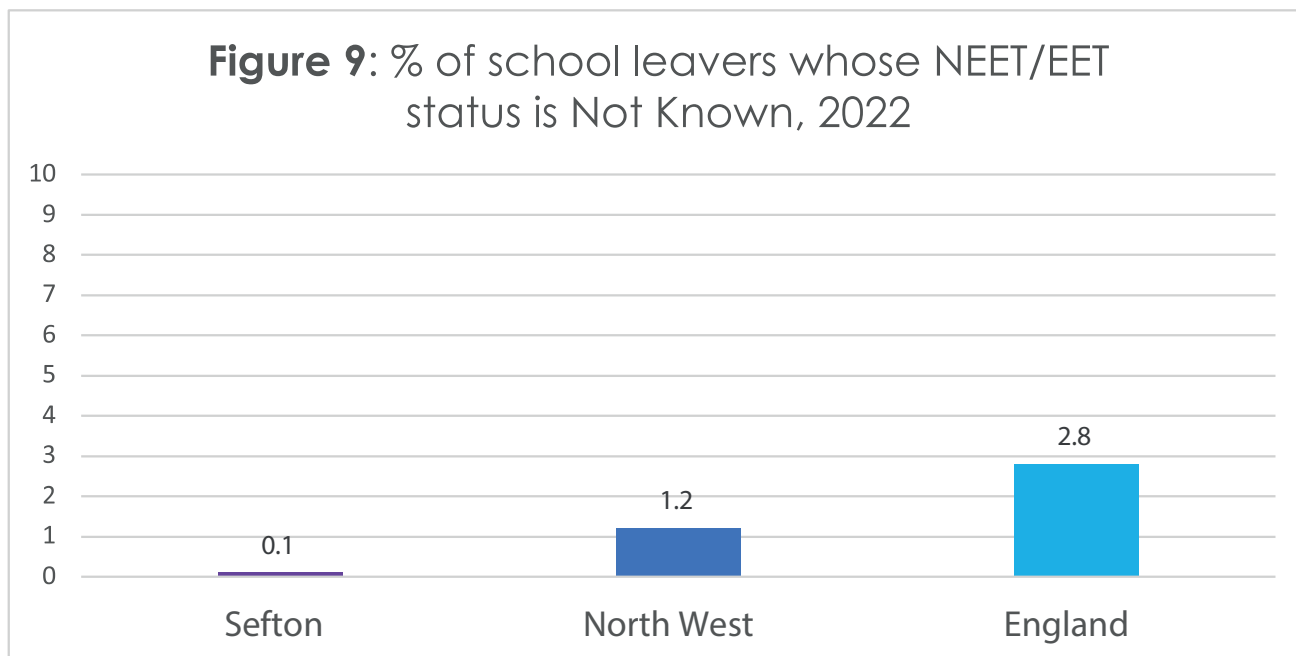
<sup>8</sup> Local Authority Interactive Tool. User guide. Department for Education, 2021.

Among other LCR authorities (Figure 7) and compared to its statistical neighbours (Figure 8), Sefton had the highest percentage in qualified EET provision.



In addition to having the highest proportion of young people in EET provision among comparators, Sefton also has the lowest proportion of young people whose status is Not Known (Figure 9). In 2022, only 0.1% of young people in Sefton had a Not Known status compared with 1.2% in the Northwest and 2.8% in England. A low number of young people whose status is Not Known is key to the provision of effective support to young people most at risk of becoming NEET.

**Figure 9:** % of school leavers whose NEET/EET status is Not Known, 2022



## Interviews with stakeholders and young people using the service

The interviews with stakeholders were structured around three questions:

- reasons for the switch to targeted early interventions.
- perspectives on what makes early interventions from Year 9 work.
- additional success factors beyond the provision of support from Year 9.

Interviews with young people were structured around participants narrating their journey from school to the current day, the support they have received along the way, and what affected the choices that they made.

Responses are summarised around the four questions and the views of young people that participated in the programme are integrated throughout.

### Reasons for the switch to targeted early intervention

The main reason given for the change in approach was that the reactive nature of the previous service met the statutory requirements but was not effective in reducing NEET. It was having a limited impact on NEET over time and the relatively high rates of NEET and Not Known young people was becoming a growing problem. It was necessary to take steps towards prevention rather than reaction.

*“I never liked school, I always found it difficult, my attendance wasn’t very good, and my teachers didn’t like me, my mum’s health was also difficult, and my mum and dad split up when I was 12. I didn’t have many friends and I just felt lost and helpless.”*

There was no significant increase in resources available to address the growing problem, so it was a case of finding a way of having a greater impact with the same resource, or lower resource if one takes account of inflation.

The main change was the identification of young people from Year 9 onwards that are at risk of becoming NEET, and the provision of more intensive CEIAG support to those young people over the two years leading up to them being academic age 16.

*“Every now and then school would try different things but then I felt that they forgot about me until I was really bad and then they would try and help again, lots of meetings.*

*When I was introduced to Career Connect, I didn’t give it much thought, just someone else. The worker spoke to my mum, and I think helped my mum too. It took me a while to want to speak to her and when I did, she was really nice, she said she wanted to help and focused more on my steps to help me after school, this helped me think about the future.”*

It was also felt that this change alone would not be sufficient and that a wider set of arrangements were required to address the rising number of young people that were NEET between the ages of 16 and 18. These included closer working with all agencies involved in supporting young people, and stronger use of data to target support and track outcomes.



## What makes early interventions (from Year 9) work?

The key driver of the impact seen is the acknowledgment of the changing nature of the cohorts of young people that services were working with from the end of Year 11. A larger proportion were not ready for employment, further education, or training, and required intensive support over a longer period. By targeting interventions from Year 9 onwards, this time and support was built in before young people turned academic age 16, helping them to better prepare for this transition.

Schools are not able to provide the intensity of support required within their existing budget for Careers provision. Even those that perform well against the Gatsby benchmarks are perceived to struggle in meeting the needs of those most at risk.

*"I didn't need to go to school to see her – she would come to the house."*

Early interventions are not additional but preventative of the need for extensive interventions post-16 years. They reduce NEET rates and time spent NEET through ensuring that more young people are going into the transition from compulsory education in Year 11 with a plan of action and are prepared for what comes next.

*"I wasn't sure what I wanted to do but breaking down all the information and showing me, even coming with me on visits – helped."*

A secondary factor identified in what makes early interventions effective is the need for relationships of trust between young people and their advisers to be developed before effective transition support can be provided. Many of the most at-risk young people are distrustful of services and support and feel a sense of previously being let down. It is not possible to deliver meaningful support without a relationship of trust being built in the first instance. This takes time and if it only begins at the end of Year 11, when these young people are about to leave school, then an opportunity to make a difference is being missed.

*"I had never thought about it till I worked with Career Connect as I was just thinking of school and scared of what happened in the future. I wasn't sure, but I trusted my worker and could be honest and ask questions."*

## What are additional success factors?

A number of success factors in addition to the provision of interventions to Year 9 young people were identified. First, is the extension of the concept of 'early intervention' to those aged 16-17 who are in provision but who may be struggling, or the provision is not quite right for them. An emphasis on the quality of EET provision is key.

*"Even when the first college wasn't right, and I didn't want to go she wasn't annoyed she just arranged another appointment and spoke about what support I needed, and she told them."*

This is seen as key in the substantial reductions seen in the amount of time that young people most at risk are spending NEET between the ages of 16-18, as advisers are actively managing their transitions between different college courses and training opportunities.

*“We spoke about different options, college, smaller training providers, we looked online, it was about trying different things. The main thing for me was to make friends and attend as well as my maths and English – I didn’t do well in school.”*

Better use of data was also seen as an important factor supporting success. Career Connect, the delivery partner for Sefton Council, oversee and have full access to tracking data on risk factors and the NEET/EET status of young people. Several benefits are identified. First, it allows for easy identification of young people whose NEET/EET status is Not Known. A high percentage of status Not Known is an indication that a service is missing many young people that require support as, in most cases, these young people are outside of EET provision. Secondly, it allows for the effective targeting based on risk profile. Data is used to identify levels of risk within the cohort and to direct resources and support to where it is most needed at the right time.

Thirdly, it allows for early identification and evidencing of emerging issues that may require a wider multi-agency response. This represented a major shift from data being primarily about statutory requirements to report on NEET/Not Known, to intelligent use in terms of targeting of services and early identification of issues.

A third additional component is close partnership working between the local authority teams, Career Connect (as contracted providers of CEIAG services), schools, and post-16 provision (FE colleges, training agencies, and employers). Continuity of contact across this network is key.

*“My worker kept in touch sometimes just a quick message and then other times a phone call, when I didn’t like my first college, I messaged them to let them know. I don’t know what I would have done if we hadn’t been in touch, I would have probably just dropped out, it was good I had someone to tell who could point me in the right direction and just explain that there were other options. When you make a mistake you think it is all over and it’s the end of the world but there are things you don’t know about.”*

The service being commissioned, rather than provided directly by Sefton local authority was also identified as a success factor. It allowed for a continued focus by the delivery team on their unique role in the provision of a critical service.

*“My mum tried to help me, but she wasn’t well, I didn’t have friends – I don’t know what I would have done without Career Connect. School tried but I don’t think they liked me as I was a pain for them not attending and sometimes with my behaviour. I needed someone to listen to me.”*

A KPI framework that has a clear focus on outcomes rather than outputs or process was also identified as a factor supporting success. Without this, authorities and delivery partners risk prioritising activity that does not drive positive outcomes for young people.

# References

1. Holman, J. (2014). Good Career Guidance: The Report of the Aims Professional Development Advisory Group. The Gatsby Charitable Foundation.
2. The long-term NEET population. Impetus Research Briefing, 2019.  
<https://www.impetus.org.uk/assets/publications/Youth-Jobs-Gap-The-Long-Term-NEET-Population.pdf>
3. Youth Employment Index 2022, PWC and Youth Futures Foundation, 2022  
<https://www.pwc.co.uk/services/economics/insights/youth-employment-index.html>
4. Not working. Exploring changing trends in youth worklessness in the UK, from the 1990s to the Covid-19 pandemic. L.Murphy, 2022. Resolution Foundation and The Health Foundation.  
<https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2022/06/Not-working.pdf>
5. Local action on health inequalities: Reducing the number of young people not in employment, education, or training (NEET), Public Health England and UCL Institute of Health Equity. Health Equity Evidence Review 3: September 2014.  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7dd2a040f0b65d88634a03/Review3\\_NEETs\\_health\\_inequalities.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7dd2a040f0b65d88634a03/Review3_NEETs_health_inequalities.pdf)
6. Participation of young people in education, employment or training Statutory guidance for local authorities. Department for Education, September 2016.
7. Local Authority Interactive Tool. User guide. Department for Education, 2021

For more information about this research, please contact **Gary Mundy**, Director of Research & Evaluation via [gary.mundy@careerconnect.org.uk](mailto:gary.mundy@careerconnect.org.uk)

Career Connect HQ Liverpool,  
7th Floor, Walker House Exchange Flags  
Liverpool L2 3YL

Tel: 0151 600 7700

   @connectmycareer